

## 1<sup>st</sup> ECOSOC Integration Segment (27-29 May 2014) to focus on SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION<sup>1</sup>

### *Sustainable urbanization as an integration tool*

In 2014, the Economic and Social Council will focus on the overall theme of “Addressing on-going and emerging challenges for meeting the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 and for sustaining development gains in the future”. One area that poses both challenges and opportunities for achieving the MDGs in 2015 and for sustaining development gains in the future is urbanization. Recognizing the importance of this issue, in 2012, the Economic and Social Council invited Governments to further promote sustainable cities and the role of local authorities in their national development policies and programmes and to consider the environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive and economically productive roles of cities in the post-2015 United Nations development agenda (Resolution 2012/27). In this connection, the Integration Segment could focus on sustainable urbanization to address the main theme in an integrated and focused way.

At the beginning of the 19th century, only 2 per cent of the world’s population was urban. By the beginning of the 20th century, the percentage had increased to 10. During the first decade of the 21st century, a historic milestone was achieved when the global population living in cities and towns reached the 50 per cent mark, thus making urban centres the dominant habitat of humankind. The rapidly increasing dominance of cities as the habitat of humankind places the process of urbanization among the most significant global trends of the twenty-first century. But this is not simply a demographic phenomenon. Rather, it is a force which, if effectively steered and deployed, could potentially help the world to overcome some of its major challenges.

With the world urban population estimated to increase from 3.5 billion today to 6.2 billion in 2050, urbanization constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity to sustainable development. Urban areas are faced with problems of unsustainable geographical expansion patterns (especially urban sprawl); ineffective urban planning, governance and financing systems; inefficient resource use (especially energy use); poverty, inequalities and slums, as well as inadequate delivery of basic services (including, water, sanitation and waste management). Youth, women and people with disabilities have often been left behind in conventional models of urban development. Extreme deprivation remains a major concern with one billion people living in slums. Furthermore, cities continue to be the major contributor to the total greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite these challenges, as centres for business and innovation, urban areas are also a source of growth, development and jobs. Urban densities offer opportunities for economies of scale and scope in development efforts, in particular in addressing poverty, health and education issues. In fact, the positive correlation between urbanization and development has long been recognized and, throughout history, urbanization has been, and continues to be, a source rather than simply an outcome of development. Today, urban centres account for 70 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP), i.e. 55 per cent in low-income countries, 73 per cent in middle-income countries, and 85 per cent in high-income economies. Thus Governments can use urbanization as a powerful tool for transforming production capacities, income levels and living standards, especially in developing countries. However, this requires a shift in mindset of the decision makers, away from viewing urbanization as a problem, towards viewing urbanization as a tool for sustainable development.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the Integration Segment of the Economic and Social Council, please go to the background note available at [http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/integration/pdf/integration\\_segment\\_background\\_note.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/integration/pdf/integration_segment_background_note.pdf)

The potential of cities was highlighted in the Outcome Document of Rio+20 Conference, which recognized that if cities were well planned and developed, including through integrated planning and management approaches, they could promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable societies. At Rio+20, Governments committed to promoting an integrated approach to planning and building sustainable cities and urban settlements and the generation of decent jobs. Promoting an integrated and holistic approach to planning and building sustainable cities requires local authorities to work with national Governments as well as other stakeholders to create employment opportunities, provide efficient transportation and communications networks, greener buildings, an efficient human settlements and service delivery system, improved air and water quality, reduced waste, improved disaster preparedness and response and increased climate resilience. Integrated approaches to sustainable urbanization target multiple MDGs and allow for strengthening of synergies between efforts to achieve different goals, such as health, education, water and sanitation, maternal and child health, empowerment of women and environmental sustainability.

Addressing sustainable urbanization would entail the consideration of its economic (i.e. employment, revenue generation), social (i.e. social services requirements) and environmental (i.e. energy consumption, transport and building policies, greenhouse gas emissions) implications and connections. It is clear that sustainable urbanization requires collective action by a wide range of stakeholders, including Governments, the UN system, private enterprises, civil society and communities. While in the past it was sometimes thought that focusing on urban areas could jeopardize the progress made in rural areas by attracting the rural population to urban centres, it is now clear that urbanization is inevitable, that the challenge is how to manage urbanization rather than reducing or preventing it, and that sustainable urbanization should, in fact, be planned to be supportive of rural development through the provision or improvement of physical, economic and social infrastructure in small rural towns and service centres. Furthermore, urban centres of all sizes have always provided extremely valuable markets for rural produce throughout history.

Consideration of the issue of sustainable urbanization during the Integration Segment would also give the Council an opportunity to contribute to the third United Nations conference on housing and sustainable urban development (Habitat III), scheduled to take place in 2016, especially to the formulation of the 'New Urban Agenda', the envisaged outcome document of the conference. In its resolution 2012/27, the Council encouraged the United Nations system, in particular the regional and functional commissions and other relevant subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council, to actively support the preparatory process of the conference.

By bringing together the ECOSOC system, policy makers and key stakeholders, including networks of UN-Habitat, Major Groups representatives and UN system organizations, the Integration Segment will help to establish a common understanding of the role of urbanization in sustainable development, and also to define the fundamental attributes of the 'sustainable city' that Member States and United Nations system organizations could collectively promote, from the perspectives of their different responsibilities and mandates. In addition, the Integration Segment will identify policy choices that could allow for an integrated approach to sustainable development and consider concrete national experiences and draw policy recommendations that could advance the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through sustainable urbanization.