

ComHabitat Strategic Plan 2007-2011

Background

For the first time in history, there are as many people living in urban centres as in rural areas. Indeed, by 2030 more than 60 per cent of us will live in cities. The UN estimates that as many as 55 per cent of the world's poor live in urban areas today, and this proportion is expected to increase as population rises since urban areas of developing countries will absorb 95 per cent of the world's population growth between 2000 and 2030. One of the greatest challenges in this trend is the rate at which slum settlements are growing. The poverty and deprivation experienced by urban slum dwellers are often underestimated and low rates of water and sanitation coverage, high child mortality and poor education enrolment go unrecognised. Yet, good slum-upgrading programmes have been shown to greatly reduce infant and child mortality rates. Slum upgrading and strategic urban planning, and effective urban governance have therefore become central to reaching the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Habitat Agenda. It will take vision and leadership, the integration of human settlements concerns into strategic plans and budgets, innovative sources of investment and new planning skills and approaches, to ensure that needs of all city dwellers are met and that sustainable human settlements are achieved.

Why is the Commonwealth strongly placed to take action on the Habitat Agenda?

The 53 Commonwealth countries vary greatly in terms of size, geographical location, income and type of economy. They are amongst those that are most affected by rapid urbanisation and as such they are central to achieving international development goals and objectives. Over 327 million people or almost one in six citizens living in the Commonwealth live in slums.¹ At least eight Commonwealth member states, all in sub-Saharan Africa, have annual slum growth rates of more than 5 per cent². In a quarter of Commonwealth countries (11 African, 2 Asian and 1 Pacific), more than two out of three urban dwellers live in slums and many of these countries are urbanising rapidly. Indeed, for some small states this is a new and emerging trend that needs innovative solutions.

While the challenges are considerable, the Commonwealth's fundamental principles and its networks are an important resource that can achieve practical results for the Habitat Agenda. Human settlement concerns are inextricably linked to the Commonwealth's fundamental values of good governance, human rights, gender equality and sustainable development. The right to adequate shelter in particular is a principle without which there can be no security and stability for households – or the wider society.

The Commonwealth's networks can enable different spheres of government and society to reach a common understanding of problems and therefore work towards effective solutions. The networks include central government, local government, professional bodies, civil society organisations and business. Commonwealth partners can share approaches that are based on similar legal, political and educational systems. In particular, there is often a common institutional legacy in relation to building and planning legislation and training for built environment professionals. Commonwealth initiatives also provide a rare opportunity to work across regions. As a trusted and neutral development partner the Commonwealth facilitates consultations at the highest political levels, informed by this wider networking, to build consensus and advocate the concerns of developing countries.

¹ The UN's slum dweller estimation is based on a definition of a "slum household" as lacking either: access to improved water; access to improved sanitation facilities; sufficient living area (less than 3 people per habitable room); a durable dwelling (non-hazardous location, permanent structure adequate to protect from climatic extremes); or security of tenure. All statistics in this paragraph are from UN Habitat (2003) *Slums of the World: the face of urban poverty in the new millennium?* Nairobi: UN-Habitat.

² There may be others with even higher rates, but data was only available for 32 member states, none of which were in the Pacific region.

How does the Commonwealth take action on Human Settlements?

The Commonwealth's principle mechanism for addressing human settlements concerns is through ComHabitat. ComHabitat is a partnership of the ministerial-level Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements (CCGHS) and agencies from government, local government, civil society and the private sector. ComHabitat promotes implementation of the Habitat Agenda and is working towards the Commonwealth Goal of: "*Demonstrated progress towards adequate shelter for all with secure tenure and access to essential services in every community by 2015*" and associated Millennium Development Goals. It focuses on networking and sharing practical examples of progress in implementation.

ComHabitat provides:

- a forum to foster relationships and projects. By working in partnership, the agencies involved in ComHabitat are able to make new connections and add value to each others work;
- a platform for developing country concerns on human settlements, presenting these at key international events and through information-sharing mechanisms;
- a deeper understanding of the issues through research, high-level dialogues and public debates in areas such as: partnership approaches to the provision of water, sanitation and waste management; financing constraints for urban development; alternatives to forced eviction; reducing vulnerability to disasters; addressing urban poverty in national poverty reduction frameworks; and placing human settlements at the centre of the development agenda; and
- active support to partnership approaches, for example by sponsoring exchanges to study community led approaches to slum upgrading and new building technologies, and assisting government and NGOs in Malawi to develop a plan for implementing settlement upgrading plans in line with the Malawi Growth & Development Strategy and potentially using funds release through debt relief³.

Looking Forward

This Strategic Plan is informed by ComHabitat's experience over the past three years. It provides a focus for a new phase and a framework for the development of partnerships that attract resources and harness the Commonwealth's strengths to add value to efforts at achieving the Habitat Agenda and MDGs.

The Commonwealth's goal for human settlements is "*Demonstrated progress towards adequate shelter for all with secure tenure and access to essential services in every community by 2015*".

ComHabitat partners will work to achieve this goal and support members of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements in their efforts to:

- provide basic services to households, neighbourhoods and villages;
- incorporate shelter provision into national poverty alleviation programmes;
- promote good governance;
- promote security of tenure; and
- remove systematic discrimination against women especially in respect of title to property and inheritance rights.

ComHabitat has identified specific areas where it, as a partnership, will focus its work. Its mission can be summarised by the call made by the CCGHS Chair's statement to the thirteenth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development to put "*human settlements at the very heart of the development agenda*".

³Malawi reached completion point under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative in September 2006.

Strategic Objectives

ComHabitat has identified three strategic objectives to guide its work from 2007 to 2011:

1. To improve financial investment to ensure adequate shelter for all, including access to essential services.
2. To strengthen leadership and governance by Habitat Agenda partners⁴ in approaches to sustainable and equitable human settlements development.
3. To reduce risks and build community resilience in an urbanising World.

A focus on finance

Objective 1: To improve financial investment to ensure adequate shelter for all, including access to essential services.

Rationale

Meeting the MDGs means greatly expanding investments in infrastructure and basic services, including: water; sanitation; primary health care; community development; housing and education⁵. Commonwealth member states have recognized that financing is a key issue in human settlements development.

Research and consultations by ComHabitat in the past three years have highlighted the following key constraints to financing, that:

- national frameworks, such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, lack a focus on urban poverty issues. This implies that human settlements concerns are not being prioritised in government spending plans and that governments and donors do not always maximise opportunities within urban areas to address poverty and meet the MDGs; and
- there is increasing pressure on local government to deliver basic services to meet the MDGs, yet it often does not have the financial means or capacity to do so.

Directions

To achieve the strategic objective of improving financial investment to ensure adequate shelter for all, including essential services, ComHabitat will:

- advocate the concerns of developing countries and improve international financial mechanisms for human settlements development by facilitating high-level dialogue (e.g. at Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings and other forums) on the issues of: financing human settlements development; and the inclusion of human settlements in national and local development strategies;
- exchange experiences between central and local government around the public financing of basic services to develop principles and approaches that support effective public sector decentralization and an improved flow of resources in support of the local delivery of basic services;
- research and share examples and experiences of approaches to financing human settlements development to improve access to finance mechanisms at the local level; and
- explore new approaches to local financing for human settlements development that involve a wider array of actors.

Outcomes

- Financing mobilised at a national and local level for human settlements development.
- Principles and approaches identified and promoted to facilitate decentralisation.
- Senior financing, planning and human settlements officials have a deeper understanding of the concerns and practical approaches to improving financial flows for adequate shelter and basic services for all.

⁴ The Habitat Agenda recognises that its goals can only be achieved through various actors working in partnership. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (known as UN-Habitat), is the UN agency responsible for human settlements, cities and implementing the Habitat Agenda works with partners including: governments, international and regional organisations, municipalities and various regional and international local authority groups; parliamentarians, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, women's and youth groups, trade unions, urban professionals, researchers and spiritual organisations.

⁵ UN Millennium Project (2005) *Investing in Development: A practical plan to achieve the millennium development goals*, New York: UNDP.

- Innovative approaches identified to local financing of human settlements development.

Building effective leadership

Objective 2: To strengthen leadership and governance by Habitat Agenda partners in approaches to sustainable and equitable human settlements development.

Rationale

It is widely acknowledged that strengthening governance at all levels is essential for sustainable development, and that this requires effective leadership by all agencies with a role to play. To nurture sustainable human settlements, Commonwealth member states have stressed the need to share practical ideas, showcase good practice and analyse what lessons can be learnt from experience.

Approaches such as the UN Habitat Urban Governance Index, and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum's Aberdeen Agenda (which sets out principles on good practice for local democracy and governance), can help to underpin sustainable and equitable human settlements development.

Leadership is also needed in the planning sphere. A recent position paper by the professional association representing planners in the Commonwealth calls for leadership and new skills amongst planners, stakeholders and all levels of government to address the challenges of rapid urbanisation. It recognises that new urban development approaches need to be: explicitly pro-poor and inclusive; acknowledge the dynamics of informal sectors; and create opportunities for all. There can be no rigid blueprint for urban development, since this rests on a diverse set of cultures and legal systems. The approach recognises the potential that exists to use information and communication networks, Commonwealth universities and other training institutions, professional groups and practitioners, to develop curricula and learning materials, and to share experiences in sustainable planning of urban centres.

Directions

To achieve the strategic objective of strengthening leadership and governance in approaches to sustainable and equitable human settlements development, ComHabitat will:

- review and promote experiences and implementation of successful initiatives to improve governance of human settlements; and
- exchange ideas and experiences on new approaches in urban development, and promote initiatives such as the Commonwealth Association of Planner's work on "New Urban Planning".

Outcomes

- Stronger champions for more inclusive and integrated approaches to human settlements planning leading to more economically, environmentally and socially sustainable human settlements.
- More information available to support stakeholders at all levels in improving the governance of human settlements development through leadership.
- Approaches implemented that improve governance for sustainable human settlements.
- Built environment professionals and other stakeholders showing leadership in developing new urban planning approaches.

Addressing risk

Objective 3: To reduce risks and build community resilience in a rapidly urbanising World.

Rationale

The international community has been heavily engaged in disaster management issues in recent years, and people have found themselves faced with devastating large-scale events. Hurricane Ivan badly affected Jamaica and devastated Grenada in September 2004; the December 2004 tsunami affected countries in Asia and the Indian Ocean, including Sri Lanka and The Maldives; and a massive earthquake occurred in Kashmir in October 2005. It is

estimated that more than 200 million people on average have been affected every year in the past two decades by disasters⁶. The impact of disasters on people's lives can be greatly reduced by effective forward planning and governance.

Informal settlements and slum communities are often built on marginal land such as floodplains and coastal swamps, making poor people particularly vulnerable to events such as flood, storm surges and fire. Such events have to be seen as factors preventing poor people improving their quality of life and they greatly aggravate poverty. The worsening of the flood situation and the rise of sea level as a consequence of climate change will thus further increase poverty. It is important to involve the affected communities in planning for post-disaster rehabilitation, disaster risk reduction and the design of more disaster resistant dwellings and appropriate hazard alleviation measures.

The Conference of Commonwealth Meteorologists has noted that about 90 per cent of all disasters are hydrometeorological in nature and effective services are needed to support early warning and preparedness for disasters. Climate change is a growing concern for human settlements. The predominant focus of international initiatives on climate change and cities – such as the Cities for Climate Protection campaign of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) – is on climate change mitigation. There has been much less emphasis on promoting adaptation to climate change in our growing cities. There is a strong case for special assistance to help poor urban people to adapt to climate change. This is where Commonwealth networking could help to add value.

An international meeting of Commonwealth professional associations and international organisations⁷ showed that building codes, planning regulations and disaster response and recovery plans are not always adequate to address current disaster risks. This needs to be addressed and projected risks from climate change must also be integrated into planning for sustainable human settlements.

Directions

To achieve the strategic objective of reducing risk and building community resilience in a rapidly urbanising World, ComHabitat will:

- review national legislative frameworks related to disaster management and mitigation to ensure that human settlements concerns are adequately considered;
- galvanise built environment professional organisations to respond to technical challenges posed by climate change and disaster risk management; and
- share examples and experiences of approaches to disaster management and mitigation, and community based climate change adaptation.

Outcomes

- Frameworks reviewed and shared for integrated approaches to disaster risk reduction, disaster management and adaptation to climate change.
- Jointly owned work plans to advocate disaster risk reduction, disaster management and adaptation to climate change within the Commonwealth.
- Effective policy frameworks in place and operational at national and local levels, supported by communities and professionals with skills to develop, monitor and implement.

Implementation

The value of the ComHabitat partnership is that it brings together agencies from different sectors that are critical to implementing the Habitat Agenda (government, local government, non-governmental organisations, professional associations and the private sector). Ministers that lead on implementing the Habitat Agenda in their own countries are also part of this partnership through the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements. All these

⁶ World Conference on Disaster Reduction, 18-22 January 2005, Kobe, Hyogo, Japan: *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters*.

⁷ Commonwealth Foundation Workshop *Preparing for Change: Adaptive Strategies for Climate Change and Disaster Management in the Commonwealth*, held 9-12 October 2006, Mahé, Seychelles.

groups are actively engaged in implementing the Habitat Agenda in their own spheres, but they also collaborate through ComHabitat to achieve their own goals effectively through more integrated approaches to the development challenges of human settlements. The reach of the ComHabitat partnership makes it particularly effective in networking, advocacy, information sharing and the development of innovative policy approaches.

ComHabitat is governed by the ministerial-level CCGHS. A Management Group, made up of partner organisations, oversees the work of the ComHabitat Secretariat and is responsible for approving and monitoring the detailed annual work plan of the ComHabitat Secretariat. Management Group members are: the Commonwealth Secretariat; the Commonwealth Foundation; the Commonwealth Association of Planners; the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council; the Commonwealth Local Government Forum; Homeless International, and the UK Government's Department for International Development. At present, the secretariat function of ComHabitat is provided by Homeless International. ComHabitat has a working relationship with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and is developing a network to facilitate broader engagement by many more organisations and individuals in the CCGHS process. Throughout the period of the Strategic Plan, ComHabitat will engage practitioners in developing countries in reviewing the direction and implementation of its work.

The Strategic Plan will draw on the institutional resources and experience of its partner institutions, but ComHabitat will also need to raise additional resources to fully implement this strategic plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The strategic plan will be monitored and evaluated through processes at four levels:

- the CCGHS approves the Strategic Plan and reviews its progress on a biennial basis;
- Commonwealth civil society forums provide opportunities to gain wider input on ComHabitat's direction and activities, including partnerships;
- ComHabitat's Management Group will be responsible for implementing and monitoring the overall Strategy and for overseeing the work of the ComHabitat Secretariat; and
- each partner organisation will monitor activities for which it is the lead organisation; this monitoring will inform and drive the implementation of individual projects.

In addition to setting monitoring and evaluation criteria for activities under the Strategic Plan, ComHabitat will develop ways to support the review by its partners of progress towards the Commonwealth goal.

The CCGHS governs the ComHabitat partnership and its biennial meetings provide an opportunity to evaluate progress made midway through this plan (in 2009) and at the end in 2011.

¹ CCGHS (2005) *Statement on Behalf of the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements at the Thirteenth Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development*, April 2005