

UN-HABITAT's "State of the World's Cities 2008/2009" Report Singapore Launch Summary

URA Centre, Singapore 24 October 2008



The Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC) hosted the launch of UN-HABITAT's flagship publication "State of the World's Cities 2008/2009" Report in Singapore on 24 October 2008.

The focus for this year's Report is "Harmonious Cities", as a run-up to the upcoming World Urban Forum in Nanjing, China. The Report was launched by UN-HABITAT officials, Mr. Ali Shabou (Chief of the UN-HABITAT Office in Amman, Jordan), Mr. Banji Oyeyinka (Director of Monitoring and Research Division) and Ms. Rasna Warah (Editor of the Report).

Mr Andrew Tan, Director of CLC, noted the timeliness and relevance of the theme for the Report as half the world's population lives in cities today. Many of the emerging cities are from the developing world, namely Africa, Asia and Latin America. In Asia itself, there is growing awareness of the need to manage the growth of cities well. As cities increase in size, concerns over employment, environmental pressures, safety and security have risen to the forefront of national agendas.

Mr Andrew Tan also highlighted that dealing with these challenges requires a multi-faceted response, at the national, regional and international levels. In this regard, UN-HABITAT's report provides policy makers with a better understanding of the challenges. Platforms such as the World Cities Summit and World Urban Forum provide opportunities for various stakeholders to learn from one another and explore common solutions.



The Report, which covers 245 of the world's fastest growing cities, generated a high level of interest among the audience consisting of policy makers, academia and the media. During the questions and answers session, the audience sought clarifications and queried on the different aspects of the Report as well as on how 'harmonious' Singapore is as a city.

Rising urban inequality and slum prevalence

Based on the best available data spanning the last 5-6 years, a key trend observed is the rise in urban inequality in most cities. The situation differs between regions and countries. For example, the wealth generated from the economic growth of African cities in general are not evenly distributed; While urban inequality is not a serious problem in Asia, it is apparent for some cities within Thailand. This could possibly be attributed to the lack of equity considerations in pro-growth policies.



The collected data also gave an insight into the level of slum prevalence in cities. Slums are characterised by the lack of access to safe drinking water, lack of access to sanitation, overcrowding, lack of durable housing structures and lack of secure tenure to shelter. North African countries such as Tunisia and Morocco have been relatively more successful in reducing slum prevalence. Mr. Banji also added that as the next phase, the UN-HABITAT would look into helping cities achieve zero-slum prevalence and the data presented in the

Report would help cities formulate a more targeted approach.

Singapore as a model city

Mr. Banji noted that comparatively, Singapore has done remarkably well in achieving zero-slum prevalence while slum-formation is still a challenge even in advanced countries. Mr. Banji also remarked on Singapore's success in achieving quality public housing and public transport, as cited in the Report.

On the environment front, Ms. Rasna commended Singapore on her environmentally friendly policies encouraging low motor usage and urban greenery. Ms. Rasna further

commented that environmental sustainability could be pursued with success regardless of urbanisation, as exemplified by a city-state like Singapore.

The UN-HABITAT currently oversees the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment and Bahrain's Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa Habitat Award to recognise and showcase cities best practices. Mr. Banji highlighted that both these awards provide a useful platform for cities to both share and learn from the experiences of others.

Transport and connectivity

Transport and connectivity are key drivers of cities' growth, as evident from the rise of emerging cities. Ms. Rasna cited the example of China's Shenzhen. The city experienced a phenomenal growth rate of up to 20% after being declared a special economic zone. The city's proximity to Hong Kong, which is a transport hub, also contributed to its growth. It was said that the city's population had increased from 1 to 7 million in 10 years' time.

For the case of New Delhi and its satellite cities, improvement in transport and commuter networks has resulted in high population growth in the form of 'bedroom communities' at the immediate outskirts of the inner city. A good rail network has similarly contributed to the phenomenal growth of Navi Mumbai with respect to Mumbai city.

"Soul" of the City

The aspect of "soul" of a city also drew interest from the audience. In an era when skyscraper-dominated city skylines are fast becoming the norm, a city's "soul" is perceived as the unique characteristic that enables a city to differentiate itself from the others.

Though there has been no known direct measurement of a city's "soul", there are nevertheless proxies to which references can be made. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) looks into and promotes the preservation of cultural and architectural heritage in cities through its programmes and activities. A noteworthy point mentioned is that such efforts not only help cities preserve their identities, economic value is also generated from increased tourism as a result.

Ms. Rasna highlighted that the Report also explores the relation between social capital and social cohesiveness in cities. It has attempted to measure social capital in terms of the availability of social networks and level of community participation. Generally, there is a positive correlation between levels of social capital with how harmonious cities are.

Private sector involvement

While the role of governance has been highlighted in the Report, increasing emphasis has also been placed on private sector involvement in the United Nation's work. One good example is the formation of the UN Global Compact and increasing private sector participation in the biennial UN-HABITAT's World Urban Forum (WUF). Mr. Banji also said that more activities with private sector participation could be expected in between future WUFs.