



General Assembly Second Committee Topic Background Guide
Human Settlements¹

October 21, 2009

Human settlements are the places people live. They may be urban or rural. Until 2007, most people lived in rural areas. In 2007, the balance tipped. Since then, more than 50 percent of the world's inhabitants have lived in cities. By 2029, the percentage of urban residents will reach an estimated 60 percent.² By 2050, the figure will be 66 percent.³

Human settlements have physical, environmental, political, social, and cultural elements. According to the UN, these can be divided into "(a) physical components of shelter and infrastructure; and (b) services to which the physical elements provide support, that is to say, community services such as education, health, culture, welfare, recreation and nutrition."⁴ In addition, each human settlement exists in a unique environment that affects life in the community and is affected by that community."⁵

The fundamental goal of sustainable development is to improve conditions in human settlements while preserving or improving the environment. Achieving improvements in human settlements would enable individuals to more fully enjoy the political, civil, economic, cultural, and social rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁶ In addition, it would create more national, regional, and international stability and security.

Increasing urbanization poses both opportunities and challenges. In terms of opportunities, cities are sites of concentrated economic activity, which is necessary for economic development.⁷ They are also places where services such as education and health care can be delivered efficiently, when funds and personnel are available.

When urban populations grow faster than economic opportunities and services, increasing urbanism can complicate development and compromise human rights. Today, this is the situation in many countries. Less-developed countries (LDCs) have been particularly affected, for two reasons. First, people in LDCs are moving

¹ This document was written by Ashley Zuelke, 2008 ECOSOC Chair, and Karen Adams, Faculty Advisor.

² UN News Centre, "Top UN official highlights impact of financial crisis on world's urban poor," 23 October 2008, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=28683&Cr=housing&Cr1>.

³ UN-Habitat, "About Us: Our Mission: The Challenge," available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?typeid=19&catid=10&cid=928>; accessed 22 October 2009.

⁴ UN Statistics Division, *Glossary of Environment Statistics*, Series F, No. 67 (1997), quoted in OECD, "Glossary of Statistical Terms: Human Settlements," <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1266>

⁵ UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "What is Human Settlements;" available at <http://www.unescap.org/huset/whatis.htm>; accessed 15 February 2009.

⁶ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," (1948) available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

⁷ David E. Bloom, et al, "Urbanization and the Wealth of Nations," *Science* 319: 5864 (8 February 2008), 772-775.

from rural areas to cities in large numbers. Each month, LDC cities together grow by 5 million residents.⁸ Second, cities in less developed countries have fewer organizations and resources to address the needs of urban residents.

As a result of the gap between urban immigration and economic opportunities, urban slums are found throughout the world and are growing quickly. According to UN-Habitat (the UN organization charged with improving conditions in human settlements), a slum household lacks any one of the following:

1. Access to improved water (access to sufficient amount of water for family use, at an affordable price, available to household members without being subject to extreme effort);
2. Access to improved sanitation (access to an excreta disposal system, either in the form of a private toilet or a public toilet shared with a reasonable number of people);
3. Security of tenure (evidence of documentation to prove secure tenure status or *de facto* or perceived protection from evictions)
4. Durability of housing (permanent and adequate structure in non-hazardous location)
5. Sufficient living area (not more than two people sharing the same room).⁹

Today, one billion people live in slums. This is one-third of urban residents and one-seventh of the world's population.¹⁰

Slums not only pose challenges to their inhabitants. They also impose environmental, social, and political costs on other people, as well as on the states and regions in which they are found. Many slum dwellers reside on steep slopes and in flood plains, which contributes to environmental degradation and vulnerability to environmental disaster.¹¹ In addition, slum residents live in close proximity to one another and have access to few services, such as trash collection, clean water, sanitation, and health care. This increases pollution and facilitates the spread of disease. Finally, slums offer few employment and educational opportunities. Thus they are often marked by crime and political unrest.¹²

In the coming decades, UN member states must find ways to improve life in human settlements. As they do so, they must cope with increasing urbanization, economic crisis, and climate change. Today, most of the world's cities are located in coastal areas. According to scientists, coastal cities will experience increasing rates of natural disaster. In addition, they will be affected by rising sea levels, which may require massive resettlement.

History and Current Events

After World War II, improvements in agricultural technology and medical care allowed the world population to grow rapidly. Population growth was especially strong in developing countries, which had not previously benefited from increasing food supplies, declining infant mortality, and longer life expectancies.

According to the UN Population Division, in 1950, the world population was 2.5 billion. By 2005, it had grown to 6.5 billion. Between 1965 and 1970, the annual rate of world population growth rate peaked at 2.2 percent per year, then began to decline. From 2000 to 2005, the world population grew at a rate of 1.26 percent per year.

⁸ UN News Centre, "Top UN official highlights impact of financial crisis on world's urban poor."

⁹ UN-Habitat, "UN-Habitat's Slum Indicators" (box), on "The UN Millennium Declaration and its Goals," <http://ww2.unhabitat.org/mdg/>; accessed 21 October, 2009.

¹⁰ UN News Centre, "Top UN official highlights impact of financial crisis on world's urban poor."

¹¹ UN Commission on Sustainable Development, "Sustainable Human Settlements Development: Implementing Agenda 21," March 1994; <http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/cn17/1994/background/ecn171994-bpch7.htm>.

¹² UN News Centre, "Top UN official highlights impact of financial crisis on world's urban poor."

Due to declining birth rates, this rate is projected to fall to 0.34 percent in 2045-2050. Nevertheless, by 2050, the world population is expected to reach 9.1 billion.¹³

As shown in Table 1, the percentage of the world's population living in less developed regions rose from 68 percent in 1950 to 86 percent in 2005. According to the UN, less developed regions include "Africa, Asia (excluding Japan), Latin America and the Caribbean plus Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia."¹⁴

Table 1¹⁵
World Population and Population Density in More- and Less-Developed Regions

Year	Population in More Developed Regions			Population in Less Developed Regions		
	#	%	density	#	%	density
1950	0.8	32%	15	1.7	68%	21
2005	1.2	18	23	5.3	82	64
2050 (est)	1.3	14	24	7.8	86	95

Numbers are in billions
Percentage is of total world population
Population density refers to persons per sq. km

Table 1 also shows that population density is currently three-times higher in less developed regions (95 persons per sq. km) than in more developed regions (24 persons per sq. km). Population density is a marker of urbanization. In less developed regions, population density increased 204 percent from 1950 to 2005, compared to just 35 percent in more developed regions.

Together, these data show that levels and rates of urbanization are highest in less-developed countries. According to the UN Population Division, in 2007, the five largest cities were Tokyo, New York, Mexico City, Mumbai, and Sao Paolo. In 2025, the five largest cities will be Tokyo, Mumbai, Delhi, Dhaka, and Sao Paolo.¹⁶

Because economic growth rates have generally exceeded urbanization rates, urbanization has offered opportunities to individuals and governments. But the benefits of economic growth have not been spread equally. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), from 1970 to 2007, gross domestic product (GDP, or national income) per capita (per person) in Africa grew by a factor of 4.5, compared to 10.5 in Latin America and 17.3 in Asia.¹⁷ There are also important differences among countries. According to UNCTAD, from 1990 to 1998, twenty-two LDCs were "stagnant or in economic regress. In 11 of these, all of which

¹³ UN Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision," Panel 1, Basic Data, and Panel 2, Detailed Data, available at <http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp>; accessed 21 October 2009.

¹⁴ UN Population Division, "Definition of Major Areas and Regions," in "World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision," available at <http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp?panel=5>; accessed 21 October 2009.

¹⁵ Derived from UN Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision," Panel 1, Basic Data.

¹⁶ UN Population Division, "Urban Agglomerations 2007: Wall Chart," available at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2007/2007urban_agglo.htm

¹⁷ Prices are in current dollars. UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Handbook of Statistics 2008*, Table 8.1, <http://stats.unctad.org/Handbook/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>; accessed 21 October 2009.

experienced serious armed conflicts and internal instability during the 1990s, the real GDP per capita ... [declined] by more than 3% annually.”¹⁸

From 2002 to 2007, even the poorest LDCs (called the least developed countries) experienced some economic growth. But the financial crisis that began in 2008 threatens their growth, as well as environmental, social, and political stability worldwide. According to UNCTAD:

Forecasts for the global economy in 2009 are bleak. The current financial crisis has already pushed most developed countries into a recession that is likely to have negative consequences for LDCs’ future economic prospects. Global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 is now expected to fall... This is likely to undermine [LDC] achievements of the present decade in lowering poverty and improving social welfare... The human and social costs of the present crisis are considerable everywhere, but for the poorest countries, they will include not just the loss of employment but also rising levels of poverty, spreading malnutrition and higher mortality rates for children and other vulnerable groups. There will also be increased pressure on the skilled and able-bodied to emigrate. For many LDCs, there is thus a real risk that this economic crisis will turn into a social and humanitarian disaster.¹⁹

In 2006, before the economic crisis began, one-third of urban residents worldwide lived in slums. According to UN-Habitat Executive Director Anna Tibaijuka, rates of slum living ranged from 6 percent of urban populations in the developed world to 72 percent in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole and nearly 100% in some sub-Saharan African states. In between were Latin American countries, at 31 percent, and Asian countries, at 57 percent.²⁰

According to a recent article in *Science*, urbanization occurs in three ways. First, people move from rural areas to cities (rural-urban migration). Second, although birth rates are usually lower in urban areas, death rates are too, which yields a larger population. Third, as rural towns grow, they are reclassified as urban areas. Of these, rural-urban migration is the most significant. It is responsible for 40 to 50 percent of urban population growth.²¹

Rural-urban migration occurs for several reasons. Perhaps most important is the search for jobs. This trend is heightened by government policies favoring city dwellers, who are more politically active than their rural counterparts. In addition, wars and natural disasters create refugees, who generally settle in urban areas. In recent years, people fleeing wars have fled to many cities, including Karachi, Pakistan and Kinshasha, Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition, droughts and floods have destroyed rural economic infrastructure in Angola, Ethiopia, and Mauritania, leading to mass migration to cities in those states and neighboring countries. Historically, Asian urbanization has been largely the result of industrialization and employment opportunities. By contrast, African urbanization has been strongly affected by political instability, civil conflict and ethnic tension.²²

Currently, about 200 million people per year are affected by natural disasters.²³ Climate change is expected to increase this number. Thus it is likely to contribute to further rural-urban migration. Increasing urbanization will,

¹⁸ UNCTAD, “World’s Poorest Countries Losing Ground,” Press release, December 2000, available at <http://www.unctad.org/Templates/webflyer.asp?docid=2706&intItemID=1528&lang=1&print=1>.

¹⁹ UNCTAD, *LDC Report 2009*, pp. 1-7, available at http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ldc2009_en.pdf

²⁰ BBC News, “Report reveals global slum crisis,” 16 June 2006; http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/in_depth/5078654.stm

²¹ Bloom et al., “Urbanization and the Wealth of Nations,” p. 774.

²² Bloom et al., “Urbanization and the Wealth of Nations.”

²³ UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, “Deaths and economic losses jump in 2008,” 22 January 2009; <http://www.unisdr.org/eng/media-room/press-release/2009/pr-2009-01-disaster-figures-2008.pdf>

in turn, increase vulnerability to natural disasters. Urbanization concentrates people in coastal areas, along rivers, and in areas marked by environmental degradation, all of which are especially vulnerable to disaster.²⁴ In addition, urban residents use more resources and emit more greenhouse gases than their rural counterparts, which contributes to climate change.²⁵ Recent natural disasters -- such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 Pakistani Earthquake, and the Australian bushfires -- show the effects of climate change on human settlements.²⁶

Climate change is also expected to raise sea levels. Because two-thirds of the world's largest cities are located in coastal areas, this will have profound effects on the quality of life for urban residents and will create pressures to resettle them elsewhere. According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),

Many millions more people are projected to be flooded every year due to sea-level rise by the 2080s. Those densely-populated and low-lying areas where adaptive capacity is relatively low, and which already face other challenges such as tropical storms or local coastal subsidence, are especially at risk. The numbers affected will be largest in the mega-deltas of Asia and Africa while small islands are especially vulnerable. Adaptation for coasts will be more challenging in developing countries than in developed countries, due to constraints on adaptive capacity.²⁷

More than 634 million people are in coastal regions that could be inundated. Among the cities threatened are Tokyo, New York, Mumbai, Shanghai, Jakarta, and Dhaka.²⁸

Previous Committee Work on This Topic

UN member states first addressed human settlements in 1976, at the UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat I), which was called by the General Assembly. At the conference, states began what has become a decades-long discussion about the international actions needed to improve conditions in rural and urban areas. In doing so, they considered a number of issues the UN had previously addressed separately -- including housing, building, transportation, water, sewage, the environment, and development. Because these issues are closely related and must be addressed simultaneously to achieve sustainable progress, states decided to address these issues together in the concept of human settlements.

The result of HABITAT I was the Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements (1976), in which member states noted that "the condition of human settlements largely determines the quality of life, the improvement of which is a prerequisite for the full satisfaction of basic needs, such as employment, housing, health services, education and recreation." In addition, they recognized that "the problems of human settlements are not isolated from the social and economic development of countries and that they cannot be set apart from existing unjust

²⁴ William Donner and Havidan Roderiguez, "Population Composition, Migration and Inequality," *Social Forces* 87:2 (December 2008), pp. 1090-1093.

²⁵ UN General Assembly, "UN-Habitat Chief, in Second Committee, Cites 'Rapid and Chaotic Urbanization,' Shortage of Affordable Housing as Causes of Global Financial Crisis," Press Release GA/EF/3224, 28 October 2008; <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/gaef3224.doc.htm>

²⁶ "Natural disasters and extreme weather," *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/natural-disasters>; accessed 3 March 2009.

²⁷ IPCC, "IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Working Group II, Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability," 2007, p. 12, available at <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

²⁸ Thomas Wagner, "Cities at Risk of Rising Sea Levels," Associated Press, March 28, 2007, http://www.livescience.com/environment/070328_ap_sea_rise.html

international economic relations.” The Vancouver Declaration articulated objectives, principles, and guidelines for both rural and urban settlements.²⁹ According to the Declaration, it is each government’s responsibility to create sustainable human settlements. In addition, the international community must “provide the necessary financial and technical assistance, evolve appropriate institutional arrangements and seek new effective ways to promote them.”³⁰

In 1978, the GA created a new agency, UN-Habitat, to “promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all.” The full name of UN-Habitat is the UN Human Settlements Programme.³¹ UN-Habitat reports to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which in turn reports to the GA. Most substantive debate on human settlements occurs in the GA-2, due to its concern with economic development.

In 1992, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development, member states addressed human settlements in Chapter 7 of the Rio Plan of Action, also known as Agenda 21. Specifically, they created the Commission on Sustainable Development and called on it to use effective human settlements as an indicator and goal of sustainable development. In addition, Agenda 21 called on developed countries to increase their foreign aid to developing countries to 0.7 percent of their GDP.³²

In 2000, in the Millennium Declaration, UN member states affirmed the goal of 0.7 percent of GDP in aid from developed countries. According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), if all developed countries met this goal, there would be sufficient funds to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As of 2009, just five developed countries met or surpassed this target.³³

In 1996, the GA called a second Habitat conference in Istanbul. At Habitat II, 171 UN member states approved the Habitat Agenda, which establishes a global plan of action for “adequate shelter for all” and “sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world.” In the Agenda, member states declared that “human beings are ... are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.”³⁴

In 2001, the GA adopted the Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium. This declaration notes failures in implementing the Habitat Agenda and urges further action to eradicate poverty.³⁵

²⁹ Vancouver Declaration On Human Settlements (1976), available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=924&catid=1&typeid=25&subMenuId=0>

³⁰ UN-Habitat, “Habitat Debate: 30+ dreams and reality,” 12:2 (June 2006); <http://ww2.unhabitat.org/HD/>

³¹ UN-Habitat, “About Us: Our Mission,” available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=10>; accessed 21 October 2009. See also UN General Assembly, Resolution A/56/206 (1 January 2002), <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?ID=2070&catid=10&typeid=23&subMenuId=0>

³² UN-HABITAT, “Habitat Debate: 30+ dreams and reality.”

³³ UN Development Programme (UNDP), “Tracking the MDGs: Global Partnership Progress,” available at http://www.undp.org/mdg/tracking_donorcountryreports2.shtml; accessed 21 October 2009.

³⁴ “The Habitat Agenda Goals and Principles, Commitments and the Global Plan of Action,” (1996), available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?ID=1176&catid=10&typeid=24&subMenuId=0>

³⁵ General Assembly Resolution A/S-25/2, “Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium,” 16 August 2001, available at [http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/4012_29587_Special%20session%20\(I+5\)%20resolution%20\(A_RES_56_205\).pdf](http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/4012_29587_Special%20session%20(I+5)%20resolution%20(A_RES_56_205).pdf)

From 2002 to 2009, UN-Habitat hosted four sessions of the World Urban Forum to support governments in implementing the Habitat Agenda. The most recent forum was held in November 2008 in Nanjing, China.³⁶ The fifth World Urban Forum will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in March 2010.

The most recent human settlements resolution drafted by GA-2 and passed by the GA was A/Res/63/221 (March 2009). In this resolution, member states recognized “the need to integrate water, sanitation, and other issues within a comprehensive framework for sustainable development.” In addition, they encouraged greater financial contributions to UN-Habitat and other organizations trying to improve urban conditions.³⁷ The resolution was drafted in response to UN-Habitat’s 2008/09 State of the World’s Cities report, which demonstrated that rising food and energy prices, as well as climate change, have strongly affected human settlements.³⁸

In October 2008, as the international financial crisis was breaking, UN-Habitat Executive Director Tibaijuka addressed the GA-2. According to a press release from the meeting, Tibaijuka argued that “rapid, uncontrolled urbanization and a dearth of affordable housing were the underlying causes of the current financial crisis.” When low-income Americans were given “access to housing through risky lending and borrowing practices, the results [were] devastating, prompting ... government intervention and ... [a] resurgence of homelessness.”³⁹

According to Tibaijuka, the economic crisis in the developed countries -- which has spread to LDCs through a downturn in trade, investment, and aid -- means that the number of people living in slums (which was already 1 billion) will rise even faster than before. Unless governments address the “urban poverty crisis,” civil rest will occur.⁴⁰

Even before the crisis, Tibaijuka argued that the goal of improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 (MDG goal 7, target 11) was too modest. According to her,

Yes, it would be possible to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020, but while that is happening, more than one-half billion – that is, 500 million – more people will have been drawn into the misery of slum life. We would need to improve the lives of not just 5 million slum dwellers per year until 2020, but more than 30 million per year if we are to reverse the developing world’s headlong plunge into urban poverty.⁴¹

Conclusion

To improve living standards worldwide and meet the Millennium Development Goals, it is necessary to improve conditions in human settlements, especially urban slums. Doing so requires attention to physical, environmental, social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of human life. Today, this challenge is complicated by high rates of urbanization, the international economic crisis and climate change. How can the GA-2 best address these issues?

³⁶ UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service, “4th Session of the World Urban Forum: Making Cities Work for Everyone,” *UN-HABITAT Roundup* 135, September 2008.

³⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution A/Res/63/221 (3 March 2009), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4a54bbf30.pdf>

³⁸ UN-Habitat, “State of the World’s Cities 2008/2009 - Harmonious Cities,” <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=5964&catid=7&typeid=46&subMenuId=0>

³⁹ UN General Assembly, “UN-HABITAT Chief, in Second Committee.”

⁴⁰ UN News Centre, “Top UN official highlights impact of financial crisis on world’s urban poor.”

⁴¹ UN-Habitat, “UN-HABITAT seeks major revision of millennium pledge on slums,” 4 April 2005, available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=1753&catid=312&typeid=6&subMenuId=0#>

In developing your country's position on human settlements, consider the following questions:

- What is the level and rate of urbanization in your country? If people are moving to cities, why are they doing so? What are your country's cities like? What percentage of your country's urban population lives in slums?
- How economically developed is your country? Are economic growth rates keeping up with the rate of urbanization? Why or why not?
- If your country is a less-developed country, what progress has it made on the MDGs? What challenges does it face?
- If your country is a more-developed country, is it meeting the target of 0.7 percent of GDP going to foreign aid? Why or why not?
- Has your country experienced natural disasters? Has it received large numbers of political refugees? How vulnerable is it to climate change? Has your country received or given international assistance to address these problems?
- Are your country's policies consistent with the Habitat Agenda and other UN declarations about human settlements?
- Given the international economic crisis and climate change, how can and should the UN address human settlements?

Recommended Reading

BBC News. "Urban Planet." 15 August 2007. Available at
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/world/2006/urbanisation/

This BBC website features in-depth reports on slum dwellers, modern cities, urban migration, and the environmental impact of human settlements.

United Nations. "Millennium Development Goals Report 2009." Available at
http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_Report_2009_ENG.pdf

This report describes regional progress in achieving each MDG. For detailed country reports, see UNDP, "Tracking the MDGs: Country progress," at http://www.undp.org/mdg/tracking_countryreports2.shtml
Another excellent source for country information is UNDP, *Human Development Report 2009*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

UN-Habitat. "About US: Our Mission." Available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=10>

This site provides access to the text of all of the UN declarations and resolutions related to human settlements.

UN-Habitat. "Information by Country." Available at <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=2>

This site provides access to data on each country's level of urbanization and percentage of slum populations, as well as information on UN-Habitat activities in each country.

UN-Habitat. "State of the World's Cities 2008-2009 – Harmonious Cities." 2008. At
<http://www.unhabitat.org/pmss/getPage.asp?page=bookView&book=2562>.

This report focuses on importance of equity and sustainability in achieving spatial, social, and environmental harmony in cities. It include recent statistics and discussion of important trends.