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## Briefing Paper

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### HUMAN SETTLEMENTS AND THEIR PLACE IN DEVELOPMENT

It is now a year since representatives from 131 countries, 6 liberation movements, 161 non-government organisations and a bevy of inter-governmental bodies foregathered at Vancouver to discuss the future of human settlements and their role in development. The Habitat conference ran from 31 May to 16 June 1976 and was the sixth in a series of global conferences held this decade. One of the recommendations of the conference was to establish an international secretariat for human settlements. The UN is expected to take a decision on this in July, so it is now timely to outline the problems that Habitat was convened to consider.

#### What are the issues?

Habitat was subtitled 'The UN Conference on Human Settlements'. The impetus for Habitat lies in the increasingly rapid growth of human settlements, which is itself a product both of population increase and migration. Between 1950 and 1975 the world acquired some 1.5 billion (thousand million) new faces; during the last 25 years of the century the increase will be 50% greater – 2.3 billion. The table shows that the developing countries have accommodated the bulk of this increase and will continue to do so. Two intertwined strands of thought – one philosophical, one practical – were evident at Habitat. The first sought to place human settlements at the centre of the discussion of change; the second aimed

to publicise the plight of human settlements, especially in the Third World, and to galvanise action to solve their problems.

The concept of a human settlement is both social and physical, and it can be defined as having two components: a human group, and the habitat of this group. This important distinction makes it clear that settlements are not just roads, houses and other infrastructure: they are also sets of social relationships. Defined in this way the issues of human settlements are wide-ranging – population, pollution, employment, social welfare, health and food as well as the more normally understood questions of shelter. Indeed, it was argued at Habitat that, since nearly everything that happens to man takes place in settlements, the subject matter is the whole of life. The attempt to put human settlements at the centre of discussion therefore implies a new way of looking at the totality of life, and in the words of Barbara Ward 'to examine global human experience not in all its "minute particulars" but in the close web of interdependence which holds it all together and largely determines the impact of each separate part'. It seeks to replace or complement a sectoral approach to problems with an analysis of the whole.

There are clear advantages in such an approach. The interrelationship within the fields of urban and rural

#### Population Growth 1950–2000 (millions added)

	Urban		Rural		Total	
	1950–75	1975–2000	1950–75	1975–2000	1950–75	1975–2000
Africa	70	209	114	203	184	412
Asia	383	801	535	613	918	1414
Middle and South America	129	269	32	28	161	297
North America	76	75	–5	–15	71	60
Europe	186	194	–31	–67	155	127
Total	844	1548	645	762	1489	2310

Source: UN, *Trends and Prospects in Urban and Rural Population 1950–2000 as assessed in 1973–74, 1975.*

\* The institute is limited by guarantee.

development are imperfectly understood, and such terms as 'urban' and 'rural' are often inappropriately applied within the context of development policy to establish an invalid distinction between places or localities. It is perhaps worthy of note that Habitat itself did not attempt a definition of these terms. While it is not appropriate to attempt to define them exhaustively here, it may be helpful to think of urban settlements as a hierarchy of central places distinguished by their functions and their relationships with their hinterlands, viz market and service centres, social and cultural centres, as well as political and administrative centres, rather than attempt to distinguish between settlements by means of arbitrary criteria such as population size or density. Some small settlements in rural areas may be justifiably regarded as urban by the nature of their facilities and services; their role and their functional linkages with primary production areas should therefore be taken into account in rural development strategies for those areas.

The problems of the towns are partly caused by migration from the countryside. About half of the less developed countries' (ldcs') urban population increase forecast for 1975–2000 will reflect such migration (rather less in South and South East Asia, more in Africa). The remainder, however, will be a result of natural increase. Thus even if rural development measures were to halt rural-urban drift immediately, the towns would still have to accommodate large population increases. The converse is also true: there will be population pressure in the rural areas despite migration.

There is no general agreement on the reasons for migration, but the lure of employment is thought to be important. It follows that the provision of rural employment may slow the drift, but it is unclear how much expenditure is required to reduce migration by a given amount: to persuade people to stay where they are it is necessary to provide jobs and desired facilities, whereas they can be persuaded to move to the cities simply by the possibility of acquiring jobs and comforts at some time in the future. Nor is it easy to identify the type of rural expenditure needed. The 'rural areas' and the 'poor' are often lumped together, but while it is often true that a majority of the poor live in the countryside, it is not true that rural investment will necessarily reach them. One of the reasons for urban bias in development expenditure is that it is easier to spend money on certain types of project (notably infrastructure) which are often located in urban areas than on others (eg improved agricultural extension). If 'rural development' simply means urban-style expenditure in rural areas, it may not reach the poor, and it may not slow migration to the cities.

An emphasis on interrelationships is also valuable as it underlines the social and political aspects of human settlements. Although the problems of settlements frequently manifest themselves through inadequacies in the physical environment – overcrowding, poor sanitation, pollution – they often have social and political roots. In traditional villages there may be social controls that limit overcrowding and keep the demand for and supply of housing in balance. In the largest cities such traditional systems may not be feasible but even in smaller towns, where they may be practicable, often they do not oper-

ate, with the result that overcrowded and insanitary squatter areas grow up, often at a rate of over 20% a year. The inadequacies of infrastructure may be evenly matched by a lack of political will to do anything about them. Possibly one reason for Habitat's failure to produce a clear and concise message is that the issues involved are soluble only if there are political initiatives within each state.

Unfortunately, desirable though it may be, it is difficult always to view human problems in their entirety. There is a clear tendency to slide away from a wide concern with human settlements as a whole towards a more narrow interest in infrastructure. There is a danger that instead of replacing or complementing sectoral studies, human settlements will become just one more sectoral approach concentrating on the built environment. This would have two corollaries. First, the problems of the cities, especially those in the ldcs, become the focus of interest because it is there that the inadequacies of the built environment are most striking. Second, the movement to put human settlements at the centre of discussion becomes an attempt to give one sectoral approach precedence over others such as the stress on employment creation contained in the 'basic needs strategy'. In many cases the built environment and basic needs approaches will be in consonance, but it is possible to envisage a situation in which an employment creation strategy will produce an unsatisfactory built environment. In such a case, the employment approach would presumably favour the strategy while the built environment approach would not. It is not obvious, in ldcs at least, that the second approach is the more desirable of the two.

Thus the philosophical strand is welcome but has certain drawbacks. The practical strand is very timely since the problems faced by human settlements, notably ldc cities, are acute. In 1972 the World Bank calculated the cost per head of conventional 'low income' housing in ldcs to be \$200. It estimated a further \$90 per head for the cost of primary school buildings and a minimum of \$100 per head for employment in the more traditional urban sectors. Such estimates are clearly open to wide margins of error, but may be useful for a broad illustration. To house the expected increase in urban population of the ldcs in 1975–2000 would thus cost, at constant 1972 prices, some \$255 billion; to provide them with primary school classrooms would cost \$115 billion and to create traditional sector employment adds a further \$128 billion. To put these figures into perspective, the total lending of the World Bank for 'urban purposes' in ldcs from its inception to 1972 was \$13 billion; one radical and as yet unadopted proposal at Habitat was to divert from military expenditure \$3 billion a year for human settlements, or \$75 billion over the 25 years to the end of century.

#### **Habitat's role**

There were two Habitats which were intended to cross-fertilise one another. One was a formal conference of governments, the other was a forum of those non-governmental groups with views on human settlements. The official conference produced a *Vancouver Declara-*

*tion of Principles and Recommendations for National Action* under the headings of settlement policies and strategies, settlement planning, shelter, infrastructure and services, land, public participation, and institutions and management. Although the declaration and some recommendations for national action failed to win unanimous support at the conference, the opposition was largely directed at anti-Israeli gestures and not at the proposals on human settlements themselves.

The official conference covered a very broad field. Its conclusions and recommendations are therefore set at a high level of generality, and no real sense of an order of priorities emerges from its deliberations. The Habitat Forum was better placed to highlight key issues. While the world's governments were drafting their communique, representatives of private action groups turned a former air force base at Jericho Beach into a visual demonstration of new technologies designed to ease the problems of human settlements and a centre for less formal debate on development philosophy. The meetings of the forum were open to anyone, and although a small drafting committee met in private after the open sessions, the *Resolution of the NGOs* which it prepared was not a consensus document. It supported the conference recommendations on land ownership, participation, and technology, and emphasised the need for clean water and adequate waste disposal for everyone, the provision of better transport facilities and, more controversially, a moratorium on nuclear-power-plant construction, and the annual allocation to a human settlements fund of 10% of the money currently spent for military purposes. This resolution has been overshadowed by the *Declaration of the Vancouver Symposium*, a document drafted by 24 notables, of whom Barbara Ward has received most publicity, who addressed the forum in a related series of lectures. The symposium established a 14-point priority plan in general accord with the conference and NGO views on land control, self-help, clean water, conservation, a nuclear moratorium, participation and institutional re-organisation. Two interesting points were calls to reinforce intermediate towns and rural settlements to lessen pressure on big cities, and to promote socially balanced communities.

### Five themes

The various disparate resolutions and declarations of Habitat cover more than 100 pages which cannot be summarised in a short space. However, five themes which were prominent in both the official government conference and the non-governmental forum have achieved widespread support and highlight a few of the key current issues for Idcs.

**1 Land.** This is a basic element of human settlements planning, and most countries have laws giving public authorities some control over private land use. In many Idc cities, orderly growth is hindered by an inefficient pattern of land use in existing urban areas and the difficulty of acquiring new land for public purposes. Habitat's view was that greater government involvement in land-use planning would ease such problems, and that windfall gains in land values arising from urban expansion should accrue to society and not to private individuals. The

desired objectives of government policy in Idcs seem to be: to increase the supply of land for development, to mobilise the resources needed for development, and to improve patterns of land use. In some cases these objectives may be furthered by greater government powers, but in others the answer may be improved administration: in some cities public land exists in quantity but is no more rationally exploited than is private land because of poor co-ordination and blurred objectives. In other cases what is needed is not an absolute increase in powers but a redirection and focusing of such powers on existing problems. The relationship of private and public sectors in financing land development is controversial: what seems clear is that a successful strategy must mobilise private resources but that this need not necessarily occur via direct private ownership of land or buildings.

**2 Self-help.** One important means by which private resources can be mobilised is through the growth of self-help housing areas in which the public authority provides serviced plots on which the residents can build their own homes. Such areas are financially cheaper than estates of conventionally-built houses. If they make use of traditional house-building skills they will also tend to be labour intensive and to make use of locally available raw materials and technology. However, while they are financially cheap, they may make heavy administrative demands. Ideally they should be socially self-regulating, and indeed, a valuable corollary of self-help is that the common task of building a house forms a focus from which a community organisation can develop. Unfortunately, in areas of recent immigration such social organisations may not arise spontaneously, or if they do, they may be based on ethnic lines and be unacceptable to government. If the public authorities have to take over responsibility for administering the self-help areas, it may become a very heavy burden and unfortunately the administrative capacity of many governments is just as weak as their financial capacity.

**3 Water and waste disposal.** One of the most publicised calls at and since Habitat has been for the provision of clean water for everyone by a specified date. A very plausible case can be made that these two facilities do a lot to improve health standards in cities, particularly if waste disposal is extended to include storm water drainage in wet areas. Of the two, waste disposal is probably the more important, if only for the practical reason that if a sewerage network is inadequate, people will simply ignore it whereas, in dry areas at least, there may be no alternative to the piped water system even if its poor coverage causes hardship. An effective waste disposal network can produce savings for other infrastructure: the provision of water-borne sewerage in place of pit latrines, for example, means that housing densities can be increased with consequent savings on roads, water, and power networks. However, water-borne sewerage is expensive and there is a need for research into cheap and effective waste disposal systems for different climates.

**4 Intermediate cities.** A feature of urbanisation in Idcs is the emergence of primate cities, and an important part of the problems facing the largest, such as Lagos and Calcutta, is their sheer size. The call for the development of intermediate cities can be seen as analogous to



the new-towns movement in the UK and designed to relieve pressure on the largest cities. It is also aimed at stimulating rural development. Its potential should not be exaggerated. The major social and financial costs associated with urbanisation occur when people uproot themselves from the village and move to a town. Such costs may be avoided if they can be persuaded to stay in their village, but if the strategy is merely to substitute a 100km migration to an intermediate city for a 500km movement to a primate city, it is not clear that there will be any savings except for the very large cities. The spawning of intermediate cities and towns may promote rural development, however, by providing a stimulus to agricultural production in their hinterland and by supplying urban services to the region.

July 1977

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*5 Transport.* This forms a major item of public expenditure on urban development. Its form also determines and is determined by human settlement patterns. The rapid growth of the ldc urban population makes it likely that there will be a continuing need for heavy investment on urban transport. It is therefore important that transport plans are integrated in other aspects of spatial planning so that due provision is made for pedestrians and cyclists who form a majority of road users, employment centres and worker housing areas are brought close together, possibly at decentralised growth nodes, and better transport management is encouraged. Above all, there is a need for priority to be given to public transport over private motor vehicles but here, as elsewhere, it is clear that the solution to human-settlement problems is as much political and social as it is technical.

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