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Statement by Dr. Arcot Ramachandran,
Executive Director of the United Nations Centre
for Human Settlements (Habitat)

on

THE HUMAN SETTLEMENTS CHALLENGE



The Human Settlements Challenge

Note to the World Commission on Environment
and Development

by Dr. Arcot Ramachandran
Executive Director of the United Nations
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INTRODUCTION

For those of us concerned with issues of development few initiatives of recent times can be more significant or more welcome than the creation of the World Commission on Environment and Development. That such a high-powered Commission with such a far-reaching mandate could emerge under the present international situation, characterized as it is not only by fiscal restraints in all quarters, but, more importantly, by the seeming preoccupation of affluent nations with their own particular problems and a corresponding decrease in attention to the development problems and needs of the developing countries, is a remarkable tribute to the force of the environment movement. It is a sure sign that the notion that sound development can only take place in harmony with the protection and enhancement of environmental resources has indeed passed on from researchers and scientists to policy makers, and more notably from what one may call "the environmental advocates" to the general public. Today, few political leaders in any country would express themselves against this principle and many would even acknowledge it to have all the hallmarks of the proverbial "idea whose time has come".

From this point of view, then, the task of the Commission may be said to be the conversion of this broadly accepted principle of environmental relevance into an operational cornerstone of national policy in every country. The Commission has already risen to its task in an encouraging fashion by agreeing at its first meeting last October on a new approach to this subject and identifying the outlines of a new agenda.

A human settlements focus

One of the major items on that agenda is "Human Settlements, Environment and Development". I wish to make the case for heightened attention to this item, even among competing priorities. This case, simply put, is as follows. It is now firmly accepted that the ultimate objective of all development efforts is human welfare; that the ultimate value of any endeavour lies in its contribution to human well-being. From this flows the conclusion that priorities among problems are properly determined by reference to the actual or threatened consequence to people. Human Settlements are the environment of people; more strictly, they are that part of the environment which has the most intimate and immediate connection with human life. They are, as I have often observed the milieu into which the human being is born, the milieu in which he lives, works, plays and ultimately is laid to rest - quite literally, therefore, the milieu in which he "moves and has his being".

If all this is so, then no environmental condition can possibly have more impact on the human being, and hence no environmental concern claim greater priority, than that of his settlements.

Distinguished Commissioners who view the foregoing as a statement of the obvious are quite right. Why then do we do it? We do it because we believe one should have no hesitation at all in stating and, as necessary, re-stating the obvious when fundamental issues such as the human condition and the future of human society are at stake. There can be little doubt that the issues with which this Commission is seized belong to that order. Like its predecessors, the Brandt Commission report on the "Common Crisis" and the Palme Commission report on "Common Security", the conclusions which will emerge from the work of this Commission are bound to have far-reaching consequences for the

way we perceive environmental and development issues for years to come.

The Commission is quite right in its view of environmental policy not as an "add-on" but as an integral component of economic and social policy and in advocating a policy-oriented approach to the issue of environment and development. However, in order to optimize the benefits of such a strategy, it is critical in our view to place maximum emphasis on the human settlements environment. We are genuinely concerned that since the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, attention has been gradually shifting away from what was one of the central concerns of the Conference - the relationship between man and the environment.

The gradual abandonment of the human and social dimensions of environmental problems in favour of a "scientific" and "well defined" approach - such as monitoring of the Ozone layer and other issues of concern to industrialized countries - has inevitably caused a dichotomy between attitudes of developed countries and developing countries, and the consolidation of a well known myth: that environmental protection is a luxury which only rich countries can afford and that the costs of environmental protection could result in an added and unnecessary constraint to growth in developing countries.

HUMAN SETTLEMENTS CONDITIONS

I would like to use the familiar phenomenon of urbanization to illustrate my contention that the condition of human settlements is the most important and urgent environmental challenge facing humanity between now and the beginning of the next century.

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Urbanization: the problems ahead

Man's environment is increasingly becoming an urban one. These trends are well known. According to official United Nations estimates and projections, by the year 2000 and for the first time in history, the majority of the world's population will be living in places classified as urban: basically, in towns and cities. This will happen mostly through the powerful urbanization forces at work in the developing world. While urbanization distributions are basically stable in industrialized countries, developing countries will be faced, in the remaining 15 years of this century alone, with a steady rise in urbanization which will double their urban population from slightly over 1 billion to well over 2 billion. Thus, by the year 2000 the cities of the developing world will have to double their capacity to handle their shelter, services, and infrastructure needs - and probably in conditions of diminishing resources and rising expectations.

Urbanization: cities as creators of wealth

The foregoing statistics undoubtedly portray a daunting prospect for human settlements in the years to come and an intimidating picture of the obstacles confronting us in taking up the human settlements challenge. However, we must also bear in mind the critical fact that human settlements - towns and cities in particular, but also small settlements in rural areas - are themselves also creators of wealth. Growing settlements are the most common indicators of overall growth of any national economy. Conversely, efficient and functioning settlements are essential to sustain growth and to ensure that at least some of the material benefits of economic expansion are shared by the majority of the people.

Cities are generators of wealth, but they cannot perform this role well - or even at all - if they do not function well as cities. As with any engine of production, cities, towns and settlement systems in general need maintenance, care and improvement. Yet this is one of the most neglected aspects of management in most countries, particularly countries of the developing world. Why is this?

Urbanization: dispelling the myths

The basic problem may well lie in current attitudes to urban centres and to urbanization itself, around which many negative myths have been allowed to grow. These myths, all of which have made policy- and opinion-makers regard cities and towns as net consumers of wealth, rather than the net creators of wealth that they really are, must be exposed and laid to rest if we are to generate the political will and attendant resources necessary to meet the challenge of which we speak.

The following are some of these myths:

(a) "Urbanization is bad". A whole school of modern thought, often promoted by wealthy urban dwellers in industrialized countries, has contributed to the consolidation of this myth in which the urban machine has been portrayed as representative of the supposed evils of the productive system as a whole.

(b) "Cities are destructive of the environment". A corollary of the previous one, this myth rests on the supposed damaging effects of rapidly growing urban concentrations on the environment and on some basic natural resources, such as soil, vegetation and water. The Commission should explore this concept in depth: if this were done, it would be discovered that well planned and managed cities - regardless of their size - are possibly the most

effective vehicles for protecting and safeguarding environmental resources both inside and outside their administrative boundaries.

(c) "Growing cities of developing countries are unmanageable". Size, and growth rates, need not be an excuse for despair. Evidence shows that there is no direct relationship between city size, population growth rate and the deterioration of the services, infrastructure, amenities and environmental conditions which are the main ingredients of the "quality of life". Experience in a few but representative cities in all four developing regions of the world shows that responsible policy-makers and administrators at the national and sub-national levels, and efficient and dedicated city planners and managers can find the legal means and can mobilize the financial, technical and human resources to improve environmental conditions in cities.

Urbanization: a fact of life

On the important question of attitude to the urbanization process, there is, of course, one critical factor that cannot be overlooked: urbanization and growing cities are a fact of modern life. Some may decry it and others may even try to reverse it, but no one can ignore it. One need only view the prospect in the developing world where the percentage of urban dwellers is expected to increase from slightly under 30 per cent in 1980 to over 40 per cent in the year 2000 and almost 60 per cent at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century^{1/}, to appreciate the force of the phenomenon.

A second important fact of life to bear in mind in this context is that the urbanization phenomenon is leading not only to more cities and towns but to larger and larger cities - megacities, as they have been called. In the year 2000, for

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^{1/} Demographic indicators by countries as assessed in 1982, Population Division, United Nations.

example, 24.2 per cent of the urban population will live in cities with more than 4 million inhabitants, as compared to only 9.6 per cent in 1960. In fact it is projected that by the year 2000 the number of cities of this size will nearly triple in developing countries. In short, megacities are not merely here to stay; they are here to get bigger. The modalities and characteristics of growth - whether they are to go through a process of managed growth or uncontrolled expansion will depend to a large extent on deliberate and explicit decisions (and non-decisions).

COPING WITH THE CHALLENGE

If, then, the development scenario is an increasingly urban one - and if, therefore, decisions related to the environment are increasingly going to originate from an urban context and radiate outwards - the question becomes what can or should be done to adapt our thinking, planning and policies to this phenomenon; more specifically, what should the World Commission be doing about this?

Step 1 - re-define the issue

The first step is to re-define the issue itself. The environment is not - or not merely - fresh streams, pure air, untouched landscapes, and rare and delicate plant and animal species. The environment is the world we live in - a world which is the product of countless manmade modifications, inextricably linked to the emergence of cities as the most complex but most productive form of human organization and venue of interaction in space and time. The environment is not only "the future borrowed from our children": the environment is here and now and, for half of the world's population, it is the cities and towns we live in. Hence, the urbanization phenomenon and, in particular,

the megacities of the third world - cannot be addressed as an environmental aberration. Settlements - towns, cities and the megacities of today - are the expression of the evolution of man's society and culture. The extent to which they express individual and social progress, depends entirely on how we look at them and what we do with them.

Urban environmental relationships become very complex when the issue narrows down to the interactions between urban growth and local environmental resources.^{2/} To equate physical growth of large cities and megacities with environmental damage is a gross generalization. The widely varying "environmental record" of cities developing in largely similar conditions proves that environmental destruction is not an inevitable consequence or a direct function of urban growth. In broad terms, it can be argued that the concentration of population in space is the most effective way to safeguard large tracts of territory which would otherwise be subject to haphazard settlement and exploitation.

Step II - adopt deliberate urbanization strategy

The second priority need is the revision of national development policy according to a deliberate urbanization strategy. It is quite evident that managed urban growth cannot take place without a reasonable assessment of population distribution alternatives in terms of resources, employment opportunities, and migration trends and the potential represented by selected small and intermediate urban centres as sustainable alternatives to primate city growth and as poles for rural development. Even in market economies, governments have at their disposal legislative and economic means,

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2/ The concept of the environmental impact of urban growth is indicative, in its one way approach, of the anti-urban bias which still plagues environmental thinking. The question of the impact of given environmental conditions and constraints on urban growth is rarely, if ever, considered.

particularly economic incentives, to steer investment, and consequently urban growth, in such a way as to favour the development of national settlement systems which allow a wiser and more productive utilization of human and natural resources.

This process has to extend to the allocation of capital and current expenditure resources at the local level. Municipal authorities must be enabled to operate within a reasonably clear framework and an extended timeframe in terms of the availability of central government funding and their role in the implementation of development programmes and projects of national interest.

Step III - re-define urban policy in environment/development context

The third step is to re-define urban policy in an environment/development context. Cities are creators of wealth, but particularly in developing countries, cities are also the places where misery and poverty are most visible. This does not mean that cities are places of impoverishment since, as a rule, cities are net importers of poverty from the rural areas, and evidence suggests that most rural-urban migrants succeed in improving their income levels and living conditions. What it does mean is that in the final analysis, cities as a milieu present the most convenient context for a direct attack on that greatest of all polluters: poverty.

Approaches to the environmental problems of the urban poor have evolved considerably in the past 10 or 15 years. In essence, this evolution can be described as a shift in the role of government from "provider" to "enabler": from providing shelter and community services to a few fortunate ones to creating a favourable environment in support of the efforts of the poor in improving their own shelter conditions. However, success of this approach requires that governments assume positive responsibility for creation of the requisite environment.

Governments often take for granted the urban environment in which much of the national wealth is generated. Outlays for new urban infrastructure and services, as well as for the modernization, improvement and maintenance of the urban environment, continue to be viewed as unavoidable, though regrettable, expenditures rather than as high-priority productive investments. Furthermore, even those decision-makers willing to appreciate the value of environmental improvement will still be tempted to object that resources are simply not there.

Critical role of local authorities

This attitude may well stem from local authorities being perceived, and in turn, seeing themselves, as distributors of welfare and passive enforcers of regulations rather than as primary actors in the urban development process. I firmly believe on the contrary that responsible policymakers and administrators at national and subnational levels, and efficient and dedicated city planners and managers can find the legal means and mobilize the financial, technical and human resources to improve environmental conditions in cities - and make a profitable activity out of it.

Controls and regulations alone will not do it, however. More imaginative approaches are called for. For instance, local authorities can successfully guide the urban development process on a partnership basis with the private sector, as long as the essential ground rule is clear: the urban community must get a fair return on the urban development process. This can happen in a direct way, with municipalities assuming an entrepreneurial role in areas such as land purchase, land banking and land development, or in an indirect way, by enabling them impose

charges on and collect revenue from property, land transactions and services, and by penalizing exploitative practices in the use of environmental resources.

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted in the preceding pages to present the case for a human settlements approach to environmental issues, the crux of this case resting on our view, first, that human settlements are to the individual the most consequential part of the environment and, secondly, that it is at any rate impractical to talk of protecting and/or improving the environment without first addressing the conditions of human settlements, where all human activity takes place.

I have in the process noted that challenge posed to development, the environment and indeed human society by present and foreseen trends in human settlements conditions and have highlighted, as an illustration, the crucial role of urbanization, of cities, both in accentuating the challenge and in offering at the same time the possibility of meeting it.

I have consequently argued that the challenge in front of us, however formidable, can be met provided three main priority action areas are addressed: first, a re-definition of the issue itself; second, a re-thinking of national development policies along deliberate urbanization strategies; third, new urban policies based on the re-definition of the role of local authorities as the central actors of the urban development process. The Commission, within its broad and independent mandate, is uniquely placed to address the challenge - and along the lines suggested. It is in a position to exert decisive influence at three levels: on national development policy; on international aid, both multilateral and bilateral; on opinion-makers and research institutions all over the world.

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As its designation indicates, the World Commission on Environment and Development has been given a broad and far-reaching mandate; as the items on its agenda reveal, the Commission intends to adopt a bold and comprehensive approach to its task. We at UNCHS (Habitat) heartily welcome these developments. All that we would urge is that the Commission embrace the concept that the long-term prospects for protecting the "natural" environment depend critically on meeting the human settlements challenge. There are without doubt many other weighty issues in the range of matters before the Commission, many other matters of moment to the environment to be considered - the nine items on the Commission's agenda attest to this. Yet we also recognize that, as with most human endeavours for which resources are finite, the Commission must perforce adopt, explicitly or tacitly, a scale of priorities to guide its efforts. If so, then all that we must respectfully submit is that the Commission should approach its task from the ground up, from the inside out, from the near to the far off, and from the practical to the esoteric, the known to the unknown. If it should do so, it will find, we are certain, no better candidate for priority attention than what we have termed the human settlements challenge.

A call to action

UNCHS (Habitat) is already in the frontline battling the human settlements challenge. The Commission can take the first step in the suggested direction by throwing its considerable weight behind this on-going effort. The General Assembly's proclamation of the Year 1987 as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless provides a most opportune occasion for this link-up.