

23rd session of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration

Written statement by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

Agenda Item 5: Institutions, climate action and environment

Currently, half of the world's population lives in cities with projections indicating that urban population will increase to 6 billion people by 2045. This expansion brings forth a myriad of opportunities, but also presents complex challenges, including overburdened infrastructure, congestion, pollution, loss of green spaces, and overall environmental degradation. These issues strain the fabric of our urban ecosystems and exacerbate the effects of climate change, such as temperature differentials already reaching up to 10 Celsius degrees higher than nearby rural areas.

Unfortunately, without adequate measures, this growth is likely to be accommodated through carbon-intensive urban expansion, rather than resilient urban densification. Addressing these issues demand innovative, people-centred and sustainable solutions, such as nature-based approaches, green and digital technologies, and robust legal frameworks. As climate change impacts on cities intensify, urban areas assume a pivotal role in mitigating its effects, yet they also contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions which is exacerbated by inadequate regulatory frameworks.

Effective national legal frameworks governing urban development will determine cities' capacity to mitigate climate change impacts and reduce carbon footprints sustainably and equitably. Governance approaches must embed principles of transparency and accountability to counteract corruption and support climate action ambitions and must consider the capacities and skills that are needed at the municipal and national levels for their adequate enforcement and implementation.

Placing people's needs at the centre of planning mechanisms and policy reforms gives communities the opportunity to participate in essential decision-making, thereby increasing their long-term impact. Considering the unequal impact of climate change, a human rights-based approach is essential, particularly for vulnerable communities and nations like Small Island Developing States. These states face existential threats from rising sea-levels and extreme weather events, necessitating strategic land-use planning and resilient infrastructure. Urban areas situated in coastal zones encounter a two-fold challenge posed by rising sea-levels and storm surges, especially heightened by tropical storms and cyclones. These natural events lead to devastating consequences such as inundation of land, coastal erosion, and soil degradation, inflicting substantial damage on socio-economic and cultural infrastructure.

A poignant illustration of this occurred in Vanuatu during the early days of March 2023, when the region experienced the unprecedented occurrence of two category four cyclones within a span of less than 72 hours—a historic event underscoring the grave vulnerability of coastal areas to extreme weather phenomena. The twin tropical storms were followed by a 6.5 magnitude earthquake, together affecting over 80 per cent of the population with intense rainfall and flooding. An estimated 75 per cent of buildings and houses were damaged. The price tag of

this dual disaster was roughly USD 50 million, a costly toll on a nation with a GDP of USD 1.06 billion.

The small island states have taken proactive steps, such as forming a Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law to advance international legal duties and seeking clarification from national and international courts on climate change obligations. However, international forums such as the UN Climate Change Conferences have underscored the insufficiency of existing interventions, including legal measures, in effectively implementing climate-related policies. Another factor that contributes to addressing climate change comprehensively, is the urgent need for robust climate finance mechanisms. Climate finance plays a crucial role in addressing the global challenge of climate change by providing funding for mitigation and adaptation efforts. It encompasses financial flows from various sources, including governments, international organizations, private sector entities, and individuals, directed towards projects and initiatives aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and building resilience to climate impacts.

Through various programs and initiatives, UN-Habitat supports cities in accessing climate finance to implement projects that enhance resilience and promote sustainable urban development. This includes providing technical assistance to local governments in developing climate-resilient infrastructure, facilitating access to funding sources, building capacity for project design and implementation, and growing technical skills and capacity at the local institutional level to leverage multi-stakeholder partnerships for increasing smart, sustainable and resilient urban solutions for all.

Additionally, UN-Habitat advocates for the inclusion of urban priorities in international climate finance mechanisms, ensuring that the unique challenges faced by cities, especially those in developing countries, are adequately addressed. By promoting the alignment of climate finance with urban development goals, UN-Habitat contributes to building climate-resilient and sustainable cities that can thrive in a changing climate.

However, challenges remain in ensuring adequate and equitable distribution of climate finance, as well as in leveraging private sector investment at scale. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among governments, financial institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector to unlock the necessary resources and facilitate the transition to a sustainable and climate-smart future.

To ensure transparency and accountability in climate finance, it's crucial to address corruption risks. Recommendations include proactive risk assessment, transparency standards, comprehensive accountability frameworks, leveraging technology, and engaging local stakeholders.

UN-Habitat plays a vital role in promoting sustainable urban growth, emphasizing the importance of well-drafted legislation in fostering inclusive, environmentally sound cities. However, many existing urban management frameworks, including institutions, laws and policies, hinder rather than facilitate low-carbon development, necessitating urgent reforms.

Furthermore, local governments often lack the necessary resources and personnel to effectively implement climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, including initiatives such as developing transit infrastructure, upgrading informal settlements, and conducting

comprehensive mapping of climate risks and hazards. Therefore, prioritizing the establishment of robust urban legislation and its seamless integration with climate change considerations is paramount. Building cities capable of withstanding environmental challenges and adapting to evolving climate conditions hinges upon the foundation of sound urban legislation.

UN-Habitat's **Urban Law Module, as part of the Law and Climate Change Toolkit** developed by UNEP, UNFCCC, and the Commonwealth Secretariat, aims to help countries align their domestic legislation with international climate goals, enhance urban resilience and foster climate-friendly urbanization. The module pays particular attention to the quality of the laws governing cities that has a direct bearing on how successful climate change measures are. It offers structured guidance to analyze and reform legal frameworks impacting urban development and climate concerns.

The Urban Law Module has five distinct components, including **climate governance for urban areas; urban and territorial planning; urban planning and design for adaptation; urban planning and design for mitigation; and economic and non-economic tools for climate-friendly urban planning**. This approach guarantees a comprehensive examination of the legal framework controlling cities in relation to climate change. The Urban Law Module allows participants to conduct a thorough structured analysis of the legal frameworks impacting urban development regarding climate concerns. The tool has currently been piloted in 10 countries, prompting the initiation of climate-related legal reforms in these nations.

Additionally, effective multi-level governance is vital for successful urban climate action, requiring collaboration between local and national governments. Publications such as UN-Habitat's '**Multi-level Governance for Effective Urban Climate Action in the Global South**' offer insights and case studies to facilitate such cooperation. It explores the complexities of multi-level governance, establishing the fundamentals of multi-level governance in the context of climate action.

In summary, achieving sustainable urbanization, climate action, environmental protection and strong institutions demands a holistic approach encompassing efficient legal frameworks, climate-conscious policies and anti-corruption measures, intergovernmental collaboration, and active public involvement through innovative methods and tools. The ultimate goal is to build urban areas that promote the well-being of their residents while preserving the environment for future generations. UN-Habitat's initiatives contribute to transformative change in cities, ensuring they can withstand and thrive amidst the challenges of climate change.