

Executive Director's Introduction



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In February 2020, as UN-Habitat announced that the 2022 World Urban Forum will be hosted by Poland in the city of Katowice, we could not imagine that the world would go into lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic created a temporary crisis of confidence in the future of cities as urban dwellers across the world, especially in large cities, fled to the perceived safety of the countryside or to smaller towns.

At the peak of the pandemic, what were once bustling cities became desolate as residents disappeared from public spaces during enforced lockdowns. Today, in 2022, many cities have begun to resemble their old selves, cautiously returning to the way they operated previously. There is a broad consensus that urbanization remains a powerful twenty-first century mega-trend. A sense of optimism is returning that the pandemic is providing us with the opportunity to build back differently. Can our children inherit an urban future that is more inclusive, greener, safer and healthier?

If the world were to experience another pandemic or major threat, would our cities and towns be sufficiently prepared based on what we have learned over the last two years? Would our cities have developed a robust system of resilience to respond to and withstand future shocks? I recall mayors and city managers asking: how do we build back better, greener and inclusively?

The answer lies with what we have learned and adopted as best practices responding to COVID-19 and the climate crisis. We must start by acknowledging that the status quo leading up to 2020 was in many ways an unsustainable model of urban development. To meet this challenge, the future of cities must respond to pressing urban challenges in different parts of the world. An optimistic scenario of urban futures will reduce inequality and poverty, foster productive and inclusive urban economies, invest sustainably to promote clean energy and protect ecosystems, and prioritize

public health. These ambitions, in turn, must be facilitated by responsive urban planning and multilevel governance systems in which finance, innovation and technology play overarching roles.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has occupied a significant share of global attention since 2020, it is far from the only threat facing the future of cities. High inflation and unemployment, slow economic growth, looming recession, mounting public debts, supply chain disruptions, armed conflicts, and a global food and energy crisis amount to a bitter cocktail of contemporary challenges. Unless concerted action is taken, millions of poor and vulnerable families across the world will continue to live in a future that is unfolding without the necessary safeguards and one that eclipses their dreams of a better urban future. Building economic, social and environmental resilience, including appropriate governance and institutional structures, must be at the heart of the future of cities. Economic resilience with new fiscal sustainability frameworks, societal resilience with universal social protection schemes, climate resilience with greener investments, and stronger multilevel collaboration to confront future shocks must be the main building blocks of a resilient future that can withstand and respond to the various threats and shocks that urban areas face.

The World Cities Report 2022 envisages an optimistic scenario of urban futures that relies on collaborative and effective interventions to tackle multidimensional poverty and inequalities; promote vibrant, resilient, diversified urban economies and productive urban futures; build healthy and thriving cities; strengthen the drive towards green urban futures; promote well-planned and managed urbanization processes; and ensure inclusive digital economies for the future. The optimistic scenario envisions concerted policy action facilitated by the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. It has now been over five years since the New Urban

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Agenda was adopted at the Habitat III summit in 2016 and the implementation framework must be amplified to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by making transformative progress in addressing the multiple challenges confronting cities both now and in the future.

The Report reaffirms that the vision for the future of cities must embody the “new social contract” in the form of universal basic income, universal health coverage and universal housing and basic services. This proposal was first articulated in the 2021 UN-Habitat report *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future* and remains more urgent than ever.

The vision of sustainable and equitable urban futures will not be guaranteed unless cities and subnational governments take bold and decisive actions to address both chronic and emerging urban challenges. Without urgent and transformative policy action at all levels, the current situation will only get worse. The urgency of new approaches for transformative change in cities cannot be overemphasized. Within this Decade of Action window, it is urgent for cities and subnational governments to adopt innovative approaches that will foster the optimistic scenario of urban futures.

The New Urban Agenda provides a holistic framework for urban development that encourages the integration of all facets of sustainable development to promote equality, welfare and shared prosperity. Our cities and towns must mainstream these commitments in their local development plans with a deliberate focus on tackling inequality, poverty and climate change, among other challenges. Sustainable urban futures remain a cornerstone of the fight to ensure that cities are better prepared for the next crisis.