

GIM INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS DR ANNA TIBAIJUKA, UN UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UN-HABITAT

Secure Land Tenure Key

On 29th June 2007 UN under-secretary-general and executive director of UN-Habitat Dr Anna Tibaijuka and ITC Rector Prof. Martien Molenaar signed a co-operation agreement to cluster their knowledge on urban development in developing countries: capacity development, training and research. Professor Molenaar feels the Netherlands must raise its profile as expert in urban development and management, as it is already doing with water and agricultural expertise. We asked Dr Tibaijuka how the new agreement would help meet UN-Habitat aims in combating poverty and achieving sustainable urban development.

What were the main reasons behind UN-Habitat signing a co-operation agreement with the International Institute for Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation (ITC)?

For us ITC is a knowledge base with many students in the field of surveying, that generally means the production of geo-information, and in the use of geo-information. And geo-information is one of the important prerequisites for achieving sustainable urban development. ITC's expertise in geo-information management is very complementary to the concerns and expertise of UN-Habitat. Therefore we are keen to have them contribute to the international work we are doing in assisting others. In ITC we have a service partner that is part of a global network of solidarity and co-operation in our pursuit of development.

One of the millennium development goals of the UN is to reduce poverty and improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. How can this be achieved?

The slum target is Target 11 of Goal 7 of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Goal 7 is to *ensure environmental sustainability*, and the slum target aims, as you have said, at achieving significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. In addition to the slum target, Goal 7 has two more targets. One concerns the environment while the other is to reduce by half the number, totalling one billion, of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water. In summer 2002, during the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, it was recognised that 2.6 billion people still lacked access to basic sanitation, and therefore the safe-drinking-water target was extended to include sanitation, more specifically, to halve the number of people without access to basic sanitation by 2015.

Why two different deadlines and evaluation criteria: the one in relative terms the other in absolute?

It is indeed remarkable. The sanitation target is stated in proportional terms while the slum target is formulated in absolute numbers. One of my objectives has been to point out this anomaly. In my view you cannot say that you want to reduce the number of slum dwellers by 100 million. It is not even 10% of the people living in slums. Where should this happen? China or India could alone deliver that target. The reduction should cover all countries, so I see target formulation in absolute terms as flawed. We have to work in proportional terms, and that is to halve the number of people living in slums by 2020, the baseline being the city. In every city in any developing country this proportional goal should be achieved. But such a goal cannot be achieved by upgrading slums alone. We have been working hard to have this correction made, and I am very happy to say that in 2005 the Declaration introduced a notion on slum prevention which is more proactive than is upgrading.

The cities of many developing countries are overwhelmed with rural people fleeing desperate poverty. Massive migration is turning

metropolises into megalopolises. How can the creation of slums be prevented under these circumstances?

Prevention is a planning issue and the technology, in particular geo-information technology, is available to support proper planning, provided there is the political will. Every poor country in the world has land, so that cannot be the problem. The issues concern particularly getting proper services, such as water and sanitation, on the ground. Therefore I am now campaigning for aid to get these services into the places where slum dwellers settle so that they have a good start from the beginning. Fortunately, world leaders have now endorsed the principle of slum prevention. This means planning is now back in the policy room and the political will is there. During the World Urban Forum 4, to be held in Nanjing, China in June next year, this issue will be very prominent.

To what degree are these ideas inspired by the insights of Chilean economist Hernando de Soto?

The Advisory Board of the Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor, of which I am myself a member, is co-chaired by Hernando de Soto and the former US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright. For me, de Soto's most insightful contribution was to raise the topic of the futility of waste of investment in property. We face, and this is almost an absurdity, the problem that valuable houses are never accepted by banks as security for loan because there is a threat that these houses will be demolished at any time and people do not have secure tenure, official registration of house ownership. So the banks are not willing to treat these houses as tradable goods and the owners have no possibility of turning them into commercial assets. De Soto made a very important, seminal contribution in popularising this awareness. And it is clear to us that to arrive at sustainable development and social equity it is necessary to establish proper tenure systems. In practice, however, one needs to recognise that tenure systems are not the same everywhere in the world. A wide range of formal and customary tenure systems exists based on a diversity of cultural and historical influences, such as communal and Islamic land-tenure systems. Many religions have firm rules on land ownership and, unfortunately, in many countries the rules work against women. But in the end people need access to affordable housing, and for many slum dwellers only shacks are affordable; shacks illegally and cheaply built by entrepreneurs who want to make fast money by exploiting the poor. This is something we should combat too.

Would it not be in the natural way of things for people with power to attempt to snuggle up close to aid providers and their monetary resources, thus enriching themselves and enhancing their own power while the poor, without such access, remain poverty-stricken and weak?

You raise the point of aid effectiveness: how much money from the taxpayer in the north reaches the grassroots in developing countries? This is an important issue because it is true that aid delivery is associated with very high transaction costs, so that the amount of money consigned may be considerably reduced by the time it reaches the grassroots. It is an issue I looked at when I was a member of the Commission for Africa established by former British prime minister Tony Blair. However, you suggest that the sources of delay and inefficiencies are located only in the developing countries. This is not true; they are also on the donor side. The costs of running UN-Habitat, for example, are considerable but unavoidable because taxpayers' money is involved and this requires a control mechanism to warrant a certain level of transparency and accountability, a mechanism inevitably associated with bureaucratisation. But modern technology may help to reduce costs while keeping transparency and accountability at the same level. On the side of developing countries, money drainage is often attributed to corruption. Although there is no doubt that corruption exists, there is also a tendency to exaggerate the amount of money involved, for this makes headline news, and often rather sensational news at that.

You mention the issues of corruption and discrepancy between the financial resources provided and what dribbles down to grassroots. Criticasters even claim that total financial aid provided to Africa over the past half century has had no effect at all, and when it has this has been negative.

I think there is no factual basis for drawing such a drastic conclusion. In order to be able to answer this question, which is actually an academic one, you have to be able to show how Africa would have been today without having received any aid. After the second world war the Europeans got assistance via the Marshall Plan and it is obvious that when your development is held back for historical reasons you need support. This is a matter of decency and a part of international commitment. The problem is that the Africans have not received sufficient co-ordinated aid to make a difference. As an African I would say that we are looking for improvement in the situation. Better knowledge exchange and harmonisation between the parties involved is crucial in this respect. In conclusion, I would say that the observation is misplaced. There is no scientific basis for it and, in my opinion, aid which has gone to Africa has been useful and should therefore continue.

Better knowledge exchange will, among other things, be achieved by co-operation with the ITC, the foundation for which you laid today?

Yes, it will.

Thank you very much for your time and your insightful words.

