

HUMAN SETTLEMENTS - STATEMENT BY NORWAY

Mr Chair.

I will start with commending the Secretary General's report on human settlements. The issues that I will elaborate upon are all reflected in his report.

Human settlements provide a concrete context for action. Cities, in particular, being catalysts of political opinion, innovation, cultural crossroads and market places are well suited to be the triggers of development. According to an old German saying: breathing the air of the city can make people free. Unless of course they die in of pollution in the meantime. This is what we have to avoid.

Almost all the population increase over the last twenty years has taken place in urban areas (90%). If radical changes are not made in current urban policies, this rate will continue. By 2030 half the population of the developing world will be slum dwellers.

We share the Secretary General's recognition that it is the urban poor that are the most important agents for social and economic change. The urban poor are however not an homogenous group. Norway particularly sees women and young people as the agents with the greatest potential for change. Youth is no longer the only the future, it is also, due to ongoing demographic changes, the present. Three billion people of today – almost half the world's population, are below the age of 24.

Norway will, having women and youth in mind, advocate the need to shift gear from a needs based approach to a rights based approach. A prerequisite for a rights based approach is, however, that people know their rights. Human rights education must be given higher priority, both within formal as well as informal education, both in developing as well as developed countries.

A rights based approach implies that something is done with the causes of poverty and underdevelopment. It implies that the main change agents are identified, empowered, given the opportunity to organise, mobilise and advocate their grievances in relation to local, national and international powerholders. Community led initiatives are promising: how to scale up in particular with local governments generally however remains a challenge.

One of the staggering facts about poverty, which is not addressed explicitly among the MDGs, is that the vast majority of the world's poor live their daily lives outside the rule of law, in what often is referred to as the informal or extralegal sector. Excluded from the benefits of a legal order. The result is lower growth, less revenues and less room for investing in health, education and infrastructure, and sometimes more instability and armed conflict. Against this background, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom with an increasing number of developing countries, will in the near future launch an initiative to elaborate how the poor can be legally empowered. The purpose is to promote poverty reduction through improved asset security, formalisation of property rights and the rule of law. Without ownership there will be no sustainability and no expansion of real choices.

Sector reforms need to be speeded up and the poorest countries cannot wait for another five or ten years for the reforms to start yielding results. Investments and reforms need to be implemented in parallel.

An effective global monitoring mechanism needs to be put in place so that 1) the urban poor are put on the map in national and international development plans and 2) to allow accurate tracking of progress towards achieving these targets.

Decentralisation and building capacity in local authorities, pro poor urban planning and development are also important factors to halt the urbanisation of poverty.

To conclude, Norway would like to applaud the positive developments that during the last couple of years have taken place in UN-HABITAT under the able leadership of the Executive Director Ms. Anna Tibajuka. We look forward to discuss Habitat issues more extensively during the forthcoming Governing Council meeting in Nairobi early April, also in order to provide further input to CSD 13 and the MDG meeting in New York in September.

Mr. Chair, it has been a pleasure to address this small but exclusive assembly under your able leadership. Thank you.