

Key note address mr. Hans van der Sluijs, chairman Dutch Habitat Platform, Mayor of Maarssen,
On the occasion of the Conference of European Parliamentarians on Habitat,
12 May 2006, The Hague

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of parliament and representatives
of European States, Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen!

It is an honour for me to address you as participants in this parliamentary
conference. You are in the position to influence one of the most crucial
challenges in today's world:

how to ensure that our living environment can become more sustainable,
and how to make sure that opportunities and resources are equally
distributed among all people, In North and South and East en West.

Ten years ago in the city of Istanbul the Habitat Agenda was adopted by
almost all member states of the United Nations. Many results have
been achieved since then, but the pace in which the world is
developing can apparently not be matched by the endeavours of
governments, or by the investments of the business community.

The world population is still growing fast. Cities – especially in
developing countries – are almost exploding. Exploding in the sense
that capacity of provisions falls short and the number of slums is
growing faster than we can improve existing situations.

Those of you who have travelled by air to Mexico City may have seen
from the air a vision of an exploding city, houses that are build over the
edge of a volcano into its crater.

Today half the world's population live in cities and no less than one third
of the people on this planet live in slums, bidonvilles, favelas or
whatever name you want to give it. On the African continent no less
than

- 72% of the people live in slums
- only 48% have a water connection
- about 31% of the dwellings are connected to a sewage system
- and 40% of the people live under conditions which are life and
health threatening!

Just some statistics, but what a chilling message!

Urbanisation is a very rapid going process. As I said before, half the population of this world is living in urban areas, but in 25 years 60% will live in cities. In some continents like Europe and Latin America the percentage of urbanisation already reaches 70. The number of very big cities, with a million or more inhabitants, is growing very fast.

This is not in every way a negative development. Cities are centres of development, growth and opportunity. Cities attract creative, intellectual and industrious people. They are centres of commerce, the arts and they are stimulating political ideas and the development of society.

Cities are truly “magnets of hope”, which incidentally is the theme of the UN World Habitat Day on the 2nd of October of this year.

The skyline of many a city, with its twinkling lights at sunset, is a true symbol of this and that may be the reason why so many people leave their birthplace in rural areas to try their luck in a city.

Unfortunately behind that proud skyline many city administrations struggle with enormous problems. They have to deal with a steady influx of people which put strains on the housing market, the local economy, the education system and public safety.

Facilities take years to be developed – or are not developed at all - and so problem areas are born.

In many third world countries these problems are even worse. There, slums are fast developing, without proper housing, drinking water and sewers. The administration is not able to provide services and is losing control. In many a case local crime bosses step in.

A big city is a complex entity and I sincerely believe that it is the most complicated form of government. Problems at this scale are interlocking and many administrations lack the resources and even the power to deal with the rapid arising problems.

Based on the old and proven instrument of the twinning of cities the Dutch Habitat Platform developed a concept of cities helping each other. It is an integrated, multi-stakeholder and multi-sector approach: the City Wide Approach.

After a slow start it is beginning to show results. During a recent conference in Ethiopia, recently organized with other Dutch NGO's, it

seems that we found a concept which is attractive for African cities. Could it work in other continents as well?

There are no blue prints, and every country and every city demands its own strategy, careful selection of stakeholders and careful coaching of the partners in this process.

Too few people benefit from the advantages living in urban areas. Most people in developing parts of the world are living in very poor conditions, and their numbers grow, not withstanding the fact that the United Nations recognized this already 30 years ago on a conference in Vancouver.

There the importance of cities and improvement of slums was already emphasized. In my opinion this is the real target of the Habitat Agenda!

We adopted this Agenda in Istanbul ten years ago, and now we committed ourselves to the Millennium Goals. But I still feel that we pay not enough attention to the threatening effects of urbanisation, the growing gap between rich and poor, and to our unsustainable use of non-renewable resources!

We are consuming our resources faster than is allowed according to what the world can produce in a sustainable way. Our cities only cover a small percentage of the surface of the Earth, but their ecological footprints have a big impact.

Europe and the United States are also using a bigger share of the worlds resources than should be allowed according to an equal distribution of resources.

I am referring at the use of energy, the spilling of clean and drinkable water and air pollution, not to mention the effects on the ozon-layer.

Too little funding, scientific research and intellectual power is devoted to create a sustainable society for the future and for the next generations that will grow in numbers.

The Millennium Development Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals are adopted to counter this, but progress is already too slow to counter this problem.

The Millennium Development Goals, especially Goal 7, target 11, but also the targets on safe drinking water and sanitation, and diminishing urban poverty *are important* in the context of Habitat's main principles: adequate housing and sustainable human settlements.

My conclusion after many years working in local government and being for some time involved with the Habitat Agenda is, that this Agenda as an integrated and interactive approach is very much underestimated. It deserves more attention of national and local policy makers.

Nowadays, politicians and policy makers focus very much on economics, financial approaches, interest rates etc. but the importance of what really drives entrepreneurs and workers, buyers and investors is mostly overlooked. It is not only the availability of cheap labor.

The social atmosphere, stable political climate, safety and security in an area are also important factors for the decisions on investments. An equal important factor in economics is the infrastructure: investors are looking if roads, infrastructure, market places, public transport, and electricity are available. If not, they won't invest.

Take for example a country like South Africa where in out-flux of capital is as big as the influx. There is actually nothing left in the country to invest. And this is almost purely a consequence of the social insecurity of the country.

Someone once said "the economy is too important to leave to the economists". Difficult as it may be, economy is an integral issue that should be taken up by economists and social policy makers together.

Another question investors might ask is: What is the health and social position of workers? I would like to remind you that 100 years ago in the Netherlands, the owners of the big companies urged the government to draft and implement a Housing Act (1901) in combination with a Health Act.

This for instance put an end to open sewers and the use of canals in cities to disperse human waste, which were a source of all kinds of diseases which threatened the health situation of the workers.

Today the world is facing a new challenge as new diseases rapidly develop and which are often resistant to most antibiotics. Modern air

transport is not only a convenient form of public transport but can also spread new diseases very rapidly.

But it is also the old bird that can be a thread to our health as recent events show us. This is a complicated matter that probably cannot be solved in a simple way.

But I cannot stop to wonder, when looking to television images of bird flu victims in Asia of Turkey that proper housing, water and sanitation, clean air and light are of vital importance for people's health, and therefore for all economies. A world wide epidemic disease might even be easier to prevent.

Another example where habitat can help to make an economy more sustainable is the field of energy. We are running out of oil and we are struggling to find other , more sustainable sources of energy.

However, a lot can be gained in the saving of energy in the field of housing, drawing on the experiences, gained in Western Europe en North America. High-rise apartments in Eastern Europe are a famous example of wasting of energy.

We could easily reduce the amount of energy needed in houses if we could help to organize the inhabitants to take the proper measures. People in Central and Eastern Europe use 60% of their living expenses for household energy. This is money which is drawn from their already low income and prevents them to stimulate the economy, and it also harms the environment.

Also urban planning is a rather neglected way to save energy. Here the US could serve as an extreme example. Buildings and provisions are spread over the country as if distance and fuel do not matter.

Europe is slightly better organized, but there is a lot to gain considering the fact that traffic is still increasing. Not only traffic to go to work, but even more leisure traffic. In the Netherlands nowadays, the non-labour related traffic outnumbers the labour related traffic.

Quite often traffic congestion during the weekend is quite worse compared to a normal weekday. The family car seems to have become a civil right . We ought to organize our recreational activities in a better and a more sustainable way in our own towns and neighbourhoods.

We should be constantly searching for instruments which can help in these situations, within the framework of the Habitat Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals. It is not an easy job. It takes time, and it is not easy to sell in a world which is fast moving and demands a quick solution for a problem when it arises.

About the relation between the Habitat Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals I would like to say this Although the documents carry different titles, and differ in words, they share the same, important message: improving the conditions of those living in poor housing serves sustainable development.

As members of parliament you could put more emphasize on the principles that are laid down in these documents. The city administrations in your countries need your support in keeping ahead of the problems.

A great number of your citizens will benefit of sustainable development of cities. And finally you could stimulate the use of the experience and knowledge of city administrators in the field of foreign aid.

For people working in the field of Habitat is important to know that members of parliament are getting involved. Tomorrow you hopefully will adopt the Declaration of The Hague. The title "Pleasant Places" not only coins what it is all about: responsibility for the basic living conditions for our people, but it also gives an idea about improving the quality of life.

I hope this declaration will be forwarded to your colleagues outside Europe and that each of you will bring this declaration to the attention of your own parliament, to local governments, to national stakeholders and interest groups, your constituents

and especially to the participants of the Third World Urban Forum in Vancouver next month, where everybody that matters in the field of sustainable development will be meeting. That conference hopefully will bring us all many steps forward in reaching our goals.

Thank you very much!