



Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Committee on Environment and Development

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Outcome of the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum**Outcome of the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum****Note by the secretariat***Summary*

The Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum was organized by ESCAP and 30 partners from within and outside the United Nations system in Bangkok. The Forum comprised 3 plenary panel discussions, 5 subregional focus group discussions, 19 break-out sessions of the Bazaar of Ideas and Practices, a documentary movie night, and an exhibition of innovative practices and programmes, as well as 2 field visits and 11 associated and side events. Over 900 national and local government officials, private sector representatives, academics, civil society organizations and journalists participated in the Forum. In addition, local urban forums were held simultaneously in four cities in the region. The plenary discussions of the Forum were web-casted and panellists answered “tweeted” questions from the local urban forums. The present document provides a brief summary of the discussions and recommendations for action at the regional and subregional levels and seeks the Committee’s guidance on the role of the secretariat in implementing them.

I. Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has been periodically convening the Asia-Pacific urban forums since 1993 to identify, discuss and prioritize emerging and critical issues in inclusive and sustainable urban development from the perspective of different stakeholders; share experiences on good and innovative practices, and approaches related to inclusive and sustainable urban development; and to explore how activities of different actors can be better coordinated and linked with each other and to relevant regional and global processes, events and development objectives.

2. The Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum was held in Bangkok from 20 to 25 June 2011. It was organized by ESCAP in partnership with over 30 organizations within and outside the United Nations system. The Forum brought together over 900 national and local government officials, academics, civil society, the private sector, grass-roots leaders and United Nations representatives from 45 countries to discuss how to move Asia and the Pacific towards a more inclusive and sustainable urban future.

3. Urban areas in Asia and the Pacific are growing at an unprecedented rate. A majority of Asians (about 2.7 billion) will live in urban areas by 2030. Already producing over 80 per cent of the region's GDP, cities are engines of economic growth and centres of social development, culture, creativity and innovation. Yet, much of the region's rapid urban growth and progress have been neither inclusive nor sustainable. The region's cities and towns are places where poverty and disparities are most concentrated and visible. Over 30 per cent of Asia-Pacific's urban residents live in slums without access to adequate shelter, basic services or income opportunities and excluded from decision-making. Given the region's geo-climatic conditions and with most of its urban population living along rivers, low-lying deltas and coastlines, Asia and the Pacific is also the region most vulnerable to natural disasters and other adverse climate change impacts. An inclusive and sustainable development path therefore has to focus on economic progress that does not continuously overstretch nature's carrying capacity and whose benefits are shared in a more equitable manner to meet the needs and demands of the growing urban populations, particularly the urban poor. Further, it has to enhance the resilience of cities and their populations to the broad spectrum of natural and man-made crises and disasters. In recognition of the fact that, while urbanization poses tremendous challenges, it also presents tremendous opportunities, the theme chosen for the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum was "Cities of Opportunity: Partnerships for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future".

4. The main meeting in Bangkok was organized around plenary sessions, subregional focus group discussions and bazaar of ideas sessions. Plenary sessions introduced key issues, linked various themes/discussions and provided participants with a forum for debate and an exchange of ideas and practices. The plenary sessions were linked via web-casting and Twitter to local urban forums organized by partners in four cities of the region. Participants of the local urban forums were able to view the proceedings live via web-cast and ask their questions via twitter. The first *State of Asian Cities* Report, published by ESCAP, UN-Habitat in partnership with UNEP and the Asia-Pacific Section of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG-ASPAC) was also launched at one of the plenary sessions.

5. The subregional focus groups met in parallel break-out sessions to discuss urban development priorities and practices in the Pacific, North and Central Asia, South and South-West Asia, South-East Asia and North and North-East Asia, and explored ways to forge more effective and inclusive links between different stakeholders involved at the subregional level.

6. The Bazaar of Ideas and Practices comprised a series of parallel break-out sessions organized by Forum partners. They promoted networking and facilitated the exchange of ideas by sharing different approaches to address urban opportunities and challenges as well as good

practices and ideas. ESCAP and its partners organized 19 sessions on various urban issues.

7. In addition, 11 associated and side events, 2 study visits, an urban documentary night and an exhibition with 26 exhibitors were held. Among the associated events of particular interest was the Ministerial Dialogue on Citywide Upgrading, which was organized by the Government of Thailand, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and ESCAP. Over 10 ministers and deputy ministers and other senior officials participated in the Ministerial Dialogue and in the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum.

8. The opening ceremony was presided over by Her Royal Highness Princess Chulabhorn Mahidol, who also presented the keynote address. The Forum was opened by the Prime Minister of Thailand, with the Executive Secretary of ESCAP delivering the welcome statement.¹

II. Follow-up cooperation agreements as a result of the Asia-Pacific Urban Forum

9. The Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum resulted in concrete partnerships. The Governments of Indonesia and Thailand signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation and exchange of experience and technical assistance on citywide upgrading of slums. The memorandum was signed by the Ministry of Housing of Indonesia and the Community Organizations Development Institute of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security of Thailand. It was witnessed by the Executive Secretary of ESCAP.

10. Similarly, the Regional Network of Local Authorities for the Management of Human Settlements (CityNet) had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights and the Community Organizations Development Institute of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security of Thailand to work closely together on the issue of low-income housing. CityNet had also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Cities Development Initiative for Asia (CDIA) on financing urban development.

III. Outcomes of the subregional discussions

11. The outcomes of the subregional discussions were presented at a plenary session as the chairperson's summary. The following text is based on those summaries.

A. South and South-West Asia

12. The session was chaired by Mr. Abdul Manan Khan, Minister of Housing of Bangladesh. Prof. Om Prakash Mathur, of the National Institute of Urban Affairs, New Delhi, started the discussion by presenting a discussion paper entitled "South Asia's Urban Transition".

¹ For more information on the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum, see www.unescap.org/apuf-5.

13. The focus group concluded that South and South-West Asia was undergoing rapid urbanization. It was recognized that 14 to 15 per cent of the world's urban population lived in this subregion, which included 46 per cent of the world's urban poor. Urbanization was an ongoing process. Over the next 20 years, 340 to 350 million new residents were expected to settle in cities of the subregion. The implications of this demographic transition were not understood and had not been discussed seriously by policymakers in the subregion.

14. Urbanization in South Asia was, to a great extent, influenced by forces beyond its control and there was a deep dissatisfaction with the way urbanization was unfolding. It was resulting in:

- (a) Negative effects on culture, history, family values, social fabric;
- (b) Unaffordable long-term costs;
- (c) Disruption to peace and security;
- (d) Distortions in land markets;
- (e) Deficits and inequities in basic infrastructure.

15. Urban stakeholders were often unable to cope with these problems efficiently. It was difficult for the public sector to cope with the massive demographic transition, as devolution and decentralization had failed to take off. The private sector was unlikely to absorb the high costs of urbanization. Both sectors showed a decline in interest to finance urban infrastructure. The costs of under-investment in urban infrastructure, particularly in secondary cities and small towns, were not recognized sufficiently.

16. Stakeholders did not have enough data on which to build their policies. The lack of information nearly made it impossible to perform a meaningful assessment of urban challenges and opportunities. Research terms and methodologies were not consistent within countries, let alone across the subregion. This was particularly relevant to the subregion as, with globalization of information and improved physical and information connectivity, it was no longer clear what was "urban" and "rural" anymore. The focus group called upon ESCAP and its partners to assist countries of the subregion in developing a robust urban research agenda and to assist them in implementing it.

17. The focus group also noted that gross domestic product (GDP) had become the sole measure of growth and development, while urban sustainability was key to the subregion's development. Factors such as security and peace, rural and cross-border migration, age, family, health, culture, literature, happiness and environmental sustainability were ignored in the subregion's current urban development paradigm. Long-term policies for sustainable and equitable cities were missing. Where such policies existed, implementation was often difficult.

18. To overcome these problems, the focus group suggested adopting a new development model and paradigm which would be inclusive, sustainable and resilient and respectful of culture, social fabric and family values. Urban infrastructure and services needed to be seen in a broader context of societal and public good, not just economic development. A broad vision of long-term development was very important, with a special

focus on resource efficiency, urban land markets, water resources and waste management. Such a vision could only be made after multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder consultations. For stakeholders to provide meaningful inputs, they should be strengthened by capacity-building programmes and skill and leadership development courses. Available data and information should be presented in new ways. These included updated databases on urban trends, as well as mapping of vulnerable urban settlements.

19. The focus group concluded that, to make all of this happen, regional support was needed. Subregional initiatives in the South Asian region were still in their early stages and the results were not known or evident. Therefore, the focus group strongly recommended the convening of a multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder South-Asia Urban Forum, preferably at the ministerial level. It called upon ESCAP to work with the secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to convene such a forum. The focus group also recommended that ESCAP organize, in partnership with other organizations, regional and subregional thematic policy dialogues on the issues of land, sustainable urban infrastructure, water and waste management.

B. North and Central Asia

20. This session was chaired by Mr. Sergey Gulyayev, Deputy of City Council, Pavlodar, Kazakhstan. It was co-chaired by Mr. Ilya Andreev, Attaché and Assistant Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to ESCAP. Ms. Alexandra Kazakova, President of KAMEDA Foundation, Kazakhstan, who had written the discussion paper for the region, introduced the issues for discussion.

21. The focus group concluded that, as the subregion comprised countries that constituted the former Soviet Union, this made it distinct from the rest of Asia and the Pacific. The Soviet legacy left the region facing unique challenges. Good physical infrastructure had been established, including the provision of services and transport. However, years of poor maintenance and lack of refurbishment as well as outdated technology had meant that the services were run down, resources wasted and pollution rampant.

22. In the Soviet era, a comprehensive system of social services had been established and included education, medical services and social protection. It was now increasingly expensive to maintain those services. There were similarities in institutional, legal and regulatory systems with Russian as the common language. This provided a means of communication and meant that there was a huge potential for subregional collaboration.

23. Most of the countries in the subregion had relatively low population densities, low population growth and low urban densities. There were hardly any cities with population of more than a million. Urban areas in the subregion were beset with harsh climatic conditions with temperatures ranging from minus 40 in winter to 40 degrees centigrade in summer. Most of the countries were landlocked. The subregion covered a vast territory with huge distances between cities.

24. As a result of the generally lower level of urban density and relatively good urban infrastructure, the subregion was only starting to face

some of the challenges that were already plaguing the rest the Asia-Pacific region. Policymakers and practitioners in the subregion therefore lacked the experience to deal with emerging urban challenges. The meeting identified several gaps and challenges that needed to be tackled.

25. Governance was one such issue. Decision-making was highly centralized, which often meant that local governments did not have enough power or political will to make decisions and did not have enough control over their budgets. There were weaknesses in the legal frameworks and enforcement of existing rules and regulations.

26. Civil society participation was weak because of the lack of effective mechanisms for such participation and the lack of motivation caused by the common belief that it would not have any impact on the decision-making process. Generally, it was only government or administrative failure that prompted civil society to organize and take action—as in the case of Shanyrak when district residents organized to protect their housing rights.

27. Another crucial issue was urban planning. Urban planning was seen as “window-dressing”. This was because master plans were inappropriate to the needs of their cities. Even though there was significant potential in the subregion, urban planning was often left to the officials in the government administration and there were no effective mechanisms to involve civil society participation in decision-making. Urban planning often ignored environmental sustainability and the ecological capacity in cities.

28. Even though the rate of urbanization was not high, this process was largely unregulated, leading to the expansion of informal housing that lacked infrastructure, and to increased vulnerability of population that occupied such informal housing. This included a lack of secure tenure and registration. The absence of mechanisms to formalize land ownership often translated into limited access to government funded education, medical and social protection services.

29. Transboundary rural to urban and urban to urban migration was another challenge in the subregion. Although it was demand-driven, the high rate of illegal migration, particularly of low-skilled labour, to the more developed cities of the subregion posed a number of problems. There was no mechanism to protect these illegal migrants from crime and the violation of their rights, or to ensure access to education, medical services and social protection, making them extremely vulnerable.

30. Illegal migrants generated very little tax revenue for receiving countries, although the economies of sending countries received the remittances that migrants sent their dependants. These illegal migrants were often men from poor families trying to find better income opportunities. As result of their migration, families were frequently left divided and the female-headed households were often plunged deeper into poverty.

31. The focus group concluded that dilapidated infrastructure and the reliance on outdated technology had resulted in the inefficient use of resources, as well as severe air, water and land pollution. These included the lack of proper solid waste management and the lack of facilities for recycling used materials.

32. There was an acute water scarcity and seasonal fluctuations in the water supply—both for domestic and commercial purposes – for industry, agriculture and the production of electricity. For some countries, there was an unreliable energy supply, in some cases as a result of inefficient infrastructure. Environmental damage was also rampant. For example, there were eco-refugees and cities located close to heavily polluted areas, such as the Aral Sea and Baykanur.

33. The focus group felt that an overhaul of the legal framework was needed, especially of the legislation on the environment and local self-government. Law enforcement needed to be improved. Systems that ensure participation and partnership between the government, experts and civil society in urban planning need to be tightened. Urban authorities and civil society organizations needed increased capacity development. Moreover, the urban population in the region needed to be made more aware of issues of good governance and environmental sustainability.

34. The focus group felt that new strategies and mechanisms were essential for more efficient infrastructure upgrading and city planning. Policies aimed at removing barriers to private sector development, especially small and medium enterprises should be implemented. A new pricing structure for services, particularly utilities and transport should be introduced and developed, including incentive mechanisms for key groups.

35. To achieve more inclusive and sustainable cities in the region more effective situational analysis, based on reliable data was needed to establish a baseline and help formulate ways forward. This would involve comprehensive surveys or studies of urban development in the subregion.

36. The focus group also suggested that a “forum of cities” could provide an institutionalized mechanism for multi-stakeholder dialogue at the city level within the subregion. This could also help increase the capacity of everyone involved by learning from the experiences and practices that already exist. At the same time, the forum could serve as a platform for the exchange of ideas and practices between the cities across Asia and the Pacific.

C. South-East Asia

37. This focus group discussion was chaired by Ms. Liana Bratasida, the Assistant Minister for Global Environmental Affairs and International Cooperation of Indonesia and Chair of the ASEAN Working Group on Environmentally Sustainable Cities. Mr. Yap Kioe Sheng, Honorary Professor of Housing at the City and Regional Planning Department, Cardiff University, started the discussion by presenting the discussion paper, which identified a number of key urban challenges facing the subregion.

38. The subsequent discussion on the challenges and the opportunities for subregional cooperation in confronting those challenges was initiated by Mr. Apisayadeth from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Professor Goldblum from France, who presented the outcomes of the recent regional seminar on South-East Asian Emerging Cities and Urbanization, which had been held in Vientiane as an associated event of the Asia-Pacific Urban Forum.

39. The focus group concluded that the formulation of effective urban policies required a thorough understanding of the process and conditions of urbanization. However, the available data were often unsuitable for policymakers and urban planners. There was an urgent need to develop databases on urban rather than municipal conditions and processes, on intra-urban and inter-urban disparities, and on new urban developments, including city clusters, urban corridors and cross-border urban developments. The focus group agreed that this was an area where the countries in the subregion could benefit from greater cooperation and learning from each other. The focus group also stressed the importance of disaggregating the data by gender.

40. Urbanization resulted in socio-cultural changes that have long-term and far-reaching consequences. Among these were declining fertility rates and an ageing population, which raised issues of dependency, social welfare and the role of the family, the State and civil society. Other consequences of economic development and increasing connectivity, particularly access to information technologies and urbanization, were the rise of the urban middle class and its impact on the economy, politics and the environment, as well as the spread of urban norms and values to rural areas. Participants pointed to emerging social issues, including the importance of problems related to the spread of HIV/AIDS and illegal drug use.

41. The focus group felt that the conventional view of economic growth, poverty reduction and environmental protection as being interrelated might not hold. The long-term viability of economic growth in South-East Asian cities was not guaranteed, given the fierce competition in the current global economy. Economic growth on its own would not necessarily lead to reduced poverty unless serious efforts were made to increase the capacity of the poor to seize any emerging economic opportunities.

42. Economic growth and broad-based prosperity would further damage the environment unless they were decoupled from the use of natural resources. Local governments, the private sector and civil society in South-East Asia must rethink their growth and development approaches in anticipation of the significant climatic changes that were likely to affect the subregion. For example, increasing food insecurity in urban areas was among the possible consequences of climate change.

43. Participants also discussed the needs and opportunities for urban agriculture and to strengthening rural-urban linkages. Several people warned that water shortages, water pollution and the problems of inadequate sanitation would increasingly affect the urban population, especially the poor.

44. Central Governments alone could not solve all urban challenges. It needed the cooperation of everyone involved: the private sector, local government, local communities and civil society. Decentralization could help local governments to improve service delivery and in ensuring that the local needs and demands were met more effectively. But many local governments lacked the financial and human resources to carry out these new responsibilities. This was where public-private partnerships and privatization could help fill the gaps. However, local governments often lacked the capacity and the willingness to negotiate contracts that

guaranteed the private partner the necessary profit while also serving the public interest.

45. Moreover, market-driven urban development was often not inclusive and could exclude the urban poor and other marginalized groups from affordable housing, reliable basic infrastructure and participation in decision making. The focus group stressed that urban development must take into account current and future human needs and community ideas, and not only focus on profit-making in order for cities to be environmentally sustainable.

46. The problems with decentralization and privatization were not an argument to reverse or abandon these processes but were an argument to strengthen local government and civil society and to empower the urban population, particularly the poor. As decentralization was relatively uncharted territory, local governments needed to learn from each other in order to deal with the impacts of decentralization, privatization and globalization. Learning from good practices and developing local leadership were critical to strengthening the capacity of local government in order to deal with the new urban challenges in relation to economic development, reducing poverty and environmental sustainability.

47. Governments of South-East Asia needed to be aware of these challenges and these should be raised in existing regional forums. The focus group agreed that the ASEAN Working Group of Environmentally Sustainable Cities would be a suitable forum for these issues to be aired, and it asked the Chairperson to bring the issues to the ASEAN Working Group. In addition, the focus group urged participants to raise the issues with their respective governments, so that the leaders were in a position to highlight the issues at relevant ASEAN forums.

48. Other urban players, such as the private sector, should also be included in forums and partnerships in order to help come up with effective and comprehensive solutions. The focus group also considered other platforms to raise awareness about the urban challenges, like the various forums provided by CityNet and other regional networks. Furthermore, cooperation and synergies with development agencies and donors would be important in prioritizing issues and strengthening subregional cooperation. Finally, the meeting stressed that ASEAN, CityNet and others should not limit themselves to just talking, but should seek ways to turn talk into action at the subregional level.

D. North and North-East Asia

49. This session was chaired by Mr. Sun Sheng Han, a professor in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning of the University of Melbourne, who had written the conference paper for the region. He began by characterizing the subregion as one in which there was strong government intervention in urban development. The region was the world's economic powerhouse, and there was severe environmental damage in the subregion. A key feature of the subregion was its uniqueness in terms of economic-political systems and approaches towards transforming the economies. The level of urbanization steadily increased, with the Republic of Korea showing the most rapid urbanization in the 1960s and 1970s, while China progressed rather rapidly in the past 30 years. Migration patterns were also distinct in terms of urban-rural, large city to small city,

and large city to other large city movements of mostly migrant workers in search of better living conditions.

50. Four key challenges and gaps were identified: (a) lack of an effective decentralization policy to deal with the over-concentration of urban populations in primate cities and in the high-density regions; (b) lack of an effective social security net to deal with the increased inequality that has resulted from economic liberalization; (c) inadequate technology, planning strategies and individual efforts in coping with environmental problems; and (d) lack of vision and supporting mechanisms to support the growth of the subregional city-regions that have emerged as a result of regional integration of capital, goods and people across country boundaries.

51. The focus group discussed how to deal with some of the challenges, especially spatial planning in the form of relocation of capital and development of satellite cities to create space, the development of infrastructure and the provision of services in order to cope with increasing rural-urban migration, rights to private land purchase and ownership to generate capital wealth in formerly communist countries, and the role of civil society in building inclusive and sustainable cities.

52. The meeting focused on the key policies and strategies that were needed to cope with the identified challenges. An urbanization policy should be developed to deal with the hierarchical and spatial distribution of cities. Major institutional adjustments were needed to allow equal access to urban services and jobs. Policies should be expanded to decouple economic growth from environmental deterioration with a sustainable development approach. Finally, it was felt that new institutional agreements should be introduced that assist the development of cross-border infrastructure projects and economic specialization with the help of international organizations and mechanisms.

53. Several suggestions were made with a view to ensuring that the strategies could be implemented properly. Local conditions should be considered in each case, as no single solution can deal with different countries and challenges. Good strategic planning is needed that would take into account both the local and external dynamics of each city, region and country. Public-private partnership with other stakeholders is necessary for successful planning and programme implementation.

54. International organizations and mechanisms were considered appropriate vehicles through which governments could gain opportunities to improve the urban future in the subregion. Examples include organizing learning forums that provide the latest information on place-specific urban trends, projects in the pipeline, and “state-of-the-art” practices.

55. Training programmes were needed to help increase capacity in the areas of visioning, strategic planning and management. In connection with knowledge sharing in the subregion, a feasibility study was needed on the establishment of a centre to coordinate research and the transfer of knowledge on urban development in the subregion.

56. Areas where subregional cooperation and initiatives could be pursued included: (a) strategic planning of sustainable, harmonious and ecologically friendly cities; (b) public-private partnerships in infrastructure provisions; (c) institutional reforms for municipal governance; (d)

development of a green GDP as a performance index for cities; and (e) promotion of low carbon cities with renewable energy.

E. The Pacific

57. The session was chaired by Leith Veremaito, Program Manager for the Governance for Growth Program in Vanuatu. Sarah Mecartney started the discussion by presenting the discussion paper, which identified a number of key urban challenges facing the region. These were good governance, economic development, including the urban-rural link, housing, services and infrastructure, and adapting to climate change and its consequences.

58. The focus group agreed that the region's urban challenges required considerable planning and far-sighted policies, which would involve consultation and decision making that included the communities and traditional authorities. Urban management strategies must also be part of national development plans.

59. The need to share best practices for managing urban growth across the region was stressed by the focus group. It was noted, however, that there were particular limits to the development of blueprints, particularly as a result of the different land tenure systems and cultural values associated with land in the Pacific. It was also noted that opportunities existed for a regional focus, if not approach, on the region's rapidly growing urban centres. This was particularly important for many Pacific island countries in view of the growing economic importance of urban centres.

60. Among the challenges identified by the focus group were the limited number of specific urban governance institutions, the absence of forward-looking planning, limited infrastructure and services and inadequate funding for maintenance, the very limited domestic capital for investment in cities and the lack of recognition that urban governance and management required a broad coalition including customary authorities, which had an important role, particularly regarding land issues. Overall, the absence of successful models in the region was of considerable concern in view of the region's rapidly rising urban population.

61. One key challenge was the lack of specific urban-related information and data. The absence of a well-defined focal point or agency for urban issues and the lack of coordination across government and civil society hindered the development of a cohesive and effective urban planning strategy. There was also an acute lack of political commitment for urban planning and development across the region.

62. Each of these challenges required a very specific approach. In countries where there had been some success in dealing with urban growth, namely Samoa and Vanuatu, the approaches that had been followed were very diverse. Each reflected distinct institutions and relationships with peri-urban landowners and customary authorities. Thus, no common policy lessons could be drawn from their experiences. Both approaches had lessons to be shared with other countries.

63. The key answer to increasing urbanization in the region required managing urban growth as part of the national development plans. This approach must be inclusive and involve the diverse voices on urban issues,

with the key focus on establishing coalitions to encourage ownership and partnerships that link “urban” and “rural” areas more effectively. This was fundamental to achieving more livable and sustainable cities and towns in the subregion. Many Pacific island countries lacked the necessary expertise in urban planning and management to accomplish this, however.

64. Climate change and other environmental challenges were also particularly serious for the Pacific subregion. These were long-established problems for the region’s atoll and micro-States, but the challenges posed by the need to adapt to climate change and develop disaster resilience were now much more urgent. This was made worse by the acute lack of resources within the subregion. These environmental threats were heightened by the increase in the urban population, which lacked access to sanitation and water services. This was especially urgent for the burgeoning peri-urban populations, which accounted for almost all the urban population growth in some cities.

65. The focus group agreed that a clear commitment to a subregional approach to urban challenges was vital. Opportunities to advance the urban agenda in Pacific island countries included the Pacific Urban Agenda (2003, 2007),² the Cities Alliance-UN-Habitat supported Pacific Urban Regional Knowledge Framework (2011), and the existing efforts to strengthen local government and their associations.

IV. Regional synthesis of issues

66. The concluding session included the presentation of and discussions on outcomes of the subregional focus group discussions and an open discussion in the Voices from the Floor session.

67. The Voices from the Floor session was launched with a short video presentation by the bloggers from the Goethe Institute’s Cityscapes website (blog.goethe.de/cityscapes). The video reflected the bloggers’ impressions on the issues discussed at the Forum, with excerpts from participants and illustrative scenes shot around Bangkok. The floor was opened to participants to share their views and opinions on the Forum, including overall impressions, specific outcomes of break-out sessions and proposed follow-up actions.

68. Discussants and participants pointed out that the conventional dichotomy between rural and urban areas was fading away and there was a need to redefine what was meant by “urban”. Traditional definitions, based on administrative jurisdiction, were no longer relevant. Cities and their rural hinterlands needed to be seen as one continuous, dynamic system. Current classifications might actually be underreporting the extent of urbanization as many outlying areas of a city were in fact urban in nature but often reported as rural in official statistics. Moreover, the information revolution and increased connectivity meant that residents of “rural” settlements had “urban” aspirations and residents of “urban” settlements often relied on traditional, “rural”, community-based support and protection systems.

² See ESCAP resolution 66/7 of 19 May 2010.

69. Another commonality was that the majority of each subregion's urban population lived in secondary cities and small towns, while most of the research and policy initiatives focused on large cities. To make inclusive and sustainable urban development a reality, a concerted effort was needed to collect information on these cities and towns.

70. Many participants noted that the current development dialogue did not truly reflect the immense indigenous knowledge and spiritual values of Asian cultures. Many of these values were deeply ecological and would need to be reinvigorated if the region was to really move away from the current consumer-oriented development paradigm towards a more sustainable development paradigm.

71. The Forum felt that issues of environmental sustainability and poverty were closely interlinked. In South Asia and South-East Asia, a majority of the urban population either walked or used bicycles or public transport. Yet, most investment in transport was directed towards expressways and flyovers, which benefited only a minority. More investment was needed in mass transit systems, with an emphasis on those mass transit systems that were more affordable to the poor.

72. Participants felt that the advent of new technologies, particularly those that made physical and virtual communication easier within a city, and between the city and its rural hinterlands were, overall, a positive development as such technologies would increase economic productivity and environmental sustainability and reduce poverty. However, the introduction of new technologies often meant that those with access to capital and information benefited and those that did not lost out. Policies were needed to ensure that such disparities were minimized by introducing programmes that allowed the urban poor and other marginalized groups to benefit from new communication technologies. Examples of these were economic transactions through mobile phones, access to market price information on commodities by farmers in urban peripheries, and marketing of the products of microenterprises through the Internet.

73. A change in the approach to development was essential because cities and towns in the Asia-Pacific region were highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. These included short and intense disasters, such as cyclones, earthquakes and tsunamis, and disasters that took longer to unfold, such as drought, desertification and soil erosion.

74. Another similarity that participants pointed out was the fact that the social fabric of Asian cities and towns was fraying because of exclusion, inequalities and unsustainable development. This was not only happening in cities and towns, but also in rural areas from which rural migrants came to cities and towns. In some countries, rural-urban migration had resulted in households headed by women alone and households that comprised mostly elderly persons and children. This social dislocation was leading to increased intolerance, violence and lack of security, particularly for women and children.

75. All the subregions reported some degree of economic informality. In some countries, the informal sector was at least as large as the formal sector. This informal economy added to the unique vibrancy and individuality of the cities in the region, especially in South Asia and South-East Asia, but it also caused problems. In some cities, land mafias were very powerful in

determining the direction and form of urban development. This directly affected economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, equity and social inclusiveness. Both the positive and negative aspects of the informal sector needed to be re-examined. The links between the informal sector and governance, including the role of organized crime and corruption, certainly warranted more careful examination. The issue of urban land management was therefore of singular importance.

76. Methods of governance and the way resources were allocated needed to be re-evaluated. Governance systems needed to be made more effective and inclusive. The region's youth were a huge resource that could be channelled to bring about change. Tapping into their energy and including them in development and governance could be crucial for the region's towns and settlements to be sustainable.

V. Subregional and regional support needed from ESCAP and its partners

77. The Forum felt strongly that the region lacked "institutional memory." Many issues and strategies were discussed at different forums, but there was no central reservoir of knowledge on inclusive and sustainable urban development where practices and policies were systematically analysed. Even when there was relevant information, it was often scattered and difficult to find. ESCAP, UN-Habitat and other organizations were asked to work together to create a regional storehouse of knowledge on urban issues. Such a regional knowledge platform should take into account existing information sites, such as the UN-Habitat Global Urban Observatory.

78. In view of the importance of research on urban issues, participants felt that ESCAP and other organizations needed to help identify and support a robust research programme, which should be linked to the preparation of the second *State of Asian Cities* report.

79. Most participants found the Regional and Subregional Focus Group discussions, as well as the Bazaar of Ideas and Practices, extremely useful. The Forum proposed that those discussions be continued online through blogs and discussion groups, along the lines of that initiated by the urban bloggers of the Goethe Institute during the Forum. ESCAP was asked to set up an online forum as a follow-up to the Asia-Pacific Urban Forum.

80. Participants also proposed that ESCAP and its partners work with relevant subregional organizations to convene subregional urban forums. Some countries also recommended that national-level urban forums be organized. The Forum felt that regional and subregional forums should be linked to ministerial dialogues or conferences. It requested ESCAP and its partners to organize a ministerial conference linked to regional and subregional urban forums.

81. The Forum also asked ESCAP and its partners to organize multi-stakeholder thematic policy dialogues at the regional and subregional levels on specific urban issues, such as urban land management, urban finance, urban transport, urban governance, slum upgrading and low-income housing, urban culture and social fabric. Participants also wanted ESCAP and other organizations to work with networks of local governments and

other actors to increase the training and capacity-building opportunities available to local governments and their partners.

82. Some participants urged the setting up of a regional alternative financing mechanism for strengthening grass-roots financing and the linking of the formal financing sector to community-based financing. They suggested that ESCAP, UN-Habitat and ACHR work on the issue together.

83. Participants felt that the Forum had achieved its objectives of discussing critical and emerging issues and exchanging experiences. They particularly appreciated the opportunity to network and discuss pressing urban issues. In particular, grass-roots leaders appreciated the unique opportunity to interact with other involved parties, especially ministers, mayors, senior officials and academics, as they felt this recognized the importance of community organizations as agents of change. In this way, the Ministerial Dialogue on Citywide Upgrading of Slums was particularly useful. The Forum suggested meeting on a regular basis.

84. The frank exchanges with the private sector were also highlighted, as many felt that often there was a lack of private sector participation in such forums. The Forum recommended that ESCAP ensure greater engagement of the private sector in future regional and subregional urban forums and policy dialogues.

VI. Issues for discussion

85. The Committee may wish to review the conclusions and recommendations of the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum on regional and subregional actions and activities. The Committee may also wish to guide the secretariat in implementing the requests made by the Forum regarding follow-up activities aimed at promoting sustainable urban development in the region.
