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# TACKLING TRAFFIC



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Under Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT speaks to Our Planet.

*With over half of humanity now living in cities and towns, how do urban areas contribute to climate change?*

Urbanization and climate change are virtually inseparable. Cities form islands of heat due to their high energy consumption and

greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and their high density of concrete and asphalt.

Rich cities produce more greenhouse gases than poor ones as higher incomes and changing lifestyles increase consumption and energy dependence. Every day the population of the world's cities grows by almost 200,000 people, and this will increase the proportion of humanity in urban areas to 60 per cent within two decades, so the contribution of cities to climate change must be taken very seriously.

*What is the impact of climate change on cities?*

Three quarters of all large cities are coastal, and 14 of the world's 19 biggest ones are ports. Indeed, sixty per cent of the world's people live in coastal zones less than 10 metres above sea level.

Sea level rise, together with other climatic changes, will inevitably increase in local and inter-urban migration. We estimate that already about 30 per cent of slum dwellers are environmental refugees, putting considerable pressure on local authorities for land, housing and other basic services.

Higher temperatures and increased pollution can also be expected seriously to increase health problems especially for the urban poor, living in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions.

*How can cities work on mitigation and adaptation to climate change?*

Cities offer opportunities to reduce emissions through economies of scale and large-scale urban initiatives. Their local authorities are an essential locus of intervention for change and can,

and must, provide leadership and implement practical participatory programmes for urban communities.

Many mayors in cities around the world are already carrying out activities to encourage energy efficiency, renewable energy, cleaner production and applying regulations to control industrial emissions.

Such good practices must be shared. Many cities have established “cities in climate change networks” sharing experiences and exchanging successful action plans.

UN-HABITAT and UNEP are working together on the Cities and Climate Change Initiative, part of SUD-Net, the Sustainable Urban Development Network, to encourage inter-disciplinary approaches. However, local authorities in the developing world need further assistance in areas such as capacity building, technology transfer and technical support.

### *How can cities reduce emissions of greenhouse gases from urban transport?*

Urban transport is the planet’s fastest-growing source of GHG emissions. Rapid increases in the number of vehicles on city roads and insufficient investment in urban transport planning and traffic management in developing countries are exacerbating air pollution and decreasing economic productivity. Low-density, sprawling cities in developed countries are two

to three times more expensive to run and service than more densely populated ones.

Reducing transport’s impact is the single most cost-effective measure local governments can make towards mitigating climate change. Investment is urgently needed to replace hydrocarbon-fuelled vehicles with environmentally friendly transport. Priorities must include developing non-carbon based fuels and alternatives to the internal combustion engine through efficient solar and other systems of electrical power generation.

UN-HABITAT also promotes human settlements development strategies that better integrate land use planning, taking into account commuting distances. For example, we promote public transport and non-motorized transport as alternatives to over-reliance on private automobiles to meet future demand.

### *What does the future agenda for transport hold?*

Almost all rapidly growing developing country cities are moving towards a huge increase in their needs for transport and related services. The most

famous examples are the cities of China and India, but these are increasingly aware of the need to minimize emissions through improved integrated policies.

African countries are often considered to be low greenhouse gas emitters but, before long, the continent’s transport will be a major source of emissions. By 2030, Africa will cease to be a rural continent. East African cities are expanding at unprecedented rates. Nairobi is one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, with an annual growth rate of seven per cent, and already suffers from inefficient urban transport services and management, inadequate infrastructure, and high levels of air pollution.

City authorities in both the developed and developing worlds must immediately work on integrated urban planning strategies that encourage compact cities, better public transport and minimized emissions.

