

Mohamed Halfani

UN-HABITAT, Nairobi, Kenya

**REVITALIZING COMMUNITY: EXTERNALIZING FOR LINKAGE AND
INTERNALIZING FOR RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY -
Reflecting on UN-HABITAT's Experience**

For the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT), the revival of the discourse on community by the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Fetzer Institute is a timely and welcome initiative. The Agency has just embarked on elaborating its recently approved Medium Term Strategic and Institutional Plan for 2008 – 2013, whose over-arching goal is the promotion of sustainable urbanization at a global level. One of the components of this strategy, and indeed a key one, is the fostering of participatory urban planning, management and governance. It is expected that this particular focus area will be achieved through the strengthening the capacity of national governments, local authorities and other stakeholders to develop more livable, productive and inclusive cities. The preliminary elaboration of the indicators of achievement for this component of the strategy underscore the need for clarity on the intervention points for gaining impact on the ground and the necessity for delineating the locus and linkages of human agency to the lowest level. This new exploratory initiative by WWC & Fetzer Institute provides an opportunity for UN-HABITAT to revisit the viability of re-deploying the construct of community in the pursuit of its Medium Term Strategy.

The emerging discourse on community and how to foster its resilience has also an additional significance for UN-HABITAT. A number of key insights did emerge from the recently concluded 4th edition of the World Forum that was held in Nanjing, China. Among these is the critical necessity of paying attention to the non-physical, social, cultural, and relational dynamics of urban development. At Nanjing, questions of identity, history, integration, inclusiveness, management of flows, and the relationship between constituent parts of the city were given prominence. Once again, the proposed analysis of

the notion of community, even as initially outlined in the two background papers, offers a promising follow-up to some of the discussions that started at the World Urban Forum.

This brief reflection paper attempts to trace the experience of an international development agency (UN-HABITAT) in revitalizing communities with a view to achieving sustainable human settlement development. While the document will not dwell on conceptual nuances, it will attempt to illustrate the different modalities in which endeavours were made to reach out, harness the potential, and to deploy the latent energy of community. The simple point it attempts to make is that conventional approaches to community development are overly functionalist and tend to externalize the potent attributes of community. There is a need to pay more attention at the operational level on internalizing community potential, a process which seems to be more effective in building all-rounded resilience. Essentially this note calls for a rigorous re-examination of the approaches used by international agencies in supporting community development.

The Habitat Agenda and the role of Community

The Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda of June 1996 constitute the rare occasion when the international community represented by a cross-section of stakeholders reached an agreement on a vision for societal development. For the decade and a half since its adoption, the Habitat Agenda has served as a foundation for articulating principles, defining norms and values for human settlement development, including urban transformation.

It is true that there is a proliferation of slum settlements in the world today, which is contrary to the Habitat Agenda goal of providing adequate shelter for all. There is also an increase of urban inequities and a rise in social, economic and environmental threats and breakdowns - aspects which are almost a converse of the sustainability aspired for in 1996. Indeed, these may cast some doubt on the commitment of the international community to pursue the broader vision of the Habitat Agenda. On the other hand, the UN-HABITAT as well as national governments and local authorities do continue to derive substantive

inspiration and to develop operational frameworks from the commitment of the Declaration and the content of the Agenda. Furthermore, subsequent global pronouncements, including the Millennium Declaration and the Development Goals, Istanbul +5, the Johannesburg Declaration and even the recent pre-occupation on cities and climate change have retained the essence of that seminal undertaking of 1996.

The Habitat Agenda therefore remains a useful and valid reference at a global level and it continues to provide the basis for UN-HABITAT's normative and operational interventions. Indeed, it is rather striking, that the notion of community in the Agenda seems to be predominantly place-based, and also subsumed within the broader sphere of 'sustainable human settlement'. While extensive reference is made to community and community-based-organisations, the focus is more on the organizational aspects relating to action to be undertaken and benefits to be accrued.

The implicit assumption in the Agenda is that the 'health' of a community derives from the health of the larger society in the city as a whole. The lower level and the parts of a city are treated more or less as a microcosm of the larger entity, which replicates its features either horizontally or across levels. It is in this respect that the Agenda refers to sustainable human settlements as those that, '*inter alia*, generate a sense of citizenship and identity, cooperation and dialogue for the common good, and a spirit of voluntarism and civic engagement, where all people are encouraged and have an equal opportunity to participate in decision-making and development;' While this broad generic characterization of a societal health refers to the city or even to an urban system as a whole, the subsequent separate reference in the strategy of implementation underscore the organizational and functional role of community and community based organisations

One is therefore tempted to suggest that right from the Habitat Agenda, the perspective of the city has been predominantly macro, with the constituent parts being considered in instrumental-functional terms or as lower level and partial replica of the broader entity. To some extent, such an un-dialectical linkage creates an in-built tension in realizing the dual commitment of 'enablement' and 'participation' which are the key principles of the

Habitat Agenda that also underscore the centrality of a bottom-up in achieving the Agenda goals.

At the operational level, the dual approach of enablement and participation guided the design and packaging of intervention for most of the project and programme work following the Istanbul conference. Enablement involved the promotion of reforms in policies, legal instruments and in the institutional framework and processes in order to facilitate the delivery of services, access to land and shelter, and the management of the environment by the communities and stakeholders. And the participatory dimension entailed creating a space and capacity for the intended beneficiaries to be involved in the processes that produce the deliverables. This is the model that applied in almost all interventions during the immediate post-Istanbul period. Rather conspicuous in both those two cases is what seems to be almost an endeavour foster an external linkage of the micro-level social formation and to connect them with the larger system.

In fact, even when programmes were designed with the specific aim of revitalizing community, the approach tended to remain more or less functional and instrumental with an emphasis on targeted deliverables. Such was the case for the Community Development Programme in Africa supported by funds from DANIDA and the UNDP, which for almost a decade focused on working with communities to find sustainable ways to meet their needs and improve the quality of their lives. The activities of this programme include mobilization, training and capacity building, sensitization, exchange of information, promotion of partnership. All these were connected to the specific deliverables which ranged from improving security of tenure, through micro-economic enterprises to decentralization and environmental management.

The same accent of externalizing community potential is also evident in the relatively more advanced Training and capacity building programme. Of the two sets of tools that have been developed to contribute towards the capacity building of non-governmental as well as community based organisations the main focus was given to managing and developing financial and human resources, as well as fostering organisational outreach. Additional tools were developed in promoting a linkage between local authorities and the NGO/CBOs through participatory planning and the management of conflicts and

differences. The underpinning framework for intervention through capacity building derived from the broader campaign to promote urban governance by fostering inclusiveness and the building of structures of local democracy.

It appears that it is in the post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction that a more ardent attempt is made to enhance the internal potential of community and to build all-rounded resilience, starting from the reduction of vulnerabilities, harnessing social capital, enhancing capacities as well providing enabling support.. UN-HABITAT activities in the reconstruction of settlements and communities affected by the earthquake in Pakistan Tsunami in Indonesia, to conflict in Afghanistan and Somalia have been lauded as a model by a number of sister agencies in the field. Major emphasis has been given to reinforcing the internal fabric of community, which in the process has led to the building trust, solidarity, collective vision, leadership. Over time, organic capacities are built within the community to be able to absorb external support and to channel it to their prioritized needs.

The reconstruction model of community development has also demonstrated a more effective means of establishing the linkage between community and sub-national systems of governance such as local authorities and district administration. The establishment of support centres that cater for a group of communities , the provision of seed funding, capacity building and technical back-up has reinforced the internal coalescence of communities while at the same time contributing to modernizing their social relations. In the same regard, the construct of ‘sustainable relief’ that is also deployed by UN-HABITAT – referring to ensuring an organic continuity between relief, reconstruction and development has also guaranteed the overall sustainability of the interventions.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this reflection, deriving from an overview of UN-HABITAT’s interventions is that revitalizing community is definitely an important undertaking for increasing the functional effectiveness of urban governance and efficiency of generating outcomes on the ground. The tendency has been to concentrate on the externalization of community potential with the aim of ensuring an effective linkage of

the community and the macro-system. This approach not only partially deploys the potential of community to engage, but it also has the danger of relegating community to becoming a mere appendage of society - We do notice however, by doing so, the to be deployed functionally and instrumentally when necessary. On the other hand, the experience of post disaster and post-conflict reconstruction demonstrates that it is possible to harness the internal and endogenous attributes of community to transform community to exist for itself. In this way, not only can resilience be enhanced but also dynamic sustainability can be ensured.