

# Interview

## Collective responsibilities

Enabling holistic governmental and societal approaches that benefit all members of society, including refugees and migrants, is a priority for **Maimunah Mohd Sharif**, for whom the fight against urban poverty and inequality is one that should engage everyone.



*Maimunah Mohd Sharif has been the executive director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) since December 2017. She has previously served as mayor of the City Council of Penang Island, Malaysia, having risen through the ranks of local government from her entry position in 1985 as a town planner in the Municipal Council of Penang Island.*

**UN-Habitat has put cities at the centre of its agenda for a long time, but since when has the organisation seen migration as an urban important issue?**

Migration has always been a major driver of urbanisation. It is UN-Habitat's mandate to assist governments manage the challenges of rapid urban growth, particularly if the intensity of growth is due to migration. This means supporting governmental authorities to develop inclusive governance structures, addressing issues around informal settlements, planning for sustainable growth and ensuring adequate access to housing and basic services.

UN-Habitat brings its expertise to global initiatives such as the UN Migration Network and the World Bank-led Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development. We work with cities and countries to confront the challenges of displacement and ensure

that urban migration is harnessed as a positive contribution to the life of the city.

**What kind of activities and campaigns has UN-Habitat been involved in in relation to migration and cities?**

In most countries and regions, migrants move to urban areas. Our contribution comes from our urban knowledge and expertise, and our ability to provide innovative and evidence-based urban solutions, both normative and operational.

Migration to cities happens both in humanitarian and development contexts. UN-Habitat's experience is particularly useful when rapid influxes to cities leads to an urban crisis, and when government authorities, specifically at local level, don't have the necessary resources or capacity to cope or provide basic services, housing and shelter to new arrivals.

Urban solutions can only be developed in a multi-sectoral approach and strong cooperation of different government levels is needed. UN-Habitat has a strong convening role with key urban decision makers at local and national levels. Even in humanitarian settings we aim to build the capacity of local actors and influence long-term change at policy, operational and implementation level. Through inclusive and area-based approaches, we ensure that vulnerable host communities also benefit from interventions to enhance social cohesion.

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Urban solutions can't be developed in silos. Due to its technical expertise in rapid urban growth, UN-Habitat can play an important coordination role in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus as migrants often have similar needs to host communities in vulnerable situations.

**Could you sum up what the New Urban Agenda is for our readers and how important is it to the issue of migration and cities?<sup>1</sup>**

The New Urban Agenda is an action-oriented document that aims to mobilise member states and other key stakeholders to drive sustainable urban development at the local level. It can be seen as a roadmap to accelerate the urban dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals.

It highlights the need to support migrants, but also takes in consideration the situation of host communities. Under the New Urban Agenda UN member states committed to ensuring “full respect for the human rights of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants and [to] support their host cities in the spirit of international cooperation.”

It mentions the need to recognise both the challenges of large movements of people into towns and cities but also the significant social, economic and cultural contributions they bring to urban life.

Member states also committed to ensuring safe, orderly and regular migration through planned and well-managed migration policies and to support local authorities to find ways to help migrants make a positive contribution.

**Often there appears to be a contradiction between national immigration policy and municipal treatment of those arriving in cities in mixed flows. Is this based on ideological differences or just practical necessity?**

Migration policies are national-level responsibilities, but many services are provided by local authorities. In many migration and displacement contexts, local authorities are the first to respond to the needs of people that migrate to or transit through their cities. They have to manage to respond to and balance the needs of migrants and host communities. Local authorities often work closely with civil society and the private sector to meet the needs of those arriving.

Local authorities are rarely consulted in national migration policy development, and national responses to migration often do not take into account the situation in the arrival cities. The local context needs to be more prominent in policy processes and decisions. Recent global frameworks, from the New Urban Agenda to the Global Compact for Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees acknowledge this. City and local government networks such as United Cities and Local Governments and the Mayors Migration Council are now formally included in global dialogues on migration related topics.

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**For many cities, the issue of migrants and refugees appears to be viewed as a problem, often a political problem. Is this only an issue of perception, or are there concrete problems facing cities receiving significant numbers of migrants and refugees?**

In some contexts, rapid urban population growth can be challenging due to perceived or real competition for jobs and livelihood opportunities, housing or land and services or infrastructure. This competition can be “politicised” and used for advancing political agendas, leading to mistrust, marginalisation and discrimination.

Migration has shown to have a positive impact on social and economic development in cities. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the fears of host populations. It is key to ensure that any action taken in development or humanitarian contexts benefits both migrants and host communities in vulnerable situations

1 The New Urban Agenda was adopted by UN Member States at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) on 20 October 2016 in Quito, Ecuador and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly two months later.

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and that representatives of all communities are included in decision-making processes.

**Cities encounter migrants and refugees in many different ways in different parts of the world. Can you offer some examples that bring out these contrasts of extreme differences in the various locations UN-Habitat works?**

In Iraq, many internally displaced people and specifically Yazidi returnees faced challenges regarding land tenure rights, which then also increased the possibility of conflict within communities. In Somalia, the absence of adequate, affordable, and accessible housing for returning migrants and internally displaced people was one [pressing] challenge. In Latin America, many cities struggled with the provision of services due to the rapid influx of Venezuelan migrants.

**What do you and/or UN-Habitat feel about cities that have high levels of migrant labour without any facility or intention for migrants to integrate or have channels for family unification or residency? Is this just another model of interaction for cities and migrants?**

Labour migration can have positive impacts both for the countries of destination as well as countries of origin as many migrants send home remittances to support their families.

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While the right to migrate for the purposes of work does not imply the right of residency and family reunification, it is important that the human rights of labour migrants are respected. This includes labour rights, as well as the right to adequate housing, basic services (including health services) and the right of participation in local decision-making processes.

Our work has strong impact on local economic development and the well-being of people in urban areas in areas such as housing and the safety and inclusiveness of public spaces. We seek to ensure that no-one, including migrant populations, even those transiting or residing in cities temporarily, is left behind.

**In what ways do you think the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting progress made to date in relation to migration and cities? Has it caused significant setbacks?**

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Migrants and in particular those in irregular migration situations or informally employed are specifically vulnerable. They often live in inadequate, overcrowded living environments without access to water or sanitation. And they can face specific challenges when accessing services due to their migration status or being stuck at previously open borders.

Many cities have supported migrant communities during the Covid-19 pandemic: they have expanded citizenships, included migrants in service provision, or have increased migrants' access to housing in order to avoid homelessness.

At the same time, the contribution of migrants to our cities has become clearer during the Covid-19 crisis: many migrants work in crucial sectors, including health, food or agriculture, sales or transport or other basic services. The widely recognised work of care givers, nurses and doctors—many of them migrants—will hopefully help to change public opinion on migrants.

**Were you surprised by the scale of reverse migration out of some cities back to the countryside seen in 2020 due to the pandemic? Are you assuming this is merely temporary?**

Nobody could have foreseen this pandemic or its impacts on every aspect of our lives. The reverse migration to rural areas highlights the challenges in poor urban areas where migrants and the urban poor have no access to water, sanitation nor space for physical distancing.

When people lost their jobs, they couldn't afford to live in urban areas anymore so going home was the only option. In many countries, the return migration to rural areas brought economic and social challenges and helped spread the virus.

Some countries have been successful in reducing the spread of the pandemic due to lockdowns, but in other contexts, we saw that trying to keep people from migrating is not possible.

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**Do you think mayors and municipal managers were given sufficient voice in the planning and drafting of the global compacts, especially the Global Compact for Migration? Do you see this changing in the future, in terms of their involvement in global decision making?**

The process leading to both global compacts was long and local authorities were given a voice. It is difficult to judge if they had a “sufficient” voice. However, there has been great progress in involving local authorities as well as civil society and private sector in drawing up global frameworks.

During the drafting process of the Global Compact for Migration, mayors from all over the world came together at several Mayoral Forums on Mobility, Migration and Development, with the fifth Forum taking place at the same time as the summit for adopting the migration compact, in December 2018. It ended with the signing of the Mayors’ Declaration which outlines cities’ and other local and regional authorities’ commitments to contribute to the achievement of both global compacts.

Local authorities are now also part of the Mayors Mechanism of the Global Forum on Migration and Development and actively contribute to the UN Migration Network’s working groups. This gives them a strong role in monitoring and shaping the implementation of the compacts.

**What role does UN-Habitat play in implementing the Global Compact for Migration?**

We are engaged in the global implementation frameworks, including the UN Migration Network, but also active in different regional structures for advancing the compact’s objectives. Our normative products and guidance documents contribute to global knowledge platforms and mechanisms for the compact. UN-Habitat with the World Health Organization is co-leading the working group of the UN Migration Network on “Access to Services” and contributing to two other working groups.

Then there are our urban migration and displacement related projects under the different thematic areas that are developed in line with the compact’s objectives and implemented in partnership with other UN agencies and other development and humanitarian actors. In our current strategic plan, we put a strong emphasis on

urban migration-related topics and improving the lives of migrants and displaced persons.

To advance UN-Habitat’s operational and normative work on urban migration, we are currently developing a flagship programme on urban migration, which is titled “Inclusive cities: Enhancing the positive impact of urban migration”. It is designed to enable countries and cities to harness the potential of migration and ensure a human-rights and sustainable urban development approach.

**Should cities be gearing up for a future of increased migration and new arrivals of refugees as an inevitable continuation of historic trends? And if so, to what extent do you think climate change will affect the process?**

Migration and human mobility is not a new phenomenon; and people have been moving for centuries to find better living environments and improved livelihoods. This will continue as long as inequalities, natural and human made disaster persist, and as long as there are unmet labour and skills demands and employment opportunities in cities.

Climate change will certainly be among one of the main reasons for migration and displacement. Climate change impacts agricultural production and rural livelihoods. We have also seen an increase in natural disasters that lead to displacement with those from rural areas settling permanently in cities.

UN-Habitat is also working on integrated territorial development approaches and strengthening urban-rural linkages. By fostering capacities and creating opportunities in rural towns and small or intermediate cities, people have choices and can find non-farming/agricultural jobs also in rather rural areas.

At the same time we see that many people in vulnerable situations, including migrants and displaced people, who have moved to urban areas are at risk of climate change impacts when settling in areas that are prone to risks such as flooding or landslides. We need to ensure that cities are more resilient to shocks of any kind.

**If you were the mayor of a large city, what would you prioritise as a critical aspect of meeting the challenges of migrant and refugee influxes, many of whom may be undocumented?**

There is no “one size fits all” approach in urban areas and authorities need to respond to their challenges within the existing legal and policy environment based on their resources and capacity.

We have seen many local authorities coming up with innovative and tailor-made solutions for their



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specific challenges including regarding undocumented migrants, working in strong cooperation with civil society, private sector and other relevant stakeholders such as academia and media – for changing the discourse on migrants.

But let me refer to my own experiences, as mayor of Penang, in Malaysia. Penang, when I was mayor and president of the Municipal Council, attracted many people, both from within Malaysia and international migrants. The global compacts were not yet in place, but the New Urban Agenda, with its “people at the centre”, action-oriented approach, gave concrete guidance for sustainable and inclusive urban growth.

Malaysia is a multi-cultural society and Penang’s economy thrived, so any additional workforce was very welcome. As a mayor, my job was to ensure the human rights of all the inhabitants of my city. I worked with international organisations to ensure we had accurate data on our population growth, so we could respond to the basic needs of our citizens and new arrivals and plan for adequate service provision. My key priorities were access to adequate housing and basic services, access to decent work, security of land tenure and fostering social inclusion. I proposed investments into public infrastructure as well as social services, to ensure that development would be benefitting all inhabitants of my city.

In Malaysia, we have a strong coordination between different government levels, a well-functioning civil society and good level of cooperation with our private sector actors, so I can strongly relate to the Guiding Principles in the Global Compact for Migration.

In my role as Executive Director of UN-Habitat, fostering whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches and developing integrated solutions for all members of society is the focus of my attention. We need to all work together to reduce poverty and inequality, in cities and in the rural-urban continuum, so that migration is a choice and not a necessity, and that people can live in dignity and peace.