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Report of the World Urban Forum

Independent evaluation report of the ninth session of the World Urban Forum

Note by the secretariat

I. Introduction

1. The secretariat has the honour to submit the present note, which summarizes the independent evaluation report of the ninth session of the World Urban Forum, to the United Nations Habitat Assembly at its first session. The evaluation was mandated by Governing Council resolution 26/6 of 12 May 2017, which requested an assessment of the impact and outcome of the Forum using a results-based approach, including various evaluation tools and mechanisms. The assessment was conducted by an independent external consultant and managed by the evaluation unit of UN-Habitat. In addition, an evaluation reference group was established to oversee the process and ensure its credibility and quality. The secretariat of the Forum supported the evaluation by providing documentation and coordinating with stakeholders to obtain the information for the evaluation, which began in June 2018 and was completed in March 2019.

2. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the impact and outcomes of the ninth World Urban Forum, provide accountability and promote learning and the exchange of knowledge. The evaluation will be used by UN-Habitat and its governing bodies and by host countries and other Habitat Agenda partners to inform and influence the planning, delivery and effectiveness of future sessions of the Forum. Furthermore, the evaluation has organizational significance in the light of the reforms being undertaken within UN-Habitat to better position it as a partner and effective focal point for sustainable urban development within the United Nations system.

II. Overview of the ninth World Urban Forum

3. The ninth Forum took place from 7 to 13 February 2018 in Kuala Lumpur. The Forum is held every two years and gathers a wide range of experts in the field of sustainable urban development and human settlements. UN-Habitat serves as the convener and secretariat of the Forum. Its innovative and inclusive nature, combined with its high-level participation, makes it a unique event and the world's premier international gathering on urban issues.

4. The ninth Forum was the first large-scale event on urban development after the adoption of the New Urban Agenda at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in October 2016. The theme of the Forum was "Cities 2030 – Cities for All: Implementing the New Urban Agenda". It was attended by Habitat Agenda partners, national and

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subnational government representatives, parliamentarians, and representatives from academia, civil society organizations, grassroots organizations, the private sector and the public.

5. The Government of Malaysia provided \$6 million in funding for the planning, organization and delivery of the Forum. Of that funding, \$4 million was disbursed to UN-Habitat and \$2 million was retained by the Government of Malaysia to implement activities and support the organization of the Forum. The Government of Malaysia also provided in-kind contributions valued at \$5 million.

6. The objectives of the Forum were to advance the coordinated implementation of the New Urban Agenda and raise the profile of UN-Habitat as a leader in the field of urbanization and consolidate its knowledge base, incorporating the conference outcomes into the strategies and work of the Programme. The Forum had the following five expected accomplishments:

(a) Expected accomplishment 1: Awareness would be raised on sustainable urban development among stakeholders and constituencies, including in the public at large;

(b) Expected accomplishment 2: Collective knowledge on sustainable urban development would be improved through inclusive, open debate, the sharing of lessons learned and the exchange of urban solutions, good practice and policies;

(c) Expected accomplishment 3: Coordination and cooperation would be increased within the United Nations system and with different stakeholders and constituencies for the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the urban dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(d) Expected accomplishment 4: Substantive and strategic input from multilateral organizations, national and subnational governments and stakeholders would be provided for reporting on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda;

(e) Expected accomplishment 5: The profile of UN-Habitat would be raised and strategic programming supported, with specific focus on the six-year strategic plan and biennial work programme and budget.

III. Approach and methodology

7. The evaluation objectively examined the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact of the Forum. It aimed to assess outcomes and longer-term results and impact using a results-based approach by tracking the results chain and applying tailored indicators. To achieve that, the focus of the evaluation was shifted from “growth” to “transformational change” and a theory of change approach was applied to measure change, complemented by a systems approach.

8. Various methods and tools were used to collect and integrate data from multiple sources, including document reviews, interviews, surveys and field visits. Member States were consulted during the evaluation process through the Committee of Permanent Representatives. Other stakeholders, including Forum participants, organizers in Malaysia, UN-Habitat and its partners were also engaged in the evaluation. Comments were sought from key stakeholders, including the Committee of Permanent Representatives, on the inception and draft evaluation reports, and were considered in the final evaluation report. Limitations of the evaluation included its extensive scope, the complex nature of events and the many external factors making it difficult to attribute impact to the Forum.

IV. Achievement of the expected accomplishments of the ninth World Urban Forum

9. The evaluation found that the ninth session confirmed the Forum as the world’s premier conference on cities and sustainable urbanization. It was well attended, with more than 24,000 people gathering in Kuala Lumpur to renew their commitment to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

10. Expected accomplishment 1: All the events held during the ninth Forum raised awareness among participants, who now better understand their role in implementing the New Urban Agenda. Of the respondents to the participant impact survey, 92 per cent said that the Forum had raised their awareness of sustainable urban development. They reported having a better understanding of their role in implementing the New Urban Agenda and being more motivated and confident. Findings from interviews demonstrated that professionals working in different institutions are more motivated and confident and are already planning new initiatives inspired by the Forum.

11. Expected accomplishment 2: Ninety-three per cent of respondents to the participant impact survey and most interviewees found that the Forum had enhanced their knowledge of sustainable urban development. All interviewees were asked what they had learned from the Forum. They reported having benefited the most from sharing the experiences of other countries, including exposure to other cultures, groups and more integrated working methods. Participants from developing countries were in general more critical. Most of them did not attend the Forum to enhance their knowledge, but rather to be inspired. Some found that that expectation had not been fulfilled, noting that they had been “bored”.
12. Expected accomplishment 3: The Forum increased coordination and cooperation within the United Nations system and with various stakeholders. Some 143 events focused exclusively on networking and partnerships. Many participants proposed that the format of networking and training events should be more participatory and suggested more active forms of engagement through diverse and innovative platforms.
13. Many participants were successful in connecting with new partners and potential donors. Some participants from developing countries wanted to connect internationally and had the opportunity to connect with international organizations, including the Commonwealth Association of Planners and the International Society of City and Regional Planners. Malaysian participants were more focused on expanding regional networks. Certain participants, despite having met the same people at various different forums, were still interested in exchanging experiences with one another.
14. Expected accomplishment 4: The Forum was conceived as one of the platforms for providing input into reporting on the New Urban Agenda. The session reports delivered at the end of the Forum included resolutions and commitments by partners to report on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Participants came with new ideas, such as engaging young people in reporting on the New Urban Agenda. For instance, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments committed to defining effective mechanisms to ensure full involvement in the New Urban Agenda monitoring and reporting process. However, the surveys and interviews conducted revealed a lack of clarity on the connection between the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, especially among non-professionals and the general public.
15. Expected accomplishment 5: The interviews revealed a positive image of UN-Habitat.

V. Overall performance of the Forum based on the evaluation criteria and crosscutting issues

16. Relevance. The Forum’s overall objective is “advancing sustainable urban development”, and the ninth Forum was the first to refine that objective as “reporting on the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda”. Nevertheless, participants and stakeholder groups felt that the objectives of the Forum had not been clearly communicated and the evaluation revealed that participants had diverse perceptions and expectations of the Forum. Some interviewees felt that the objective of the Forum should have been much more ambitious, aiming to address the challenges of urbanization in the overall context of the global development agenda.
17. Efficiency. There is broad recognition that the Forum was successful and participants praised the achievements of Malaysia in hosting it, including the organization of the exhibitions. However, the input of some thematic branches diminished and the secretariat of the Forum took charge, led by the advocacy, outreach and communications branch. The Forum suffered from late mobilization in its final preparations, placing significant pressure on event organizers, including UN-Habitat staff.
18. Effectiveness. The sessions organized directly by UN-Habitat primarily targeted transfer of knowledge and skills, while events organized by partners were more effective in facilitating networking and creating synergies. A number of participants felt that the urgency of sustainable urbanization had been insufficiently addressed, which was perceived as a lost opportunity.
19. Impact and sustainability. The Forum strengthened the role of UN-Habitat as the United Nations focal point to support countries and mobilize stakeholders in the implementation, follow-up and review of the New Urban Agenda. The Forum generated many new partnerships and 20 memorandums of understanding were signed with UN-Habitat during the event alone. United Nations agencies, funds and programmes expressed their intention to work more closely with UN-Habitat and with each other, also pledging to enhance collaboration with the private sector in the pursuit of sustainable urban development.

20. Cross-cutting issues of gender, youth, climate and human rights. The evaluation found that the Forum was committed to ensuring gender balance, including by avoiding constituting panels with only male panellists. Of the respondents to the participant impact survey, 47 per cent were women and 53 per cent were men, which approaches gender balance based on Forum attendance. The Forum organized dedicated events for children and youth, which were perceived as highly innovative and were among the most successful events, as they were found to give a voice to people who are otherwise not heard. Climate change received significant attention and was an important theme for all participants, as was the need to increase collaboration with the private sector on climate change. The Forum promoted a vision for cities that was grounded in human rights and that recognized the need to give particular attention to addressing multiple forms of discrimination.

VI. Lessons learned

21. Key lessons from the evaluation included a need to address the lack of clarity on the objective of the Forum; the incomplete Forum results chain; the demand for results-based management; the need for the Forum to belong to all participants; the understanding of the Forum as a universal event with different dimensions; an awareness that the goals of UN-Habitat and the Forum are not necessarily interchangeable; and a need to clarify and update the working arrangements defined in annex IV to the report of the first Forum in 2002.

22. The objective of the Forum was not clear and created confusion among participants, who had varied expectations that could not all be met, which in turn diverted the thematic focus during certain events. The evaluation found that the Forum was perceived by some as an event in its own right and by others as a capacity-building and change project, to bring transformational changes in the effectiveness of the Forum, including efficiency of policy instruments and strengthened ownership of stakeholders.

23. The results chain in the logic framework of the Forum programme is incomplete, as only expected accomplishments are currently shown. The indicators should be better targeted, as most are still growth indicators, despite the focus of the Forum being on fostering transformative change for the achievement of sustainable urban development.

24. There is demand for results-based management. Participants want to be able to measure and be apprised of the results of the Forum. Some participants have started to evaluate their own events. UN-Habitat staff also want to showcase the results of the Forum and the impact of their work to partners. Future sessions of the Forum should therefore be organized to highlight the achievement of the planned objectives.

25. The Forum belongs to all participants. The New Urban Agenda highlights the importance of effective coordination and cooperation to achieve sustainable urban development. The evaluation revealed that stakeholders and partners in urban development demand greater participation and increased interaction in Forum events to foster joint ownership. There is a certain fatigue with the format of speeches and panel discussions in the events directly organized by UN-Habitat.

26. The Forum is a universal event with a variety of intended outcomes. According to the participant impact survey, 20 per cent of respondents felt that the Forum very much enhanced their knowledge of sustainable urban development, while only 8 per cent said that they would apply the acquired knowledge in their workplace. Some interviewees were not focused on the New Urban Agenda or even the Sustainable Development Goals. They wanted to be inspired and to change the course of urban development. They were not interested in resolutions or evidence-based policies, wishing rather to address the reality of conditions on the planet. They expected hard measures and firm commitments from all participants. The Forum has grown so large that some participants found it overwhelming due to practical, organizational and venue considerations, and the abundance of events, which was sometimes confusing.

27. UN-Habitat and the Forum do not have interchangeable goals. Expected accomplishment 5 is to raise the profile of UN-Habitat. The evaluation found that the Forum had strengthened the image of UN-Habitat vis-à-vis its partners and had strengthened internal collaboration within the Programme. However, expected accomplishment 5 underplays the strong energy of participants at the Forum inspiring each other, as opposed to UN-Habitat inspiring the participants. There is a need to make a distinction between the objectives of the Forum and the aspirations of UN-Habitat.

28. The working arrangements need clarification. The working arrangements formulated in annex IV to the report on the first Forum in 2002 have been gradually adapted in different Forums, but the changes have not been formally endorsed. That has led to ambiguities in working arrangements, roles and responsibilities and created tensions in December 2017 in the lead-up to the ninth Forum.

VII. Main recommendations

29. Eight recommendations were proposed in the independent evaluation report.
30. Recommendation 1: Set clear objectives for the World Urban Forum. UN-Habitat should set and clearly communicate the overall objectives of the Forum in its documents, including in the project document and the concept note, clarifying that the Forum is both an event and a transformative project. The overall objective or longer-term results of the Forum should not be confused with its expected accomplishments or the direct results of the events of each forum.
31. Recommendation 2: UN-Habitat should consider removing the result of raising the profile of UN-Habitat from the results framework of the Forum. It should treat that result and the result related to support for strategic programming with specific focus on the implementation of the draft strategic plan of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme for the period 2020–2025 and the biennial work programme and budget as a side effect, rather than as an expected accomplishment of the Forum. UN-Habitat should consider internal team-building events, separate from the Forum, to strengthen collaboration and synergy between the Programme’s headquarters and its regional offices.
32. Recommendation 3: Revise the logical framework of the Forum’s programme for 2018–2023. UN-Habitat should revise the Forum’s results chain and logical framework by (i) clearly indicating the Forum’s overall objective; (ii) defining the capacity development cycle and change process; (iii) fine-tuning its coordination and cooperation concept to target specific groups that require dedicated measures; and (iv) developing corresponding indicators. Each of the Forum’s events should have dedicated objectives and a target audience.
33. Recommendation 4: Learn from partners and change the event formats at the Forum. UN-Habitat should reconsider its current format of speeches and panel discussions and make Forum events more participatory, varied and interactive. Rather than organizing events by stakeholder group, they should be organized according to urban themes. UN-Habitat should specifically learn from the successful events that were organized by partners. In short, UN-Habitat should foster openness with constituencies and partners and greater engagement among stakeholders.
34. Recommendation 5: Develop and sustain the change and capacity-building cycle. Besides the current focus on enhancing knowledge and skills, UN-Habitat should develop specific events targeting awareness-raising, networking and implementation, heightening the thematic focus and ambition of its events. UN-Habitat should go beyond seeing the Forum as an event and embrace it as a transformative process, meaning that it should improve the capacity development cycle and change process of the events, targeting specific change agents and shaping events accordingly.
35. Recommendation 6: Focus on quality and content rather than growth. UN-Habitat should not aspire to increase participant numbers, as the Forum has grown sufficiently, but should instead concentrate on the quality and content of the events. Limiting the duration of the Forum should also be considered. Rather than focusing on innovation, themes should be disruptive, promoting uncomfortable topics, including shrinkage versus growth, less anthropocentrism and greater focus on flora and fauna, restructuring the spatial environment and circular urban economies.
36. Recommendation 7: Update the working arrangements of the Forum. UN-Habitat should revise the working arrangements of the Forum, as set out in annex IV to the report of the first Forum in 2002, so that they do not focus solely on urban development. In addition, the Programme has changed dramatically over the past fifteen years. The new working arrangements should be discussed with partners and should be based on the recommendations of successive Forums.
37. Recommendation 8: Include capacity development within the results chain of the Forum. UN-Habitat should articulate and define capacity development in the results chain to enhance the effective delivery of the Forum and strengthen the focus on achieving results rather than outputs. The results chain of the Forum should use a framework to measure change and capacity development on two levels, namely at the individual or group level and at the institutional level.

VIII. UN-Habitat management response to the evaluation

38. The management welcomes the Forum evaluation report. The evaluation was timely, as UN-Habitat is undertaking reforms to become a more transparent, trusted and accountable organization and is aiming to increase its development effectiveness.

39. Overall, the management agrees with the findings on the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, outcomes and impact of the Forum. It acknowledges the achievements of the Forum and the areas requiring improvement, in particular the unclear objectives of the Forum; the incomplete results chain in the logical framework of the Forum's programme; the need for a more creative format for the Forum and for updated working arrangements; and the need to articulate and define change processes within the results chain to enhance future planning, delivery and achievement of the Forum's objectives. The management accepts all eight recommendations and has begun to implement them to improve the planning, design and implementation of future forums.

40. The full text of the ninth Forum evaluation report can be accessed at www.unhabitat.org/habitatassembly.
