

## **World Urban Forum 4: Harmonious Urbanisation, Nanjing, China 3-6 November 2008**

Nanjing, host city for the 4<sup>th</sup> World Urban Forum (WUF), is at the forefront of China's urban expansion, while at the same time being presented as a historical city - 'the ancient capital of the Six Dynasties of China'. This contradiction between the imaginary and material, and also the continuing need to meet the human and environmental challenges of urbanisation in the context of rapid growth and global environmental change, lay at the heart of this global conference. The WUF, sponsored by UN-HABITAT, brought together around 7,000 delegates from NGOs, urban professionals, academics, state and local government departments and, national and international associations of local governments. The venue - Nanjing's brand new international Expo centre, a few blocks from the Olympic centre on what two years ago were rice paddies - symbolized the rapidity and profundity of China's current urban development trajectory.

The technical, institutional and at times political elements of urbanization shaped discussions. This was a welcome change from the previous WUF in 2006, hosted by Vancouver, where private sector and engineering interested were more dominant. That said, the exhibition stands were dominated by large Chinese firms and municipalities, each trying to outdo the others in terms of the glitzy, hypermodern visions of remarkably western-style urbanity being purveyed and produced across the country's cityscapes. Curiously the largest regional contingent was from Africa, with relatively few south and southeast Asian delegates. Perhaps UN-HABITAT is taking seriously the recognition that Africa is the world's most rapidly urbanizing continent.

IHDP was well represented by UGEC members. David Simon and Mark Pelling both presented on a UN-HABITAT panel on humanitarianism and cities (a session feeding into the policy division framing of urban disaster risk); the UN-HABITAT Urban Researchers' Roundtable on Climate Change and Cities (feeding into the Global Human Settlements Report 2011 on climate change and cities) and a session co-sponsored by ENDA, UGEC and UN-HABITAT (organised by Cheikh Guèye and David) on *Cities of the South: Localising Global Environmental Change*. Mark also participated in the launch of *Disaster Risk Reduction: Cases from Urban Africa* (Earthscan), an edited collection with Ben Wisner (also a UGEC Associate) drawing from the findings of the African Urban Risk Assessment Network, supported by the ProVention Consortium. David also served as panelist and rapporteur for the fourth Dialogue session, entitled *Harmonising the Built and Natural Environments*, which was ably chaired by Steve Bradshaw, editor and presenter of BBC World's 'Life on the Edge' series.

A notable feature of the Forum's programme was the prominence accorded to climate/global environmental change, which is now taking its place alongside the existing concerns with disaster risk and vulnerability reduction in both the humanitarian and longer-term development-oriented foci of UN-HABITAT's work. Indeed, immediately before the WUF, David was invited to Bangkok to lead an internal workshop for staff of UN-HABITAT's Disaster Management Programme (the humanitarian division) and their Asian partner organizations on these issues and how to integrate them into their work agendas. One thing emerging clearly from that session was some frustration among staff at how the institutionalized dichotomy

between humanitarian (emergency relief) and development (longer term) activities hampered effective operations.

Closing the World Urban Forum, United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, Anna Tibaijuka, called for the development of new ideas and working models to enable the emergence of livable urban environments, identifying key issues as the need:

- For governments to assume their responsibility for basic needs, even during times of global financial crisis;
- For every stakeholder to be committed to ensuring that rapid urban growth does not exclude the poorest;
- For urban planning, good governance and gender concerns to form the pillars of a better urban future;
- To ensure that climate change adaptation and mitigation are accepted as part of such pillars; and,
- For governments to promote pro-poor housing finance systems and balance market forces that tend to fail if left unregulated.

In short a call for inclusive governance, accountable government not being afraid to regulate where markets fail and the mainstreaming of adaptation and mitigation.

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