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Thematic/Country Presentation

Public Space in Asia-Pacific

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Speaking notes

The character of a city is defined by its streets and public spaces. From squares and boulevards to neighbourhood gardens and children playgrounds, public space frames city image. The connective matrix of streets and public spaces forms the skeleton of the city upon which all else rests.

Over the past few years there has been growing attention to public space. The adoption of SDG 11.7 and the New Urban Agenda provide significant recognition of the importance of public space to sustainable development.

Against this backdrop, public space is decreasing in the Asia Pacific region (as in other cities in the world) – Over the last 30 years, public spaces are becoming highly commercialized and have been replaced by private or semi-public buildings, resulting in the flourishing of shopping malls, gated communities, and loss of the street grammar.

In many cities in Asia, there is a high deficit in the amount of land allocated to public space, but also in the quality of those spaces. In some cities the reduction of the share of land that is allocated to streets and open spaces results in congestion and segregation. In other towns and cities some public spaces are not maintained and left derelict, their vibrancy and potential lost. Weak legal frameworks coupled with poor policy and weak political will have resulted in grabbing of public land, the capture of benefit by private actors and sometimes led to conflict between communities and government over the use of public space. PRIVATE WEALTH is leading to PUBLIC POVERTY.

Some cities and countries in Asia are on the other hand, putting public space at the core of urban development, just to mention a few:

- 1. China** – has approved a new national guidance/policy on people-centered urban development which includes directives against gated communities (privatization of public space)
- 2. South Korea** - opening of the Sky Garden in Seoul, already seen as new leading example of strategically developed public space, of city-wide relevance and with a strong urban renewal strategy
- 3. Indonesia** - the Mayor, as witnessed by many during Prepcom 3, has used greening and public space strategies for several years to transform the city and make it highly inclusive.
- 4. In South Asia** - there are several public space initiatives as well. There is a great awareness with city leaders to clean and green cities, providing dignity to the streets in the city, creating jobs for maintenance, enhancing safety for people and increasing the value of neighbourhoods. UN-Habitat strongly supports, for instance, the city of **Kabul** in this regard.

I would also like to take the opportunity to highlight that in the Vision of the NUA promoting socially inclusive, integrated, connected, accessible, gender-responsive, environmentally sustainable and safe public spaces is key in achieving the New Urban Agenda. Good quality public space provides connectivity and access, protection from crime and violence, shelter from climate, seclusion from traffic and the opportunity to rest, work and meet. Through its multifunctional and multi-disciplinary nature, public space offers a holistic and integrated view of the city, such as social inclusion, gender equality, the benefits of nature and green spaces, governance, health, safety, education, climate change, transport, energy and the local urban economy.

It is clear that public space is one of the most important assets of cities, and, if well planned, designed and managed, can be the lever of sustainable urban development and transforming the quality of urbanization.



During this session, Bruno Decron, from the **Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific** will briefly introduce the relevance of this issue for Asian cities. The Urban Planning and Design Branch will present the activities being undertaken at regional, national and local level in Asia, as well as their link with the global level work.