

UN Commission on Human Settlements focuses on global strategy for 2000

By Eric Carlson

THE twelfth session of the UN Commission on Human Settlements was convened in Colombia, at the Convention Center of Cartagena, from April 24 to May 3, with the participation of 350 delegates from 82 countries. The Commission devoted the bulk of its time to examining questions concerned with implementation of the Global Strategy for Shelter adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1988. Special attention was directed to how national policies and action formulated in accordance with this strategy should be monitored on a systematic basis.

Each country is to adopt its own timetable for reorganisation of its

'Mobilising resources for housing'

shelter sector in the following suggested sequence:

- 1989-1991 Establishment of national policies and strategies and design of new institutional arrangements.
- 1992-1994 Introduction of new institutional arrangements, and strengthening of existing national programmes.
- 1995-2000 Full-scale operation of national programmes and progressive strengthening of institutions for activities beyond 2000.

The major feature of the Global

Shelter Strategy is to facilitate adequate shelter for all by the year 2000, with particular focus on the poor and disadvantaged. The operational focus is for action at the national level. A fundamental premise is that governments should not carry the entire burden of shelter production and distribution but should adopt "enabling" strategies.

The strategy is to be a framework for integrating and advancing national economic and social development objectives. It recognises the contribution of women as income-earners, home-makers and heads of households in the development of housing policies, programmes and projects. The public sector has the responsibility of creating incentives and facilitating measures for housing action by other entities, particularly as represented in the private sector by non-governmental and community-based organisations.

Governments are expected to encourage the mobilisation of resources for housing and for infrastructure and to ensure that the shelter sector is allowed to compete fairly for domestic financing. They should also stimulate the flow of sufficient serviced land to meet shelter needs, to expand the provision of basic infrastructure as well as urban road and transport networks, and to support the expansion of indigenous building materials production.

The Global Shelter Strategy is, therefore, an impressive inter-

national mandate for action. The monitoring guidelines for national governments are being developed by the UN Center for Human Settlements in Nairobi. Governments are urged to prepare annual progress reports on their national shelter strategies and to target these for release and presentation on the annual Habitat Day, the first Monday in October.

Bi-annual reporting to the Commission, however, will take on more importance, as henceforth the UNCHS will meet only every two years. The 13th session of the Commission will be held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1991, at which there will be a review of the Global Strategy and the results of monitoring involved in the first biennial reports prepared by governments.

The Commission's session in Cartagena was inaugurated by

'Stimulating flow of land'

Colombian President Dr. Virgilio Barco Vargas, who endorsed the new approach represented by the Global Strategy, and saw it as an avenue towards eradication of poverty while achieving development objectives. He reported that the Colombian Government has approved legislation designed to promote rural and urban land

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reform, and to give broad autonomy to local governments.

The Commission considered two special theme papers, the first on The Role, Responsibilities and Capabilities of Governmental and Non-Governmental Sectors in the Field of Human Settlements, and the second on The Maintenance of Buildings and Infrastructure and Its Financing and Cost Recovery. On the first subject the Commission approved a resolution requesting priorities in the Global Strategy work programme

'Debt equity conversion'

and the medium-term plan for 1992 to 1997 as follows:

(a) Strengthening the management and implementation capacities of local government through support for such measures as devolution and decentralisation, appropriate financial capability and training.

(b) Defining relationships between government and the private sector in such areas as the supply of urban services, housing and land, etc.

(c) Encouraging effective community participation at all levels in human settlements programmes, especially those designed to combat urban poverty through training and emphasis on self-reliance and self-help.

(d) Urging governments to promote co-ordination between public agencies and to engage in dialogue with private and community sectors.

(e) Requesting national governments to accord local government authorities a substantial role and corresponding responsibilities for the management and development of human settlements.

On the second subject, maintenance of buildings and infrastructure was seen as complementary to new capital investment in public works. In many developing countries, and in times of financial stringency, maintenance could be the most economical

means of sustaining services essential to economic growth and social improvement. The Commission adopted a resolution on this subject providing guidelines for government consideration.

Papers on Financing the Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000, and Assistance Provided To and Among Developing Countries on Human Settlements were also reviewed by the Commission. The reports raised fundamental issues about the need for governments to put into place national finance systems for addressing shelter development on a sustainable basis and at the required scale. The issue of financing shelter and urban infrastructure was seen as an opportunity for domestic resource mobilisation, and in light of the need for private capital formation and employment generation.

The difficulties of achieving a sound financial system were recognised, especially in times of economic recession, external debts, high inflation and cuts in public investment. At present the housing and shelter sector receives only about 2% of international aid assistance across the board. The Global Strategy paper on Shelter Finance suggested new possibilities that might become available through debt-equity conversion arrangements which are beginning to be employed in several countries.

The representative of the International Union presented a statement endorsing further action to investigate debt-equity conversions and other arrangements to facilitate capital flow to developing countries, and their potential for assistance to the industries and services involved in housing, building and construction. He suggested that a special task force or working party be established regarding this matter, which might also help in reviewing the need for a new international financial services entity for assistance to countries in

need of shelter and housing development. Excerpts from the statement of IUBSSA's senior consultant, Eric Carlson, appear in the accompanying box.

The Commission accepted the work programme of the Center for Human Settlements (Habitat) for the biennium 1990-1991, which will focus on the Global Strategy for Shelter and the "enabling" concept. The Center was requested to give more weight to the following issues: roles of governmental and non-governmental sectors, municipal management, finance, training, land policies, urban and regional planning, comprehensive urban development, and the link between shelter and related environmental issues. The 1992-1997 programme for the Center's future work was also

'Global strategy launched'

accepted by the Commission, and, after adoption by the UN General Assembly, will form an integral part of the UN Medium-Term Plan for the same period.

During the Commission's session in Cartagena a special meeting was held of the 60 participating Parliamentarians to discuss the legislative and institutional changes necessary to launch action at national and local levels. The Global Strategy itself has been launched with some ceremony, including a special meeting held at UN Headquarters on 16 February, 1989, attended by the executive heads of other relevant UN agencies or departments, the World Bank and several non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A consultative meeting on the strategy of 12 organisations and agencies of the UN system was held in Geneva in July 1989.

A number of countries are already participating in preparatory work for their national shelter programmes, with support from both bilateral and

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IUHFI STATEMENT TO TWELFTH SESSION OF UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

THE International Union of Housing Finance Institutions has followed since 1965 the work of the United Nations on housing and shelter finance and the mobilisation of resources for this sector.

The executive director's report on Financing of Shelter and Infrastructure is an excellent concise statement. The Union is in substantial agreement with the findings and recommended approaches. However, more work is needed if the report is to be an adequate and sufficiently specific response to the Commission's resolution. The financial constraints and needs of the developing countries should be more sharply identified and quantified. Also required is rigorous analysis and realistic consideration of possible solutions for obtaining the funds required. The level of United Nations commitment for work in this field should also be indicated, including regular staff, consultant and adviser services.

To follow up some aspects of the report, such as paras 80 to 82 on debt equity conversions, a special task force or working party should be established.

Such a dedicated group action for financing of human settlements should expand the stock of information available within the UN system and elsewhere on individual country conditions and needs as well as evaluate the relative merits of actual programmes. It would explore and work through various possibilities for new funding from both public and private sectors. It would focus on practical measures of value to the majority of countries, drawing upon the best of existing experience in mobilising savings and financing in

both urban and rural communities and townships. It would analyse the trends towards globalisation of financial services and technologies, and their implications for shelter, housing and human settlements development.

The International Union would be pleased to co-operate with such an undertaking, and is sure that in today's conditions it could produce new directions useful to the entire international community.

In addressing the Commission on several occasions, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka has proposed study of a "Global Housing and Shelter Bank". There seems to have been little follow-up to this proposal. But the need remains for international focus on housing finance, and for a service institution to devise means to harness credit for settlements and to help mobilise domestic savings and resources along the policy guidelines of the Executive Director's report. Such an institution would provide seed capital and technical assistance and help governments to modernise their housing finance structures.

Feasibility studies for such an entity, fund or financial institution should be pursued as part of the essential global strategy for human settlement development to the Year 2000. Assistance for such a project should be sought from UNDP and its Capital Development fund, the World Bank, other multi/bilateral financial bodies, and national and international NGOs concerned with this sector. At its World Congress in 1968 in Sydney, Australia, the International Union endorsed and supported United Nations' initiatives in this direction and it stands ready to

collaborate with a project of this type, if one should be agreed to.

In addition to its own projects, the United Nations should conduct a review of worldwide experience of non-conventional funding and organisation for housing and human settlements: eg the use of credit unions in Central America for housing improvement loans; the extensive involvement of community-based organisations for housing in Colombia; the Nehemiah Plan of Brooklyn, New York; new methods of funding for rural villages. Special attention should be directed to relevant experience of long-term investment and funding for housing through pension, social security, postal savings, and insurance funds. An international research project on current experience with mobilisation of private sector funding and investment for human settlements could provide tools for developing new partnerships and approaches, especially for involvement in low-income and rural/urban poor communities. United Nations support will be required for a network of regional training and research centres on financing, management, technology and education for human settlements.

The International Union is pleased to collaborate with the Commission in the development of an international shelter strategy. Attention will be given to these efforts at the Union's World Congress to be held in Washington DC, September 17 to 20. The Union is also a co-sponsor of the Third International Shelter Conference to be held in 1990.

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multilateral agencies. These include Bolivia, Burundi, Colombia, Costa Rica, Djibouti, Indonesia, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Oman, the Philippines, Tunisia, Turks and Caicos Islands, Uganda, Vanuatu and Zimbabwe. At regional and international levels also, projects, workshops and training activities related to Shelter Strategies are under way or programmed.

It seems clear that this new panorama of national shelter strategy development and implementation around the world will require additional resources if it is to succeed and also be sustainable. The UNCHS (Habitat) is already overloaded with a menu of projects and activities under eight different programmes in addition to many technical co-operation projects financed by the UN Development Programme for which the Center acts as executing agent for an overhead fee of 13%. It is subject to the overall UN budgetary restrictions of "no-growth" in recent years. Its limited regular budget allocations have been supplemented by extra-budgetary funds available for personnel, services and projects from the UN, Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation.

'Donor community reluctant'

But despite the stated support for the Global Strategy and other allied follow-up resulting from the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (1987), the international donor community has been reluctant to step up its contributions and assistance to the Foundation for the use of the Habitat Center. At the Cartagena session, for example, only an additional \$1.5 million was pledged, from the following countries: Burkina Faso, France, The Federal Republic of Germany, Kenya,

Papua New Guinea, Sweden and the United States of America. An additional \$2.9 million had been pledged at the UN pledging conference in New York in November 1988. The total is not impressive for the tasks which are ahead in mobilising a new world programme of action for shelter and housing.

The NGO role

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations are counted on for a major role in implementing the Global Shelter Strategy, but only a handful were present at the Commission session in Cartagena. The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) did, however, present several constructive statements to the Commission regarding its agenda topics and the importance of involvement of NGOs and community-based organisations as partners in housing and shelter sector development. The HIC is a federation of over 200 organisations from all over the world which was founded in 1978, and in 1987 undertook a reorganisation of its constitution, structure and programme, including the promotion of new regional groupings.

The HIC's objectives are expressed in the following paragraph from its new policy statement:

"It is HIC's belief that the problem of housing is neither a localised problem nor one only of particular sections of society such as the poor, nor can it be seen in isolation from other social issues. Rather it is a structural issue, interlinked with issues of domination by market and state and the inhibition of local initiative, of global resource degradation and it is the collective responsibility of all peoples to address this problem. HIC believes that it must not only be seen as the problem of individuals nor can it be tackled by projects alone but rather through the creation of conditions

by which all people can gain and retain adequate housing. Accordingly, it directs its efforts towards support for the struggle for the right to housing and the promotion of enabling policies in the field of housing and human settlements."

'Creating the right conditions'

The HIC held a workshop before the UNCHS session and adopted a first draft of a Declaration of Housing Rights. This will be discussed among its members and other NGOs and CBOs as part of a Global Campaign for Housing Rights, leading to the formulation of an international Convention on Housing Rights, and action by the UN in this context. The new president of the HIC is Hans van Putten, who was its former secretary and also former secretary general of the International Union of Local Authorities in The Hague. He succeeds David Hall, executive director, Town and Country Planning Association, London. HIC's recently appointed executive director, Enrique Ortiz, continues to serve from the Mexico City office of HIC.

Although few international NGOs participated in the UNCHS session, Colombian professional and civic groups, with the support of Cartagena municipality, organised in the historic walled city an unusual event titled I Colombia Habitat Festival. It was a five-day feast of stimulating discussions, round tables and cultural events held in different historic sites. Present and former officials of leading Colombian housing sector institutions participated, as did many professionals and civic leaders from universities, NGOs and communities. Their experience and viewpoints gave witness to Colombia's long-standing work in the housing field. Invited visitors from other Latin American countries presented additional perspectives. ■