Bridging the urban divide
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The urban divide stands out as one of the major paradoxes — some would say scandals — of this early 21st century. After all, cities concentrate what has become known as the “urban advantage”, namely, a bundle of opportunities which, from basic services to health, education, amenities and gainful employment, have never been so favourable to human development. Yet all too frequently, cities also concentrate high, unacceptable degrees of inequality as these opportunities elude major segments of the population.

Equal access to urban services and opportunities is often restricted by all kinds of invisible barriers, but the outcome is so visible. Look, for example, at the growing number of gated communities in many countries that continue to shut the have-nots out. Walk along a street in the capital of a developing country, and you can see the back of the well-serviced, well-appointed local headquarters of a worldwide business consultancy facing a row of tiny, ramshackle shops catering to the needs of low-income residents.

More often than not, the bumpy stretch of mud that passes for a street will lead to a slum — the cruellest form of urban divide. The other paradox — or scandal — of early 21st century cities is that the opportunities that come with the “urban advantage” are often closed to women, children and young people with vital roles to play in our collective future. Beyond livelihoods, health and personal development, the whole continuum of deprivations that characterizes the wrong side of the urban divide has a tangible impact on bodies and minds, stunting the physical and intellectual potential of millions among present and future generations.

Even from a purely economic perspective, the stark inequalities are making the urban divide look paradoxical too. Business and affluent residential areas typically thrive on the many cross-border linkages that ultimately connect them to the tight network of “global” cities dominating the world economy. The resulting prosperity is what drives the rural poor and immigrants into urban areas, in the hope of securing their own fair share.

The irony is that for lack of qualifications or opportunities, they remain largely confined to a slum-based informal sector that looks like an inverted image of the glowing formal economy in terms of productivity, technology and business connections.

Nearly 10 years into the 21st century, the urban divide has become so acute that its main determinants have, in turn, become easier to identify. Just as slums and sub-standard housing stand as the by-products of
inadequate land and housing policies, the informal economy stands as an offshoot of inadequate regulation.

Today's urban divide is largely an outcome of the biases and inadequacies of the three main tiers of government — central, local and municipal. “The State of the World’s Cities 2010/2011: Bridging the Urban Divide” is published in a very important year (2010) — a key milestone that marks the halfway point towards the deadline for the “slum target” of the Millennium Development Goals. Government efforts to reduce the number of slum dwellers show some positive results.

According to new estimates presented in this report, between the year 2000 and 2010 over 200 million people in the developing world will have been lifted out of slum conditions. In other words, governments have collectively exceeded the Millennium Target by at least a multiple of two. However, this achievement is not uniformly distributed across regions.

Success is highly skewed towards the more advanced emerging economies, while poorer countries have not done as well. For this reason, there is no room for complacency, because in the course of the same years the number of slum dwellers increased by six million every year. Based on these trends it is expected that the world’s slum population will continue to grow if no corrective action is taken in the coming years.

The international survey at the core of the report does more than identify the factors behind the economic, social, political and cultural inequalities that continue to plague so many urban areas across the world. Survey respondents and analysts answer the challenges of the urban divide with a number of pointed recommendations.

I believe that the way public authorities perform their duties is just as important as the nature of what they achieve. Governments must strengthen existing institutions, or create new ones. Effectiveness also requires new linkages and alliances to be established
Experience shows that lack of inclusionary planning is only planning for trouble. Any sustainable vision for the future of any city can only be of an inclusive, not divisive nature. These are just some of the reasons why we chose to launch a new global campaign at the Fifth Session of the World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro in March 2010. We see Rio as the beginning of something new — the World Urban Campaign. We launched this campaign to keep up the momentum of the forum, to heed the messages of our partners inside and outside government, the private sector, and of course our survey respondents. The idea is to start with 100 best cities in the world and then trumpet their ideas to spread the word to more and more cities so that we can multiply to 1000 cities and beyond. This is how UN-HABITAT and our partners will lobby to bridge the urban divide.