

Envisioning Sustainable Urban Economy in Uncertain Times

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A major output of Urban Economy Forum is the Regent Park World Urban Pavilion by UN-Habitat (The Pavilion), a collaboration between the Urban Economy Forum, UN-Habitat and the Government of Canada. The Pavilion will be a global knowledge and innovation exchange hub that will pilot innovative and creative programmes related to sustainable urbanism.

Toronto Canada – The 2nd Urban Economy Forum 2020 (UEF 2020) was held virtually on October 5 & 6, 2020 on occasion of World Habitat Day and the 75 Anniversary of United Nations. The Forum was inaugurated with a message from the Prime Minister of Canada Honourable Justin Trudeau highlighting the importance of UEF2020, which “brings together community leaders and financial stakeholders to monitor, assess and improve the sustainable development of urban economies”.

Over 160 speakers and 100’s of participants joined UEF2020 throughout the 2-day program. Several representatives from UN and UN Agencies, such as UN-Habitat, UNESCO, UNYOUTH, UNEP and UNICEF, joined the forum to share their evaluation of sustainable urbanism to achieve the urban SDG. Mayors, city leaders, urban practitioners, and academics from dozens of countries also provided their perspectives and practical approaches that others could take back home.

The forum launched with video messages from the Secretary General of UN and Executive Director of UN-Habitat, who shared their remarks about this year’s World Habitat Day theme “Housing for All: A Better Urban Future”. The theme was a major topic of discussion throughout the 2-day forum as participants discussed the experience, challenges and opportunities in a world impacted by COVID-19.

Lieutenant Governor of Ontario Honourable Elizabeth Dowdeswell applauded participants’ virtual engagement amidst a global pandemic and said that it was a “recognition that adequate, safe and affordable housing is critical for the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities from around the world”.

Her Honour’s message was reiterated by the Canadian Federal Minister of Youth, Families and Social Development Honourable Ahmed Hussen who highlighted the opportunities that COVID-19 has given rise to and that now it is time for everyone to come together to build a stronger and more resilient country and world.

Reinforcing housing as a crucial urban resource at the centre of cities and communities, Rafael Tuts, Director of Global Solutions Division, UN-Habitat emphasised the importance of

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reflecting on the moral aspects of humanity to create positive economic impacts for housing and sustainability.

On housing, speakers supported the effective regulation by urban authorities of urban land and property markets through the formulation and enforcement of policy instruments such as land value capture, sale of development rights, developer charges and impact fees, land pooling or land readjustment and inclusionary zoning amongst other measures to improve access to affordable and sustainable housing.

The provision of adequate infrastructure catering to all citizens was emphasised along with an encouragement to ensure social inclusion and cohesion through mixed income housing and neighbourhood development.

Homelessness was brought into the discussion by Mayor Don Iveson of City of Edmonton Canada, who supported ending homelessness in Edmonton and called for other cities to join this goal to build a better urban future.

Following the opening address and keynote speakers, UEF 2020 participants had the opportunity to contribute to deeper dialogue in UEF 2020's seven themes. Participants engaged in topics such as urban economy theories and action, sustainable municipal finance, urban assessment, data and technology, shifting paradigms in urbanism, housing and real estate, public participation and social inclusion, and environment and sustainable resources.

Several recurring themes were drawn out during the course of the two days. COVID-19 and the negative impacts it has had on the financial sustainability of cities was examined closely, including how these impacts have affected the most vulnerable populations disproportionately. Mayor of Helsinki, Jan Vapaavuori, highlighted this as an opportunity for the world and called on everyone to "make the cities of the future work better for the people". Juliano De Oliveira, Research and Policy Specialist at UNICEF, emphasized the importance of strengthening the capacity of local governments to deliver results for children and youth. Juliano stated that "our cities must have strong focus on child rights, inclusion and participation".

To achieve this, creativity and innovation will play a crucial role, said Eduardo Moreno, Head of Knowledge and Innovation, UN-Habitat and Honorary Chair of UEF 2020. Participants emphasised the need to build back better and work toward low carbon growth. Investments in affordable and sustainable housing, civil society participation, low carbon transportation, local and circular economies, making cities food secure and expanding sustainable urban farming are just some key elements discussed.

Professor Jyoti Hosagrahar, Deputy Director, World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, called for support to the leveraging of cultural heritage, including those of the Indigenous Peoples, for Sustainable urban development and recognise its role in stimulating participation and responsibility. She emphasised the need to promote the integration of heritage protection with innovative and appropriate use of heritage and the historic fabric in its larger setting, with the

intention of value creation, through respectful conservation and adaptive reuse, as well as regeneration of housing.

Collaboration was a common thread in the discussions. Cities and people need to work in cohesion at the local, national, and global levels to achieve the SDGs. Sharing evidence-based challenges and opportunities from past experiences is an important mechanism to ensure that limited urban resources are invested in the most impactful policies and programs. Chris Williams, Head of New York Office, UN-Habitat encouraged all participants to interact with the New Urban Agenda Platform, as an important tool for academics and practitioners to exchange knowledge and track progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The forum closed with participants drafting the UEF 2020 Resolution, including:

Financing the growth of cities and their inhabitants' livelihoods are among the most significant challenges facing leaders worldwide. Creative approaches are required to build awareness across finance and government sectors to better design, build, and finance our cities' agents of development regarding the urban SDGs, such as encouraging cooperatives and circular economies.

UEF 2020 continues to provide an interactive platform for city leaders, urban development organisations, financial institutes, and academics to exchange best practices to achieve the NUA and SDGs, and aims to establish Toronto, Canada, as a global hub for sustainable urbanism. Municipalities are encouraged to join the SDGs Cities Initiative as they work toward the SDGs.

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Honourable Ahmed Hussen looked forward to the launch of The Pavilion in his speech, which will take place in early November, The UEF secretariat encourages all urban leaders and practitioners to join this occasion.

[Stay tuned for the 3rd “Urban Economy Forum 2021”, which will again be held in conjunction with World Habitat Day on October 4 & 5, 2021. For more information visit: www.ueforum.org]