

World Urban Forum 3 held in Vancouver, Canada

WOBO founding president Omkar Channan and WOBO Secretary/Treasurer Robert Solomon attended the UN Habitat, World Urban Forum 3 (WUF3) that was held 18-23 June 2006 in Vancouver, Canada. This event, held bi-annually, is organized and sponsored by the United Nations Human Settlements Program – UN Habitat. WUF3 was organized around three themes and related dialogues. They included:

Social Inclusion and Cohesion

- Achieving the Millennium Development Goals - Slum Upgrading, Affordable Housing
- Public Engagement – Inclusive Approach

Partnership and Finance

- Municipal Finance: Innovation/Collaboration
- Urban Safety and Security

Urban Growth and the Environment

- The Shape of Cities: Urban Planning and Management
- Energy: Local Action, Global Impact

These multiple themes and related dialogues centered directly on the broad goals of UN Habitat concerning infrastructure upgrades to water, sanitation, transportation and electricity; single family and multi housing construction; educational opportunities; jobs; and security. WOBO and its members have a role and stake in these objectives and more importantly, can serve as a resource to UN Habitat to improve upon these objectives.

A series of jam-packed, standing room only presentations covered the realm of housing, construction and health issues. Every speaker was eloquent (and passionate) in their delivery of what has been done, what is being done and what can be done in the future to make marked improvements towards the living conditions in both the developing, and developed countries. In between sessions, attendees were also able to view the many exhibits (over 100) that were sponsored by many of the attending countries and organizations.

Miss Anna Tibaijuka, Under – Secretary General and Executive Director of UN Habitat lead discussions at several of the plenary sessions. Her plea has been for all UN Habitat members to keep the momentum from the first UN Habitat conference held in Vancouver in 1976 to keep moving forward. While grateful and appreciative for the work that has been done, she emphasized the need to keep doing what we are doing.

In another plenary session, the U.S. Secretary for Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Alphonso Jackson; the President of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India, Mr. Jockin Arputham and the Minister of Housing for the Government of South Africa, Ms. Lindiwe Sisulu discussed programs at both the local and national/federal government levels that work to improve quality of life issues. While Mr. Jackson and Ms. Sisulu discussed several successful initiatives, it was perhaps Mr. Arputham who had the most compelling talk. He summarized the "... *many hundred conferences, and seminars, and papers and studies ...*" that have dealt with the UN Habitat goals and wondered, actually challenged the attendees with the question "... *how many more hundred conferences, and seminars, and papers, and studies...*" will be needed to fully implement the ideas that are often times shared at these events. His bottom line, he would like to see more action and execution rather than talk.

Mohammad Yousaf Pashtun, Minister of Urban Development from the Government of Afghanistan spoke about the challenges of establishing an infrastructure in a country that has been devastated by war. Surprising to many, Minister Pashtun had many successful examples to discuss with regard to the progress in Afghanistan.

Enrique Peñalosa, the former mayor of Bogota, Columbia spoke about infrastructure developments and improvements in Bogota. These changes have been on-going since the early 1990's have centered on improvements to public transportation and alternative transportation schemes, such as more bike paths to lessen vehicle congestion in the city limits.

Each local and national government has some success story that can be piloted in other countries. Not every plan that is successful in one area is guaranteed to work to everywhere, but WUF3 allowed a broad range of ideas to be shared. Sheltering of urban populations in safe, secure and substantial dwellings is of key importance. Full accessibility to those living and working environments is also of crucial importance.

Attendees were sent away with many lasting impressions and ideas and urged to take action. Of particular note was the challenge to the Non-Government Organizations (NGO's). While reliance on national governments will continue to be important, reliance on NGO's such as WOBO will be even more crucial moving forward.

WUF4 will be held in June 2008 in Nanjing, China.