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“1st HABITAT SUMMIT: A UNIQUE MODEL FOR BUILDING ALTERNATIVE URBAN FUTURES FOR INDIA”

1st HABITAT SUMMIT – A PLATFORM FOR DEVELOPING LIVEABLE CITIES IN INDIA

“Urban centres the world over are moving fast. We cannot afford to stay behind, and the focus on our cities is critical in attaining this growth”, said **Mr. M. Ramachandran, Secretary, Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India** in a special address at the **1st Habitat Summit 2009**. The 1st Habitat Summit, which is taking place at the India Habitat Centre, Delhi from September 24-26 is a joint initiative of the **India Habitat Centre** and the **Urban Habitats Forum**. The summit brings together economists, policymakers, urban planners, urban development strategists, bureaucrats, consultants and young professionals to drive **public engagement towards the creation of an alternative urban vision and agenda that considers liveability, sustainability and competitiveness as key parameters for success in the development of India’s current and future cities.**

Mr. Ramachandran lauded the timeliness and relevance of the Summit’s theme, *“Towards Alternative Urban Futures for India”*. The Summit, he noted, comes at a time when “urban India is seeing a great transformation.” He pointed out that “in 2007, the world’s urban population equaled the world rural population signifying a great social, cultural and political transformation.” In India, however, the figure for urbanization is only about 30%. In his address, Mr. Ramachandran outlined a broad framework for managing this process of urbanization. He underscored the need to bring about active participation of communities within the given time frame; the importance of coordinating various institutions working in the area of urban development to work together; the need to make master plans more dynamic and requirement centric; improvement of sanitation facilities; creation of knowledge led cities and benchmarking of service levels; quickening the pace of infrastructure development; and providing reform linked financial assistance.

Earlier in the day, in his inaugural address, **Mr. Arun Maira, Member, Planning Commission, Government of India**, emphasized the importance of adopting a different and innovative approach for the development of liveable cities. According to him, “to change an organization, we need to change people themselves. We need to turn their fears into hope, their fights into co-operation, and it is only then that we can build a sustainable organization. In a similar manner, we need to examine the nature of three models of processes to make cities liveable:

- What are the things that need to be improved?

- How do these things change?
- How can we engage with this change?

The Planning Commission is a Strategic Partner of the 1st Habitat Summit.

With over 65 speakers of national and international repute and over 500 delegates — of which 300 of whom are students and young professionals in the age bracket of 18-35 years selected through the UHF Fellows Programme, the Summit is arguably the biggest urban event of its kind to be organized in India.

The first day saw serious and nuanced discussions on issues of critical importance. In one of the sessions, *'Urbanisation as a Development Policy: India, China and the World'* the speakers highlighted the learnings from China's experience in urbanization that India could adapt. The need for decentralization of the planning process was and is the urgent need for policymakers to create the necessary institutions and connective infrastructure were also emphasized in the session.

The session entitled *'Beyond the Megacities: Shaping the Next Generation of Cities in India'* saw the propagation of the concept of 'metacity' - a city that works with all functions coordinated as well as the need for intelligent solutions such as creating walkable cities, catching the water before it goes into the sea, producing renewable energy, reducing demand-district cooling and building verticals.

Sharing the thought process that shaped the Summit, Mr. Raj Liberhan, Director, India Habitat Centre said that there was a need to begin a process through which hopes of thousands of citizens can be turned into the dream of achieving a livable city - a city that spells mobility without fear, a city that spells the chance to learn and earn, a city that promotes the pursuit of excellence by individuals, and finally a city where people can live without bias and threat to fellow citizens. He said, "Our hope and aim is to use this summit as a discourse, beginning in Delhi, but to be taken to other cities".

Cities are here to stay, according to Mr. Anupam Yog, Managing Director, Mirabilis Advisory. However, he noted, there exist tensions between the habitat and its inhabitant, which could lead to a terrible rupture in the megacities that are now taking shape. But there is hope yet. "It is not hard to see that political changes – perhaps, new city states, perhaps, new forms of city-cum-regional government -- may ensue. With luck, the tension can instead be put to work reinventively to create better cities", he observed.

With two more days to go, Mr. Maira urged the delegates to participate in the Summit with an open mind to learn and unlearn, and also to examine their own assumptions, theory and drive behind what they want to do and the cities that they want to live in.



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The India Habitat Centre was conceived to provide a physical environment which would serve as a catalyst for a synergetic relationship between individuals and institutions working in diverse habitat related areas and therefore, maximise their total effectiveness. (www.indiahabitat.org)

Mirabilis Advisory is an international economic development consultancy that works in the area of globalization, sustainability and entrepreneurship.

Urban Habitats Forum is a public awareness platform established by Mirabilis Advisory in partnership with India Habitat Centre, and designed as a collaborative network of multidisciplinary thinkers and change-makers to push for innovation in shaping the next generation of cities in India. The forum aims to mobilise action through intelligent discourse, impactful research and result-driven advocacy.