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Contents

Urbanization: meeting environmental challenges

Urbanization has been the dominant demographic trend during the last half century. Urban environmental management (or UEM) therefore presents increasingly complex challenges. In 1950, some 750 million people lived in urban areas; today there are close to three billion. UEM addresses urban inhabitants, their leaders, and the whole range of responsible officials. It also considers the many sustainability issues faced by urban society - issues that have been highlighted by the UN Habitat conferences. And UEM concerns industry, for instance when it provides urban services or operates in urban areas.

Urban environmental management is about coping with urban problems sustainably. As cities have grown to enormous size, their inhabitants' consumption and production patterns have generated environmental stresses beyond those due to limitations on the land, water and other natural resources required to feed, clothe and shelter them. In addition, there is a need for schools, health facilities, transport and jobs, as well as open spaces in which to enjoy nature, including clean air and water.

Those most negatively affected by the impact of overstressed and overstrained urban resources, especially in developing countries, are the urban poor, who are unable to compete for scarce resources or protect themselves from harmful environmental conditions. Urban poverty is accompanied by many health and environmental problems related to lack of access to basic services (e.g. sanitation, solid waste collection, transport, electricity).

UEM is about factories, offices and households consuming fewer resources to obtain the same goods and services. It is about efficient energy use, for instance through the introduction of efficient, reliable and comfortable mass transit systems, less polluting fuels, and more energy-efficient household appliances, lighting, air conditioning and heating; and it is about producing less waste and promoting recycling. In short, UEM is about respecting nature.

UEM is also about respecting others' right to enjoy nature's bounty. It is about protecting everyone, including the economically and socially disadvantaged, from the harsh impacts of an overstressed environment. It is about social equity and justice with regard to natural resources use. The essence of sustainable development, especially in urban settings, is that no one has the right to abuse or misuse finite natural resources. There is a right to sustainable use, which implies respect for subsequent generations' right to benefit from these resources as well.

UEM is about participation. It is about the obligation of public authorities to engage citizens — the most potent urban stakeholders — in managing resources and addressing environmental concerns. It is about urban managers' duty to ensure that air, soil and water are protected, and to keep citizens informed, consult with them, and defend their interests.

UEM can help avoid urban environmental crises by anticipating the impacts of environmental emergencies. It is therefore a survival kit for urban areas that want to shape events rather than being overtaken by them. Urban environmental management is all this and much more. But it is definitely not about deciding to "wait and see".

The urban areas now practising UEM, and institutionalizing its principles and processes, will be the best prepared to cope with increasing environmental pressures from many different sources.

This issue of ***Industry and Environment*** highlights a number of UEM tools and instruments. It cannot present them all: for instance, legal, administrative and financing instruments are not included. These instruments would be a good topic for a follow-up issue. ◆