



United Nations Activity Report

The [68th United Nations Civil Society Conference “Building Inclusive and Sustainable Cities and Communities”](#) was held 26-28 August 2019 in Salt Lake City, Utah, United States.

The three-day conference, co-hosted by the United Nations [Department of Global Communications](#), Salt Lake City, and the [NGO Executive Committee](#), featured opening and closing plenary sessions, interactive thematic sessions, NGO-sponsored workshops, exhibits, and a youth hub.

Report Submitted by Aric Shimek, Sigma United Nations Liaison

Opening Plenary

From the event website: “The reality is that livelihoods in cities and human settlements are being experienced in increasingly unequal ways, especially among women, female-headed households, youth, children, and other marginalized groups including: the poor; stigmatized ethnic groups; the LGBTQI community; the elderly, and people with disabilities.”

Moderator: Maruxa Cardama, Chair, 68th United Nations Civil Society Conference

Speakers: Soraya Sayed Hassen, Head of [United World College](#), [Mahindra College](#); Millicent Auma Otieno, Human Rights and Community Activist; Annise Parker, Former Mayor of Houston, President and CEO of [LGBTQ Victory Fund & Institute](#); Ivan R. Shumkov, CEO, [Build Academy](#), Board member of [Liter of Light](#); Mariarosa Cutillo, Chief of Strategic Partnerships, [United Nations Population Fund](#) (UNFPA).

Discussion centered [Sustainable Development Goal #11](#) and the efforts we can support to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. This also touched on [Sustainable Development Goal #17](#) given the need to partner with many members of local and civil society in order to promote change.

A staggering statistic opened the session — 25% of the world’s population currently lives in just 37 cities around the world, and these numbers are growing every day due to the mass migration we are seeing at unprecedented levels. As such, the role of cities in the global economy has never been more important than now. Cities were never designed to hold the populations they now have — they were built using the best knowledge available at the time but were never built to be adaptable to the growth in size, population, and pace that our cities now have. Recent advances in technology are allowing people to move back to smaller cities providing them with better access to quality of life, closer relationships with their families, and access to nature. Being able to work remotely is helping to offset the trend of moving to cities out of job/economic necessity, but it’s not enough to slow the trend we’re seeing of people flooding toward major cities, often with unexpected negative health and wellness impacts. It’s also

important to recognize the needs of the rural populations so that people feel that they can be successful where they are — not that success only lies in moving into the city.

The former mayor of Houston, Annise Parker, was an excellent speaker and reminded us all that visibility matters. She stated that how cities spend money empowers communities or sets them behind. The leadership at the top needs to understand the needs of their communities; empowering them to have their voices heard really matters. According to Ms. Parker, “It’s not just about cities, it’s about putting people at the center. The 2020 Census is a good example of how we can make the invisible, visible. Those who are born but not registered don’t really ‘exist’ on paper to their governments. How do we start seeing them and take into account their needs? When it comes to partnerships, trying to find the common ground where roles are complementary but not the same and where the wins are clearly defined for all parties, is the key way forward.” This mindset is a good reminder for politicians and nurses alike because nurses are often the last (or only) advocate a patient will ever have. Incumbent upon us is the responsibility to ensure that all our patients and all our neighbors are seen, heard, and respected.

To do this, the notion of language was discussed. Language is also a great equalizer, and cities must recognize a person’s need to communicate in their own language so that needs can truly be understood first and then addressed. Only a few languages are prioritized in the world and if you don’t speak one of these, you are automatically excluded.

As one speaker stated, families are the smallest unit of government. That’s why cities need to focus their interventions on both the individual AND the family level when working to attack obstacles to adequate child care, good prenatal care, etc. All of these need to be addressed by cities because they have the chance to impact the 68% of the global population projected to live in urban areas by 2050.

We must make rural settings better able to compete in the world. Cities are launching pads and landing places — we must understand what makes people move in and out of cities. Cities like Houston whose population is 25% foreign-born allow for cities to be progressive even in conservative states. Given that more people aren’t from the area, they don’t bring with them the culture and attitudes of the area — they just want a city that works.

Health and the built environment are very important. Diet and quality of the environment are key in overall health. Cities in which we live do not necessarily correlate to the lives its current citizens have. Cities designed around cars are out of date now. Design is often influenced by the industries important at the time — motor industry, real estate industry, etc. The built environment has a direct impact on the way we feel, and that feeling has an impact on our health. If you feel safe, connected, and happy — this will carry over to your health.