BEST PRACTICES
ON SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY
IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

UN-HABITAT

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All other case studies are taken from the Best Practices database of UN-HABITAT, http://www.bestpractices.org. Case studies in this database are submissions for the Dubai International Award on Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment.

The views expressed are those of the authors.

Cover photo: The new siheyuan on both sides of the alley (hutong) in Nanchizi area ©Fu Jing

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of globalization on cities has been as vast as it has been varied. World trade liberalization and freer flow of capital have put cities, as much as nations, at the forefront of economic competition. Some cities with comparative advantages such as highly educated workforces, strategically located ports, airports, as well as other transport and communications infrastructure have been able to capitalize on rapidly expanding global trade. Many others have exploited unique physical or cultural assets to attract rapidly expanding tourism.

Most cities and countries, however, are struggling with the challenges of economic and financial globalization. They must also grapple with the neoliberal policies prescribed for integrating them into the global economy and to making them more competitive. The combined impact of lack of opportunity and widening inequity becomes tangible in terms of territorial segregation and economic polarization.. These are major factors contributing to urban violence and crime, which in turn threaten the long-term social and economic sustainability of the city.

Sustainable forms of urbanization require more than environmentally sound approaches to urban planning and development. They call for simpler reforms to current approaches to the promotion and distribution of economic growth. They require a concerted set of socially inclusive policies capable of ensuring that the benefits of urbanization today will remain sustainable in the future. In an increasingly urbanized world, the promotion of sustainable urbanization; encompassing issues of economic growth, social equity, cultural and ethnic cohesion and environmental protection; require strategic planning, consensus building, and conflict resolution.

Over the last few decades, inner cities and their historic districts all over the world have been deteriorating. In many cities the combination of old housing stock, congestion, outdated infrastructure and poor services have led to the migration of inhabitants to outlying settlements, leaving behind unoccupied buildings and an ageing population. In other cities, residents have undertaken to modernize their homes and workplaces, often to the detriment of previous architectural heritage. On the other hand, while such initiatives can be successful in preserving select areas, they tend to harm the district and rarely reverse the vicious cycle of inner city decay in favour of suburban development.

Gentrification processes are now increasingly threatening the social cohesion of historical districts, often leading to brutal transformation and eventually to forced evictions. Gentrification, a sociospatial process, usually takes two forms: one proceeds through the exclusion of working class in districts that are already bourgeois; the other happens through an increase in more wealthy strata of society in an area which, until then, had been sociologically mixed or more working class.

Historical urban centres have become growing sites of social exchange. The sudden rise in rents and building speculation compels tenants to give up their homes and neighbourhoods. It seems that town

in a UNESCO publication From Istanbul to Venice: Socially Sustainable Revitalization of Historical Districts, Architects Speak Out. In 2004, during UN HABITAT World Urban Forum II held in Barcelona, Spain, UNESCO proposed to identify some bad and good practices on enhancing social sustainability in urban revitalization projects in historical districts. At the same time, HABITAT organized a Dialogue on Urban Realities focusing partly on this topic.

The following case studies represent a selection of initiatives in the enhancement and conservation of cultural heritage contained in UN HABITAT's Best Practices Database. They have been selected from all regions of the world to demonstrate the variety of entry points, methods that have been used by different communities in different social, economic and political contexts to deal with the issue of historical districts in their entirety. All these cases represent approaches that have proven themselves over a period, including some that have been scaled up and replicated. Lessons learnt from these case studies have been included in UNESCO/UN HABITAT guide for local authorities"Historic districts for all: a social and human approach to sustainable revitalization".

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