



A Renewed Commitment to Buildings and their Social Benefits

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As the dust settles from Rio+20, I finally have a moment to reflect upon the outcomes of the historic Earth Summit Conference. The non-committal nature of the Rio text was a surprise to no one, yet the identification of buildings as an important strategy for the development of sustainable cities and urban infrastructure was still a “win” for the green building movement. Energy efficiency was also recognized as a strategy for combating climate change within both the developed and developing world. Our leaders’ acknowledgement of the role of the buildings sector in sustainable development is a testament to the benefits of green building that go beyond protecting the environment, as outlined in the United Nations Environment Programme Sustainable Buildings and Climate Initiative’s new report, [“Building Design and Construction: Forging Resource Efficiency and Sustainable Development.”](#)

As the world’s population rapidly urbanizes, we need to address future development and construction. Picture this: In order to accommodate the expected increase in urban population of two billion people before 2030, we would need to construct 200 new cities larger than Paris! Our planet cannot accommodate such development, especially if done conventionally. Clearly the decisions that we make today are crucial to ensuring the future health of our planet as cities put more pressure on our finite resources.

Green buildings not only address the development requirements of future urbanization, but also serve important social and economic needs of these populations. For example, the International Labour Organization estimates that the construction sector employs 111 million people globally; and as green buildings increase their share of the market, they also provide stable employment for millions and boost local economies around the world. Green schools and affordable housing programs help spread the social benefits of green buildings to a wider audience, promoting education and health.

Finally, the report outlines the role of cities in driving green building construction and sustainability. Sub-national governments are taking the lead on urban sustainability as national governments are slower to implement progressive policies. As building design and construction have acute benefits for local populations, cities are often best suited to implement these policies.

The UNEP-SBCI report helps build the broader case for green building throughout the world as more than an environmental movement, but also a social and economic one, which appropriately aligns with the themes of Rio+20—economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental protection.



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