

Capacity Building through Networking of Local Governments

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The birth of cities is an important milestone in the history of the development of human society. Along with the process of human civilization, cities have been playing a more and more important role in the prosperity of nations and the development of the whole world. Today, cities are not only stages to demonstrate economic development, but also serve as the core driving force in the development of regional economy. Metropolises have become the most dynamic regions in the world, dominating the global economy. Urbanization has become the engine of national economic growth and social development. In the next 20 years, the urban population will increase to 5 billion, accounting for more than half of the world's population. Only by realizing a reasonable city size, improved infrastructure and good environment, can we meet the growing material and cultural needs of so many urban residents, and promote economic development and improve the level of social civilization. It has become a common task for the international community to create a livable city environment to meet the material and cultural needs of human kind.

However, while promoting human development and progress, urbanization has also produced a number of problems which are hard to solve, such as deterioration of ecological environment, imbalance of regional development, etc. The rapid development of globalization has increased the spread of the "urban disease". It is reported that the world's urban poverty population now amount to about 1.5 billion; at least 600 million people do not have adequate housing; 1.1 billion people are without access to fresh air, and 10 million deaths are caused annually only because of unclean drinking water. In addition, other problems including poor infrastructure, traffic congestion, heavy pollution, waste of resources, diseases, unemployment, crime and lack of funds for urban governance are all threatening the urban economic development potential, and have become bottlenecks for future urban development.

Local government and city leaders all around the world are exploring ways to deal with these problems. Each city has to study and find its own development model based on its stage of industrialization and urbanization, and formulate its corresponding development strategy. It is necessary to raise the level of city management so as to manage city resources effectively, adapt to the rapid progress of technology and be committed to sustainable development, and thus solve the city's economic, cultural, ecological and social issues. More importantly, cities must find ways to share their experiences, and strengthen international and regional cooperation and exchanges with the aim of mutual benefit so that all can share the useful experiences to cope with the common challenges.

International cooperation mechanism and network play an important role in promoting capacity building of cities and local governments. They have become an important platform for promoting international

exchanges and sharing experiences. Take China as an example. In recent years, China's rapid economic development has also accelerated the pace of urbanization. According to the statistics, the number of Chinese cities has increased from over 130 in the early days of the founding of PRC to over 660 at present; the urbanization rate is raised from 10% to over 40%. But at the same time, China is also faced with the tremendous environment and development challenges brought about by urbanization. As a late comer in urbanization, China actively carries out international exchanges and cooperation through the channel of sister cities. Till the end of 2005, China had established 1,315 pairs of sister cities in 115 countries. In the past 20 years and more, the economic, cultural and people-to-people exchanges between sister cities have played a very positive role in promoting China's economic and social development. They have promoted Chinese cities' external cooperation, accelerated their pace of internationalization, and increased opportunities for personnel exchanges and personnel training. Through mutual exchanges and communication, many cities have learned from each other and influenced each other, and gradually found suitable ways and fields for cooperation and achieved substantial results which have promoted their economic and social development, and benefited their citizens directly. Currently, China's urban development strategy is undergoing a historic transformation from "GDP priority" and "Materials-priority" to "people-oriented". Many cities have shifted their plans into building "Livable Cities" and "Sustainable Cities". This change is inseparable with the learning from international experiences.

Ever since it's founding, the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has been making unremitting efforts to promote the sharing of experiences between cities and local governments. It is the leader and

active participant of the cooperation mechanisms of cities. After the Southeast Asia tsunami, the UCLG committed itself in creating a database of the human and technical resources available with cities that can be mobilized in the event of disaster in partnership with the UN. To cope with cities' other problems in urbane development, UCLG has established a number of committees and working groups. UCLG ASPAC has also been promoting dialogues and exchanges among local governments in the region by organizing seminars and training forums to strengthen their capacity building. The "Cities Development Initiative for Asia" brought up by the Asian Development Bank and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development will become an important component of the cooperation mechanism and network for local governments and cities in the Asia-Pacific region, and will surely make new contributions to the development and cooperation of the cities and local governments in this region. The UCLG World Organization and UCLG ASPAC are willing to work closely with the initiative to create a new phase of exchanges and cooperation among cities.