



The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, «Habitat II» (Istanbul, June 1996), highlighted the impact of the global urbanization process and the key contribution of cities to the economic, social and cultural development of countries. It also underlined the growth-generating effect of urbanization over entire territorial areas, particularly rural areas.

In developing countries, urban growth is particularly strong and will remain so despite the slowdown in rural-urban migration. In the years to come, the population of cities in the South will account for two thirds of the world's urban population.

Cities are meeting places, heartlands producing economic, social and cultural wealth, key areas for the globalization of trade and sustainable development policies. Cities are also at the centre of social change and relationships between local authorities and civil society. Urban management is a challenge but it can also be the framework for lessons in democracy.

In cities both in the North and the South, the sometimes brutal impact of economic changes results in increasing inequality, poverty or even social exclusion. And the never-before-attained extent of the urbanizing process makes pressing demands on the international community for the financing of facilities to cater for more than two billion people in just one generation.

It is in African countries, which remain France's priority partners, that projections for urbanization are the highest. The early days of the African community week held in January 1998 in Abidjan, «Africités 98», demonstrated the henceforth essential role to be played by local authorities in the African institutional evolution and the contribution of decentralized cooperation to local development.

For the past few years, France has been devoting increasing attention to urban development. Our aim is to intensify this process within the general framework of our international development aid policy. But the complexity of the problems requires us to stop and examine the relevance of our action in this field.

To answer these interrogations as satisfactorily as possible, I have sought to examine the lessons learned from the «Habitat II» Conference with a view to charting new courses for French urban development aid. I particularly intend to involve French local authorities more closely in governmental efforts in favour of inter-city partnerships that will strengthen the democratic process and local development.

This approach is consistent with the reform of the French action plan for international cooperation and development aid. France will continue to collaborate with its many partners throughout the world, with a view to enhancing its political and economic presence and intensifying cultural, scientific and technical exchanges. At the same time, France will focus public development aid on a «priority solidarity area», concerning the least developed countries, including those in Africa, where the Agence Française de Développement Group, formerly CFD, will be particularly active. Methods will be adjusted to concentrate more on negotiations and partnerships with key local players through multiannual programmes. The Haut Conseil de la Coopération Internationale, a consultative body set up under the reform, is also opening up development aid to the entire French civil society, including international solidarity organizations and local authorities.

France will strengthen dialogue with European and international institutions and will pay particular attention to making the French-speaking zones a focus for cooperation on urban problems.

This document is the result of broad dialogue with public and private professional communities. I take pleasure in putting my signature to this introduction and in sharing in the results and follow-up contributed by my colleagues, particularly those in charge of economics and development.

Charles JOSSELIN
Minister for Cooperation and Francophony