

Sunday Star  
SAYS

## Time for a rethink on urban living

KUALA Lumpur is hosting the ninth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF9), which ends on Tuesday. The week-long United Nations conference is noteworthy for several reasons.

First, consider its billing as the "world's premier conference on cities".

If anybody needs to be convinced that we ought to pay close attention to the social, economic, environmental and political impact of cities and urbanisation, here are some figures from the UN and the World Bank.

More than half of the global population – 54.5% in 2016 – live in urban areas, and the growth is rapid.

That percentage is expected to rise to 60% by 2030. And the plan-

et's urban population is projected to nearly double by 2050.

The masses unleash economic power; at least 80% of the world-wide GDP is generated in cities.

Given the cities' large populations and bustling economies, it is no surprise that they can consume up to 70% of the world's energy.

With these comes an unfortunate and rather symmetrical side effect: about 70% of greenhouse gas emissions and global waste are the result of urban living.

In her speech at the WUF9 on Thursday, UN-Habitat executive director Datuk Maimunah Mohd Sharif pointed out that cities are the backdrop to many armed conflicts and take in millions of refugees and migrants.

The conference in Kuala Lumpur

is also significant because it is the first World Urban Forum since the 2016 adoption of the New Urban Agenda, a UN document that provides a blueprint and a roadmap for sustainable urbanisation.

It is also the first World Urban Forum since the UN member states committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015.

Fittingly, Cities for All, Cities 2030: Implementing the New Urban Agenda is the theme for the WUF9.

"By selecting Cities 2030, Cities for All as the theme, we wished to recognise that all people must be at the core of the thinking on urbanisation," said Maimunah in her speech.

But we the people must do some thinking on urbanisation too. We should start by being clear about the kind of cities we want to live in.

The WUF9 envisions cities of the future that are "environmentally sustainable and resilient, socially inclusive, safe and violence-free, and economically productive, while territorially connected and contributing towards sustained rural development and prosperity".

That's a solid wish list, but does that mean we cannot have any of that right now?

That surely cannot be the case. There are a lot of things in urban Malaysia that can and should be fixed right away.

For example, enforcement of worksite safety has to be tightened and construction project accidents must be met with deterrent penalties.

We expect infrastructural development to be transparent and well-

planned, and to bring far greater and more lasting benefits than the inconvenience that it sometimes causes.

The convenience and opportunities of urban living mean less if health hazards such as infectious diseases and poor food hygiene continue to trouble city folks.

And no community, urban or rural, can consider itself truly strong if it does not do enough to help its most vulnerable members.

The WUF9 definitely offers plenty of food for thought.

We must, of course, do our own thinking as to what we want our cities to be.

And when we know what we want and why, we are in a better position to demand changes for the better.