The forum's theme was sustainable cities, with the aim of sending all participants home with at least one good idea to act on and improve the quality of life in their communities. Observers say the challenges are numerous, complex and lack one-size-fits-all solutions. "Everything is interrelated here," Kelly says. "There are no magic bullets."

The environmental challenge

Cities use 75 percent of the world's resources and account for a similar percentage of its waste. The challenge is to make them develop sustainably even as they grow monumentally.

"The top opportunity is to connect the natural environment and its need for stewardship with the human environment that needs space and place for people to live and work," Oberlander says. "It takes very little to tip the scale."

Oberlander—whose wife, Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, is a landscape architect specializing in "green" design, for instance drawing inspiration from Canada's Mackenzie River system in designing the garden roof on the new Canadian embassy in Berlin—argues that people must think about land as a precious resource and allocate it accordingly.

Urban sprawl is eating up crucial farmland and making people more dependent on cars. Although planners stress more compact urban design or "densification," the demand from homebuyers for large properties in ever-widening city outskirts remains high. Cities range from the extremely dense—such as Hong Kong, with 5,000 people per hectare—to suburban Toronto, Johannesburg and Los Angeles, where there are only about 100 people per hectare.

Cities are also grappling with the demand among growing populations for energy. Powering urban areas in a sustainable way requires using more renewable forms of energy as well as conservation. San Diego, for example, has won international acclaim for its wide-ranging efforts to save energy, including producing electricity from a landfill's methane gas and upgrading the local police headquarters to become virtually self-sufficient in terms of energy.

The social cost

The social price of rapid urbanization has been high in developing countries. Roughly one billion people—one in six of the world's inhabitants—live in slums. That number is expected to double within 25 years.

One of the world's worst slums is Kibera in UN-Habitat's host city, Nairobi. Here, several hundred thousand people are jammed into tiny shacks that line filthy, narrow laneways and stinking brown streams. Clean water, electricity and cooking fuel are in short supply—and usually come at a high cost. Pit latrines in crime-ridden neighbourhoods are so dangerous to use at night that

Remembering Jane Jacobs

Jane Jacobs, the Canadian writer and activist who died in April at the age of 89, was one of the most original thinkers of our time on urban issues. Jacobs' most important work was the influential and controversial *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961. "The point of cities is multiplicity of choice," she wrote, championing new approaches to planning that respected people's preferences and behaviour and inspired generations of urban activists. A brave, singular voice challenging the dominant theories of the planning establishment, the self-taught Jacobs gave the world a fresh look at what makes cities work and what makes them fail.

photo: CP/Adrian Wyld

A new approach to cities: The late writer and activist Jane Jacobs.

residents resort to what are known as "flying toilets": plastic bags filled with human waste tossed out of windows.

From this place of misery came a plea for help, a message from a slum dweller tapped out on a computer in rudimentary English during a global online "jam" sponsored by Canada and organized in the lead-up to the WUF event: *"My name is Hawa i live in Kibera i am a widow my husband passed away and left me with 8 children who are not even going to school because of lack of money. We live in a one bedroomed house with my eight children. i would like the gornment to build houses and offer less rent for everyone to afford."*

Securing cities

As more people flock to cities, urban spaces are where human security will be strengthened or threatened. Cities can be conflict-resilient, as different groups interact and build trust, while democratic authorities empower people to interact with the level of government closest to them.

Nonetheless, rapid urbanization, extreme poverty and failed public security in cities can lead to violence— exemplified by last year's riots in Paris, the ongoing civil strife in the Cité Soleil slum of Port-au-Prince in Haiti, and the recent brazen gang assaults on police and civilian targets in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

"We are seeing an unsustainable number of people move to cities," says Maciek Hawrylak of the Human Security Policy Division at DFAIT. "Local authorities are unable or unwilling to provide security in some cases, with the result that people are forced to ensure their own safety."

The wealthy fill the security void with private guards, while in slums, armed vigilante groups and gangs take over entire communities, Hawrylak says.

Mexico City alone is home to some 1,500 gangs. In nearly half the cities of Latin America and the Caribbean there are neighbourhoods where police fear to go or avoid