Daniel Biau

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"The UN and the Urban Agenda, a journey from Vancouver to Nairobi, Istanbul and Medellin."

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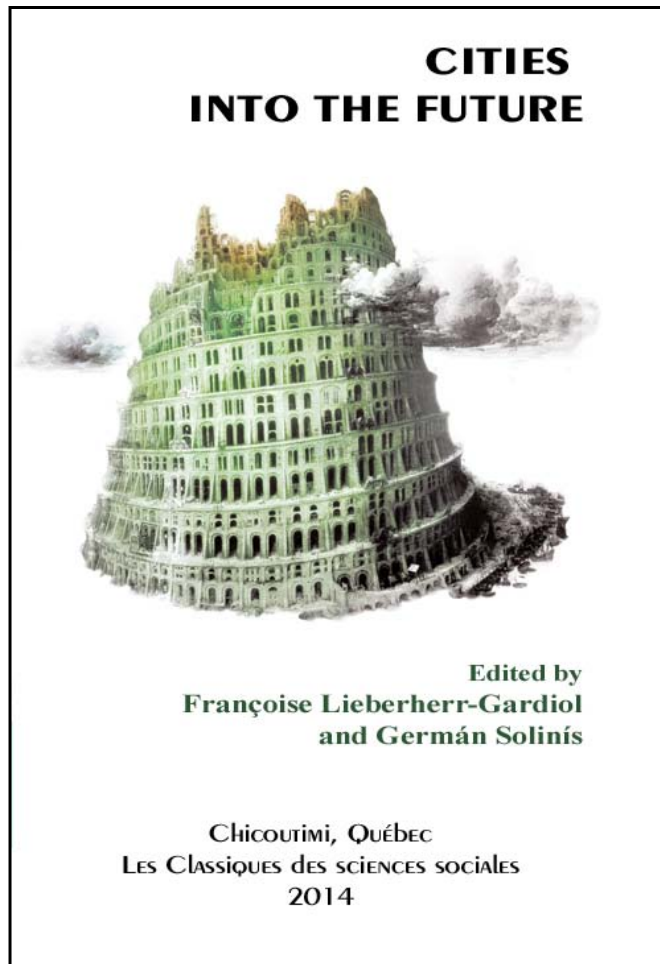

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Part I.
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

I

The UN and the Urban Agenda, a journey from Vancouver to Nairobi, Istanbul and Medellin

by Daniel Biau

TOC

The urban agenda is probably too broad to be an international priority. This explains why during the last three decades, the United Nations system has tried to give it some focus and to link it to clearer or simpler priorities such as sustainable development, democratic governance or poverty eradication. This has not worked very well in terms of resource mobilization and overall visibility. But it has allowed better understanding of the on-going urban transition, to identify and highlight local policy options and to advise a number of governments on the best ways and means to develop and implement housing and urban strategies.

Contrary to a prevalent view, the urbanization process of the developing world has been less chaotic than expected by the media. Many countries are managing their urban development relatively well, particularly in Asia, the Arab States and Latin America. Ideas and good practices have been shared, adapted and successfully applied in a number of emerging economies. Of course many other countries, par-

ticularly the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), are lagging behind and are unable to address the slum crisis. But the urbanization of our planet should not be seen as an outright disaster. It has both positive and negative features. The United Nations has always stressed the negative to raise awareness while not placing enough emphasis on the positive role of cities, including their impact on rural development.

This article seeks to redress this imbalance. It describes the major milestones of the international urban debate over the last 36 years, from the viewpoint of a UN manager and expert who has been personally involved in many stages of this journey.

1. Vancouver 1976 – the birth of the urban question

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At the opening of the first World Conference on human settlements in June 1976 Kurt Waldheim, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated that "one third or more of the entire urban population of the developing world lives in slums and squatter settlements". The Secretary-General of the Conference, Enrique Peñalosa, responded that "the paramount question was whether urban growth would continue to be a spontaneous chaotic process or be planned to meet the needs of the community" (see United Nations, 1976). Similar statements have been repeatedly made since 1976 at many international meetings.

The outcome documents of the Vancouver Conference include a Declaration of Principles, the Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements, as well as recommendations for national action and international cooperation. When revisiting such documents one wavers between two feelings – it seems on one hand that everything had already been said in 1976, while on the other, some recommendations look obsolete in substance or style.

The Vancouver Declaration starts with a preamble stating that "unacceptable human settlements circumstances are likely to be ag-

gravated by inequitable economic growth and uncontrolled urbanization, unless positive and concrete action is taken at national and international levels". The first action is to "adopt bold, meaningful and effective human settlement policies and spatial planning strategies (...) considering human settlements as an instrument and object of development". Among the general Principles, the Conference advocates improving the quality of life through more equitable distribution of development benefits, planning and regulating land use, protecting the environment, integrating women and youth, rehabilitating people displaced by natural and man-made catastrophes. Nothing outdated here. In the Guidelines for action, various elements of a human settlements policy are defined. Focus is placed on harmonious integration, reduction of disparities between rural and urban areas, orderly urbanisation, progressive minimum standards and community participation. The Declaration states that "adequate shelter and services are a basic human right" and that "governments should assist local authorities to participate to a greater extent in national development" – still very current concerns. The Declaration strongly emphasizes that "the use and tenure of land should be subject to public control", an idea which lost its attractiveness in the 1990s. The Declaration concludes with a call on the international community to support national efforts.

Twenty years later, the Istanbul Declaration of June 1996 put more emphasis on the role of cities in social and economic development but noted the continuing deterioration of shelter conditions. It adopted the principles of partnership and participation and agreed to promote decentralization through democratic local authorities. It also insisted on the need for healthy living environments. Land use was no longer a priority, while housing and municipal finance were still buried under the agreed need to mobilise financial resources.

The Vancouver Action Plan

The substantive outcome of the first Habitat Conference is a series of 64 recommendations for National Action. These recommendations are organized in six sections. Sections A (Settlements policies and strategies) and E (Public Participation) have become almost self-evident. While the proposed policies devote exaggerated importance to population distribution, public participation could be seen as the

cradle of the future good governance paradigm of the 1990s. Section F (Institutions and management) is certainly the weakest. It implicitly recommends the creation of Human Settlements Ministries and of specialised financial institutions. This occurred in many countries, with disappointing results. It also called for enabling legislation, but not yet public-private partnerships.

The real substance of the Vancouver Action Plan lies in sections B (Settlement Planning), C (Shelter, infrastructure and services) and D (land). In section B one finds a mix of the old fashioned top-down spatial planning and of visionary forward-looking statements. All kinds of planning is advocated, from national to neighbourhood levels, even for rural, temporary and "mobile" settlements! But the improvement of existing settlements is not forgotten. Special attention "should be paid to undertaking major clearance operations only when conservation and rehabilitation are not feasible and relocation measures are made". The word "slums" does not appear, but the idea of participatory slum upgrading is there. The next recommendation on urban expansion calls for legislation and institutions to manage land acquisition and development, for securing fiscal and financial resources, and integrated development of basic services. Reconstruction after disasters is also emphasized as both a challenge and an opportunity "to reconcile the meeting of immediate needs with the achievement of long-term goals". But the question "who are or should be the planners" is not addressed. Partnerships are not yet on the agenda, and the link to implementation and management is missing. Section C carries 18 recommendations representing the core of the Action Plan. While some financial recommendations are outdated, recommendations on the construction industry and the informal sector are still very valid. Among the identified priority areas: "ensuring security of land tenure for unplanned settlements, and providing sites and services specifically for construction by the informal sector". Excellent recommendations are also made on National Housing Policies (provide serviced land on a partial or total subsidized basis, make rental alternatives available, promote aided self-help) and Infrastructure Policies (use pricing policies for improving equity in access, minimize adverse environmental impact, give priority to safe water supply and waste disposal, favour mass transportation and energy efficiency).

Section D on land starts by stating that "private land ownership contributes to social injustice", and that "public control of land use is therefore indispensable". It advocates a very pro-active land policy based on zoning, land reserves, compensated expropriation, redistributive property taxes, the recapturing of excessive land profits resulting from public investment, and public ownership wherever appropriate. It also encourages the establishment of comprehensive land information systems.

In fact, sections C and D could be positively compared with the strategies recommended in the Habitat Agenda, adopted in Istanbul in June 1996, to provide adequate shelter for all (see United Nations, 1996). Governments moved from the Keynesian consensus of 1976 to the market-driven paradigms of 1996 ("enabling markets to work"). And they have now moved from the Cold War era and the New International Economic Order to a globalizing world with more opportunities and risks. It is a world in which national action is more constrained than it was in 1976. This evolution had a direct impact on human settlements policies, strategies and practices around the world. The outcome documents of Vancouver 1976, however, remain valid in many strategic areas. Some recommendations have become irrelevant due to broader changes in the world and a number of issues were not addressed because they were not yet visible on the human settlements screen. But we should remember the historical pendulum: what seems obsolete now may come back, in a different way, as a basis for future innovations.

2. Sustainable urbanization, a response to economic and social development challenges

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Despite hundreds of international gatherings, the debate on the role of urbanization in development has never reached the global political level. In fact world leaders have never expressed any specific views on that matter. UN-Habitat clearly established the strong and positive correlation between urbanisation and economic and social development: the poorest countries are generally the least urbanised, the ri-

chest usually the most urbanised. There are very few exceptions to this universal rule. Aware of this correlation, why are governments and a number of international agencies trying to reduce rural-to-urban migrations? Why are journalists, NGOs and charity groups so concerned at the growth of urban populations in Africa and Asia? Why are cities still seen as a danger or an obstacle to human development? Why are the pre-industrial views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on rural harmony prevalent in so many development forums which deal with Sub-Saharan Africa? Of course, we know. Urban development has been rather spontaneous during the last 40 years, and many developing cities suffer from unemployment, environmental degradation, lack of basic services, social exclusion, crime and the proliferation of slums. Therefore urbanisation has a bad image because all these problems seem to result automatically from rapid urban growth. Combating urban growth would then alleviate the problems: this appears to make sense. But it is wrong.

Managing urbanization better

The solution lies rather in better urban policies, better urban governance, and better integration of new populations in the urban economy. A good urban policy can be designed, implemented and made effective in any city, irrespective of its size and rate of growth, provided sufficient political, managerial and technical capacities are available. There are indeed many cases of well-managed mega-cities and poorly managed small towns around the world. There are also some cases of urban growth without economic development, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The real challenge is to combine local capacity-building and urban policy reforms in order to guide and efficiently manage the urbanisation process and to turn urban risks into urban opportunities. Examples of cities which have been able to address this challenge successfully abound in countries as different as China, Thailand, Egypt, Tunisia, South Africa, Colombia or Brazil. On the other hand, very few developing countries have been able to reduce rural-urban migration through deliberate policies. This is understandable as people migrate to cities in search of better employment opportunities and they often find those opportunities by creating their own jobs. These jobs may be insecure, informal and exploitative, but they are more attractive than the prospect of fighting for survival on a minus-

cule piece of land in overcrowded rural areas. Bad luck for J.J. Rousseau. The romantic village under the palm-trees on the bend of the river belongs either to the colonial ideology or to the leaflets of international tour operators. It is an appealing but obsolete myth.

What has to be done is to help Least Urbanized Countries of Africa and Asia manage their on-going and unstoppable urbanization processes and make full use of cities as engines of development. Many years have been lost because of the anti-urban bias of both governments trying to favour their rural constituencies and international agencies trying to keep people in the countryside in the hope of achieving food security. The international community should move from myth to reality and give due priority to the urbanisation requirements of poor countries. This is the best way to increase their chances of meeting the Millennium Development Goals and to break the vicious circle of low urbanisation - low economic development. Providing more resources to support sustainable urbanisation in developing countries will have a positive impact on rural development. Well-functioning cities - with adequate infrastructure and dynamic land markets – can easily absorb excess rural population. Because of the highest productivity of urban labour, they can support the expansion of national infrastructure through fiscal redistribution. And larger cities provide larger markets for agricultural products. Improving agricultural productivity and promoting sustainable urbanization are in fact the two sides of the same coin, the two legs of sustainable development. Rapid urbanisation can be managed for the benefit of both the rural and urban poor, it can bring about the much needed increase in human development. Political will and progressive strategies can make a difference and open a virtuous circle towards sustainable development.

In that perspective, the World Development Report 2009 (see World Bank, 2009) recommended to encourage spatially unbalanced growth and to reduce disparities through economic integration. Basically it recognized that slowing down urbanization constitutes an ineffective policy response and that agglomeration economies and labour mobility should be promoted. For once, this argument came from beyond the narrow circle of urban specialists.

3. UMP (1986-2005), a major research-action effort

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The Urban Management Programme was initiated in 1986 by the World Bank and UN-Habitat, 10 years after the first Habitat conference, and a decade before the Istanbul Summit. Its launch marked an important step in the evolution of international thinking on urban development. In 1976, at Vancouver, the world had discovered the problems of rapid urbanization in the South, as well as the serious limitations of urban planning. The international community had also discovered the first urban projects, sites and services and settlements upgrading schemes. This project-approach, based on the implementation of well-defined physical projects, prevailed from 1976 to 1986, while master planning disappeared progressively from the priorities of developing countries.

Between 1982 and 1986, a new concept of urban management emerged. The idea was to replace long-term physical planning, which had no real impact on city development, with daily action-oriented urban management, integrating both physical and financial parameters. The other goal was to insert discrete projects within a framework of overall city management. However, the approach remained sectoral, and UMP-Phase 1 addressed three areas, revealing a technical understanding of urban challenges – finance, land and infrastructure – as key components of the urban development process. In addition, UMP-Phase 1 tried to influence central governments more than local authorities. Urban management was replacing master planning, but municipal development was not yet on the agenda. One of the discoveries of this first phase was precisely to highlight the potential role of local governments in urban management.

Introducing urban governance

The second phase of UMP went further, by directly supporting decentralization processes in various developing countries. The UMP-thematic focus evolved in parallel, as Phase 2 incorporated two multi-sectoral objectives of urban policy: environmental management and poverty reduction. These two objectives became also top priorities of multilateral and bilateral support agencies, as well as of the Habitat Agenda. From the thematic point of view, UMP Phase 2 combined the sectoral approach of the 1980s with the integrated approach of the 1990s. This transition led to a structuring of Phase 3 around three objectives: protecting the environment, reducing poverty and improving governance, which are all multisectoral. The importance given to urban governance reflected a major step towards a better understanding of urban problems and also offered a direction for their resolution. The concept of good or sound governance – defined as a system of government that is participatory, transparent, equitable and effective – refers to the political dimension of urban management. Good governance requires the combination of urban management and local democracy. It emerged in the early 1990s as the new paradigm in the urban development arena. This is where the world stood in 1996. From planning to management, from management to governance, from central government to local authorities, from technocracy to partnerships, from large infrastructure to sustainable development, UMP was at the heart of the debate on urban development during the 1986-1996 decade.

City consultations

During its third phase (1997-2001), the UMP tried to build adequate regional capacities to implement these new policies in developing cities. Having established four regional offices, the UMP developed an institutional anchoring strategy through which it built the capacities of a number of national and regional institutes which became centres of excellence in urban management. This was a difficult process as it was going against the well-established approach whereby expertise comes systematically from the North. In fact this exercise had to be extended into a fourth and last phase (2002-2005). A most interesting

dimension of the 1996-2006 decade was the promotion of city consultations as a means to translate good urban governance into reality. Invented by the UMP and its twin sister, the Sustainable Cities Programme, city consultations are a practical way to involve stakeholders in urban planning and management, i.e. to define common priorities, agree on responsibilities and initiate concrete actions. More than 100 cities adopted this approach which has become an international standard.

While city consultations are essential at the planning stage, they have to be complemented by follow-up mechanisms at the implementation stage. This may have been the weakness of UMP, connected to the persistent weakness of municipal finance systems in many countries. The programme has identified some promising options such as city community challenge funds and participatory budgeting, but a lot remains to be done in this area. In fact this crucial issue of urban finance remains a stumbling block that the World Bank has not been able to fix in spite of billions of US dollars of capital assistance. An important result of the UMP is to have introduced urban poverty and urban governance into the mainstream of UN-Habitat activities. And the UMP has worked closely with UN-Habitat Regional Offices to promote City Development Strategies (CDS) and set up Regional networks of urban specialists. The UMP has essentially been a useful think-tank involving a broad network of experts. It has renewed urban planning approaches and built new capacities in the developing world. Part of its heritage has been incorporated in the Cities Alliance.

4. Urban planning revisited

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As urban management emerged as a priority, conventional urban planning or master planning almost passed away in the mid 1980s, particularly in developing countries. Many reasons explain this sudden "death":

- In terms of process, urban plans were designed by bureaucrats and experts, generally ignoring political and social dynamics of

the city. City planning was a top-down technocratic exercise, not too different from economic planning.

- In terms of product, urban plans were essentially spatial zoning and land-use maps, not associated with investment planning and resource mobilisation.
- In terms of implementation, urban planning was generally blind on institutional issues such as the relationship between sectoral ministries, and between central and local governments. It did not associate long-term goals with daily city management constraints and short-term priorities.
- In terms of strategy, urban planning tried to go around the need for policy and legal reforms, and often unquestioningly accepted existing situations. Consequently, it failed to address the root-causes of many urban problems. As a result of these limitations, most Master Plans were simply not implemented. Many still lie in the archive unit of Urban Development Ministries and Town Planning Departments.

The international debt crisis of the early 1980s dealt a fatal blow to traditional urban planning as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) were imposed in many developing countries. Under SAPs, governments had to slash social spending, including on basic services in order to repay their debt. Urban planning became irrelevant as there was nothing left to plan.

The revival of city planning

Planning came back through the environmental window in conjunction with the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. UN-Habitat was one of the agencies that re-appraised urban planning and subsequently introduced participatory planning and management as an element of good urban governance. At the Istanbul City Summit, while urban planning did not figure as a key issue in its own right, it was in fact subsumed under the broader urban governance framework which emerged as the main outcome of the debates. This new planning was expected to meet the following criteria:

- In terms of process, urban plans should be prepared in a democratic way, involving civil society organizations and all concerned stakeholders. Experts should mainly play a facilitating role.
- In terms of product, strategic plans or City Development Strategies should replace master plans. The focus should be on a shared vision for the city (linking social development, economic productivity and environmental protection) and on multi-partner action plans to translate this vision into reality by addressing priority issues.
- In terms of implementation, local authorities should be in the driving seat as the level of government closest to the citizens. Powers and resources should be decentralised and local capacities strengthened. Planning and urban management should be closely integrated.
- In terms of strategy, planning should be considered as a tool, its effectiveness dependent directly on the quality of the urban governance system. Good governance and appropriate urban policy should almost automatically lead to good planning. Several UN-Habitat programmes and projects have demonstrated that this new type of city planning is feasible provided it is focused, locally-owned and politically supported. However it seems too early to claim that urban planning is back on the global development scene. In fact the 2009 Global Report on Human Settlements has once again revisited this issue.

Can urban planning become affordable for all?

The new planning approach promoted by international organisations and already adopted by several developed countries, is a complex process requiring a lot of discussions, commitment and continuity in leadership, and adequate capacities at different levels. This process is hardly affordable by least developed countries which lack institutional capacities, financial resources and often clear policies. The challenge, therefore, is to identify and promote a minimalist approach to urban planning. This approach would generally respect the above-mentioned criteria while simultaneously focusing on very few top

priorities considered as essential for guiding urban development. This concept could be called "affordable participatory planning". By definition, the minimalist planning approach should not be comprehensive but selective:

- The process should mobilise civil society and political organizations in the definition of the vision ("the city we want") and priority areas ("hotspots") through popular consultations;
- In terms of product, it should prioritise infrastructure development with emphasis (especially in LDCs) on primary road and water networks and on pricing and municipal finance;
- Implementation should include a strong component on institutional strengthening, particularly at the local level;
- The strategy should preferably be associated with a review and reform of urban governance legislation, rules and practices.

Of course minimal planning requires maximum political commitment to ensure impact and sustainability. With such commitment, urban planning can certainly become affordable and useful. But planners should also accept to play a more modest and more targeted role in the management of urban affairs. International agencies have adopted a low profile on that delicate topic that UN-Habitat is now trying to bring back on the agenda.

5. Rediscovering slums in the new millennium

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Slums came back on the international scene with the creation by UN-Habitat and the World Bank of the Cities Alliance in 1999 and the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in the year 2000. The Cities Alliance was designed to support the preparation of city development strategies (CDS) and slum upgrading projects, and to encourage donor coordination at city level. According to official data slums represent

almost one third of the world urban population. This ratio is going down very slowly in spite of all political declarations and official commitments, and slum upgrading is rarely part of national policies. The first question is: Why do slums exist? Are they a planning mistake? Do they simply reflect the inefficiency or malfunctioning of land markets?

The answer is simple: slums are the best way found by many countries to provide cheap housing for the urban poor. And cheap housing means a cheap labour force, low-income workers. Slums are the physical expression and condition of urban poverty: in many countries they are necessary to ensure profitable economic growth!

Before being a problem, slums are therefore a solution at a particular stage of economic development. They were a solution in Victorian London as they are a solution in Mumbai today. Slums are not a market failure, they are a market success. This is the first thing we should know about slums: they are economically useful, sometimes extremely useful, because they offer low-cost housing options to the poor.

Overcrowding patterns

But all informal settlements are not equally squalid. From Latin America to Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa to the Indian subcontinent, slums are very different, particularly in terms of overcrowding. Some slums are built on public land, some on private land, some are squatter settlements, and others provide rental housing options. Some areas are extremely dense (3 people or more sharing a small bedroom and more than 1,000 persons per ha). For instance in South Asia, 150 million people live in overcrowded units. In West Africa on the other hand, most slums have relatively low densities (less than 500 persons per ha).

The degree of shelter deprivation is directly correlated to the degree of urban inequities. Thus the worst slums are found in the most inequitable cities. These are cities where the poor pay more than the rich to access land and urban services, the cities where land is monopolized by the upper classes, the cities that are physically divided into poor areas and gated communities.

The existence of slums is always a reflection of urban poverty but the intensity of shelter deprivation is usually a reflection of urban inequity. For example, Nairobi is richer than Kinshasa but more than 50 percent of its population lives in slums - the same percentage as in Kinshasa. And the slums of Nairobi offer much worse living conditions than those of Kinshasa, because Nairobi is more inequitable than the Congolese capital. Therefore Nairobi slum dwellers are squeezed into only 5 percent of the total city area. The largest slum, Kibera occupies less than 1 percent of the city area and regroups 20 percent of the city population Its density reaches 3,000 persons per ha.

This is the second thing we should know about slums: they are a manifestation of social injustice, a reflection of a social divide which excludes the poor from the benefits of urban life.

Survival strategies

But the urban poor are not only victims, they are also actors. In fact slums and informal settlements demonstrate everyday how the urban poor fight for survival, how they innovate, how they find resources and energy, how they create their own employment opportunities and transform their environment.

In some cities they form community groups to defend their interests. Slum-dwellers may be the most dynamic "entrepreneurs" of our time – the main "Private Sector" actors. Good at survival strategies, slum people rarely reach the accumulation and development stage. They need support, or at least they need to be left alone, away from public harassment.

Slum life shows that the concentration of people in cities is in itself a positive development factor, simply because concentration means more exchange, more markets, more opportunities, and more risks. This is the third thing we should know about slums: they are a manifestation of human resilience, a reflection of social dynamics, of fantastic human energy. Sometimes they are places of solidarity, often they are places of urban violence, always they are places of urban life, of multiple struggles for survival and for human dignity.

Policy principles

From these three things, we can derive a few basic principles for the reduction of urban poverty. Firstly, the absolute necessity to adopt a holistic approach to address urban development challenges. This means bringing together policy makers from economy and finance ministries with housing and local government departments, to ensure that the key contribution of urbanisation to economic development is well understood, that resources are properly mobilized and allocated, that employment policies are associated to slum upgrading policies. In a word this means advocacy campaigns to strengthen or create enough political will at all levels.

A lot remains to be done. Only a few governments have adopted a comprehensive slum upgrading strategy, national targets are rarely established and the Millennium Development Goals are usually ignored by national and local politicians. In the meantime the UN tries to popularize success stories demonstrating that good policies bring economic and social advantages.

The second principle is to ensure better access of the urban poor to land, housing, credit and basic services. This means identifying urban inequities in these areas and correcting them. The poor should pay less, not more, than the wealthy for the comparative benefits of urban life. Inequity should be replaced by solidarity, the divided city by the inclusive city. Of course political will is required but technical solutions are available, they have been tested, they work.

The third principle – participatory and transparent governance – is the means to deliver on any dimension of urban development, on the three components of sustainable development (economic, social and ecological). Efficiency in municipal finance (resource mobilization and allocation) constitutes one of the best indicators of good urban governance. Since the Istanbul City Summit of 1996 this third principle is widely accepted in the international arena. But it needs to be implemented more systematically at country level.

Indeed a number of governments have adopted reasonable and effective urban policies in the last 10 years. We can mention Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Morocco, Thailand and China. Many of them have

focused on slum clearance and re-development rather than incremental upgrading.

In the meantime the Cities Alliance did not succeed in increasing international assistance to urban development and slum improvement. As middle-income countries can largely work on their own, the urban crisis is now concentrating on Least Developed Countries which are urbanizing rapidly without sufficient institutional resources. The Cities Alliance is expected to focus on these poor countries.

6. Focus on Water and Sanitation

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According to the 2006 Human Development Report (see UNDP, 2006) the world faces a water crisis rooted in inequality and flawed water management policies. More than 1 billion people are denied the right to clean water and 2.6 billion lack access to adequate sanitation. Every year, according to the World Health Organization, 1.8 million children die as a result of diarrhoea caused by contaminated water and poor sanitation. All experts agree that access to water can make or break human development and international institutions invest billions in this sector. While the human right to water and sanitation remains to be recognized in many countries, water debates have gained momentum in international arenas since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in September 2000. These debates are both consensual (everybody agrees on the magnitude of the water crisis) and controversial (options and solutions are deliberately politicized). Among many topics under discussion, the basic principles and directions to be adopted by national policy-makers in the definition of water management strategies come on top of the agenda. In this area, two inter-related debates have been going on for more than 10 years. The first one is about privatization of service provision, the second one about the price of water for the consumers. But the most difficult challenge is to provide sanitation for all.

Regulating public-private partnerships

In 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, several NGOs criticized a general move towards the privatization of water provision, particularly in developing countries. Some argued that water being a human right should be provided free of charge to low-income groups. Private companies responded that natural water was free but that the service had to be paid. The discussion on privatization has become highly ideological and seems to repeat itself in hundreds of articles, workshops and conferences.

Most independent specialists nonetheless agree on a number of key points:

- what really matters is the regulatory framework under which the service provider operates, i.e. the conditions negotiated between the local authority and the provider in terms of quality, quantity, spatial coverage, prices, network expansion, etc.;
- there are examples of both efficient and inefficient public utilities as there are examples of both accountable and irresponsible private utilities;
- separating the client/regulator from the service provider is recommended to avoid conflict of interest and to ensure control and transparency;
- public-private partnerships based on public ownership of the network and private management of water distribution, under clear arrangements and rules, have been tested successfully in many different contexts;
- full privatization (as in the U.K. since 1989) is rare and not advisable because water is a common good requiring large scale investment and public scrutiny;
- except in a few documented cases (Buenos Aires, Cochabamba, Manila) “concessions” have worked in several countries as a good format for public-private partnership. In this model private providers (domestic or foreign) manage the network (under a

long-term contract) and are responsible for investment and risk. In some cases, public investment is also mobilized;

- water demand management, i.e. water saving, is as important as water production as in many countries between 25 and 50 percent of the drinking water is unaccounted for (lost or wasted).

It is clear that water provision is a profitable business at many levels, from the multinational company to the street vendor. Water being essential for life, everybody is ready to pay for it. Most consumers don't care about the status of their service provider: they want good quality and sufficient quantity at reasonable prices. In fact this can be achieved in any city of the world provided the following (internationally agreed) principles are respected:

- transparent participatory and effective governance;
- regulated partnerships between local authorities and service providers;
- environmental sustainability;
- affordable prices and sustainable financing.

Interestingly, there is no correlation between geographic areas facing water stress and proportion of people facing inadequate water supply. For instance in tropical Indonesia (where fresh water is abundant) many people don't have access to safe drinking water. Water scarcity for livelihoods is truly a man-made phenomenon.

Making water accessible

The real challenge is not to privatize water supply but to make clean water physically accessible and financially affordable to the poor. In the vast majority of developing countries, this is not the case. In fact the poor generally pay more (up to 20 times more) than the wealthy for the same quantity of water because of wrong governmental policies and misdirected public investment. It should be the opposite: pricing policies and targeted subsidies can and should make wa-

ter available and affordable to all. And water should be accessible: in African cities, women without piped water at home frequently spend more than one hour daily to collect drinking water.

The experience of several South African cities demonstrates that "lifeline tariffs" can be adopted and benefit the poor. Such tariffs provide the first 25 litres (per person per day) free, then the price per litre increases with the quantity consumed (this is called block tariff). Of course this approach assumes that the poor are connected and metered. When they are not, public standpipes have to be subsidized and properly managed. This applies to most slum areas of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where individual water connections remain unaffordable and where the poor often spend more than 10 per cent of their income on water.

To keep the prices affordable to the poor, public money (fiscal transfers) should be used to extend water networks in informal areas and cross-subsidies through progressive pricing, reflecting social solidarity, should be systematically put in place. These two principles are essential to ensure that the human right to drinking water is enforced.

In many developing cities, poor people live with less than 10 litres a day of unsafe water. In Europe the average consumption is around 200 litres a person a day. In the USA it is about 500 litres, with peaks of 1000 litres in the Southern states. According to the Worldwatch Institute, American gardens, lawns and golf courses require 45 billion litres per day, more than the total human consumption of the entire African continent. These disparities are striking. They confirm that providing 20 litres a day of clean water to each human being constitutes a very feasible target.

While it is fair to recognize that some progress has been made in a number of countries during the last 20 years, a lot remains to be done to ensure universal access to water.

Sanitation: an impossible challenge?

Much more difficult than water supply (in terms of both technical responses and cost-recovery) is the provision of adequate sanitation in overcrowded settlements. This can be done only within the broader

framework of city-wide upgrading and inclusive urban development strategies. Many obstacles can make this task a “mission impossible”.

Half of the developing world’s population does not have access to basic toilets. More than 80 percent of the population of African cities lacks toilets that are connected to sewers. In Nairobi for instance, hundreds of thousands of people defecate into plastic bags that they throw away every morning. This is known as the “flying toilet” phenomenon.

Water is life, sanitation is dignity. Lack of sanitation is humiliating, particularly for women and girls. Unfortunately sanitation lags far behind water in public provision. Partly because sewerage networks are too expensive, sanitation is often left to individual initiatives. Pit latrines and septic tanks may be adequate in rural areas but they are difficult to implement in dense shanty towns. Public toilet blocks, as those adopted in some Indian cities, offer a good alternative but maintenance needs to be ensured.

Public subsidies are usually indispensable, and they should be targeted to the poorest sections of society. This requires a political will which is clearly lacking in many developing countries. Because the sanitation deficit remains a kind of social taboo, because its impact is not immediately visible, election campaigns rarely focus on “sanitation for all”. Inauguration of toilet blocks is less attractive to politicians than the opening of airports, highways or shopping centres. This is what UNDP calls “the national policy barrier”. On the other hand many NGOs and Community-based Organizations (CBOs) are promoting and implementing sanitation programmes at the grassroots level. One of the best uses of international funds would be to support these programmes, particularly when they are community-driven, large-scale and well coordinated with local authorities.

It is estimated that universal access to water and sanitation would require an additional $20 billion per year while the overall cost of current inadequate supply amounts to more than $100 billion in social expenditures and economic losses. There is therefore a strong case for investing more in the water sector. Both UN-Habitat, the World Bank and regional development banks are very active in this sector.

The benefits of improved access to water and sanitation cannot be questioned. In spite of heated discussions, the technical, financial and

institutional options are known and the solutions are within reach. Fundamentally there is only one serious debate: Do we want to reduce poverty and inequality? Do we want to promote and support human development? “We” here means political leaders and activists, opinion makers, intellectual and moral authorities, all over the world. They should be aware that: “Water is life, sanitation is dignity, and inaction is crime.”

7. Territorial affirmative action – the need for political will

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Affirmative action policies have been implemented in many countries – particularly India, the United States and South Africa – to redress historical racial and sexual discrimination. Less known is the need for territorial affirmative action to redress spatial inequalities, be they between regions or provinces or between neighbourhoods in a particular city. Affirmative action is required to promote a more equitable and more balanced development through taxation, tariffs, subsidies, and pro-poor investments. Territorial affirmative action can address simultaneously spatial and social inequalities. It should be a major element of sustainable urbanization policies and a political instrument to bring disadvantaged groups and areas into the mainstream of economic and social development. In the planning and management of human settlements, several types of affirmative action can be identified. At least five of these have been tested and applied successfully in different countries.

Investment incentives

Regional planning policies often have a limited impact on the ground because of their weak relations with private investment strategies. In many developed countries, financial incentives are the main means of attracting investors to disadvantaged geographical regions. In the case of France, these incentives amount to approximately euros 10,000 per job created in specifically designated areas (which host

one third of the national population). They represent a huge budgetary effort that has helped revitalize a number of medium-sized cities, resulting in a better-balanced urban network covering the whole country.

Public infrastructure priorities

A very direct way to address spatial inequalities is to spend more public money in the development and expansion of infrastructure and services in low income or disfavoured areas. Slum upgrading is a case in point; likewise the rehabilitation of dilapidated housing estates in the transition countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The challenge for decision-makers is to devote proportionally more public resources per capita to disadvantaged areas than to the rest of the city. Political will is therefore essential.

Pricing of water services

Affordability of water services for the urban poor constitutes a serious problem in most developing countries. Low-income households generally pay more for their water than high-income households because many water utilities are poorly managed. Affirmative action measures in this field are usually tariff related, aiming at keeping water bills low for those who consume little. “Block tariff” structures provide a free or very low-priced first block of water to individual households and then reflect the transition in prices from basic to discretionary water uses in subsequent blocks. This approach has been adopted in South Africa, based on a lifeline supply of 25 litres per person per day at very low price and cross- subsidization of small consumers by large consumers. Several African countries do the same, implementing de facto the human right of access to drinking water. This principle could also be applied to electricity and other marketable services.

Progressive property taxation

A progressive tax imposes a higher percentage rate of taxation on those with more expensive land and property. In many countries proportional taxes are however the norm and this does not allow property taxes to be used as a redistributive fiscal tool. As land taxes are generally a major source of revenue for local governments, regularly updated valuation of properties and efficient tax collection should be a priority of public authorities all over the world. On the other hand progressive land taxation (with rates varying for instance from zero on small plots to 1 percent of the value on very large plots) could go a long way in redressing social and spatial inequalities – if this revenue is adequately used for infrastructure development.

Intergovernmental transfers

Another important source of municipal revenue is the transfer of funds from national and provincial spheres of government to local governments. The provincial and national authorities can thus contribute to the reduction of inequalities among towns and cities. However, this geographical redistribution of national income (sometimes known as financial equalization) should also encourage local initiatives and dynamism. It cannot simply be based on needs. A delicate balance between two goals (reducing inequalities and encouraging local dynamics) needs to be found: affirmative action is about positive discrimination, not about aligning the most advanced areas on the lowest standards.

Political challenge

This review of various lines of intervention shows that territorial affirmative action is necessary and already applied in several parts of the world. It is an essential means of combating unequal development. It addresses the needs of disadvantaged social groups and geographical areas, and promotes justice and social inclusion. Affirmative action always requires political courage because policy-makers have to convince those better off to share part of their wealth (through taxation and differential pricing) to redress historically and geographically

unbalanced development that is very similar to racial and sexual discrimination. Therefore the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in building the necessary political will cannot be over-emphasized. CSOs should appreciate that the full realization of the rights to adequate housing and city life depends on resolute affirmative actions in all countries, rich and poor.

8. The recognition of Local Authorities

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The 1996 City Summit included the first World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities. It gave a strong impetus to the collaboration of the UN with local authorities, both at the normative policy level and at the operational level. Governments recognised local authorities as their closest partners in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and committed themselves to decentralizing responsibilities and resources to the local level. The role and influence of international associations of local authorities vis-à-vis the United Nations system have increased ever since, particularly with the establishment of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA) in 2000 and the creation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) in 2004. At the same time, many programmes and initiatives of UN-Habitat have deliberately targeted local authorities and their needs for capacity-building. Hundreds of local authorities have benefited concretely from this collaboration on issues such as urban management, environmental sustainability, city planning, infrastructure management and slum upgrading.

Partnerships at global level

Most global programmes of UN-Habitat have involved local authorities associations in their governance structure. The Urban Management Programme, for example, has worked closely with regional and sub-regional associations in Latin America. The Cities Alliance benefits from the presence of representatives of UCLG and Metropolis in its Consultative Group and Executive Board. In each case, the perspectives and expectations of local authorities have proven very useful

to guide UN-Habitat and its international partners, such as the World Bank and UNDP, in their programming and evaluation activities at the global and regional levels.

UN-city partnerships

UN-Habitat is the UN agency for local authorities. The greater part of UN-Habitat managed resources is spent in developing countries to address the needs of local authorities, in terms of capacity-building, urban policy reform, environmental planning and monitoring, as well as concrete housing and slum upgrading programmes. Since its creation in 1978, UN-Habitat has supported hundreds of cities in improving their living environment. These range from the poorest towns in Least Developed Countries to the wealthy cities of the Middle East. UN-Habitat has, for instance, cooperated for many years with the small towns in Burkina Faso and with Dubai Municipality, bringing about crucial changes in municipal management and planning. This work has contributed to a complete renewal of urban planning approaches, with a move from top-down spatial planning to multi-stakeholders action planning based on city consultations and debates.

UN-Habitat has also played a major role in post-conflict urban rehabilitation, including through the re-establishment and training of local authorities in countries such as Somalia, Serbia, Iraq or Afghanistan. This intimate knowledge of the capacities and needs of local authorities around the world constitutes a solid reference basis and also a testing ground for UN-Habitat’s normative work and policy guidelines. Indeed, this cooperation with local authorities works both ways as many cities support UN-Habitat activities, either through city-to-city cooperation or through direct contributions. In this latter category, mention should be made of Fukuoka and Rio de Janeiro which host and support financially the regional offices of UN-Habitat for Asia and Latin America respectively. Several Chinese cities have also hosted and financed international conferences such as Nanjing which hosted the fourth session of the World Urban Forum in November 2008. The cooperation between local authorities and UN-Habitat benefits from the political (and often financial) support from many national governments which are increasingly aware that efficient local authorities are essential for the improvement of housing conditions

and the sustainable development of cities and other human settlements.

From a European charter to international guidelines on decentralization and basic services.

In June 1996, at the Partner Committee of Habitat II, local authorities made the case for the preparation of a worldwide charter on local autonomy. It was suggested that the experience gained in the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government could be used as a basis for developing a global charter that would set out the key principles underlying a sound constitutional or legal framework for a democratic local government system. An expert group meeting was held in April 1998 to prepare a first draft of the world charter, which was thereafter submitted to consultations in all regions of the world in 1999-2000. The draft charter was then revised and submitted to the UN Commission on Human Settlements in February 2001. However, the Commission could not reach a consensus on the proposed charter because some governments felt that it could contradict their constitutions and that therefore they would prefer a less binding declaration of principles.

The Special Session of the General Assembly (Istanbul +5) of June 2001 welcomed "the efforts made by many developing countries in effecting decentralisation in the management of cities" (United Nations, 2001). But the General Assembly did not discuss specific guidelines. In April 2002 the first session of the World Urban Forum recommended the development of constructive guidelines on decentralisation as a substitute for the world charter. The establishment of an Advisory Group of Experts on Decentralisation to support the dialogue process was endorsed by the Governing Council in 2003. This group developed draft guidelines which were finally adopted by the Governing Council in 2007. Additional guidelines on "access to basic services to all" were also drafted by UN-Habitat during 2005-2009, in collaboration with UCLG and other partners, and formally adopted in April 2009 (UN-Habitat, 2010).

UN-Habitat has always tried to ensure that the voice of local authorities is heard loudly and clearly in international forums, including in the UN intergovernmental machinery. This was the case with the

Istanbul Partner Committee where governments were briefed by Local Authorities and other partners in an official segment of the Habitat II Conference. High-level dialogues were thereafter formally included in the proceedings of UN-Habitat’s Governing Council from its 16th session onwards. UN-Habitat also tried to promote the direct participation of local authorities in the work of its Governing Council emphasizing that local authorities and their associations could not be considered NGOs because local authorities have governmental functions. Their associations are therefore more inter-governmental than non-governmental. Another step in the same discussion came after the elevation of UN-Habitat to programme status in the UN system, resulting in the need for drafting new rules of procedure for the Governing Council. These rules, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2003, include a specific section on the participation of partners to the Governing Council of UN-Habitat. Rule 64 reads as follows:

> “Duly accredited representatives of local authorities, invited by the Executive Director, in consultation with their respective governments, where requested, or representing national or international associations or organizations recognised by the United Nations, may participate, as observers at public meetings, in the deliberations of the Governing Council and its subsidiary organs.”

Two comments can be made on this rule. Firstly, governments could have a say on the accreditation of individual local authorities. Secondly, representatives of individual local authorities and of their national and international associations can participate fully in the deliberations of the Governing Council, without their presence and statements being subject to approval by the Council. They cannot vote or discuss administrative issues, but they can contribute to consensus-building in all substantive areas. Provided it is well structured, the voice of local authorities can be taken seriously into account in the sessions of the Governing Council. UCLG is expected to play an active role in organizing its members to ensure an optimal interaction with the UN system and its various programmes, with UN-Habitat as the designated entry point.

9. Cities and Climate Change

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During recent years climate change has become a major issue in the media and in international negotiations. Its causes and consequences have been analyzed by an army of scientists. The renewal of the Kyoto Protocol to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases has been under intense discussion and the process was to be completed in December 2009. Unfortunately the Copenhagen Conference was one of the biggest flops of UN history, a failure due not only to the diverging short-term political interests of G20 members but also to a poorly managed consensus-building process. This process has re-started and got some momentum in Durban in December 2011 but the international community remains very far from a new and meaningful agreement.

As more than 60% of all energy consumption and greenhouse gases emissions occur in cities of developed and emerging countries, the interaction between cities and climate change should be brought to the attention of the international community. The reduction of emissions requires four types of actions: increasing urban densities, improving energy efficiency of buildings, promoting mass transport systems and developing clean energy sources. This is well known from all urban planners. The required policy response is also known: strict land, building and transport regulations combined with financial and fiscal incentives. As usual what matters is the political will to adopt and enforce these measures.

In the short-term, cities have to adapt themselves to face the unavoidable impact of climate change, particularly sea-level rise and more frequent floods. New investments in physical infrastructure are needed, particularly in developing countries. The World Bank and UN-Habitat have designed a programme to support the most vulnerable cities and attract financial resources. Because climate change (unlike slums) is recognized as a global issue, this initiative may succeed. However it will have to involve many partners and to be seriously monitored. Once again urbanization will be addressed through the

environmental lens rather than the social or economic lenses, but this is probably the easiest way to build an international consensus. In the meantime the discussion of a new international agreement on climate change will go on, probably for several decades.

10. Other topics on the urban agenda

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In 2002, UN-Habitat initiated the World Urban Forum as a major discussion platform for all partners, with a view to assessing the state of urbanization and discussing policy options on the basis of concrete national and local experiences. This biennial event, held in Nairobi (2002), Barcelona (2004), Vancouver (2006), Nanjing (2008), Rio (2010) and Naples (2012), has attracted thousands of academics, experts, activists and policy-makers who all wanted to have a say on our urban future. The 7th session took place in Medellin, Colombia, in April 2014. It constituted the largest UN meeting of the year by the number of participants (20.000).

In addition to the issues mentioned in the previous sections of this article, several other topics of great importance have been discussed. To mention only a few examples : (i) the reconstruction of countries and cities affected by crisis or natural disasters; (ii) the reduction of urban violence or (iii) the need for new urban tools, e.g. for land management or city monitoring. With the recent global financial crisis (which was ignited by the failure of the US mortgage market), the difficult issue of housing finance will certainly be revisited in the near future.

Indeed the Urban Agenda covering by essence a cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary field, it has to be related to many aspects of the economic, social, environmental, cultural and political life. It has to provide the territorial or spatial dimensions of a number of societal challenges that the UN system tries to bring together at the global level, in an often scattered but consensual manner. This might be the weakness of the urban agenda: because it is too broad it cannot stand on its own and needs to be subsumed under -or associated with- more popular and fashionable topics. But then it loses its explanatory po-

wer, its comprehensiveness, its political value. Therefore urban specialists have no choice but to continue the struggle and frequently restructure this agenda in the most convincing way to reach the leaders of our world.

A new brand of experts is now required to take over from the Vancouver generation, who are progressively leaving the urban development scene, and to find more arguments for promoting the cause of sustainable urbanisation. The forthcoming Habitat III Conference, to be held in 2016, will bring a new generation to the forefront of the urban debates. They will update our common knowledge, produce a renewed Urban Agenda, but should not forget to learn from the past.

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