

# > Reflections on Sustaining and Improving Urban Life

By **Aisa Kirabo Kacyira**, *United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director, UN-Habitat; Perry World House Visiting Fellow, 2016–2017*

*The urbanization process has long been a catalyst for societal progress. Today, there is a growing recognition of the inextricable link between urbanization and socio-economic development. Cities have become a potent force for inclusive and sustainable socio-economic growth, development and prosperity, as well as for innovation, consumption, and investment. However, in order to develop their full potential, cities require solid economic policies, rigorous urban planning and design measures, as well as sound urban management, laws and governance.*

Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development has recognized urbanization as a driving force for development and prosperity. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 calls for “inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities.” The New Urban Agenda (NUA), which was adopted last year in Quito at the 3rd United Nations (UN) Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), put forward a clear action plan for advancing development through urbanization. Its implementation has the potential to positively shape the future of cities and ensure sustainable development by supporting efficient economic growth and environmental sustainability and ensuring that cities are socially inclusive and promote shared prosperity.

International frameworks, such as the SDGs, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the NUA, and their respective follow-up mechanisms provide an opportunity to build on this momentum and devise global strategies for implementation, monitoring and review. In that context, it is crucial to create alliances for implementation on the ground, making full use of partnerships with various stakeholders and empowering local actors to contribute fully to the search for solutions.

## INCLUSIVE CITIES

### Putting People Center-stage

A city should first and foremost be a reflection of its citizens and create a sense of belonging. Citizens should have their voices heard and valued, not only in social innovation projects and decision-making but also in the planning, implementation and evaluation of urban policies. In short, cities should be inclusive.

Reaching that goal depends on several factors, including sufficient political commitment by stakeholders in government and other relevant sectors. In addition, incentive structures must be adjusted to avoid biases towards uneven and unequal development. This, in turn, requires leadership that reflects a city’s people and diversity. Well-balanced, representative institutions are critical to facilitate inclusion, whether it concerns universal access to services, spatial planning, participatory policymaking or accountability. Policymaking should also be undergirded by evidence-based mechanisms that use disaggregated data to adequately capture the state of our cities. Finally, it is crucial to recognize and strengthen the complementary roles of national and local governments in achieving inclusive growth.

### Improving Access to Public Spaces and Land

Public spaces help build a sense of community, civic identity and culture. They are critical for creating a more inclusive urban environment. In fact, access to public spaces not only improves people’s quality of life, it is also a first step towards civic empowerment and political participation. Moreover, ensuring access to public spaces for the most vulnerable residents is a powerful tool to combat discrimination and insecurity.

Urban policies are an important means to provide access to public spaces and address spatial inequalities. High-density development and efficient street networks, for instance, make access to jobs and services easier. They also limit urban sprawl, with direct benefits, such as lower land and energy consumption as well as decreased greenhouse gas emissions. The sustainable maintenance and management of public spaces require sound economic and financial models. It is therefore key for cities to put in place adequate financial frameworks and governance systems to ensure municipal finance mobilization. Endogenous job creation and strategic investments will further secure sustainable funding and can generate a virtuous financial circle, in addition to healthy competitiveness.

Another major issue is access to land. We need to provide equitable access to land and security of tenure, and should be aware of the impact of urbanization on the value of land. Mixed land-use and socially diverse neighborhoods are critical components of inclusive cities, as are policies for the acquisition of land for public use and the availability of houses in different price ranges and tenures. Difficulties in securing access to adequate, affordable housing for all should be compensated through proper public spaces and services. Overall, fair and effective urban planning supported by the requisite laws makes cities more compact, efficient and people-oriented—and thus more equitable and sustainable.

### **Providing Access to Services and Infrastructure as well as Opportunities**

Policies, investments, and plans that promote more cost-effective access to basic services and infrastructure can contribute to making cities more inclusive. For example, by connecting social and political commitments with targeted investments and job opportunities, the urban poor can be better integrated. Furthermore, transparent, pro-active planning systems can increase a city's credit-worthiness. This positively influences the investment climate and allows political leaders to deliver on safe and inclusive urbanization projects. Taking into account rural-urban linkages when establishing an integrated development agenda is similarly important.

Beyond the local level, cities also need to follow up on international commitments concerning the nexus between urbanization, economic, social and environmental development, as well as peace and

security. Monitoring and performance management compacts are useful tools to advance the implementation of those commitments. In addition, cities can use frameworks, such as the SDGs, to learn from one another and share lessons learned, including on accountability measures. Needless to say that implementation is not without its challenges, not least because of the various interconnected governance layers and short-term mandates of political leaders. Investors also take advantage of loopholes and contribute to short-termism.

### **Addressing the needs of marginalized groups**

Another feature of inclusive cities is their ability to address the needs of marginalized, vulnerable groups, such as slum dwellers, migrant workers, indigenous peoples, minority groups, children, young and elderly people as well as persons with disabilities. Today, one third of urban dwellers in the developing world (863 million people) live in slum-like conditions. More women and girls than men and boys live in poverty in cities around the world. They are commonly responsible for unpaid care work, face greater risks of violence, especially in poorly designed urban spaces, and often lack access to basic services and infrastructure. Furthermore, over three billion people (almost half of the total global population) are under the age of 25. Many of them live in cities and towns in countries affected by crises and fragility, and are at high risk of becoming radicalized and violent.

Urban policies are key to addressing inequalities and the exclusion, even criminalization, of these groups. They can help avoid or reduce divided cities typified by gated communities, slums, increased polarization and privatization of urban space. They can contribute to creating safe spaces for vulnerable groups and empowering women and girls—economically, legally and in terms of political engagement. They can also provide young men and women—society's most essential and dynamic human resource—with opportunities for training and jobs. In doing so, urban policies and programs can support efforts to sustain peace in countries at different stages of the conflict cycle. In addition to addressing the youth bulge, they are also important in ensuring the inclusion of disabled persons and the rapidly growing number of elderlies. Finally, by improving access to adequate housing, urban policies can help integrate migrant laborers who increasingly move from rural to urban areas.

## THE ROLE OF NATIONAL URBAN POLICIES

Coherence and coordination between central and local governments are essential to ensure synergies and complementarities of interventions at different levels, and to incorporate urban growth into national and local planning. National Urban Policies (NUPs) play a critical role in this regard: their adoption and implementation contributes to an enhanced synergetic connection between the dynamics of urbanization and the overall process of national development. To harness urbanization, mitigate negative externalities and promote an “urban paradigm shift,” a coordinated approach and clear policy directions are needed. Unfortunately, these are still lacking in many countries, where different government departments are in charge of dealing with different aspects of the urbanization challenge, often working at cross purposes.

NUPs should therefore provide an overarching framework to steer public interventions in urban areas and serve as reference for government ministries and service providers as well as legislative institutional reforms. NUPs are also an important instrument for raising awareness of the benefits of sustainable urban development, and for promoting inclusive consultations with various urban stakeholders. Finally, it is crucial to include strategic territorial regional planning

frameworks with clear urban-rural linkages as well as an urban legal framework. These should be responsive to the real needs and capacities on the ground and take into account available resources, especially with respect to land use and land tenure security as well as the allocation of private versus public space and land value capture.

In conclusion, urbanization is a man-made phenomenon. If managed well, it is probably the most accessible and affordable policy strategy to achieve sustainable development. While common global principles of urban planning and policies remain relevant, it is important to note that urbanization is also a human process and cannot simply be copied. It will grow to reflect the citizens’ culture and identity in each context. UN-Habitat has responded to these challenges by investing in global and thematic research, and has tested its findings through operational programs at national and local levels, in both peaceful and crisis environments. Tangible transformative results have been achieved and, today, together with its partners, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-Habitat is braced to scale up and support Member States in the implementation of the NUA. The leadership role of governments, their effective coordination and a proactive engagement with our partners all are crucial in this regard.