

Outcome Document

Advancing the New Urban Agenda in a Shifting World: A Multi-Stakeholder Workshop December 9, 2016

This document is the product of a Perry World House multi-stakeholder workshop “Advancing the New Urban Agenda in a Shifting World,” held on December 9, 2016 at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kleinman Center for Energy Policy. It convened Penn faculty, policymakers, and practitioners in a full day of robust round-table conversations on key questions and issues pertaining to the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. This outcome document seeks to:

- 1) summarize key ideas discussed at the workshop;
- 2) identify areas for further research;
- 3) propose next steps for policy-relevant work in this space (workshop participants only).

The New Urban Agenda is an action-oriented document that outlines a vision for sustainable, inclusive urban development over the coming decades; it was adopted at the third UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, known as Habitat III, in October 2016. While the New Urban Agenda promotes a laudable vision for urban development as a force for positive change, Perry World House’s workshop reaffirmed that the actual life of this document will be determined where the text ends. It will be shaped by those who choose to implement it and with what interpretation; influenced by the voices that are empowered and the absence of others; and subject to improvisation where policy voids exist.

Governments, civil society, and practitioners seeking guidance on implementing the New Urban Agenda may struggle with concepts that are not explicitly articulated. From the criteria for monitoring and evaluation to the differing interpretations of democratic principles, human rights, and climate change, the New Urban Agenda will reflect the intentions and goals of the implementing agent. It is in that space—the space for interpretation between the text and the execution—that this workshop added significant insight to the overarching question: “Under what conditions does urbanization create sustainable, inclusive development?” This paper outlines four overarching themes that emerged.

Urbanization: Global but not monolithic

While the global scale and pace of urbanization are unprecedented, with more than two-thirds of the world’s population expected to live in cities by 2050, it is not a homogenous phenomenon. Therefore, while the New Urban Agenda is impressive for its global vision and inclusive language, it is important to recognize two points about the document: 1) it is grounded in a framework that reflects a certain set of beliefs; and 2) its implementation requires context-specific analysis and application.

The process for drafting the New Urban Agenda allowed for extensive stakeholder input. Ultimately, however, the language reflects compromise and thus the inevitable ordering of views and concepts. The New Urban Agenda, for example, discusses a transition from “informal to formal” economy (para. 13d) which could be interpreted as a shift that further marginalizes, even criminalizes, informal sectors.

Moreover, some read the document as equating progress with modernization, while others express concern that housing and land rights were not sufficiently prominent in the document. The New Urban Agenda is grounded in a belief that the doubling of the world's urban population by 2050 is, for all intents and purposes, inevitable and that if better managed, is a force for good. These perspectives are widespread but not universal. While the New Urban Agenda is now an internationally adopted albeit voluntary vision for urban development, should it not be critically analyzed as part of a cultural and spatio-temporal context? Some have suggested that the New Urban Agenda is not actually a paradigm shift but rather the advancement of a certain set of beliefs about urbanization, leading one to ask:

- Does the New Urban Agenda constitute a paradigm shift, and if so, according to whose criteria?

Furthermore, the variation in urbanization around the world reflects the urban traditions and conditions in which it is embedded. The implementation of the New Urban Agenda will take distinct forms depending on the context in which it is implemented, influenced by numerous factors such as political will, tax infrastructure, and technical capacity. This raises important questions about the scalability of knowledge, including evidence-based knowledge. Examining if or how to share strategies and best practices across contexts will be an important consideration for those implementing this vision for urban development. In paragraph 131, the New Urban Agenda acknowledges its support for “**context-sensitive** approaches in financing urbanization and in enhancing financial management capacities at all levels of government, adopting specific instruments and mechanisms necessary to achieve sustainable urban development.” But many important questions in this space remain unanswered, especially regarding monitoring.

- Should all pledgers or participants be held to the same goals, and if not, how should targets be differentiated? How should success be monitored?

Integrated analysis and the importance of multi-disciplinary insights

There are still many untapped intellectual resources that could be used to inform smarter urbanization; learning how to identify and utilize those resources, including diverse disciplinary and professional analyses, will be important to the sustainability and effectiveness of the New Urban Agenda. By including the views of a wide range of experts, lacunae and points of concern can be identified more readily and the construction of false dualities avoided. For example, while references to climate change are found throughout the document, it was pointed out during the workshop that there is no systematic exploration of carbon emissions reduction amidst rapid urbanization. A critical, multi-disciplinary assessment of what low-carbon urbanism might suggest for the New Urban Agenda, taking into consideration the competing political, social, and economic interests, could be an important contribution to early planning for implementation. Capturing the complex, and often contradictory, forces at play in urbanization is an essential first step to understanding how any new interventions will be received, and no sole discipline or experience can capture the complexity of urban life.

Expanding the methods used to understand and inform policy directed at the urban landscape can help strengthen the quality of research data, predict potential policy pitfalls, and minimize bias. Rather than creating urban reforms that cater to an ideal outcome, integrating research can help inform pragmatic, sustainable results. For example, understanding urban economies requires understanding the motivations of the social actors behind them. There needs to be much greater substantive thinking about integration across academic disciplines and professional fields, and a critical part of this challenge begins with finding common languages to communicate across professions and cultures.

- How can different academic and professional perspectives be better integrated and leveraged in analyzing and monitoring the implementation of the New Urban Agenda?
- How is language, in any form, creating barriers (or bridges) between stakeholders?

Assembling effective governance mechanisms

In order to foster sustainable urban development, all levels of governance must be involved and coordinated. Understanding what the relationship between these should be, as well as how these levels can better work together both horizontally (e.g., between cities) and vertically (e.g., between federal government, city, and municipal government) is extremely important for the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Given that many global agreements must ultimately be implemented at the local level, it is important to create and sustain mechanisms that allow for the transmission of resources and information across and between levels of urban governance, while also maintaining a degree of consistency even during political shifts. Currently, many challenges exist in trying to coordinate these actors. For example, the federal government can celebrate the ability of city government to achieve certain goals when their strategic interests align; but cities become a liability as soon as those interests diverge. Moreover, cities are increasingly asserting themselves at the international level, and it will be important to understand the implications of this shift for governance structures.

Decentralizing governance and actively engaging grassroots actors with vested interests, according to many workshop participants, will be critical to achieving sustainability and inclusivity in urbanization. This includes encouraging “local experimentation” that allows grassroots actors to implement goals or respond to particular needs. The quality of multi-level governance will be a major factor in determining whether the New Urban Agenda takes roots with citizens or remains a top-down plan.

- How can multiple levels of governance be better coordinated in implementing the New Urban Agenda?
- How can local governance mechanisms be strengthened to ensure inclusive participation in, and responsible implementation of, the New Urban Agenda?
- To what extent are cities becoming their own actors, exerting greater independence in the global arena?

Financing: Can the playing field be leveled?

It has been said by Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, that good urbanization will pay for itself. This logic suggests that with good legislation, fiscal decentralization, and technically sound urban planning, the necessary revenue streams to sustain inclusive urban development should emerge. Yet many countries and urban areas are starting at a place in which one, if not all, of those pillars is fundamentally weak. Meanwhile, urbanization is taking place at a lower per capita income than in the past; investment in housing and services is lagging; and settlements are expanding at a stunning rate.

If the New Urban Agenda is unable to raise funds comparable to more prominent development initiatives like the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, one must consider the extent to which many countries will have the necessary resources to begin implementing the New Urban Agenda. Whether it means fiscal decentralization or rethinking the ability of development banks to loan to cities, new financing options will need to be conceptualized in a way that allows for the advancement of this global vision.

- How should developing countries garner the resources to begin implementing the vision outlined in the New Urban Agenda?
- How can the New Urban Agenda be embedded in existing development initiatives?
- Should development banks be able to work directly with cities?

The participants of this workshop were offered an opportunity to apply for funding to advance policy-relevant research and output connected to the issues raised in this workshop. We look forward to sharing their work with others in the future.