

Cities for People and by People

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This century will see a substantial majority of the world's population living in urban centers. The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), to be held in Quito, Ecuador, from 17 to 20 October 2016, therefore has as its mission the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, an action-oriented outcome document that will set global standards of achievement in sustainable urban development. The Agenda will enable us to rethink the way we build, manage and live in cities by strengthening cooperation among stakeholders, urban actors at all levels of government and the private sector.

We recently visited Myanmar and met with a women's savings group in Htantabin Township. These women, who are among the very poorest squatters in Yangon, had for many years been uprooted and impoverished by evictions and faced all types of socioeconomic problems until they were able to work together to buy a small piece of unregistered land, lay out a tight community of 70 house-plots and build simple bamboo and wood houses for themselves for just \$991 per family. The money came in the form of a community loan from their city development fund. Once they had secure land and houses of their own, and had built a friendly new community, the women could get better jobs outside of the community.



Their incomes grew, and they were able to take loans to expand their small businesses. Soon they had set up a small welfare fund, and their children could go to school. Their health improved, their status in the neighborhood increased, and their relations with the local government became friendly. They obtained official house registration and could sleep soundly at night. It would be fair to say that life had finally started for them. Their housing development process had transformed their lives, helping them overcome misery, poverty and isolation.

The beautiful city of Yangon is on the verge of a very big change, as Myanmar opens up with new democratic freedoms and new enthusiasm for the future. The economic opportunities that come with this political opening are transforming Yangon into a nexus linking the country's economy and global markets, like other big cities in Asia. Industrial areas are springing up around the city, yet for thousands of factory workers, there is no social support, no plans for affordable housing and no acknowledgement that their lives and well-being are part of the city's development. Accordingly, even in this upbeat atmosphere, we see squatters and small-room renters everywhere, living in squalor and isolation. Most have probably been evicted many times. Recently, the Chief Minister of the Yangon Region announced that 450,000 people living in illegal settlements are to be evicted with no housing alternatives offered. For decades, we've seen this same, lopsided scenario in cities across Asia, where development emphasizes investment, infrastructure and economic growth, but somehow, the social and human aspects of development are lost.

Imagine, however, a different scenario, where that small community housing project in Htantabin Township is not a unique case but a model that could be replicated throughout the city. Economic development would come with opportunities for even the poorest squatters to become active and confident participants in both their own community housing development and the city's socioeconomic

progress. Yangon and other cities around the world could then become places of opportunity and shared development, where everyone could live decently, with creativity, equality and dignity. Residents could participate actively as citizens in city development and share civic responsibilities. What a lively and varied process that would be!

It is encouraging to see that the Habitat III global development agenda is focused firmly on cities. This makes sense, especially in Asia, where many countries are still mired in highly centralized and bureaucratic national government systems that are stuck in old hierarchies and overburdened with rules and regulations. These national structures don't respond to the real dynamics of change in their countries, and problems only accumulate. While there's little use in looking for innovation at the national level, in cities, where the majority of us now live, there is more room for change.

This is not to say that cities are perfect: they can also be quite centralized and bureaucratic. In most Asian cities, the current Western-style political and electoral systems have long been hijacked by contractors, powerful families and special interest groups, who have made a science of buying into and holding onto power, mainly for their own purposes. The policies and projects that come out of such political systems enrich a few and blight many cities with a variety of problems and economic stagnation. This is worsened by the global emphasis on economic development, which encourages cities to compete for investment and open themselves up to market forces. Top-down investment, we are told, creates opportunities that will trickle down and generate prosperity and democratic space for everyone. When that investment does come, however, it generates instead a development process that is divisive rather than inclusive, with a few winners, many losers and precious little trickle-down prosperity. This emphasis on free-market economic development has increased gentrification, fuelled evictions, commercialized more aspects of our lives, alienated people from each other and made our cities more unequal.

Despite these problems, cities remain our best hope, because in urban communities, those who govern are closer to those who are governed. Some cities have developed systems that are more responsive to real changes on the ground. It is important to acknowledge, however, that such changes are too great and happening too fast for anyone to plan for or govern alone. We need more imaginative reformulation of the systems by which we manage change, so these systems can be more balanced, inclusive, integrated and responsive. Conventional, 'vertical' city governance systems are in need of drastic change; they must become more 'horizontal' so that they can be jointly managed by people and communities.

If cities are to be the object of the new global development agenda, then people must be the subject. Citizens have to be seen as capable and sensible participants in their city's development. For any urban development process to be sustainable, people must be more than just passive recipients or voters or numbers in a poll. They have to play an active role as participants and drivers of their city's management, bringing with them not only their ideas, abilities and economic force, but the richness of their history, culture, social systems and interconnectedness.

One way to encourage a more realistic and participatory urban development system is to create new alternative platforms or councils that would bring together key stakeholders and communities for discussion and planning at the city level. Such platforms would make room for representatives from diverse population groups, sectors and institutions to take part in various aspects of their city's development and bring a broader range of issues to the table. Instead of relying entirely on a few elected officials, these actors from different sectors could interact, consider aspects of urban development and negotiate agreements on how to move forward. This simple approach could allow broader participation of people and groups in city management, and create new possibilities, ideas and collaborations. It could also help make the process livelier and more representative.

One of the most powerful tools for creating more balanced and participatory urban structures is housing development. Housing defines communities and is the foundation of our cities. Housing is an issue that touches everyone and affects all the key elements of urban development, including land, infrastructure, regulation, finance, participation and governance. Housing fulfills our basic need for shelter, security and social interaction.

This is especially true for the poor. In informal settlements, interdependence is the lifeline by which the poor collectively meet their individual needs. When we discuss housing development, we are talking about a process in which people understand their situation as a group. They then plan and build structures in which they live together and decide on the physical and social form that togetherness will take. This kind of housing development process embraces much more than the physical structures themselves: it creates new communities where people live together as well as support and take care of each other. In doing so, it builds the roots of a more people-oriented urban social structure. Housing development is an important intervention for building this kind of communal living system from the bottom-up, with people taking the lead.

In the past, communal living might have been organized around religious or ethnic groupings, clans or trades. In Asia, we have a legacy of existing community structures. Low-income settlements are particularly rich in this sense of community. Sometimes such communities are centered on a temple or a mosque, a market or factory, or a geographical feature like a hill or a river. We should focus, as much as possible, on how to support and strengthen existing community structures. Modern society may take on new forms, however, so it is also important to think creatively about new systems of how people can live together. Housing is one of the most potent ways of creating and bringing to life these new forms of community. It can help shift big-city development back to the people and ensure that residents live together in healthy, secure and supportive communities.

Housing development must be pursued citywide. There is an urgent need to make community upgrading and housing development a proactive and central part of the urban development agenda. It must be citywide in scale if it is to foster change in political and structural systems, which often allow poverty, slums, evictions and social exclusion to grow in cities. Individual communities' scattered pilot projects and sectoral interventions cannot address large-scale structural change. The process of structural change should begin with a citywide perspective and information gathering on the city's structures and community network-building. The process should support the building of a proactive people's movement with the strength of numbers, backed by citywide savings and community funds to build the community's financial strength and links with other financial resources. Partnerships should be pursued to bring key stakeholders together to develop a common understanding of the citywide situation and set a common direction for development. The citywide scale is appropriate for creating a new momentum for change, to adjust relationships between residents and other stakeholders and to build partnerships.

It is crucial for the global community to take a more ambitious approach. Our experiment with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, which initiated citywide upgrading in 215 Asian cities, with initial financial support of just \$40,000 to \$65,000 per city, has shown that fixing poor people's housing problems on a citywide scale is possible. This change doesn't necessarily require a lot of funding, but it does demand the right approach, one focused on unlocking people's energy to promote change with other development partners in their respective cities.

Finance is key. The need for a flexible finance system is crucial. Unfortunately, the current system is rigid, top-down and driven by the market for profit, and thus, doesn't serve the interests of the poor. If the financial system can be redesigned at the city and national levels to be more flexible, allowing different social initiatives to be developed by different groups of people, then new and innovative action can be taken. If finance is designed with social goals in mind, it can provide city government and residents with the freedom and power to develop more creative urban solutions on a citywide scale.

This new participatory city development process can be gradual and friendly. Without structural reform, however, all the lofty development goals and sustainability targets in the world will be meaningless, and nothing will change. It is crucial that the global community embrace this view of necessary change in cities, and put its weight behind the search for new ideas and approaches.