

An aerial photograph of a city, showing a mix of residential buildings, green spaces, and a major road with traffic. A large teal triangle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title and subtitle text.

The Implementation of the Principles of Planned Urbanization: a UN-Habitat approach to sustainable urban development

Working Paper

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1 Acknowledgements

The production of this paper was coordinated by the Capacity Development Unit of the Research and Capacity Building Branch of UN-Habitat. It has been reviewed and commented by a number of individuals belonging to different units of UN-Habitat before its present version. The purpose of the paper is to unfold the principles of planned urbanization as an approach advocated by UN-Habitat to address the challenges facing cities in the developing world. Ultimately the paper is meant to sustain the development of a training module that will support the capacity building program that will be rolled out in the aftermath of the Habitat III conference.

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2 Preamble

This paper is prepared as a background working paper outlining the principles and application of planned urbanization, herein called the Three-Pronged Approach (3PA) of UN-Habitat.

This approach advocates for an integrated urban management and urban planning practice that simultaneously adopts the implementation of (1) an urban/spatial plan that addresses density, land use, streets and public spaces, and the definition of public and private domains through urban design; (2) a legal plan that contains the rules of land subdivision and land occupation, as well as the regulatory frameworks governing planned urbanization; and (3) the financial plan to mobilize resources for its realization.

This paper is meant to provide the foundation for the design of a training programme and the development of training materials and case studies which are part and parcel of its curriculum.

The paper elaborates on the conceptual and practical framework of the principles of planned urbanization, characteristic of the integrated approach adopted by UN-Habitat to address the challenges of rapid urbanization in the developing world, namely (1) Rules and Regulations, (2) Urban Design, and the (3) Financial plan.

From the outset, this paper argues in favor of a deliberate choice for planned and sustainable urbanization and clarifies key elements and principles required for implementation. It clarifies the linkages and synergies between the Habitat III process, the New Urban Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly SDG-11 on cities and human settlements.

To conclude, this paper elaborates on the synergies between various UN-Habitat programs and elaborates on a number of existing toolkits, including the Rapid Planning Studio and the City Prosperity Initiative.

3 Sustainable Urbanization as a Source of Prosperity¹ (and Wealth)

Our world has become predominantly urban over the last century. Today, over half of the global population lives in urban areas. These urban areas will accommodate an additional 2.5 billion people by 2050, amounting to 70% of the world's population.² Lewis Mumford, quoting Aristotle, wrote "that men came together in cities and towns³ to live, but remained there to live the good life."⁴ However, the capacity of cities and towns to absorb population growth and enable such good living (as measured by wealth and quality of life) depends, among other factors, on the quality of its urbanization process.⁵ In other words, it depends on how well urban development is managed and planned for, and the extent to which the benefits resulting from urbanization are equitably distributed amongst its population.

Current development trends have demonstrated the inability of cities to cope adequately with the challenges of sustainable urbanization and to deliver implementable and feasible solutions for all, not only in developing and rapidly urbanizing countries, but also in developed and highly-urbanized nations. Physical and social spatial segregation, increasing congestion and pollution, and shortages of adequate housing are conditions found in both developed and developing countries, though in varying levels and intensities.⁶ Concerns regarding land supply for urban development are increasingly common in countries at all levels of economic development, not only due to land being a finite resource with a wide range of competing functions, but also due to the increasing penetration of market forces, speculation, and quick profit approaches⁷ into the efforts of developing and providing accessible land. In the developing world, and particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of Asia, urbanization has become synonymous with informal settlements and slum formation,

meaning that cities are not growing on the basis of an enacted urban plan and land use ordinance, but rather through informal land development processes and self-built housing. UN-Habitat data suggests that 1 in every 4 urban dwellers in the world lives in slums today.⁸

We must take into account that cities and towns have made and remade themselves in the image of political ideologies, some characterized by the *laissez-faire* and some by strong regulatory frameworks. In many cases these ideologies have, directly or indirectly, intensified poorly-planned and informal urban growth.⁹ In general, such ideologies are built upon insufficient technical and economic resources, poor strategies, and management decisions driven by inertia,¹⁰ free market forces, or, in certain contexts, upon both simultaneously.

Under such circumstances, it is very difficult to respond at the speed and with the strength required to accommodate urban expansion or redevelopment within a formal planning framework and to control the pressure of real estate markets. But, paradoxically, the pressing challenges faced by cities and towns also hold the key to aligning urbanization processes in an equitable and sustainable way that enhances overall prosperity.

It is time to reclaim and advocate for processes which ensure that, when urbanization takes place under certain conditions and it is well-planned and managed, it becomes a tool to foster sustainable development and produce the wealth and prosperity that improves the lives of all urban dwellers, especially the poor and the vulnerable. Sustainable urbanization supports urban value creation through economies of scale, economies of scope, and agglomeration economies.¹¹ The first theory highlights the correlation between city size and productivity; the second states

that the proximity afforded by urban areas facilitates synergies and sharing; and the third emphasizes the productivity advantages of a city's setting with respect to innovation, job, and wealth creation. If urban value generation has the potential to foster economic growth, social development, environmental sustainability, and resilience, then well-planned urbanization should ensure the redistribution of this value by

facilitating job creation, equal access to adequate housing, public services, and healthy and safe environments (air, soil and water that are not physically vulnerable) for all. Urbanization, steered by values of equity, sustainability, and integrity¹² can leverage the benefits attributed to good urbanization and achieve greater collective prosperity and benefits for all

Principles of Sustainable Urbanization¹³

In 2015, Resolution 25/15 was adopted by the UN-Habitat Governing Council, approving the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (IGUTP). The IGUTP are intended to be a framework for improving global policies, plans, designs, and implementation processes. The Guidelines promote key urban and territorial planning principles and recommendations that can assist all countries and cities adopt a strong inter-sectorial and multi-level/multi-scale approach. Moving away from a prescriptive, legislative approach, toward serving as a source of inspiration, the IGUTP can be readily adapted to local contexts.

The Guidelines have been designed as a universal framework, a reference document integrating the three dimensions of urban policy (why plan?), management processes (how to plan?) and technical products (what urban and territorial plans?). The Guidelines are conceived as an instrument to promote sound urban and territorial planning around the world, based on universally-accepted principles and national, regional, and local experience. Together, the IGUTP form a broad framework to guide urban policy reforms, taking into account specific approaches, visions, models, and tools existing in each country. The main content of the IGUTP is summarized in the 5 following principles:

1. Integrated policy formulation and implementation;
2. Transformative renewal strategies;
3. Environmental planning and management;
4. Planning for compact and connected cities and regions; and
5. Inclusive and Participatory planning.

4 SDG-11 and Habitat III: Call for Sustainable Urbanization

The Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements recognizes that:

*cities and towns [are] centres of civilization, generating economic development and social, cultural, spiritual and scientific advancement. We must take advantage of the opportunities presented by our settlements and preserve their diversity to promote solidarity among all our peoples.*¹⁴

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in September 2015, recognizes the power of urbanization to transform the current model of urban development and admits that there can be no sustainable development without sustainable urban development. In particular, Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG-11) sets a target to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.”¹⁵ Other goals and targets are also important as they make clear that the SDGs and other urban agendas must be underpinned by a fundamentally pro-poor agenda.

In parallel, and as a first step in the implementation of SDG-11 in particular, Habitat III, the United Nations International Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, is an opportunity to define a new urban policy agenda as global trends of urbanization are being questioned and challenged. The New Urban Agenda¹⁶ should discuss two key issues. First, that a new way of managing cities is needed, and second, that this new approach – understanding planned urbanization as a source of prosperity – has the potential to be both more inclusive and extraordinarily productive and effective in delivering positive urban conditions for all, and especially for the most vulnerable groups.

5 Planned and Sustainable Urbanization is by Choice, Not by Chance.

The New Urban Agenda proposed by UN-Habitat argues that some ways of maximizing the transformative outcome of urbanization are more successful than others. For example, adopting certain sustainable and inclusive principles and approaches may emphasize “better” ways to plan, design, build, engage, and manage cities and towns that are more effective and sustainable over time.

Current planning practices in many rapidly-urbanizing countries are opting for building typologies with small footprints (5-10%), thereby creating the characteristic “tower in the garden.” In the 1970s and 1980s, academics and experts, including Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, and Oscar Newman, among many others, examined the failure of existing models of urbanism and called for a new urbanization based on the principles of density, compactness, variety of uses, and social diversity. In parallel, a number of cities and towns, especially in developing countries, are repeating mass housing schemes to provide affordable housing that is built on cheap and peripheral land where people usually have limited access to services, jobs, and opportunities. The result is that, in many countries, the stock of vacant houses is increasing even when millions of people have nowhere to live.¹⁷ The combination of these models is contributing to social, environmental, and financial costs far beyond what the majority of cities and towns can afford.

The capacity of urbanization to become a tool for prosperity and wealth creation is not the result of an abstract or generic vision, but of practical action informed by knowledge, data, past experience, and local conditions. Managing urbanization will impact politics, social norms, institutional change, and the broader financial system.¹⁸ Planned urbanization that is sustainable

and inclusive is, therefore, the result of clear and strategic choices; it does not happen by chance. Planned urbanism creates the necessary conditions to improve citizens' lives and increase their chances of prosperity,¹⁹ although it may not be enough to solve all the challenges and problems that contemporary urban societies are facing. Sustainable urbanization is accomplished both at the outcome level – a more equitable and sustainable city – and throughout the process – a better way to guide and leverage the transformation of our cities through expansion and redevelopment actions. It requires institutional capacity, urban planning, and management tools, as well as the ability to employ them and enforce their outcomes on existing and newly-formed cities and human settlements.

Given the differences in context and conditions between cities and towns around the world, we cannot ignore that the successful implementation of plans which deliver sustainable urban development processes and planned urbanization outcomes, particularly to address deeply rooted structural social, economic, and spatial inequalities, requires strong political will, law-enforcement capacity, and partnerships with all relevant stakeholders. It is important to recognize that urbanization is not a politically-neutral professional practice, but the expression of a series of collective social, economic, and political choices. This realization highlights the need for political leadership as such choice is not built

and management practices and to propose the adoption of fundamental principles and approaches that promote planned urbanization that are, in essence, environmentally sustainable, spatially and socially-inclusive, legally-bound, rights-based, and economically and financially sound.

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is mandated to promote sustainable urbanization and human settlement development, and to support national and local governments in this regard.²⁰ National, regional, and city governments are struggling to cope with demographic pressures and increasing demands for housing, land and infrastructure, services, and employment, while being pressed to address the dynamics of market forces operating within the urban setting. Land, housing, and real estate markets can generate development speculation, social exclusion, and spatially-segregated cities if not properly regulated and managed. The inability to address these challenges and manage cities in a way that can guide them towards a planned and sustainable urban future adversely affects the outcomes of urbanization. In other words, cities can become a liability and lose the opportunities provided by urbanization, becoming more likely to develop into informal, congested, inefficient, polluted, segregated, and violent places to live.

There is little to no room available for governments to manoeuvre around

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