

September 3, 2018

**“Cities and the Global Agenda: On the Road to the U20 in Buenos Aires”
A Reflection on the New School Conference of July 13, 2018¹**

Overview

During the July 2018 UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) a parallel full day conference was convened to independently consider the progress being made towards the achievement of the global agenda for 2030 as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). This discussion was marked by a sense of social and political urgency due to the fact that there are only 12 years left for the achievement of these goals.

Participants were invited from civil society, official development institutions, local governments, foundations, and academia. The conference was convened by The New School in partnership with the Mistra Urban Futures Centre from Sweden, the School of Architecture, Design, and Urban Planning of the University of Buenos Aires, and the Global Platform for the Right to the City. This event was attended by about 100 people and included speakers from 10 countries in both the global South and North.

The conference conclusions were broadly the following:

- Ms. Maimounah Mohd Sharif, the Executive Director of UN Habitat, set the tone in her opening remarks by observing:

“We live in the age of disruption. Let’s rethink government structures at the local, national and also international levels. We have to disrupt the way of thinking and local governance, get rid of all silos, and work in teams that talk to each other.... If we cannot translate program into action, if it cannot be felt and smelled by the people on the ground, it is useless.”

- Despite the enormous efforts made to frame and adopt global goals, there is relatively little progress being made towards their achievement. The complexity and sheer number of goals has undermined the likelihood that countries and cities will fulfill them. Moreover, the data and methodologies needed to provide a rigorous assessment of implementation at either the national or urban level are missing.

¹ This note was prepared by Michael Cohen of The New School with substantive inputs from Margarita Gutman, Maria Carrizosa, and Lena Simet, all from The New School, and David Simon and Jan Riise of the Mistra Urban Futures Center.

- This situation is not just one of faulty assessment, but rather reflects two fundamental contradictions: first, that national governments have not provided the political and financial support to local governments to implement the global goals, and secondly, the sectoral organization of problem-solving capacity in silos across most institutions, including national and local governments, universities, and civil society organizations, inhibits the capacity of institutions to solve problems in integrated ways that reflect the interdependence of these problems.
- These contradictions therefore imply the need for new forms of integrated urban practice, including problem-solving, education and training, and resource allocation, to address urgent urban issues. More of the same is not enough.

The Conference

The meeting consisted of an opening session and panels to discuss four subjects, as outlined in the attached program.

- Assessments: The quality of the UN assessment of progress made on Goal 11, the “urban goal”.
- Practice: The introduction of the importance of developing new forms of urban practice.
- Capabilities: Discussion of the need to develop institutional capabilities to achieve the SDGs.
- Strategies: Plans for the U20 meeting to be convened by the major cities of the G20 countries in Buenos Aires in October 2018.

The major conclusions of these deliberations were the following:

Framing the Discussion:

Global agreements and what is at stake?

- The global goals present an interdependent set of objectives. The focus has been on the “what”. Not enough attention has been devoted to the “how”. Urban practice, the way problems are addressed, continues to be independent and unconnected. This contradiction raises the following questions:
 - What do we understand by urban practice? What are examples of new/good forms of urban practice?
 - How can we have urban improvements somewhere and regression elsewhere?
 - How can we have stronger economic growth in some African countries, but more slums at the same time?

What is meant by the capacity of local governments and institutions? What does it mean to build capacity in concert with these global objectives?

Stakes at play:

- Global capital is available, yet the people managing money see too many risks to invest the money in cities. They are like pilots in a holding pattern, seeing “too many holes in the runway”.
- The issue of urban practice is not just what is done in cities, but how cities can be put in the position to do more in a financial sense, increase their contribution to national development of countries, and assist them to implement measures of climate change in an integrated and ‘mainstreamed’ way.

We are having this discussion at a time of unusual opportunity. This is the first time the G20 has picked up the urban question. With heads of states possibly discussing the urban agenda in November 2018, we need to tell them what is doable, in a timeframe that appropriately conveys political and social urgency.

Assessing the Assessments

- Sakiko Fukuda-Parr of The New School noted that we need a transformative agenda, because the world is going the wrong way. UN reports remain in silos. We need a holistic vision.
- While there has been extensive activity about developing indicators for each SDG and target at the national levels, we should lower our expectations about what these assessments can actually achieve. We noted that there has been little concrete progress at the city level in developing a monitoring system to assess city level progress.
- The absence of comparable city level data across cities makes it impossible to have a rigorous global city level monitoring system.
- National country urban profiles that create “average” urban conditions across cities fail to meet the test of analytic rigor. Indeed, as noted by Eduardo Moreno from UN Habitat, “60% of the national progress reports for the HLPF had no data.”
- The weakness of official data reinforces the need for approaches for the “co-production” of data and trans-disciplinary research by diverse actors within a given urban area. As David Simon of Mistra Urban Futures noted, co-production among often antagonistic urban stakeholder groups and institutions also has the benefit of contributing to the construction of consensus about “urban facts’ and thus a shared diagnosis of problems facing individual urban areas and how to formulate locally more appropriate and acceptable solutions.
- Ultimately, changes in the performance of city level institutions depend heavily on the policies and attitudes of national government institutions in reference to modes of decentralized decision-making, availability of timely and sufficient

financial resources, and the strengthening of local capacities. Supportive national institutions are, in general, rare.

- William Cobbett from Cities Alliance asserted: “In terms of preparing future professionals, we must change the mindset from urban development to urban management” and reflect this in appropriate training.
- Ultimately, we may have to reduce our expectations of the 2030 agenda. We cannot assume that data solves problems and, equally, should not allow data deficiencies to be used as a pretext for inaction. Rather, institutions need to play their roles by seizing the opportunity provided by the NUA and SDGs.

New Urban Practices

- Margarita Gutman of The New School opened the session saying that the interdependence of the SDGs raises the need for more integration of sector practices, across silos and disciplines.
- Jeb Brugmann of the 100+ Resilient Cities Program remarked, “We have talking about integration for 40 years. The question is how to do it.”
- Jan Riise from Mistra Urban Futures noted, “If you place a silo horizontally, it can be a great communication channel.”
- This integration can be achieved within projects of many kinds. An emblematic urban project would be a slum upgrading program where such cross-sector integration is essential.
- Understanding practices requires a more analytic view of disciplines, their assumptions, scales, and possible impacts. This is well demonstrated in the case of metropolitan analysis that, in most contexts, is not understood as a phenomenon by itself but is rather seen as merely increased urban scale.
- Process affects outcomes. More attention must be devoted to the “how” and not just focused on the “what”.
- Martin Motta from the Institute of Housing of the City Government of Buenos Aires commented, “we don’t have a master plan, we have a collective process. If we think in processes, we can change the way we do public policy”.
- Innovation in cities is growing and offers many promising solutions, although the notion of “smart cities” requires a carefully balanced assessment of benefits and costs, including about who controls the data upon which many technological decisions are made. Antonella Contin from the Politechnic of Milan remarked, “We have to move beyond the participation rhetoric. Bottom up must meet top down and sideways.”

Building Local Capacity to Achieve Global Objectives

- Building local capacity is a priority for cities of all sizes, particularly small and medium-sized cities.
- Susan Parnell, from the African Centre for Cities, Cape Town, South Africa and the University of Bristol, stated, “Devolution is not only giving power back to mayors. Believing that is naïve. National urban policy must commit to increase capacities and resources to urban governments and then to codify those commitments into law.”
- National governments can enhance effectiveness and accountability of multi-level governance by legally clarifying the roles and responsibilities of different international, national and local levels.
- The challenges of building local capacity are very large and diverse, depending on local circumstances.
- Programs to strengthen the resilience of cities have generated a significant database of city level experiences around the world.
- Horacio Corti, Public Defender of the City of Buenos Aires, argued that access to justice at the city level is an important dimension of building local capacity. It is often also critical to engaging positively with poor and marginalized communities.
- Nelson Saule of the Global Platform to the Right to the City highlighted that the right to the city movement has experienced increased engagement in the institutional process of global networks regarding the aspirations of the new agenda.
- Eugene Zapata-Garesche of the 100+ Resilient Cities Program commented that mayors of small cities had no contact with, or perhaps even interest in the SDGs and NUA. He asked how can these goals be made relevant for them, since all urban areas have to report on them and should use them proactively? He identified three possible ways: 1) Make people/constituents understand that local/city decisions will impact the world, 2) Provide the city government with a dedicated team and office to follow these issues, 3) Goals have to be legal and achievable.

Preparing for the U20 in Buenos Aires

- The U20 process, a new diplomatic initiative starting from the city governments of Paris and Buenos Aires to embrace the leading cities in G20 countries, has generated support from the multi-lateral development banks, the C-40 organization, and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) representing cities working to mitigate the impacts of climate change.
- The City Government of Buenos Aires is encouraging the organization of an “extended week” that will include an all-day International Conference on “Building Knowledge for the Metropolis” on October 24 at the School of

Architecture, Design, and Urban Planning of the University of Buenos Aires (FADU-UBA). This event, organized by FADU-UBA, the New School, the City Government, and the U20, will be followed by an official U20 open event on October 29 and a closed session of mayors the following day.

- Susan Parnell posed the question, “What must the U20 think about?” Answering her own question she proposed “prioritizing and localizing SDG 11 and the NUA so they can trigger and compound impacts”.
- Francisco Mugaburu from the City Government of Buenos Aires stated, “We are not creating a new engagement group”.
- Guillermo Cabrera, Dean of the School of Architecture, Design, and Urban Planning, commented, “I think that if we can all do the same thing all at the same time, we can make some change that is worthwhile.”

A Proposal for Action: A Short List

1. In order to strengthen existing forms of training to develop new urban practices, it is proposed to establish an international commission to assess the training of urban professionals and to identify ways in which urban training can be made more relevant to the urgent needs of 21st century cities. This should include proposals for curriculum reform.
2. Meetings should be held with urban professional associations to discuss ways to encourage new forms of urban practice.
3. An assessment should be made of existing funds to support various forms of needed urban innovation and, if needed, a new international fund should be established for this purpose.
4. Cities should be encouraged to experiment with new solutions and to work closely with local academic institutions to evaluate their effectiveness and impacts.
5. A network of partner organizations with particular expertise and research experience, such as those who worked on the campaign for an urban SDG, should be convened to support cities’ efforts to implement the NUA and SDGs.
6. A workshop should be convened to consider alternative paths to improve the collection, storage, dissemination, and analysis of urban data.



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Cities and the Global Agenda: On the Road to the U20 in Buenos Aires

Parallel event to the HLPF

July 13, 2018

The High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will meet at UN headquarters in New York from July 9 to 20, 2018 to conduct a review of progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. This meeting is expected to attract thousands of development specialists from around the world. This review will include a review of Objective 11, the cities objective, which will take place for two hours on Wednesday morning, July 11. Speakers will include representatives of specific countries and other organizations.

The New School will host a full day conference on “Cities and the Global Agenda: On the Road to the U20 in Buenos Aires” co-organized with MISTRA Urban Futures, the University of Buenos Aires, and the Global Platform for the Right to the City. This event will be held in the Theresa Lang Student Center (which seats 220 people) at 55 West 13th Street and consist of an introductory session and three sessions in the form of panels, as indicated below:

Program with Speakers

Introductory Remarks 9:30 AM - 10 AM

Michael Cohen, Professor, The New School
Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat

Panel 1. 10 AM - 11:30 AM: Assessing the Assessments

Chair: **Sakiko Fukuda-Parr**, Professor, The New School

Speakers: **Eduardo Moreno**, Director of Research and Capacity Development, UN-Habitat

David Simon, Director, Mistra Urban Futures, Chalmers University,
Gothenburg
William Cobbett, Director, Cities Alliance

Discussant: **Michael Cohen**
Coffee Break

Panel 2: 11:45AM-1:15 PM: New Urban Practices to Achieve a New Global Agenda

Chair: **Margarita Gutman**, Professor, The New School

Speakers: **Martin Motta**, Director, Slum-Upgrading Program, Villa 20,
Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad, Buenos Aires
Antonella Contin, Professor, Politecnico di Milano
Jeb Brugmann, Vice-President, Solution Development and
Innovation, 100 Resilient Cities Program

Discussant: **Jan Riise**, Mistra Urban Futures
Lunch Break

Panel 3: 2:15-3:45 PM Building Capacity for Implementing Global Goals

Chair: **Guillermo Cabrera**, Dean, Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urban
Planning, University of Buenos Aires

Speakers: **Susan Parnell**, Professor of Urban Geography, University of Cape
Town
Horacio Corti, Defensor General del Poder Judicial, City Government
of Buenos Aires
Nelson Saule, Polis Institute, Brazil

Discussant: **Eugene Zapata-Garesche**, Managing Director, Latin America and the
Caribbean, 100 Resilient Cities Program

Coffee Break

Panel 4: 4:00 - 5:30 PM Identifying Strategies for the U20, Closing Panel

Chair: **Michael Cohen**

Speakers: **Francisco Mugaburu**, Director-General, International Relations and
Cooperation, City Government of Buenos Aires
Guillermo Cabrera