

## **Urbanization and communities**

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The intervention of Frédéric Saliez provided a few elements of contexts about urbanization, explained the approach adopted by UN-Habitat, and reflected on the potential contribution of religions in achieving the urban dimension of the Agenda 2030.

He introduced the perceived positive and negative consequences of urbanization, highlighting the collective economic and social benefit associated with the transition from a rural to an urban way of life. Urbanization is about economy of scale as well as benefits agglomeration, among which the very existence of communities.

While urbanization, in its various forms, has existed for several thousands of years, it has taken a new dimension with industrial revolution. The United Nations consider that in 2019, approximately half of the world population currently live in urban areas. This proportion was about only 2% before industrial revolution; and is projected to reach 70% or more in a predictable future. Africa and Asia are the regions of the world where the urban population is expanding the most rapidly.

Frédéric Saliez emphasized the radical transformation of societies that comes with urbanization. At the scale of history, urbanization is a one-in-a-time opportunity and a movement of which we have not yet measured all consequences.

If urbanization is an opportunity, it does not come without challenges. It collectively creates economic prosperity but can also be associated to an increase of social inequalities. While it is associated to air pollution, climate change, degradation of ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, it also remains the best way to reduce our collective footprint by making use of public transport, adopting efficient heating and cooling systems, protecting natural areas against urban sprawl, making a better use of natural resources.

The urban way of life is also an opportunity for a wider access to education, for social and political emancipation, for being exposed to a wider diversity of people, religion, culture, opinions. However, such new freedom comes with new responsibilities, it comes with the risks of a wider social divide, the risk of losing collective meanings, the risk of losing the protective environment of families. It comes with the illusion of consumerism and individualism.

The bottom is that there is no easy answer to urbanization. Urbanization is a very powerful transformative force. A movement that can lead to positive or negative outcomes depending on how it is driven.

Much of the challenges associated with urbanization are in fact a direct or indirect consequence of a too rapid, too chaotic, uncontrolled urban development. While it would likely not be possible to halt urbanization, it is possible to reduce its speed and, more importantly drive it to the right direction.

A major innovation of the Agenda 2030 has been to create specific goal for cities, goal 11 – “Make cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable”. Within this

framework, urbanization is considered both a context – the place where transformation happens, and a policy area in itself.

Goal 11 is therefore both an entry-point and a cross-cutting dimension for many of the other goals.

Addressing the urban challenge calls for policy coherence and the need to build vertical and horizontal systems of collaboration. It requires to work both vertically – across multi-level governance layers – and horizontally – across thematic sectors.

Goal #11 comes with 10 specific targets that are the result of a complex political negotiation process. If these 10 targets do certainly not cover all the complexity of urban systems, they represent 10 opportunities for positive change, and 10 areas that are actively monitored. While they should be addressed in an integrated way, it is interesting to look at progress made in their achievement.

The prevalence of slums is perhaps the most dramatic expression of the urban challenge. Between the year 2000 and 2014, it is estimated that the proportion of urban population living in slum-like conditions was reduced from 28 to 23%. However, this is only a proportion. In absolute terms, the number of people living in slums has increased by 76 million over the same time-period and continues to increase every day.

Land use efficiency: The latest report shows with compelling evidence that cities are spatially expanding at a faster rate than that of population growth. Urban sprawl is directly associated to unsustainable development patterns.

Another critical aspect relates to the availability and accessibility of public spaces. Observations indicate that the share of land allocated to open public spaces in most cities is insufficient and does not show any sign of improvement. There are also rising concerns for crime and safety in public spaces.

These questions may seem technical, but density and the availability of public space have direct consequences on the vitality of urban life, on the way communities may or may not interact at the neighbourhood level. Reports further indicates that participation of civil society in urban affairs remains very low, despite its known value for nurturing and strengthening good governance and social cohesion.

The approach adopted by UN-Habitat is built along the same line of thought. It is guided by the objective of maximizing the positive dimension of urbanization while providing support to the people and sectors that are negatively affected by urban transformation.

The recently adopted strategic plan of UN-Habitat contains four “drivers for change” which are the areas of urban planning and design, urban policy and legislation, urban finance and urban governance. Working on these four drivers is essential to achieve any structural long-lasting impact on the identified “domains of change”.

Religion and faith-based organizations can support the realization of the urban dimension of Agenda 2030 in several ways.

A first and immediate contribution, which is already happening in a variety of context, has to do with the social role of religious organizations. Where urbanization has failed to deliver its promises, where the state remains desperately absent, religious organizations are often the only remaining structures that support the people that suffer from the ruthless expansion of cities.

Beside this social role, religious organizations can have a more structural influence by providing guiding principles and value that can help drive urbanization towards its more positive outcomes. While urban planning and design are not politically neutral, faith-based organizations can contribute to the urban debate on what is fair and what is not, what is just and what is not in the organization of cities. Given their intimate connection with people's identity, they have furthermore an important role to play in promoting social cohesion and tolerance to cultural diversity.

Finally, faith-based organization, through their institutional network and their presence at community level, can play a decisive role in monitoring urban living conditions and the achievement of agreed goals and targets. They can promote a better understanding of urban development dynamics, their challenges and opportunities, and encourage civil society participation to urban decision-making.

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