

Editorial

The Unfinished

Agenda –

Turning the Tide in Asian Urban Development

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In May 19 - 21, 2014 the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific called a meeting in Bangkok of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development to discuss how ASEAN should prepare for meeting the goals of the UN post 2015 Development Agenda. The Thai representative listed the social sectors where joint action will be urgently needed:

- Poverty Reduction
- Addressing Social Inequality
- Disaster Risk Reduction and Preparedness
- Access to Universal Healthcare

In a recent joint publication by UNDP Asia-Pacific Regional Centre and United Nations Human Settlement Program UN-Habitat Bangkok “Addressing Urban Poverty, Inequality, and Vulnerability in a Warming World” the same issues were presented. The unanimity of goals is as striking as it is challenging. Will Thailand and its ASEAN neighbors be able to take the lead in introducing legislation and follow up in daily practice on implementing necessary measures that will turn the tide in Asian urban development?

The publication mentioned above (Asia-Pacific Issue Brief Series on Urbanization and Climate Change No.1) presents a holistic and interactive picture of the present situation:

The proportion of the poor living in urban areas has been seen to increase in developing countries of the Asia-Pacific region with urbanization leading to increased poverty and deprivation most visibly evidenced by growing slum and

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squatter settlements. UN-Habitat estimates that there are 850 million urban dwellers living in slums and slum-like conditions globally with 500 million living in the Asia-Pacific region, comprising about one third of the total population.

While cities all over the world are seen as engines for growth and development, this growth has not according to the brief, trickled down to the poor. In spite of the fact that urbanization in countries like China has created a large new middle class the number of people living in poverty has continued to increase throughout the region. And there is the risk that the new consumerist lifestyle will create an environment for cultural and social poverty.

Natural disasters as the results of climate change have worsened the situation for the vulnerable urban poor who mostly live in high-risk, low-lying coastal areas or along river banks susceptible to flooding. It is a sad fact that in this the last year of the UN Decade for Sustainable Development unplanned and unsustainable city growth has increased the vulnerability of large parts of our city populations.

There is an emerging understanding that we will not be able to solve the challenges of rapid urbanization on a global scale without correspondingly large scale cooperation. Four days before the meeting in Thailand of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development on May 14 -15, I had the privilege of attending the 4th Partnership for Change's Oslo conference with the theme "Turning the Tide – Methods for Lasting Social Impact."

The Partnership for Change organization was established in Oslo in 2011 as a meeting place for concerned individuals and organizations working collectively toward creating social innovation and change toward a sustainable future. At the May 2014 Oslo conference, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee, Liberian peace activist, women's rights advocate and social worker joined, Kjell Magne Bondevik, former Prime Minister of Norway, now Founder and President of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, and other international activists, intellectuals, artists, and social entrepreneurs in seeking common ground for joint action.

A special session was set aside to discuss the Shared Societies project initiated by the prestigious Club de Madrid, exploring new ways toward co-existence and developing shared social responsibility. Other sessions included Action for the Planet-Now – Promoting Intergenerational Dialogues and sessions dealing with support for democratic change in Myanmar.

A special cooperative program for Myanmar set up by Partnership for Change and supported by its Social Innovation Fund included projects for community development in the Inlet region of Shan State, a program of vocational training, and environmental and human rights programs. In this project a culture and arts program involving support for the performing arts and the establishment of a House of Literature and the Arts in Yangon has been designed for Partnership for Change by our Editorial Board member Geir Johnson.

For more than a decade the Urban Research Plaza has been honoring an agenda for change that has given decisive impulses for turning the tide in urban development not least in the Asia-Pacific region. This agenda is born of a shared vision and shared belief in the necessity of a creative agency propelling sustainable city development. We should now be reaching toward fulfilling the UN post 2015 goals with special attention to urban cultural and social needs.

Time has come to explore new avenues of initiating partnerships for entering into a new phase of community building and urban change through a process of recognizing opportunities, mobilizing people and resources, and seeking involvement from diverse and non-traditional partners.

Our JUCR agenda has been born from a belief in partnership and participation in research and urban activism just as our annual URP March Forum will continue to function as a meeting place of researchers, artists, art educators, city planners and administrators alike.

It has already made it possible to seek, communicate, and implement creative solutions to the issues listed above. We invite all contributors and readers to join our agenda.