

# PLANNING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: POLICY DIRECTIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

*Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements 2009* assesses the effectiveness of urban planning as a tool for dealing with the unprecedented challenges facing 21st-century cities and for enhancing sustainable urbanization. There is now a realization that, in many parts of the world, urban planning systems have changed very little and are often contributors to urban problems rather than functioning as tools for human and environmental improvement. Against this background, the Global Report's central argument is that, in most parts of the world, current approaches to planning must change and that a new role for urban planning in sustainable urban development has to be found.

The Global Report argues that future urban planning must take place within an understanding of the factors shaping 21st-century cities, including:

- the environmental challenges of climate change and cities' excessive dependence on fossil fuel-powered cars;
- the demographic challenges of rapid urbanization, rapid growth of small- and medium-sized towns and an expanding youth population in developing nations, and, in developed nations, the challenges of shrinking cities, ageing and the increasing multicultural composition of cities;
- the economic challenges of uncertain future growth and fundamental doubts about market-led approaches that the current global financial crisis have engendered, as well as increasing informality in urban activities;
- increasing socio-spatial challenges, especially social and spatial inequalities, urban sprawl and unplanned peri-urbanization; and
- the challenges and opportunities of increasing democratization of decision-making as well as increasing awareness of social and economic rights among ordinary people.

An important conclusion of the Global Report is that, even though urban planning has changed relatively little in most countries since its emergence about 100 years ago, a number of countries have adopted some innovative approaches in recent decades. These include strategic spatial planning, use of spatial planning to integrate public-sector functions, new land regularization and management approaches, participatory processes and partnerships at the neighbourhood level, and planning for new and more sustainable spatial forms such as compact cities and new urbanism. However, in many developing countries, older forms of master planning have persisted. Here, the most obvious problem with this approach is that it has failed to accommodate the ways of life of the majority of inhabitants in rapidly growing and largely poor and informal cities, and has often directly contributed to social and spatial marginalization.

There are a number of key messages emerging from the Global Report, all of them contributing towards finding a new role for urban planning in sustainable urban development. One important message is that governments should increasingly take on a more central role in cities and towns in order to lead development initiatives and ensure that basic needs are met. This, to a large extent, is a result of the current global economic crisis, which has exposed the limits of the private sector – in terms of its resilience and future growth as well as the ability of the 'market' to solve most urban problems. It is clear that urban planning has an important role to play in assisting governments to meet the urban challenges of the 21st century.

As the world becomes numerically more urban, it is important that governments accept urbanization as a positive phenomenon and an effective means for improving access to services, as well as economic and social opportunities. If

urban planning is to play a more effective role as a consequence of this policy orientation, countries need to develop overall national urban strategies.

With respect to the reconfiguration of planning systems, the Global Report's message is that careful attention should be given to identifying opportunities that can be built on, as well as factors that could lead to the subversion and corruption of planning institutions and processes. In particular, urban planning needs to be institutionally located in a way that allows it to play a role in creating urban investment and livelihood opportunities through responsive and collaborative processes as well as coordination of the spatial dimensions of public-sector policies and investment.

To ensure that participation is meaningful, socially inclusive and contributes to improving urban planning, a number of minimum conditions need to be satisfied, including: a political system that allows and encourages active citizen participation; a legal basis for local politics and planning that specifies how the outcomes of participatory processes will influence plan preparation and decision-making; and mechanisms for socially marginalized groups to have a voice in both representative politics and participatory planning processes.

The Global Report identifies a number of promising trends for bridging the green and brown agendas, including:

- the development of sustainable energy in order to reduce cities' dependence on non-renewable energy sources;
- the improvement of eco-efficiency in order to enable the use of waste products to satisfy urban energy and material needs;
- the development of sustainable transport in order to reduce the adverse environmental impacts of dependence on fossil fuel-driven cars; and
- the development of 'cities without slums' so as to address the pressing challenges of poor access to safe drinking water and sanitation as well as vulnerability to natural hazards.

The report recommends a three-step process for effectively responding to urban informality: first, recognizing the positive role played by urban informal development; second, adopting revisions to policies, laws and regulations to facilitate informal-sector operations; and, third, strengthening the legitimacy of planning and regulatory systems. Two aspects are particularly important in this process: embracing alternatives to the forced eviction of slum dwellers and informal entrepreneurs, for example regularization and upgrading of informally developed areas; and the strategic use of planning tools such as construction of trunk infrastructure, guided land development and land readjustment.

Strategic spatial plans linked to infrastructure development can promote more compact forms of urban expansion focused around public transport. In this context, linking major infrastructure investment projects and mega-projects to strategic planning is crucial. An infrastructure plan is a key element of such strategic spatial plans. In this, transport–land-use links are the most important ones and should take precedence, while other forms of infrastructure, including water and sanitation trunk infrastructure, can follow.

Most urban planning systems do not have monitoring and evaluation as an integral part of their operations. The Global Report suggests that urban planning systems should integrate monitoring and evaluation as permanent features, along with clear indicators that are aligned with plan goals, objectives and policies. Urban plans should also explicitly put in plain words their monitoring and evaluation philosophies, strategies and processes. The outcomes and impacts of many large-scale plans are difficult to evaluate because of the many influences and factors that are at play in cities over time. For this reason, it makes more sense to focus on site plans, subdivision plans and neighbourhood plans, all of which are smaller in scale and more conducive to monitoring and evaluation.

A final message of the Global Report is that curricula in many urban planning schools need to be updated. This is particularly the case in many developing and transitional countries where curricula have not been revised to keep up with current challenges and issues. Planning schools should embrace innovative planning ideas, including the ability to engage in participatory planning, negotiation and communication, understanding the implications of rapid urbanization and urban informality, and the ability to bring climate change considerations into planning concerns. In addition, it should be recognized that planning is not 'value-neutral' – for this reason, urban planning education should include tuition in ethics, the promotion of social equity and the social and economic rights of citizens, as well as of sustainability.

The Global Report is published at a time when there is keen global interest in the revival of urban planning, within the context of sustainable urbanization. I believe the report will not only raise awareness of the role of urban planning in striving for sustainable cities, but also offer directions for the reform of this very important tool.



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