Brief for GSDR – 2016 Update

Revisiting the 'Urban Age' Declaration

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Introduction

The United Nations' contemporary 'urban age' declaration is well known to researchers and institutions across diverse disciplines. In 2007, UN-Habitat and UNFPA boasted that the world is more urban than ever before, with over 3.3 billion people residing in urban areas (UNFPA, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2007). Despite its universal appeal and credulous acceptance, this urban age thesis has recently been revisited by scholars concerned with the appropriateness of current methodologies to measure the degree of urbanization patterns as well as its present state (Brenner and Schmid, 2012; Cohen, 2004; Seto et al, 2010; Seto and Shepherd, 2009).

While the UN began collecting data on the global population since 1951, it was not until 1986 that the organization began to speculate and forecast an inevitable urban future. The prediction that more people will soon be living in urban areas than in the rural periphery was repeated in the following decades, and continues to date (Brenner and Schmid, 2012)

Present in Context

This mantra of urbanization as the diffusion of people into agglomeration settlements is rooted in early postwar attempts by scholars to calculate the urban population. Since the beginning, researchers were troubled with the question of appropriateness of scale and spatial boundaries, given 'the relentless dynamics of sociospatial restructuring…that began since the nineteenth century'. To reconcile this spatial problems, researchers created the urban population threshold (UPT), which can be conceptualized as '$U=P_c/P_t$' (U = urbanization; P_c= population of cities; P_t = total population). This conceptualization of the urban population as something that could be counted was appropriated to the national and even regional level, in a map produced by UN-DESA in 1969.

As a result, the UN's present methods to measure urbanity through population count is an epistemologically identical and empirically unjustified equivalent of a system conceived half a century ago (Brenner and Schmid, 2012).[1]

"Statistical artifact and theoretically incoherent"

Current techniques deployed by the UN to measure the severity of global urbanization has been put under question by Neil Brenner of Harvard University and Christian Schmid at ETH Zurich (Brenner and Schmid, 2012, 2015). Their contention lie with the organization's 'state-tistic' methodology that depends on individual countries to demarcate its urban-rural boundaries. It is not difficult to imagine possible reasons for this: it could be interpreted as the UN's recognition of state sovereignty, given the political nature of boundaries.

Yet, it is exactly this respect for sovereignty that has produced an 'urban age' paradigm that Brenner and Schmid critique as a "statistical artifact". In the 2001 *World Urbanization Prospect*, 109 UN member states

[1] Data used in Brenner and Schmid 2012 publication do not take into consideration data released in the 2014 edition of the World Urbanization Prospect.

used 'administrative criteria as the sole or primary basis for their urban definition', and led a certain municipality or locality to be considered as nonurban based solely on this administrative enclave. Similarly, 34% of member states used population (UPT) as the 'sole or primary criterion' for its measurement, which varied from 200 in Iceland to 10,000 in Benin and Italy.

This practice is further complicated by countries that change their urban classifications. Highly populated countries such as China and India can tip the scale and dramatically change the global urban population. 'China's level of urbanization in 1999 could have been 24%, 31% or 73% depending on which of three official definitions of urban populations was used' (Satterthwaite, 2010). Similarly, India uses the following troublesome metric to categorize urban areas, requiring that they meet the following criteria:

i. A minimum population of 5,000
ii. At least 75 per cent of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and
iii. A density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km

(Brenner, 2015; India Census, 2011)

The major red flags that arise here, is why exactly it has to be "75 per cent", and why it can only include the "male" population. While India is represented as a mainly rural nation, it could be classified as urban if its categorization for populations exceeding 5,000 people were consistent across settlements (Satterthwaite, 2010).

As an additional layer of concern, 38% of data used in the *2001 World Urbanization Prospect* were more than 8 years old. The age of the census data used for global reporting also vary considerably by country and do not consistently reflect a particular year or point in time (Brenner and Schmid, 2012).

Sustainable Development Goals: New Opportunity

While demographic data relating to urbanization at the regional and global scales are widely available, there has been little focus on the "interactions between the social and the physical dimensions of urbanization and the bidirectional feedback between urbanization and global change". Much of our understanding on urbanization as the conversation of land for urban advantages, and is based on specific studies targeting concrete boundaries—cities or metropolitan areas—and less understood on the global scale (Seto, Sanchez-Rodriquez, and Fragkias, 2013). It is necessary to find the commonalities and differences in urbanization processes across and intra-state, given the various impacts of urbanization on local and global environment (Seto et al, 2013; Guneralp and Seto, 2013).

To continue with current methodologies would be to discount the effect of urbanization on the environment—the urbanization of rural land, the transformation of indigenous land into tar sands, and among a host of other issues. It also means that the international community is ignoring the facilitative effects of inherent definitions and classifications on discourse and subsequent responses from the local to international level.

The new Sustainable Development Goals offer a unique opportunity to revisit this 'urban age' declaration, in order to form a more complete and accurate understanding of the necessary conditions for sustainable development. This could be achieved by creating a holistic approach that takes into consideration the following points:

1. The urban and urbanization are theoretical categories.
2. The urban is not a universal form but a historical process.
3. The sociospatial dimensions of urbanization are polymorphic, variable and dynamic.

4. Urbanization involves both concentration and extension.
5. Urbanization has become a planetary phenomenom.

(Brenner and Schmid, 2012)

Moving Forward

Given the longstanding history of usages and its permeability across agencies and programs, this process will require time and resources, more so than in the past. This question of proper classification has long been debated within UN agencies, although no satisfactory conclusions have been reached regarding best methods to proceed. As rightly mentioned by Brenner and Schmid in their publication, the UN has provided invaluable data to help conceptualize various segments of the urban. There contentions, though, lie with institutional methodologies that inaccurately measures the 'urban age', and the subsequent impact it has in framing scholarly work and programs (Brenner and Schmid, 2012).

With this year's theme, "Ensuring that no one is left behind", a revisit of the topic proposed in this policy paper will provide a fitting opportunity to ensure that every person has fair opportunity to be counted and included in national urban census, and have equal access to the policy attention they are entitled to.

A re-articulated urban tapestry will equip policymakers and civil society with better tools to address current and emerging urban challenges, by involving territories that have historically be unrecognized in the urban conversation. This would require a coordinated effort among member states and international organizations to revisit this question with a new lens, and determine whether new forms and methods of classifications of the urban are necessary given new and emerging insights, and if so, what needs to be developed to resolve these conflicts.

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