HLPF 2020

Accelerated Action and Transformative Pathways: Realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

Theme 6: Bolstering local action to accelerate implementation

Co-convenors: UN-DESA, UN-Habitat, UNODC, UNECE and UNESCAP

Corresponding GSDR Entry point: Urban and peri-urban development

Specific lens: COVID-19 impact and responses

Reponses provided by
        Luigi Cuna
        Senior Evaluator
        Council of Europe Development Bank
        luigi.cuna@coebank.org

Please provide written inputs to the following questions:

1. How can transparent urban planning and design help in creating inclusive access to housing, basic services and infrastructure, environmental sustainability, improved air and water quality, and healthier communities?

> Based on my experience, I would like to underline two features of urban planning and design processes that are crucial for promoting peaceful, inclusive and green societies.
>
> The first feature concerns the **strategic and long-term vision** embedded in urban planning. In my evaluation work, I have come across housing and social development programs that were driven by a strong social rationale but whose implementation was characterized by a narrow and short-term horizon. Said projects improved the housing conditions of beneficiary households and individuals in the short run; however, these operations were not sufficient to achieve a long-term sustainable impact. This was mostly because they lacked a holistic approach, integrated into the broader directions of human, economic, social and territorial development. I also came across projects inspired by the aspiration of achieving inclusive social and economic development; they however lacked social acceptance, policy backing and financial resources. They thus remained isolated one-off initiatives.
>
> Urban planning and design do not only shape the physical fabric of metropolitan areas, cities and villages. Urban planning shapes the concept of society we want to create. Ensuring access to safe, affordable and safe housing is a long term objective that can only be achieved by adopting a holistic and integrated vision by looking at multiple themes/sectors as well as territories (rural, peri-urban and rural areas). This may require taking courageous (and often unpopular) political and social decisions. They require

leadership skills, awareness raising and advocacy work to increase social acceptance and get buy-in from key stakeholders. They need to be accompanied by a sound and transparent financing plan, clear objectives and successful partnerships including with actors operating in the social and human development field.

The second feature concerns the word 'transparency' used in this question. Transparency entails that urban plan objectives remain clear and accessible to all population groups. At the same time, transparency means that procedures are adopted for ensuring **participation** of concerned citizens and population groups (including those that are at risk of being left behind). There might be a need for rethinking the role of urban planning processes, their standards and the tools in order to make them more participatory, capable of combining technical features with the evidence-based analysis and identification of long-term human, social, environmental and territorial aspirations. Participation needs to be nurtured by the multi-disciplinary nature of urban planning, sound analytical work (see below) and credible data to inform and monitor the planning agenda. Transparency also means that feedback is provided to competing proposals by articulating (possibly in an evidence-based fashion) why a certain direction has been taken instead of another. Through participatory processes, policy makers may have a better visibility and understanding of the trade-offs and the tensions that may materialize around proposed initiatives and their impact on the territories and people. Participatory processes can challenge urban planning proposals by putting on the table questions such as: who will benefit from the envisaged changes in the urban environment? Have the needs of men and women been duly taken into account? Do proposals respond to the key needs, aspirations and objectives of children and young people including those living in low-income households?

2. How can transparent urban and territorial planning and development support economic growth which is diverse, balanced, inclusive, safe, green and sustainable?

In the short term, it is difficult to promote economic growth processes that combine simultaneously diversity, social balance, inclusiveness, safety, green growth and sustainability. Each constituent of inclusive growth may require specific policy and technical instruments that should be implemented in a way that is **coherent and integrated with other related relevant policy directions** in the sphere of education, welfare, health, employment, etc. In the short term, the various constituents of sustainable and inclusive growth may have to be linked to various (and sometimes competing) elements and initiatives of urban and territorial planning. Some of these elements may not be explicitly linked to economic growth and may instead prioritize social or environmental protection outcomes. Trade-offs need be acknowledged and, if possible, anticipated by putting in place mitigating measures (in case of negative spillover effects) or complementary measures (in case of positive spillover effects on which synergies can be developed). For example, trade-offs may surface between the objective of reaching small improvements for a larger number of beneficiaries or promoting more visible changes to a much smaller group of households, individuals and

social groups; in the specific case of housing interventions, choices need to be made between the objective of promoting adequateness of housing solutions (defined in terms of space, standards, accessibility to services, employment, education and social development opportunities) or instead give priority to affordability considerations (i.e. defined in terms of cost of construction, rent levels, etc.).

In order to contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth, urban planning needs to be informed and accompanied by **independent analytical, research and evaluation work** grounded on credible evidence. Such work should explore the various layers of the urban environment and its surrounding territory, including the human and social ones. Analytical work should underpin urban and territorial planning. During design, independent analytical work can challenge initial assumptions; they can identify and understand vulnerable groups, the cause of their exclusion from economic growth and the extent to which they can be involved in specific urban planning initiatives by proving evidence on the needs of elderly people, children, people with disabilities, etc., and identifying areas for intervention. Analytical work can help operationalizing the concept of 'sustainability' or inclusive growth that otherwise is at risk of remaining vague and elusive. In line with what is discussed later on, the quality and added-value of the analytical work that underpins urban planning can be improved by generating and accessing appropriate and credible data. After urban planning operations reach maturity, these operations **must be evaluated**. Undertaken in a participatory manner and grounded in sound data and evidence, evaluations can play a key role in informing policy makers on the degree of success of the evaluated initiatives, the adjustments that need to be introduced and the lessons to be retained for future similar activities. Evaluations can catalyze and use in a meaningful manner the data various sources; they can explore and point out direct and indirect, intended and unintended effects, trade-off, tensions and spill-over effects.

3. Which kinds of policies, plans, governance, investments and partnerships can help create transparent, inclusive, healthier and safer cities and communities that are able to withstand destabilizing effects of negative social phenomena, such as corruption, drug and illicit firearms trafficking and terrorism, unregulated migration, lack of access to public goods, widespread public protests etc.?

Today's context leaves space for **innovative** policies, investment and partnerships: urban environments are increasingly complex, some social challenges are growing while new and unpredictable events affect the life of women and men in their communities. At the same time, budget constraints are more and more severe for a growing number of countries. In such context, innovative practices must be tested for the transformation

of urban systems founded on a strong result-orientation framework, coupled with the commitment to optimize available resources.

Creativity is required to deal with such complex scenarios; plans need to combine ambitious (but clear!) objectives with scarce resources (especially if they entail construction, regeneration or reconstruction initiatives). Local and national governments as well as the international community will have to **experiment** with various sets of policies, financing plans (such as social impact bonds), partnerships (including partnering with private sector stakeholders) and projects. Such operations need to be constantly monitored and **evaluated** in order to assess their final performance in an evidence-based manner, identify lessons and apply corrective measures.

National development banks and international financiers are likely to play an important role as they are in a privileged position to promote access to funding, scaling-up successful experiences and promote compliance with national and international standards and regulations (including in terms of consultation with public groups, enforcement of anti-corruption standards, etc.). In recent years, I have been directly involved in the successful exchanges that took place between the Office of Evaluation of the Council of Europe Development Bank, where I work, and the UNECE Housing and Land Management Unit. In several initiatives organized by UNECE, the knowledge generated by CEB in evaluations focused on housing projects/programs targeted to low-income people and population groups at risk of social exclusion has been bought to the attention of international, national and local stakeholders. UNECE thus promoted exchange of knowledge on the key findings and lessons emerging from the evaluation of CEB-funded projects and programs on housing affordability, participation of low-income population, targeting of migrants, displaced persons and refugees, use of evaluation approaches for analysis of social phenomena, role of data and evidence for policy makers, etc. The CEB Office of Evaluation has been actively involved in sharing relevant evaluation knowledge with the academic and research community. Such **multi-disciplinary exchanges** between the evaluation community, sector experts, policy makers and international financiers and organizations need to be strengthened and continued in order to bring new perspectives to the debate and the understanding of the complex themes of urban planning, housing development and social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Key word: creativity, experimentation, evaluation, partnership

4. What is the role of science, technology, communication and innovation in the transformation to sustainable and equitable urban systems, which also incorporate and address informality and help overcome the digital divide?

Innovation, communication and technology have an important role in promoting the **generation, access and use of data**. Data are needed for understanding urban system

dynamics and their challenges; they can be used to articulate, in an evidence-based manner, conclusions about performance and results. In order to adequately inform urban planning initiatives, it is important to identify the type of data needed as well as the instruments and processes that can make them accessible. Special attention should be given to the disaggregation of data (for example by gender, population groups, etc.) in order to ensure that research, evaluation and analytical work undertaken in the context of urban planning processes can capture the living context of those at risk of being left behind. Technology, communication and innovation can improve access to information around the planned objectives and results of urban planning process. Moreover, information communication technology can be used in the context of participatory initiatives undertaken during design of urban plans. There might be a need to build capacity in handling data sources and making them useful for urban planning.

From a scientific point of view, partnership with and input from human and social scientists are needed in the context of analytical and evaluation work in order to explore all relevant layers of the urban fabrics. Social and human sciences can inform urban planning with perspectives and analyzed focused on the needs and priorities of the groups at risk of social exclusion.

Key word: creation access and use of data, participatory techniques

5. How can local and national governments work together to ensure adequate resources are available for sustainable, inclusive, safe and transparent urban development? How can local government financing be made more predictable and robust?

National and local governments must work together to identify, formulate and implement coherent program and policy proposals inspired by integrated territorial development approaches. These proposals need to be convincing from both a financial and social perspective (i.e. showing a high social return to investment) and combine economic soundness with appropriate standards of design and implementation. In order to achieve this scenario, there might a need for preliminary investment in capacity building, knowledge transfer and strengthening of know-how especially at local level. Central government may play a key role in promoting the sharing of knowledge and experience from various local experiences on financing, technical solutions, social outputs, etc. Given their close proximity to citizens, local governments are in a strategic position to increase social buy-in and the acceptance of courageous development operations. There might be a/the need for nurturing institutional relationships among the different tiers of the government system in order to promote coordination and identify the synergies that are necessary to access financing sources. Moreover, special attention needs to be paid to the diversification of the financing sources and type of financing (short- vs long-term financing, government and private funding, etc.)

Key words: quality of policy proposals, institutional capacity

6. How can urban, peri-urban and rural areas be connected through infrastructure that is resilient and integrated with transparent, urban and territorial development plans, focusing on access, affordability, inclusivity, resource-efficiency and innovation?

> In recent years, we have experienced the rapid growth of urban agglomerations and the corresponding increase of housing prices. This created challenges in accessing dwellings that are affordable from an economic point of view but also adequate in terms of compatibility with the aspirations of low-income households and their need to access quality services, employment and education opportunities[1]. In some metropolitan areas, it is still possible to increase population density; housing developments in these contexts may, in principle, require less investment in connectivity and complementary new infrastructure (especially in the case of brownfield developments). In too dense metropolitan areas, developments may take place in the surrounding peri-urban and rural areas (through brownfield and greenfield development initiatives). There, urban planning needs to foresee complementary investment in strengthening existing infrastructure or developing new ones. In both contexts, a long term strategic view is necessary in order not to create or re-create patterns of segregation and physical isolation. Special care should be given to environmental aspects including ensuring access to infrastructure, strengthening countries' resilience to climate change and their commitment to the protection of the natural environment.

> The COVID-19 crisis will however challenge the appeal of living in densely-populated metropolitan areas.

> Households might prefer accommodation options that are compatible with the presence of green spaces and social distancing rather than densely populated areas. The connectivity paradigm needs to be strengthened and urban policies and operations must now encompass a broad-based and integrated territorial approach by zooming out their focus and scope. This creates challenges in terms of integrated planning, institutional governance for infrastructure management, partnership and coordination responsibilities. Policy actions undertaken by various local and national actors will have to be coherent in order to achieve common and long-term objectives of social, economic and environmental sustainability. Clean, sustainable and Innovative instruments of urban mobility will have to be experimented and rigorously evaluated before their replication and scaling-up.

> Key words: changing aspirations of households and individuals, integrated territorial development

---

[1] The Target 1 of SDG 11 refers to access to safe, adequate and affordable housing.