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Why Habitat III must reflect the century of the city

Words: Brian Mark Evans



If we are to meet the planning challenges of the 21st century, we must recognise and respond to global trends in migration and urbanisation, says Brian Mark Evans



After the hope of Vancouver 1976 and the worthy and wordy Istanbul 1996, the UN resolved on a more active approach to Quito in 2016. Dr Joan Clos, the former Barcelona mayor and Secretary-General of UN Habitat, has brought a mayoral mentality to the post to shift UN thinking from issues to action.

Clos has gone straight to what he knows best – the college of city mayors and leaders around the world, pragmatic politicians who operate on city visions with everyday issues.

The 21st century is the century of the city. Humankind's only hope is to find ways to enable more than 70 per cent of the global population to live sustainably in cities.

Clos has directed everyone preparing for Habitat III to stop thinking about urbanisation as some inevitable, technical or market-driven process and start thinking about the city. This is a change from process to project – living places. He also directed everyone to think about urbanisation and economy, social equity and environment, and to consider the governance needed to deliver this thinking.

“Humankind’s only hope is to find ways to enable more than 70% of the globe to live sustainably in cities”

Much of UN rhetoric is global, with an understandable focus on the megacities and informal settlement of the East and the South. But under Clos, preparations for Quito are thematic and regional. As principal writer for the regional report on the territory of the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), I reflected on trends in North America, the EU/EFTA, Russia and the former CIS, and the culturally disparate grouping of Turkey, Israel, and the Balkans.

This diverse region is home to 17 per cent of global population, has 45 per cent of global GDP and 66 per cent of fresh water. The boreal forest is greater in extent than the rain forest and its biosphere is growing. It sits in the temperate zone between the Tropic of Cancer and the Arctic Circle. It's the global 'Garden of Eden', yet politicians feign surprise that people wish to migrate here.

It has changed from the 'industrial city' to the 'knowledge city', exhibiting trends such as the clustering of cities into regional 'super-cities', with associated challenges of urban coalescence and concentration. The North's 'super-cities' are engines of the knowledge economy and the digital revolution and, far from provoking the 'death of distance', have fuelled concentration and inequality.

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Opportunities for work abound in the developing world, but the job is far from done in the developed North. Much has come out of the declarations ahead of Quito – let's see what emerges.

Brian Mark Evans is professor of urbanism and landscape at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, and lead author of UNECE's report to Habitat III, Towards a People-Centred, City-Focused and Integrated Approach to the New Urban Agenda (PDF)

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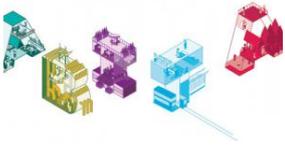
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