

Urbanisation of Africa is inevitable, and good

It's time to build sustainable cities, says UN Habitat

8 October 2012

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www.neurope.eu

To outsiders, the problems raised by increased urbanization in Africa seem insurmountable but the new Director for UN Habitat in Brussels, Jean- Christophe Adrian disagrees, saying building sustainable cities after many decades of poor or non-existent planning can be done, but it will take resources, time and most importantly a change in focus from the development community.

Adrian moved to Nairobi in 1988, joining Habitat a couple of years later, then he moved to Haiti before arriving in Brussels to start his new post two months ago.

The Kenyan capital is where the magnitude of Africa's change into urban societies can be seen, alongside the problems. The Kibera district, in Nairobi's South West is a popular destination for journalists and others to stand horrified by the squalor of an estimated quarter of a million people, living with precious little water and fewer amenities.

That generations have lived there, and in many places like it, with no sign of improvement, is a source of shame. Although urbanization is causing severe difficulties all over the world, and the struggle to reframe urban centres as sustainable cities is a serious challenge for even the most developed nations, it is in Africa where the issue is at its most raw.

Throughout the continent, millions are trapped in urban slums, trapped in grinding poverty, trapped with disease, without education. But are they trapped without hope? Are the problems of urbanization overwhelming?

"No," says Jean- Christophe Adrian, who can see a long and difficult path to a better future.

"For too long we have seen cities and urbanization as a result of development and as a negative result," he adds. "What we say is urbanization is development. That is where you create economies of scale, advancement in the economy, politics. It's all happening in urbanization. You can't have urbanization without development."

Adrian points out, "In Europe, nobody is questioning that we developed because we urbanized. If Europe is advanced it is because we urbanized, industrialized early on."

These remarks are a challenge to development orthodoxy, which has seen urbanization as a negative and one reason large development resources have been dispersed in rural areas was to try to keep people from migrating to cities.

"I'm not saying that you shouldn't support rural development, but you can't have rural development without cities," says Adrian, "Where are you going to sell your crops, for example?"

"How are we going to accommodate the inevitability of urban growth?" asks Adrian. "First we must have an overall national framework, and many countries do not have an urbanization policy, with instruments for financing policies.

“Secondly, it is the local authorities who are in charge, Mayors and their teams. Very often they are not properly equipped technically or financially. This needs to be focused on, supporting local authorities to help them plan. We must support national governments to make sustainable urbanization plans and the local government in implementing them.”

What does a plan need? “The planning process doesn’t require genius, we’ve had ‘master plans’ for a city before, where a couple of million dollars goes to a consultancy to write one. Where do these plans go? In a drawer and they stay there.

“How to make a better plan? You involve all the actors who are shaping the city, because they are the ones who will implement a plan,” he adds, noting, “There is a phenomenon that we are seeing, that slum dwellers are beginning to get organized. This is very important. They are also in a better position to manage their own development.”

Adrian says that the best way of dealing with large urban slums is to make a map. Often the slum districts are ‘off the charts’ of government and by using local communities a multi-layered map can be constructed to make the first step in planning, finding out exactly what the situation on the ground is.

These communities are “a tremendous resource, these people are real survivors, smart, intelligent and adaptable people,” says Adrian, believing that community built maps can show what is needed and help local authorities plan and improve services.

“A community can say that they will clear the garbage, but then you need the local authorities, because they will then need to dispose of the collected waste.”

Another result is that, by bringing in slum dwellers into mapping and community groups, they are also being brought in from the margins of political and economic life.

While the problems are enormous, as Adrian says, people are not going to stop moving to cities and that cities are growing even without newcomers and policymakers must accept the reality that this trend will continue.

The cities will grow and so will the number of people who live in urban slums, currently estimated at 850 million.

That’s one person in seven.

It’s time to change how we think about development and urbanization or these people, like their parents and grandparents, will be condemned by our inaction to a life full of squalor and devoid of hope.