

Presentation by George Martine in Plenary Session II of the INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON URBANIZATION AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: Opportunities & Challenges for Sustainability in an Urbanizing World. ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, TEMPE, ARIZONA, USA. OCTOBER 15-17, 2010

(text of oral presentation)

Over the course of these three days of meetings, you will be exposed to a wealth of information and useful suggestions about how to plan for sustainable cities. But most of it will focus on existing cities. What I want to emphasize is that we are only at the halfway point in our urban history. What we're seeing is just the tip of the iceberg: all the population that has amassed in urban areas from the beginning of history to this day will double by mid-century. The implications of this growth are mind-boggling.

Should we worry? On the contrary, I think we should celebrate the opportunity since cities are undoubtedly the places where the enormous economic, social and environmental problems of the world have a better chance to be solved. But, in order for cities to fulfill their potential, we need to have a firm grasp of the issues and get the policies right. Unfortunately, that is not what I see happening now in some of the regions most affected by urban growth. During the next few minutes, I will briefly review urban growth trends in order to establish some common ground with respect to this process and then focus on two major policy suggestions: the need to plan ahead for the needs of the poor, and the need to take a proactive stance towards the sustainable use of urban space.

The main message I wish to emphasize is that massive urban growth in developing countries is inevitable, whether we like it or not. This massive growth could be very positive or very negative, depending on if and how we prepare for it. What we require is a proactive and positive approach that will build on what cities have to offer. Unfortunately, too many policymakers are not only failing to plan ahead for urban growth in developing countries, but they also try to prevent it. According to a recent United Nations survey, the proportion of all developing countries having policies that try to retard urban growth has jumped from 44 to 74% over the last 30 years. They are particularly reluctant to absorb the poorest elements of the population. But in doing so, they are making it difficult not only for the poor, but for the viability and sustainability of the city itself.

Massive urbanization is a very recent phenomenon. We have records of cities since 3,500 BC, but, for many centuries, the proportion of the world's population living in towns and cities remained small. As late as 1850, only seven per cent of the world's total population was urban. But huge transformations have happened since then. We are now at 50% urban, and it's expected that this proportion will reach 70% in 2050.

However, the change in the proportion urban is not nearly as important as the growth in the *absolute* number of urban dwellers. Indeed, the volume of urban population has multiplied rapidly over time. Urban growth in the now-industrialized countries was much more gradual, and it will basically stabilize at

around 1.1 billion people. But the urban population of the developing world will literally explode in size. It has already multiplied by 70 times since 1850, and the numbers are expected to push past 5.2 billion in 2050. This is really what we need to worry about – the impending urban growth that we need to urgently prepare for. This is what I want to talk about here.

The urban growth yet to come is crucial not only because of its volume but also because of where it will happen – in low and middle income countries, most of it in Asia and Africa. These two regions are expected to experience a doubling of their urban population in only 30 years' time. Indeed, Asia and Africa will account for some 80% of all future urban growth, while developing regions will comprise 93% of the growth between now and 2050.

Where, and in what kind of cities, will this huge new urban population be found? Much is made of the mega-cities, that is, cities with more than 10 million people. Without a doubt, the number and importance of these huge dynamoes has increased. Nevertheless, megacities still make up only 9 per cent of the world's urban population. The middle row of cities, those having from 1 to 5 million people, has maintained around 13% of the world's total urban population. But it's the smaller cities, those of less than half a million people, that we have to focus on. They will continue to harbor half of all urbanites in the foreseeable future. In a territorial and political sense, they may be more flexible and easier to administer, but they often lack the technical and financial capacity to promote sustainable growth; in other words, they are the ones that may need the most help.

Another commonly misunderstood issue is the source of urban growth. Most people assume that the urban explosion in developing countries comes mostly from rural-urban migration. This is important because, on the basis of this belief, people often try to prevent rural-urban migration, assuming that this will stop urban growth. But the fact is that, more and more, urban growth is due to natural increase (that is, the difference between fertility and mortality) of the resident urban population. Of course, countries that previously had radical anti-migration policies, such as China and Vietnam, now have a much higher proportion of their growth coming from migration and from the reclassification of rural areas as urban. But the historical fact is that, over time, the natural increase of urbanites tends to become an ever larger proportion of all growth. In other words, instead of trying ineffectively to prevent migration, people should be preparing for inevitable growth.

Unfortunately, negative attitudes towards urban growth lead to negative policies. The most affected by this are the poor, who often make up half or more of the total urban population! In developing regions, the existing slum population makes up about one-third of the entire urban population. In Africa, this proportion is more than 60%. Then when we look at the two main sources of urban growth – migration and natural increase – the poor make up an even higher proportion of all new urbanites because they are more likely to migrate and because they have a higher fertility.

Failing to attend the needs of the largest social category – the poor – in a proactive manner leaves them to fend for themselves. That’s why they end up building their shacks in the worse possible places. The poor obviously suffer from this because they cannot gain access to what the city has to offer. But the city itself also suffers from it. Because the poor locate and expand in inadequate areas, it becomes much more difficult for the city to plan for infrastructure and services. The environment also suffers because these landless people may settle in watersheds, steep slopes, forested areas, floodplains and riverbanks, or in areas possessing rich biological diversity. As a result, the city can become ugly, difficult to administer, foul-smelling, and environmentally problematic. In such conditions, the city is unattractive to potential investors, leaving it behind in the globalized competition for investments. Without economic activity, it is unable to offer employment to its growing population and also lacks the tax base to promote improvements in infrastructure and services. In short, not dealing with the housing needs of the poor is the starting point for a vicious circle that is harmful, not only to the poor themselves, but also to the quality of life for the entire city.

What can be done to transform the impending urban explosion into a positive force for development? Given the negative impacts of letting the the largest social contingent fend for itself, I’d say that the first thing we need to do is attend to the housing needs of this large group. Improving access to land and housing for the poor requires both planning ahead and collaboration with neighborhood associations and organizations of the urban poor.

Once the political decision has been made to help the poor settle adequately in the city, the first thing to do is to ensure a supply of affordable land. This is not something that can be done once and for all; there is no magic bullet here. It requires considerable advance planning and constant attention to future needs. In sum, it requires vision and political will.

The functioning of urban land markets has to improve, despite the real and huge obstacles involved. In attending to the housing needs of the poor, we also have to be realistic. There is no way that full housing and services can be provided for all; but, minimally-serviced land that is purchased over time and on which people gradually improve their homes is eminently feasible.

Not dealing in a proactive way with the needs of the poor makes it much more difficult and more expensive to try to correct matters after slums have spread spontaneously. It also becomes almost impossible to provide people with minimal services or to improve the city’s infrastructure.

The other and simultaneous step in generating a win/win situation with regards to inevitable urban growth requires promoting what I call “the sustainable use of space”. From an environmental standpoint, it’s crucial that we start by avoiding the invasion of critical ecosystems and danger hotspots. Moreover, we need to minimize the size of the urban blot and to this end, we need to favor density and mass transport. Globally, the density of cities has been declining alarmingly because of sprawl.

One general rule that is increasingly applicable to all cities, but especially in developing countries, is the need to favor mass transport. Cars are tremendously expensive for cities in terms of land use, roads and parking spaces; they contribute to higher carbon emissions, promote sprawling american-style suburbanization and promote inequity because they inevitably discourage efficient mass transport systems. Cities are also being affected by what is now-called peri-urbanization, that is to say, sprawling and uncontrolled expansion, fueled by lack of regulations and by speculation in land. Ultimately, what we need is urban planning that is imbued with a systematic concern for sustainability and environmental values. Obviously, we need rules and regulations to do this but, in the face of massive urban growth, we also need proactive approaches that plan ahead for inevitable growth.

In short, what we need to do is to narrow the gap between theory and practice on urbanization. On the one hand, urbanization is essential for development and poverty reduction. From an economic standpoint, cities already account for more than 80% of GNP growth, and their comparative advantages will only increase with globalization. For that reason, poverty is, on the average, 30% higher in rural than urban areas. Social indicators are universally more favorable in cities, despite the growth of slums, because cities have more resources for social improvements. The advantages of proximity and scale make any social service cheaper and easier to provide in urban localities. Cities also provide people, especially women, with greater opportunities for social and political participation. In short, urbanization is, potentially, a powerful catalyst for development. From a demographic standpoint, fertility reduction is always faster in cities because urban areas offer few incentives for large families and because they offer better RH services. Finally, concentration is ultimately essential for environmental preservation in a world already burdened with some 6.8 billion people.

Yet, despite these clear advantages, as I noted earlier, the aversion of policymakers to urban growth seems to increase with urbanization and the needed proactive stances haven't been forthcoming. This is what we need to change.

So my message is – let us take a clear proactive stance towards inevitable urban growth, because if we don't, we might very well find ourselves in the predicament observed by the Greek philosopher, Seneca, who in the year 50 BC stated that “There are no good winds for navigators who don't know where to go.”