Editorial:

Leave no city behind
Michele Acuto and Susan Parnell

Close to 4 billion people live in cities.. As the driver of environmental challenges, accounting for nearly 70% of the world's carbon emissions, and as sites of critical social disparities, with 863 million dwellers now living in slums, urban settlements are at the heart of global change. This momentum is unlikely to disappear, as approximately 70 million more people will move to cities by the end of this year alone. The good news is that recent multilateral processes are now appreciating this key role of cities and are increasingly prioritizing urban concerns in policy-making. Yet how then can we ensure that these steps towards a global urban governance leaves no city, town, or urban dweller behind?

The third United Nations conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) will set out a "new urban agenda" (NUA) this October in Quito, Ecuador. Twenty years after Habitat II, the NUA aims to inspire nations, cities, and towns to pursue sustainable urban development. Habitat III's focus on cities reinforces recent wider multilateral attention to cities through the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2030 Agenda of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing sustainable development, and the COP21 Paris climate agreement [including a call for a city emphasis by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)].

Despite these good efforts, and the potential for Habitat III and the NUA to coalesce action, the road ahead is complex. Consensus that cities are critical pathways of change does not indicate agreement on what the priorities should be, how they are assessed, and how policy and implementation might be refined. The envisioned assimilation of city, national, and international indicators to track progress across sectors and scales is far ahead of the science-policy capability on the ground. Until recently there was limited discussion on any practical approach to achieving and assessing the transformations required. Yet, the metrics selected to track progress, and the credibility of the organizations that implement them, will determine how this broader global urban agenda unfolds.

Many organizations are already tracking for sustainable urban development: multilateral bodies (e.g. UN-Habitat, World Bank); city networks (e.g. United Cities and Local Governments, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group); academia (through the International Council for Science); think tanks (e.g. Adelphi); and

foundations (e.g. the Prince's Trust). Indeed, there is no shortage of urban expertise, but there is little clarity on how concerned and knowledgeable parties might engage. The NUA's zero draft points to evidence-based policy as critical to its success, and proposes an "International Multi-stakeholder Panel on Sustainable Urbanization" led by UN-Habitat. Some experts suggest creating an even broader monitoring body – akin to an "IPCC for cities." Others urge caution and raise concerns about scientific input. The SDGs, Paris agreement, and Sendai Framework all call for data that is increasingly spatial (e.g. geographic information system-based) rather than statistical (e.g. demographic) to achieve the granularity that is necessary to understand cities.

Data-gathering capacity is underdeveloped, weak, or dysfunctional in many parts of the world. Building credible local data systems requires strong governmental data institutions and university-city collaborations that, with an increasing influence of large private sector interest and capacity, are rarely in place. Africa, Asia, and Latin America are especially data (infrastructure) poor. There is no consensus on who should set metrics, who might generate and monitor data, or what the architecture of the science-policy interface underpinning global urban governance should be. Implementing a global monitoring mechanism for cities acknowledges that there are transnational drivers of urban change, and embraces the idea that the way all cities are run will determine our common future. If the Post-2030 Agenda logic of "leave no one behind" is to incorporate the logic of "leave no city behind," then fundamental attention to fair, accessible, and effective monitoring and review is imperative.

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