

## Three Pathways for Urban Change - Utilising planners and architects to realise the New Urban Agenda

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### Executive Summary

Cities around the world are facing pressing environmental challenges whilst simultaneously experiencing rapid population growth. Planners and architects play an important role in shaping these urban environments and therefore it is vital that they do so with a thorough understanding of both environmental and social issues.

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) provides guidance for necessary changes in urban development practice, yet routes to implementation are still unclear. World Urban Forum 9 (WUF9) presented an opportunity to address this issue. The following report will examine the role of planners and architects in responding to environmental challenges under the policy guidance of the NUA. It will discuss three

pathways for urban change; *collaboration, global networks and engaging practitioners*, and outline how they can contribute to successful implementation of the NUA.

### Introduction

The introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 saw a new emphasis on environmental issues, decidedly lacking in the Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup>. A goal solely dedicated to cities, SDG 11, highlighted the importance of urban issues in future development agendas<sup>2</sup>. In response to this, the UN-HABITAT III Conference, held in Quito in 2016, presented the New Urban Agenda (NUA); a framework for realisation of sustainable urban development<sup>3</sup>. Two years on, the ninth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF9), led by UN-HABITAT,

focused directly on the implementation of the NUA<sup>4</sup>.

The emphasis on the role of cities within sustainable development action arises at a critical time. More than 50% of the population now reside in urban areas, with that figure expected to rise to over 70% by 2050<sup>5</sup>. Simultaneously, the world is facing extreme environmental challenges exacerbated by rising levels of greenhouse gas emissions, 80% of which comes from cities<sup>6</sup>. However, instead of framing cities as the perpetrators of environmental degradation and climate change, the NUA argues that cities should be seen as innovators in new ways to tackle these issues; as a creative hotbed for architects, designers and planners, working collaboratively to shape a sustainable future.

### **The Role of the Practitioner**

Within the design process, architects and planners have a direct role in balancing the potentially conflicting aspects of sustainability; the social, economic and environmental. However, it is often the

case that the social and economic aspects are prioritised whilst the environment is side-lined. This is perhaps due to a political focus on short-term economic gain, and an absence of clear methods to demonstrate environmental importance within the current socio-economic system. A social shift is required to bring environmental concerns into consideration globally, at both small and large scales. Whilst the NUA presents an opportunity for this change, full engagement will be necessary, from not only academics and policy makers but also active practitioners within the design world and the communities that they serve. Indeed, the main challenge will be to convert thoughtful policy objectives into active urban interventions.

### **Practitioners in The New Urban Agenda**

The NUA contains 175 points that offer guidance and set the groundwork for future policies and approaches to tackle urban issues<sup>3</sup>. The importance of practitioners or professionals for successful urban development is mentioned infrequently within the NUA and appears explicitly in only two points.

Point 48 states that;

*‘We encourage effective participation and **collaboration** among all relevant stakeholders, including...**professionals** [and] academic institutions...in order to identify opportunities for urban economic development and identify and address existing and emerging challenges’*

Point 149 goes further, to state that;

*“We will support local government associations...and their **cooperation** with...**professionals**, academia and research institutions...This should be done by means of peer-to-peer learning...**collaborative actions**...[and] the establishment of **practitioners’ networks** and **science- policy** interface practices”*

The next section will explore how these points were addressed at WUF9 and how they will inform policy to enable successful implementation.

## **World Urban Forum 9**

The intention of WUF9 was to act as a platform to discuss the implementation of the NUA. Over the 7 days, 22,000 participants from 165 different countries attended to engage with over 500 events<sup>4</sup>. There were many sessions that discussed the environment and the role of practitioners. A comment made during the week that “built environment professionals are 20 years behind the climate change community in responding to global urbanisation” highlights that it is about time these fields intersect.

WUF9 highlighted three key pathways that will be crucial to successful implementation of the NUA; *collaboration, global networks* and *engaging practitioners*.

### *1. Collaboration*

A key issue emphasised at WUF9 was the current lack of integration and collaboration between practitioners and academics. In the planning field, whilst practitioners are developing skills

throughout their profession regarding climate change this is not necessarily being shared with academics. This leaves academics, the majority trained when issues of climate change were not on the curriculum, lacking the knowledge and confidence needed to teach these skills to current students. There is a worry that this will produce another generation of planners not properly equipped to deal with climate change.

However, even if knowledge is more effectively shared between practice and education this may not be enough. There was a call to further extend this collaboration across disciplines. There is a huge breadth of knowledge on climate change in scientific circles which is not necessarily being shared with architects and planners. As scientists are beginning to realise the importance of the built environment on environmental degradation, it is hoped the conversation between disciplines will be strengthened. This needs to happen not only in education, across university departments, but also at practice level where perhaps scientists can become part of the design

process, planning process and implementation.

## 2. *Global Networks*

In response to the need for collaboration in the NUA, global networks that look to combine scientists with practitioners in the built environment are becoming increasingly important. Two examples will be discussed below.

The International Climate Initiative (IKI) was set up in 2008 by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety<sup>7</sup>. Recently IKI has engaged with cross sectoral urban development projects and believes it is crucial to better interlink the science and urban development sectors. IKI issues worldwide calls for ideas, with proposals coming from internationally active organisations. Projects will be chosen and funded if they are deemed to have a particularly sustainable and innovative approach to climate and biodiversity protection. This is an excellent step towards multidisciplinary collaboration, however effective

promotion is crucial to ensure organisations across the world are aware of this initiative.

Planners for Climate Action was set up by UN-Habitat at COP-23 in November 2017. The initiative has been set up to advocate for strengthened urban/regional planning, help to monitor implementation of relevant targets and to map and share knowledge globally<sup>8</sup>. It was clear from the huge amount of positive engagement in the session hosted at WUF9 that it is being actively engaged with by both practitioners and academics in the planning sphere. However, a quick google search for the initiative reveals that it is hard to find out much information, other than a few news articles regarding its implementation back in November 2017. Whilst the initiative is barely 3 months old, it is difficult to grasp how planners across the globe will engage with it if it is not effectively advertised.

### *3. Engage Practitioners*

Whilst there was a fairly active number of representatives from the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) present at WUF9,

there were no representatives from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). As architects are frequently at the root of the built environment process, this was extremely worrying. The question is whether policy makers are not engaging with architects, or whether architects are not engaging with policy makers. Due to the fact that there were very few sessions at WUF9 specifically discussing the role of architects in the NUA, and considering that the word 'architect' is not mentioned in the NUA, it could be argued that it is the former.

This was one of the most frustrating outcomes from the WUF9 and one that must be addressed immediately. In order to make implementation possible, practitioners, particularly architects, must be engaged. They play an integral part from specifying and sourcing the materials used, which is incredibly important environmentally, to designing the spaces in terms of environmental performance. There is a call for institutions to play a stronger role in integrating policy and practice. Due to the fact that the United Kingdom's architecture and planning

institutes are so well respected, they should be paving the way.

### Conclusion

In order to tackle issues of climate change and environmental degradation, those involved in urban development must act immediately. There is an opportunity for architects and planners to be creative and innovative in order to fully respond to SDG 11 and the guidance of the NUA. WUF9 presented a perfect platform to further discuss how this opportunity might be utilised.

Three prevalent issues must be addressed if the NUA is to be achieved. Collaboration is needed between practitioners, academics and students in order to ensure that the next generation of practitioners have the required skills to tackle environmental issues. Collaboration is also required across disciplines, particularly between scientists, architects and planners. Global initiatives are emerging, but engagement from practitioners, academics and students from around the world will be key to achieving the desired

outcomes. Finally, the NUA will not be achieved without the necessary integration of policy makers and practitioners.

It is clear that many of those attending the WUF9 left inspired and ready to act on the issues discussed. However, it could be argued that those attending were there because they are already engaging, and are keen to enable successful implementation. It is therefore important that practitioners that are active within academia and policy-making champion this collaborative effort, in order to ensure that everyone is on board with the NUA and its implementation.

### References

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