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**HOW TO IMPROVE URBAN PLANNING AND POLICIES
TO ENSURE A BETTER FUTURE FOR CITIES**

Discussion paper

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I. CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

1. Now, even more than before, the leaders of the majority of countries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) are confronted with thorny problems with respect to urban habitat and questions concerning the strategies that will have to be developed if their cities are to maintain or acquire comparative advantages vis-à-vis all the other competing cities.
2. The issues of habitat, quality of life and quality of the environment can no longer be addressed separately since, together, they are becoming strategic arguments for or appalling counter-arguments against the economic and human future of cities. As if this were not enough, the need to create more sustainable and balanced conditions for the development of cities must also be taken into account.

3. Experience, particularly in some countries, which, over the past 30 years, have attempted ambitious policies¹ that were considered good models at the time, has shown that such practices could no longer be applied by other countries because:

(a) Many areas have undergone change, the impact of which has been greater than anticipated; these areas include regional governance, the structure of investment, which is now more private than public, and the rivalry between regions, which has become all the more fierce as human resources and production costs have taken advantage of the competition facilitated by increased human mobility and the end of economic protectionism;

(b) Expectations are higher in terms of the quality of life to be afforded to populations;

(c) Countries and their cities are now obliged, owing to the speed with which they may go into decline, to take a far more serious and less dogmatic approach to managing the future.

4. Cities and countries are ever more aware of the need to establish specific links between the new techniques of urban planning and the problems they are encountering, which only relate in a very limited way to the narrow field of physical planning and can no longer be solved through separate and uncoordinated policies on housing, economic development, transport and so on.

5. The study and evaluation of specific examples of success or failure in the UNECE region and their causes must be regarded by urban planners and decision makers as an effective tool for progress in their respective areas.

6. There are three main areas of concern for public policy makers: habitat; urban transformation; and management of urban regions. Solutions in these areas are complex enough for attempts to have been made to pool available knowledge and experience.

A. Habitat

7. This is a huge and complex subject; it is also one of the most significant collective obligations of States. Each country has existing housing stock, and the issue of its regeneration and adaptation to the new loci of economic development is already a central concern. This problem is all the more urgent in those countries that recently put their faith in the virtues of housing privatization without having first organized a real - i.e. fluid, creditworthy - market.

¹ “Ambitious policy” is used here to mean complex, radical, large-scale policies, for example: new towns; granting of public credit at very low rates of interest or over very long periods to enable tenants to acquire full ownership of their public rented housing; demolition of very large buildings in order to revert to more intimate, more traditional, more “residential” buildings.

8. The involvement of citizens in matters relating to habitat, including urban and regional planning, is essential, especially since these matters touch on changing cultural values, social requirements and priorities. The Ninth Conference on Urban and Regional Research (Leeds, United Kingdom, May 2002) highlighted the importance of behavioural aspects in the practice of urban planning. It is imperative to take into consideration, when elaborating plans and tools to make cities more liveable and sustainable, the expectations and mindset of the populations and groups concerned. These more behavioural approaches to urban planning cannot, however, replace the techniques of analysis, evaluation, design and management that constitute the foundations of expertise in this area; they can at least complement the more established methods involving physical planning, urban design and local fiscal systems, and they are also important for promoting social harmony.

9. Despite the significance of citizen involvement, it is important to realize that the many experiments in public participation conducted in recent decades by teams of urban planners in numerous countries have had very mixed results, depending on political and civic practice in each country; generally, these experiments found it hard to withstand the difficulties created by the majority communities in the areas concerned, or to which those communities themselves were subjected, and the problems caused by joblessness.

Questions

10. Are there examples of public participation in the region that can serve as models of more sustainable solutions?

11. How can residents be involved in the economic and social improvement of their area?

12. In order to achieve greater success, should other aspects of public policy be linked with techniques of urban planning: governance, distribution of local power, deployment of personnel with experience in economic and social policy in areas relating to habitat, local fiscal systems?

13. How can the values of an area (cultural, social, quality of life) be preserved when it must be reorganized or regenerated from the outside?

14. How can a strategic vision be developed of the manner in which to add to or alter existing residential areas when profound social change seems to be required?

15. What role could, or should, the enhancement of public spaces in residential areas play in improving integration of differing populations, i.e. populations that differ from one another in terms of their cultural origin, social status and the proportion of youth and elderly persons?

B. Urban transformation

16. Cities and regional urban structures change regularly, in a cyclical manner. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the need for change in cities has reached a particularly critical point owing to four phenomena that have developed concurrently over the past 15 years:

(a) Globalization of the systems of production and trade, which has created huge industrial vacuums in some of the world's cities and regions, while necessitating the expansion of urban areas in others;

(b) Increased human mobility, which, coupled with the lack of organization of land production systems, has produced regional aberrations;

(c) The transition process, still under way in some UNECE countries, which has created new urban and development challenges requiring innovative rules and practices to be put in place;

(d) European integration, the main effect of which has been to facilitate the free movement of citizens.

17. Migration is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges facing cities. Throughout the twentieth century, across the world, the significance of internal population movements from one city to another was underestimated, with no preparatory measures being taken ahead of the arrival of migrants.

18. Subsequently, the huge public expenditure involved in settling these new arrivals has become apparent, as has the cost of providing compensatory assistance to regions and cities that have become depopulated because of their lack of a vision for the future.

19. The ever greater concentration of services and employment opportunities in large cities is a key factor of migration and increased mobility. Drawn by this phenomenon, the populations of neighbouring regions end up being housed, more often than not, in high-density areas. As their standard of living rises, they seek to acquire property in areas that are more residential in character than their dense urban neighbourhoods and, above all, more affordable as far as property and local taxes are concerned. Such movements are possible owing to the increase in the number of private cars and the overall reduction in working hours. They involve the inner and intermediate suburbs in agricultural areas where low incomes have brought down the price of building land. There are numerous consequences in terms of poor management of collective resources, unsustainable consumption of the countryside and endless clogging of transport systems, with the attendant impact on the environment.

Questions

20. How can new neighbourhoods, urban structures, commercial zones and tertiary-sector employment centres be integrated in cities without standardizing them or encouraging internal segregation, which would be socially unacceptable?

21. How can urban sprawl be contained:

(a) How can it be contained within limits large enough to allow for different types of habitat and facilitate the development of several somewhat specialized, and thus complementary, centres within the same city?

(b) How can this be done while keeping the limits small enough to avoid dispersal of financial investment, segregation through distance and deferral of sustainable development goals for years to come?

- (c) How should these limits be set and according to which criteria?
 - (d) How should these limits be enforced?
22. How can former industrial zones be transformed into multifunctional urban areas?
23. How could regional planning policies enable the populations of small and medium-sized towns to remain in these towns and have satisfactory future prospects, instead of being encouraged, or pushed, to migrate to metropolises?

C. Management of urban regions: competition between cities and between urban regions

24. For some years now, cities and regions, and even, in some ways, States, have been competing with one another. This competition is not that of the past, when each city simply wished to shine a little more brightly than its neighbour. It is no longer this horse-trading that local politicians engaged in with the central government, which always ended up with each part of the national territory getting something. Competition today is just the reverse.
25. It is now in the interests of cities to group together with their neighbours in order to achieve the necessary appeal to challenge other larger or better prepared cities with which they are competing or have chosen to compete.
26. Across the UNECE region, there are cities and civic organizations that have provided good examples of city-to-city cooperation and learning. Some of the major associations/networks of local communities include the Association of Cities and Regions for Recycling, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), Energie-Cités, Eurocities, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), the Union of the Baltic Cities and the World Health Organization's Healthy Cities. While these are good examples of city-to-city cooperation, such initiatives need further strengthening for city-to-city cooperation seems to be growing ever more important.

Questions

27. How can cities build sustainable systems to promote complementarity with neighbours that are distinct, sometimes even distant, from them so as to acquire the status of cities of the future in the eyes of both their own inhabitants and business leaders across the world?
28. Who can take the initiative?
29. What links can be established with the rural systems around large and medium-sized cities so as to ensure that the city and its periphery together have all the quality-of-life factors that are lacking in the big metropolises, weakening their appeal?
30. How can States help cities fulfil this new requirement to become strategists?

II. THE NEW SKILLS AND EXPERTISE OF URBAN PLANNERS AND THEIR NEW RELATIONS WITH PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS

31. The new challenges for urban planning and the new trends that emerge from the analysis and observations offered above are having a significant impact on the techniques and science of urban planning and the services that public officials and populations expect it to provide.

32. Recent developments have reaffirmed that there is more to planning and urban and regional development than simply drawing plans. There is also a political process through which a balance must be achieved between all the stakeholders in human life in a city, region or country. Urban planning is designed to permit or facilitate choices among competing interests and choices of overall direction, although these choices themselves are within the exclusive purview of decision makers.

33. Urban planners have long been preparing for this role. Henceforth, instead of being confined to the physical aspects of urban and regional development, they will be ready to consider and address all the elements that relate to the strategy for a particular area or for the settlement of people in it.

34. Recently, countries and regions have found themselves subjected to the impact of strategic contexts for which they are not prepared, notably because their institutional processes are based on other logics and ideologies. Countries, regions and cities thus need to diversify their skills, whether through the establishment of new institutions or recourse to outside help. Urban planners must be able to:

(a) Read and interpret the signs of the times and the reference points for cities and regions in order to steer them towards the future, when the first effects of urban and regional development policies will become evident;

(b) Identify and analyse the future potential of a city or region and its capacity to increase its competitiveness vis-à-vis rival cities or regions;

(c) Incorporate evaluation processes and elements of flexibility in action plans, so that it is easy to make corrections later, should they deviate from their objectives, or modifications to deal with new developments (needs, opportunities, etc.), which are bound to arise during development processes of this magnitude;

(d) Make available information accessible to decision makers, investors and the general public;

(e) Ensure that practical sustainable-development measures are incorporated as naturally as possible in urban and regional development policies and initiatives;

(f) Encourage partnerships between the public and private sectors in order to develop investment, create jobs and achieve social cohesion.

35. Public-private partnerships are becoming a new fact of public life and public management. In order to make such partnerships attractive to the authorities and comprehensible to private investors, the results - both direct and indirect - have to be explained. It is difficult for politicians to do this up front because they prefer to put their own spin on the outcome of their initiatives, rather than leave their partners in a position to point out the disparity between the goals announced at the beginning and the end results. This is why, despite all the talk in these countries of the need to establish public-private partnerships to resolve the difficult issues relating to urban and regional development, there are still not enough of them to call them a genuine urban planning method.

Questions

36. How are urban planners responding to the new challenges? What results are they prepared to guarantee? Under what conditions? To whom?

37. Have they devised new working methods that take account of more factors to reflect the complex choices in urban and regional planning today?

38. Have they incorporated in their criteria concerns relating to equality, resource levels, social harmony and the need for human security?

39. At what stage in the elaboration of a country, region or city's policies should urban and regional planners be involved or consulted?

40. With regard to the public organization of institutions, would it be more effective for urban and regional planners to be attached to the general administrative staff (orientation, strategy, choice of overall policies) or, as is now the case in the majority of countries, to the technical staff responsible for building and maintaining the infrastructure and facilities to support human activities in a particular area?

41. What sort of dialogue is needed with the population, with decision makers and with private partners in order to find new solutions? Does such dialogue form an implicit part of the minimum content of the mission of urban and regional planners or must the decision to have such dialogue rest, as is now the case in the majority of cities and countries, with the inhabitants, elected representatives, even if this means impeding their capacity to think up possible better solutions before choosing from among the available alternatives, as they are mandated to do?

42. More generally, between public officials and urban and regional planners specializing in enhancing the life of people and creating the best conditions to safeguard the competitiveness of regions and cities in the future, who is responsible for what, to whom and within what time frame?
