

City dwellers seek to transform debate on urban poverty

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Brazil has pulled more than 30 million people out of poverty since 2002, a success partly attributed to legal changes that empowered cities to act on social issues. Now, urban experts would like to see similar policies empower local governments to act on major global challenges on an international scale – and they warn that the consequences could be dire if their recommendations are not built into the global development agenda.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) failed to effectively account for the dramatic urban transformations of the last decade and – if the post-2015 development agenda does the same – we risk losing valuable gains in the fight against poverty and the response to climate change, experts say.

Mounting concerns about the future of cities have inspired a campaign for a development goal dedicated to urban issues, a proposal that will be debated by the United Nations' open working group on the post-2015 development agenda in January.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) – an international network of academic institutions headed by economist Jeffrey Sachs – launched the campaign in September.

Meanwhile, the Global Network of Cities, Local and Regional Government (UCLG) gathered support for a standalone urban goal from 138 organisations, including municipal governments from around the world.

“If we don't transform the way cities function and how the urban metabolism and its relationship with rural areas actually is, we're putting the entire planet at risk,” said Aromar Revi, director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements in Bangalore.

According to the UN's 2013 World Economic and Social Survey, as many as 3 billion people will live in slums by 2050 if global development follows its current course. There is a broad consensus that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are expected to replace the Millennium Development Goals when they expire in 2015, must account for the urban transformations that are underway.

But how the international community should deal with the urban question is up for debate. After months of consultation and debates at the UN, it will be the member states that will ultimately decide, said Thomas Gass, UN assistant-secretary general for policy coordination and inter-agency affairs.

The campaign for an urban development goal, which is supported by international urban organisations, such as UN-HABITAT, contrasts with the approach proposed by the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The panel suggested dealing with urban issues within goals focused on themes by sector, such as health and access to services, including water and sanitation.

Urban experts say this isn't good enough. They argue there is a rural bias in the international development agenda and that the complexity of urban environments requires an integrated approach that prioritises the role of local governments.

"A lot of what's proposed in the post-2015 development agenda or sustainable development agenda depends on local governments [for implementation]," said David Satterthwaite, a researcher who studies urban issues at the International Institute for Environment and Development in London.

Urban researchers highlight the experience of Brazil, where the 2001 City Statute pushed cities to create master plans that helped millions out of poverty. The legislation improved the lives of slum dwellers by pushing local governments to invest in infrastructure, recognise the urban poor's right to access land for housing and encourage popular participation in setting budgets and policy priorities, said Edesio Fernandes, a Brazilian lawyer and city planner based in London.

In contrast, the Millennium Development Goals – which aimed to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 and halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation – failed to adequately consider urban issues, said Rafael Tuts, coordinator of the urban planning and design branch of the United Nations Human Settlement Programme.

The target on improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers was accomplished early on, but, over that same period, double that number moved into slums, he said.

"We need to be very careful about how we frame the targets and indicators so that they take into account poverty issues in urban contexts," said Paula Lucci, a research fellow in growth, poverty and inequality at the Overseas Development Institute in London. She said that the MDGs measured access to water and sanitation in urban and rural areas without accounting for the differences between these settings, leading to a murky picture of how much conditions in urban areas have actually improved.

Shagun Mehrotra, an assistant professor at the New School who studies urban planning and climate change, says that problem-solving in cities requires an integrated, place-based approach that would not be possible if urban issues were "mainstreamed" across sectoral SDGs.

“I think issues of slums cannot be tackled through other goals because it’s not a sectoral problem,” he said. “It’s place-based and it’s a complex urban issue.”

“If you say I’m going to fix the school system, but not realise that the kids don’t have eye correction or there are other undiagnosed health problems ... you’ll miss the point,” said Sachs. “So a holistic vision, which brings together expertise from a number of different directions, is really very fruitful.”

Given that cities emit 60 to 80 percent of global CO2 emissions, climate change is another issue that should be addressed through an approach that looks at urban areas as systems and gives local governments the capacity to act, said Shobhakar Dhakal, one of the coordinating lead authors of the International Panel on Climate Change’s report on human settlements and climate change mitigation.

“The UN system is used to talking to countries, but the point is in a large country, like India, what is happening in the south is completely different from what’s happening in the north,” said Revi. “... And you have to accommodate all that diversity, you have to have systems that can do that.”

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