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EUA Special Issue Prologue

Sustainable, Healthy and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods

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This prologue establishes the case for a comparative study of urban neighbourhoods in fast-growing cities in developing countries in Asia and Africa to help achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We firstly outline the debates about sustainable development and sustainable cities. We then discuss the urgent need for comparative and multi-disciplinary research on the internal physical and socio-economic structures of cities and sustainable issues at the neighbourhood level.

Sustainable development and sustainable cities

We are now in the urban age; by 2050 the world's urban population is expected to nearly double, making this the century of cities. Not only population but economic activities, social and cultural interactions, as well as environmental and humanitarian impacts, are increasingly concentrated in cities (UN 2016). How to make global development, especially the urbanisation process, sustainable is a major challenge faced by researchers and policy makers around the world.

Some researchers have argued that urbanisation can contribute to sustainable development through economic growth, improved living standards, poverty reduction and environmental management, and the conservation of ecosystems (Dorosh & James, 2012; Turok & McGranahan, 2013), while others claim urbanisation is stalling development, fostering growth in consumerist culture, reducing connection with (and therefore concern about) the natural world, and attacking the tripartite goals of sustainable development, especially in Africa (Cobbinah et al 2015). Historically, rural-urban migration has been accompanied by improvements to population health and education, yet contemporary rates and styles of urbanisation suggest that these benefits may not continue to materialise in developing nations.

Although the concept of sustainable development has dominated both the environmental and development literatures since the 1980s, it has no universally agreed definition. The most widely cited is still that of the World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission): *Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs* (WCED 1987). Researchers and policy makers in the 'global north' tend to be more concerned with the

natural environment and conservation. Environmentalists for example argue from a 'green' perspective and identify the natural resource base as the focus of the sustainability debate. Others take the view that it is more important to consider sustaining present and projected future levels of production and consumption in order to enhance human development.

There has been much work on the concept of the 'sustainable city' with respect mainly to the developed world. Haughton and Hunter (1994) suggest that a sustainable city *is one in which its people and businesses continuously endeavour to improve their natural, built and cultural environments at neighbourhood and regional levels, whilst working in ways which always support the goal of global sustainable development.* (p.27). Other sustainable city debates focus on urban form: *A form is taken as sustainable if it enables the city to function within its natural and man-made carrying capacities, and to be 'user-friendly' for its occupants, and promotes social equality* (Williams, Burton & Jenks, 2004, p.4). Some governments and planners in Europe and North America therefore promote the compact city, which favours high-density living and encourages people to move back to inner cities, thereby reducing travel demand and energy consumption.

Cities in the developing world, for a long time, have had quite different priorities, centring on human development, that is at increasing the material standard of living of the poor at the 'grassroots' level (Potter and Lloyd-Evans, 1998). Here the main concerns are about more immediate needs including water, safe land, adequate shelter, sanitation, and access to basic services and secure livelihoods, which constitute fundamental human rights and underlie the notion of sustainable development (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1989). Rural-to-urban migration, sprawl, slums and poverty in developing countries have been major challenges to researchers and policy makers since the end of World War II. The World Bank and other international organisations promoted a wide range of urban and housing policies and projects, notably the construction of subsidised public housing (Burgess 1992), encouraging 'self-help' (Turner 1987), providing 'support'/'enablement' (Pugh 1995; Payne, 2002). Since the 1990s these organisations have supported the application of more generic neo-liberal macroeconomic policy, emphasising growing urban economies, with poverty alleviation supposedly to be achieved by 'trickle-down', supplemented by 'safety nets' for the most vulnerable (Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002).

In the present millennium, development policies promoted through the UN Habitat Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000-2015) emphasised global trends in urbanisation, inequality and the alleviation of urban poverty, and the role of links between local and national

governments in addressing urban shelter problems. The MDGs in particular provided an important framework for development but progress has been uneven, and particularly deficient in Africa (UN 2015). Recent fast urbanisation in developing countries and the rapid growth of the economy and the urban middle classes in some countries, including China and India, has unified global debates over sustainable development. The concern about climate change, in particular, has encouraged researchers and policy makers (both inside and outside developing countries) take a more balanced view of social, economic and environmental sustainability. There has been a realisation that the impacts of global warming would disproportionately affect disadvantaged and vulnerable populations through food insecurity and higher food prices, income losses, lost livelihood opportunities, adverse health impacts and population displacement, and that many of the cities most at risk from sea level rises are in the global south (IPCC 2018). Several developing countries have begun to take policy actions to mitigate the negative effect of economic growth and urbanisation. China and India, for example, have put a lot of emphasis on promoting ecologically sustainable smart cities in recent years. In China this has been labelled the 'new style of urbanisation'.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) form a new plan of action for the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental. The SDGs have been further promoted by Habitat III in the New Urban Agenda (NAU) that promotes a shared vision of cities for all, and have placed the cities at centre stage. The NAU aims to maximise the benefits and minimise the harms of urbanisation by making transformative commitments in respect of: a) sustainable urban development for social inclusion and ending poverty, b) sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all, and c) environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development (UN Habitat 2016).

Cities in Africa and Asia

Most developing countries in Africa and Asia have a relatively low levels of urbanisation and it is projected that much of the world's future urban population growth will be in these two continents. In Africa, more than half of urban population is under 25 and, despite advances in the *Education for All* agenda, many remain marginalised from access to learning opportunities. The majority of the urban population lives in slums or other types of informal and unplanned settlements that lack basic infrastructure such as roads, water supply and drainage systems. Asia features high, middle and low-income economies (as does Africa), as well as a wealth of diverse societies and cultures. It hosts many developing countries, including the two largest ones, China and India, but is also home to the

world's largest population of slum dwellers. Asia has a higher urbanisation level than Africa and many cities have experienced fast economic growth and intensive industrialisation. Although urbanisation in some cities has been accompanied by improvements in living conditions, for many of the region's very poorest people, inequalities and limited access to basic infrastructure, educational and health services remain serious challenges (UN Habitat 2015).

Within Africa and Asia, there are important differences between countries in relation to economic development, regional characteristics, cultural and historical background, levels of industrialisation and urbanisation. Among the developing countries, at one end there is India and China, which have both demonstrated fast economic growth and where urbanisation, industrialisation and economic growth have continued apace over the last twenty years. Parts of these countries are now highly urbanised and their major cities have developed strong linkages with the global economy and have created huge wealth. There is also an emerging middle class in these cities who live in a range of well-serviced neighbourhoods. At the same time, there are serious inequalities in income, living standards, housing, and in access to infrastructure and public services, especially between recent rural-to-urban migrants and established residents. Through their growing economic power, these countries now influence the development and urbanisation courses of neighbouring countries. At the other end, we see relatively poor countries, such as Rwanda, Tanzania, Bangladesh and The Philippines which represent a wide range of political administrative systems and cultural backgrounds and exhibit a different set of economic development trajectories and potentials.

As urbanisation expands, there is a need for a major reconceptualization of approaches to African and Asian urbanisation. Much of the current sustainable cities debate tends to focus on well-known examples of a few large cities in developing countries, but the majority of all urban dwellers reside in far smaller urban settlements (Henderson 2002; Bhattacharya, 2016). To achieve a better understanding of the regional complexity in urbanisation, we need to study all types of cities from the national capitals, mega-cities, regional and provincial centres to smaller local cities.

Neighbourhoods and Sustainability

Cities in poor countries are often dominated by a disproportionately young population living in unplanned, informal and slum neighbourhoods, supported by very limited industrial growth. Differentials in access to opportunities, income, consumption, information and technology based on gender, age, ethnicity, location, disability and other factors are the norm, not the exception, in developing countries, and threaten sustainability (UN Habitat 2015). In developed countries,

neighbourhoods have been of central concern to urban studies since the era of Chicago School and have been invigorated in more recent times by the debate about 'neighbourhood effects' (Galster, 2001; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Andersson and Musterd, 2005). The key to this compelling interest lies in the association between neighbourhoods and a wide range of other inequalities. There are stark differences in exposure to crime and in health and wellbeing, education, employment and life chances between residents in different neighbourhoods. Indeed, it is significant that notions of 'neighbourhood effects' are a common currency and language between diverse disciplines.

Sustainable cities and neighbourhoods depend to a considerable extent on a population with the resilience and resources that good health brings, and on relevant learning. Access to healthcare and the chances of good health outcomes depends very much on the sustainable development of cities and the neighbourhoods within them. Educational opportunities are also predominantly shaped by neighbourhood factors and neighbourhood-level services. The relationship between place, learning, health and quality of life is well documented in both developed (Osborne, M. 2014; Fitzpatrick and LaGory 2011) and developing countries (Smit *et al.* 2014) but western models concerning these relationships do not capture the realities of the global south, with the contribution of spirituality and family and community relationships to individual health often ignored (Smit *et al.* 2014:144). Responding to the duality of urbanisation requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional approach to studying cities in order to understand the complex relations between sustainable cities, education and health. At the neighbourhood level this means research on the combined workings of social, economic, environmental and governance factors at the community level, with a view to better understanding how inequalities between neighbourhoods, social groups and families can be reduced and social and spatial integration promoted.

The neighbourhood also represents an important scale at which social policy is delivered (through, e.g. schools, health facilities and basic infrastructure) and debate in developed countries continues about the extent to which socio-spatial segregation compromises attempts to improve social welfare (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; van Kempen and Wissink, 2014). There are important questions about whether cities in developing countries are moving in the same directions as the developed world, and about the implications of socio-spatial change for effective and fair public policy delivery, and ultimately for social stability. It is therefore important and timely to test 'neighbourhood' as the spatial and conceptual unit of analysis by using a combination of spatial analytics and local perspectives.

This mission, however, presents a number of challenges. Neighbourhood level analysis demands that the concept of neighbourhood is defined, and neighbourhoods identified, which is contentious even within a single city and country. In the developing country context, neighbourhood could be initially defined/based on historical development style and expansion of the city, local geographical features (e.g. transport routes, rivers, hills, and parks), government and administrative organisation and related boundary, health and educational provision and catchment areas. It is generally more difficult to define residential neighbourhood in mixed use central areas compared to predominately residential areas. Neighbourhood created under different political and economic conditions also vary in size, and social and economic profile of residents. Neighbourhood could mean a new commercial or social housing estate or gated community, a traditional/colonial central urban area, a traditional sub-urban residential settlement, a squatter settlement, a slum area or 'urban village'. Researcher-defined neighbourhoods also ultimately need to be reconciled with the lived experience and perceptions of residents. Categorising neighbourhoods, identifying their spatial distribution and the inequalities between them, understanding their internal social, economic, physical, and political and governance structures and sustainability, and exploring how the neighbourhoods function together as 'city systems' is an important key to analysing spatial and social transformations and addressing the problems of inequalities in developing cities.

GCRF Centre for Sustainable, Healthy and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods (SHLC)¹

SHLC is one of the three urban-focused projects among 37 funded by The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Growing Research Capability call launched in 2016 (UKRI, 2019). Its programme involves nine partner organisations working in 14 cities in Asia and Africa and its central purpose is to strengthen research capacity among researchers in urban studies, health and education, government officials and policy makers in the public and private sectors both in the UK and in developing countries.

The means by which research capacity is to be enhanced is by conducting systematic and comparative studies of challenges associated with urbanisation and large-scale rural-to-urban migration and the formation and differentiation of urban neighbourhoods. The SHLC research programme aims to rescale the research focus in developing country cities from the general discussion of cities to the development of sustainable neighbourhoods. It aims to develop

¹ For more information about SHLC, please visit the Centre's website: <http://www.centreforsustainablecities.ac.uk/>.

understandings of fast urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration and how they relate to sustainable development. It also aims to improve the evidence about how neighbourhood conditions relate to health and wellbeing in developing country cities, and add to the evidence base on how both formal education (schooling) and non-formal, community-based learning can contribute to economic prosperity, wellbeing, and cultural and social development in urban settings.

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