

RIO+20 DIALOGUES: THEME 8 - SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND INNOVATIONS

FACILITATOR'S REPORT¹

By

Winnie V. Mitullah²

1. Introduction

Sustainability and innovation issues cover urban environmental development; governance and institutional management; city growth, planning and development. Cities are dealing with these issues with many facing challenges. While these challenges face almost all cities, the problems are more intense in developing countries where there is rapid urban growth with a majority of the population living in informal settlements, and working within the informal economy. These cities are least prepared to deal with threats of urban development including climate change, environmental and socio-economic challenges, partly due to governance, institutional deficits, and inadequate resource mobilization and coordination for sustainable development.

Sustainability and innovation are pillars for development which many cities are struggling to embrace... Innovation entails creative thinking: the capacity to perceive problem in a new way, perhaps even reformulating it with a different range of possible solutions. Innovation begins with a creative idea and ends with implementation, from which point it becomes routine. Innovation has multiple dimensions: end products, technology uses; techniques and procedures application; processes such as consultation; implementation mechanisms; problem redefinitions; a target audience; behavioral impacts to be achieved, and particular professional contexts views. Innovation is context specific, and what is considered innovative in one city, may be a common practice in another city.

The two concepts are closely linked and have several tenets which cities pick and promote depending on their level of awareness, capacity, and ability to rally relevant resources, including stakeholders. Sustainable cities are likely to have a number of innovations cutting across several sectors, processes and institutions. The Rio+20 dialogues on Sustainable Cities and Innovation covered a variety of issues, ranging from concepts and language used in city sustainability and

¹ Summary report based on dialogues facilitated using online platform in preparation for Rio+20 Conference on behalf of UNDP and the Brazilian Government.

² Prof. Winnie V. Mitullah is based at the University of Nairobi, Institute for Development Studies (IDS). E-mail: mitulla@uonbi.ac.ke

innovation discourse to, putting in place energy efficient systems, with stakeholder involvement cutting across almost all subjects of discussion.

Dominant discussion areas included the importance of an international neutral language for stimulating innovation; placing culture, creativity and diversity at the core of sustainable cities; promoting dialogue among stakeholders, including networking cities and schools to learn and work together towards sustainable development; mobilising communities to consult each other and actively engage in continuously improving social and physical environment for sustainable development; establishing strategic partnerships, with stakeholders to fund and nurture multi-level collaborative models of governance by city governments for energy efficient service delivery consumption, including putting in place smart grids, promoting selective waste collection and recycling, promoting access to reproductive healthcare and investment in education to empower women and slow down the population growth; funding and facilitation of research, documentation, and dissemination of innovative practices by city governments in collaboration with knowledge generating and financial institutions; adjusting GDP to include environmental damage and social measures to ensure that economic growth is socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

2. Summary of Dialogue

The issues highlighted above were discussed extensively; while this was useful in generating good ideas on sustainability and innovation, the fact that most the participants seemed to be sticking to their areas of interest and expertise, created in-breeding which is not useful for cross fertilization of ideas. Sustainability and innovation require holistic understanding of city dynamics, and an appreciation of all components which, together, contribute to sustainable development. The 1987 Bruntland Report, followed by the Rio Summit of 1992 and Agenda 21, made sustainability a core issue in development, but it was not until the 1995 Copenhagen UN World Summit for Social development, that sustainability was recognized an overarching concept integrating not only environmental issues but also social, economic and cultural dimensions. These issues are interdependent and have to be addressed in a harmonized manner if sustainable development is to be realized in many of the world cities.

Facilitation of Theme 8: Sustainable Cities and Innovation was assigned to three experts but unfortunately, the other two experts were not able to join in facilitating the discussions. I am sure their participation would have given additional strength to this output. As a facilitator, I rolled out the dialogue process by identifying the dialogue sub-themes, and deliberately stuck to macro issues, namely: governance models which acknowledge partnership approaches, and enable cities to effectively reproduce themselves; coordination mechanism for ensuring synergy among

various actors operating within cities and ways and means of mobilizing resources required for various interventions, and effective management of cities for sustainability and innovation. A preamble elaborating each of these issues with questions was posted for rolling out the on-line dialogues. This was followed by inviting many experts and civil society organization leaders across the globe, but unfortunately, very few of the invited actively participated. Instead, the dialogue attracted other interested parties across the globe who effectively participated.

The participants discussed issues posted and moved from macro to micro level suggesting actual interventions required, in particular in the area of governance, service delivery and innovation. On a daily basis I facilitated the dialogues: contributing, answering questions directed to me, monitoring, raising further questions to enrich the dialogue, providing additional knowledge, and bringing the dialogue back on track whenever a participant took the discussion out of track. At the close of the dialogue, most of the discussions included the problems cities are facing in ensuring sustainability, innovation and recommendations on what should be done but little of who should undertake the tasks proposed.

A positive outcome of the dialogues is the prominence the participants assigned to participation, consultation, and partnership approach in promoting sustainable development. Indeed, this is in line with Agenda 21, chapter 28 which highlights the importance of city consultation, increased levels of cooperation and coordination. This came out in the discussions through many voices, including local and sub-national authorities, and their recommendation, on a new multi-level governance architecture with potential of 'promoting effective partnerships in building sustainable cities, and integrating all relevant partners into plans of action for sustainable development at all levels'. The International Association for Advancement of Innovative Approaches to Global Challenges (IAAI) added its voice with its 15/15/15/ which recommends, Rio+20 to mobilise 15 billion Euros and 15 million volunteers by the year 2015 for participatory, UN led, sustainable development. All these recommendations place emphasis on the importance of citizen participation, and go beyond citizens to include enterprises, NGOs, schools and universities. The discussions, further, called for participatory development of strategic city visions, outlining the importance of transparent processes and input from all stakeholders.

Concern for energy efficient service delivery was another running theme in the discussions, with a clear focus on technology and energy efficient modes of delivery, and in particular the promotion of smart grid. It was agreed that such a grid has potential of encouraging decentralized service delivery, innovation, and new infrastructure with the ability to boost economic growth, and generating more employment opportunities for sustainable development. It was noted that the implementation of a smart grid, with an improved energy supply chain will generate

electricity using different forms of energy, including renewable sources such as wind, solar, geothermal and waste. Examples of energy saving, provided by participants included: keeping travel time for commuters to a minimum, solar panels on roof tops to offset energy consumption, timed lighting in businesses, less reliance on neon lighting and advertising, using distance services through information technologies, bicycle friendly cities with cycle paths, cycle hire for the inner city, and efficient planning and building which empowers citizens, enabling accessibility and mobility and eliminating traffic lights, improves traffic flow and taking old vehicles off the roads with cash returns. Some contributions noted that the latter is more needed in developing countries.

Other areas of discussion included the importance of international neutral language for stimulating innovation, promotion of culture, diversity and creativity, supporting the role of sustainable cities as an open laboratory for innovation and promoting global standards (framework) of sustainability for cities. Debates on appropriate language which captures what needs to be done to transform cities revolved around concepts of sustainability, resilience and regenerative cities. While sustainability has been used since 1992, questions surround the concept, with some critics maintaining that focus should be on how urban communities can become resilient; while other critics maintain that the long term target should be that cities 'regenerate' the same amount of resources they absorb - ecological foot print. In this respect, efforts must be made to enable cities to develop regenerative relationships with the world's ecosystems and their natural resources.

As submitted by the Cities and Urban Issues cluster at the NGO major group, facilitated by Ecocity Builders, a global sustainability framework should be based on sustainable development principles and should establish verifiable and transparent indicators with the potential of enabling cities to measure and share, as well as accelerate, progress towards increased sustainability. This does not imply a 'one size fits all' solution, indeed, each city, through a participatory partnership approach, should create its own road map to achieving the key elements of sustainable urban systems

3. Recommendations

Many recommendations came out of the dialogues, a number of them overlapping. This sub section provides a brief on each, indicating what needs to be done and who should be responsible.

3.1 Promote culture, diversity and creativity as a core element to build sustainable cities:

Culture, diversity and creativity are sources of strength for ensuring sustainability. Creativity calls for thinking differently and imaging new ways of using technology. Consequently, this has potential of resulting into an innovation. Dialogues revealed that while a lot of innovations are concerned with big technical systems, the reality is that local technical solutions may be far more efficient.

Promotion of culture, diversity and creativity require an enabling environment which allows city residents to express themselves and test their capacities without any limitation. The creation of such an enabling environment should be the effort of city authorities, in collaboration with stakeholders.

3.2 Promote opportunities for direct dialogues among government, citizens, enterprises, NGOs and schools.

Direct dialogue allows city residents to express themselves and to contribute to planning and management for sustainable development. However, this cannot occur if the real issues of engagement are not identified, priorities isolated and spaces for dialogue established under the leadership of city authorities. Participatory planning can be an effective tool for realizing this goal.

3.3 Promote the active engagement of local communities to improve the physical and social environment in cities:

City authorities on their own cannot mobilise adequate resources for sustainability, and must work with communities. However, in many cities, especially in the developing countries, the communities have not adequately organized themselves as a voice and action group for sustainable development. In a number of cases, a large percentage of communities are struggling with survival issues which can compromise sustainable development. In this respect promoting active citizen engagement requires the joint effort of city governments and civil society, in particular NGOs. The latter are good at working with communities, but often do not have adequate resources for building capacity of communities and supporting them to sustain their livelihoods. Realising this goal requires collaborative mobilization of resources, with city authorities taking a lead role, while NGOs concentrate on implementation of the recommendation.

3.4 The design of urban spaces should take into account the empowerment of local communities.

For decades, urban design has been delinked from communities, especially in the developing countries. It is in response to this gap that, the UN-HABITAT dedicated its 2009 Global Report

on Human Settlements to 'Planning Sustainable Cities. The report acknowledges the important contribution of local communities including those operating within the informal economy. Empowering these communities is a role which has largely been played by non state actors, albeit ineffectively due to limitation of resources, including qualified, adequately coordinated human resource. Empowering local communities requires legislation by city authorities, allocation of adequate resources for the task.

3.5 Planning in advance for sustainability and quality of life in cities.

Planning remains a core element in ensuring sustainability, especially in developing countries, where informal economy generates more new jobs with a large majority operating within the sector. For decades the sector was regarded as illegal with many cities taking punitive policy responses. However, there has been rethinking and renewed attempts to develop alternative policy responses, including enacting legal provisions for against evictions, regularization and upgrading of informal settlements and land sharing arrangements. The UN-HABITAT 2009 report acknowledges the role of strategic use of planning tools, including public investment in trunk infrastructure to influence patterns of development, guided land development, land pooling and partnerships with informal economic actors to manage public spaces and provide services. Effective planning is an expensive task, which requires partnerships, involving both public and private, including local communities and NGOs.

3.6 Cities and schools should develop networks to learn and work together towards sustainable development

Schools are seedbeds for sustainability and effective partnership with them has potential for exposing learners, from an early age to embrace the basics required for sustainable development. In turn, they become agents of sustainable development with ripple effects in society. This recommendation should go beyond schools to include all institutions of learning, training and research.

3.7 Promote the use of waste as a renewable energy source in urban environments

Management of waste is a costly affair and many cities can hardly cope with waste management. Using waste as a renewable energy has the potential not only for generating resources for the city but also ensuring a good living and sustainable environment. This, notwithstanding, using waste as a renewable energy source is not cost free; it requires appropriate technology and close collaboration with city residents. Getting the right technology and mobilizing adequate resources demands partnerships with the private sector, including local communities and NGOs. The latter

are best placed to work with communities in waste management entrepreneurial ventures, and building their capacity for sustainable management.

3.8 Support the role of sustainable cities as an open laboratory for innovation towards sustainable development

Cities have to create their own road maps and act as open laboratory. This entails compact, mixed-use urban design and transportation planning; healthy socio-cultural conditions (green and equitable economy, lifelong education, healthy culture, community capacity and governance, well being); healthy bio-geo-physical conditions (water, air, food, soil, materials and resources, reduced waste); within the context of global ecological imperatives (living within Earths carrying capacity, improved disaster preparedness and response, increased climate resilience). These proposals call for research, learning, training and sharing experiences, including having open laboratory for innovation. The UN should take lead in implementation of this recommendation and work with cities in mobilizing resources, monitoring and coordination of resources, including actors.

3.9 Promote global standards of sustainability for cities

Global standards of sustainability may not be attainable considering that cities have their own foot prints and there is no `one size fit all`. However, it is possible to develop a threshold which cut cross cities. In developing a threshold, the resource challenges of cities must be taken into consideration, and cities that are comparatively disadvantaged assisted to meet the threshold. This task is best carried out, monitored, and coordinated by the United Nations and regional bodies, in close collaboration with cities.

3.10 Local governments should ensure energy-efficient delivery of services and promote sustainable consumption

Scarcity of energy is a global challenge which all cities are confronting, although the challenge is more intense in the developing countries. Unfortunately, there is higher sensitization on energy use and conservation in the developed countries than developing countries. Delivery of energy efficient services requires the cooperation of consumers and energy conservation conscious consumers, which is a first step of ensuring energy efficient delivery of services. Using energy efficient sources, especially renewable energy require technology and skills which is often not readily available to local communities. Consequently, local governments must mobilise resources and nurture partnerships especially with the private sector for efficient delivery of services.

4. Conclusions

The discussions around the theme of Sustainable Cities and Innovation revealed the skewed perception of the public on sustainability and innovation. A perusal, through the various topics discussed during the dialogue period show that, only a few participants were able to engage beyond specific topics of their interest and expertise. This reflects some of the challenges cities are facing in bringing all stakeholders on one page, as city authorities struggle with many challenges facing cities, including mobilizing and coordinating adequate resources for sustainable development.

While the discussions reveal interests in different aspects of sustainability, important aspects such as governance, including coordination and mobilization of resource did not come up as prominent issues. These are overarching critical aspects of sustainability that have to be addressed, not only by cities, but national governments, the United Nations and non state actors. Efficient governance enables cities to have visionary leaders who champion the putting in place of policies and legal frameworks for sustaining all components of development within the city. Most of the actors engaged in sustainable development are not bound by any legal framework and operate largely on grounds Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Partners have to move beyond CSR to be part of city development, contributing resources including knowledge, and ideas, as well as being part of the team that ensures that the planned is achieved and managed in a sustainable and innovative manner.

Coordination of many actors, projects and programmes is another challenge. The lack of effective coordination results in duplication and waste of resources. Cities in collaboration with relevant departments of national governments should take full charge of coordination, monitoring and evaluation of activities. A number of partners participate for different reasons and image building without having an ultimate goal of ensuring well coordinated output relevant for sustainable development. This has to be turned around, by making every partner appreciate not only the ultimate goal for partnership, but the processes entailed in ensuring sustainability and innovation.

In conclusion, many dialogue participants made recommendations which may not be directly identified among the ten recommendations, but this does not infer that such recommendations are not useful. Some of the recommendations were overlapping and can be addressed within the ten recommendations, while others did not directly fall within the theme of discussion and are likely to be highlighted in other themes of the dialogues. Overall, dialogue participants made great contributions, and I sincerely extend my appreciation to them. It is my hope that both the UNDP

and the Brazilian Government will ensure that the on-line discussions are adequately stored and available for public use.