

URBAN ISSUES AND SUSTAINABLE ECOLOGY IN AFRICA AND ASIA: An Introduction

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The world is inexorably becoming urban. By 2030 all developing regions, including Asia and Africa, will have more people living in urban than rural areas. In the next 20 years, *Homo sapiens*, “the wise human”, will become *Homo sapiens urbanus* in virtually all regions of the planet (UN-HABITAT VIII). The role of cities will be decisive in leading the world towards its sustainability. The goal of urban development should therefore not be a sustainable city; rather, cities that contribute to sustainable development goals within their boundaries, in the region around them and globally (May Hald 2009:43).

In this case, Africa and Asia deserve special attention. On one hand, in the continuous process of globalisation following the expansion of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism started from Europe, Africa and Asia were not uprooted by Western Civilisation and therefore should be the main source and pool of bio-and-cultural diversity needed for the sustainability of our planet. On the other hand, Africa and Asia together will account for 86 per cent of all growth in the world’s urban population over the next four decades. Africa’s urban population will increase from 414 million to over 1.2 billion by 2050 while that of Asia will soar from 1.9 billion to 3.3 billion. The largest increases in urban population are expected in the following countries: India, China, Nigeria, the United States and Indonesia. Over the next four decades, India will add another 497 million to its urban population; China – 341 million, Nigeria – 200 million, the US – 103 million, and Indonesia – 92 million (UN News 2012).

Meanwhile, globalisation has posed two levels of challenges to cities. The first one, at planetary level, is the global ecological crisis (e.g. the decreasing sources of fossil energy, the pollution, the climate changes...). The second one, at local level, is the acceleration of urbanisation and urban growth accompanied by the growing volume of goods (food, infrastructure, building, energy, means of transport, equipment, gadgets...but also rubbish, garbage, trash, waste...) and the increasing diversity of

immaterial culture (ethnicity, religion, way of life, ideological affiliation, artistic creation, cultural expression...).

So, how do African and Asian cities deal with those challenges? In what sense are their responses relevant or irrelevant to sustainability at local or global level?

Urban Preoccupations in Africa and Asia

Thirteen authors have helped us to answer these questions through eleven papers. Four of them are dedicated to three countries of Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania), four to four Asian countries (China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia), one to a group of countries around the Mekong riverside (Burma, Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam) and two to non-specified countries. They allow us to identify the preoccupations of urban development actors in Africa and Asia as following.

1. Urban Poverty

To understand in a split second the main reason provoking “Bandung”, wrote Arthur Conte in 1955, we just need to juxtapose two pictures. On one side, an evening on Broadway, or in Picadilly Circus, or on the Champs-Élysées, or in any place of Amsterdam, a tulip seller, plump and chubby. At the other side, a horde of starving little Chinese in Shanghai, or a village of sleeping sickness at the edge of an African jungle, or a procession of blind beggars in a street of Arabia, or peacocks wandering beside rotting corpses and a troop of lepers in a street of India. Bandung is there, in an eye-catching contrast (CONTE 1955:15). Now, 55 years after Bandung, poverty is still haunting African and Asian cities, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The last available data on population living under 1.25 USD per day concern 22 per cent of the world population. The percentage is 14 for East Asia and the Pacific, 36 for South Asia, 47 for Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2012). Between the year 2000 and 2010, the urban population in the developing world increased by an estimated average of 58 million per annum. At the same time, UN-HABITAT estimates that through upgrading or prevention of informal settlements, developing countries lifted an annual 22 million people out of slum conditions between the year 2000 and 2010. Based on these trends, the world’s slum population is expected to reach 889 million by 2020 (UN-HABITAT 2008:XXII).

The papers of Albinus Makalle from Tanzania and Favour Temitop Jiboye from Nigeria seem to represent this world state of affairs. They speak about the relationship between poverty and environment in an informal settlement in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and the impacts of urban renewal on poverty alleviation in Lagos, Nigeria.

2. Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity has been declared by UNESCO “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations” (UNESCO 2001). And Africa and Asia are the remaining source and pool of cultural diversity in the world since the other parts of the earth — North and South America, Australia and New Zealand, Pacific Islands and Oceania, East, Central and West Europe — have been transformed largely, if not completely, into the extension of Western Civilisation characterised by its homogenising languages (English, French, Portuguese and Spanish) and religion (Christianity). However, African and Asian diversity has been suffering from impoverishment, as indicated among others by the continuous disappearance of rare languages and civilisations. This impoverishment is aggravated by the compelling globalisation based on short term economic and materialist interests, which puts as top priorities material productivity and profit, which transforms nature into commercial commodities, which pushes people to be greedy consumers. This globalisation is led by a small number of economically rich countries, which take the major part of natural resources of the planet for their own comfort, pleasure and security. Thus, Africa and Asia are facing a great dilemma: taking part in globalisation threatening diversity on one side, preserving the existing diversity on the other side. Moreover, globalisation — through the circulation of ideas, thought, information and the growing of social networks beyond Nation-States’ borders — has allowed hidden elements of cultural diversity to appear. This is the case of sexual orientation, for example, which has been recognised universally as an element of cultural diversity and a part of human rights (YOGYAKARTA PRINCIPLES 2006).

Two papers respectively from Africa and Asia illustrate this issue. The paper of Rasheed Olaniyi speaks about the problems of ethnic diversity in Nigeria, especially for an ethnic group (Yoruba) who live in a territory (Kano, Northern Nigeria) that is not

their territory of origin (Southern Nigeria). The paper of Herliana and Khudori shares a similar problem of exclusion: transgender people in a hostile society. The formal teachings of Islam perceive LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) persons as abnormal or a social disease and extremist Muslims consider them as an enemy to be eradicated. The paper speaks about the integration of a transgender community in an urban poor neighbourhood in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the biggest Muslim country in the world.

3. Colonial Legacy

Western colonialism has officially ended, however its damaging impacts have not completely disappeared in Africa and Asia. Colonialist countries have applied a series of measures for perpetuating their colonial rule: territorial control, exploitation of land and people, imposition of political-social-economic-cultural model, racial discrimination and territorial occupation. Some of these measures continue to haunt the contemporary societies in Africa and Asia such as the territorial division of Africa by the 1884 Berlin Conference and the dualistic structure of economy — modern capitalist and traditional pre-capitalist (BOEKE 1953) — that appeared to be the dualism of formal-informal, modern-traditional, urban-rural sectors where the first dominates the second. Thus, Africa and Asia have to deal with the colonial legacy.

The most outstanding example of racial discrimination was certainly the apartheid applied by the White to the Coloured People in South Africa between 1948 and 1994. Almost twenty years later, the wound left by apartheid has not been recovered. South African society continues to be characterised by “racial” groups: White (9.2 per cent), Coloured (8.8 per cent), Asian or Indian (2.6 per cent), Black (79.4 per cent), and by extreme differences in income and wealth. “Between-race” inequality remains a central issue. In 2000 the average White household was earning six times more than the average Black household. In term of housing, South African society is characterised by a socio-spatial divide between the rich *gated communities* of the White and poor townships of the Coloured People (WIKIPEDIA).

The paper of Martina Jordaan from South Africa represents perfectly this preoccupation. It speaks about the efforts of post-apartheid South African governments in bridging the multidimensional (social, cultural, economic, political) divide through a

compulsary module for students of South African universities: Community-based Project.

4. Heritage Protection

“Forms of music are forgotten, frescoes fade, palaces collapse: time weaves its web of amnesia spontaneously and without respite. In a context of instantaneous planetary communication and globalization, there is furthermore a genuine risk of standardization of culture. But to exist, every people needs to convey a testimony of its daily life, to express its creative capacity and to preserve the traces of its history” (UNESCO 2002). “A people that is aware of its roots is well-equipped to build peaceful relations with other peoples and to pursue what is often an age-old dialogue and forge its future” (UNESCO 2002). In this respect, Cultural Heritage is the instrument of two-way process between past, present and future. It takes “different forms, whether tangible (monuments, landscapes and objects) or intangible (languages, know-how, the performing arts, music, etc.) and is of inestimable worth for cultural diversity as the wellspring of creativity and wealth” (UNESCO 2002). The cultural heritage in diverse parts of the world is threatened to deteriorate or disappear due to diverse reasons: the homogenising force of globalisation; people and government’s lack of awareness, of technical knowhow and of funds; natural disaster and climate change; religious fundamentalism. Africa and Asia are confronted with these challenges.

Three papers respectively from China, India and Malaysia, illustrate well the way the different actors of cultural heritage of those countries deal with the issue. Roland Chih-Hung Lin presents his work on the heritage protection of Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius in China, which was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Sagarika Suri and Swati Janu tell us how different political regimes of India treated the Yamuna river, changing its functions from an urban landscape to a border of socio-spatial segregation and a draining of city sewage. Meanwhile Benny Teh Cheng Guan presents the urban development of Penang as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

5. Regional Integration

“The crisis of the post-war order led to the emergence of a new global political structure. This new global political structure made obsolete the classical Westphalian

concept of a system of sovereign States to conceptualise world politics. The concept of sovereignty becomes looser and the old legal definitions of an ultimate and fully autonomous power of a Nation-State are no longer meaningful. Sovereignty, which gained meaning as an affirmation of cultural identity, has lost meaning as power over the economy.[...] Regional integration and globalisation are the two phenomena challenging the existing global order based upon sovereign States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The two processes deeply affect the stability of the Westphalian State system, thus contributing to both disorder and a new global order” (WIKIPEDIA). “Past efforts at regional integration have often focused on removing barriers to free trade in the region, increasing the free movement of people, labour, goods, and capital across national borders, reducing the possibility of regional armed conflict, and adopting cohesive regional stances on policy issues, such as the environment, climate change and migration” (WIKIPEDIA). All these measures have appeared to be new elements of spatial and urban planning and development in the regions concerned.

Africa and Asia do not escape from this phenomenon. The Greater Mekong Sub-region or GMS is an example. It represents an emerging economic area encompassing the watershed of the Mekong River and comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and two provinces of southern China (Yunnan and Guangxi). After years of relative in-country isolation, millions of people are today on the move in the GMS, striving to adapt their livelihoods to meet their basic needs and to achieve stability for themselves and their families.

The paper of John Walsh deals with this geographical area with special attention to the impacts of interregional integration on urban development in the capital cities of GMS: Phnom-Penh, Vientiane, Naypyidaw, Bangkok, Hanoi and Kunming.

6. Theoretical Model

Africa and Asia are the cradle of great civilisations but scientific and industrial revolution took place in Europe. Scientific approach and knowledge have been instrumental in the expansion of Western colonialism and imperialism propelled by capitalism and industrial revolution. The voluntary use of scientific approach and knowledge by the West in dominating the rest of the world has been studied extensively

under the name of Eurocentrism and Postcolonialism (WIKIPEDIA). Today, in the post-colonial era, the dependence relations between the West and Africa and Asia continue to function. On one hand the West continues to accumulate, document and theoretise information, data and knowledge from Africa and Asia. This is possible thanks to its own researches, but also due to African and Asian students doing studies on their own countries in the West. On the other hand, the actors of urban development in Africa and Asia continue to consume knowledge, concepts and theories produced by the West. This may be temporary or permanent, depending on one or the other of the two following reasons: either they believe that Western concepts and theories are compatible with the needs of local development in Africa or Asia, so that there is no need to produce concepts and theories based on local realities; or there is a lack of local concepts and theories, so that they use Western concepts and theories while preparing concepts and theories based on local realities.

The papers of Eka Swadiansa (Indonesia) and Deden Rukmana (Indonesia/USA) illustrate perfectly this situation. Both of them represent the actors of urban development who see the incompatibility of Western concepts and theories of urban planning and design with local realities in Non-Western countries like Indonesia. Swadiansa contents himself with demonstrating the incompatibility of Western concepts and theories of urban development, which he considers Eurocentric, with the realities in emerging countries. Rukmana goes further by suggesting the use of urban planning theories rooted in developing countries.

Concluding Remark

In what sense are those responses relevant or irrelevant to sustainability at local or global level?

The UN-HABITAT published its official discourses on urban development in 2010/2011 in terms of “Bridging the Urban Divide”, “Inclusive City”, “Holistic Approach”, “Harmonious Cities”, “Right-based Framework”, all around four dimensions of equality: social, political, economic and cultural (UN-HABITAT 2008). The urban divide does not just refer to a fragmented space or a community riven by socio-economic disparities. More often than not, economic lines of divide tend to coincide with social, cultural and political barriers. Various forms of exclusion continue

to marginalize vast amounts of human capital ready to be mobilized for the sake of a sustainable city (UN-HABITAT 2008:XXII).

In order to *bridge the urban divide*, the UN-HABITAT introduced the notion of *inclusive city*. It provides *all* residents — regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic status — with adequate housing and decent basic services, and facilitates equal access to social amenities, opportunities and other public goods that are essential to the general and environmental well-being of everyone (*social inclusion*). An inclusive city upholds citizens' rights and liberties, and promotes social and political participation for the sake of better-informed and more democratic decision-making (*political inclusion*). An inclusive city is one that fosters economic development by way of equal opportunities for business and access to employment, and promotes pro-poor economic policies (*economic inclusion*). An inclusive city promotes social integration and celebrates diversity. It values people's cultural rights, recognizing the human capital of all segments of society, which it strives to enhance through the promotion of creative artistic expression and heritage activities (*cultural inclusion*) (UN-HABITAT 2008:56)

Seen from the UN-HABITAT's perspective, all the papers demonstrate the ways the urban development actors in Africa and Asia go consciously or unconsciously towards *inclusive city*. The papers related to Urban Poverty and Colonial Legacy show efforts towards *social and economic inclusions*. The one dealing with Regional Integration corresponds to *political and economic inclusions*. And those concerning Cultural Diversity, Heritage Protection and a Theoretical Model lead to *cultural inclusion*.

Cities are constantly changing. They are built, rebuilt, transformed and inhabited by various groups, and used for various functions. In this sense, planning comes as an attempt to bring some order to this constant process of transformation (UN-HABITAT 2008:130). Urban planning should be participatory, inclusive and representative of a comprehensive cross-section of interests and social diversity, with special attention for economically weaker and marginalized groups (UN-HABITAT 2008:133). As builders of bridges between present and future, urban planners are in a good position to help define and implement “visions” for inclusive cities (UN-HABITAT 2008:157). The recommendations of Rukmana in his paper on urban planning and urban theory from Third World cities correspond to this UN-HABITAT's orientation.

If this remark is correct, there is a reason to be optimistic for the future of urban development and sustainable ecology in Africa and Asia.

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