

Cities of Opportunities: Connecting Culture and Innovation

World Urban Forum, Abu Dhabi, 8–13 February 2020

Introduction

A delegation from Mistra Urban Futures visited the World Urban Forum (WUF) in Abu Dhabi in February 2020. The participation was part of the Sida Consolidation Programme 2020, as a major event and opportunity to disseminate and make accessible findings and results of the Mistra Urban Futures 10-years programme.

Participants

Stephen G Agong, Kisumu Local Interaction Platform, KLIP

Mariana Camissa, City of Buenos Aires

Kerstin Hemström, Mistra Urban Futures, GMV, Sida

Michael Oloko, Kisumu Local Interaction Platform, KLIP

Jan Riise, Mistra Urban Futures, GMV, Sida

David Simon, Royal Holloway University of London, Mistra Urban Futures, Sida

Warren Smit, Mistra Urban Futures, African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town

Tarun Sharma, Nagrika, Dehradun, India

Impressions, comments and experiences

Some general and shared impressions of the World Urban Forum were:

- The urban development “discourse” is more widely shared between practitioners and academics than before
- The connection between culture and innovation was recognized as important in many events, talks and not least in the Abu Dhabi Declaration (appendix 1)
- And, to some extent, the irony of summit being held in one of the world’s least sustainable cities

All the politicians who gave speeches were using the same concepts and terminology that progressive urban scholars have been using for a long time (e.g. the need for a shift from regulatory-type planning to more innovative solutions, the need for a mix of top-down and bottom-up actions, the need to recognise and respond to the fourth industrial revolution, etc.). This shows that the academic discourse on sustainable cities has found its way into political discourse, which is a very positive sign. At the previous World Urban Forums there has been a noticeable disjuncture between academic and political discourse on cities.

Perhaps what we are perceiving as a shared language in terms of urban development, is the result of the global buy-in, rhetorically and probably increasingly also in practice, to the global agendas of Agenda 2030 /SDGs, NUA, Paris Agreement and Sendai. Diverse stakeholders could converse more easily on the same panel and it has removed one of the main sources of previous friction. That is already a significant benefit of these agendas but hopefully it will also stimulate transdisciplinary engagement and action – and hence the ‘acceleration’ towards more sustainable urban development. (‘Acceleration’ is UN-Habitat’s new word for how they see the NUA and SDGs. This will be strongly evident when the World Cities Report 2020 is published on World Cities Day in October)

Inevitably, I guess, one significant silence at the WUF was discussion of the irony of holding the global summit on urban sustainability in one of the world’s least sustainable cities – even if that was part of the point of having it there.

Hosting the World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi was interesting in that Abu Dhabi is not really a model sustainable city, as it is sprawling and low density and doesn’t have public transport. However, there are many interesting initiatives there in terms of sustainability (e.g. Masdar City) and recognising the importance of culture and heritage in cities (e.g. the Souk development and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque).

Those of us who went on the field visit to Masdar City on Wednesday 12th (Kerstin, Michael, Mariana and I) found it both interesting and disappointing in different ways. It clearly is not a model for global urban sustainability as originally intended. It is also a creature of its time – a decade on, only about 1/6th of the site has been developed (at vast cost) and, while the architectural and neighbourhood designs, incorporating some traditional Islamic features for passive wind cooling, etc – but some elements are outdated and it is at best relevant only to high and upper middle income mixed commercial and residential land-use contexts.

WUF10 was particularly significant in that it was the first major global event to highlight the importance of culture and heritage in cities and urban development processes. The *Abu Dhabi Declared Actions* (Appendix 1 to this report) says that the participants of WUF 10 “are convinced that culture is an integral part of the solution to the challenges of urbanisation and achieving the New Urban Agenda... Culture is a core component of local identity including heritage, creativity and

diversity, and urbanisation needs to be planned, designed and managed to enhance this... Culture and heritage are essential in the context of peoples' empowerment as well as their universal access to services, and ownership of regeneration and social cohesion strategies.”

Culture is a complex issue, but it is good that it has been highlighted as something that is important to address in urban transformation actions. The fact that WUF 10 theme was focused on culture also highlights the deficit in the 2030 Agenda on including it as a dimension of sustainable development. This brings to attention the importance of culture in relation to urban development and how it plays a huge part in sustainable solutions for today's urban challenges: gender equality, climate change, and migration flows among others.

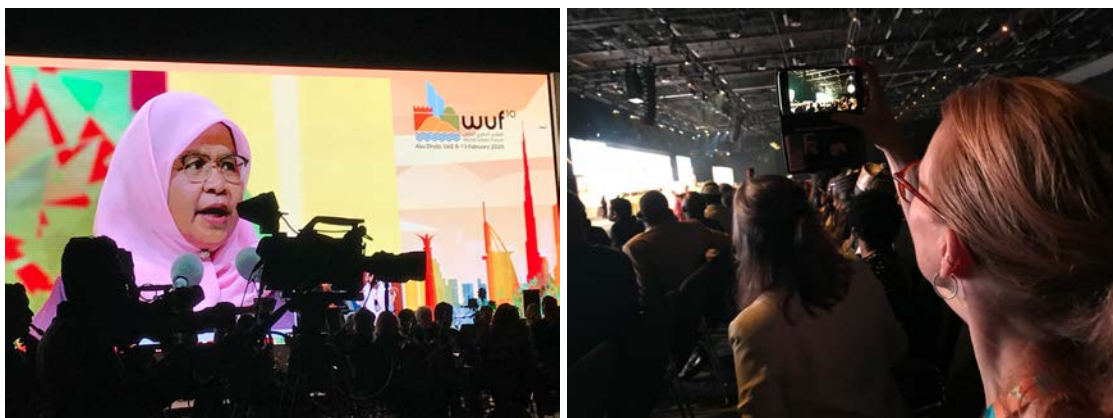
The Voluntary Local Reviews were the topic of many side and networking events held throughout the forum. They were mostly related to the VLR processes that cities are taking to achieve the SDGs at the local level. However, there were also a number of sessions relating to specific topics such as:

- Planning cities for and with women and girls (organized by Mistra Urban Futures Stockholm partner Global Utmaning)
- The launch of the SDG Project Assessment Tool
- The Law and Climate Change Toolkit
- Building Sustainable Small Cities.

Part of this debate was seen in the VLR sessions and the challenges that cities face when defining indicators to measure the improvements or development towards meeting the SDG targets. Likewise, many of the debates were focused on whether VLRS should be exactly the same from city to city or if the current differences between the ones already existing is the way to go.

In other words, I think it will be very interesting to see in WUF 11 if cities were really able to move forward on the localization of the global agendas and in overcoming the metric challenges and move to action.

However, as Mariana Camissa writes: “As this was the first time I have attended the World Urban Forum, I had great expectations of how global leaders and urban planners around the world debate which are the most efficient and sustainable ways to make our cities better and more sustainable, leaving no one behind. Since the UN has been defined this decade as the “decade of action”, I expected to see more solution and action-based approaches from city officials. Nonetheless, cities are still struggling on how to adapt or localize the global agendas designed for national states to the local governments.”



Opening ceremony of World Urban Forum 10, UN-Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif

Networking Event



From left to right: David Simon, Michael Oloko, Jan Riise, Warren Smit, Mariana Camissa, Tarun Sharma, Kerstin Hemström

Mistra Urban Futures, in collaboration with Sida, African Centre for Cities and GMV, arranged a networking event called “Innovative SDG/NUA Localisation Practices through Cross-Sector Co-Production of Knowledge”. The event took place Tuesday 11 February.

Event application text as appendix 2

Event presentations as appendix 3

David Simon opened the session and talked about transdisciplinary research, Mistra Urban Futures research agenda, the global agreements and the challenges cities meet in terms of localizing the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

Michael Oloko talked about the implementation in Kenya and in Kisumu, where overlapping levels of governance (city, county, nation) present additional challenges, as institutional boundaries not necessarily align with the city’s. However, co-production and collaboration have proven useful to bring local stakeholders together.

Warren Smit highlighted the challenges of SDG targets and indicators not always being very useful in the local contexts. As an example, Warren pointed at the transport indicators which assume formal and scheduled public transport. Energy efficiency, accessibility, vulnerable situations are not included.

Mariana Camissa talked about the work in Buenos Aires with the Local Voluntary Review, and its objectives to provide accountability, access to information for citizens and opportunities for new forms of collaboration.

Tarun Sharma gave a presentation about the situation in Shimla, India, with indicators, challenges, and opportunities as key words.

Kerstin Hemström, last speaker before discussion and refreshments, talked about how co-production can be promoted – although being contested, complex and sometimes without real accountability for any partner. She also talked about the forthcoming book, a guide for transdisciplinary urban knowledge co-production (spring 2020).

Jan Riise, moderator, mentioned some conclusions: the transformation potential at local authorities is significant and largely untapped. Multi-level governance issues need to be solved and there is a “window of opportunity” right now, through the global agreements, including the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

Participants were offered some refreshments which were much appreciated and the discussions went on for a long time.

Other sessions and events

Members of the team took part in a wide range of other side-events, networking events, launches and other kinds of activities. See list below.



“Accelerating Urban Transformation”, Raf Tuts, UN-Habitat, to the left; Azra Jafari, former Mayor of Nili, Afghanistan, in the middle

9th Feb

- The opening session, with among many others, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat Maimunah Mohd Sharif and the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani
- Special Session 1 – Sustainable urban development in the Arab/MENA Region
- Researchers’ Roundtable
- Right to the City: connecting the SDGs and NUA

- “Domesticating the *International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning in Africa: Lessons and best practices*”
- “Cities of integrity – innovative approaches to tackling corruption and cultivating a culture of integrity, trust and openness in urban development” (
- “Urban areas for children and youth: Establishing a collaborative network of organizations”
- Achieving Cities for All: Planning with and for Women and Girls
- Launch of the SDG Project Assessment Tool (UN-Habitat)

10th Feb

- Dialogue 2: Implementing the NUA to drive sustainable change
- Launch of UN-Habitat Flagship Programme, People-focused Smart Cities
- Special Session 5 – Voluntary Local Reviews
- The localization of the SDGs and NUA: Lessons from the GOLD V report
- Heatwaves in an increasingly urban world: the silent killer
- “Upscaling Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme”
- “Exploring the potentials of rental housing in African cities”
- Africapolis: Urbanisation in Africa – innovative data for better policies
- Urban-Rural Nexus: Challenges and Innovations (SLU)
- Voluntary Local Reviews
- Accelerating Urban Transformation

11th Feb

- Breakfast meeting with Luís Bettencourt, Director of Mansueto Institute for Urban Development at University of Chicago
- “Innovative SDG/NUA Localisation Practices through Cross-Sector Co-Production of Knowledge” – our own session where the whole team participated as speakers and moderator
- Launch of first edition of the Compendium of Case Studies for the Implementation of the Urban-Rural Linkages: Guiding Principles and framework for Action
- Launch of the European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews

12th Feb

- Launch of the “Inclusive, vibrant neighbourhoods and communities” flagship UN-Habitat programme (12 February).
- “Let’s start with streets: A step-by-step guide for cities”
- Book launch: African urban risk knowledge
- Masdar City field visit (see above)
- The law and climate change toolkit, an innovative tool to support the implementation of the Paris Agreement at city level (speaker)
- Building sustainable small cities: innovations in traditional knowledge systems (Nagrika) (speaker)

In addition, David Simon was interviewed at length about our experiences and the way Mistra Urban Futures worked, for an international research project (Univ of Melbourne, UCL and UN-Habitat) on the role of urban observatories.