Culture's Contribution to Achieving Sustainable Cities

Current urbanization policies often ignore the importance of cultural heritage preservation and promotion and the great potential of creativity in addressing social, environmental and economic urbanization challenges. How does culture weigh in addressing urbanization challenges today? As a major challenge of our era, can sustainable urbanization be achieved on a cultural "tabula rasa"?

Background Note[1]

The Challenge of Urban Areas Today

Today, for the first time in human history, more than half of the world's population lives in cities. According to UN-Habitat, within two decades, five billion people will live in cities, a majority of them in the Global South. Widespread poverty, a gross lack of sanitation and infrastructure, deteriorating urban environments and growing greenhouse gas emissions provide a grim view of the urban future. With increasing urbanization, uneven economic development, and depleting resources, cities in the 21st century demand serious consideration in order to manage them appropriately. The greatest challenge in places with a rich heritage is balancing the often-conflicting pressures of conservation of heritage elements with sustainability and local economic development.

In recent years, urbanization in many emerging economies has been rapid, incessant, excessive, and often uncontrolled. The rampant growth of cities has resulted in deteriorating urban environments, inadequate water supply and sanitation, and a vast increase in poverty among those living in slums without access to many of the social amenities and infrastructure of the surrounding city. Such modes of urbanization have also been destructive of local ecologies, natural resources, including land and water bodies, and cultural resources including built heritage, building crafts, traditional knowledge and creative industries.

Pressures for economic development and for the prioritizing of engagement with the global economy have accompanied rapid urbanization. In many societies, pressures for economic development have privileged modernization efforts. However, a variety of modernization projects based on universal models and global technological capabilities have in the past led to the failure of such projects or have had negative consequences

on the communities they were intended to benefit due to their insensitivity to the specificities of local resources and cultural frameworks.

Such failures have ranged from large-scale projects, such as new town developments, satellite cities, innumerable housing projects, the construction of metro-rail and road fly-overs, to smaller-scale but still significant efforts to increase sanitation through the provision of community toilets. Aspirations to being global have often been at odds with local potentials and resources, leading communities and development efforts to reject, neglect, or destroy local resources, both cultural and natural. In other urban areas, the real estate value of property has overwhelmed the identity and character of heritage areas as a result of high-rise towers or destroyed heritage structures.

The pressures of rapid urban growth have also made cities places of great inequality. In addition to debilitating social inequalities that define the identities of rural, ethnic, and transnational migrants, inadequate infrastructure and lack of employment options have created inequalities in access to minimal housing, water, power, sanitation, schooling, health, and employment opportunities. Many people have migrated from rural areas to cities, pushed out of their homes by famine, drought and natural disasters, wars, and persistent conflicts. Unable to continue in their ancestral villages or on their ancestral land, they have moved to urban areas in search of employment and education for their children. Despite the seemingly significant steps in economic growth of many countries, a major urban challenge remains how to create inclusive cities. Faced with competing demands, many governments have pitted development against the management of natural and cultural resources in the allocation of scarce funding. Hence, the conservation and management of cultural heritage and creative practices have often received negligible funding in comparison to, for instance, infrastructure development for urban areas.

Large-scale infrastructure projects have not succeeded in bridging the employment gap in urban areas. UN MDG programmes and evaluations in different countries have consistently pointed to the need to address poverty alleviation through livelihood generation and skills development. Ameliorating gender inequality by providing women with opportunities and support for employment is also an important aspect of making cities more inclusive.

One of the biggest challenges facing urban areas today is managing the risks associated with climate change and climate-related natural disasters. While the impacts of climate change on fragile ecologies are now widely recognized, cities are the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases. With the expected increase in climate extremes and variability, the frequency and severity of climate-related disasters is also likely to increase. Increasing and excessive urbanization leaves residents, especially the poor, vulnerable to the impacts of both climate change and natural disasters. Earthquakes and floods have also severely affected the cultural heritage in recent years.

Although natural disasters are not new, the frequency of climate-related natural disasters is increasing. Cultural knowledge in dealing with the risks of floods, mudslides, droughts, as well as earthquakes, is valuable in helping to make communities resilient. Furthermore, local building technologies and the use of local materials in heritage structures and the knowledge of ecosystem management that is inherent in their responsiveness to climate, topography, and available natural resources are all significant as sources of knowledge and offer a diversity of solutions for particular conditions.

UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes

In November 2011, UNESCO's General Conference passed a resolution for a UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL). This important Recommendation recognized the challenges of urbanization today, as well as the importance of cities as engines of growth and centres of innovation and creativity that provide opportunities for employment and education. The Recommendation identified urban heritage, including its tangible and intangible components in their natural context, as a key resource in enhancing the livability of urban areas and fostering economic development as well as social cohesion.

The HUL Recommendation integrates the goals of urban heritage conservation with social and economic development. The approach aims to preserve and enhance the quality of urban environments while fostering the productive and sustainable use of urban spaces. The concept is rooted in a balanced symbiotic and nurturing relationship between urban and natural environments as well as cultural and creative ones. From the perspective that cultural diversity and creativity are valuable assets for human development, the HUL Recommendation provides tools to manage urban change in order to integrate it positively with cultural heritage.

The pressure to follow a global mode of development has resulted in increasing homogenization. The HUL Recommendation approach offers opportunities for more plural, gentler, and more contextually responsive modes of development. By emphasizing locality, context, historical continuities, and identity, a heritage-sensitive approach to development promises greater opportunities for achieving the goals of equity and social justice.

Potential of Cultural Heritage and Creativity to Address Challenges of Urbanization

The cultural heritage and creativity are valuable cultural resources for sustainable development in urban areas. The built heritage, both monumental and ordinary, as well as cultural forms, expressions, practices, elements, values, and forms of knowledge, are all cultural resources that can contribute to development. Cities may benefit from these assets in three ways:

(1) Cultural heritage and creativity as a driver for economic development in urban areas:

- Historic towns and the historic parts of cities are valuable for their uniqueness and identity. In a globalized world that is becoming increasingly homogenized, the cultural and historic identity of a city can differentiate it from competing locations. Uniqueness and character command attention, and cities with heritage have what some scholars call "designer quality." Urban areas rich in cultural heritage and with a vibrant creative sector are more attractive for investments and businesses.

- Cultural heritage and uniqueness of identity also attract tourism and investment. Global tourism to heritage sites and cities has at times been excessive, insensitive, and even destructive. In some cases, it has exacerbated the conflicts between global cultures and local beliefs and practices. However, when tourism is accompanied by small local investments and controlled numbers of visitors, along with employment and training for local people in a variety of jobs from guides and waiters to business-owners, and carefully managed to bring maximum benefits to local people, then cultural tourism can be a valuable resource that brings income and improvements to urban areas that may not be attractive or appropriate for other types of industries. Cultural heritage that is carefully managed attracts tourism investment in areas that are in the proximity of heritage areas without damaging it.

- Creativity in urban areas has increasingly become part of the culture-led redevelopment of urban areas in order to bring about improved economic returns and increased competitiveness between cities. Museums, art galleries, performance theatres, and a variety of cultural festivals have become hallmarks of creative and cultural cities. Many cities seek to give impetus to a diversity of contemporary and innovative creative expressions.

- Other cities have revitalized their economies by carefully promoting intangible heritage elements, such as crafts, music, dance, the visual arts, cuisine, and dramatic plays that are often an integral aspect of historic urban areas. Such activities also provide employment for local people, building on skills that they may already have or may easily acquire in the region.

- In many urban areas, local livelihoods, hereditary or traditional occupations, and local economies are dependent on various inherited forms and practices or may be integral to a city's cultural landscape and heritage. Many traditional occupations and crafts draw on local knowledge of ecosystem management, natural resource extraction, and local materials. As many of them require lower levels of technology, energy, and investment, while enabling and encouraging the intangible

heritage and traditional occupations, the creative sector can generate sustainable livelihoods and contribute to green economies.

- o Examples of how the cultural and creative economy can contribute to economic development include: Columbia's craft production, which brings in an annual income of US$400 million (including US$40 million in exports), while tourism brings in US$800 million; Morocco's craft production, which forms 19 percent of the country's GDP, while tourism contributes to 6.5 percent of GDP; India's handicrafts, which employ over nine million people and bring in revenues of US$3.5 billion; and the UK's creative and cultural sector, which employ 88,250 people, adding some 3 billion GBP to the national economy.[2]

(2) Cultural heritage and creativity as a resource for improving the livability and sustainability of urban areas:

- o Many historic quarters and towns already have a strong urban logic and order, so encouraging the continuation of that order can deter haphazard new development.
- o The adaptive re-use of the existing built fabric is resource-efficient, as well as ecologically sustainable.
- o Traditional building technologies and materials may still be available and relevant. They can also provide opportunities for green jobs that are locally based or training that can be provided within the community or region.
- o Historic urban areas established prior to the advent of the automobile are often densely built for walking. They require little motorized transportation and form a positive model for ecological cities today. As many of these cities were built to be responsive to the local climate, the buildings were designed using principles of passive heating or cooling so that their orientation, thick walls, sloping roofs, and shady courtyards all contributed to making the structure comfortable for local conditions as well as compatible culturally.
- o The cultural heritage of cities contributes a strong and unique identity to the communities that live in them. Identity is an expression of a group of people or a community and builds a sense of belonging and of cohesion.
- o Livelihoods based on local knowledge, skills, labour, materials, and technologies promote green economies. Such a cultural environment nurtures creativity of all types that is rooted in local knowledge and materials and is responsive to local geography, climate, and natural resources. Livelihood options based on traditional occupations and intangible heritage provide opportunities for more inclusive cities that

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[2] Estimates based on National Sample Survey Organization, Survey of Unorganized Manufacturing, New Delhi, 2001; Creative and Cultural Skills, (London, 2006); See also the UNESCO brochure, *Power of Culture for Development* (UNESCO Culture Sector, 2010).

recognize and value a diversity of knowledge, practices, and training, and cultural expressions.

- o Local traditional knowledge and practices for ecosystem management, including those for disaster risk reduction and response, have contributed to environmental sustainability in many places. In many flood-prone cities like Dhaka and Bangkok, the older parts are often the driest as they were built on higher ground. Architects and engineers recognize the value of traditional construction techniques in contributing to seismic resilience in many parts of the world, as, for instance, in Iran.
- o The consumption patterns of communities rich in cultural wealth are often premised on low levels of energy and local materials and foods, and they integrate recycling and reuse.
- o Multi-use strategies of appropriation and small-scale production with little surplus and low energy needs, as well as a custodial approach to land and natural resources, avoid waste and resource depletion.
- o Localized solutions to the provision of infrastructure such as water, waste, and fuel (including animal waste) and local solutions to building materials and technologies also contribute to environmental aspects of sustainability. Local knowledge and traditional practices for the provision of infrastructure offer creative alternatives to universal capital-intensive technologies as the only solution.
- o The mixed land uses of cultural industries reduce the need for roads, vehicles, and transportation.
- o Cultural heritage and creativity together can help inform more effective strategies for adaptation to and mitigation of the increasing risks of the impacts of climate change, including climate-related disasters.

(3) Cultural heritage and creativity as an enabler for increasing the effectiveness of development interventions in urban areas:

- o In recent years, the lack of success of well-intentioned development projects have been a reminder that universal goals of sustainable development have to be reconciled with the particularities of place and its history, culture, and social institutions. Culturally embedded processes in diverse settings play a significant role in sustainable improvement efforts. While balancing the sensibilities of a globalized and interconnected world, culture-forward development interventions emphasize local context and the historicized cultural particularities of place in achieving sustainability. Cultural heritage and creativity play a supporting role in achieving urban sustainability and facilitate a better fit between goals and processes and local conditions in development projects from health to education and infrastructure. The emphasis on place-based solutions and local resources also promotes sustainable development. Social cohesion creates the conditions for development

interventions, while cultural approaches promote inclusiveness, equity, and diversity.

- o Culture-forward solutions that build on heritage and creativity assets also promote a diversity of solutions and approaches to pressing urban problems from infrastructure and housing to employment and food security. Current modes of urban development expect to have a single approach or solution to urban problems, for instance centralized systems of providing water supply or sewage. However, instead a variety of decentralized solutions that fit the needs and resources of different communities within the city are likely to reach more people, while also enabling them to provide for themselves.

Multi-Stakeholder Financing

- o Recognizing and building upon cultural resources cannot be in exclusion of other drivers, but requires careful planning to make them compatible. A diversity of solutions demands a diversity of financing options.
- o Large-scale infrastructure planning has required large capital investments that have generally come from governments through government bonds, or from international agencies. Decentralized and small and medium scale enterprises and urban development options provide opportunities for small and medium investors. Further, supporting and enabling market links to micro-enterprises and micro-credits nurtures livelihoods rooted in cultural heritage and creativity. In turn, this allows such enterprises to invest in their own environments in order to improve and sustain urban areas.

Governance and Institutions

- o An integrated approach to managing urban areas requires a variety of legal instruments as well as administrative coordination in order to manage a range of heritage and development issues and nurture and promote the cultural vitality of urban areas.
- o Institutional capacities may need to be strengthened and innovative mechanisms established for multi-sectoral approaches to managing and building upon cultural heritage and creativity as resources for better, more sustainable cities.
- o How cognizant governance structures at national and local levels are of cultural particularities when addressing globalization and migration (both rural-urban and transnational) has implications for stability and social cohesion in cities and nations. Culturally informed decision-making,

adequate representation, and participation in local governance are also central for ensuring social inclusion.

Finally, culturally informed modes of development and urbanization are not against or in contradiction with necessary modern infrastructure, innovation, or economic growth. Rather, urbanization that builds on cultural resources and creativity is more sustainable, more diverse, and more inclusive.

A focus on cultural heritage and creativity can help build peace and social cohesion as foundations for urban growth and development, and help create green economies that enhance sustainability, provide opportunities for employment that helps in poverty alleviation. Culturally compatible development projects in urban areas have been shown to enhance the goals of equity and human development, and building on cultural heritage and creativity enables and empowers individuals, communities, and cities to contribute to urbanization and become active agents of a city's development.[1]

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[1] For further discussion see, Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Integrating Culture and Development: Framing UNESCO's Engagement with Culture and Development* (UNESCO Culture Sector, 2012).