

Conference Summary

On September 8, 2015, an interdisciplinary conference on 'Sustainable Urban Growth: Addressing the Challenges of Urbanization in the 21st century' was held at the Center for Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability (CCRS) at the University of Zurich.

The overall purpose of the conference was to discuss the contextual nature of sustainable urbanization, meaning that policies designed to promote sustainable urban growth need to take into account the historical situation as well as the geographical location of a city.

Three integrative panels discussed urbanisation in megacities of Asia, green cities of Europe and emerging patterns of urban development in Less Developed Countries (LDCs). The panels featured moderated discussions of the challenges and opportunities of urbanisation in different contexts.

Experts speaking about megacities in Asia highlighted the importance of public-private partnerships supporting development of urban energy-systems and transport infrastructure. Speakers also discussed the impact of global production and consumption patterns on the forms of Asian urbanisation.

Presenters in the panel on Green Cities reported on urban design and planning in cities based mostly in OECD countries. They recognized the potential for novel technological applications in the context of creating smart cities and the use of technical solutions in response to priorities set by city councils to promote sustainability. Examples of successful efforts to promote energy, transportation and water efficient investments highlighted the link between new technologies, wise use of scarce resources and thoughtful life style choices (new bicycle tracks, new recreational space, urban densification, recycling). Such gestures are usually "one off" and not yet scalable. Still to come are harmonized systems that emphasize simultaneous integration of planning for the use of sustainable construction materials, personal mobility solutions, water reuse through specialized treatment, appropriate and localized energy systems and enhanced sensing to improve public safety.

Panellists on urban futures in global south cities discussed the role of new institutions that are jointly designed and applied by the public and the private sector. Discussions reinforced interest in and provision of public goods such as housing, education and health infrastructure for urban residents, especially the urban poor.

The speakers generally agreed that care must be taken to ensure that definitions of sustainable urbanisation are rooted in the lived experience of citizens in these countries. Too often discussions fail to differentiate the meaning of sustainable urbanization in global south city contexts. Care is required to ensure that local conditions are at the heart of definitions of urban sustainability. Cities of the global south are unlikely to develop along the lines of Europe, the U.S. or other high wealth countries. Success in planning new urban developments should be an outgrowth of and in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations (Sept 25-27, 2015) in New York.

The main findings of the panels were reaffirmed by presentations of three keynote speakers of the conference. Prof. em Franz Oswald from ETH Zurich argued in favour of a people-centered approach to urban design, responsive to the needs of urban and rural dwellers alike. He further argued that sustainability must include a fourth dimension, complementing the environmental, economic and social spheres. He calls this dimension psychological/aesthetic which also includes the consideration of love/passion as the main driver of sustainable change. After all, you cannot succeed in doing something great, if you do not have a passion for it.

Amy Glasmeier, MIT Professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, focused her remarks on «The Meaning of Smart Cities», recalling the historical and geographical dimensions of urban development. Referencing historical examples, she suggested that cities have always been in the business of attracting new industry in the hope of sparking economic and social innovation leading to capital flows and economic growth. With today's emphasis on technological evolution in the midst of rapid economic change, cities find themselves locked in competition navigating the tension between centralisation of knowledge and decentralisation of capacity. Accompanying technological

developments are centrifugal forces cycling economic activities toward the edges of sites of urbanization. Dispersal of wealth requires that cities continue to seek the creative frontier with the hope of balancing quality of life with economic opportunity. Sustained development requires careful planning and constant consideration of new opportunities even as they strongly depart from and sometimes are in reaction to existing modes of understanding and past institutional practices.

Ann Miroux, Director of the Division on Technology and Logistics of UNCTAD summarized the major findings of the keynotes and panel contributions and put them into the larger context of the current global debate on how to implement the SDGs. She made a forceful argument for the need to put people first in discussions of technological solutions to contemporary urban challenges. References from her years of experience in international development reminded the audience that the issues that challenge development practices of today are those also of the past, requiring that we maintain a commitment to getting “economic development” right with all the tools and techniques currently within our grasp. At the same time, she reminded us that it is not for the developers alone to say either what are the problems or what should be the solutions to this moment in global urban development, but rather to work cooperatively with communities around the world, which are all working for better lives for themselves and their descendants.

Ultimately, we have to become aware that cities are, and have always been, a means to an end for people in search of a better life, and these ends change with the evolving view of what a better life means.