

Sustainable Urbanisation in the Commonwealth

Dr Greg Munro, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, highlights the need for integrated action on sustainable urbanisation in order to deliver social, economic and environmental wellbeing across the Commonwealth's rapidly expanding cities.



Dr Greg Munro,
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It took seven hundred years for the world's population to double between the 9th and 16th centuries, yet from 1950 to 1987, it took only 37 years to do so. While the doubling rate has slowed since then, the rapid expansion of the global population has also been coupled with an exponential rate of urbanisation.

A total of four billion people – half the world's population – live in urban areas today and by 2050, this is projected to grow to almost seven billion, or two-thirds of the global population. It is further predicted that, towards the end of this century, more than one billion people will live in just 20 cities, 60 per cent of which are in current Commonwealth member states.

While economies of scale can be leveraged in cities, and living standards in general are higher in urban areas, almost a third of all urbanised people live in slums. The global financing gap in cities for services and infrastructure currently stands at US\$1 trillion annually.

For Commonwealth governments, cities are where they connect with the majority of their citizens. In addition to the provision of essential services such as water, waste and sanitation,

primary health care and environmental management, cities are also the centres for education and training, innovation and entrepreneurship. They are the focus of economic development, trade and employment. Apart from the national tax regimen, almost every influencing factor on foreign direct investment decisions is based on the city (liveability, safety, ease of doing business, education and transport, among others). It is no surprise, then, that 80 per cent of global GDP is already generated in cities. However, they are also major contributors to climate change, with estimates suggesting that cities are responsible for 75 per cent of global CO₂ emissions.

Former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, stated that “our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities”. It is clear why. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)



11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Key focus areas of SDG 11 are identifying sustainable approaches, building appropriate capacity and skills, securing finance, innovative designs and delivery models and, importantly, ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement.

Sustainable urbanisation demands collective action and true multi-level governance, to empower, enable and support cities and their citizens, many of whom are currently grappling with poverty, informality, infrastructure deficits, a lack of economic opportunities, and with communities vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters.

It is essential, however, that urbanisation is viewed within the context of cities and wider human settlements. The urban rural continuum and the role of secondary cities and towns in food production, transport and supply chains, necessitates integrated planning. This is well recognised in Rwanda which, for some years, has integrated the developmental planning of Kigali with those of its secondary cities.

Our cities and human settlements provide the environment in which an increasing proportion of Commonwealth citizens live and work, and are key to the Commonwealth's agenda for delivering social, economic and environmental wellbeing.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Kigali, Rwanda, has the five sub-themes of: Governance and

Rule of Law; ICT and Innovation; Youth; Environment; and Trade. All of these intersect at a city level. Strong city leadership and good governance are essential for cities to prosper. A total of 60 per cent of Commonwealth citizens are aged under 30 years old and, if they are to have access to economic opportunities, trade, business development and incorporating informal economy drivers into city economies, will be required. There are numerous examples across the Commonwealth of cities using connectivity, information technology and innovation to deepen democracy and development. Many of these issues have been on the agenda of the members of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and, in particular, through its Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Network.

We need to learn from each other and the Commonwealth provides a unique platform from which to do this. It is possible to mobilise skills and expertise at all levels: across disciplines from the community, civil society organisations, private sector, academia, regional and municipal governments, to the nation state. The Commonwealth has the unique ability to convene key decision-makers at all levels to enhance policy, legislation, innovation and financing, in relation to its urban areas.

In response, at the forthcoming CHOGM, the Rwandan government, supported by Commonwealth countries and by a wide range of Commonwealth organisations representing local government, the business sector, academia and the

built environment professions, are collaborating to advocate for a call to action that supports integrated action on sustainable urbanisation across the Commonwealth. In order to ensure that cities and human settlements have the capacity, skills and resources to deal with the challenges of rapid urbanisation; to adequately plan urban expansion; deliver services; stimulate urban economies and create inclusive, prosperous and resilient communities.

No single organisation, sector or country can deal with all of the challenges or identify and seize all of the opportunities in relation to urbanisation. We need collective, integrated, multidisciplinary and multi-sector action if we are to succeed. Under the leadership of the Heads of Government, the next CHOGM provides a unique opportunity to mobilise intergovernmental, associated and accredited organisations of the Commonwealth to create a meaningful partnership to support sustainable urbanisation.

Resources need to be dedicated to enhancing a more collaborative partnership for delivery, which can be enabled through the existing Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Network.

At the next CHOGM, we therefore have an important opportunity. Through the Commonwealth network, we can create a powerful mechanism to help shape our common future in sustainable urbanisation across our cities and human settlements, for the benefit of all of our citizens. The time to act is now. ◆

BELOW:

Lagos in Nigeria is one of the world's fastest growing cities. Towards the end of this century, more than one billion people will live in just 20 cities.

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