Urban Planning – quo vadis?

What does the implementation of the New Urban Agenda mean for urban planning? – This was the theme of an Expert Meeting involving the planning branch of UN Habitat which was held from 14th to 15th March and hosted by the city of Seville, with the support of the Autonomous Government of Andalusia and the cooperation agency AACID.

In the Spanish region of Andalusia, over the last decade, the regional development strategy has given priority to mitigating the segregation of peripheries and rural areas. In this time, the region has invested € 170 million of European Union, national and regional funds to achieve this. Intermediary cities and towns have particularly benefited from improvements in public services, to the point that many of them have even established their own economic development agencies. Today, Andalucía is considered a good example of urban-rural integration and of fostering pride in rural values.

The region's capital, the city of Seville, which is immersed in this regional strategy, has not shown any significant population growth during this period. The city's population is currently around 700,000, while its metropolitan area has around 1.5 million inhabitants. However, Seville has experienced a property market boom and has had to meet the demands of urban development, not all of which have been related to construction. With new challenges emerging, promoting a more inclusive society and combating climate change are also considered important objectives for urban planning. This combination shows the value of having suitable planning instruments which have enabled multiple stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process.

Juan Espada, the Mayor of Seville, underlined the fact that "One important way to cope with these new demands is to encourage local government to play a much greater role at the international level. It is necessary to create a facilitating environment in which local government agencies can interact with greater flexibility and in different governmental spheres".

Global trends and a strategy for urban planning

Laura Petrella, director of the planning branch at UN-Habitat, stressed the fact that the rate of land consumption is greater than that of population growth and that this is an indication that population density is decreasing. Intermediary cities have been particularly affected by this process. Another notable challenge relates to the mono-functionality of peripheral development. In poor income peripheries, population density tends to go unplanned or to be inappropriately developed. Petrella called for improvements in the planning capacities of cities and for them to appropriately manage urban growth. UN Habitat is therefore preparing instruments to help cities improve their capacity related to the financing, design and governance of urban development, following a 3-pronged approach.

Where are the starting points?

From a statistical perspective, the historical evolution and the social movement of the "city user" from being poor to forming part of the middle class has brought with it 2 additional challenges related to increased densification:
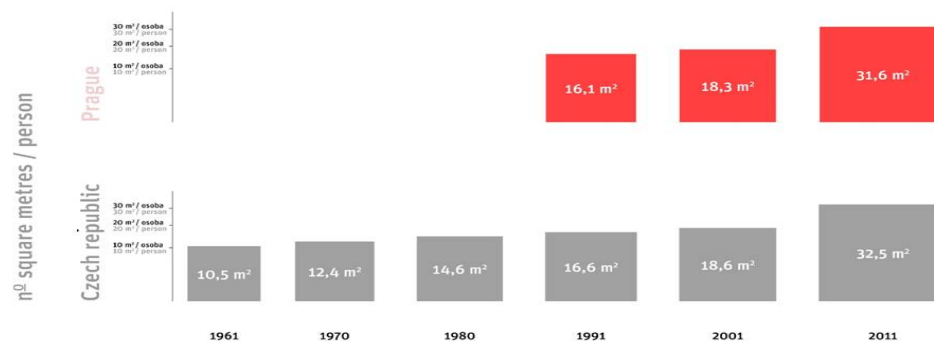
- Fewer inhabitants per household (which means more construction per person) and more cars per household. The diagram, relating to Prague, shows the doubling of its per capita area (m^2) dedicated to housing over the last 20 years – it has now reached $32m^2$/person (source Czeck Statistical office)
- One major spatial opportunity would to reverse the tendency to organize the layout of cities in line with the needs of the car. For example, in cities like New York more than 20% of the space is dedicated to cars.

How can this trend be reversed?

Spatial Aspects

Compact cities are desirable in terms of their sustainability. This also contributes to the more sustainable use and management of goods and services. Nevertheless, all of the examples presented during the meeting underlined the current conflict over the quality of the public space found in compact cities. A clear example of this confrontation was presented by Jeffrey Shumaker, former urban planner of the city of New York. This related to the use of Central Park as an open urban space that has ensured the quality of life of citizens since the mid-19th century. However, despite its crucial role in the urban life of the city, this park is in current time would be considered a contemporary utopia. In order to

maintain its public spaces, the city authorities have had to organise and protect it through regulation, infilling and by providing underground functions. Some of this has been done with local community involvement and has also entailed place making within local neighbourhoods. These measures have helped New York to be a city that combines large-scale public spaces and high housing densities.

Another issue that was stressed during the meeting was the informal densification of formal settlements. This phenomenon often occurs in cities located in the Southern Hemisphere. In cities like Cape Town, some townships which were initially planned and built up at the time of Apartheid have since been informally densified, growing in population by up to 5 times in only 25 years. Catherine Stone illustrated a case in which the original neighbourhood/township had been designed in the 1990s for 3,000 housing units and 14,000 inhabitants. Today this neighbourhood has 16,000 housing units and 66,000 inhabitants in an area of 92.8 hectares.

Formal interventions to densify informal settlements are also becoming more frequent. An example of this type of intervention has recently taken place in Mumbai. This included a US$ 1 billion plan to densify urban settlement that involved putting 20,000 people and 2,000 shops, covering a surface area of 16.5 hectares, into a 65-storey building. Densification is not only relevant for housing; it is also relevant for many commercial activities, including street vending, which deserve specific attention and not only regulation. By attending to both issues, we can hopefully achieve greater harmony between **density and intensity** and **vibrancy in the streets**.

Chinese cities have historically been densely populated and the formal and informal densification of neighbourhoods can be studied from different perspectives, including studying informal settlements. New options make a clear differentiation between dense and crowded when it comes to establishing spatial standards in a particular neighbourhood.

Financial and Legal Aspects

With reference to financing mechanisms, the exposure of the public sector to investment opportunities and access to financing mechanisms were both highlighted as relevant. Investment in urban development cannot only be left to the private sector and, more specifically, to large-scale private investors (such as corporations and banks). The funding mechanisms are very diverse, with very different interest rates being available, while debt can also weaken the public sector. The participants highlighted the importance for local government entities of making an inventory that shows the strengths of small and local investors. Although these may be more difficult to manage, they are important for sustainable social and economic development.

Cities that are experiencing a property or urban development boom, such as cities in the Asian context, can and should benefit enormously from learning from other cities' experiences. The case of Oregon shows that, even in a metropolitan area, different government bodies may compete for the same funds and incentive policies. On top of that, they continue to rely on the value of their share of local land, which they consider a major asset.

It was acknowledged during the meeting that the long term cost of urban sprawl needs to be made clear, as does how urban development could be considered a financial asset. The cost of urban services, such as health and education, in low density areas is up to 3 times greater than in high density areas. Another problem is real estate development which does not respond to real demands. Brazilian and Chinese cities are already experiencing the

consequences of the failed booms that previously affected the economies of Spanish and US cities. The situation in Brazil is now dramatic: 6.5 million housing units are needed in Brazil, but there are 5.5 million units of underutilised public and private property and also large amounts of empty land equipped for services. Furthermore, informal urban development remains the norm (this includes aggregated peripheries and failed satellite neighbourhoods).

Legal principles must be followed when organising and administering densification policies, land and property prices and land structure. Edesio Fernandes, an expert from the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, concluded that densification is not an automatic solution unless it is structured within frameworks specifically designed for urban land.

Finally, there is the administrative challenge associated with taxing small and informal land owners who informally benefit from densification. In the case of the Cape Town township, the property owner financially benefits from any rent received while enjoying the same costs for services like waste collection and sanitation.

Governance and Social Aspects

Given the challenges posed by densification outlined above, the importance of governance and stakeholder involvement cannot be underestimated by planners and they need to support processes of implementation led by local government agencies. A clear mechanism for participation is required. Moreover, tenants should be treated as equal stakeholders to property holders. As highlighted by Sara Hoeflich (UCLG), different actors may favour very different dynamics and strategies (push or block). As in a Tangram game, all of the players need to search for a single, shared solution that will allow them all to be part of the project.

The deputy mayor of Deyang, Ms Qui, gave insights into the challenges facing cities in China. Urban development requires a mechanism for promoting individual participation. The Private Public Partnership (PPP) model is the predominant way for carrying out development and the removal of local inhabitants against the payment of compensation is still the norm.

Finally, the crucial point was raised as to how politicians are dealing with planning and planners with politicians. Urban development and land management are important public tasks that frequently come up against individual interests or speculation. More transparency and monitoring is therefore desirable.

The upcoming shift in the planning profession:

Urban sprawl to compactness; Segregation to integration; Congestion to connectivity-

Planning will continue to focus on: providing appropriate street networks; the importance of a mixed land use approach to foster social cohesion; the importance of restricting large scale specialization; and, providing access to public services, public space and housing.

However, the social and strategic dynamics involved in this should not be underestimated. Is barefoot planning the way forward in order to gain and secure the energy of stakeholders in a long term process? Also, how much regulation is helpful for this type of process?

There is probably no single, global solution to what is a very culturally diverse problem, but there are global lessons and principles that can and should be shared. UCLG will keep everyone updated on the way ahead, working with UN Habitat to support national, regional and local governments in implementing the urban agenda.