

A Call for Leadership in an Urban World

Why don't our leaders talk about cities? In my own country, the United States, most Americans live in city regions. The 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas generate 75 percent of our GDP. Most of the Fortune 1000 companies and our nations' universities, research centers, hospitals, arts centers, and sports franchises are in urban areas. American culture—remarkably influential and potently felt around the globe—is imbued with an urban sensibility. Urbanist, writer, and activist Jane Jacobs said it best: "Without cities we would all be poor."

And, yet, our political leaders don't talk about their vision for cities. This may be partly because for some Americans, the mention of cities brings to mind negative images, such as the horrific urban racial strife of the 1960s, the subsequent decaying of urban centers (populated by minorities and the poor), and the growth of exclusive suburbs (primarily populated by middle-class and affluent whites). But this was a lifetime ago and recent evidence suggests that this paradigm has been turned on its head as our suburbs grow more diverse and large numbers of suburbanites, especially baby boomers and singles, are returning to central cities. Between 1990 and 2000, racial and ethnic diversity in America's suburbs increased from 19 to 27 percent.

In the developing world (or Global South), urbanization is inevitable and irreversible because of two profound trends—globalization and population growth in urban and rural areas. Here as in the Global North, agricultural development and urbanization are inextricably linked. For most of the last century, however, leaders in the Global South and many development institutions did not work effectively to integrate this economic reality into development priorities. Rural development practice was often disconnected from a focus on developing urban infrastructure and markets.

The result has been urban mal-development, manifested in the Global South acutely in the proliferation of urban slums. For most of the 20th century, urban leaders in the developing world regarded slums as temporary and slum dwellers as transients who would eventually return to the rural villages from whence they came. But as we cross the mark of 1 billion slum dwellers in the world, it is painfully clear that the face of poverty in this century will be increasingly urban and we must tackle this phenomenon head on to change it.

Fortunately, discussion of the critical role that cities can and must play in a country's dynamism, resilience, and economic growth is increasing around the world, particularly in developing regions where urbanization is occurring most quickly. For example, Zhou Xiaochuan, governor of the People's Bank of China (which is equivalent to the Reserve Bank of India or the U.S. Federal Reserve) noted in a 2008 submission to the Commission on Growth and Development that "10 or more years ago, the Chinese central government resisted urbanization, because the authorities thought its pace was too rapid ... this policy [of slowing urbanization] should be part of the list of 'bad ideas' because of the importance of agglomeration efficiencies....The Chinese government has now reversed policy and understood the key role of urbanization in structural transformation."

our urban future

Recognizing the profound trend of urbanization and motivated by our mission to expand access to opportunity for poor and vulnerable people around the world, the Rockefeller Foundation in 2007 began a broad exploration of urban issues in the developing world and in the United States. We initiated our engagement by organizing a Global Urban Summit, an unprecedented convening of an array of urban leaders from six continents: more than 250 urban scholars, practitioners, NGOs, public officials, and foundation and corporate leaders. They gathered at the Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy. For more than four decades, this Center has been a venue for framing contemporary international debates and devising creative responses to some of the most pressing issues of our time, from public health to food security to human rights.

The Rockefeller Foundation Global Urban Summit, consisting of eight conferences over four weeks, highlighted a set of actionable opportunities and solutions to the challenge posed by rapid urbanization. As you will see in the pages that follow, the Summit provided a platform for an in-depth examination of financing infrastructure for shelter, water, and sanitation; building climate change resilience; promoting urban population health; and developing

urban planning and design, all in the Global South; and, in the United States, creating a national policy agenda for transportation reform; and improving regional policy and planning. While participants discussed many innovative ideas and models during the conferences, one sentiment was particularly strong: These new models must be designed for the broadest application possible so that they can address systemic, not just individual, problems.

Participants agreed that the challenges facing cities in this century demand multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary approaches, rather than the traditional reliance on “silos” of policy and practice (such as the “stovepiped” work of the public health, environmental, and finance fields). New models for meaningfully and effectively working in this integrated manner are required at local, regional, and international scales.

With cities confronting a complex overlay of problems, the brightest and most creative minds must apply their skills and knowledge to make urban areas more vibrant, inclusive, and environmentally sound. Poor public health and lack of infrastructure in existing urban settlements—both of which severely hamper economic and social vitality—have been long-standing problems. Today these issues are further complicated by 21st century challenges: While improving health and infrastructure, we must also help communities become more resilient to the inevitable devastating impacts of climate change and slow the production of greenhouse gases. We must combat new health threats resulting from environmental changes and increased demographic mobility. We must tap financial intermediaries to help catalyze private sector capital to enable lower-income households to gain access to shelter and water and sanitation services.

Summit participants agreed that in the United States the next few years offer a critical opportunity to help craft and inform new policy that addresses a variety of urban needs: A reimagined surface transportation system that reduces pollution, decreases foreign energy dependence, creates jobs, and improves equity and access to housing, employment, and education. Building climate change resilience must be elevated in public discourse. National economic development policies must incorporate demographic shifts among central city and suburban populations as well as the growth of megaregions.

From entrepreneurial NGOs and creative businesspeople to resourceful public officials, Summit participants shared new approaches, inventive strategies, and promising solutions that are now addressing the challenges

of urbanization in every part of the world. Shack/Slum Dwellers International, a federation-based organization with operations in more than 26 countries, is helping inhabitants of informal settlements galvanize financial and political resources. In regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, nascent urban planning associations are expanding the exchange of ideas and best practices by strengthening professional networks. To better quantify urban expansion and slum development, new mapping technologies and community-based enumeration techniques are being combined. And in the face of rising energy costs in the United States, new policies are being crafted to eliminate incentives that favor building more roads and extending urban sprawl.

the rockefeller foundation's urban agenda

Armed with new partners, networks, and ideas, the Rockefeller Foundation continues to build on its efforts to expand opportunities for poor and vulnerable urban residents. For example, as part of our Climate Change Resilience initiative, the Foundation is supporting the development of climate adaptation plans for several cities in Asia. We have made a major multiyear investment in advancing equitable and environmentally sustainable transportation policy in the United States. A grant to Shack/Slum Dwellers International is assisting the organization in helping residents generate savings, housing, and political power. Support for UN-Habitat is helping the group hone its model for a finance fund for urban housing organizations. Our funding of the African Cities Network at the University of Cape Town is fostering a network of African urban planners. And we are exploring a new field, urban health, which will bring together some of the best minds in the fields of public health and urban policy.

It is through cities that the dreams and aspirations of many millions of people have been realized. We urge leaders in the United States and around the world to join in a global movement to invest in the ideas, institutions, and individuals at the forefront of forging solutions to the urban challenge

of this century. Darren Walker

Vice President, Foundation Initiatives

The Rockefeller Foundation