



**In their relentless pursuit of superlatives, many urban planners fail to realize that a good city should be moderate in scale and responsive to the needs of its residents.**

**Wan Lixin**  
wanlixin0616@sina.cn

One Man's Meat

# Forum draws journalists to explore prospects, perils of rapidly urbanizing Asia

**Wan Lixin**

A RAPIDLY urbanizing Asia and its regional implications were key subjects at the 10th Asian City Journalist Conference held in Jakarta, Indonesia, on October 20.

Focused on the theme of "Asian Cities and Sustainable Urban Development," the conference this year was intended to share information on the state of Asian cities among participating journalists.

The conference this year was organized by The UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, in cooperation with the government of Indonesia and Nishinippon Newspaper. Five journalists from India, China, Japan and Indonesia shared their views about problems arising from urbanization.

Thalekkara Krishnan Arun, Opinion Editor of The Economic Times in India, cited the need for new cities in India to accommodate migrants from rural India seeking new industry and service jobs, which have grown at least three times faster than agricultural jobs.

Currently India is only 32 percent urban, suggesting that there is still plenty of room to urbanize as economic growth accelerates. By the time India becomes 50 percent urban, an additional 250 million people will move into the country's growing towns and cities.

As Arun observed, this process will necessitate the conversion of farmland

for commercial use and the "displacement of people and livelihoods, which will lead to social conflicts." Hence the need to create policies that ensure displaced people become stakeholders in the prosperity that comes up on their former land.

Among possible options, Arun favors the establishment of companies that can lease farmland to developers. Half the equity in such companies could be given to the developer and farmers respectively. As development projects generate leasing and rental income, this money can be shared among stakeholders. Laws could also establish a multi-year lock-up period, during which farmers are required to hold their stake and realize the capital gains from the appreciation of their land.

Some state governments in India have come up with others solutions, such as land pooling. Returning 13-15 percent of acquired land back to the farmers in a developed form is another solution, along with upfront compensation and annuity payments for 25 years.

As new towns are built with land released from agriculture, the latest advances in urban planning can be deployed to make these towns sustainable and their inhabitants' lives productive and secure. These new towns need to be carefully planned. Vertical towns can counter urban sprawl, mixed land use can obviate long commutes and public transport can

connect people with other towns.

While creating new accommodations might be important in developing India, in urbanized and aging Japan, revitalizing unoccupied houses is a much more pressing challenge.

## Measured development

Akihisa Nonaka, Bangkok Bureau Chief of Nishinippon Newspaper, shared his thoughts on how to give a new lease on life to unoccupied, timeworn houses at risk of illegal settlement, fire or collapse. According to recent statistics, in Japan such houses number 8.2 million and are still growing. Many local governments have been trying, in vain, to identify their owners. Nonaka mentioned the implementation of a new law in May that makes it easier for local governments to knock down abandoned houses without owners' consent. Still, in the absence of an owner, local governments risk bringing down heavy financial burdens on themselves from teardown cases.

There are other options.

Instead of destroying these buildings, some city authorities and communities turn them into useful public spaces: cafes, cram schools, facilities for the elderly, galleries, etc. They could even be converted into low-cost business offices to promote local employment.

In Jakarta, providing decent housing to its fast growing population is also a

challenge. According to Evi Mariani Sofian, city news head editor at The Jakarta Post, the forcible eviction of residents in Kampung Pulo by city administration has created bitterness among those displaced.

Some residents defended their claims to their land, and whether they have legal documentation supporting their ownership rights or not, their claims are bound to have complex legal ramifications.

In terms of urbanization, China is confronting problems of its own.

Wan Lixin from Shanghai Daily elucidated the need for measured development in China after a decade of heady growth.

Although urbanization is increasingly seen as necessary to fuel sustained growth, more attention should be paid to the plight of migrants, social and cultural decay in certain villages and the long-term environmental consequence of urban growth. In their relentless pursuit of superlatives, many urban planners fail to realize that a good city should be moderate in scale and responsive to the needs of its residents — rather than a giant prestige project designed to impress tourists and visiting dignitaries.

In Shanghai's long-term urban plan for 2015-2040, now being reviewed by the municipal people's congress, there is a clear awareness of the limits to which a city can expand and the impact of urban growth on environment sustainability.