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Journalist conference highlights challenges faced by cities in dealing with urbanization

Wan Lixin

WHILE agglomeration in urban areas provides economies of scale, it is associated with significant externalities, notably noises, congestion, and pollution.

It was a view shared by panelists at the 11th Asian City Journalist Conference, held September 27-28 in Fukuoka, Japan.

The conference, organized by the UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ROAP) and Nishinippon Newspaper, was themed "Sustainable Cities and Communities — Sustainable Urban Development and Regeneration," and included visits to Japanese communities which have been innovative in revitalizing their ageing communities.

Rapid migration of population into cities fuels economic growth and consumption, but failure to provide adequately for the livelihood and welfare of the migrants also leads to discontent and frays social fabric.

There is growing recognition that if urbanization is not predicated on equitable distribution of opportunities and benefits, urban expansion and growth might not mean decent standards of living and working conditions for all segments of the population.

The ethical dimension of urban development calls for participatory decision-making process that might lead to sustainable, inclusive and accountable urban development.

It remains a challenge to adapt them to local circumstances as cities experience urbanization or deurbanization at distinct stages, participating journalists pointed out at the conference.

However, as Yoshinobu Fukasawa, Director of UN-Habitat ROAP, said, reports and observations from journalists would go a long way in determining how UN-Habitat can support Asian nations in achieving sustainable urban development.

Faizan Haidar, from The Hindustan Times, discussed the implications of New Delhi's rapid increase in population density from 6,352 persons per square kilometer in 2001 to 11,320 persons per square kilometer in 2011. The demographic shift has aggravated problems of slums, garbage disposal, sewage, traffic and open defecation.

According to one statistic, of the top 20 most polluting cities in the world, 10 are in India with New Delhi ranked 11th.

New Delhi is taking measures to tackle the problems. For instance, to ease its traffic congestion, priority is given to public transport. Dedicating more space to pedestrians and cyclists, creating seamless changes between

public transports, or imposing congestion charges can also help keep private vehicles off the road. Worsening urban problems could mean people might start leaving the city.

Japan is generally considered super aged and shrinking, but the situation in Fukuoka is slightly different. As Takao Maeda, deputy editor of the Nishinippon Newspaper, observed, Fukuoka is still relatively young, with its population expected to grow for the next 20 years. This allows the city time to adapt to the inevitable. Regeneration of aged communities is the key to the solution, Maeda said. Importantly, the city's future would be shaped more by the self-governance of Fukuoka citizens, who will decide what kind of communities they would prefer to live in the future. Growth is important, but so is maturity of the city. It is generally held that ageing takes away vitality, but is this true?

Social inclusion

Kim Eun Young from The Busan Ilbo (The Busan Daily News), South Korea, cited the importance of providing public space in improving quality of urban life, social tolerance and inclusion. Cultural revitalization should help bring marginalized segments of the population into the mainstream. There are ongoing challenges in this respect. For instance, government bought unoccupied houses to give them to artists. But rentals grew, and threatened to drive away the artists. Kim said there was a need for all parties to unite and hold against big capital.

Wherever we live, there is this need for safe, beautiful and sustainable city. We are in a transition whereby economic growth should be shared equally across all segments of the population.

Mongolia generally conjures up an image of an expanse of lush pasture under azure sky, but according to Saryantuya Tsedevsuren from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, air pollution is becoming a serious issue in a city that is home to about 45 percent of the national population, and often described the coldest. The pollution, blamed on rising population, soaring ownership of private vehicles and coal-burning power plants, poses a serious health hazard unless effective measures are taken at its mitigation. Media organizations have weighed in trying to find a solution — unfortunately to little avail so far.

Teeranai Charuvastra from Khaosod Newspaper in Bangkok, Thailand, said while Bangkok remained quite young, the city had not been well prepared to meet the challenges of an ageing society, with public infrastructures ill-equipped for the needs of the aged and disabled.



Panelists discussed challenges associated with urban development at the 11th Asian City Journalist Conference, which was held September 27-28 in Fukuoka, Japan. — Photo courtesy of UN-Habitat

Vietnam is also witnessing social dislocations relating to urbanization. Pham Hoang Anh from Viet Nam News observed that in Hanoi, the influx of migrants has pushed its population from just under a million in the 1970s to nearly 10 million today, overwhelming infrastructure and causing damages to the natural landscape. The expanding population translates into traffic jams, needs for schooling and medical care, and pollution, all of which are proving expensive to address.

Urbanization has other implications. For those who have moved to cities, going back to villages quickly becomes an obligation, Pham concluded. In many villages, only elderly and children are left behind. So when you visit a village, you are impressed that everything is done by the elderly. But moving to a city is a risk you are forced to take.

Regional disparities

Wan Lixin from Shanghai Daily observed that in China, the urbanization process is being subject to different, and sometimes conflicting, trends. The concentration of resources in big cities and growing regional disparities mean that migrants would continue to flow into the few big cities, but the process would be more nuanced given higher living costs, regulatory effort and demographic shift.

Meanwhile, as the social impacts of long separation from their children and parents for migrants become more manifest, there is a national strategy to steer migrants to small- and medium-sized cities.

The lack of working-age labor would

also pose serious threats to a city like Shanghai, which is rapidly ageing, but at the same time trying hard to contain the number of its permanent residents within target.

The loosening of family-planning policies is just one solution that is expected to improve the structure of the population. But today, the decision whether to have more children is shaped more by economic and social factors rather than traditional Chinese preferences for bigger families. Thus a sudden change in family planning policy is not going to bring about radical change in the demographic situation.

For a city like Shanghai, which is critically dependent on migrant workers for vital services, the future challenge would probably be how to put more locals back to work, and help renew their faith in labor as source of wealth and happiness, Wan argued.

If we view urbanization as something more than economics, the plight of migrants also deserves our attention.

It is part of China's stated government policy to promote urbanization as a measure to unlock pent-up consumption potentials, in changing the economy from export-oriented to one driven by domestic demand. But without more substantial, human-centered urbanization (addressing the rural-urban divide), migrants would continue to save feverishly for the education of their children or healthcare, suggesting urbanization might not directly translate into the kind of consumption as anticipated by policy makers. Wan believed that it is time for the government to address the hidden fractures resulted in decades of heady growth.