

State of Commonwealth Cities *Communiqué*

There is one overarching and compelling issue the Commonwealth must face if its countries are to overcome poverty, enjoy economic stability and sustainable growth. It is the issue of urbanisation.

Urbanisation must be recognised as fact and the Commonwealth needs to gather the necessary evidence to inform policy making that deals effectively with the reality. A major part of the solution to the complex issues of increasing urbanisation is planning.

Last week in Brisbane, The State of Commonwealth Cities Symposium heard startling statistics on urbanisation, and planning representatives from ten Commonwealth countries resolved to ensure the Commonwealth embraces an Urban Agenda.

The Commonwealth is urbanising more rapidly than the rest of the world and the solution to securing socially, economically and environmentally healthy cities and countries is a Commonwealth Urban Agenda.

In this time of rapid technological change and ever increasing numbers in our populations, our biggest challenge is the proper management of growth. In all areas of management and governance, policy making is inextricably anchored to proper planning.

The importance of human settlements was noted by Commonwealth Heads of Government for the first time in Trinidad Tobago in 2009. Now, two years later, there is a far greater urgency for the matter to be added to this, and all future CHOGM agendas.

The importance of human settlements was also highlighted and prioritised by the Australian Government just last week in Brisbane with the release of its second *State of Australian Cities Report*.

Cities play a critical role in the health of a country and the Australian Government has recognised the importance of governance in human settlements with a firm commitment to urban planning. Through proper urban planning social, economic and environmental issues can all be addressed. Planning is as much about jobs and economic growth as it is about creating better places and spaces and providing accessible services.

A Commonwealth Urban Agenda would see countries helping each other as they meet the challenges created by significant change.

Urbanisation throughout the Commonwealth is growing by 24 million people each year. Currently 75% of GDP is produced in cities leaving rural areas poorer. Projections show by 2015 there will be no net gain in rural jobs. Without planning, the rural poverty problem will be transferred to the urban environment with economic and social implications.

Population in the cities of developing countries is expected to double to 4 billion by 2030. In 2000 urban built-up areas in the world consumed some 400,000 square kilometres or 0.3% of the total land area of countries.

Our cities are growing by 2.2% per annum with city density growing by 3% and among the concerns in managing growth is food security. Each day globally we lose 20 square kilometres of good food producing land to competing objectives through development.

A well-structured planning agenda would allow Commonwealth leaders to help member countries determine a better future. Through committed programs, facilitated interaction and formal communication, countries would be better able to share ideas and outcomes.

As the planning of cities is important to a country, so should the planning of countries be important to the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth leaders should engage with planners, just as planners are engaging with the public in cities and communities throughout the Commonwealth.

A Commonwealth Urban Agenda would provide a platform to guide programs and projects needed for specific purposes throughout Commonwealth countries. Needs will vary and may be proactive or reactive. An example of how a planning agenda can react quickly is the Queensland Government's establishment earlier this year of the Queensland Reconstruction Authority. After the state's devastating January floods, the authority quickly rebuilt affected townships and localities, including Brisbane's Southbank Parklands that were proudly on display this week to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

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The real value in good planning however is in its intention to be proactive. The planning process should attempt to resolve future conflicts, provide certainty and safeguard people's interests in a transparent and equitable manner. Ideally planning should provide opportunities for stakeholders to have a voice in the decision making process.

Access to reliable data is the first premise of good planning and predicting the implications of climate change is one of the issues that cannot be lost in amongst the larger city issues.

Three Pacific islands have already been resettled due to consequences of climate change. In many parts of the Commonwealth climate change means climate change refugees. Planning needs to include a provision for this reality. In Tonga alone, climate change is an issue of life and death. Addressing global migration should be a part of planning our cities and indeed the UNHCR has included climate change on refugee definitions.

Commonwealth governments need to look closely at what is happening in their settlements on a number of levels. The issues don't just sit with housing or land - as important as they may be, the Urban Agenda is about how governments can manage places better.

Each country and each city is unique and needs to work with its own assets, advantages and cultures. However, a shared Commonwealth Urban Agenda can point policy makers to a basic set of practical actions.

The Commonwealth is in a unique position to help itself. The launch in 2009 of the Inclusive Cities Network (ICN) by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum is a prime example of practical initiatives that can be taken.

ICN was designed to promote inclusiveness as an essential element of decision-making by local councils and as a means of sharing good practice on the many issues around urbanisation and inclusion – slum dwellers, migrants, minority groups, women and young people. The challenges of urbanisation are huge and this was designed to help cities learn from others across the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth could also guide the need to understand the energy consumption and carbon footprint of cities and towns to provide the data for evidence based planning.

A commitment to the recognition of urban growth and planning issues faced by Commonwealth countries should be a permanent item on the Commonwealth agenda. Urban growth is both a cause and a consequence of economic, social and political modernisation. Job opportunities, economic strength and better health, education and livelihoods all depend on proper planning. The key for the Commonwealth is the establishment of an Urban Agenda.

The phrase 'Think Global - Act Local' was coined almost 20 years ago. But its relevance can be fashioned to address today's planning issues. Urban settlement may be a local issue, but it is local throughout the Commonwealth and requires guidance from the Commonwealth.

There are a number of things the Commonwealth can do to ensure its countries and cities enjoy a better future. The Commonwealth can insure against poverty, economic instability and social insecurity by first embracing a Commonwealth Urban Agenda and engaging with planning for better outcomes throughout Commonwealth countries.

Specifically, ideas are abundant. They may include the development of strategic, integrated and participatory planning systems which guide development, or the identification of opportunities for the creation of new sustainable urban development.

Whatever those planning specifics are, by embracing an Urban Agenda, the Commonwealth will take the upper hand in guiding the outcomes in the most serious issue facing our times - the management of rapid growth and the planning for a better future for all Commonwealth countries.

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