

How can young planners in the Commonwealth contribute to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable?

1. Introduction: What are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities?

“Today there are 180,000 more people living in urban areas than there were yesterday. There will be another 180,000 there when you wake up tomorrow and another 180,000 the day after that.” (Professor Cliff Hague, Heriot-Watt University)

Inclusive and safe settlements are not just about creating diverse communities. To be truly inclusive, settlements should seek to create an environment where all members of society, regardless of their age, race, beliefs, wealth or health, can feel happy, safe and valued. This could range from ensuring women have the same job opportunities as men, to creating open spaces which are safe and appealing to both young and old, or including worship rooms within public facilities.

The traditional definition of a sustainable city has moved on. To be truly sustainable, cities must now be adaptable to future change whether it be political, environmental, economic or social change. They must operate sustainably in their current context whilst also having built-in resilience and capacity to deal with a future which is often unknown. Coupled with a need to remain liveable and desirable, this presents an increasingly complex urban challenge.

2. How can young planners in the Commonwealth help achieve this?

As the policy makers and urban designers of the future, young planners will be at the forefront of sustainable city planning. They will need to address the challenges of modern urban life, from air pollution and road safety, to physical inactivity and obesity. This essay discusses five key areas where they can bring real added value.

2.1 Digital technology

Young planners will be at the forefront of emerging technologies which can help improve the efficiency of urban planning.

Online tools such as consultation platforms provide the opportunity to create more inclusive engagement programmes through reaching a wider audience. These are continually developing to include digital mapping, real-time visualisations and virtual reality tools which allow members of the public to see how a proposed development will look in context with its surroundings. In Santa Monica, city authorities are trialling a new urban planning app called CitySwipe which allows local residents to submit their opinions on everything from street furniture and parking, to murals and market stalls through simple yes/no questions and swipe



Figure 1: Virtual reality apps are being developed with 3D virtual avatars of a city (Source: Yuganov Konstantin)

options. Heriot-Watt University are even developing an augmented reality platform which could allow 3D models of new developments to be superimposed on to their real-world sites, letting local residents walk around future proposals.

Technology also creates potential to improve the resilience of cities

through the digital integration of data such as utilities, infrastructure and planning policies to inform the likely viability of future developments.

However, as technology develops and moves forward, the population will also require upskilling to ensure maximum usage. Planners must take particular care to ensure that digitisation of planning processes does not isolate certain demographic groups such as the elderly or those without access to the internet.

2.2 Age friendly cities

Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the global population aged 60 or older will increase from 12% to 22% (WHO, 2017). Coupled with this, 60% of urban populations will be under the age of 18 by 2030 (UN, 2016). Today's young planners will therefore need to plan settlements which are not simply designed for the working population.

A number of studies have shown that spaces designed for children are equally suited to the elderly. Both young and old have a slower walking speed than the average adult therefore regular stopping points and facilities such as toilets, seating, shelter and lighting are important. A legible streetscape with step free access, wide pavements, clear sight lines and bold signage helps to make navigation of cities and streets easier. Well-planned and well-used outdoor spaces are also proven to improve safety and reduce anti-social behaviour.

“Children are a kind of indicator species. If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for all people.” (Enrique Peñalosa, Mayor of Bogotá)

Spaces can also be designed to help foster social interaction across age groups. In 2017 Singapore created its first intergenerational playground which is shared by a children's centre and nursing home. Indoor and outdoor spaces allow the young and old to play, sing and do arts and crafts activities together. The playground has special features for young and old, including a merry-go-round with wheelchair locks and custom-built seats for toddlers.



Figure 2: Elderly residents and children at the St Joseph's Home playground in Singapore (Source: Ariffin Jamar)

2.3 Sustainable movement

Growing populations, increasing congestion and environmental degradation will be key challenges for our cities of the future. Young planners can help overcome this with measures to encourage sustainable movement both within and between settlements. This will need to go beyond a simple shift from private cars to public transport, towards a greater focus on the total design solution.

Land use planning can help by encouraging mixed use developments around transport hubs. This places residents and workers within close proximity to key facilities and services. A number of cities are also encouraging alternative uses of streets for activities other than driving. Since 1974, 76 miles of Bogotá's streets are closed to traffic every Sunday for use by runners, walkers and cyclists of all ages. In the UK, residents can apply for a temporary Play Street Order to close a residential road for a short period of time, allowing a safe environment for children to play outside.



Figure 3: Traffic free streets in Bogota (Source: Helen Anne Travis)

Existing public transport modes can also be made more sustainable with a shift towards greener technologies such as hydrogen fuel cells, fossil fuel hybrids, and electric vehicles. In Manila, the Asian Development Bank is introducing 100,000 e-trikes to replace current fossil fuel versions, with drivers offered a financial incentive to use them.

2.4 Equal opportunities for all

Inequality in our cities can occur across many aspects including income, social background, environment, education, or health. In a continual bid for prosperity, many cities can forget about the less glamorous parts of the economy. This includes low wage, low skilled job industries as well as affordable housing. Young planners must ensure that these vital elements of cities do not get forgotten.

An important part of this is seeking a diverse input when creating visions and making decisions on urban planning. As well as ensuring that community engagement activities reach a wide and representative sector of the population, we should strive for diversity amongst those employed in the policy, planning, design and construction industries. An article by Smart Cities Dive about improving women's safety in cities pointed out that until we achieve greater diversity amongst decision makers, we will continue to create a build environment designed by men for men. Instead, cities of the future should be designed by the many for the many. Young planners will form a key part of this and equality should be at the heart of their professional work.

2.5 Adaptability

Cities change at a fast pace and in order to be sustainable and resilient they need to change with the times. Young planners will need to encourage cities which are flexible to new industries, new skills, new uses and new processes.

Temporary land uses including pop-up shops, stalls and festivals are being introduced in a range of locations such as stations, homes, factories and open spaces. A new wave of flexible planning is also emerging, demonstrated by Qatar's new World Cup stadium which is constructed from shipping containers. Each container will house removable seats, concession stands and toilets, allowing the stadium to be quickly assembled, disassembled and then reassembled in a new location. This provides an interesting solution for developing countries where megaevents can often struggle to create a positive legacy.



Figure 4: (L) The demountable Ras Abu Aboud Stadium, Qatar (Source: The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy)
Figure 5: (R) Pop-up retail in Old Street underground station, London (Source: The Telegraph)

Young planners can help support flexible design by challenging the preconceptions of developers, designers and landowners who may not be accustomed to this type of development. It is also important that our future planners help create a planning policy system which supports this type of flexibility, for example through simple change-of-use laws.

Adaptability is also about responding to an increasingly fragile natural environment. This includes resilience to natural disasters such as flooding and earthquakes, as well as resilience against our own carbon footprint. Our young planners are in an ideal position to bridge the important gap between physical infrastructure (whether this be implementation of recycling bins, increasing cycle networks, or incentivising green energy initiatives) and educating the population. Particularly in developing countries, a shift towards sustainable living can require a significant change in the national mind-set to ensure that new technologies are well used and well understood.

3. Conclusions

It is clear that significant challenges remain in achieving cities and settlements that are truly inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Across the world and across all demographics, our population is becoming increasingly urban and this only heightens the importance of this challenge. This essay sets out just some of the ways in which technology, urban design, land use and infrastructure can help achieve this goal. Young planners are in a unique position to act as agents of change in driving forward the sustainability agenda for our future generations.

References

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World Health Organization (WHO) (2017) *10 facts on ageing and health* [Accessed online: <http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/ageing/en/>]