

Conference Report

Transforming our cities for a better urban future: World Urban Forum 11, Katowice, Poland, 26–30 June 2022

Introduction

From 26 to 30 June 2022, the 11th session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 11) was held at the International Congress Centre in Katowice, Poland. WUF 11, as the world's leading gathering on sustainable urban development, has brought all different types of stakeholders from all over the world, including all agencies engaged in urban development, and has been a renowned platform for exchanging experiences and sharing collective knowledge on urban issues and challenges. It aims to encourage international cooperation among national, regional and local governments, urban planners, academics and NGOs. Organised by UN-Habitat in partnership with the Polish Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy and the Municipality of Katowice, it is noteworthy that WUF was hosted in East-Central Europe for the first time since its launch in 2002. WUF 11 brought 17,000 delegates in total and more than 10,000 offline participants from 158 countries.

The forum took place under a general theme of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) – ‘Transforming Our Cities for a Better Urban Future’ (UN-Habitat, 2022). It was focused on a total of 17 sessions addressing the aims: raising awareness of sustainable urbanisation, improving knowledge of sustainable urbanisation through inclusive open debates and exchange, increasing coordination and cooperation between different stakeholders and constituencies, and providing inputs from stakeholders for reporting on the implementation, thus achieving Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), ‘making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. WUF 11 highlighted the current urban issues and challenges that the crises of the past two years have brought into cities. The ‘triple C crises’ – the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disasters and emerging conflicts in Ukraine and Yemen – have not only brought extensive new urban challenges but also exacerbated existing vulnerabilities such as poverty and exclusion. Covid-19 in particular has led to the common awareness that cities must take action to build resilience and accelerate transformation for a sustainable urban future.

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The debate at WUF 11 was structured through thematic dialogues. The extraordinary dialogue ‘Urban Crises and Urban Recovery’ shed light on enhancing response and accelerating urban reconstruction and recovery, particularly in relation to the post-conflict contexts. The six thematic dialogues featured:

- *Equitable Urban Futures* – the challenge of urban planning and implementation to create affordable, inclusive, resilient and sustainable housing to achieve equitable urban development;
- *Building Resilience for a Sustainable Urban Future* – how to build resilience across economic, social and environmental dimensions, including multi-sectoral and multilevel governance and institutional structures;
- *Future Urban Economy and Finance* – building resilient post-pandemic urban economy and enhancing more inclusive socio-economic development;
- *Integrated Governance in Spatial Planning* – to improve stakeholder engagement and cooperation;
- *Transforming Cities through Innovative Solutions and Technologies* – using smart technologies and innovation to prevent future crises while putting people first;
- *Greener Urban Futures* – to achieve environmentally sustainable development in light of the global agenda climate change.

Transforming cities through innovative solutions and technologies

To give a more in-depth impression of the forum’s debates, we focus on the thematic dialogue ‘Transforming cities through innovative solutions and technologies’ to highlight the multitude of formats that enabled a rich debate: Among others, Networking Events created opportunities for global practitioners and professionals to share ideas and experiences to strengthen partnerships and build communities of best practice that advance sustainable and inclusive urban development. The events gave examples of how data can improve air quality for citizens or create decision-support tools for local governments, for example:

- ‘About the ingredients in the secret sauce of smart cities: learning from urban innovation and co-creation practices’ – enabling and enhancing horizontal peer learning on innovation and co-creation in global South smart cities;
- ‘Fostering urban data observatories as local level resilience centers’ – discussing the roadmap to build local level capacities to lead digital transformation strategies that are people-centred and share the tools necessary for developing a rights-based governance of the digitalisation of municipal services;
- ‘Using technology and data for livable cities’ – demonstrating data collection tools used to measure accessibility, safety and inclusivity in public spaces.

Beyond, the dialogue sessions brought diverse stakeholders together to address the need for a ‘people-centred’ approach to technology for inclusive planning of cities and improved decision making. Key speakers included Maria-Francesca Spatalisano (*UN-DESA, United States*), Oliver Lah (*Urban Living Lab Center, Germany*) and other representatives from leading organisations and global think tanks. They highlighted that with the availability of open data and geo-informatics tools at the disposal of a town planner, contemporary town planning practices have proven to be more pragmatic and evidence-based. This has also boosted the development of diverse urban solution tools and products highlighting a momentous shift to digital methods being adapted for town planning and urban development activities. The ‘special session’ on urban data and circular economy, for example, focused on how urban data can help achieve equitable, sustainable and inclusive urban development, alongside the opportunities of promoting the circular economy in the built environment. It gathered actors to discuss ways to advance the transition to a circular economy and how data gathering can help advance this transition. Best cases showcasing ways to use innovative technologies and platforms for the collection, generation and analysis of data to support data-driven governance were shared.

The thematic dialogue on innovative solutions and technologies also pointed out the need for self-reflection. Often, smart city approaches apply technology uncritically, based on supply rather than demand. They, subsequently fail to fully consider the real needs of local governments, city residents or the broader aims of urban sustainability and inclusion. The lack of capacity and limited resources affects many local governments, jeopardising their ability to identify and procure appropriate technologies that meet their people’s needs.

Citizen-led open data for participatory urban governance

One networking event – ‘Citizen-led open data for participatory urban governance: experiences from Germany, India, and the Republic of Korea’ – allowed the participants to share experiences and lessons on citizen-centric digital initiatives for sustainable urban planning, management and governance from the three countries, with different dynamics of urbanisation and adaptation of digitalisation in their cities. The event was organised by German institutes – the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IOER), Dresden and Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) on 27 June 2022. The ninety-minute session, with input and a panel discussion, was moderated by Saebom Song and Mohit Kapoor.

With his keynote, Mathias Jehling laid the foundation for the panel discussion by highlighting the key levers of change needed to develop open data initiatives toward participation and co-creation in both the global North and global South, by strengthening accountability, building trust and improving citizen engagement. The need to

assess social, legal and technological settings for enabling the co-creation of knowledge amongst citizens and public actors through open data was highlighted. Stefano Della Chiesa (*IOER, Germany*) added to this in his opening remarks by asking fundamental questions about the meaning and definition of open data. Open data is a knowledge enabler that empowers stakeholders and actors to co-create solutions and new knowledge. He emphasised the growing international attention to the importance of using open data as a policy priority in the European Union. He gave examples of how crowd-sourced data or open government data enable urban planners to harness and exploit the potential of this data.

In her contributions to the panel, Carolin Klonner (*University of Heidelberg, Germany*) spoke about German cities and their approach to using open data as a communication tool between various stakeholders and actors for building trust with the citizens. Referring to her project, ‘participatory mapping’, she shared her experience of working on disaster risk reduction projects using open data and integrating local knowledge for urban flooding and heat stress (Klonner et al., 2021). She noted that the use of open data provides a ‘playing field’ for citizens to share their opinions and communicate by directly determining what data and parameters are needed to build a system through citizens’ experiences with disasters. She stresses that citizens are experts in their cities and urban issues, based on their own experience, and can make use of open data to make optimal place-based decisions. Therefore, she proposed ‘collective open data’ and emphasised that the transparent process of data collection and selection can maximise citizens’ creativity in using open data in the future.

Harpal Dave (*Town and Country Planning Organisation, India*) gave an insight into the Government of India’s Smart Cities Mission and National Urban Digital Mission (NUDM) initiatives, focusing on empowering citizens through responsive and participatory digital governance with a key focus on people, processes and platforms. He highlighted the merits of low-cost and widely available internet data in India resulting in the roll-out of e-governance services at scales such as online building permit systems, e-property tax collections etc., and the wide adoption by millions of citizens who acknowledge such ‘value additions’ improving their quality of life. Regarding trust building for the use of open data in response to Carolin Klonner, he stressed it is significant for central government to provide and manage reliable data with coherent standards. For example, open data on public transportation, in particular, must maintain accuracy and reliability. He pointed out that the role of academia is important in monitoring and assessing the quality of open data.

HyeJeong Lim (*National Information Society Agency, Republic of Korea*) gave an overview of the national open data strategy and the third open data master plan in the Republic of Korea, focusing on encouraging ‘citizen-led use of open data’ and creating new forms of civic collaboration. She shared interesting cases of how open data policy has changed over time, which demonstrates the evolving phases from techno-driven

top-down implementation to citizen-led usage. Korea's experience with open data during COVID-19 demonstrated the importance of using open data to tackle an urgent national disaster. Referring to the public mask app, she presented an example in which the national government responded agilely to public demand and interest by using public open data to supply public masks rapidly. However, to maintain open data quality, which is a prerequisite for more active use of open data, its evaluation and monitoring at the national level and continuous education and training of the public sector are highlighted as essential.

Crossing and combining dynamic experiences of the global North and global South, the panel discussion shed light on the various evidence of more inclusive and transformative policies and implementations of open data in different social, legal and economic contexts. However, the panel discussion highlighted the need for a common ground of placing people at the centre of any policy and project. Therefore, an exchange of experiences and potential pathways across cultural and sociopolitical contexts is key.

Closing of WUF 11 and the future urban agenda

After five days of debate and discussion, with 400 events featuring 700 speakers from government, civil society, communities, academia and the private sector, the eleventh session of the WUF closed on 30 June 2022. The enthusiasm generated by participants was however balanced by warnings that there could be no further delays in taking urgent action to deliver sustainable urbanisation, given the multiple crises confronting world cities. Addressing the closing ceremony, Maimunah Mohd. Sharif, executive director of UN-Habitat, said:

The climate emergency, pandemics, the housing crisis, violence and conflict, all converge in cities. If we want to transform to a better urban future, we will have to increasingly deal with urban crises. We have no excuse not to be prepared. We don't have much time to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets of 2030. We have only 7.5 years, 90 months, or 2,742 days left to implement the NUA in order to achieve the SDGs. So, what shall we do? The time to act is now.

Subsequently, urban practitioners need to realise the potential of digitisation and technology to address this urgent demand. This requires a sustained effort to build capacities and equip town planners, city managers and local government officials to use contemporary digital tools innovatively and efficiently. The closing ceremony concluded with the torch for WUF 12 in 2024 being officially passed to the Egyptian government.

References

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