

REPORT ON WORLD PLANNERS CONGRESS AND THE WORLD URBAN FORUM HELD IN VANCOUVER, CANADA, JUNE 16 – 23, 2006

The World Planners Congress and the World Urban Forum provided a significant platform for the showcasing of the works and opinions of 1150 delegates from 47 countries including a significant number of planners from wide ranging backgrounds. From my time of arrival into Vancouver until I left every moment was well spent. The registration for the World Urban Forum started at the airport, thus contributing to the efficient delivery of the planned programme. The registration for the Planners congress which took place at the venue was a little less efficient, but once this was done the conference went very smoothly. From the outset there was a wide range of activities for everyone to participate in. The manner in which the fora were organized provided participants with the option of participating in sessions of their choice. My work in housing, most naturally, influenced in a big way the sessions in which I participated.

On the first day I was blessed with the opportunity of participating in a field trip, with brown bag lunch in hand to look at urban agricultural land uses. This took us to a cranberry farm, a co-generation plant and tomato greenhouse, an urban edge planting project and a vineyard and winery. Day two was equally interesting. The address made by the keynote speaker Paul Farmer on “Sustainability – Planning’s New Holy Grail” reintroduced us to the issue of smart growth. Cliff Hague also addressed the session on “New Urban Planning”. These presentations underscored the need for integrated planning and for rethinking the conventional planning methods and embracing approaches that are more flexible.

On day three the session addressed the issue of planning tools for urban disaster resilience by introducing models that provided early estimation of damage, real time information of actual events, detailed loss estimation scenarios and agent based simulation. The issue of how communities mitigate against hazards was also addressed. One of the more interesting presentations for me, entitled “The Ethical Planner” also took place on this day. It examined issues pertaining to the moral, procedural and substantive responsibilities of planners. This presentation also underscored the need to facilitate democratic partnerships, questioned the values that planners should exercise in decision-making and emphasized the ethical responsibility of planners to future generations regarding environmental sustainability. It also spoke to the need to integrate nature and culture with professional responsibility. A presentation was also done entitled, “Towards Social Sustainability – Building the Bridge Between Health and Housing”. It emphasized the importance of housing to social sustainability, looked at issues pertaining to vulnerable groups such as the aged; identified the roles of cities and examined the tools needed to facilitate. The Keynote speaker at the evening’s plenary was Dr. Anna Kajumumulo Tibaijuka, head of UN Habitat. She too noted the impact of rapid urbanization on poverty; emphasized the issue of SMART growth and spoke to the Millennium Development Goals providing opportunities for the international community to address global problems.

The keynote speaker on day four was Dr. Dennis Mileti, the Author of “Disaster by Design”. He spoke on Natural Hazards and Sustainable Development and reiterated the need for an integrated approach to be adopted to address natural disasters, so as to ensure resiliency, as well as to build local capacity. The need for public education was also emphasized. I later participated in the session entitled, Density, Design and Doom. The presenters included Larry Beasley, Bill Rees, Patrick Condon and Andres Duany (activist for new urbanism. Emerging issues included the unprecedented urbanization and the need for ecological footprint analysis; the need to reconfigure how we live and curtail the export of middle class lifestyle that supports a wastage of space and design diverse building types to support different lifestyles.

Subsequent to an earlier informal meeting held with Commonwealth Association of Planners (CAP) members to air a few issues, the Commonwealth Association Business Meeting was held on June 20, 2006. The meeting was updated on issues pertaining to the financing of the Association and membership subscription, RTPI Development work and the nature of the Commonwealth Foundation support. The meeting also heard of CIDA's extension work in Trinidad and Guyana and Women Development Issues brought by the Women in Planning Network members. The need for the continued education of planners and the establishment of exchange programmes for planners were also discussed. The election of officers for the Association was also undertaken at this meeting. The meeting ended on the understanding that the possibilities will be explored for the holding of the Congress in Johannesburg in 2008.

The closing Keynote Speaker, Mr. Stephen Lewis, extensively challenged planners to re-evaluate the way in which we undertake our work. Mr. Lewis, though not a planner, used his address to share with participants the role he envisions for planners in this changing world impacted by HIV/AIDS. He examined this in the context of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7 which speaks to ensuring environmental sustainability and in particular target 11 "Achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020. He placed the planner, in a position akin to that of a ship's rudder, in the fight against HIV/Aids, namely in the:

1. provision of sanitation particularly in slums with the advent of AIDS and the decimation of people's immune systems
2. household food security- he sees food and security as being central to urban life, thus making it more important to the planning process
3. energy supply – the need for the planner to be at the core in the provision of energy, such as that from fossil fuel
4. urban infrastructure – the planner cannot be indifferent to the human condition- issues of urban homelessness must be addressed
5. the provision of adequate financing to meet the MDGs, urban growth, etc - the 0.7% foreign aid commitment agreed to by G8 countries is not being met, due to delinquency. The Planner needs to take a stand on such matters.
6. matters of capacity building, particularly in the urban setting. The pandemic of HIV/AIDS has compounded everything. The pervasiveness of death and the loss of productive population between the ages 15 – 49 is impacting many countries
7. advocacy – more pronounced social movement of planners is needed; not peripheral social intervention. The planner needs to be tenacious, dogged and indefatigable.

Another speaker from the UN Habitat also addressed the need for:

- planning to have its own core set of values to deal with political issues such as forced eviction – as Planners cannot afford to stand in the sideline
- Planning Associations must become a strong part of internationalism; to lobby international organization for funding – many of which view planning as getting in the way.
- Planning to be given a bigger footprint at conferences such as the World Urban Forum to be held in China in 2008.

Due to the overlapping of the World Planners Congress and the World Urban Forum on some days, I did not commence my participation in the latter forum until approximately June 20. My first participation in a plenary was that on Social Inclusion and Cohesion, which saw Jockin

Arthuptham of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India making a very powerful presentation. Lindiwe Sisulu, Minister of Housing South Africa, also addressed the gathering. There were calls for poverty to be brought back to the centre of the debate, need for collaboration between governments and civil society

Subsequent sessions explored issues pertaining to land markets and the impact of outdated legislation on its efficiency; safety and security; the transportation sector as it relates to funding for infrastructure; disaster risk and development planning and the need for social and environmental prevention. The issue of the role of faith-based institutions in urban security and the citizen's role in neighbourhood security were also explored.

The June 22 plenary addressed the issue of Urban Growth and Environment. Presenter, Enrique Penalosa from Colombia spoke to the need for greater public pedestrian space; and the need to place restrictions on car use, so as to make resources available for other social good. Subsequent dialogue on this day saw Prof. John Friedmann speaking on "The Role of Cities in Creating Environmental Sustainability." Osamam Saleem also spoke to the expansion of the security footprints of cities and Tasneem Essop spoke to the issue of wealth setting the agenda and the need for governments to act in the interest of the public good, while seeking to ignite the responsiveness of the private sector.

Cliff Hague, former President of the Commonwealth Association of Planners and now Secretary General also addressed one of the sessions. He spoke to the overtaking of planning practice by rapid urbanization. He also used the opportunity to highlight ten principles of planning that present planners should adhere to:

1. Sustainability
2. Integrated planning
3. Budget connectivity to plan
4. Partnerships
5. Subsidiarity – undertaking of job by the lowest level capable of doing it
6. Market responsiveness – setting the agenda regarding the direction of market
7. Access to land
8. Recognize the reality of informal settlements
9. Appropriate tools to reflect affordability
10. Pro-poor planning – inclusiveness and the recognition of cultural variation

In another session Professor Mabugunje called for people's involvement in planning to avert the messing up of master plans.

The closing plenary of the World Urban Forum addressed the role of civil society, women, the private and the youth in addressing the challenges of the world. The increased involvement of women in decision-making was highlighted, as well as, the need for the private sector to be given greater access to participate in urban sustainability problems. Regarding the youth, the call was made for the recognition of this socially under-recognised demographic via the establishment of advisory councils and the undertaking of field research to determine their impact in communities.

In concluding it must be said that the juxtapositioning of the World Planners Congress and the World Urban Forum provided the ideal platform for information exchange and networking. The topics discussed at the plenary and the parallel sessions were quite interesting and the subsequent interchange and discourse were meaningful. The tying in of off-site field trips provided a double benefit, that of affording us an opportunity of seeing Vancouver and at the same time providing an opportunity for us to see planning at work on the ground.

The fora were not all about the talk, there were also many planned social activities to satisfy the desires of the diverse participants. These ranged from receptions and dinners to book launches. The Planners Congress also ensured that we were well fed by providing breakfast and many snack options in between sessions. We were also well fed at cocktail receptions and dinners. The free bus passes given at the World Urban Forum also afforded us the opportunity to see a little bit more of Vancouver than would otherwise be possible as we rode on the city's buses and sea train. The entertainment packages at the World Urban Forum were exceptional. The performance of the Masai Sisters from Kenya was remarkable and stood out for me. The literature and cultural displays were also quite extensive and did much for the showcasing of the offerings of the many participating countries.

Special commendation to CAP for sponsoring my participation in the fora, as President of the Jamaican Institute of Planners, and in particular Annette O'Donnell for being so responsive to my needs and for ensuring that I got very comfortable accommodation and financial support during my stay, thus making my stay very enjoyable and meaningful. I must admit that I am back home in Jamaica much more educated and aware of existing and emerging planning issues around the world. With the added responsibility of being selected as the women in planning representative for the Americas at the CAP Business Meeting, I now look forward to the challenges to come and hope to continue to make a meaningful contribution.