

Transitions in Urban Environments

World Social Science Forum session, 13 September 2015

During this session, a number of early career researchers who participated in the World Social Science Fellows Programme presented their perspectives on the transitions in urban environments. Questions they addressed included:

- What are the major transitions in urban environments?
- What are their major drivers?
- What alternatives can we suggest to reduce the negative consequences and expand the positive ones?

Three sets of presentations formed the backbone of the session; one by Fellows who participated in the first seminar on Sustainable Urbanization in 2013 (in Quito, Ecuador), one by Fellows who participated in the second seminar on sustainable urbanization in 2014 (in Taipei, Taiwan) and one by Fellows who had just participated in the third and final seminar on sustainable urbanization in Durban, South Africa. The session was chaired by Mark Swilling (Sustainability Institute, Stellenbosch, South Africa) and Etienne Nel (University of Otago, New Zealand and Comparative Research on Poverty Programme). Below, each group reports on its contribution to the session.

Quito Fellows (report by Ferne Edwards)

The Quito Group focused on the outcomes, approach and perspectives from the recently published book, *Untamed Urbanisms: Practices and narratives on socio-environmental change for urban sustainability* (London, Routledge). This book, an outcome from the Quito Workshop in 2013, teases out understandings of urban transitions and socio-political practices in the Global South.

The session was formatted as a panel to best capture the views of its four World Social Science Fellows in attendance: Dr. Jenia Mukherjee, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata; Dr. Irene Sotiropoulou, Independent Scholar / Researcher from Greece; Dr. Moises Lino e Silva, Harvard University; and Dr. Ferne Edwards, University of Melbourne, who hosted and presented in the session. (Unfortunately Dr. John Harris from the University of Oklahoma was unable to attend.)

Fellows discussed their contributions in the book and how their work had developed since, with topics ranging from the transforming trajectories of blue infrastructures in Kolkata, 'infernal alternatives' as the re-politicisation of the relationship between urban development, labour devaluation and privatisation of commons and public goods in urban and rural areas, and the emergence of urban alternative food procurement towards greater control over food access and quality.

The audience were engaged and provided ample questions to all session participants. The final statement from an audience member commented on how impressed he'd been by the session to then invite all the panelists to publish in his book series if they so desired! The Quito Fellows who attended the Forum are now planning to take the perspective and approach of *Untamed Urbanisms* to the next level to design a research project to investigate untamed urban water practices in India, Brazil and Nigeria.

Taipei Fellows (report by Leon Morenas)

The WSS Fellows from Taipei made two presentations.

Sonia Roitman and Peter Elias made a presentation on, "How do we make sense of urbanization?" In their presentation, they highlighted the fact that sustainable urbanization is both a process and a goal, with inclusivity and equity being part of the agenda. This presentation— like many others at the conference— highlighted the importance of seeing sustainable urbanization as part of the SDGs along with issues of resource management, governance, poverty and inequality.

They then went on to speak about some of the "dimensions" of sustainable urbanization, including [a] environmental; [b] economic; [c] socio-cultural; [d] spatial; [e] technological and; [f] political. They

emphasized the complexity and interconnectedness of these dimensions and suggested that an interdisciplinarity around sustainability needed to be developed and nurtured.

The second presentation was by Leon Morenas who approached the sustainable urbanization debate from the vantage of critique. Drawing from both global and local (the city of Delhi) research, he was able to show how a certain fear mongering and Malthusianism populated the sustainability discourse. This fear mongering unfairly placed the blame on the Global South and even in the Global South on the urban poor. He concluded that "the theme of the conference *is Transforming Global Relations for a Just World*. What I've hoped to convey in the paper is that we perhaps need to reframe our reading of the theme. It is not through a linear process of transforming global relations that a just world is created. It is the lens of justice and a vision of a just world that must be used, in the first instance, to critically understand what global relations are, and how they are transfigured and reified in local contexts. "

In the audience of about 40-50 people were a number of other WSS Fellows. Other attendants included Ina van der Linde from the Human Sciences Resource Council.

It was interesting how central the demographically determinist ideas still hold sway over the entire sustainability discourse. According to Hartmann (2009) "the industrialized countries, with only 20 percent of the world's population, are responsible for 80 percent of the accumulated carbon dioxide build-up in the atmosphere. The U.S. is the worst offender. In 2002 the U.S. was responsible for 20 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per person, compared to only 0.2 tons in Bangladesh, 0.3 in Kenya and 3.9 in Mexico." However, it is the populations of Sub-Saharan Africa and countries like India that are blamed for global warming and climate change.

In drawing attention to these numbers, one interesting discussion concentrated on the role of rag-pickers in India, South Africa, Argentina and Mexico. They are integral members who contribute to the "reuse and recycle" mantra of sustainability yet they remain marginalized spatially and in discourse. I am now writing a full length paper on two outcomes of the same "bourgeoisie environmentalism" Supreme Court judgement of 2000. While I presented work on the pollution of the Yamuna River, I will be discussing air pollution and how Delhi is now the most polluted city in the world. I was interviewed by Africa Radio about the contents of my paper and Ms. Der Linde (mentioned above) is writing a longer piece using some of my work for a magazine in South Africa.

Durban Fellows (report by Kareem Buyana)

The topic of the session was transitions in urban environments, and the Durban group specifically focused on the emerging modes of urban governance for sustainable urbanization. A summary of the fellows' case studies was presented, followed by their experiences and field visits in Durban, particularly eThekweni Municipality, where the concept of area-based management, and climate change governance were deeply examined through presentations and city neighbourhood walks.

The session involved all the Durban fellows and the earlier groups from Quito and Taipei. It also attracted officials from eThekweni Municipality, editors of Journals, a representative from UNESCO and reporters from local digital and print media

Interesting point of discussions:

- No single theory or approach can claim to have researched extensively and infinitively, and therefore what works at multiple scales and in different contexts is something that is yet to be established.
- The search for appropriate governance modes requires an incremental approach and creating relationships that can facilitate the co-production of knowledge, through joint work with academics of different discipline in collaboration with policy makers, practitioners and urbanites of different socio-economic backgrounds.

In order to provide more insight to the session, three questions emerged:

- How can urban theory from the Global South shine light on urban transformation? This is a question that requires answers from different fields of urban studies, therefore requiring a transdisciplinary approach.
- Within a number of complex urban crises, what emerging processes can we identify across our case studies?
- Rethinking truth to power: what role/position is there for the researcher within urban transformation? What models of co-production of knowledge are emerging and how effective are they? How can we enhance/measure co-production of knowledge?