



# Julia Unwin: Why We Need To Build Social Capital In Cities

This is a lecture given by Julia Unwin at the Human Cities Institute's sixth Annual Lecture in Leeds, UK. It epitomizes the United Nations' New Urban Agenda Pollyannish view of city living in the future. This sentiment is seen globally in identical format. □ TN Editor

If growth is to be genuinely inclusive then we need to tackle some of our current obstacles to building strong social capital, says Julia Unwin.

## Why cities matter

Cities are central to the development of our world. By 2030, urban areas are expected to house 60% of the world's population and generate up to 80% of global economic growth. Over the last 50 years, the percentage of people living in cities has increased from 34% to 54% and is believed to rise up to 66% by 2050, according to a report published in 2014 by the UN.

In the UK 61% of growth is generated by city regions. Nearly half the UK

population live within the largest 15 metropolitan centres and, if the UK's top 15 metropolitan centres were to realise their potential, it is estimated they would generate an additional £79bn growth.

Cities are powerful and dynamic engines of growth. They are growing in importance and impact. They can be the sources of innovation and creativity, bringing people together in new and unexpected ways and spawning the cultural quarters, the digital invention, the start-ups and connections that enable modern growth. They can be places where independence flourishes, where identity can be reinvented, where people can flourish and grow. Our very recent history has seen the cultural renaissance of Birmingham, the regeneration of central Bristol, the retail revolution of Leeds. It has witnessed the flowering of Cardiff, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Belfast, and the impact of the City of Culture in Hull and in Derry.

Across the UK cities were physically remodelled in the 1990s and early part of this century. They were bashed and damaged by the global financial crisis of 2008, and now they enjoy (if that is the right word) the prospect of changes to the administrative, legislative and political architecture.

## **Cities good and bad**

In short, cities can be the place we become our best selves, the place where our human ingenuity and our capacity to support each other flourishes.

They can be places of sanctuary, providing warmth and a place for new and different identities to flourish. Look at the ways in which some cities have absorbed, welcomed and celebrated the arrival of immigrants with distinctive cultures, cuisines and capabilities. Look at the confidence and security of the 'gay quarters' of the 1990s, providing safety and support, and so often also supporting creativity and cultural reinvention. Cities can be places where we can be ourselves, liberated from some of the more stultifying aspects of small town life, and even, occasionally, our own families.

But cities can also be places of isolation, of poverty, and of misery. They can become places where innovation and creativity are driven out. Where the bonds of social engagement are attenuated and where solidarity is fatally eroded. They can become places where poverty is locked in. Places where progression and development is prohibited. Places where people without the support of family find alternative social networks impossible to access. Places which, while not actively hostile to the incomer, afford them so little welcome that in effect they remain for ever the stranger.

## **Why social capital matters to cities**

It is the depth and the breadth of social capital in cities that distinguishes the creative, lively, bonded city, from the miserable dystopia I have painted. Cities where everyone is too busy to interact breed loneliness and despair. Cities where automation has made every interaction a soulless one, driving out human contact in the interests of speed and efficiency. Cities where the more vulnerable are shunned and ignored are cities of fear, not to mention huge potential costs. And cities where one of the very many people in the early stages of dementia receive no neighbourly support, and can only turn to A&E and the police, are cities that will be expensive to run.

Cities need the skills and assets of all their citizens. If people with money desert the city centre because of violence and danger, those centres will never thrive. If people as they reach retirement age leave the cities in which they worked, the city loses wisdom, and civic leadership. If cities are unaffordable for young people they lose economic potential. And if the nature of the return to growth simply locks poverty into particular areas, those cities will never become the engines of sustained growth and prosperity that a poverty-free UK demands.

Social capital is not an optional extra for a city. It is as fundamental as the financial capital and the skills base of any successful city.

## **The language of cities and the language of**

# social capital

When we talk about cities we talk about the physical infrastructure, we talk about inward investment, skills matrices and the role of powerful institutions. When we talk about social capital we talk about kindness and generosity. We talk about families and neighbours. We talk about affinity and belonging, of liveability and about happiness and love. When we talk about cities we use the skills of economics and of physical planning. When we talk about social capital we learn from neuroscience and from behavioural economics. As so often these days I end up looking at Canada and the pioneering work of Charles Montgomery on what makes people happy, and therefore makes their cities successful.

It's high time we talked about these things together.

## What do we mean by social capital?

I identify three layers of social capital that are as essential in big cities as they are in tiny villages.

First there is the largely unexplored world of everyday kindness which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [examined in a neighbourhood in Glasgow](#). Community participants were asked to list the everyday, often unacknowledged favours, bits of help and mutual help. Rather beautifully one described it as 'spraying water on a spider's web' and some were amazed both at the strength of this apparently fragile web, but also its breadth and reach. Equally, others noted quite how thin their webs of support were, and how desperately isolated they were. This essentially reciprocal and vital layer of social capital needs nurture and care. It does not happen by accident and there are steps we can take to preserve and grow, just as surely as we can destroy.

We know that neighbourhood responses to poverty always start at this level. It is the shared fiver that circulates in so many families and social groups, the short term mini loans. It is the offers to babysit and the introduction to possible job starts, the offer of a sofa for a teenager that stops her from becoming homeless. Word of mouth and social networks are, and always have been, the front line defence against poverty.

The second layer involves the many organisations, groups, associations and businesses which contributed to help happening in a place - what sits between the very informal, person-to-person helping relationships and formal help and care.

The middle layer has an important role to play in creating the conditions for 'ordinary kindness', simply by encouraging social interaction. Groups, organisations and associations draw people together through shared interest or purpose; and they provide spaces within which interaction can happen. As such, they serve as junction boxes, connecting diverse strands of community and social networks. These networks and groups are worth fostering.

While there may be an apparent fit between the community sector and notions of everyday help and support, 'ordinary kindnesses' are evident in corporate or commercial settings too - whether a supermarket, café or corner shop. For example, in one area of Glasgow, the local supermarket was a place where interactions of kindness and help happened. In another area it was the local café that served as a meeting point and a source of help for local parents with children.

It is often when individuals transcend their formal or scripted roles that there is the greatest scope for small acts and relationships of help and support to emerge.

The third layer is the institutions that govern, as well as serve, the city, the neighbourhood. They are the ones that frequently absorb the available resource and talent. The anchor institutions, the housing associations, the local authority, the hospital, the university, and the funded voluntary organisation. How much do these bodies foster social capital? Are they providing services to customers, or are they building the strength and resilience of the communities they exist to serve?

Perhaps even more crucially, how much are these institutions and economic systems enabling the pre-conditions for strong social capital?

# **The pre-conditions for strong social capital**

Social capital is not formed in a vacuum. What happens is shaped by our external environment, and what is happening around us is different from that faced by previous generations of city leaders.

Social Capital is in real peril. Our labour market has changed, and changed fundamentally. At the bottom end of the labour market our current economy produces part time, insecure and poorly paid work. People doing multiple jobs just to get by is becoming the norm, and increasingly the much vaunted 'gig economy' is actually producing a group of people who, while technically self-employed, seem to me to have many of the working conditions of the 19th century casual labourer.

At the bottom end of the labour market people lead poor and insecure lives, faced with higher costs and constantly managing debt. Work is undoubtedly for many of us the best route out of poverty. If the work is insecure, and has no progression (and four out of five people starting in low paid work are still low paid 10 years later) it does not provide a secure route.

People in poverty are also leading extremely crowded lives. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation makes it clear that the only possibility of escaping poverty for a couple with two children is for the family to at least have 1.6 incomes. This leaves precious little time for the creation of social capital - the support for neighbours and family, the engagement with others that is one element of the vital fuel for the growth of social capital.

The second element of this social capital fuel is security. There is good and compelling evidence, if we didn't already know it from the personal experience of each of us, that a secure home is the necessary foundation for a route out of poverty, the best way of building a life, raising a family, and contributing to your neighbourhood. Our modern housing market increasingly lacks security. Life on a six month tenancy in the private rented sector or life on a short-term conditional tenancy in the social sector does not create the pre-conditions for contributing to strong

secure neighbourhoods.

I have rarely been to a regeneration scheme and not encountered the (usually very angry) grandmother whose drive, persistence and commitment to improving the area has forced landlords, local authorities and investors to change. Home owners threatened by repossession, or playing the game of riding the current turbo charged housing market, are equally unlikely to develop those deep and sustained roots that are essential for social capital. Time, security - a sense of sufficiency - these are vital elements. But they are not the only ones.

Public services can support the formation of social capital, and they can just as readily destroy it. Evidence from across the UK makes it clear that there is no linear relationship between the support given by the state and other institutional providers. But at a time of huge reductions in local expenditure:

- What we know is that very hard pressed communities are damaged by the current erosion of the basics of public service to communities - if you are struggling to survive the capacity to support others is jeopardised.
- We know from Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded research that some of the programme of austerity has hit the poorest places in the UK hardest, and we also know that improved targeting of services - inevitable when resources are tight - will leave many needs unmet.
- And we know that internationally as research from CIVICUS shows us the places for civic life are disappearing, and in this country, and in this city, the threats to libraries, cultural venues, and other places where people can meet, threaten and undermine participation and engagement.

Our interest in growing social capital for the good of our cities must take into account these real threats - the insecurity, shortage of time, and pressures on public finance.

# Social capital in cities - a historic view

A bit of history about what we know of social capital in cities.

It was the Industrial Revolution that transformed the notion of a UK city. People moved from lives of grinding poverty to the new industrialised jobs of the 19th century; swapping back-breaking, poorly rewarded work on the land for back-breaking poorly rewarded work in the mills and factories of the rapidly transformed England. This created opportunity, but also massive challenge. Living lives of unimaginable squalor, for the first time free from the constraints of family, village and church life, the experience of people in the newly industrialised cities of the UK has been described in vivid and horrific details by George Gissing, etc. What we would now call a moral panic gripped the nation, and commentators, authors and politicians all weighed in - in a way that is all too familiar for those of us who have lived through similar panics. 'Something must be done' was the cry.

As ever, observing the actions and not the words pays dividends.

This was the time of the biggest explosion of 'social capital' we have probably ever seen in response to this unprecedented upheaval. Churches and chapels sprang up in the heart of the newly populated cities. Girls and Boys Clubs, friendly societies and working men's clubs were formed. Mutual aid and trade unions began. The pioneering charities like Barnardo's, the hospital funds and the prison reformers. The new profession of housing management, led by women, created the cornerstones of our current housing association movement and laid the foundations for the council housing of which we should all be so proud. Social work developed as a profession. Workers' education institutes, reading rooms and political discussion sprang up in the newly crowded, and deeply divided, cities.

Of course this activity contained within it both what is good and what is bad about social capital. Of course some of it was patronising and ill thought through. We read about Mrs Jellaby in Bleak House and cringe. We look at the advice given by the Charities Organisations Society and from our comparatively privileged position allow ourselves a smug



grimace. Of course dreadful things were done in the name of social capital. Children sent to Australia, horrific abuse took place in the laundries of Belfast, extortionate rents were undoubtedly charged for squalid housing, and predatory lending has a long history. But we also see the great strengths of self-organisation and mutual support, the creation of new institutions for different times. The development of networks of support, and the engagement of those with privilege in genuinely, if occasionally misguidedly, seeking to improve lives for their fellow citizens.

As Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation you would not expect me to get this far without talking about the enlightened progressive capitalists of this period and the ways in which Rowntree, Cadbury, Titus Salt and others, worked, making a lot of money, for sure, but also developing approaches to employment practice that still resonate today. Taking responsibility for their workforces and housing people who would otherwise live in the slums of York, Birmingham and Bradford in beautiful, well designed and green environments.

And of course the great civic leaders who built our city halls, improved public health, built and managed vital housing, were born from just this energetic social capital, connecting back through the ballot box to the needs of populations which were changing, and facing new and entirely different problems.

Social capital takes many forms and is never an unequivocal good. But the Industrial Revolution witnessed the way in which the power of financial capital, the demands of human capital combined to generate enormous social capital which still shapes the social architecture and engineering of our big cities today.

Some of the pre-conditions that we now possess would have been beyond the imagination of our nineteenth century predecessors.

First we have the people. Our ageing population is so often described as a 'burden'. In the calculation of social capital the fact that we will all live longer, hopefully healthier lives, brings wisdom, knowledge and capability to addressing some of our most pressing social problems. Our

much more diverse, much better educated population also contains the skills and the abilities to foster real reciprocal, creative and innovative social capital.

And secondly we have the technology. The digital revolution has changed and continues to change so much of what we do, as well as how we do it. Open data, generously shared, is a vital tool for the development of the social networks and connections that create capital. Communication, at the press of a key, enables communities of interest to be formed, enfranchises those without a voice and enables far more of us to engage in a genuinely pluralist debate. Of course there is a darker side - the internet can reinforce loneliness, generate hate and exclude as much as it can enable. But the optimism and drive that transformed this city can harness the power of digital to enable genuine, productive engagement.

In discussing social change we often end up talking about data, its power, and its resilience. We believe as technocrats that clean, well marshalled data can solve everything. But the real data that powers social capital is often messy. It involves a close and detailed understanding of the web of relationships that keeps any neighbourhood alive. We know that it is vitally important for the police and security services to understand in fine detail the operation of community networks and relationships. We accept that the big commercial service providers know more about us than our closest family. And so those of us concerned with the fostering of social capital need to harness just this data to understand and support the very real networks of mutual support that make this city tick, and make survival possible.

Knowledge - real, informed, current knowledge - is vital to the development of social capital. Interventions that are rooted in how people really live - the ethnography of neighbourhoods - are part of the modern skill set. Social capital comes from within. Top down announcements of new ways of engaging lack this fine grained knowledge, will be based on anecdote, generalisation and stereotype and have the capacity to destroy real and important social capital.

## **Social capital today**

Today, we face a revolution as profound as anything the nineteenth century pioneers had to contend with. We live in a globalised world in which the pace of change, and the sheer volatility of it all, sometimes simply feels too much. A world in which a decision in Mumbai can change the lives of communities in the West Country overnight. A world in which it is sometimes easier to feel connected to events in the Kashmir than the events in your own neighbourhood. A world in which work is becoming faster, more demanding, and frequently much less secure. A world in which housing is a fragile asset, not a platform on which to build a secure life. A world in which mass movements of people can both enrich and strengthen, but can too often be experienced as threat and division. A world in which the distance between generations can seem overwhelming.

In this world there is more need than ever before for the conscious fostering of social capital. For our cities to thrive and prosper, we need the sort of social capital that enabled people to survive seismic social change in the last centuries.

But we cannot replicate what went before. Modern social capital will need to look and feel different, but it will have all the same qualities of human warmth and reciprocity that we need to live truly prosperous lives in cities.

Modern social capital will need to foster skills for living as well as for working. It will enable and encourage the small acts of kindness that enable us all to survive. But it will also connect people across generations, and across faiths and nationalities. It will be built on the power of relationships, not on transactions.

It will almost certainly be made up more of networks than of organisations. The architecture of the 19th century was mirrored in the settlements and big institutions of that era. A more adaptive and digitally informed social capital may look more like a set of movements than an institution.

It will be more democratic, providing a platform for the dispossessed as much as tending to their needs. It will not be afraid of anger and of division - because social capital is messy, just like social change.

It will bring together surprising friends - cultural organisations, with those who feel furthest away from the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. It will cross boundaries, finding support in the corner shop as much as in the funded voluntary organisation. It will not look for permission, but instead will make demands.

But this active, new energetic social capital will be the reason that cities like Birmingham flourish into the next century. It will bring resilience and capability. It will enable innovation and sustainable growth. And it will make sure that our cities are places where people want to live, not dread destinations into which they are forced.

But without a concerted, conscious effort to build inclusive growth, there is a risk that the poorest people and places will be left behind. Our newly developing prosperity risks benefitting the better off at the expense of the poorest people and places. It risks creating cities which are at their heart unsafe and unsustainable because they contain within them places where people are dispossessed, insecure and overlooked. These divided cities will never contribute to a new prosperity.

That is why the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has committed so heavily to understanding both through research and through practice, what good growth can look like in cities. In the Leeds City Region we are working in partnership with local authorities, business and the anchor institutions to identify the steps that can be taken to make that growth truly inclusive. But we are also working with the Young Foundation to understand the details of what is happening in neighbourhoods. Through our support and engagement with the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission we are also doing what we can to make sure that the voices and experience of people experiencing poverty are heard clearly and effectively in the places where decisions are made. And city leaders can use their powers to create a rebalanced economy in which there are far greater opportunities for the people and places previously left behind. The test of city leadership will not be judged only in improved gross

value added. It will also be in the extent to which damaging poverty and isolation are conquered.

It is only by this conscious commitment to building social capital in cities that we will see the emergence of a city economy fit for all our citizens in the 21st century.

[Read full story here...](#)

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## **Everybody Rides: Bicycles Key To Safer, Healthier, More Vital Cities**

Sustainable Cities will do whatever it takes to get you out of your automobile and onto public transportation. If you want a personal transportation device, you will get a free pass to acquire a bicycle to get some exercise and lose some weight at the same time. Technocrats

always seem to know what's best for you. □ TN Editor

Frustrated by the obstacles to urban cycling in North America, Melissa and Chris Bruntlett traveled with their two kids from Vancouver to the Netherlands in 2016 to take a deep five-week dive into places that do cycling better. Traversing cities in the Netherlands by bike, they found that cycling is not just a better way to get around; when done right, it leads to healthier, safer, more vibrant, more family-friendly communities. They wrote it all up in their new book, *Building the Cycling City: The Dutch Blueprint for Urban Vitality*, which provides a guide for cities and communities that want to do cycling right, and for urban cyclists and families who want to learn the keys to cycling as a way of life.

I spoke to the Bruntletts by phone earlier this month about what they've learned and about what cities and people in the United States and Canada can learn from the cycling lifestyle in the Netherlands. Our conversation has been lightly edited for space and flow.

### **Why did you decide to go to the Netherlands and start cycling like the Dutch?**

Melissa: We lived so long experiencing cycling in Vancouver and telling a lot of great stories about what building cities for cycling can do. We felt that in order to really tell that story, we needed to go to the place where that is what people enjoy throughout the country and learn what has made them so successful.

**Sometimes critics of cycling say it's about "yuppies," "hipsters," and "the creative class," and a force for "gentrification." But your book talks more about the role of cycling for families and in building stronger communities.**

Chris: Cycling plays a tremendous role in how we now look at cities for families. If it's not safe enough for our 8-year-old son, then it's just simply not good enough. I think for far too long in North America, we've made cycling acceptable for the "fit and the brave" that are willing to suit up and get on their bikes, but there are entire segments of the population that are completely ignored.

M: What people overlook in those conversations are the people that can't drive. For anyone that is not of driving age, cycling is an independent means of transportation, so they don't need to rely on an adult or a bus. When we get older, there is a certain point when we may not be legally allowed to drive anymore. A lot of the conversation in terms of the elderly population is around aging in place. But it also includes the ability to still feel connected to their community, being able to go outside and travel comfortably even with limited mobility. Bicycles play a key part in that. It's less stress on the joints. It also affords elderly people a way move around the places where they have always lived and where they want to continue living. By saying that the infrastructure and the investment in cycling is only for the "fit and the brave" is to completely ignore entire swaths of our population and not afford them the same rights that we afford able-bodied people in their 20s and 30s.

**I remember when I was a boy growing up in New Jersey, my brother and I rode our 10 speeds everywhere. LeBron James recently said the thing that most affected his youth growing up in Akron, Ohio, was the ability to ride a bike everywhere. How can cycling help kids get a sense of the city or even a sense of freedom?**

C: The Netherlands ranks as having the happiest children in the world. That's not by accident. That's because they give them safe places to cycle and they trust kids to get from place to place without adult supervision. They don't quite have the stranger danger that we have. It's also because their streets are traffic-calmed, there's fewer cars, they're going slower. Kids are given a free reign to get around the city, whether it's by foot, bicycle, or bus.

M: A lot of kids are getting less and less physical activity. And that simple bike ride to school is one of the easiest ways to build in 15-30 minutes of physical activity in a day and help them be a little bit healthier. The Dutch are one of the only advanced countries to reduce their obesity rate. It's not because they have the healthiest diets. It's because they have built exercise into their day-to-day activity.

**I had a colleague from Sweden who visited Toronto and she said**

**she wouldn't ride in Toronto or let her kids ride there, not just because of cars and inadequate bike lanes, but because the cyclists ride too fast—like they're in the Tour de France is how she put it. But as you point out in your book, cyclists in the Netherlands ride at a slower pace. Why is that important?**

C: I think that's an indication of how you build your streets. If you build hostile streets, people are going to want to keep up with car traffic and armor themselves up with protective equipment. There's a differentiation in the Dutch language between a sports cyclist and a utilitarian cyclist; the two phrases loosely translate to "walking with wheels" versus "running with wheels." The "wheeled walkers" make up the vast majority of people that bike in the Netherlands because they've created these conditions that aren't as hostile, so anybody feels like they can do it.

**Another point you make in the book that's so important is about the different kind of bikes Dutch cyclists ride.**

M: They're upright, they're a little bit slower but they're meant for utility. They're meant to get them comfortably, without any complication, from point A to B, hauling some goods along the way or hauling children. Those utility bikes mean a lot in terms of simplifying the trip. They don't overcomplicate it. The bikes already come with all the gear, you don't have to worry about buying lights or a bell separately. They're meant for day-to-day transportation.

**Why is the bike shop such an important part of the cycling environment?**

C: In Vancouver, the cycling shops were still very sport-focused. The staff weren't trained to sell bikes, they usually only have one or two collecting dust in the corner. Because the vast majority of people riding bikes in North America are doing it for sport and recreation, the retail industry is still playing catch up. It's almost become this chicken and egg scenario where they don't see a large market for transportation bikes so they're not putting many resources into developing that market. Bike sharing has kind of changed this a little bit, because people are riding



these more upright utilitarian bikes. But if they ultimately want to invest in one, they have a real job on their hands trying to find one.

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## Cities Urged To Reject Federal Government, Go It Alone

The future of globalization and Sustainable Deveopment is seen in cities, not nation-states. The rise of autonomous cities is seen throughout the world, and global interests are whispering in the ears of U.S. mayors to effectively secede from the Federal government. □ TN Editor

The mayors are coming. In recent months, City Hall occupants in Tallahassee, Nashville, and Tuscaloosa have won Democratic primaries for their state's gubernatorial races. Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles, former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, and former San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro are rumored to be considering White House bids in

2020. City leaders seeking higher office are banking on the idea that voters will respond to what cities embody today: innovation, diversity, and progress.

In the Age of Trump, [some experts](#) have been urging cities to [declare independence](#) from the federal-level chaos in Washington. Others herald [local power](#) and [local actions](#) as antidotes to national dysfunction. Across the country, corporations and philanthropies are pouring millions of dollars into city initiatives, attracted by the notion that solutions in urban areas—on issues like economic development, clean energy, and resilience—might bubble up to the national level.

I understand the impulse. From the perch of a national think tank on cities, I see cities mounting promising responses to big problems like climate change, housing affordability, and criminal justice. At the Brookings Institution, we help local and regional leaders accelerate solutions to global competitiveness and [shared prosperity](#).

But city boosterism can also go too far: Urging city leaders to go it alone celebrates a deep dysfunction in federalism—and it normalizes a self-destructive shift in politics and governance.

For instance, the Trump administration is using the narrative of increased local capacity to justify [draconian cuts to federal support](#) for cities, from [transit programs](#), [community development financing](#), to the entire Economic Development Administration. The [president's 2019 budget](#) notes that it “...recognizes a greater role for state and local governments and the private sector to address community and economic development needs,” signaling abdication of a longstanding federal role in those areas.

Further, federal policies *do* matter, whether city leaders like it or not. Federal deportation forces are striking fear into city and suburban immigrant communities. The new [tax law imposes a limit](#) on state and local tax deductions, making it more economically and politically costly for city governments to raise revenue. Tariffs are threatening companies and jobs across all kinds of communities but the Trump administration proposes to [protect farmers from those effects with billions of dollars in](#)

[subsidies](#) provided by urban and suburban taxpayers. City-by-city actions can't overcome national policies that broadly undermine urban America.

And as Sherrilyn Ifill of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund [has observed](#), extolling the virtues of localism papers over the dark history of “local control” in America, where deference to local decision-makers has yielded persistent racial segregation and the active suppression of minority voting rights. “We should not romanticize localism,” Ifill wrote, responding to the recent [New York Times column](#) on “The Localist Revolution” by David Brooks. “It has often been brutish, oppressive & violent.”

[Read full story here...](#)

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## **Wicked Problems: The New**

# Urban Agenda and Smart Cities

The mind of Technocracy is clearly seen in the first line of this story: Any problem caused by technology can be fixed with more technology. It never occurs to a Technocrat that many problems cannot be fixed with technology. □ TN Editor

*Technological fixes such as smart cities make a system more complex, resulting in “wicked problems” that require ever more extensive technological remedies.*

In October 2016, at the [World Urban Forum 8](#) in Quito, Ecuador, [UN Habitat](#) launched its third planning cycle with [Habitat III](#), now known as the [New Urban Agenda](#). The agenda defines the work of the global urban community until 2036, by which time humanity will be well on its way to an estimated 2050 population of 10 billion — two-thirds of which will be urban dwellers. The New Urban Agenda established an ambitious and aspirational plan for how the world will manage the intensified process of what French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, writing in 1970 termed, “[planetary urbanization](#).”

Habitat III was part of a larger process within the community of experts and practitioners working on the great problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: climate change, energy transition, food and water insecurity, demographic shifts (growth, aging and urbanization), pandemics, ecological degradation, economic stress and political instability, among others. Prior to Habitat III, their ambitions constituted what is known as the post-2015 development agenda. The year 2015 was significant because it marked the renewal and reinforcement of several key development agendas. The first was United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Relief’s re-worked disaster risk reduction platform, the 2015 [Sendai Framework](#), followed by the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) in September 2015, the [Paris Climate Agreement](#) in December 2015 and, ultimately, Habitat III in October 2016.

# Replicating Power Structures

Many see the New Urban Agenda as the key to humanity's ability to weather a perfect storm of global crises. As the roadmap for surviving the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it carries an immense burden, and those working to make its vision for inclusive and [sustainable](#) urbanism a reality must contemplate a wide array of wicked problems. At Quito, however, it became clear to many observers that the New Urban Agenda was a mile wide in ambition, but not even an inch deep with concrete plans for implementation. Session after session deferred the tedium of substantive action by insisting that the work ahead was to figure out how to implement the fine words of the document. That work would be undertaken in Kuala Lumpur, at the [World Urban Forum 9](#) in February 2018.



The task of the forum was to figure out how to implement the New Urban Agenda. The forum focused on the SDGs, especially [Goal 11](#), which aims to “make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.” It was an appropriate focus for a gathering of the world's city-engaged human development experts and practitioners, providing a place to compare notes, promote best practices and network. This, however, is not the full story.

The plausible, if skeptical, take is that World Urban Forum 9 was about reproducing a development agenda deeply entrenched in the Washington Consensus values of market liberalization and institutional commodification. The presence of experts who ostensibly control the knowledge behind the agenda added a whiff of legitimacy. The [program](#) featured a dizzying array of workshops that had the common narrative of “hearing from the audience” and fostering “participatory development.” However, the content and many of the messages appeared to be driven by funder or grant mandates. Left

wanting, in many cases, were those who came to learn something practical: how to provide water in informal settlements, how to prepare for climate change or how to improve waste disposal.

Many sessions had a neo-colonial atmosphere as representatives from the privileged global minority — heads of agencies, NGOs, research institutes, graduate programs, corporations and financial institutions — chaired sessions and monopolized talk time. It was a scene profoundly reminiscent of the global development process of the past half-century.

## **SMART CITIES**

A new development at World Urban Forum 9 was the emergence of [smart cities](#) as a meta narrative for the New Urban Agenda's implementation. The forum featured a proliferation of sessions about smart city technologies, plenary speakers dropped the term as the gold standard in sustainable and inclusive urban planning, and many exhibition booths featured strident declarations about the intersection of green, smart and inclusive — all underpinned by the vast potential of technology. Considering that Habitat III's New Urban Agenda scarcely mentions smart cities, the term's ubiquity at World Urban Forum 9 merits some contemplation.

Smart cities have abruptly appeared on the agenda for a combination of reasons. First, the world's urban pontificators — a faddish lot — need a flashy concept to embody the implementation solution for the New Urban Agenda. Second, in its ambiguity the smart cities concept has become a canvas onto which many agendas are splattered. This versatility makes smart cities more a convenient placeholder for a normative vision of 21<sup>st</sup>-century urbanism than a substantive solution that can be implemented. Third, and perhaps most importantly, smart cities are where the big money is flowing. Cisco Systems, Microsoft and Google, among many other corporate players, are all committing to smart cities, and they stand to capture a growing piece of the speculative capital that sloshes around the global markets.

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# New UN-Habitat Head Vows To Tackle Rapid Urbanization Challenges

The new UN-Habitat leader “will be guided by the principles of the new urban agenda and the UN’s universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in tackling urbanization challenges.” The UN intends to set urban policy for the entire planet. □ TN Editor

The new head of the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) has vowed to prioritize strengthening the housing agency to effectively tackle the challenges of rapid urbanization.

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, said she will be guided by the principles of the new urban agenda and the UN’s universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in tackling urbanization challenges.

Sharif added that the UN housing agency has innovative solutions that have been tried elsewhere with success.

“I want to make the agency more responsive to the needs of countries by helping them in addressing the challenges of rapid urbanization and at the same time harness the benefits of good urbanization,” she told journalists in Nairobi.

“It is time to strengthen UN-Habitat and ensure we can effectively support countries to implement the new urban agenda in collaboration with all the United Nations system, all levels of government and stakeholders,” she added.

The new urban agenda is the outcome document agreed upon at the UN-Habitat 3 cities conference in 2016. It guides the efforts around urbanization of wide range nation states, city and regional leaders, international development funders, UN programs and civil society for the next 20 years.

According to Sharif, tackling challenges in the cities was urgent since they are centers of economic growth and contribute to 70 percent of global GDP. If urbanization is well planned, it will lead to the achievement of SDGs, she said.

“While working on the new urban agenda, it will mean we have created jobs, this way she shall be curbing poverty, we shall improve on sanitation and we shall have handled the climate change challenge. All these are SDGs we shall have achieved to mention just a few.”

Shariff said she has formed a task force to help re-strategize and harmonize its operations in Kenya, noting that the task force will help program activities in line with the government’s vision and other development plans.

“We intend to scale up the good experiences in close collaboration with other stakeholders,” Sharif said, noting that the UN agency is ready to offer expertise in supporting the government to realize its goal of availing one million houses within a specified period.

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# Smart Cities Have Little Real Value To Offer The New Urban Agenda

Technology-driven Smart City dogma invaded World Urban Forum 9 in Kuala Lumpur and delivered mostly empty rhetoric. Technology is rightly likened to a Ponzi scheme that will ultimately result in the collapse of cities and societies. □ TN Editor

In October 2016, at the [World Urban Forum 8](#) in Quito, Ecuador, [UN Habitat](#) launched its third planning cycle with [Habitat III](#), now known as the [New Urban Agenda](#). The agenda defines the work of the global urban community until 2036, by which time humanity will be well on its way to an estimated 2050 population of 10 billion — two-thirds of which will be urban dwellers. The New Urban Agenda established an ambitious and aspirational plan for how the world will manage the intensified process of what French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, writing in 1970 termed, “[planetary urbanization](#).”

Habitat III was part of a larger process within the community of experts and practitioners working on the great problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: climate change, energy transition, food and water insecurity, demographic shifts (growth, aging and urbanization), pandemics, ecological degradation, economic stress and political instability, among others. Prior to Habitat III, their ambitions constituted what is known as the post-2015 development agenda. The year 2015 was significant because it marked the renewal and reinforcement of several key development agendas. The first was United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Relief's re-worked disaster risk reduction platform, the 2015 [Sendai Framework](#), followed by the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) in September 2015, the [Paris Climate Agreement](#) in December 2015 and, ultimately, Habitat III in October 2016.

## **Replicating Power Structures**

Many see the New Urban Agenda as the key to humanity's ability to weather a perfect storm of global crises. As the roadmap for surviving the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it carries an immense burden, and those working to make its vision for inclusive and [sustainable](#) urbanism a reality must contemplate a wide array of wicked problems. At Quito, however, it became clear to many observers that the New Urban Agenda was a mile wide in ambition, but not even an inch deep with concrete plans for implementation. Session after session deferred the tedium of substantive action by insisting that the work ahead was to figure out how to implement the fine words of the document. That work would be undertaken in Kuala Lumpur, at the [World Urban Forum 9](#) in February 2018.

The task of the forum was to figure out how to implement the New Urban Agenda. The forum focused on the SDGs, especially [Goal 11](#), which aims to "make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable." It was an appropriate focus for a gathering of the world's city-engaged human development experts and practitioners, providing a place to compare notes, promote best practices and network. This, however, is not the full story.

The plausible, if skeptical, take is that World Urban Forum 9 was about reproducing a development agenda deeply entrenched in the Washington Consensus values of market liberalization and institutional commodification. The presence of experts who ostensibly control the knowledge behind the agenda added a whiff of legitimacy. The [program](#) featured a dizzying array of workshops that had the common narrative of “hearing from the audience” and fostering “participatory development.” However, the content and many of the messages appeared to be driven by funder or grant mandates. Left wanting, in many cases, were those who came to learn something practical: how to provide water in informal settlements, how to prepare for climate change or how to improve waste disposal.

Many sessions had a neo-colonial atmosphere as representatives from the privileged global minority — heads of agencies, NGOs, research institutes, graduate programs, corporations and financial institutions — chaired sessions and monopolized talk time. It was a scene profoundly reminiscent of the global development process of the past half-century.

## Smart Cities

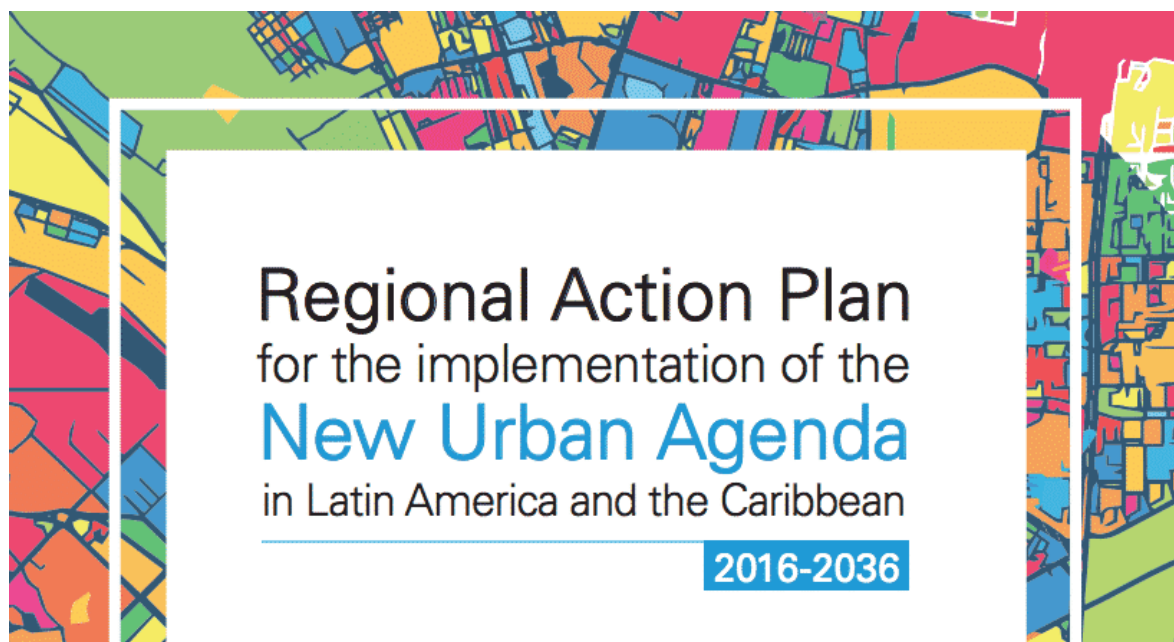
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## **UN's New Urban Agenda In Latin America Calls For Paradigm Shift**

The main outcome of Habitat III held in October 2016, was “the adoption of the final New Urban Agenda (NUA) document as the new mandate for the development of cities and human settlements during the next 20 years.” The U.N. is now meddling with Latin America to impose its Technocratic tyranny on unsuspecting city-dwellers. □ TN Editor

An action plan for implementing the New Urban Agenda (NUA) in Latin

America and the Caribbean envisions the city as a “macro-level public good” where citizens’ economic, social, cultural and environmental rights are guaranteed.

The ‘Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC): 2016-2036’ (RAP) was published by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), UN-Habitat and the General Assembly of Ministers of Housing and Urban Development of Latin America and the Caribbean (MINURVI). The guiding principles and strategic objectives (2016-2036) of the RAP include: inclusive cities; sustainable and inclusive urban economies; urban environmental sustainability; and effective and democratic governance.

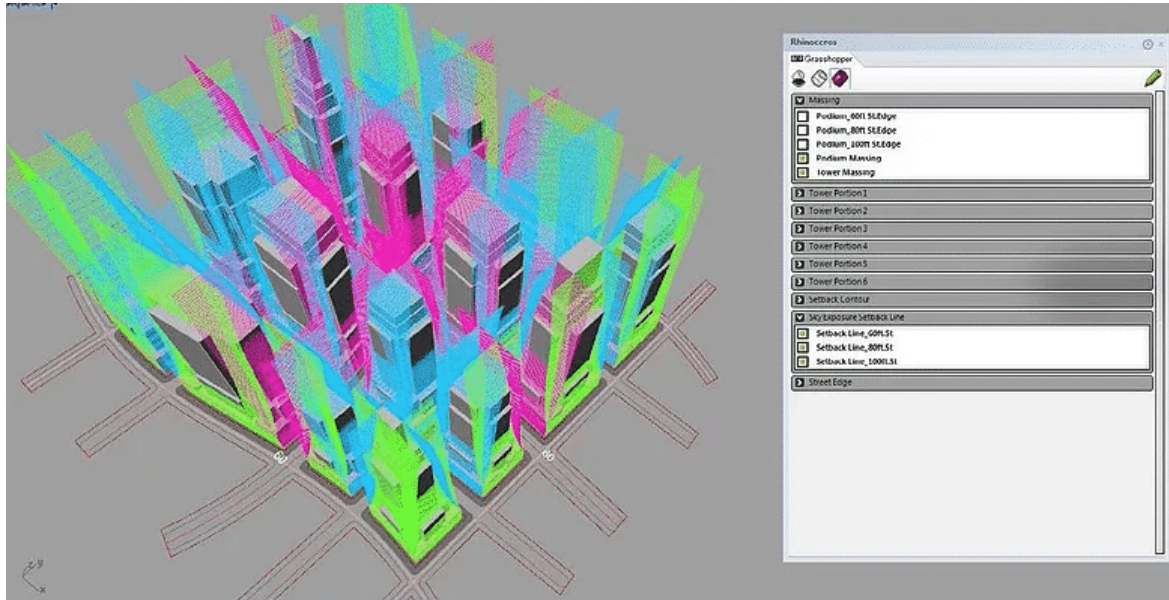
The RAP argues that current regional policies have failed to successfully address unsustainable urban trends. Therefore, structural changes are required that place sustainability and equality at the center of the urbanization process. It provides a road map of potential actions, interventions and evidence-based policy guidance for LAC countries towards achieving sustainable urban development, and establishing a more equitable urban paradigm.

The RAP contains six action areas, namely: national urban policies; urban legal frameworks; urban and territorial planning and design; urban economy and municipal finances; local implementation; and monitoring, reporting and revision mechanisms. These action areas and their strategic objectives comprise the key components necessary for implementing the NUA in LAC. The document describes enabling conditions and essential elements for each area, and how each is aligned with specific SDGs and related targets.

While aimed at implementing the NUA in the region, the RAP will also enable the building of synergies with other global agreements and agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and the Paris Agreement on climate change, among others. The RAP was designed for the region as a whole, but it can also be used to evaluate needs and actions at the subregional, national and local levels.

[Publication: [Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the NUA in LAC: 2016-2036](#)]

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## AI-Based Zoning Posed As The Answer For Smart And 'Equitable' Cities

Technocrat Smart City architects are turning to AI and systems-theory to automate property zoning. Dr. Parag Khanna was right when he said the *'globalization is the system'*. □ TN Editor

Zoning codes are a century old, and the lifeblood of all major U.S. cities ([except arguably Houston](#)), determining what can be built where and what activities can take place in a neighborhood. Yet as their complexity has risen, academics are increasingly exploring whether their rule-based systems for rationalizing urban space could be replaced with dynamic systems based on blockchains, machine learning algorithms, and spatial data, potentially revolutionizing urban planning and development for the

next one hundred years.

These visions of the future were inspired by my recent chats with Kent Larson and John Clippinger, a dynamic urban thinking duo who have made improving cities and urban governance their current career focus. Larson is a [principal research scientist at the MIT Media Lab](#), where he directs the City Science Group, and Clippinger was formerly a Research Scientist at the [Human Dynamics Group](#) at the MIT Media Lab and is now a cofounder of [Swytch.io](#) which is developing a utility token called Swytch.

One of the toughest challenges facing major U.S. cities is the price of housing, which [has skyrocketed over the past few decades](#), placing incredible strain on the budget of young and old, singles and families alike. The average [one-bedroom apartment is \\$3,400 in San Francisco](#), and [\\$3,350 in New York City](#), making these meccas of innovation increasingly out-of-reach of even well-funded startup founders let alone artists or educators.

Housing is not enough to satiate the modern knowledge economy worker though. There is an expectation that any neighborhood is going to have a laundry list of amenities, from nice and cheap restaurants, open spaces, and cultural institutions to critical human services like grocery stores, dry cleaners, and hair salons.

Today, a zoning board would simply try to demand that various developments include the necessary amenities as part of the permitting process, leading to [food deserts](#) and the curious [soullessness of some urban neighborhoods](#). In Larson and Clippinger's world though, rules-based models would be thrown out for "dynamic, self-regulating systems" based around what might agnostically be called tokens.

Every neighborhood is made up of different types of people with different life goals. Larson explained that "We can model these different scenarios of who we want working here, and what kind of amenities we want, then that can be delineated mathematically as algorithms, and the incentives can be dynamic based on real-time data feeds."

The idea is to first take datasets like mobility times, unit economics,

amenities scores, and health outcomes, among many others and feed that into a machine learning model that is trying to maximize local resident happiness. Tokens would then be a currency to provide signals to the market of what things should be added to the community or removed to improve happiness.

A luxury apartment developer might have to pay tokens, particularly if the building didn't offer any critical amenities, while another developer who converts their property to open space might be completely subsidized by tokens that had been previously paid into the system. "You don't have to collapse the signals into a single price mechanism," Clippinger said. Instead, with "feedback loops, you know that there are dynamic ranges you are trying to keep."

Compare that systems-based approach to the complexity we have today...

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# UNESCO Promotes Multi-Pronged Approach To Resilient Cities

UN technocrats are obsessed with control and micro-management of people in cities, and the implementation of the seventeen so-called 'Sustainable Development Goals'. Other global institutions like the World Bank, are intimately involved as well. □ TN Editor

By 2050, the world will be two-thirds urban, placing cities at the frontline of global challenges and opportunities. Migration is a major factor of urbanisation, contributing significantly to economic development and cultural diversity. As people and assets concentrate in cities, these become increasingly vulnerable to the impact of climate change, disasters and conflicts. Yet if planned and managed well, cities will become an engine for sustainable development.

For cities to be inclusive, safe and resilient, governments, mayors and local stakeholders need urban policies that integrate the soft power of culture, education, science and social integration, as suggested in the [New Urban Agenda](#) adopted at the Habitat III conference in 2016.

UNESCO's participation at the 9<sup>th</sup> World Urban Forum in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 7-13 February 2018, demonstrated this with five events engaging international and local voices on how cities can forge a sustainable future.

Cities in post-conflict and post-disaster situations face numerous challenges and were the focus of the networking event on "[Culture, Reconstruction, Recovery](#)" led by UNESCO and the World Bank. "Culture should be placed at the core of reconstruction and recovery processes by embedding cultural and natural heritage as well as intangible heritage and creativity into integrated strategies that rely on both people-centred and place-based approaches," said Sameh Wahba, World Bank Global Director for Urban and Territorial Development, Disaster Risk Management and Resilience.

Experts stressed that urban regeneration strategies need to use culture as a key resource, asset, and tool, and build on the “3-Ps” approach (people, places, policies) set out in the UNESCO Global Report, [Culture Urban Future](#).

The training event on [“Creativity for Sustainable Cities: Leveraging Culture for Social Inclusion, Economic Development, and enhanced resilience”](#) co-organized by UNESCO and UN Habitat highlighted the importance of cultural heritage, living heritage, and culture and creative industries in the shaping, implementation and assessment of culture-engaged urban development policies. “Culture is a key element to humanizing cities” said Christine Musisi, Director for International Relations in UN-Habitat.

Virginio Merola, Mayor of Bologna (Italy), underscored that the major responsibility of mayors and local authorities is to enhance the “urban commons” and use culture to build the conditions for people from diverse social, cultural and generational backgrounds to live together peacefully. The importance of measuring the actual contribution of culture to urban development processes was underlined, to build not only on its economic value but also on its impact on education, people’s well-being, resilience and social inclusion.

UNESCO’s event on [“Building Urban Resilience”](#) focused on how cities cope with the provision of water related services and natural hazards. Water services, for example, can be acutely affected by climate change. There are many replicable best practices and solutions for water management and policies, and disaster risk reduction. Dr Nicola Tollin, part of the UNESCO Chair of Sustainability at the Technical University of Catalonia, President of RECNET and Executive Director of the International Programme on Urban Resilience, RESURBE, demonstrated the need to bridge local and international climate action at the urban level, with projects that use nature-based solutions for water management and generate environmental, economic, social and climate co-benefits.

The [VISUS methodology](#), a science-based assessment methodology for school safety was also presented, along with the UNESCO [International](#)

[Hydrological Programme](#)'s examples of knowledge sharing and exchange on water within the framework of the [Megacities Alliance for Water and Climate \(MAWaC\)](#), which are all useful tools and resources for enhancing the resilience of cities

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## **Taking On The World: Meet UN-Habitat's First Asian Female Head**

Maimunah Mohd Sharif was formerly a city planner, but now she is the premier city planner for UN-Habitat, which curates the United Nations New Urban Agenda. A devout Muslim, the fact that Sharif would accept such a position demonstrates that Sustainable Development (aka Technocracy) is compatible with Islam. □ TN Editor

If there is one quality that defines Datuk Maimunah Mohd Sharif - the

newly elected head of UN-Habitat - it is her determination to make a positive, tangible difference in people's lives.

The former president of the Seberang Perai Municipal Council (2011-2017) and until recently mayor of Penang Island City Council says she was always vocal about all the ways that she believed the UN could change things, and now she is in the position to "walk the talk".

It's a proud achievement for Maimunah to be the first Asian woman to take the helm of the UN agency with the mission of improving life in fast-growing cities, which will be home to two-thirds of the world by 2050.

Maimunah is excited to have the opportunity to "create sustainable, fair and inclusive cities for all".

Just over a month into her four-year term as executive director, she admits that she's still settling into her new job and learning "how the UN system works". She's still firming up her vision and mission which will inform her work at the UN.

"I know what I want, to make UN Habitat relevant. How can we help cities and local governments implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and World Urban Agenda that have been laid out.

"How can we ensure that every citizen enjoys good quality of life," says Maimunah, who was awarded the Global Human Settlements Outstanding Contribution Award by the Global Forum on Human Settlements last October in Quito, Ecuador for her contributions to sustainable planning in Seberang Perai.

[Maimunah](#) may have just stepped into office but she's been a vocal commentator on the UN Settlements programme for years. As the Seberang Perai municipal council president, she was invited to sit on the Global Task Force for Local and Regional Governments in 2016 where she advocated for dialogue with local governments.

She urged the UN to provide platforms for local and regional governments and their networks within the UN as national and global

sustainability can only be achieved when local and regional governments are empowered.

A town planner by training, Maimunah started her career at the Municipal Council of Penang Island in 1985.

In 2003, she was promoted to Director of Planning and Development where she was directly involved in development control of Penang city projects and landscape development.

She also led a team in planning and implementation of the Urban Renewal Projects in George Town. In November 2009, she became the first General Manager to establish George Town World Heritage Incorporated and manage the George Town World Heritage Site which was inscribed by Unesco in July 2008.

She then became the first woman to be president of the Seberang Perai Municipal Council in 2011.

Now, Maimunah is ready for her new challenge, emboldened by the support from her team in Nairobi, Kenya where she will be based for the next four years.

“It’s been very good, so far. I touched down in Nairobi on Dec 22 and stepped into my office the next day.

“I’ve been meeting my team and the heads of departments as well as our stakeholders. I’ve received tremendous support. In fact, when I delivered my address at the town hall meeting on my second day of work, the hall was overflowing ... and I was told that the attendance was unprecedented.

“Hopefully, this is a sign of the support I will receive,” says the affable Maimunah.

## **Chance Of A Lifetime**

Maimunah didn’t apply for her UN post, nor did she expect the appointment. She learnt that United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres had nominated her for the position in December last year.

“They asked me if I was aware of the vacancy and if I had applied for the post before nominations closed on Oct 21. I didn’t know anything ... on Oct 21, I was busy handling the landslide in Penang. I was then told of my nomination and went through a 90-minute interview via video-conference,” she relates.

On Dec 20, Guterres informed the General Assembly of his nomination and there was a vote.

“I was watching the session live from my home. It was 4am Malaysian time and I was excited. The vote was unanimous!” she says.

Maimunah is honoured to receive such a show of confidence.

“I have spoken about sustainable urban development at conferences. I suppose they have been listening to what I have to say,” she says.

It didn’t take long for Maimunah to agree to take on the challenge. But first, as always, she consulted her husband and their two daughters.

Women, she says, can achieve wonders as long as they have the support from family. *(Ed. note: This is an Islamic requirement)*

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