



A Caribbean New Urban Agenda post-Habitat III: Closing the gaps



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ABSTRACT

Urbanisation, climate change and natural hazards present serious challenges for the Caribbean which Habitat III brought into focus. This paper critically examines problems associated with these complex challenges, to propose a relevant Caribbean specific New Urban Agenda and suggest implementation mechanisms which are essential to forge ahead. It reviews urban issues for fifteen countries that constitute the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). These problems are investigated from the perspective of four pillars of economic, social and environmental sustainability, and governance. The paper reveals that with the application of these main components and related thematic elements, many countries in this grouping are underperforming in achieving the sustainable development goal of safe, resilient and sustainable urban settlements. The main conclusion drawn is that countries of the CARICOM Caribbean should not adopt an imported blueprint to resolve critical urban issues. This is an opportune time for crafting a relevant indigenous New Urban Agenda for CARICOM Caribbean countries and finding the right implementation mechanisms to be at the frontline of change.

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1. Introduction

The urban planning community in the Caribbean has long stressed the need to contextualise urban challenges to facilitate Caribbean specific urban policy formulation and effective implementation given its human, technical and financial resource constraints. The Habitat-II Conference held in 1996 produced the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements which articulated the need for adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements in an urbanising world. One of the legacies of the Old Urban Agenda was the adoption of constitutional rights to adequate housing. Many Caribbean countries which participated in this conference highlighted housing deficits arising from high land prices and construction costs, a lengthy building and land use conversion approval process, onerous mortgage financing policies and the leakage of subsidies to low income households. However, Caribbean countries did not ratify the Habitat-II declaration and housing policies and national spatial development plans remained in draft form and were not approved by national parliaments for mainly political reasons as governments changed. Moreover, post-Habitat II, International Donors and Bilateral Development Agencies steadily reduced investments in cities and reduced funding of urban programmes. These spending cuts undermined

the full implementation of the Habitat-II Agenda. The 2016 Habitat-III meeting discussed urban resiliency, sustainable urban development and a New Urban Agenda (NUA) given that the Old Urban Agenda post-Habitat II did not yield all that it had promised, including shelter for all and sustainable human settlements. Habitat-III provided an appropriate and timely forum for debate among Small Island Developing States (SIDS) on the alignment of priorities and strategies that would afford the realisation of policies, programmes and partnerships that would reflect the urban dynamics of the 21st century.

Habitat-III concluded with the Quito Declaration, which acknowledged that countries worldwide were far from attaining the goal of sustainable cities and called for the global community to embrace a New Urban Agenda. At the same time there was consensus among stakeholders that countries could take advantage of opportunities presented by urbanisation to drive transformative sustainable development. A NUA is fundamental to transforming the way cities and human settlements are planned, governed and managed to end poverty and social inequality, achieve environmental sustainability and promote economic development. Each

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country will, however, need to individually interpret the pillars and principles of a NUA and devise appropriate context specific mechanisms for its implementation. A NUA should be adapted to the countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) given that it is impractical to borrow a blueprint from other countries or regions.¹

It is imperative that a NUA for SIDS of the CARICOM Caribbean is relevant to the peculiarities of small geographical size, economic vulnerability, environmental fragility, very high vulnerability to climate change and natural hazards, urbanisation trends and urban poverty. In particular, the majority of CARICOM Caribbean countries are characterised by a unique urbanisation pattern manifested in the existence of primate cities, low-elevation coastal zone cities and informal urbanism. Rapid urbanisation presents difficulties for these countries that must clear a backlog of a high demand for housing, infrastructure and social services.

While there was some debate on the need for a NUA at Habitat III in 2016 and the Caribbean Urban Forum in 2017, the specific components, elements, policies, practices and tools for implementation require more detailed investigation and elaboration. In the context of prevailing critical urban issues and rapid urbanisation rates that are projected in the coming decades, this paper has a two-fold objective. One objective is to close gaps in the UN-Habitat Global Action Framework for a NUA so as to articulate a relevant CARICOM Caribbean NUA framework. The architecture of the CARICOM Caribbean NUA advocated in this paper will be guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in particular SDG 11, SDG 13 and SDG 15. SDG 11 focuses on making cities and human settlements resilient and sustainable. SDG 13 highlights combatting climate change and protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. SDG 15 underscores sustainably managing forests, and reversing land degradation, and halting biodiversity loss. The other objective is to recommend tools and prioritise best practices for achieving these SDGs and for implementing a relevant Caribbean NUA.

Firstly, the paper presents a critical review of existing urban issues in the CARICOM Caribbean to contextualise the uniqueness of the Caribbean urbanisation experience. Secondly, it discusses the major components, elements, implementation tools and best practices to close the gap in the Global Action Plan for a NUA which is more relevant to Caribbean SIDS. Thirdly, the conclusion provides key messages for Caribbean urban policymakers and decision-makers.

2. Background

Approximately 6.4 million persons live in the CARICOM Caribbean and urbanisation levels are not only rising, but also in some countries are occurring at a rapid rate. Many of these countries have actively participated in the SIDS Barbados Plan of Action, the Mauritius Strategy for Implementation and the Samoa Pathway which specifically addressed SIDS challenges and opportunities for transformation. In recent years, several events and agreements acknowledged the unique vulnerabilities of SIDS and the urgency to improve resiliency against their specific and complex problems. Rio+20 (2012), the *SAMOA Pathway* (2014), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), the *Sendai Framework* (2015) as well as the *Paris Agreement* (2015) raised issues of urbanisation impacts and underscored strategies for sustainable development to combat climate change. Urban planners within the region have

argued for the adoption of a NUA which is relevant to the needs of CARICOM states. The need for a Caribbean Urban Agenda was first raised in 2011 (Verrest, Moorcroft, & Mohammed, 2013), yet details on its main components and a governance structure for implementation require further elaboration.

3. Methodology

A critical review of urbanisation patterns, challenges and opportunities for change in the CARICOM Caribbean was conducted to help close the gap in the proposed NUA for the sub-region. Data obtained from several international, regional and local databases were used in reviewing and analysing urban problems experienced. An urban profile of CARICOM Caribbean countries was prepared using the four main pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental, social, and governance. The urban profile and main thematic subcomponents confirmed urban dilemmas and specific gaps in meeting the SDGs applicable to urban settlements. These were synthesised to inform the proposed CARICOM Caribbean relevant NUA.

4. Urban profile of the CARICOM Caribbean

This section of the paper reviews the urban profile of the CARICOM Caribbean to help inform a relevant NUA.

4.1. Levels of urbanisation and urbanisation rates

Urbanisation levels in some CARICOM Caribbean countries are high and in some cases more than half of the population lives in urban centres (See Fig. 1). The most urbanised countries in the region is the Bahamas (79%) (Alkema, Jones, & Lai, 2013).

In many of these CARICOM states there is a tendency for the population to concentrate in the capital city, which is often a primate city, or the main urban region (See Fig. 1). Half of the capitals contain more than 50% of their countries' population.² Population concentration in the capital city or one urbanised corridor has increased demands that are in excess of housing supply, infrastructural capacity and urban services provision. Also, the strong influence of the primate city over other urban centres in the settlement hierarchy has resulted in the dependency on the capital city for employment and administrative services.

Rapid urbanisation is projected as population growth accelerates the pressure to convert rural land for housing and economic development. By 2050, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados and The Bahamas will triple their urbanisation rate and St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago will experience a six-fold increase (Angel, 2012). Significant urban land cover increases are projected between 2000 and 2050 for Caribbean SIDS (Angel, Parent, Civco, & Blei, 2012). Trinidad and Tobago for example will experience a seven-fold increase in urban land cover. Land cover change has consequences for urban sprawl and the loss of cultivable lands (Angel, 2012).

4.2. Urban environmental sustainability

Urban environments in the CARICOM Caribbean have been compromised by both natural and human activity. Examples include, de-vegetation for housing and wetland loss to facilitate land reclamation and port expansion in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. Between 2010 and 2016 seven severe floods occurred in Port of Spain due to inadequate drainage infrastructure and hillside

¹ The members of the CARICOM Caribbean are Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

² The urbanisation data for Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago are official estimates but these may be undercounted.

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