

Report of the NEAT WG on Urbanisation: “Towards Good Urban Planning: Sustainable Development and Better Quality of Life” Held in Singapore

Tuesday, 21 July 2015

I Overview

1. More than half of the world’s population already resides in urban areas. The United Nations has observed that Asia is currently home to 53% of the world’s urban population, followed by Europe at 14%, and Latin America and the Caribbean at 13%. It estimates that continuing population growth and urbanisation will add 2.5 billion people to the world’s urban population by 2050. Asia and Africa are expected to contribute nearly 90% of this increase.¹

2. The ASEAN plus Three (APT) countries in Asia have to grapple with the challenges and opportunities of this expected acceleration in urban population growth in the coming years. Last year, the NEAT Working Group (WG) on Urbanisation examined the broad trends of urbanisation in the APT countries arising largely from the rural-urban migration. The WG shared experiences and best practices related to the urbanisation process in general and made some recommendations to foster cooperation among the APT countries in this area.

3. Building on this foundation, NEAT Singapore decided to embark on Phase II this year by examining the specific area of urban planning, a critical component in ensuring positive outcomes for residents living in a city. The concentration of people in urban areas has raised urban density, and with that, led to increasing demand for land use. It is therefore extremely important to plan a city well to ensure that it develops in a manner that achieves optimal economic, social and sustainability outcomes in spite of physical constraints, the competing demands for land use and the lack of resources.

4. Almost all big cities in the world have physical plans (such as concepts plans, master plans and even development control regimes) that direct the way the city should grow. However, not all development takes place according to these plans. Very often, other factors influence the way development takes place, and the physical plans remain just on paper and not translated into reality. Good urban planning thus requires not only

¹ “World Urbanisation Prospects: The 2014 Revision”, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, Released in 2014, Page 1, available at <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Highlights/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf> (accessed 16 April 2015).

well coordinated and integrated plans but also the effective implementation of these plans.

5. With this in mind, the NEAT WG on Urbanisation comprising experts from the APT countries gathered in Singapore on 21 July 2015 to share their knowledge and experience on urban planning in their respective countries. The WG discussed and exchanged views on the progress made as well as the challenges encountered by the respective countries in urban planning. The WG further deliberated on a set of recommendations for APT cooperation in urban planning which can be found in the last section of this report.

6. The list of NEAT participants is at **Annex**.

II Challenges Encountered

7. While acknowledging the progress made in urban planning in the APT countries, the WG noted that there remained wide-ranging and complex challenges to be tackled. At the institutional or systemic level, some of the key challenges highlighted included the fragmented or multiplicity of urban planning institutions; poor supervision and implementation of urban planning; too many plans; weak coordination at each urban planning level and between levels; lack of transparency in urban planning process; malpractices in the urban planning sector; and the lack of a long-term and integrated approach to urban planning. The WG stressed that urban planning went beyond the role played by urban planners although they are among the key stakeholders. What is more important is how the various stakeholders work together through a cross-sectoral manner (that includes taking into account economic, social and environmental considerations) to improve the lives of residents in urban areas over a sustained period of time.

8. At the capacity-building level, some of the key challenges included insufficiently trained skilled manpower, poor physical infrastructure and lack of financial resources. Another challenge is to engender in urban planning stakeholders a forward-looking mindset that constantly anticipates change, plans for change and looks to finding creative and even local solutions to meet urban planning challenges.

9. Global trends and developments that affect the growth of cities are also posing new constraints and unknowns to urban planners. These include the challenge of addressing post industrial development where traditional growth sectors decline and new growth areas need to be found; planning for the future when it is becoming harder to predict what the future will hold given shorter product life cycles, rapid technological advances and shrinking fiscal budgets; and, grappling with higher public expectations (and hence political pressure) on urban planners to satisfy short term demands over long-term planning. In addition, global warming and climate change can be expected to exert greater influence on the planning parameters of urban planners. Furthermore, urban planners would need to better manage the growing tension between development

and conservation not only in the cities but also in the coastal areas where the livelihoods of local communities are being threatened by tourism and other-related developments.

10. Many of the above challenges underscore the importance of putting in place at least two key pillars of good urban planning. The first pillar is to have integrated master planning and development. For one, this calls for a high degree of coordination among various government ministries and agencies. Such coordination would allow for the concerns or differences among the various ministries and agencies to be addressed and for practical solutions to be found in the interest of achieving national objectives. It also requires those involved in urban planning to adopt a long term approach, to build in some flexibility in their plans, to execute effectively and to innovate to find creative solutions based on local conditions and constraints.

11. The second pillar is to have dynamic urban governance. This refers to how the leadership at the political and bureaucratic levels interacts with citizens and other stakeholders to make decisions on how a city plans, develops, utilises and manages its physical and environmental resources to achieve national outcomes. Some of the key principles that constitute dynamic urban governance include leading with vision and pragmatism, building a culture of integrity, cultivating sound or effective institutions, involving the community or other relevant players as stakeholders, and working with markets (namely the private sector) wherever possible.

III Recommendations

12. The APT governments need to work closely together on urban planning to achieve a sustainable balance among various considerations such as economic growth, social progress and environmental protection that facilitates the building of liveable cities for residents. Together, they can develop greater synergies and mitigate shortcomings in the area of urban planning. The task of building liveable cities is getting urgent as Asia is expected to bear the brunt of more and accelerated population growth in its urban areas in the coming years. The following are key recommendations to promote APT cooperation on urban planning:

- a. Demonstrate political will and commitment by adopting a whole-of-government approach along with long-term integrated design in the planning and development of a city.
- b. Ensure sustainable urban planning outcomes by combining the pursuit of a robust urban economy with social and environmental considerations, and disaster resilience.
- c. Promote an open and inclusive approach by involving relevant stakeholders to encourage joint ownership and pooling of resources.

- d. Empowering local actors especially the local government and local community to promote bottom up urban planning and public participation, and ensure the responsiveness of urban planning policies to local needs.
- e. Undertake pilot/joint projects or compile a collection of case studies to better share knowledge, expertise and experience on urban planning among the APT countries.
- f. Enhance capacity building especially training of skilled manpower on urban planning.
- g. Explore alternate financing solutions such as Public-Private Partnerships (or PPP) or other financial institutions in urban planning apart from traditional sources of government funding.
- h. Leverage on international or global platforms such as the World Cities Summit (held biennially in Singapore - next one to be held in July 2016) and the Habitat III Conference (by the United Nations to be held in Ecuador in October 2016) to explore and share practical lessons and ways forward for sustainable urban planning and development.

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