

INTERVIEW



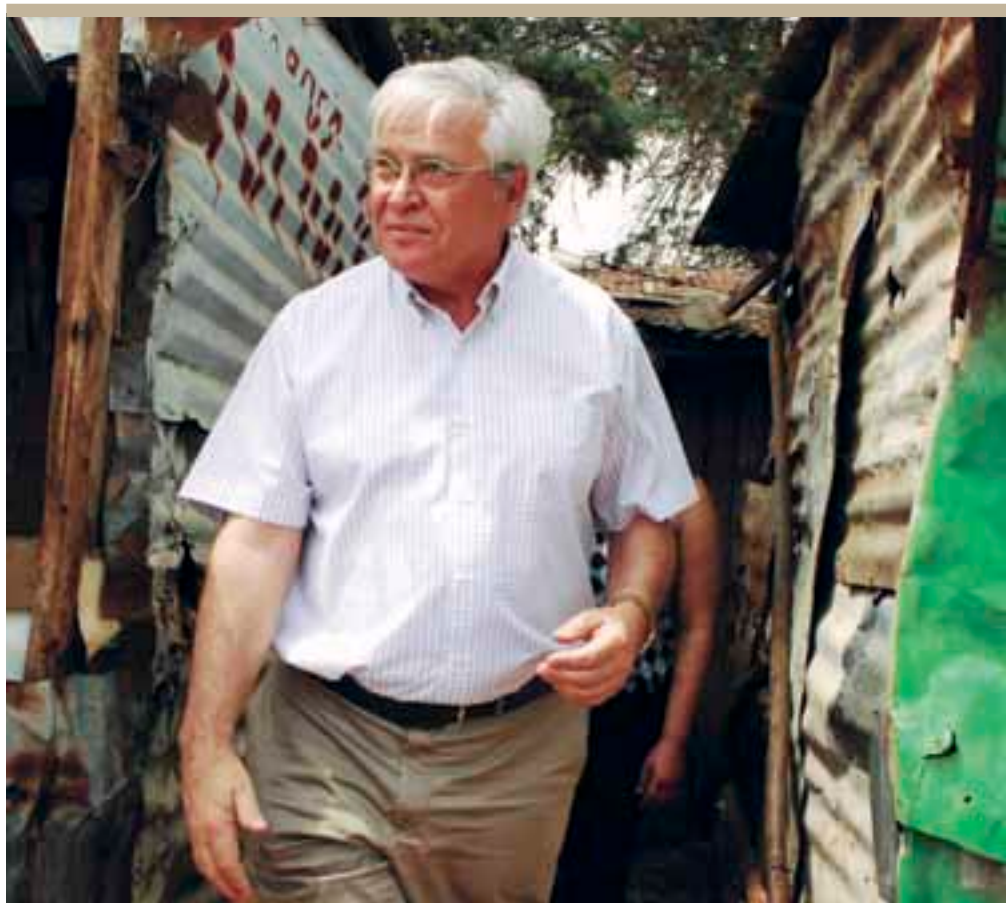
For sustainable cities, Africa needs planning

Interview with
UN-Habitat's
Joan Clos

Africa's cities are growing very rapidly. By 2009 some 395 million Africans — nearly 40 per cent of the continent's population — lived in urban areas. That number is projected to triple to more than 1.2 billion, or 60 per cent of all Africans, by 2050. For the United Nations Human Settlements Programme — known as UN-Habitat — that growth represents a dual challenge: helping Africans to better harness the productive potential of their cities, but also to cope with the increased demands for municipal services and decent housing, so that more and more people are not obliged to crowd into impoverished slum areas. Joan Clos, a former mayor of Barcelona, Spain, and since 2010 the executive director of UN-Habitat, believes that tackling those challenges will above all require more systematic urban planning. *Africa Renewal's* managing editor, Ernest Harsch, spoke with him at UN-Habitat's headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.

Africa Renewal How has the exceptionally rapid growth of Africa's cities affected general approaches to urban development?

Joan Clos We are seeing an unprecedented pace of urbanization in Africa. We have seen similar movements in other continents before. But what is different in Africa is the speed of the process. The response to that is to improve urban planning,



to plan for city growth. At the beginning, it's usually very difficult. The first waves of migration to the city are unplanned. But it is necessary to introduce as soon as possible urban planning on a massive scale in Africa.

AR In some countries in Africa, where urban planning is being attempted, it often seems slow and bureaucratic, and by the time it reaches implementation, things have already changed, growth has outstripped the plans. Can planning efforts really keep up?

JC The first step is the limitation of public space in relation to private space. This is something that has to be done by the government, because there is

Joan Clos, executive director of UN-Habitat, visiting the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya.

 UN-Habitat / Julius Mwelu

no other entity. The problem is that if the government is uncoordinated, or it doesn't have the instruments, the speed of planning is much slower than the speed of city growth. The only solution is to speed up the planning process, because you cannot stop in-migration. If it's complex because it involves different ministries, it needs to be simplified. And if it's too dependent on central government, then it should be delegated to the local authorities.

For every "if" there must be a solution. There's no other alternative for proper

city growth than to be planned. If an unplanned city is built, then its reconstruction, the introduction of planning afterward, is much more difficult. It's very expensive, it brings social conflicts. When you see economies, like the African ones, growing at 6 to 7 per cent, there's no excuse. You cannot have such a rate of growth without at the same time putting in place urban planning instruments.

AR In some cities in Africa, particularly major ones, there have been efforts to revitalize centre cities, to attract foreign investors and businesses. Sometimes, when this has been done in a top-down fashion, local communities have resisted. How can this be avoided?

JC It is a question of the maturity of the political system. In a weak system, sometimes the way they do planning is by authoritarian means, without taking into account the rights of the people. There's no need for practices that don't take care of the affected people. There's room enough

for everybody to be better off. Urban planning can help generate wealth. And when you generate wealth, there's always the possibility of distributing it. But if someone tries to develop the city and capture all the wealth for himself, then conflict is sure to arise.

There are many examples [of good planning] in Africa, but mostly at the small scale. They are not perfect, but are advancing in a good direction, in Morocco, Mauritius, Rwanda. What we still don't see is a pro-active approach, of national governments developing national urban policies to cope with the challenging future of African cities. Urban planning is not something for tomorrow. It should be there today, this afternoon.

AR How does climate change affect urban development?

JC The typical unplanned city, which has no streets, no drainage system, or is built on slopes, is very susceptible to climate change. It's very prone to huge catastrophes. The solution to the risk of climate change, again, is urban planning. This is one additional reason why governments will be pushed to do something in favour of urban planning, to protect

the population against climate change disasters.

These are now typically considered to be natural disasters. But in the future they will be seen as a failure of government. In a lot of countries in the world, people at first saw them as natural disasters, but they later on looked at the government and said, "No, no. It's wrongdoing. It's a lack of planning, a lack of foresight by the government." We have seen earthquakes with very high tolls of victims, and similar, even stronger, earthquakes elsewhere, with very few victims. The natural disaster, the quake, is the same. What is different is the outcome.

AR Many urban Africans currently are obliged to live in slums. Could you talk about UN-Habitat's approach to participatory slum upgrading?

JC In a sense, the slum is a failure of the state. In most slums the state doesn't intervene. Legitimacy inside of the slum rests with the community. If you want to improve the conditions of the slum, you need to establish a dialogue with the community. They are the ones who will understand it, the ones who have the legitimacy to perform it.

When you introduce streets and latrines, and put lights in the streets, immediately you have shops that emerge, you have more economic activities. There's a virtuous circle of self-improvement. Yes, this requires an initial investment. But it also requires dialogue with the stakeholders in the slums, the local community, the structure owners, to agree on the improvements.

AR Do upgrading slums and urban planning also involve land tenure reform?

JC Yes. Security of tenure is very related to urban planning. First you need to identify the plots. We are advising governments, regional authorities and local governments, through different legislation and land tools, to have a

Construction of a housing project in KwaMashu, the largest poor township near South Africa's port city of Durban.

 Africa Media Online / South Photos / John Robinson



proper census of urban plots. The next step is introducing urban planning. This includes introducing public space, mainly streets. This sometimes affects existing plots, so you need to readjust land ownership. And that requires a legal instrument — which is lacking in most of Africa — by which a pool of owners can readjust their share of the property in a way that they don't lose value. In every urbanized continent there are centuries of tradition of land readjustment. This is something we need to help introduce and develop in Africa.

AR In many African countries there have been moves toward the decentralization of government institutions. How does that relate to urban development?

JC I don't like the word "decentralization." It doesn't explain well what is happening. I prefer to say "local government empowerment." The weight of central government is so weak that you


cannot really talk about decentralization. What is new is that national constitutions and national political agreements now allow for the empowerment of local authorities. This allows more forces in society to develop. It empowers local governments to have local taxes, to create local fiscal systems. That requires some kind of inventory of businesses.

With all that, slowly, you see an improvement of the general institutional capacity of the country. I am sure that we will see in the next 10, 15, 20 years in Africa an evolution of local institutions, regional institutions and, of course, central government institutions, which will add more meat to the backbone of the state that we know today.

AR What about urban governance?

JC This process will also bring an improvement of governance.

Of course, there are going to be scandals, problems. But in general the tendency that I foresee is toward an increased complexity and completeness of institutional relationships and capacities in a more modern state. The only way to fight corruption is to improve your institutions. This is something that will be demanded by the population. Municipal services, as any other good, also need to be financed. I would expect that with the growth of African economies, room will be created for financing urban services.

It's not going to be easy. It's not going to be without conflicts. In the end there will be better conditions of living, and better conditions of freedom and capacity for citizens. The young people in Africa are pushing very strongly. They are going to be a political force. They are going to demand these kinds of changes. 

Naidoo interview

from page 16

KN Today governance gaps created by globalization provide a permissive environment for wrongful acts by companies. At Rio 2012, governments must agree to the development of a global instrument that ensures full liability for any social or environmental damage that global corporations cause. African governments should also call for creating strong regulation and control of financial markets and introducing restrictions on speculators and speculative products to stop harmful practices that lead to rising resource and commodity prices and an accelerated depletion of natural resources, with dramatic consequences for poor people and small economies.

AR What if negotiators fail to agree on a suitable successor to the Kyoto

Protocol, which seeks to curb emissions of the "greenhouse gases" that harm the earth's ozone layer?

KN The answer is simple: They then will be admitting that governments and political leaders are sleep-walking us into a crisis of epic proportions, putting the future and lives of our children and grandchildren in jeopardy and great danger.

Many citizens in the world, especially young people — I know my own daughter feels this way — are completely disgusted by how governments lack the political will to establish a solid, time-bound process to address the biggest threat our planet faces.

AR Do African governments need to pay more attention to their own people?

KN A true revolution can only start when governments start listening to the people and not to the polluters.

The power of the people can no longer be undermined. What our brothers and sisters in North Africa and the Middle East have done is a clear example of that. Based on what history has taught us, at the end of the day it is up to the voices of thoughtful, concerned citizens to stand up and resist the lack of action. If there is one thing I have learned about big systemic change, it is the following: Without decent men and women who say that enough is enough, and who are willing to go to prison for it, systemic change won't happen.

There is strong civil society across Africa, and it's getting stronger and stronger. The recent events not only in North Africa but also across the continent have shown the power of people. We need to go beyond the solo approach and work together and lend our voices across all sectors: environmental, human rights, health, education, etc. Only our collective voice will be heard. 