

Lessons learned at the World Urban Forum



([/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/lp/wuf7](https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/lp/wuf7))The seventh session of the World Urban Forum in Medellín, Colombia — with its focus on urban equity in development and its theme of "Cities for Life" — set out to address huge challenges and covered a lot of ground in the process. From urban poverty and the inclusion of informal communities to climate change, a broad array of dialogues, roundtables, assemblies, and side events brought people from all over the world to Medellín to grapple with some of humanity's toughest problems — and to continue laying the groundwork for Habitat III and the post-2015 global development agenda. What did we learn from WUF7? What new collaborations and alliances came out of the sessions? What strategic and tactical takeaways did we bring back to inform our own practice? Consider the perspectives of panelists Jorge Bela, Yahia Shawkat, Clarisse Cunha Linke, Omar Nagati, and Dara Kell — then join the conversation in the comments below.

Conversation hosted in partnership with UN-HABITAT (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://www.unhabitat.org/>) and the Ford Foundation (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://www.fordfoundation.org/>) in conjunction with WUF 7 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://wuf7.unhabitat.org/>).

Click on the pictures to see each panelist's perspective below.



ENGLISH

ESPAÑOL

Jorge Bela — Bogotá Community Manager, URB.im



According to UN-Habitat estimates, by 2050 there will be as many as three billion new urban dwellers worldwide — 70 percent of the population will be urban. This unprecedented change will bring enormous challenges. Dozens of new cities of more than 10 million inhabitants will have to be built, and many more will have to substantially increase their size. Urban growth will be the most important issue in development in the decades to come.

It is impossible to summarize in a short article all the ideas, often contradictory, shared at the 7th World Urban Forum. Perhaps the [Declaración de Medellín](https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://wuf7.unhabitat.org/pdf/Declaracion-Medellin_WUF7_Advisory%20Board_ENG.pdf) (https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://wuf7.unhabitat.org/pdf/Declaracion-Medellin_WUF7_Advisory%20Board_ENG.pdf) is a good starting point. But I do want to mention some of the Forum's main themes. First of all, the need for careful planning. Chaotic growth fosters inequality, creates problems of transportation, and poses a threat to the environment. Planning should be inclusive, open and transparent — which the use of new technologies, such as GIS and social media, can facilitate.

Climate change and the greening of cities should be at the core of the planning process. Greener cities imply better quality of life for their inhabitants. Safe public spaces are also crucial. Strict zoning and the building of heavy transportation infrastructures often creates segregating physical barriers and isolated areas where citizens live in constant fear of their neighbors. Public spaces facilitate innovation and the exchange of ideas that make cities inherently productive.

Finally, sufficient resources should be allocated to the daunting tasks of creating safe and resilient cities. Massive urbanization will not be a cheap process, and shortcuts will turn out to be even more costly in the long term.

Medellín proved to be an excellent setting for WUF7. As a city that has overcome serious problems, it provides a perfect illustration of the need to identify and share better practices worldwide. These practices will be at the heart of the **Habitat III** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://unhabitat.org/events-3/habitat-iii/>) conference, as will the discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals that will succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Social media allows all of us to participate in **these crucial debates** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://www.worldwewant2015.org/>), so no one should be excluded.

Bogotá Community Manager Jorge Bela has been working as a freelance writer and journalist in Bogotá since 2010. Prior to that, he worked at El País, Spain's leading newspaper, and Analistas Financieros Internacionales. Bela has also worked as a researcher at the European Latin American Research Institute and as project manager at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He has an M.A. in Latin American Studies from the University of Florida and completed the coursework for a Ph.D. in comparative politics at the University at Albany.

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WUF7 (</web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/120#comment-120>)

Permalink (</web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/120#comment-120>) Submitted by Jorge Bela on Wed, 04/23/2014 - 10:00

Hi Yahia, I agree with you in the sense that equality and justice is far more easier said than done. Still, I had the feeling that many voices were heard during WUF7, not only some official version of what urban development is or should be. Many perspectives and viewpoints, often contradictory, were heard. Some of them were indeed highly critical on how things are going. Also, there was plenty of time for questions from participants. In some of the sessions I attended were more than 24!!!!

The use of data also entails some risks, specially if it is poorly elaborated or interpreted (often interpretation is very very hard). I do not have the feeling that the use of data per se irons out the local struggles going on daily in any city in the global south. In fact, good data and analysis are the best tool to iron out political and other distortions. Poor analysis or the lack of good data are often at the root of failed programs worldwide, some of them quite well intentioned. Yet again, perhaps Omar is right, and what the world really needs is a World Urban Poor forum! But as Clarisse points out, a new culture of just and inclusive cities is necessary as the world prepares for a massive process of urbanization in the coming decades.

Medellin provided great logistics, but also space of protest and contestation. The main public plaza, just across the street from WUF7, hosted several events of local citizens that wanted to call attention to their causes.

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Urbanisation without proper planning

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/121#comment-121) Submitted by Felix Nyamedor on Thu, 04/24/2014 - 11:27

Urbanisation is very good and part of the development stages of nations. However, urbanisation becomes more of a challenge than a blessing when it overgrows planning and development in general. The population explosion in Africa contributed significantly to urbanisation in Africa, yet, the plans are out of place to sustain the population. Leaders of Africa especially must devise ways to handle such concerns. Data and research is very important. Leaders should devise ways to evenly distribute the population as the urbanisation is labour motivated mostly.

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Urbanization and youth roles

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/122#comment-122) Submitted by widya angraini on Thu, 04/24/2014 - 19:27

Thanks you for Urb.im team who provided excellent coverage during the WUF. Congratulations. I wish I could be there too as I saw so many great experts and interesting topics during the events.

Picking up from Josephine blog on urban talks I completely on Mr Toderian statements that city should be design for people and that we need to perceive city not only as a challenge but also as a success and opportunity. Most mega cities currently reacted on urbanization by providing more heavy infrastructure – roads, busses, trains – but fail to really seen the root of the problem as the cause of urbanization. Coordination between regions never been performed seriously so as population growth and flow to cities seems unstoppable. Decentralization exercised in developing countries should bring more power for cities to manage their own development however, as Clarisse mentioned, there is a lack of culture of inclusive planning that made good and just city seems hard to be constructed.

I actually also interested if there is particular talk about how youth could be engage in these issues of informality and open space or any issue regarding their role as future generation in shaping city?

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Equitable Cities (and Representation)

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/123#comment-123) Submitted by Carlin Carr on Fri, 04/25/2014 - 06:56

I agree, Widya--kudos to the great coverage from the urb.im team. It's been great following the conference from afar. Medellin sounds like it really serves as an example to the world to what can happen with some vision and collaboration. I love the idea that Dara started with: "The most beautiful spaces for the poorest." This simple idea on its own speaks volumes about a place.

It's interesting to see in these short wrap-ups of WUF7 that the need for hearing and learning from voices of the underserved is still missing, or at least lacking. I have to agree that data can only represent so much. Personal narrative and lived histories are powerful, and I believe the wants, hopes and wishes of poor communities themselves need to have a voice at convenings like these, or as Omar suggested, a World Urban Poor Forum.

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Carlin isn't it strange that

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Permalink ([/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/124#comment-124](http://www.urb.im/comment/124#comment-124)) Submitted by Clarisse Linke on Sun, 04/27/2014 - 07:05

Carlin isn't it strange that for many years we have heard that it's crucial to give voice to the communities, and still practices haven't changed? I mean when was it that Robert Chambers introduced the participatory approaches in the field of development? In the 1990s...! Still what leads policy and investments are not the narrative and stories of people, but big data, overcasting the "hopes and wishes of poor communities". How to change that?

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re: data

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Permalink ([/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/125#comment-125](http://www.urb.im/comment/125#comment-125)) Submitted by Yahia Shawkat on Fri, 04/25/2014 - 03:48

Hi Jorge,

I completely agree that data is very important, and interpretation is paramount as the same data set can be shown to give different views depending through whose eyes it is being seen. My concern is that data read and compared on a global scale obscures many local issues. Case in point the UNhabitat global slum indicator, which for Egypt shows that about 17% of Egyptians live in slums. As someone who has been working on issues of the built environment here in Egypt for some time, I find this information misleading and inaccurate. There is also a heavy reliance on quantitative indicators, which are just about doable on a global scale, however qualitative indicators are also needed, however on one of the sessions on City Prosperity Index I was told that there isn't the capacity to gather qualitative data at a national level in Egypt, a major hindrance in my opinion which will make the quantitative data at best irrelevant, at worse, misleading.

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Interesting initiative

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Permalink ([/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/126#comment-126](http://www.urb.im/comment/126#comment-126)) Submitted by Carlin Carr on Fri, 04/25/2014 - 07:03

Jorge, thanks for your great overview. I can imagine the contradictions with so many cities represented and some complex problems at hand. I was interested in your thought "Planning should be inclusive, open and transparent — which the use of new technologies, such as GIS and social media, can facilitate." This is really interesting and I wonder if there is an example that stands out from the conference on an initiative to harness technology to make planning more inclusive.

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Seguridad y Crecimiento

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/127#comment-127) Submitted by María Fernanda ... on Fri, 04/25/2014 - 08:36

Jorge, felicidades por la cobertura de este importante evento. Coincido que la planeación de las zonas urbanas en un futuro conlleva grandes retos al tener que albergar a miles de personas en sus territorios. No obstante, como mencionas, una cuestión crítica es el financiamiento y recursos económicos necesarios para implementar estrategias de innovación que promuevan las soluciones necesarias en las ciudades. Si bien, el sector privado y los empresarios son una parte fundamental, estos estarán presentes con más apoyo en la medida en que se tenga un contexto de seguridad y un estado de derecho adecuado. Por lo anterior, un elemento fundamental es que las ciudades sean más seguras para garantizar la interacción de los diversos actores que promueven la mejoría de estas.

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financing!

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/128#comment-128) Submitted by Clarisse Linke on Sun, 04/27/2014 - 07:00

This is a great question, Maria Fernanda and Jorge - financing. I participated in one panel during the WUF on financing (from GIZ) and most participants couldn't still think out of the box about how to identify financing mechanisms to implement innovative strategies. And yes, the problem seems to be the lack of clarity about the framework that surrounds all the different sectors relations.

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Financing

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/129#comment-129) Submitted by María Fernanda ... on Mon, 04/28/2014 - 08:04

Clarisse, definitely fostering financing mechanisms is a great challenge for the government of the cities. Here is an article from the World Bank which affirms that cities need to solve as a first step their financial solvency in order to have access to credits for the expansion of the cities.

In October 2013, the World Bank and its partners organized the first training program targeted at creditworthy African cities. Senior city managers from 10 African countries met in Nairobi in an event of five days, after which conducted extensive training of long-term capacity building and institutions. Here the link:

<http://www.bancomundial.org/es/news/feature/2013/10/24/financing-sustain...>

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190922125648/http://www.bancomundial.org/es/news/feature/2013/10/24/financing-sustainable-cities-africa-creditworthy>)

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Inclusive Planning

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Permalink ([/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/130#comment-130](http://www.urb.im/comment/130#comment-130)) Submitted by Olatawura Ladip... on Fri, 04/25/2014 - 08:55

This has been a very enjoyable read of different perspectives despite little similarities and wholesome overview of the WUF7, thank you panelists. What I found interesting was from the majority of the panelists the recurring underlying theme of inclusive planning. The idea of mostly formal bodies and players detached from the realities of the urban poor coming together to discuss truly inclusive measures while using blanket terms for diverse city issues and excluding the in-betweens was quite interesting. While the intent is great, it highlights the need for every step of the urbanization process to have elements of inclusivity and engagement with the public.

Rapid urbanization is happening and what I have gathered so far is while open spaces, sufficient resource and infrastructure and careful planning are important, there is little hope of creating truly just and inclusive cities where the needs of all are catered to one way or another without input from all levels of society. I hope the panels pointing out this need as mentioned by Yahia are truly heard and these lessons and concerns influence UN's agenda.

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Facilitating Inclusive Planning

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Permalink ([/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/131#comment-131](http://www.urb.im/comment/131#comment-131)) Submitted by Emily Eckardt on Tue, 04/29/2014 - 02:32

I, as well, have enjoyed reading the coverage of the WUF7 and have been reflecting on how valuable it is to bring different people to the table to discuss common challenges. In this case, it was bringing together development practitioners from urban areas around the world. Now I am left wondering, as are others above, how to bring people together who are already close in proximity, but far in values and socioeconomic class. From what I have witnessed in Bangladesh, the rampant inequality and segregation of the rich from the poor is one of the defining features of urban spaces. Of course data, GIS, social media, and other technologies can bring a certain level of reality and inclusion in the process of urban development, but that doesn't sound effective enough for the illiterate slum-dwellers and even lower middle class who are severely confined to the margins of urban spaces. Were there any panels or discussions on how to actually facilitate and advance inclusive planning since clearly the emphasis thus far has been stronger discursively than in practice?

Emily Eckardt, Dhaka and Chittagong Coordinator

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variety of contributors

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/132#comment-132) Submitted by Tariq Toffa on Mon, 04/28/2014 - 03:25

The summary provided by Jorge & the critiques by others are very helpful to those of us far away from the event. It is also really beneficial to have such a variety of contributors reviewing the event, & I hope we can see more of this in the future.

Omar's point on the "glorification" of informality is a sharp caution; and I would contend that it applies not only to governments, but to built environment professionals & other stakeholders alike. The complexity & sensitivity of the terrain means that they are dealing with lived realities as much as their trade.

Yahia, whom I saw recently at the Cities Conference in Joburg, great to read you on Urb.im. Clarisse, thank you again. And Dara, I enjoyed your perspective & I really wish I could have read more!

Tariq Toffa

URB.im (Cape Town, Jhb Community Manager)

SHiFT (shift.org.za)

University of Johannesburg, Architecture

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Storytelling - Communication and Engagement

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Permalink (/web/20190922125648/http://www.urb.im/comment/133#comment-133) Submitted by Priyanka Jain on Tue, 04/29/2014 - 06:46

Thank you to the urb.im team and all the panelists for remarkable coverage of WUF7 and e-debates. I particularly enjoyed Dara's perspective on storytelling. I agree that it is a powerful tool to communicate, engage and build consensus among stakeholders and have used it myself in my practice. I have seen narratives being even more effective where the goal of the development is to ultimately hand it in the hands of the community residents for maintenance. When working with spontaneous development and in a country(India) where there are multiple dialects and cultural/religious practices, it helps to focus on the culture that produced the development in first place and decipher the complex realities on ground.

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