

The world comes to town

November 03-06 was probably not a good time to expect decisions to be made on an urban planning application, housing project proposal or academic thesis. About 7,000 of the world's leading urban planners, policy makers, academics, NGO staff and researchers took time out to converge on Nanjing, in South-East China, for the fourth World Urban Forum (WUF4),

This bi-annual UN-Habitat event was held in the first year when humanity officially became more urban than rural. The overwhelming majority of urban growth is in developing countries, which could triple their entire urban built-up areas by 2030, from 200,000 to 600,000 sq. km. This 400,000 sq. km. increase would match the world's *combined* urban area in 2004. Few urban centres have been planned to absorb these numbers. The result is a growing urbanization of poverty (UN 2008). Such a transformation of human society over such a short period presents an unprecedented challenge to policy makers, professionals and the residents themselves, though you would never realise this from the low level of funding and interest shown by donor agencies.

Whilst international commitment and funding for urban related issues has never been high, it is ironic that even this modest level appears to be reducing when the need has never been greater. For example, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Sweden's SIDA no longer have dedicated sections dealing with urban issues and DFID sent just one staff member to join the small UK government team in Nanjing.

Despite a laudable increase in its programme budget from little more than £3 billion in 2002 to about £8 billion in 2010, DFID continues to be subject to annual 'efficiency' cuts of 5% in its administrative budget which will further erode its ability to influence key aspects of the international development agenda. This is highly regrettable as DFID was widely regarded until recently as a leading influence on urban development with innovative research, capacity building programmes and practical programmes. Whilst DFID continues to fund some important urban capacity building projects, such as a large scale programme in Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, India, this is the result of in-country agreements and means that the London HQ has virtually no influence in international development policy for urban issues. Iain Wright, Junior Minister for Communities and Local Government, flew the flag for the UK in Nanjing. Apparently he was extremely impressed by the experience, so perhaps he can have a private word with his ministerial colleagues in DFID to encourage them to re-engage with the urban agenda globally, especially since urban issues are central to addressing climate change and poverty reduction targets.

The British planning profession was well represented in Nanjing, reflecting an encouraging awareness of global issues. Together with the Commonwealth Association of Planners, the RTPI launched a 'Self Diagnostic Tool' earlier this year to help planning organisations across the world to assess their capacity to respond to the challenges of urban growth. Sadly, the RIBA was not present to reflect similar concerns on behalf of the architectural profession.

The event itself addressed the issue of harmonious urbanization, an appropriately Confucian concept given that China was the host. The UN report on the state of the world's cities, launched just before WUF4 (reviewed in *Planning* 31 October) also stressed the need for harmony, given the high levels of inequality present in affluent countries as well as the developing world.

As usual in these major events, there was a rich diet of roundtables, networking events, seminars, training sessions, a World Youth Forum and a major exhibition presenting examples of proposals and achievements in China and the rest of the world. With such a wide range of events covering many major issues, it was easy to overdose – and to miss many that were of interest.

Although there was a tendency for presenters to be addressing the converted, it was encouraging to see a large number of mayors, national politicians and private sector representatives participating with the urban specialists. Such diversity of interaction is vital if progress is to be achieved in the real world when participants return home to the everyday challenges facing urban areas. With 1 in 3 of the world's urban population presently living in slums and squatter settlements and forecasts that this will increase to 1.4 billion by 2020 and 2 billion by 2030 unless radical action is taken, there are certainly no grounds for complacency.

UN-Habitat now needs to stimulate awareness and support for addressing this and other key issues, such as climate change, a topic surprisingly under-represented at the forum, given that urban areas produce a high proportion of greenhouse gas emissions. This goal will not be achieved by holding large conferences or publishing lots of reports, but by informing and persuading those in positions of influence in the donor community.

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