

# Planning for cities of the future

## How do we make our urban areas more liveable, more sustainable?

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**A**LL ACROSS the cities of India, citizens grapple every day with the multifold outcomes of rapid change and increasing crowds. We complain, we sigh, and sometimes we express our rage. Yet, in our hearts, each one of us holds some vision for the city in which we have tried to make our home.

Surely we all want our city, whether it is a megalopolis or an emerging town, to be cleaner and greener, more convenient, less noisy, more like it was in the good old days, a better place to raise our children and more, much more?

Luckily, we are not alone, any of us, in wishing and planning for this. Many brilliant and creative minds around the world are trying to find ways and means to make the cities of the future more liveable, more sustainable, and to ensure they are the cradles of human excellence and creativity.

Some glimpses of an emerging vision were revealed at a recent panel discussion on "Cities Of The Future" held at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York. My husband Nandan was on the panel along with Jaime Learner, who as Mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, galvanised many into rapid action that changed the face of his city; the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, an urgent and savvy force for urban reform; and William McDonough, an architect and planner who works with large corporations and governments to design conclaves and cities that everyone could love to live in.

### The daily influx

What is a city but its people, said Shakespeare, a sentiment shared around the globe. And how! 160,000 people move into cities around the world every single day. In China, that number adds up to 14 million people a year. India is not so far behind with 10 million. In the next two decades, it is expected that 400 million

more Chinese will migrate to urban landscapes, as will about 300 million Indians.

With these staggering statistics, can individual cities really keep up? Can they manage their futures with hope, inspiration and creativity?

Mr. Learner seems to think so. "Any city can be turned around in three years," he said. "But it needs to be done fast, to prevent bureaucratic and political interference." He should know. His model for Curitiba — sustainable surface networks of public transport, holistic communities where work, home and play are integrated, and other such ideas have not just lived on but been adopted by about 80 countries around the world in the past decade. He believes in the value of committed leadership that can implement projects, especially in mass transportation and neighbourhood design. "Just start. If you go too far wrong, don't worry, the people will let you know," he says.

Sometimes, though, it seems that however much city governments do, it is never enough. So Mr. Livingstone has an important cautionary statement to add. "For cities to improve, people have to change their lifestyles as much as city governments have to develop their infrastructure." He claims the city of London has reduced private car use from 38 per cent to 18 per cent (of those using cars every day) in the past decade through aggressive pricing mechanisms. And he wants to do more. He is trying to stamp a £50 surcharge a day for all those commuters who wish to pull their SUVs on to the streets of his favourite city! He may get it yet. Londoners no longer will tolerate polluting vehicles that also jam up their roads.

This Mayor is thinking even bigger. People like him are beginning to address issues of sustainability that many in countries like India have not even imagined yet. As Nandan said, "It is only recently that we have begun to

acknowledge urbanisation as a positive corollary to development rather than a necessary evil coming out of rural neglect."

### Damaging environment

So far, urban models have been environmentally quite destructive — bring in resources from outside, use, misuse, abuse them and flush out the wastes without thought to downstream impact. Now, with a rising global consciousness about the human footprint on the planet's ecosystems, cities can no longer afford to be oblivious to their obligations.

"No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it," said Einstein. Everyone on the panel spoke urgently of creating a new consciousness and enforcing if necessary a new behaviour to make cities more sustainable — in terms of waste management, hydrocarbon emissions, water usage, etc.

What of the conflicts between urban and rural landscapes? In the cities of the future as envisioned by the panel, there would be less of a divide and more of a continuum between rural and urban life. As Mr. McDonough put it, we need to understand that cities are objects of human artifice that exist in natural ecosystems and a mutually beneficial relationship can develop between the two. For example, we must ensure that while the biological nutrition for the city is provided by the rural areas, the benefit must be returned as fertilizer to those rural feeding houses. "Technologies exist for all this, including the conversion of human waste into methane gas, but they are all state of the shelf now!" In the cities of the future, those technologies would be hard at work, enabling urban areas to work in synergy with rural areas and to reduce their harmful impact on the environment.

Not all cities in the world are thinking about these issues yet, and most are riddled with financial and political problems that are more urgent locally than

issues of sustainability. Yet to ignore these issues now only exacerbates the problem later. There is clearly a case to build awareness now about potential urban nightmares. And perhaps a lot of responsibility rests with the urban planners and the politicians of the developed world.

"An incredibly mature debate needs to happen here," admits the Mayor of London, "before we have something useful to say to India and China." "And," he adds, to resounding applause, "If America gets it wrong, it's hard to see the way forward for the rest of humankind."

Yet, with America still in love with the Hummer, how do we make the leap from the current paradigm of urban growth into one that is inclusive, efficient and ecologically sound?

One of the answers that came from several discussants played an unexpected tune! Look to the citizens of the future! "We must make the children love the city," was the message heard again and again from the panel, "because if they grow up hating the city, they will do everything to destroy it."

Instinctively, we all know this to be true. Here in India, it brings up images of violence and outrage — of public buses being burned and glass panes being smashed — often by those who have been given no stake in their own or the city's future. And yet, when you think of the rapid urbanisation in the past few decades, and how it has positively impacted on millions of lives in terms of poverty alleviation and livelihoods, you realise how much there is to be said for our city homes.

Hearing it articulated in this manner gives us all something good to do. Can we all, each one of us, think of ways to help every one of the city's children, including our own, to grow up loving the city he or she lives in? And in that process, perhaps, can we begin to love our city too?

(The writer is Chairperson, Arghyam Trust, Bangalore.)