



The world's urban population multiplied ten-fold during the 20th century. Since Latin America has an advanced urban transition, its initiatives offer interesting lessons learned to help create inclusive, environmentally sustainable and integrated cities in other developing countries.

ADDRESSING THE URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE IN INTEGRAL AND INCLUSIVE WAYS

SUMMARY

Integrated urban environmental plans developed in different Latin American countries show how to reduce systemic challenges in urban areas. Overcoming multi-dimensional urban issues requires a holistic view that includes channels for popular participation, higher level government support and cross-sector collaboration. However, it does not exclude a deep understanding of specific local necessities: in Brazil, transportation was a priority; in Colombia, disaster risk reduction; and in Argentina, decentralisation of public services. A critical overview of achievements in these urban environmental governance processes is key for South Asian and African cities that will need to accommodate most of the world's urban growth



URBANISATION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

During the last century, the fast-paced urbanisation process has been heterogeneous across developing countries. While some cases were driven by political disputes and armed conflicts, others were driven mainly by economic factors. Nevertheless, industrialisation, economic opportunities, and access to public services such as health and education are common denominators for pulling people towards urban centres everywhere.

Severe structural problems of city administrations result in an incapacity to anticipate and plan urban growth. Lack of coordination, as well as competition between different government levels, party politics, power relations, and the struggle for financial resources, all compromise local governance. The scenario is aggravated by the lack of sound regulatory and institutional frameworks to coordinate and integrate the work of government and non-profit agents.

AROUND HALF THE URBAN POPULATION IN AFRICA AND ASIA LACK MINIMAL PROVISIONS FOR WATER AND SANITATION.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Good urban governance can limit environmental problems and the risks generated by unplanned and uncontrolled urban growth.

Urban environmental problems seem to be best addressed within integrated, long-term and locally-focused development plans involving multiple stakeholders.

Urban development programmes work when they have a strong social and equity dimension and include channels for participatory decision-making.



As a result, urban centres face a proliferation of low-income settlements, backlogs in basic services and infrastructure provisions, uncontrolled geographic expansion, and increased pollution. Around half the urban population in Africa and Asia lack minimal provisions for water and sanitation. About a billion urban dwellers across the world are homeless or live in crowded tenements, houses, or shacks in informal squatter settlements, concentrated mostly in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The environmental challenges of these city areas are extreme.

Asia has half of the world's urban population and Africa's share is rapidly increasing.

Socio-economic indicators show that urban areas in Asia, Africa and Latin America will need to accommodate most of the world's urban growth. Right now, Asia has half of the world's urban population and Africa's is rapidly increasing.

Therefore, city administrations face big challenges in these regions, but the experiences of Latin America – a region further along in the urbanisation process – can offer useful lessons for Africa and South Asia.

INTEGRATING AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE INTO URBAN PLANNING

A key feature of many city administrations in Latin America has been their capacity to embark on integrated urban environmental planning as part of overall development planning.

Urban problems are complex; they result from the intersection of different issues that make a difference in terms of improving urban conditions, such as land use planning, environmental planning, transportation, and citizen participation. Several cities in the region are successfully implementing policies and programmes to address the problems of urbanisation in cohesive ways, and in particular, by integrating environmental management issues.

Many of these initiatives prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable. Though initially concentrating on a few interventions focused on the most marginalised, these

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became part of a holistic approach, and with time became integrated into wider policies and programmes. However success is not generalised. Many city and municipal governments continue to struggle to develop improved institutional frameworks, get support and resources from higher levels of government, advance participatory processes, and implement projects and programmes to successfully manage urban environmental challenges.

However, there are also examples of cities' success in implementing an integrated approach:

- The Colombian city of Manizales has a strong tradition of planning that addresses urban environmental challenges in an integrated way. It developed Biomanizales, the city's environmental policy, the Bioplan, the city's action plan to facilitate policy implementation, and a disaster risk management plan, all of which are integrated within Manizales Calidad SXII, the city's overall urban development plan.
- Porto Alegre, Brazil, developed an integrated environmental management plan that tackled a variety of the city's environmental problems in a cohesive way. The combination of this variety of initiatives resulted in 14.2 m² of green space per inhabitant, one million trees planted along public streets, almost 100% coverage in water and sanitation, improved control over industrial pollution, waste recycling programmes, a green area adoption scheme, and city square councils.
- Early in the 1970s, Curitiba, Brazil, developed a master city development plan that included an innovative transportation system and sustainable development measures. Converting empty urban spaces into parks and woods, as well as introducing the separation of domestic garbage on a wide-scale basis, were two of the measures adopted.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Another key feature of many Latin American cities' response to urban environmental governance is strong civil society engagement and a focus on social inclusion within programmes and policies.

Overall, effective urban environmental planning has been supported by participatory processes both in decision making and implementation. Community organisations, NGOs and the academic sector make up an active civil society with a long tradition of engagement in urban development processes.



Initially, they worked against dictatorships by advocating for human rights. Later, with the return of democracy to many countries, they started working with governments in developing adequate spheres for participation, as well as pressing for more responsive and accountable local governments. The combination of civil society actions and genuinely committed mayors has been fundamental in developing appropriate local agendas that address urban and environmental issues.

Some cities also specifically address social inclusion as a key component of their urban and environmental planning. The experience of the city of [Rosario, Argentina](#) is an excellent example. The Rosario Strategic Plan, decentralisation of the city government, and public participation, are all features of the city’s urban governance restructuring that include a strong social inclusion component.

The city has been successful with its decentralisation programme, and in the increased social inclusion that this brings. Rosario was divided into six districts, and each district centre offers administrative services, urban development and



Picture: City of Rosario, Argentina
Source: IIED-LA

socio-cultural and health services. They also have registry offices, bank branches, provincial tax offices, and customer service outlets for the different service utilities. They are so far succeeding in equalising access to services throughout the city, while also reforming and modernising public administration and opening new channels of participation.

SUCCESSFUL ENTRY POINTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT

The Latin American approach has been characterized by successfully integrating a variety of environmental initiatives under the umbrella of each city’s overall urban development plans. Focusing in on the individual initiatives that make up this integrated approach highlights the variety of innovative, concrete programmes that Latin American cities have to share, such as transportation, disaster risk reduction, participatory budgeting, information use, and multi-level government coordination.

Transportation

Since the 1970s, the city of Curitiba in Brazil has worked to develop a Public Transportation Integrated Network (*Rede Integrada de Transporte – RIT*), complemented by comprehensive initiatives in urban planning and land use management. It is based on exclusive bus lanes with express buses that are far cheaper than subways or light railway systems.

A differentiated tariff is applied to benefit the poorer population living in the suburbs. Shorter trips subsidise the longer, peripheral trips.

The transportation system initially developed along linear axes, with an exclusive lane for express busses in the city centre. This was later complemented with integrated terminals, inter-district bus lines, a road network, and a rapid bus system using special boarding stations to speedup boarding time. A differentiated tariff is applied to benefit the poorer population living in the suburbs. Shorter trips subsidise the longer, peripheral trips.



Disaster Risk Reduction

In comparison to other regions, Latin America has been quick to move from disaster response to disaster risk reduction. Colombian cities such as Medellin, Manizales, and Bogota have been pioneers in developing local disaster risk reduction programmes and systems within each city’s urban and environmental development plan. To learn more, read the [ELLA Disaster Risk Reduction Brief](#).



Picture: Landslide Risk in Ilheus, Brazil
Source: [Alfredo Filho](#)

Participatory Budgeting and Urban Management

In 1989, the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, introduced participatory budgeting (PB), a tool used to facilitate direct citizen participation in budget decision making, that has now been connected with the city’s environmental policy.¹

The on-going implementation of participatory budgeting led to other changes in urban management. For example, a series of city conferences were held to raise awareness on city-wide issues that were otherwise neglected in participatory budget discussions. These coincided with a four-year planning exercise, so conference results were incorporated into the city plans, thereby moving away from the tradition of plans being designed by municipal planners and technicians alone. Municipal Councils were also formed by government and civil society organisations to provide policy guidance and programme development on health, environment, public transport, and urban development issues.

Porto Alegre’s Participatory Budgeting facilitates direct citizen participation in decision making that is connected with the city’s environmental policy.

Information Tools

Environmental management can benefit from citizen participation, but in order for citizens to participate in a meaningful way, they need good local information to make informed decisions.

In Porto Alegre, this was done principally through the Environmental Atlas of Porto Alegre. The Atlas uses plain language to explain a variety of issues, from geology and geomorphology of the city, to urban growth, development of green areas, environmental impacts, and environmental management in an increasingly urbanised context. It is a tool that gives everyone - from technicians and managers to school children and politicians - a better understanding of their local context and environment.

Another example of information tools comes from the [Environmental Observatories](#) developed in Manizales, Colombia. It uses a system of environment traffic lights (*semaforos ambientales*) that display social, economic, and environmental indicators for the city’s different neighbourhoods on electronic billboards. Citizens can easily grasp the information and are encouraged to permanently evaluate the achievements of the programmes and projects carried out by the Municipal Development Plan, giving them the means to actively participate in its monitoring and implementation, and to push overall for accountability in achieving environmental management goals.

National-Local Collaboration

Because of the scale, complexity, and budget of many urban environmental initiatives, success is more likely if national and local governments, in addition to local communities, are coordinated and involved. For example, many urban environmental initiatives include the provision of formal tenure. This requires the incorporation of “exceptions” into national laws regulating land use, for example, street width, and involves relocations that need to be discussed with residents at the local level.

Urban upgrading programmes have been particularly successful at integrating national-local collaboration, with noteworthy examples coming from [PROMEBA](#), Argentina’s Programme of Neighbourhood Improvement (*Programa de Mejoramiento de Barrios*), Brazil’s [Favela Bairro](#) and *Procidade*, and Mexico’s [Habitat Mexico](#).

¹[ELLA’s Policy Brief on Participatory Budgeting](#) surveys a variety of PB experiences in the region.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

ENABLING LATIN AMERICA'S SUCCESSFUL RESPONSE



The urbanisation process in Latin America started early compared to Asia and Africa. As such, there has been time for urban development processes to mature. This allows for retrospective reflection on what has been achieved and what still needs to be done.

The 1980s was a decade of transition in Latin America, during which most countries returned to elected governments. The return or strengthening of democracy has generated a strong commitment from civil society to the public sphere. Community organisations, NGOs, and academic sectors have teamed up to advocate for human rights, stronger democracies and improved socio-economic and environmental development.

Governments in the region have also learned to work with other stakeholders, realising that government alone cannot bring solutions to development problems, yielding a strong tradition of citizen participation initiatives and strategies. Re-elected city mayors, and incoming mayors that support the long-term development process initiated by the former mayor, have been important, leading to continuity from one administration to the next.

Several countries have made constitutional or legal changes to promote decentralisation, giving more power and resources to local governments. This has been accompanied by changes

in the electorate system; mayors and city councils are elected by city votes, making them more likely to be responsive to the needs of their voters.

Local governments with sufficient financial and technical resources are fundamental for integrated urban strategies. An efficient economic administration, allied to long-term goals that are shared between city staff members, has also been essential for designing and implementing holistic plans for city development.

Multi-disciplinary research centres and NGOs, especially working on disaster risk, have been fundamental. Most of them come from social sciences and development sector backgrounds, becoming involved thanks to strong support from committed local governments and the assistance of national governments.

Civil society participation and engagement in decision-making only works if local governments are willing to generate participatory spaces. Non-governmental actors must be included in a meaningful and sustainable way. Different groups need to be able to express their needs and get involved in solving local urban problems. In Latin America, this sort of local, public administration is still the exception, not the rule.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 Integrated approaches are needed, but they must also address the specific needs of each city. Latin American city plans integrated social, economic, and environmental issues, and successfully coordinated with multiple government departments and secretariats such as in health, environment, transportation, housing, land use planning, and sanitation.

2 Urban growth has to respond to the needs of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable, while at the same time protecting the local environment and minimizing risk to lives and livelihoods. The cities that have made the greatest improvements in terms of

implementing a holistic approach to address urban problems have also included a strong social and equitable dimension to their programmes. This includes developing participatory tools and providing the channels for participation.

3 There are limitations to what city and municipal governments can achieve without the support of higher levels of government and the existence of efficient institutional and legal frameworks. Involvement from national, state, and provincial levels of public administration is

needed because of the complexity and multidimensional essence of urban environmental issues. Problems need the coordinated response of different sectors, government levels, and multiple stakeholders to be solved.

4 By the same token, there are limitations to what community initiatives can achieve if social groups do not engage and work with local governments, and vice-versa, if governments do not collaborate with civil society. An enabling space for participation needs to be encouraged and sustained.

CONCLUSION

Urban growth generates environmental problems and seem best addressed through collaborative, multi-level, and coordinated action between the public and private sectors, as well as civil society. South Asian and African cities can use some of the lessons learned in Latin America by adapting them to address specific local priorities – such as transportation, disaster risk prevention and land use management – as part of holistic urban programmes to tackle present and future challenges for city populations.

LEARN MORE FROM THE ELLA BRIEFS

These four ELLA Briefs focus on policies and programs that successfully address some of the key environmental governance challenges in the Latin America region.

[Urban Upgrading with Social Inclusion: The Case of Villa Tranquila](#)

Slum upgrading programmes based on social inclusion and community participation can promote a local sense of pride, ownership, and social integration in new urban infrastructure, as demonstrated by this case study from Villa Tranquila, Argentina.

[Strategic Planning in Latin America](#)

Strategic Planning has contributed to the emergence of a new style of urban governance based on participation, co-operation and shared responsibility.

[Disaster Risk Reduction in Urban Areas](#)

Urban expansion in marginal city areas increases the risk of fatalities and home devastation when extreme weather occurs. But many Latin American cities are successfully tackling disaster risk, driven by effective urban governance.

[Focus Cities Programme: Multi-stakeholder Participation in City Governance](#)

Three case studies from cities in Peru, Bolivia and Argentina show how urban environmental governance can become more effective by including residents, researchers and local governments in diagnosing problems and developing responses.

KNOWLEDGE PARTNERS

This is a sample of some of the key organisations involved in urban environmental governance in Latin America. For more information about these and other relevant organisations, read the [ELLA Spotlight on Organisations](#).

The [IIED's Human Settlements Group](#) strives to integrate sustainable development concerns into urban policy, by conducting policy research, technical assistance, and capacity building. They are also one of the few organisations working directly with partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to address the problems of the urban poor.

The [Urban and Housing Development Policies Office](#) of the [Inter-American Development Bank](#) (IDB) provides national loans for implementing Neighbourhood Upgrading Programmes, and advisory services, capacity development, and knowledge dissemination to help policy makers improve the design, evaluation, and management of urban programmes.

[Local Governments for Sustainability](#) (ICLEI) is an international association of local governments, offering networking opportunities and acting as an information source about sustainable development projects being implemented at the city-level.

The [Lincoln Institute of Land Policy](#) is one of the leading organisations focusing on land use and taxation in the world. It brings together multiple stakeholders, offering training, practical cases for reflection, and conferences and debates on land issues and tenure.

[United Cities and Local Governments](#) (UCLG) is an international membership organisation, divided into eight regional sections, promoting local democracy, autonomy, and decentralisation in the development of cities. It shares good practices on urban governance and offers useful learning forums on its website.

[UN HABITAT](#) is the United Nations agency dedicated to human settlements, and generates useful research and policy recommendations, such as yearly reports on urban change.

The [Secretariat of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) (UNISDR) is one of the key authorities



on the theme of disaster risk reduction (DRR), offering research and analysis and setting trends in the DRR debate, especially through their Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction.

RECOMMENDED READING

This is a sample of some of the key publications related to urban environmental governance in Latin America. For more information about these and other relevant works, read the [ELLA Spotlight on Publications](#).

Almansi, F. 2009. [Regularising Land Tenure Within Upgrading Programmes in Argentina: The Cases of Promeba and Rosario Hábitat](#). *Environment & Urbanisation*, 21(2) 389–413.

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United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR). 2011. [Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction: Revealing Risk, Redefining Development](#). Information Press, Oxford.

Satterthwaite, D. 2007. [The Transition to a Predominantly Urban World and Its Underpinnings](#). Human Settlements Working Paper Series Urban Change No 4. IIED, London.

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