



SUMMARY OF THE KAPUSCINSKI DEVELOPMENT LECTURE

***CITY AREAS AT THE HEART OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS***  
delivered by Aromar Revi

on 5 November 2014

The lecture examined the imperative of inserting an urban goal into the expiring Millennium Development Goals. It sketched the difficulties of identifying an urban development goal that would satisfy multiple constituencies, and showed the paradigm-shifting steps taken in the past year with city mayors, international development agencies and city-focused research entities to persuade people about the key role of cities in promoting work, income redistribution, and sustainability on our planet.

***Cities as agents of global change***

Aromar Revi's talk about the potential and imperative for cities to be agents of developmental change in a new world order was set in the context of the link between cities and civilisation. Here, the point is that urban citizens in the past had either decided to adapt to environmental, demographic, economic and political change around them, or had chosen not to do so. He instanced the Dholavira Citadel in India where 'city building' had been happening for 1,000 years; he also named the 'failed' city of Goa where disease wiped out the population. A key thread in the lecture was this theme of choice – right now, urban populations and those who govern them, are making choices everyday about the sustainability of their cities. We have a choice about our urban futures now; cities are ours to do what we like with them.

A key issue behind thinking of cities as agents of global change is their changing contribution to the planet's GDP. Cities have accumulated immense power and are very influential in the global economy: in 1900 just 13 percent of the world's population lived in cities and their US\$3 trillion accounted for 30 percent of the global productivity. One hundred and ten years later, in 2013, half the world's people are urban, and the US\$70 trillion engine generates almost three quarters of the world's economic wealth. Revi noted that old ways of governance had not kept up with such a remarkable change, and he argued that 'radical transformation' was required to attribute new power and influence, and to manage it. National governments, he suggested, are not particularly interested in the dilution and decentralisation of their long-established roles. Not only cities, of course, but also national states are staring at a new geopolitical order – in which China, Asia and Africa are becoming more significant players.

Another key element of Revi's vision of urban changes was the sustainability of the cities as they currently exist. The new urban geographies unfolding rapidly in Asia, India and Africa are part of a global urban population of 7.5 billion people. Relentless urbanism is occurring against the background of an ecologically fragile planet where indications are that very few species of animals or plants could survive a 4 percent increase in the average global temperature. Cities may be doomed anyway unless global warming is checked. And, moreover, at the present rates of consumption, the ecological deficit is massive already: just keeping up with current rates of population growth, biodiversity loss and consumption will require the equivalent of 5 planets of resources. Crucially, there is only one Earth; we cannot escape it. Future risks and opportunities need confronting, Revi said.

Revi noted, accordingly, that fundamental transformations in the world system are needed. The catalysis of change could be brought about by changing the rules of the system, changing the goals of the system, or shifting paradigms completely. Such things have been achieved before (partly ending slavery and apartheid are examples). Boldness and vision are necessary.

### *How urban change can be overseen and co-ordinated globally?*

This is possible even now, as Chinese urbanisation has indicated – there, the process of taking 10 million people out of poverty had been linked intimately with building cities. The trend could be called a giga-trend, not just a mega-trend. The experiment may have been imperfect, but it points to political will, imagination, and a willingness to grapple with trade offs around health, education, poverty, density, energy and livelihoods, among others. Shanghai's transformation after 1987 shows that massive development is possible locally, and that a polarisation of wealth, dignity and opportunity in cities is not inevitable. A key question is how this urban change can be overseen and co-ordinated globally in the vacuum of institutional capacity to work at this scale. The old dichotomies, between the rural and urban, present and future, national and local, are unsuited to massive institutional, juridical and operational change. We don't live and do business in these silos any longer, but we are governed as if we do. Rules made for frontier economies are unsuited to the contemporary world economy.

In the same way, multilateral arrangements to make a better world are intellectually outdated and have stalled. The 1948 Declaration of Human Rights was visionary at the time. The Millennium Development Goals were too, focused as they were on poor people in poor countries. The 2008 market crash and environmental concerns have propelled us into another sphere. So has rampant urbanisation. So too has the relative importance of the private sector as a change-agent, especially in the realm of infrastructure development. New voices, new challenges and new conditions demand new ideas, policies and practices. A new global governance architecture is being sought to accommodate a mostly urban planet, where deep poverty is now an urban condition, and where climate change threats and opportunities are significantly urban.

### *Is a post-MDGs Urban Goal possible?*

It is against this backdrop that attempts are being made to insert a stand-alone Urban Goal into the post-2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals. The time for cities to be recognised as drivers of development has come. Much of Revi's lecture was devoted to examining how this had been happening so far, including the organising of the scientific community, NGOs, and government representatives. Deciding what goes into and what stays out of any Urban Goal is crucial, and a matter of delicate and intensive negotiation, as parties protect vested interests. Formulating a set of acceptable but meaningful urban indicators for inclusion as a development goal has been preoccupying academics and lobbyists: the indicators need to be intelligible, practical, motivational and inspirational. Revi discussed evidence from a pilot test of urban indicators in Andhra Pradesh State in India. Creating a dialogue with the primary agents of change was an important side-benefit; highlighting weaknesses in the regulatory and legal capacity of urban governments was another valuable lesson.

Cities, Revi concluded, are among the most complex organisations ever created in human history. Their sub-sovereign standing is a political legacy that now needs changing, and cities need treating within a global governance framework. African cities, he argued, had an extraordinary opportunity to learn from mistakes made in and by cities elsewhere. Leadership is crucial for learning across and between cities. The window of opportunity may only be open for another 20 or 30 years.