

NEWS

Interview with Joan Clos

In light of the 2015 (10th) Conference on Urban Development and Planning, Guangzhou Foreign Affairs Office secured an interview with Dr. Joan Clos, executive Director of UN Habitat. He shared his thoughts and expertise on Guangzhou's urban development, offering strategy advice. He also emphasized the impressive example Guangzhou and the rest of China can set in regard to making sustainable urbanization development core policy goals for other growing cities worldwide.

1 Hello, Mr. Joan Clos. Thank you for your attention to the Conference on Urban Development and Planning 2015. Have you ever been to Guangzhou before? If you have, how do you feel about this city?

I was fortunate to go to Guangzhou on official mission in July 2011, and during that trip I visited the Liziwan urban renewal project. I was deeply impressed by the innovative progress made by Guangzhou city to improve the local living environment and revitalize the economic and tourist functions of the areas.

2 I know you've participated in the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, now it's been five years, how do you see all those changes in China? Is there anything you feel particularly impressed during your two visits?

Much of the world's urban growth has and is taking place in China. UN-Habitat commends the Government of China and its partners for the efforts it has made to harness the benefits that urbanization brings.

In a recent initiative, the central government of China strategized urbanization as one of the four pillars for China's new modernization drive. In doing so, China sets an excellent example in making urbanization an important component of the national policy for development.

Furthermore, in 2013, China adopted its National Plan on New Urbanization 2014 to 2020, which formulated strategies to promote the harmonization of urban and rural development, integration of rural migrants in cities, optimization of urban forms and patterns, and improvement of local governments' capacities for sustainable development through institutional reform.

These actions show that China is giving sustainable urban development the thought and planning it needs and it is showing in the progress being made in China's growing cities and towns.

3. The urban development and planning of Guangzhou, especially the Nansha New Zone, will be introduced during this conference. Could you give your suggestions on Guangzhou's urban planning?

UN-Habitat promotes a three-pronged approach that places emphasis on urban legislation, urban planning

and design, and urban economy and municipal finance. These can be seen as the levers for transforming cities and human settlements into centres of greater environmental, economic and social sustainability and should be addressed in a balanced manner.

A fourth focus area, urban basic services, has also been prioritized, especially water and sanitation as well as reliable waste management services, sustainable mobility solutions and safe domestic energy.

We advise all urban planners around the world, including Guangzhou, to look at these aspects of urban planning and use them to influence their urban development plans and strategies.

4[At the end of 2013, you released a roll of data before the World Urban Forum. You said that up until then, about 3.5 billion people were living in urban areas in the world, and by 2025, the number would increase by 2.5 billion to 3 billion. You also said that 96% of the newly increased city dwellers would be in developing countries. So up until now, has the data been updated? Could you give us the latest developments on these updates?

Since 2007, more people live in urban than in rural areas, with more than 54 per cent of the global population now living in urban areas. New urbanization trends data shows that the world's urban population is now close to 3.9 billion and is expected to reach 6.3 billion in 2050. Asia, despite its lower level of urbanization, is today home to 53 per cent of the urban population in the world.

China has the largest urban population (758 million), followed by India (410 million). These two countries account for 30 per cent of the world's urban population. Taken together, China, India and Nigeria are projected to account for 37 per cent of the increase of nearly 2.5 billion people in the urban population by 2050.

Between 2014 and 2050, the urban areas in China are expected to grow by 292 million. China has six megacities (those with populations of more than 10 million): Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Shenzhen and ten cities with populations between 5 and 10 million as of 2014. From the urban growth at the world level, nearly 96 per cent will take place in developing countries.

5[Facing the situation you've mentioned, is there any ongoing research projects carried out by UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme)? Could you introduce some of the outcomes or give some research data related to these projects?

The most important research that UN-Habitat is doing in preparation of the global summit Habitat III is a collaborative research with the University of New York, Lincoln Institute and the Center for International Earth Science on urban expansions at the world level. We are working in a global sample of cities that represent the world (200 cities) and we are analyzing the quantitative and qualitative attributes of urban growth, such as urban sprawl, densities analysis, land and housing markets, etc.

Moreover, a key significant challenge of the ongoing urbanization trends is how to deal with the urbanization of poverty. Urbanization is interlinked with the three pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development and environmental protection. UN-Habitat is conducting research in urban poverty, inequality and environmental outcomes of city growth in various regions of the world. Studies show that China has contributed to lift out of poverty more than 450 million people, since the Millennium Development Goals started nearly 15 years ago. The most important thing is that China did this by developing urban-based activities that were extremely favorable for the rural poor.

UN-Habitat is also doing research in the fundamental notion of shared prosperity. The Agency has developed a new monitoring framework, the City Prosperity Initiative (CPI) that is both a metric and a policy dialogue. Today more than 350 cities and 10 countries are working in this initiative that has a very strong research component. The importance of the CPI is that it integrates all the facets of urbanization and development, and evaluates city performance through several dimensions such as infrastructure, productivity, environment, social inclusion, quality of life, urban governance/legislation and finally derives urban policy

implications and strategies.

Cities that joined the global initiative are applying this framework to track their performances, both within their country and globally, and understand the dynamics of city change in search of prosperity and sustainability. Unfortunately, China is not yet part of this global City Prosperity Initiative that will be featuring in the forthcoming Conference of Habitat III.

6[China has witnessed a fast process of urbanization. Over the past 35 years, over 500 million people have settled in urban areas. According to the latest report of OECD[Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development]released by Bloomberg in April, there are 15 super cities in China which carry over 10 million people. The fast pace of Chinese urbanization comes with high prices: 350,000 people die from air pollution in China annually. In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing China in the process of fast urbanization? Do these challenges also exist in other cities around the world? Are any of the challenges relating to China's locale?

Many of the challenges facing Chinese cities, such as air pollution, traffic congestion and growing inequality, can be seen in cities around the world. But it is important to note that they are the challenges of *unplanned* urbanization. If planned and managed effectively, urbanization can and should be an engine for growth and prosperity. It is important to plan in a realistic manner according to the rate of urban growth in order to take advantage of the opportunities that urbanization presents.

While China has several megacities, there are a significant number of cities, more than 25, with between one to 10 million people, and this is where the vast majority of China's urban population resides with challenges similar to, or greater than those of megacities. Tracking urbanization and city growth in these relatively smaller cities is critical for assessing current and future planning needs with respect to urban growth and for setting policy priorities to promote inclusive and equitable urban and rural development for the whole country.

However, the most important point is that urbanization in China has been a transformative force. It has propelled economic growth and development and the growth of cities or megacities is a positive trend; they just need to be better managed and reduce negative externalities, such as pollution. Moreover, China is a very good example for the world in the creation or reinforcement of new urban configurations, like mega-regions and urban corridors. These configurations are engines of economic growth, productivity and innovation.

7[When you were at Shanghai Expo, you mentioned that China is now experiencing a phase of fast urbanization. If China can apply an urban planning model which can meet the needs of future urban development at an early stage, it can develop a best practice in terms of environmental protection and energy conservation. Could you talk about some of the development models that you think are advanced and can meet future needs? And is there any model that is suitable for China?

Because each city is unique and comes with its own geographical, economic, social and environmental aspects, UN-Habitat does not recommend applying one model of urban development from city to city. Instead, as I mentioned, we recommend robust urban planning around three pillars of urban development – urban design, urban legislation and urban and municipal finance.

If these aspects of urbanization are addressed in a balanced manner and with equal importance, within the development context of the country, China will be able to harness the benefits of urbanization for a better urban future.