**IAP POLICY STATEMENT – VERSION FOR ENDORSEMENT**, 2 June 2021

**IMPLICATIONS OF URBANIZATION IN THE LOW- AND- MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES**

**Introduction**

In recent years, urban development in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has been the subject of much serious discussion at the international level. In 2015, UN Member States adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among which SDG#11 was specifically concerned with the sustainability of cities. In the following year, the outcome of the UN’s Habitat III conference on a ‘New Urban Agenda’ was endorsed in its entirety by the UN General Assembly. Those two international events bind all countries globally to be cognizant of and promote their recommendations. Even earlier in 2012, population growth coupled with unplanned urbanization was recognized by the Global Network of Science Academies (IAP, now the InterAcademy Partnership) as being among the most serious concerns worldwide1.

The urbanization phenomenon refers to the increased growth of urban populations relative to that of the rural populations in any particular country. Urbanization through rural-urban migration was associated with industrialization in 19th Century Europe and often resulted in the economic growth experienced by those countries. Later, the mechanization of agriculture provided a further impetus towards urbanization. Thus, in the popular understanding of urbanization pertaining to LMICs, economic growth has come to be closely associated with urbanization. However, the economic conditions that spurred urbanization in the Western World are not the same as those causing urbanization in most LMICs today. In this regard, a significant conclusion in an earlier (1996) IAP Statement is that: “As urban populations multiply, older technologies and practices – previously appropriate to settlement development – will not necessarily be the best solutions to these problems…”2

This policy statement does not focus on cities and urban development in general, but specifically on how best the dynamics of the urbanization phenomenon in LMICs can be addressed. The process of urbanization impacts almost exclusively on the LMICs today. However, when the process is mismanaged it often results in serious inequity, social unrest and the rapid growth of unhygienic slums encouraging *inter alia* the transmission of dangerous communicable diseases. It then becomes a matter of global concern. Any policy on urbanization must facilitate sustainability to enable progress locally and globally. Managing urbanization should be undertaken by professionals working with political authorities who recognize their responsibility to promote the ‘New Urban Agenda’ and actively seek to achieve the UN’s SDG#11.

**The Urbanization Process in the LMICs**

It has been predicted that by 2035 all ten of the fastest growing cities in the world will be in sub-Saharan Africa3. A highly relevant statistical study in an Asian LMIC4 concludes that urbanization:

* induces growth of the largest cities;
* occurs often without industrialization;
* is mainly a consequence of demographic explosion and poverty-induced rural-urban migration;
* leads to the massive development of slums with their inevitable dystopian conditions; and
* generally occurs more because of ‘rural push’ than ‘urban pull’.

This interminable ‘distress migration’ is directed towards cities, especially ‘Primate Cities5, which have inordinately large populations and thus causes severe strains on the availability of urban services resulting in diminishing the quality of life for all residents. These conclusions apply to most LMICs worldwide.

Some other causes have also encouraged urbanization in some African countries6 such as the exploitation of available natural resources. This has led not only to the expansion of ‘primate cities’ but also to urbanization impacting new urban areas in proximity to such sites7. In some other countries, land rent speculation associated with colonial and post-colonial land management regimes has led to displacement and uneven urbanization with negative outcomes for the poor. Today, urbanization is taking place at all spatial scales stretching across the classic rural-urban dichotomy8. Most of these increases in urban populations are centered in overcrowded and underserved informal settlements or slums. It is reliably stated that 1 billion people, or one in three city dwellers, live in these informal settlements9. Not recognizing the energies of this population segment has deprived many cities of the potential of a very positive asset.

**Planning Approaches and Theories**

Although there is no evidence of its effectiveness in diminishing the current adversities and negative effects of urbanization, a planning approach developed to guide rapid urban expansion in Britain more than a century ago10 persists as a model still used in many LMICs. The inexorable expansion of slums and the unsustainable growth of car-dominated suburbs have become the urban realities in most LMICs. The application of exogenous models is discouraged by knowledgeable planners and scholars in countries such as India11, Pakistan12 as well as in Africa13,14 and Latin America15,16. Further, important inadequacies in urban planning as practiced in the LMICs are discussed elsewhere17. There are now many scholars who have understood:

* that skewed national urban systems left behind as colonial legacies in the LMICs are of little use for national development;
* market forces alone cannot be expected to alter such distorted systems; and
* intervention at the national policy level is needed to free an LMIC from such structural constraints, which would otherwise encourage ongoing unplanned urbanization.

An important observation by the IAP is that: “the potential for science to ameliorate or solve the

problems of the world’s multiplying cities has not been realized”18. A review of spatial planning literature reveals that a set of scientific theories could underlie a very relevant approach to the problems of urbanization in the LMICs. These theories, also of Western origin, are an integral part of the discipline sometimes referred to as ‘spatial economics’. This discipline may be seen as having originated with the work of Von Thunen19. It led to the development of ‘Central Place Theory’20, which concerns idealized patterns in the hierarchical distribution of cities within a country. Another important theory appears with the work by Jefferson and Linsky21. This has led to a much clearer understanding of

‘primacy’ as a deformed pattern in the distribution of cities within a country, as frequently found in many LMICs22. These theories are valuable in understanding the urbanization phenomenon in LMICs and to facilitate managing it in the future.

Another important idea has been the focus of notable planners on the role of small and mid-sized towns in national development 23,24. It is now well understood that:

* colonial planning and economic policies, reinforced by post-colonial economic growth strategies of the 1950s and 1960s, were major causes of the rapid and extensive growth of some primate cities in many LMICs;
* urban industry was given priority over rural development;
* the emphasis was on modernizing the metropolitan economy while rural regions were neglected and left poor and underdeveloped; and
* in countries with dominant primate cities, few secondary mid-sized cities could grow large enough and have sufficiently diversified economies to attract rural migrants, stimulate agriculture and promote regional development.

The need to recognize the importance of leveraging urban-rural linkages to achieve balanced regional development has also been noted in respect of sub-Saharan Africa.25

**Policy Needs and Options**

More than a 100 reviews of empirical studies across the LMICs and a large number of national programmes for small and mid-sized towns, demonstrates that spatial programmes: “can be a crucial component in attaining social and economic objectives such as increasing the populations reached by basic services; increasing and diversifying agricultural production; and increasing the influence of citizens living in sub-national and sub-regional political and administration units”.26

In discussing small and mid-sized towns, one researcher states that: “The declining government investment in infrastructure and basic amenities in these towns over the years contributed to increasing socio-economic disparities within the settlement structure.”27 Also, even where small towns with some facilities do exist, inadequate urban governance and poor social infrastructure management prevent the much needed extension of services to their rural hinterlands.28 A UN publication provides some valuable conclusions for the Asia Pacific region. It states that: urban-rural inequality is a major problem in the Asian region; and that more attention should be paid to rural development to achieve a more balanced spatial growth between rural and urban areas and a more equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth.29 This situation is also the case in most LMICs in other continents. Even assuming a committed approach to rural development, out-migration from rural areas for non-farm occupations is likely to continue. Rather than have rural migrants target the larger cities, the more manageable scenario would be a gradual process whereby such migrants move to the small and mid-sized towns first. Then, movements to the large cities could possibly be confined to the more urbanized migrants from mid-sized towns. This pattern of internal migration is referred to by some scholars as ‘decentralized urbanization’.30

Urban-based services in small and mid-sized towns not only require built infrastructure but also that people with urban-type skills are available and resident. As such skills are not readily available in the rural regions of the LMICs, urban settlement programmes designed to provide these skills from major urban areas to the small and mid-sized towns is a clear need.31 Public health is of great relevance and should also be of special concern to urban planning.32 There is the need to counter the danger of the easy spread of epidemics in dense slums, a danger currently accentuated by urbanization directed to large cities. Low-income urban dwellers consequently and inevitably face the twin burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Finally, cities being planned under all these identified initiatives, regardless of their size, must also be consciously and firmly guided particularly by the UN’s recommendation for a New Urban Agenda and SDG#11. Such planning should ensure that the results are sustainable and to the benefit of all. This inclusivity must extend to all slum dwellers who are too often excluded from the many benefits of urban life.

**Recommendations**

In the light of the foregoing discussions, findings and arguments, key recommendations relating to intervention by national policies on urbanization in the LMICs include the need for:

1. planned urbanization as opposed to reliance on market forces and/or ad hoc planning;
2. greater reliance upon science-based approaches in urban and regional planning to deal with
3. urbanization;
4. a concurrent focus on agriculture and rural development to ensure that urbanization will be an equitable process at the national and regional levels;
5. the planned spatial and economic development of small towns with efficient urban governance to provide access to social and economic infrastructure for their residents and also importantly for their respective rural hinterlands;
6. planned spatial and economic development of medium-sized towns with efficient urban governance to function *inter alia* as ready target locations for rural migrants as alternatives to the largest cities;
7. planned development of sustainable compact cities to foster healthy lifestyles through the
8. provision of safe access to outdoor physical exercise and also to environmentally protected green open spaces;
9. recognizing the serious health hazards that are inherent and difficult to combat within dense slums in large cities, especially in the context of an epidemic;
10. positive action by local agencies in respect of the international political commitments made on the UN’s ‘New Urban Agenda’ and the Sustainable Development Goals, with special attention to SDG#11; and
11. extensive investment in research focused on the varied problems of the urbanization phenomenon as is manifest in LMICs.

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**END NOTES**

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6. Apartheid South Africa and colonial Rhodesia (North & South) and also Nyasaland had restrictions imposed on family members residing in rural areas on joining their spouses working in the cities. ‘Independence’ and removal of these restrictions saw a marked increased urbanization in these

countries.

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**Statement Working Group**

**K.Locana Gunaratna**, Chair

**Berma** , Madeline; **Diaz**, Angela; **Franco**, Angela; **Galea**, Sandro; **Knowles**, Caroline; **Liu**, Yansui; **Maharaj**, Brij; **Ndilila**, Francis. M; **Obudho**, Robert; **Okabe**, Akiko; **Ricci**, Liana; **Songsor**, Jacob; **Tammaru**, Tiit.