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Latin American Leaders Present Regional Action Plan for New Urban Agenda

by Gregory Scruggs

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Fifteen months after the voluntary, landmark UN pact known as the New Urban Agenda was agreed upon in Quito, Ecuador, Latin American leaders are pushing to be the first region in the world to implement it. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL) presented a plan in February at the World Urban Forum, the world's largest conference on cities, to outline how the region, which has the highest rate of urbanization on the planet, can plan, manage, and finance better cities.

"To establish a new, more equitable urban paradigm in Latin America and the Caribbean, a regional action framework is needed to guide and transform cities and sustainable urban development," CEPAL's urban management specialist, Ricardo Jordán, told NotiSur at the forum, which took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, last month.

Latin America was the host region of the UN Habitat III summit, which brought 40,000 people to the Ecuadoran capital for a once-every-20-years gathering to discuss the future of cities. The outcome document of that summit, the New Urban Agenda, outlines a vision of sustainable urbanization for the next two decades. Individual regions, led by their UN economic commissions, are expected to draft regional action plans that adapt the agenda's vision to a local context. CEPAL's version is called "Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean."

Demographic trends

The plan highlights some of the key changes that have taken place in Latin America since Habitat II, the second UN Conference on Human Settlements, held in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1996. Significantly, the region is undergoing a "double urban-demographic transition." The rate of rural-to-urban migration is slowing down, and the population is ageing. This scenario has created a number of highly populated metropolitan areas, often at the expense of intermediate or secondary cities, which are slowly starting to grow and provide more opportunities for those unable to thrive in megacities like São Paulo and Bogotá.

While land consumption per capita dropped from 1990 to 2015, a key indicator of reduced urban expansion, the megacities have continued to gobble up their periphery. The urban extent of Mexico City has grown to encompass 214,867 hectares, and Buenos Aires reaches out to 196,466 ha.

These dense urban concentrations are the powerhouses of Latin America's economy. The state of São Paulo, the state and city of Mexico, and the province and city of Buenos Aires contributed almost 25% of the regional GDP in 2010.

Finance key

The New Urban Agenda covers the entire scope of a functional city, including areas such as urban planning, legislation, and design. Many cities in Latin America already score well against

such international standards, as cities in the region pioneered efforts like bus rapid transit and participatory budgeting that are now the gold standard worldwide.

But one area stands out as a key concern: How to pay for sustainable urbanization.

“Half of the calls I receive are related to finances,” Elkin Velásquez, director of the UN-Habitat regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean, told NotiSur. “We need to see how to get new resources.”

The action plan explains that the middle-income region cannot expect overseas direct aid to pay for the region’s needs. “We need to look not to donors but to development banks, international capital, and the ecosystem of funds that can converge,” Velásquez said.

Paraguay’s minister of housing, Soledad Núñez, echoed that attitude in her speech at the World Urban Forum. “How are we going to find the finance so we can achieve that each person has good housing?” she said. “If we don’t have housing with good, adequate services, it’s going to be difficult for us to build a city for all.”

Scaling up

As CEPAL and UN-Habitat seek to steer Latin American countries toward adopting the tenets of the regional action plan, there are bright spots among individual initiatives, according to the two multilateral agencies.

Mexico has a well-developed statistical measurement system for tracking city-level data, which is important for measuring progress on urban issues. “At the city level, decisions should be made on evidence,” Velásquez said, noting the recently created Alianza Smart LATAM (Latin American Smart Cities Alliance) was formed after last year’s Smart City World Expo in Puebla. The Mexican city will host the secretariat of the new alliance.

Velásquez also cited the proliferation of municipal “¿Cómo Vamos?” platforms, whereby cities are measured against a set of statistical indicators on topics like air quality, length of commute, access to education, and quality of health care, with the media and NGOs holding local government accountable.

These initiatives are a start, but not sufficient, Velásquez said. “We are very good at pilots in Latin America, but not at scaling up. There are 18,000 municipalities in Latin America— that has to be the ambition.”

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