

Greening the Future: We need Sustainable Green Cities in Uganda!

By Barbara Ntambirweki*

On July 1st 2020, seven former municipalities of Arua, Gulu, Fort Portal, Mbarara, Jinja, Masaka and Mbale gained city status. Uganda's Vision 2040 is the overarching 30-year national vision identifies the creation of regional and strategic cities as one of the key drivers from the development agenda of the country's long term aspirations and projections for the future. The creation of these cities comes after more than 57 years after the elevation of Kampala from a municipality at independence to city status as the national capital of Uganda.

Urbanization is taking place at an unprecedented rate throughout the world. In Uganda, about 19 per cent of its population living in urban centres and it is projected that 30 per cent of Uganda's almost 42 million people will be urban dwellers by 2035¹. Kampala currently the biggest city and is urbanizing in a largely unplanned manner with high negative externalities including poor air quality, growth of informal settlements, encroachment on wetlands, inadequate sewage treatment plants to service the city population which is exerting pressure on the environment. In recent years, the need to make cities greener has been acknowledged in Goal 11 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Therefore, the new cities created have an opportunity to change the trajectory and embrace green cities model of urbanization which would save our natural resources.

A Green city is an urban area that moves toward long term environmental protection, social inclusion and economic sustainability. Green cities are energy efficient, reduce reliance on nonrenewable energy

resources, encourage proper waste disposal and management, green and resilient infrastructure, low carbon transport and deliver improved quality of life outcomes². The green urban development approach aims to minimize the impacts of urbanization on the environment, tackles core problems of pollution and waste, the degradation and loss of biodiversity and mitigation of urban contribution to climate change. As a result of the increased attention given to energy, resource efficiency and urban form in relation to climate change, City policymakers, planners and implementers ought to answer several questions such as "Are certain urban forms and city designs more sustainable than others in terms of pollution, environmental impact and energy use?"; "What strategies and actions can effectively contribute to making cities more sustainable (greener)?"; How can we provide urban services without damaging the natural environment? How can we establish harmony by providing a healthy life and a healthy environment? and, "How can we manage the current urban expansion process under the effects of climate change, and at the same time make this process greener?" Those in charge of managing the urbanization process must find the best context-specific answers for these questions.

Achieving the development of green cities requires a concerted effort in the next years to realize the implementation of green cities across the country. Greening cities provide opportunities to create sustainable livelihoods by providing green jobs. The current waste management approach is detrimental to our environment and does not create opportunities to leverage the waste to make it useful to create green jobs to cater to the high unemployment rates in the country. Sustainable and green cities must have methods and tools such as benchmarks to measure environmental

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and/or sustainability performance. Uganda must therefore have reference guides and frameworks to help prioritize problems and propose city-level actions to improve sustainability and environmental performance by using and analysing indicators and policy instruments³.

Through a participatory approach, it is of utmost importance that the development of policy frameworks in the cities should mainstream green growth into urban planning, management and finance. The Uganda Green Growth Strategy envisages that USD11 billion over the next 15 years should be mobilized to support the green growth agenda in the country⁴. Therefore the transition to green economy is challenging due to the financial constraints for funding sustainable urban infrastructure to address cities climate change challenges. To support the change needed for urban transformation, it is imperative to build capacity to create awareness and understanding of green growth and the opportunities to enhance sustainable livelihoods.

The new cities should therefore consider green transport that focuses on the improvement of the movement of people (accessibility) as a priority by promoting walking, cycling, efficient public transport, compactness and connectivity rather than on the improvement of movement of motorized vehicles.

Most of these regional cities are surrounded by rich agriculture hubs that can be turned around to produce, process, distribute, and consume food near to the local consumer markets thus shortening the food supply chains that would reduce energy consumption and GHGs emissions. The huge urban areas of our cities have increased the distances to bring and distribute food to consumers and consequently increase the consumption of fuels and greenhouse gases (GHGs) by the transport (freight) sector. There is a need to develop green Infrastructure focusing on the building of new stormwater systems or retrofit the existing ones to be able to reduce downstream floods and to improve the water quality of the receiving water bodies. Central elements would be: the use of approaches leading to infiltrate, evaporate, retard or retaining part of the rainwater near to source; use the construction of new stormwater systems or retrofit the existing ones to increase greenery surfaces; improve site landscapes and the creation of multifunctional spaces for the preservation of urban wildlife habitat and recreation; and promote the construction of green roofs, green facades, green linear corridors, a wetland with or without detention ponds, urban parks and the used semi or permeable material such as interlocked bricks in walking sides and roads.⁵

In many cases, urbanization is characterized by

urban sprawl and peripheralisation – which is not only socially divisive but increases energy demand, in turn, puts pressure on carbon emissions and severely impacts on ecosystems. A unique opportunity exists in these new cities to leap for greening Uganda. Also, there are genuine opportunities for the technical and political city leadership to reduce carbon emissions and pollution, enhance ecosystems, and minimise environmental risks. By using the opportunity, it is possible to promote integrated urban and regional planning and design strategies with the aid of technologies available to improve urban transport, the construction of buildings, and the development of urban energy, water, and getting energy from urban waste systems in such a way that they reduce dependency on natural resources and energy consumption in the process of sustainable planning for the future. Some scholars argue that relatively high densities in urban development are a central feature of green cities, bringing efficiency gains and technological innovation through the proximity of economic activities while reducing resource and energy consumption. Urban infrastructure including streets, railways, water, and sewage systems come at a considerably lower cost per unit as urban density rises.⁶

A future that is cleaner, healthier and more prosperous should embrace the central role of cities. Given the severity and urgency of environmental degradation in the country, more and direct policy interventions at the city level are called for. The current environment trajectory must move towards a more harmonious relationship between urban development and the environment.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/03/03/managing-rapid-urbanization-can-help-uganda-achieve-sustainable-and-inclusive-growth>
- 2 <https://www.greenclimate.fund/project/fpo86>
- 3 OECD. Green Growth Indicators 2014; OECD Publishing: Paris, France, 2014
- 4 <https://www.greengrowthknowledge.org/national-documents/uganda-green-growth-development-strategy>
- 5 Ogenis Brilhante and Jannes Klaas (2018). Green City Concept and a Method to Measure Green City Performance over Time Applied to Fifty Cities Globally: Influence of GDP, Population Size and Energy Efficiency available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability>
- 6 Pankaja M.S, and Nagendra. H.N, (2015). Green City Concept– As New Paradigm in Urban Planning. The International Journal Of Engineering And Science (IJES). Volume 4, Issue 10. Pp55-60. 2015. <http://theijes.com/papers/v4-i10/Version-3/Ho4103055060.pdf>

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