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HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UN

FORUM CONTRIBUTIONS

Peacekeeping, Peace Enforcement, and UN Reform

LISE MORJÉ HOWARD

Accessing the World's Most Exclusive Club

SABINE HASSLER

International Criminal Justice

LUIS MORENO-OCAMPO

The Peacekeeping Quagmire

RICHARD GOWAN



INTERVIEWS WITH

CLAUDIO ACIOLY JR

ZEID RA'AD AL HUSSEIN

INTRODUCTION BY

STÉPHANE DUJARRIC

Spokesperson for Secretary

Ban Ki-moon

ALSO FEATURING

MARC R. ROSENBLUM

MICHAEL SHIFTER

FRANCISCO H.G. FERREIRA

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An Interview with Claudio Acioly Jr.

GJIA: Can you start by describing UN Habitat a bit?

Acioly: Well, in short, UN habitat is the United Nations agency for human settlements. It is the agency charged with turning cities into safer, healthier, greener places filled with opportunity. So UN Habitat works with different organizations, including all spheres of government, civil society, and the private sector, with the idea of building, planning, financing, and managing sustainable urban development. UN Habitat has a vision of cities that exist without slums where everyone can live comfortably, and as such, it is a very human-centered agency. Looking at our planet in broader terms, we work to develop cities that do not pollute the environment or deplete natural resources and that actually promote sustainability at every level. Because we are a United Nations agency, the issue of the rights of individuals is very important and colors basically everything we do.

GJIA: When are your services primarily employed? Does UN Habitat exclusively respond in times of crisis or is your mandate broader?

Claudio Acioly Jr.

is currently the head of Training and Capacity Development at UN-Habitat, a United Nations program whose mission is to create a better urban future by promoting socially and environmentally sustainable settlements development. He has over 30 years of experience working internationally as a practitioner, technical and policy advisor, consultant, and training and capacity development expert.

CA: We are part of the inter-agency coordination and response group. When there is a crisis or a post-conflict situation, UN Habitat brings in its expertise in human settlement, planning, designing, building, and community organization. For example, in the Congo and Somalia our work is primarily about land litigation, that is, creating a framework and providing technical assistance, so that different actors can facilitate the rebuilding of communities.

GJIA: How do you manage to work effectively with national governments in difficult situations?

CA: We try to engage the governments we work with at all levels and this comes in different forms. One is providing advice; another is providing hands-on assistance to people on the ground. An example that has been praised by different organizations is our work in Sri Lanka and Indonesia post-tsunami. Our role has been very much appreciated by communities, governments, local governments, and the international donor community because we managed to really speed up the response

engage in this context, it's always about looking at development, since that is our mandate.

GJIA: What kinds of projects are UN Habitat engaged in right now?

CA: Some projects, such as Housing Profiles, are consultative in nature and are to be used as tools to help governments analyze the performance of the housing sector and understand concerns including where the bottlenecks lie, why slums exist, and why housing prices are so high. These programs were carried out in a number of countries, such as Cuba, Vietnam, Malawi, Uganda, Ghana, Zambia, and Nepal, and it really became a reference used by actors who wished to work with the respective governments.

More recently I just returned from Saudi Arabia where we're carrying out a very ambitious and complex program called The Future Saudi Cities Programme, which involves seventeen cities. My task was to coordinate and undertake an assessment of their needs and determine institutional and technological gaps within the local authorities that govern these cities. This work

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process, organize, be on the ground, and create the conditions that not only aided local and national governments, but also provided resources to local institutions and individuals. UN Habitat also played a very important role in Pakistan after the earthquake. When we

involved meetings with mayors, policy-makers, and technical personnel from different departments in order to assess whether they had all the knowledge required for the tasks they were meant to perform, whether they were well informed about various tools used by

people in other parts of the world, and whether we could improve these cities through what we call the City Prosperity Index. It allows policymakers to have a holistic view of their cities and make informed decisions that address the non-tangible quality of life, such as happiness and creating a sense of belonging. In the end, it's not about measuring the economic dimension. The Saudis became really interested in this tool when they saw how well it was working at the 2012 World Urban Forum in Naples.

GJIA: Can you talk a bit about the street-led, citywide, slum-upgrading strategy?

CA: This idea emerged out of a discussion about ways to easily address the problems of informal urbanization and the rise of slums. We came up with the idea of using streets and public space as a way to transform slums into integrated neighborhoods in the city. The UN-Habitat strategy advocates for a few major shifts. One is to move away from projects that use piecemeal intervention and instead use a citywide approach. Another is to promote the idea of analyzing the slums or the informal settlements and creating a process that can improve the accessibility and connectivity of these areas to the rest of the city with the goal of not only regularizing the land occupation but also connecting these areas physically to the rest of the city. Instead of intervening here and there, the goal is to make an area-based plan, which is the urban plan of the settlement. We want to analyze how the settlement connects with the rest of the city and identify the streets that can

gradually be improved and widened and lands that are available so that you can relocate people as needed. We are very happy that this strategy has been picked up in many parts of the world.

GJIA: Can you give a specific example where this plan has been implemented successfully?

CA: In 1974 Zambia started implementing what they called the Road Approach to Informal Settlement Upgrading with a loan from the World Bank. They did not do this citywide, but they did have the idea that by identifying certain streets, they could improve the situation as a whole. I was also involved before joining UN Habitat with an initiative in the periphery of Tirana, Albania. We worked with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) called Co-PLAN that was involved in organizing communities and safeguarding the public space. This public space encompassed areas for future streets that would connect the entire area to the rest of the city. They did this by demarcating these areas with gravel so that they would not become muddy. Overall the program was very successful. In Pakistan, it's being used tremendously by an NGO called Orangi Pilot Project (OPP). What this means is each individual is responsible for laying pipes in front of his/her home, and in this way the community co-finances the whole network of secondary pipes, which the city then connects to the existing primary pipes. This worked so well that UN Habitat used "the people's process" to expand it. This meant that community groups were recruited and contracted to carry out the work in the communities. These

projects are not difficult; they have different names, but it's the same story.

GJIA: Were people ever resistant to outside intervention or even governmental intervention in this way?

CA: I think this is a good question. In the beginning there are always difficulties. In Albania people were afraid of the government because there had been an illegal land occupation; these were former collective farms that were abandoned so there were gray areas and some people resisted, including with arms. So there were some very difficult situations on the ground. In many places, it's not easy. People have lived there for many years, but most of them don't have security or a documented right to be there; some of them believe that the government recognized their rights, but they don't have a document that proves they own the land they occupy, so there is a lot of insecurity. As a result, there is a buy-in period. It's important that

GJIA: Do you find there is a conflict when you have to work with governments that are known human rights abusers?

CA: When you consider housing rights, there are violations all over. The moment the international community recognized the right to adequate housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living as described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, our role was to develop knowledge and tools to aid governments in fulfilling, protecting, and recognizing this right. The first thing we needed to do was correct the perception that governments are obligated to build housing for every citizen, which is not true. They must create the conditions necessary for individuals, through different means, to realize the right to adequate housing. This is even formulated in the UN Habitat agenda that was undersigned by 150+ member states, heads of state, etc. Of course people then expected UN

These projects are not difficult; they have different names, but it's the same story.

you build trust and confidence. But sometimes that confidence- and trust-building takes longer, and the process can stall. In Ghana, for example, in one big settlement, the people felt that the government was evicting them rather than including them, so they resisted. The NGO that was working there had to do an incredible amount of extra work to really bring people back to the table and build confidence. If there is no confidence, it will not happen.

Habitat to tell governments what they had to do, but that's not our role and responsibility. We cannot tell a sovereign government that it has to do this and this. Instead we called upon their commitment to their conventions, to these rights, and we tried to convince them that removing people without due process is a crude violation of these agreements. We then tried to propose alternatives, so in this respect, we really try to engage with countries that are

violating this basic right. Ultimately in some cases the actions continue to take place because we don't have the power to police. We have the knowledge and the policy advisory power but not the power to enforce.

GJIA: Can you talk a bit about UN Habitat's vision for the coming years and the challenges this organization faces?

CA: At the moment I can identify a few major trends that we must respond to. First of all, there is a whole demographic shift occurring. Though in some parts of the world, the urbanization rate has decreased, there are parts of

Cities are not forming based on a plan but rather growing informally, which is a big threat and a liability on the sustainability of these countries' urban futures. In addition, cities are growing much more in land cover, which means that cities are spreading. This trend is not good for sustainability or urban cohesion, and it will be costly. So how do we reverse it? How can we promote a more integrated, more compact, more connected type of urban environment that is sustainable, efficient, and cohesive? UN Habitat is trying a few tactics. One addresses the role of the urban economy in providing the resources and finances necessary for cities to help guide urbanization.

It's important to build trust and confidence. If there is no confidence, it will not happen.

the world that still have rapid urbanization trends. What I'm talking about is between 2 and 4 percent and even above 4 percent per year. These high rates put an incredible amount of pressure on local governments to provide services to these increasing populations. Even in countries that are experiencing falling fertility rates and falling number of persons per household, this urbanization trend is putting a lot of pressure on the system. We are moving to a planet of cities, no doubt about that. The data shows that Africa is the most rapidly urbanizing region followed by Asia in terms of numbers. But in some parts of Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, this trend has become equivalent to slum formation.

Another anticipates urban growth by providing good urban planning and design that are connected to effective legislation. This will equip cities with the tools needed for successful intervention and could generate resources that cities need to self-finance. And next year will be a very critical year because the Habitat II Conference will be taking place in which many countries and organizations from all over the world will be discussing the urban future of our planet.

GJIA: How involved is UN Habitat in shaping the new Millennium Development Goals?

CA: Instead of working directly in the

process, we provided substantive knowledge and assistance to different groups that are interested in creating sustainable cities, particularly in relation to

90 percent of the population lives in cities and even looking at Latin America where the numbers are similar, one sees that cities have created some liabilities

We are moving to a planet of cities, no doubt about that.

the sustainable development goals. We have actively participated as an organization in the discussions; our executive director has been very active on different levels speaking to governments, and the technical teams are supporting a group called the Friends of Sustainable Cities, which includes many countries and cities in promoting policies that will create a sustainable urban future.

GJIA: Final thoughts on urbanization?

CA: In some parts of the world, the population still lives predominantly in rural areas. There are countries in Asia and Africa that have 20 percent, 25 percent, even 18 percent urban development, and it's very surprising that decision makers and politicians are still in total denial about the positive effects of urbanization. We know from history that prosperity, industrialization, accessibility to knowledge, research, and innovation have all been achieved when people started coming together and interacting because of cities. Coming from Brazil where almost

because of the way they grew and urbanized, but it's also clear that countries in Latin America would never have been where they are today if they had remained rural, agrarian societies.

There is a need for more informed decisionmakers and policies, and universities will begin to play a greater role. We are actively promoting partnerships with universities, and currently 169 universities are participating all over the world. The idea is to create a new generation of urban managers that are well informed about the trends I have mentioned and who are connected with all these global experiments that are taking place in many parts of the world now. These people need to be prepared to address these different challenges that are hindering participation, inclusion, and sustainability within cities. If we have the right knowledge, the right skills, and the right capacity in these institutions supplied by this new generation of professionals, we will be better off in the future.