Debolina Kundu, Remy Sietchiping and Michael Kinyanjui: Developing National Urban Policies: Ways Forward to Green and Smart Cities

Springer, Singapore, 2020

Darshini Mahadevia¹

Accepted: 9 May 2022 / Published online: 6 July 2022
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This edited book with nineteen articles analysing national urban policies across countries of the world posts the UNHABITAT’s New Urban Agenda (NUA) adopted at the Habitat III held in Quito in 2016. The countries covered are India (Debolina Kundu), Pakistan (Nasir Javed, Rahema Hasan, and Nadia N. Qureshi), Afghanistan (Mathew French, Parul Agarwala, Humayoun Faiz, Ahmad Shoaib Azizi, Masood Hamza, Srinivas Popuri, and Jan Turkstra), Philippines (Mario R. Delos Reyes, Mark Anthony M. Gamboa, and Ryan Randle B. Rivera), China (Debolina Kundu, Tania Debnath, and Baishali Lahiri), I.R. of Iran (Sara Habibi, Maysam Basirat, and Mohammad Hassan Razavi), Nigeria (Mustapha Zubairu), South Africa (David Everatt and Zayd Ebrahim), Germany (André Mueller), France (Eric Huybrechts), Australia (Sara Stace), South Korea (Okju Jeong), Singapore (Fiona Chang and Diganta Das), and African Lusophone Countries (Marcella Guarneri, Evandro Holz, and Thomaz Ramalho). One article is on Zanzibar (by Muhammad Juma). The book therefore is a one-stop read on the implementation of NUA through National Urban Policies across the globe and learnings towards sustainable and greener cities (last chapter by the editors of the book).

This century belongs to urbanization in the global South, mainly in the cities of Asia and Africa, for which the cities need to be prepared. The New Urban Agenda is therefore aimed towards more inclusive, equitable and sustainable urbanisation. Leaving aside the critique of the NUA that has ‘everything for everyone’ and which does not deal with the real-world conflicts in times when real estate has overwhelming influence on the cities, it is worthwhile endeavour to know the National Urban Policies framed by the individual countries to take forward the NUA developed at HABITAT III. Thus, this book makes a relevant reading for the scholars and practitioners of urban policy. The book interestingly also has chapters on some countries

¹ School of Arts and Sciences, Ahmedabad University, Ahmedabad, India
of the global North, namely Germany, France, Australia, South Korea and Singapore. Some of these countries, mainly of Europe, are prone to challenges of, growing inequalities and refugee migration, in similar intensity as those of the global South. The countries of the global North, as is now widely accepted, have been hit severely by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and requires a relook at their urban policies from a holistic approach, of addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) along with climate-change adaptation and mitigation agendas. The European countries are saddled with the refugee crises, in the last decade, firstly from the west Asia, then from North Africa and now Ukraine. Hence, NUP is broadly oriented towards addressing multiple simultaneous challenges the cities would face in this century, while the countries of Asia and Africa undergo rapid urbanisation.

The editors of the volume write: “National Urban Policy (NUP) is an important tool available to governments to manage urbanisation. It provides a vision for urban transformation and to harness opportunities while mitigating inevitable challenges.” (pp. 3) They also argue that “in the absence of adequate National Urban Policies and associated frameworks, cities will continue to face multiple challenges that will aggravate urban inequalities and poverty.” (pp. 3) As the title suggests, the editors’ quest is to assess whether the included nations’ urban policies meet the challenges to have ‘smart’ and ‘sustainable’ cities. Later on, the term sustainable is collapsed as ‘green’ cities. The term ‘smart’ city is ubiquitously used, but is equally fuzzy, with every intervention in the city labelled as ‘smart’. But, as we know, if smartness in the city is to deal with application of technology than many infrastructure operations, i.e. metro rails, internet, etc., and increasingly CCTV-based monitoring of crime and violence in cities, cannot function without technological backing.

The NUP implementation at the national level is linked to the level of their respective urbanisation. Countries of Europe, which have long experience of living in cities, have long experience of urban policies, starting with provisioning of sanitation within the cities during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and then post-second world war with public housing and public provisioning of sanitation services, transport and green and open spaces. These have continued with increased consciousness about climate-change impacts and mitigation efforts. Most countries of Europe, including Germany and France (included in this volume), have strong climate-change mitigation action plans. France has efficiently built their smart technologies to tackle the problems related to sub-urbanisation, and Germany efficiently developed a policy framework to tackle the declining city core and integration of the migrants as well. Longer the period of urban living, more advanced would be the experience with urban policies. Urban policies of western European social-democratic countries are different than that of a market economy of USA. The experience of urban policies in the socialist economies too is different. The only former social country included in the volume is China, whose experience is very different than other former socialist countries of the Eastern Europe and Asia.

The volume highlights that most of the developing countries in Asia and Africa did not possess any integrated urban policy framework at the national level, which was attempted post-Habitat III Conference of 2016. In some countries like Philippines, which already had national level policy, i.e. National Urban Development and Housing Framework (NUDHF), not very competent, however, was reformulated to
achieve sustainable urban development. On the other hand, countries like India had no integrated NUP at the national level and continues to not have any clear national urbanisation policy for now. Pakistan and Afghanistan lacked any urban policy framework. Now with the political transition in the latter, it might be a while before urban policy would be on agenda. The African countries included in the volume did not have any urban policy formulation and lacking endowment and institutional framework, sought assistance from the UNHABITAT to frame one for their respective countries, with an exception of South Africa.

China had national-level urban policy since the beginning of the reform period. However, the policy only supported the growth of large cities and created regional and interpersonal inequalities. The New Type Urbanisation Planning (2014–2020) was formulated to address these issues and, therefore, tried to incorporate people-centric agenda along resilience. This was aimed to integrate the migrant population in Chinese cities. China has also laid great emphasis on urbanisation and is in the process of transferring rural populations to urban living.

The volume is an interesting collection of articles, whetting the appetite for further analysis of urban policies in different countries, whose development ideologies have undergone change overtime. A critical analysis by the editors of the volume, contextualising the urban policies against the development trajectories of each of the countries, could have been attempted. Even, without that, this is a highly informative volume. The only issue I have in the framing of the volume is considering NUP as a tool for sustainable cities. A policy is an intention of moving in a particular direction, and it is simplistic to view it as a tool, as we know, in policy making and implementation, there are two steps forward and one step backward. In essence, policy making and policy implementation are not linear and are mediated through large many urban processes embedded in the national political economies.

**Declarations**

**Conflicts of interest** The authors declares there is no conflict of interest.

**Funding** The editors of the book have not acknowledged any funding source.

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