Introduction

This issue of the Journal is one of the first to be published under the Open Access format that is becoming the norm for academic publishing. As with all innovations, it comes with a mixture of benefits and costs. The major benefits are that access to peer reviewed publications increases substantially, enhancing free access to knowledge for all and thereby furthering the prospects of creating a well-informed society. The costs, however, are that potential contributors to this enhanced information must have access to funds required to meet the costs of publication and ensure the financial viability of the publishers. Where such costs can be covered by research grants, foundations or personal resources, they can be manageable. However, there may well be cases where such options are not available, severely restricting the ability to contribute to the literature with access to funding.

The same considerations of benefits and costs apply to urban development policy and practice. In preparing this issue on ‘Improving urban social and environmental sustainability’ as guest editor, I was keen to provide opportunities for younger researchers with innovative ways of analysing an issue, as well as an opportunity for internationally renowned practitioners and academics of my generation to reflect on key lessons they have learned over their careers.

Neither of these two groups may have easy access to funds for publishing under the new system, yet both have so much to offer the academic community. The current situation contrasts significantly from that operating five decades ago when access to small research grants and obtaining secure academic posts was far easier.

This became evident when discussing possible contributions to this issue which sought to draw on a wide network of graduates from different institutions resulted in a large number of initial proposals. However, the pressures of building a career resulted in many initial proposals not leading to completed submissions. One potential contributor explained that short-term contracts severely constrain opportunities to undertake the research needed to prepare papers for publications that will help them land a more secure academic post as any time available for research is spent searching for their next job, or trying to secure their current one. For these reasons, I am extremely grateful to Professor Keivani for the invitation to guest edit this edition of the journal and to provide opportunities to address urban sustainability issues from very different perspectives.

However, what the issue lacks in quantity is fortunately more than compensated for in the quality of the contributions and a balance has been achieved in contributions from younger and more experienced contributors. All contributors address the key issues of social and environmental sustainability at a time when humanity is facing an existential crisis in terms of the climate crisis and ‘a possible confluence of calamities’ economically as noted by Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund on the opening day of the 2022 World Economic Forum at Davos.

This combination of socio-economic and environmental crises requires a fundamental re-think towards our relationship with the planet and each other at a time of great economic and political volatility. Faced with these challenges, a common initial response is often denial, followed by despair, but progress will depend first of all on public awareness and then pressure on those in positions of influence to make the changes required.

A central theme in the papers comprising this edition of the journal is that of land tenure, explored in terms of its de jure, de facto and perceived forms and degrees of security. In the first paper, Lahoti provides a non-linear framework for assessing tenure security. This develops from shared concerns regarding the concept of the ‘continuum’ of tenure categories published by UN-Habitat in 2004 to illustrate the complex range of semi-legal categories commonly found in rapidly urbanising countries. However, by implying that the most secure form of tenure is that of individual ownership or freehold, the linear form of the
continuum could be interpreted as implying that this was the ideal category, when the evidence showed that many other options could provide adequate levels of security. By developing a matrix or spectrum format, Lahoti provides a sensitive and non-linear approach that offers the possibility of a more value-free approach.

In the second paper, Shobha Rao, Jaime Royo-Olid and Jan Turkstra assess the de jure and de facto tenure issues as experienced by lower income households and reviews the policy of ‘intermediate’ land titling being rolled out across the Indian state of Odisha. The policy proposes to restrict options for the speculative sale of titles and ensure that such properties remain available for lower-income groups in the future. However, initial experience has revealed that mainstream banks are unwilling to accept the titles as collateral for granting loans, forcing households to depend upon private lenders and increasing their vulnerability. Experience elsewhere in India also suggests that preventing the sale of titled land through unregistered transfers or through ‘power of attorney’ transfers may prove difficult.

As the war in Ukraine demonstrates, many conflicts around the world are about land and who controls it. The third paper by Francesca Vianelli and Daniela Ochea Peralta explores how conflicts have a major impact upon land tenure and how the concept of ‘territorial peace’ can help to rebuild communities. They review the experiences of countries as diverse as Colombia and the Philippines where the approach was a central element in peace building. They record how post-conflict land reforms during the last 30 years have focused on restorative justice focusing on Western approaches to individual property rights. They propose a conceptual framework consisting of three elements: stability and security, sustainable livelihoods and the balance of safety and power as part of a renewed social contract in which all the ex-combatants guarantee their participation. While land inequality is at the heart of the conflicts in both Colombia and the Philippines, the authors show that while progress is being made, there is still much to be done.

Of all the policy options for increasing community-led, non-market-based options for improving access to secure and affordable land, Community Land Trusts (CLTs) offer great advantages. Despite their benefits and having been in existence for many years, they have surprisingly not been widely adopted in urbanising countries, so the paper by Mariangela Veronesi, Line Algoed and Maria Hernandez Torrales helps to bring them to a wider audience by reviewing the first example in Latin America. The authors demonstrate that in addition to providing secure and affordable housing, CLTs can protect vulnerable communities from market-driven displacement and even enhance disaster resilience. They review the example of the Caño Martin Peña CLT in Puerto Rico in which communal tenure protected the community from eviction and even enhanced their claim to funding for flood protection. While market-based forms or land development impede access to land for lower-income groups worldwide through ever-increasing prices, community-led forms of tenure enable them to achieve long-term security by reinterpreting the ethos of stewardship epitomised by customary tenure regimes.

The remaining papers in this issue of the Journal were commissioned from a number of well-established researchers and practitioners with extensive experience of land and housing issues and ways of improving social and environmental sustainability. Adding to the papers on India, Banashree Banerjee reviews land tenure policies and programmes in India within the context of a changing legal, institutional and regulatory environment. A transformation from meeting basic needs towards creating globally competitive cities has transformed options for the urban poor. She reviews the changing approaches adopted in the state of Madhya Pradesh from providing 30-year leases or ‘pattas’ and basic services to all eligible urban dwellers living on government land to the Housing for All programme and Beneficiary Led Construction programme which makes grants available to informal settlers on public land. This range of approaches has increased perceived security for many poorer urban households, though Banerjee concludes that it remains to be seen if this is sufficient to protect their rights over land.

Forbes Davidson draws on his experience of managing urban projects to reflect on the lessons they offer to build professional and institutional capacity for application at the urban scale within the context of climate change. He shows how urban projects can provide valuable ‘learning by doing’ opportunities for a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, communities and academics. Independent evaluations conducted many years after a project is implemented can provide invaluable
feedback to assess the extent to which intended outcomes were realised and the factors that influenced them. This can improve the processes of preparing terms of reference for future projects and their evaluation so that projects can be an opportunity to influence policy. The author concludes that building learning into project design and evaluation can ensure that the lessons learned can benefit future policy and project design.

Countries facing external as well as internal constraints on resources are invariably forced to develop imaginative approaches to building resilience that offer lessons to countries under less pressure. The opinion-piece by Dania Gonzales-Couret provides a primary example of how people in Cuba have adopted a range of coping strategies that enable them to live within severe economic and environmental constraints. She summarises a range of policies that sought to reduce the economic disparity between rural and urban areas and enhance food production and how lessons need to be learned from these in order to ensure that the objectives are realised in practice. She proposes that a new Ministry of Housing and Urbanism be established to provide an integrated approach to social and environmental development, with more integrated decision-making at different levels. These are issues that apply in most countries.

In the penultimate paper, the noted Pakistani architect Arif Hasan reviews the ways in which the professions of architecture and urban planning practice, and the ways in which they are taught, have changed in Pakistan over recent decades. He records how, in the 1960s, architects were heavily influenced by Western ‘modernists’ and only had two clients – the elite and the state. Housing for the remaining sections of the population was the domain of the state. More recently, the elite were replaced by the rich who prefer to live within gated communities and NGOs and Community-Based Organisations have emerged as influential actors in meeting the housing needs of the poor. Hasan records how urban planning has also undergone major changes from promoting the welfare state to planning ‘world class’ cities. All these changes are reflected in the changing terminology applied to both professions.

In the final paper, Patrick Wakely reflects on the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic and climate crisis have had on approaches to housing policies in the urban areas of the global South. While the upside of both these challenges has created or reinforced strong neighbourhood community organisations among all social classes and income groups, he notes that policies have yet to catch-up. He argues for the promotion of incremental social housing and the devolution of authority in the housing sector to meet diverse and changing local needs and notes the impressive capacity of governments and international aid efforts to provide support following the Covid-19 pandemic and geophysical disasters. He concludes with a range of social and environmental measures that are central to the achievement of sustainable urban areas.

Taken collectively, the papers in this issue address a range of issues relating to the ways in which people, especially vulnerable groups, can access land and housing and the ways in which policymakers and the professional community are struggling to respond to the major challenges of increased demand, vast numbers of low-income households and the accelerating climate crisis. The evidence shows that it is to governments that people turn in a crisis, not markets or the private sector. Understandably, governments of all political persuasions are struggling to respond to these challenges, so progress will depend upon a willingness to accept the scientific evidence provided by the academic community at all levels of experience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Geoffrey Payne is a housing and urban development consultant with five decades of experience covering all regions of the world. He has undertaken research, consultancy and capacity building assignments for the UN, World Bank, governments and academic institutions, published widely and contributed to numerous international conferences. His latest book ‘Somewhere to Live: Rising to the global urban land and housing challenge’ (2022) is published by Practical Action.

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