


Urban Development: A Viable Option after Rio 2012?

Andrea Martinez

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/sdlp>

 Part of the [Energy and Utilities Law Commons](#), [Environmental Law Commons](#), and the [Natural Resources Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Andrea Martinez (2011) "Urban Development: A Viable Option after Rio 2012?," *Sustainable Development Law & Policy*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/sdlp/vol11/iss1/9>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington College of Law Journals & Law Reviews at Digital Commons @ American University Washington College of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sustainable Development Law & Policy by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ American University Washington College of Law. For more information, please contact fbrown@wcl.american.edu.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT: A VIABLE OPTION AFTER RIO 2012?

by *Andrea Martinez**

For the very first time, in 2008, the urban population exceeded populations in rural areas.¹ Currently there are more than 378 cities with over a million residents and it is expected that by 2025 this number will grow to 599.² Almost seventy-five percent of Europe's population resides in urban areas.³ Meanwhile, urban dwellers represent seventy percent of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴ It is important to note that cities only occupy two per cent of Earth's terrestrial surface, and yet the urban-dwelling population consumes more than seventy-five per cent of the Earth's natural resources.⁵

Still, urban areas play an important role in social and economic development. Urban areas produce a large percentage of countries' Gross National Product: fifty-five percent in least developed countries, seventy-three percent in middle-income countries, and eighty-five percent developed countries.⁶ In addition to contributing to economic development, cities also drive "cultural, intellectual, educational, and technological achievements and innovations."⁷ Cities, therefore, are critical to society's wellbeing. However, it is crucial that urbanization is sustainable; otherwise the depletion of natural resources stands to jeopardize society.

Adequate urban planning brings considerable economic and resource efficiency.⁸ An example of the positive potential of sustainable urbanization can be found in the city of Curitiba, Brazil.⁹ Although Brazil has the fourth-largest urban population in the world, through proper planning, Brazil's city of Curitiba had a population of 1.828 million without "congestion, pollution, [or] reduction of public space" in 2008.¹⁰ Among Curitiba's urban planning successes are its reduction of carbon dioxide emissions through a coordinated emission reduction plan of transportation and buildings, and its creation of parks and artificial lakes in areas vulnerable to floods.¹¹ Curitiba's city planning created a city that is economically productive while also having a low impact on the environment.


Achieving the established United Nations sustainable development goals¹² has proven difficult especially after the financial and energy crises.¹³ Consequently the United Nations General Assembly decided to organize a Conference on Sustainable Development to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 ("CSD 2012").¹⁴ CSD 2012 has the following three objectives: 1) "secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development;"¹⁵ 2) assess progress and implementation gaps on agreed commitments;¹⁶ and 3) address "new and emerging challenges."¹⁷ In addition, CSD 2012 has two themes, one of them being, "green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication."¹⁸

The Green economy initiative was spearheaded by United Nations Environment Programme ("UNEP") in 2008 and was described as "an economy that results in improved human wellbeing and reduced inequalities over the long term, while not

exposing future generations to significant environmental risks and ecological scarcities."¹⁹ Although not all member states have reached a consensus on the definition of green economy,²⁰ many developed countries perceive green economy as critical to accomplishing sustainable development.²¹ Meanwhile, developing countries express concern, fearing that industrialized countries will use green economy to limit their growth by imposing difficult to meet standards via trade, official development assistance, or financing.²² Nevertheless, member states have agreed upon a study to be completed for the Second Preparatory Committee, which will address the challenges, benefits, and potential risks of transitioning to a green economy.²³

The theme of green economy has an important connotation for sustainable urbanization. In the Green Economy Report by UNEP the impact of well-designed cities is emphasized. Urban areas house large portions of the population therefore well-designed cities create "resource efficiency with economic and social opportunity."²⁴ UNEP has collected data showing that green economy invested in sustainable cities and green construction can mitigate and support sustainable development through its:²⁵

- "potential to reduce approximately [twenty-nine] per cent of the projected baseline emissions by 2020 cost-effectively in the residential and commercial sectors,"²⁶
- energy-efficient buildings, which would save energy costs and create "millions of jobs"²⁷ especially in countries in transition and developing countries,²⁸
- clean transportation, which would reduce "transport-related smog and fine air particles,"²⁹ provide "health and wider environmental benefits,"³⁰ and produce savings on fuel.³¹

Ultimately, addressing green economy concerns will be a pivotal next-step to ensuring that CSD 2012 produces an actionable agreement that will benefit sustainable urbanization.³² Although the green economy is not the only path to sustainable urbanization, it is a step-forward: it creates new economic opportunities, promotes equity, and complements sustainable development.³³ As with everything, green economy is not perfect and does pose implementation challenges. Still, Curitiba has shown the world that these challenges are not impossible to overcome and that ultimately the effort to "co-integrate nature and human economic development"³⁴ is rewarding for the entire community. In conclusion, "cities will be central in bringing about tomorrow's economic benefits and welfare,"³⁵ but the benefits will depend on society's unified, timely, and selfless investment in sustainable cities. 

Endnotes: Urban Development on page 62

* *Andrea Martinez is a J.D. candidate, May 2011, at American University Washington College of Law.*

¹ See UNEP: URBAN ENVIRONMENT UNIT, CITIES AND GREEN BUILDINGS: IN THE TRANSITION TO A GREEN ECONOMY A UNEP BRIEF, 1 (2009), http://www.unep.org/urban_environment/PDFs/CitiesAndBuildingFactsheet_20091105.pdf [hereinafter CITIES AND GREEN BUILDINGS].

² See *id.*

³ See *About the Urban Environment*, EUR. ENV'T AGENCY, <http://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/urban/about-the-urban-environment> (last visited Oct. 17, 2010) [hereinafter EEA].

⁴ See Victoria Broadus, *UNEP: BRT Key to Sustainable Urban Development in Latin America and the Caribbean*, THE CITY FIX (Jul. 19, 2010), <http://thecityfix.com/unep-brt-key-to-sustainable-urban-development-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>.

⁵ See CITIES AND GREEN BUILDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁶ See *id.*

⁷ EEA, *supra* note 3, at 1.

⁸ See *Green Economy Success Stories: Sustainable Urban Planning in Brazil*, UNEP: ENV'T FOR DEV. (2009), <http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/SuccessStories/SustainableUrbanPlanninginBrazil/tabid/4656/language/en-US/Default.aspx>.

⁹ See *id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ See *id.*

¹² These sustainable development goals include, but are not limited to: Agenda 21, Rio Declaration, Johannesburg Declaration, Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, Monterrey Consensus. For more information refer to: *Major Agreements & Conventions Overriding Issues on Sustainable Development*, DIV. FOR SUSTAINABLE DEV., http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/resources/res_majoagreconver.shtml.

¹³ See Secretary-General Sha Zukang, UNCS D 2012, *Green Economy and Trade*, BLOG ON RIO+20 (Oct. 8, 2010, 9:11 AM), <http://www.uncsd2012.org/>

index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=119:blog-on-rio20-green-economy-and-trade&catid=36:blog&Itemid=73 [hereinafter BLOG ON RIO].

¹⁴ See G.A. Res 64/236, ¶ 20, U.N. Doc. A/RES/64/236 (Mar. 31, 2010).

¹⁵ *Id.* at ¶ 20(a).

¹⁶ See *id.*

¹⁷ See *id.*

¹⁸ See *id.*

¹⁹ UNEP, GREEN ECONOMY REPORT: A PREVIEW 5 (2010), <http://www.unep.ch/etb/publications/Green%20Economy/GER%20Preview%20v2.0.pdf> [hereinafter GREEN ECONOMY REPORT].

²⁰ See *Summary of the First PrepCom for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development: 17-19 May 2010*, EARTH NEGOTIATIONS BULL. (Int'l Inst. for Sustainable Dev., New York, N.Y.), May 21, 2010, at 8, <http://www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb2701e.pdf> [hereinafter *CSD PrepCom1*].

²¹ See *id.* at 11.

²² See *id.* at 8, 11.

²³ See *id.* at 8.

²⁴ GREEN ECONOMY REPORT, *supra* note 19, at 9.

²⁵ See *id.* at 2-3.

²⁶ CITIES AND GREEN BUILDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 2.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ See *id.* at 2.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ See *id.* at 2.

³² See BLOG ON RIO, *supra* note 13.

³³ See *id.*; *CSD PrepCom1*, *supra* note 20, at 8.

³⁴ CITIES AND GREEN BUILDINGS, *supra* note 1, at 3.

³⁵ *Id.*