Conquer the Wheel of Urban Challenges!

Report of CityNet Activity at the 8th Asia Pacific Urban Forum

Written By Chris DiGennaro, CityNet Program Officer & Woo Bin Choi, SDGs Program Assistant
Edited by Youngmin Chang, CityNet Director of Programs
CityNet’s “Wheel of Urban Challenges” was the key engagement activity of the CityNet booth at the 8th Asia-Pacific Urban Forum (APUF-8), held from October 23-25 2023 at the Suwon Convention Center. The forum was organised by UN ESCAP and hosted by Suwon City, Republic of Korea. CityNet was keen to cooperate with these partners to make the forum a success. After all, ESCAP was one of the three founding UN bodies of CityNet in 1987, and Suwon City recently served as a member of CityNet’s Executive Committee. CityNet's booth was created to warmly welcome almost two thousand participants—most of them urban stakeholders—and get them thinking about how the themes of the forum and the problems facing Asia Pacific cities intersect.

For decades, the Asia Pacific Urban Forum has been the place for the region’s key urban stakeholders from the local to national levels to gather and discuss Asia's urban future. It provides a platform to promote sustainable urban solutions and implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the UN SDGs) in urban contexts specific to the Asia Pacific region. The region is urbanising at a rapid pace, leading to a host of interconnected problems that urban planners and city leaders need to grapple with all at once. Executive Secretary Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, writing in the flagship Crisis Resilient Urban Futures Report, noted that, “the megatrend of urbanisation across the Asia-Pacific region has not come without difficulties. Many of the multiple crises the world faces intersect in our cities, creating new challenges and further exposing long-standing issues, such as inequality, urban poverty, affordable housing and an expanding infrastructure gap.” ESCAP framed the challenges of urbanisation along 4 thematic tracks, which were discussed at the forum: 1) urban and territorial planning, 2) city climate action, 3) inclusive urban digital transformation, and 4) resilient urban financing.

While ministers, city leaders, and other authorities were engaged in deep discussions to seek solid commitments to the forum’s agenda and develop a roadmap for the path forward, CityNet incorporated the themes of the forum and its own work in climate change, disaster risk resilience, and localising the SDGs in cities to create an engagement activity for participants at the CityNet booth. The concept of the booth was to serve as a centralised communication hub on urban challenges and innovative approaches to city-to-city cooperation and capacity building. The booth’s prominent location ensured continuous interaction with a high volume of foot traffic, so CityNet arranged an engagement activity that could capture the spirit of the forum but also encourage participants to have fun while chewing over the real challenges facing the region's cities.

By 2050, the region's urban population will swell from 2.5 billion people to 3.4 billion
Source: Crisis Resilient Urban Future: The Future of Asian & Pacific Cities 2023

Over An estimated 65% of Sustainable Development Goals need to be met in local contexts
Source: UN ESCAP Presentation at CityNet SDG Cluster Seminar in Yokohama (Nov. 15)

By 2025, two thirds of the world’s 49 megacities will be in the Asia-Pacific region
Source: Crisis Resilient Urban Future: The Future of Asian & Pacific Cities 2023
The interactive activity challenged participants to think about how various problems facing their cities were interconnected and how innovative policy ideas could remedy these issues while making cities more inclusive and resilient. The idea of need for city planners to tackle multiple interlinked challenges was derived from the flagship APUF-8 report, *Crisis Resilient Urban Futures*, but it also reflects what CityNet has observed through its capacity building workshops series.

Participants were lured to the activity by the brightly coloured roulette wheel or the promise of rewards, neatly displayed upon the booth’s info desk. Some came for the challenge—expert policymakers, high level city officials, or ambitious Ph.D students. All came away with a better understanding of what they could do about the interrelated problems in their cities (and a CityNet branded planner or two).

To start the activity, participants needed to scan a QR code to access a survey on Mentimeter, interactive polling software which was being used abundantly in the APUF-8 plenary sessions. Participants then underwent a brief stakeholder identification process to indicate their role: city official, political leader, member of grassroots organisation, think tank, student, etc. Importantly, they were required to indicate their city and region within the Asia Pacific where they live. This data was critical to pinpoint which issues are endemic to particular regions or cities and to find out which issues were given priority by different stakeholders.
As city names were entered, a word cloud was generated. Bigger names indicate that multiple participants were from the same city. Incheon, ROK; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Suwon, ROK; Bangkok, Thailand; Manila / Quezon City, Philippines; and Dhaka, Bangladesh were some of the more common cities. The regions of Asia Pacific were adapted from ESCAP’s definitions.

When the regions of each stakeholder were visualised, it became clear that most of the participants in the activity hailed from cities in Southeast Asia (48), East Asia (30), and South Asia (26). It is fitting that these regions are well represented because in the case of South and Southeast Asia, they are undergoing a boom in urbanisation. East Asia, while further along on its urban journey, still has the lessons learned from urbanisation in recent memory.
After sorting out which city the participant was from and what kind of stakeholder they were, the activity began in earnest. Participants were asked to select 1 top priority challenge in their city from the following list of options:

These topics were chosen based on CityNet’s 3 Clusters, the 4 thematic areas of APUF-8, and other key areas such as housing, waste management, and urban mobility. Although it was difficult to pick just one issue out of many, most participants tended to have a clear focus area in their work and were able to pick one theme without too much hesitation. The graph below reveals the results of this portion of the exercise. Climate Change, Urban Mobility, and Waste Management were voted as the top 3 priority areas.

When broken down by region, it is apparent that Southeast Asia and South Asia put more emphasis on Urban Mobility and Waste Management. One potential reason for the popularity of these two challenges is that they greatly impact the quality of life for people in a city. East Asia, which has advanced greatly in those two areas, put a priority on Climate Change as the next big challenge. Housing was also revealed to be a pertinent issue for participants from Southeast Asia and East Asia to a lesser extent. Disaster Management was less of a priority, but participants from the 3 main regions prioritised it equally, as disasters affect all regions indiscriminately.

The activity became trickier in the next step, where the participants selected a second urban challenge at random. Similar to a roulette wheel, the Wheel of Urban Challenges was divided into 8 challenges in a pie shape and the surface was covered in velcro tape. Participants selected their second challenge by tossing a velcro-coated ball at the spinning wheel. The section that the ball struck would be their second challenge. Next, participants had to find some linkage between the priority challenge they chose and the second challenge that was determined at random. Through the poll, the participants described the associated challenges in a short answer.
For example, if the participant chose *Urban Mobility* as their priority challenge and hit *Housing* with the velcro ball, they might have shared an interlinked issue such as “there are not enough metro stations or bus stops within walking distance to residential areas in my city” or “housing located nearby subway stations is unaffordable in my city.” If someone selected *Digitalization* and received *Waste Management* as the random second challenge, they might have said, “my city has no clear data on the vast amounts of waste city residents are producing.” The chart below shows the outcome of the participant’s random challenge selection by throwing the velcro ball at the Wheel. According to the rules of probability, the results are fairly uniform.

Even after all this, the participants were still not quite done with the challenge. As many of the participants were city officials or other knowledgeable stakeholders, the last task was to propose a **policy solution** to solve the interlinked crisis that the participant indicated after selecting the 2 challenges. Reflecting the position of the respondent, the solutions ranged from detailed program ideas to activist-driven calls to action. For example, to solve the crux of the combined threats of climate change and disaster management, a city official might detail an increased budget for resilience measures, a representative from an international organisation might propose a capacity building workshop, and a student may call for immediate action on climate change measures that influence disaster occurrence. Once the participant had proposed a solution, they could finally say that they had conquered the Wheel of Urban Challenges.

“The reality in Asia is that the ability to try and raise resources locally has been much lower than in Europe, which is a red flag. In the future, to achieve a just transition, our cities have to really make an effort to raise more internal resources to show that they’re serious about it.”

-Vijay Jagannathan, CityNet Secretary General
Overall, the activity questionnaire elicited responses from more than 120 individuals. Below is a chart of some of the more detailed responses the activity received.

A **DRRM planner and researcher** from **Makati City, Philippines** chose **Urban Finance** as a priority issue for their city and got **Disaster Management** as the second urban challenge at random. They explained that the two challenges are linked as “Disasters especially aggravated by climate change require serious investments on prevention and mitigation. These pre-disaster interventions necessitate huge urban financing from various sources.” Their proposed policy solution to the linked challenge was to “Harness capital market/private investments and engage innovative financing solutions from the community and other stakeholders.”

A **professor** from **Kobe, Japan** picked **Disaster Management** as a top priority challenge in their city and gained **Housing** as the secondary urban challenge. They highlighted the interconnectedness of these challenges, describing that “Numerous elderly people live alone in their houses, and this results in increased vulnerability, particularly during emergencies or disasters.” They pointed out that safe housing and infrastructure are the essential elements to tackle the increased vulnerability among elderly populations and suggested retrofitting housing and disaster-resilient infrastructure to ensure accessibility and safety for elderly individuals.

“Research commissioned by Habitat for Humanity International and conducted by the Institute of Environment and Development showed that if housing improvements are done on a massive scale in informal settlements around the world, GDP and income per capita may increase by as much as 10.5%.”

-Luis Noda, Vice President of the Asia-Pacific Area at Habitat for Humanity International
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Priority Challenge</th>
<th>Random Challenge</th>
<th>Linkage</th>
<th>Policy Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Hanoi, Vietnam</td>
<td>Digitalization</td>
<td>Urban Mobility</td>
<td>Urban mobility is a problem in Hanoi now since there are not enough public transportation, while the lack of digitalization makes it hard for people to access the route.</td>
<td>Hanoi can push for the complete of the metro while at the same time working on a better platform for its citizen to submit their complain and suggestion as well as access information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Vice President</td>
<td>Legazpi, Philippines</td>
<td>Disaster Management</td>
<td>Urban Mobility</td>
<td>Legazpi City in Albay province of the Philippines is prone to disasters from typhoons and volcanic related disasters. The city is also experiencing rapid urbanisation which stresses the public infrastructure.</td>
<td>Comprehensive disaster and resilience solutions that transcend the political landscapes. A feature in the city that will not be affected by changes in politics and administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Manager</td>
<td>Incheon Metropolitan City</td>
<td>Waste Management</td>
<td>Disaster Management</td>
<td>Development of new material resources to tackle the severe air pollution.</td>
<td>Encourage numerous companies to promote ESG-centric activities and strengthen the primary pollutant removal mechanisms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and tourism Interpreter</td>
<td>Suwon City</td>
<td>Urban Mobility</td>
<td>Climate Change</td>
<td>Insufficient parking capacity and natural disasters such as air pollution caused by excessive private vehicle use.</td>
<td>Expansion of the hydrogen or compressed natural gas vehicles to easily access tourist destinations and other places besides constructing parking facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suwon Cultural Foundation</td>
<td>Suwon City</td>
<td>Urban Mobility</td>
<td>Waste Management</td>
<td>There are serious traffic congestion and parking problems in Suwon caused by its disorganised traffic systems, and the streets are not clean due to indiscriminate garbage disposal.</td>
<td>The enhancement of parking availability and the establishment of scheduled garbage disposal times are the fundamental factors in addressing these issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Associate Director</td>
<td>Delhi, India</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Climate Change</td>
<td>Housing is not climate resilient causing people to face a lot of challenges. Housing quality being poor makes it worse for informal settlement residents.</td>
<td>Participatory planning and decision making with informal settlement communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Engineer</td>
<td>Colombo, Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Climate Change</td>
<td>SDG Localization</td>
<td>There are many flood actions happening in Colombo due to climate change. Managing water supply and drainage is the key for these problems.</td>
<td>Build up more land area to infiltrate the excess rainwater and avoid riverbank congestion due to construction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Coordinator</td>
<td>Cyberjaya, Malaysia</td>
<td>Urban Mobility</td>
<td>SDG Localization</td>
<td>Some of the cities in Southeast Asia have issues in terms of urban mobility (lack of integrated public transport) as well as the active role of local government in achieving the SDG target.</td>
<td>Engage local government to achieve the target especially in developing integrated urban public transport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Councillor</td>
<td>Shah Alam, Malaysia</td>
<td>Waste Management</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>First, Housing. Shah Alam city is the heart of Selangor and Malaysia. Everything is very expensive here especially housing, rental or owning. Second, Waste management. Not enough land to dump the waste.</td>
<td>1) intervention from the government to impose policy framework such as certain percentage of affordable houses for each development. 2) Waste Management: Venture in new technology such as biodiversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Officer</td>
<td>Quezon City, Philippines</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Urban Finance</td>
<td>The availability (and sources) of urban finance are determinants of whether housing is adequate, safe, and affordable. Without the former, housing for the poor is impossible to achieve.</td>
<td>Urban finance systems should be designed in ways that target interlinked challenges (e.g. disaster-resilient housing). This way we are efficient in our use of resources and solving the problems effectively.</td>
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Perhaps the best takeaway from the Wheel of Urban Challenges exercise is that complex subject matter can be repackaged into a fun, engaging activity to bring greater awareness to the issues under review at a conference or forum. Through the activity, participants implicitly got a grasp of the biggest challenges facing cities today, the implications on sustainable urban development and managed to achieve an outcome. As we are all important stakeholders, essentially anyone who lives in an urban area can play the Wheel of Urban Challenges game to indicate their priority areas for urban development and think critically about how issues are intertwined. For the urban experts in the crowd, this activity was an opportunity for them to think outside of their own professional silos to devise creative solutions to multiple problems at once. The physical nature of the activity paired with the element of randomness added to the fun-factor and made the activity a big hit. Rather than just spinning the wheel to get a prize, participants had to engage with the activity for a few minutes, which was critical in gathering data but not overly taxing. The time taken during the activity was also an ideal way for participants to network with other participants from different cities, regions, and fields.

This type of activity is also a non-traditional way to gather data from forum participants. Through this exercise, we can get a sense of 1) what types of stakeholders attended the forum, 2) where they are coming from (city & position), 3) what their priority issues are, and 4) how they think about these problems. This type of data can nicely complement the larger outcomes of a forum, such as a joint statement, concrete action plans, conclusions drawn from high level discussions, or publications. The data can be used by CityNet to better understand the needs of our cities and craft capacity building workshops to help cities improve specific areas. For example, Incheon City officials were very specific about how the air pollution they are experiencing is tied to local waste management practices and Suwon City officials targeted traffic congestion and proposed policies that could have an impact.

Despite differences based on region or city, another big takeaway is that the challenges faced by Asia Pacific cities are rather common, yet they manifest in different ways. For example, disasters are common, but the types of disasters and the measures taken to ward against them may be very different. A public official in Quezon City hopes the metro can be equipped to handle earthquakes while a resident of Incheon hopes the city’s housing can be better prepared to withstand the heat waves that are becoming more frequent. Although the cities in the region vary greatly, due to the fact that they face similar issues, some solutions from one city may be applied to another city with appropriate localization measures.

Stakeholders also interpret the somewhat vague “SDGs Localization” challenge differently based on their priorities. Younger people may see the SDGs as a mechanism to reduce longstanding urban inequalities or as a pathway to head into a net-zero future. City planners may align multiple SDG targets to their own policies to lead to a more sustainable city whereas engineers may focus on specific areas such as water treatment and link it to housing or another challenge. Each of the other challenges can bind with SDGs Localization which is a testament to the breadth of the SDGs but also a reason why achieving all the targets is such a big challenge for city officials. With only 6 years left to achieve the SDGs, city planners will need to be creative by implementing policies that will solve multiple interlinked challenges at once. This is the ultimate purpose of this exercise and why it was such a captivating way for urban stakeholders to problematize the issues that impact their city’s sustainability and quality of life.