Religious Inequalities, Inclusive Cities and Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The crucial role of cities and communities in achieving sustainable development has been recognized in global development agendas. These include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and the Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All, also known as the New Urban Agenda, adopted during the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in 2016. However, current research and approaches to sustainable urban development overlook societal issues related to the persistence of inequalities and exclusionary practices in urban contexts, particularly in the Global South.

This chapter sheds light on the correlation between religious inequalities and the achievement of sustainable urban development. It discusses how reducing religious inequalities and fostering diverse and meaningful participation can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable cities – a largely unexplored topic. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first introduces contemporary urban challenges and the measures proposed by the most relevant developmental agendas. The second examines how progress towards inclusive urban development is affected by the persistence of religious inequalities. Finally, it discusses the potential role of heritage, mentioned only once in the 2030 Agenda as part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, to promote human–rights–based and people–centred urban development.

Towards inclusive and sustainable cities in the twenty–first century

Current challenges for sustainable urban development

For the first time in history, more than half of the global population live in cities. Urban environments, when well planned, are attractive centres for employment, business development, innovation, creativity, cultural interactions and greater societal freedoms (Florida 2011). This urban migration trend and its consequences for societies and places have been so considerable that some have called the twenty-first century 'the urban age' (Brenner and Schmid 2014: 1). It is estimated that urbanization will rise from 56.2 per cent to 60.4 per cent by 2030, with notable differences between geographical regions (UN–Habitat 2020: xvi). In fact, 96 per cent of urban growth is predicted to occur in East Asia, South Asia and Africa, and mainly in three countries (China, India and Nigeria).

Although urban transformations vary worldwide, cities have become central to global discussions around sustainable development, which have been mainly led by UN agencies. In this framework, intergovernmental organizations, national and local governments, policy makers, non–governmental organizations, academics and professionals, the private sector and representatives of indigenous and local communities have contributed to discussions tackling a wide range of global (urban) challenges. These include urbanization and migration trends, increasing demand for housing, infrastructure and services and unsustainable use of land and other resources (UN 2016b).

Affecting particularly the Global South, these urban changes have often resulted in the deterioration of urban quality, the proliferation of slums and informal settlements and the lack of essential services, like water supply and sanitation (Grubbauer and Mader 2021). They have also contributed to increasing multiple forms of poverty and inequalities, social exclusion, urban fragmentation and spatial segregation (Keivani 2010; Espino 2015). These challenges have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian crises and rising climate change. In this context, the most vulnerable communities and individuals have often been the most negatively affected (UN 2016a). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious minorities have been further marginalized, discriminated against and scapegoated (Morthorst 2020).

The way forward: the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda

The 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda represent significant milestones in global efforts towards sustainable urban development. Among the 17 SDGs proposed in the 2030 Agenda, SDG 11 aims to 'make cities and

human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'. It emphasizes the need to implement participatory and integrated policies for urban planning and management, and for national and regional development. It also sets other development targets to improve the built environment (including housing and slums) and infrastructure and transportation systems to make them more accessible, safe, affordable, resource efficient and climate resilient. All this pays special attention to 'leave no one behind', including the poorest, and to empower women, girls and the most vulnerable people, including children and youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons (UN 2015: Art. 6, 23).

The 2030 Agenda also recognizes, for the first time in a global development agenda, the important role that heritage can play in fostering urban sustainability (Hosagrahar et al 2016). Goal 11 explicitly mentions the relevance of heritage for development, stating how efforts are required 'to strengthen the protection and safeguarding of the world's cultural and natural heritage' (Target 11.4). The New Urban Agenda reaffirmed the global commitment to sustainable urban development as a critical step for the implementation and localization of the 2030 Agenda, and SDG 11 in particular, in an inclusive, integrated and coordinated manner (UN, 2016b: Art. 9). It aims to 'achieve cities and human settlements where all persons are able to enjoy equal rights and opportunities, as well as their fundamental freedoms' without discrimination of any kind (UN, 2016b: Art. 11–12).

Religious inequalities, heritage and sustainable (urban) development

Reflections on progress towards the achievement of SDG11

The degree to which global agendas towards urban sustainability take into consideration and promote social inclusion is still not prioritized compared to other (mainly environmental) considerations (Reeves 2005; Mirzoev et al 2022). The majority of publications on contemporary challenges for sustainable urban development focus on ecological and technical aspects and/or on issues related to spatial planning and urban mobility, although concepts of people-centred development (or sustainable human development) have achieved more prominence in the last 20 years (Zavratnik et al 2020; Carley et al 2001; Mahadevia 2001). These concepts are not only important for social considerations but also for other economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable urban development (Jenks and Jones 2010).

According to the Quito Declaration, urban development, in order to be sustainable, must enable full and meaningful participation of all population groups, without discrimination based on race, religion,

ethnicity or socio-economic status, and the improvement of their quality of life (UN 2016b: Art. 11, 26, 42). Moreover, the 2030 Agenda specifies how it should support the creation of a society based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the promotion of pluralism and respect for diversity and equality (UN 2015: Art. 11, 19, 26, 40). Nevertheless, these two agendas pay insufficient attention to religious inequalities and religious minorities, who are often neglected in sustainable development discourses and are particularly vulnerable to discrimination (Mir et al 2020: 1–3; Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020: 19). Neglecting religion, and religious inequalities, in urban discourses can undermine the development of place-sensitive (or community-sensitive) urban policies and strategies, and the achievement of sustainability objectives, particularly in terms of inclusion, equality, diversity and social justice (Narayanan 2015: 7).

A growing field of literature has recently explored the relationship between religious inequalities, Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and development, particularly through the work of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) at the Institute of Development Studies. However, the interconnection between religious inequalities, FoRB and inclusive and sustainable cities is largely unexplored, with notable exceptions. Some scholars have explained how religion and beliefs support the physical construction and transformation of cities and are fundamental components of people's sense of place and cultural and urban identity, contributing to community cohesion, sense of ownership and belonging (Reeves 2005: 13; Greed 2016; Narayanan 2016). Others have explained how the presence of more powerful religious expressions and dominant religious identities can lead to the ghettoization of minorities and urban degradation, the proliferation of slums and informal settlements and the systematic marginalization, if not oppression, of minorities (Narayanan 2015: 4). Ongoing processes of discrimination and exclusion of certain individuals and communities based on their religion or belief – often intersecting with other aspects like gender, ethnicity, economic status and/or disability – can undermine their 'right to the city', which, according to UN-Habitat (2020: 147), means that 'all people … should have equal opportunities and access to urban resources, services and goods'.

Religious heritage as a catalyst for sustainable cities?

Religion, spirituality and beliefs also influence how cities are used and shaped through various forms of urban heritage (Narayanan 2016; Singh et al 2020). Multifaceted heritage manifestations need to be adequately interpreted, preserved, managed and enhanced by policy makers, academics,

practitioners and communities to make cities more sustainable. Particular attention needs to be paid to different forms of (religious) heritage and the plurality of associated values (Giliberto 2021a). Heritage does not refer only to historic buildings, monuments, archaeological sites and other tangible assets. It also includes urban spaces, entire historic cities and urban landscapes, and many intangible manifestations, including social practices, rituals and festive events, community knowledge and practices, performing arts and oral traditions and expressions (UNESCO 2003, 2011). Nevertheless, the definition and implementation of heritage policies and practices is often a selective and contested process, excluding voices diverging from official narratives and belonging to religious minorities and marginalized stakeholders that are often ignored or even silenced (Singh 2008; Silverman 2011; Monier 2021).

In this context, heritage – tangible and intangible, cultural and natural – can be effectively mobilized to achieve SDG11, and improve the quality of life of religious minorities. Several publications have shown the opportunities of harnessing heritage for sustainable urban development, highlighting its crucial role for social inclusion and cohesion, urban liveability, sense of identity and belonging, people's wellbeing and community resilience (Bandarin et al 2011; Labadi and Logan 2016). For instance, the shared use of urban areas, streets and open spaces can stimulate interaction, social exchange and integration between different communities (Labadi et al 2021: 76).

Other scholars have highlighted the potential of heritage practices to develop people-centred and human-rights based approaches (Silverman and Ruggles 2007; Wijesuriya et al 2017; Rosetti et al 2022). In fact, a participatory process for the interpretation, conservation, management and enhancement of the plurality of (religious) heritage values can be a catalyst for minorities' inclusion in decision making, and the implementation of more inclusive urban policies and practices (Giliberto 2021b: 46–49). A research project led by Newcastle University (UK) in Istanbul, for example, demonstrated how giving a central role to diverse urban communities in heritage interpretation can support the recognition of heritage assets excluded from official narratives (Giliberto 2021a: 4). This process allows the concept of heritage itself to be rethought more inclusively, while also opening new ways for local authorities and managers to engage with urban communities.

Heritage's contribution to fostering more inclusive and sustainable cities was recognized in the New Urban Agenda, which highlights its role in 'rehabilitating and revitalizing urban areas and in strengthening social participation and the exercise of citizenship' (UN 2016b: Art. 38, 125). However, the 2030 Agenda fails to recognize the complexity of

heritage's contribution to inclusive cities and communities and sustainable development in general, by focusing solely on its protection and reflecting a rather limited approach to heritage for development (Labadi et al 2021: 12). Moreover, progress towards SDG 11 is measured only through per capita expenditure on cultural and natural heritage. While evaluation indicators are often narrowly based in economics because they can be more easily measured, this focus on the economic dimension does not capture the most relevant impacts, mainly related to cultural and social dimensions (Giliberto 2022).

Conclusion

There can be no sustainable cities where individuals and communities are left behind or marginalized because of their religion, faith, belief or spirituality. However, despite global efforts for promoting more inclusive and sustainable cities in the last 20 years, the implications of religious inequalities have been overlooked and not yet fully understood. Consequently, exclusionary practices, inequalities and marginalization persist in urban policies and practices. It is crucial to foster meaningful and inclusive participation and take concrete action, involving all stakeholders, and understand and respond to their needs, particularly those of the most vulnerable and marginalized. Much still needs to be done to develop meaningful, diverse, inclusive and sustainable ways for urban governance, planning and development. In this context, this chapter showed how religious heritage can be a catalyst to promote people-centred and human rights-based approaches in urban conservation, planning and governance, and make cities more inclusive and sustainable. However, further research is needed on how to implement this approach locally.

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