Ideas, implementation and indicators: epistemologies of the post-2015 urban agenda

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ABSTRACT The success of the campaign for a dedicated urban Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) reflected a consensus on the importance of "cities" in sustainable development. The relevance accorded to cities in the SDGs is twofold, reflected both in the specific place-based content of the Urban Goal and the more general concern with the multiple scales at which all indicators will be institutionalized. Divergent views of the city and urban processes, suppressed within the Urban Goal, are, however, likely to become more explicit as attention shifts to implementation. Acknowledging the different theoretical traditions used to legitimize the new urban agenda is an overdue task. As this agenda develops post-2015, the adequacy of these forms of urban theory will become more contested around, among other concerns, the possibilities and limits of place-based policy, advocacy and activism; and practices of monitoring and evaluating ongoing processes of urban transformation along multiple axes of development.

KEYWORDS new urban agenda / Sustainable Development Goals / urban policy / Urban SDG / urban theory / urban transformation

I. INTRODUCTION

Cities have become a central object of a range of global development and environmental policy debates in the last decade. There is a consensus about the importance, perhaps even the centrality, of urban processes to securing sustainable futures in a range of fields including climate change, economic growth, poverty eradication, public health and food security. The assertion of a "new urban agenda" in global policy reflects a long campaign to locate cities at the centre of development debates. But the promotion of this agenda should also be the occasion for some caution, as not everyone who promotes the urban agenda has the same understanding of the role of cities in addressing developmental problems such as health, hunger, sustainable energy or personal safety. Different communities of urban expertise and interest are defined by fundamentally divergent epistemologies. Our contention here is that these divergent understandings are likely to become more prominent as policy imperatives shift from asserting the importance of urban interventions (relative to rural action or national-level strategy) to deciding the priorities to be pursued in implementing the new urban agenda.

The rise of a pro-urban policy consensus is most often framed in terms of a demographic transformation in which much is made of the larger numbers and higher proportion of the world's population living in urban settlements. It is the fact of a predominantly urban future that has galvanized policymakers into taking cities more seriously. The precise dimensions of this putative urban transformation are subject to much debate.[1] In the proliferation of initiatives that have been stimulated by the rhetoric of a

majority-urban future, framed by ideas such as "smart cities", "metropolitan revolutions" and "urban futures", it is possible to discern the rapid consolidation of a style of urban optimism in global policy fora. A distinctive and new city-centric conception of development is illustrated by the inclusion of urban issues in the latest iterations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports on climate change in 2014 or in major initiatives by the Belmont group of science funders to develop programmes of research on urban pathways under the auspices of the massive new collaboration known as Future Earth.[2] As urban issues become embedded in these overlapping fields of global development and environment policy, transforming ideas about sustainability in the process, there is an urgent need to identify the multiple forms of knowledge that are shaping how urban processes are understood and why cities are seen as important for sustainable development more generally. Above all, there is a need to consider the significance of the shift from thinking of cities either as unimportant or as problems, to thinking of urban processes as providing a range of opportunities and solutions to be harnessed.

II. OVERLAPPING CONSENSUS ON URBAN ISSUES

Urban issues have acquired heightened visibility, not least during the process of negotiating a post-2015 development agenda, overseen by the UN, to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework. Between 2012 and 2015, the initiation of the post-2015 process brought together a set of actors around an explicit campaign to have urban issues recognized as core to future development agendas. To catalyze debate on the post-2015 agenda and how it might differ from the MDGs, the UN established the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in 2012, consisting of a set of expert groups, coordinating research centres, universities and NGOs, to present the case for what a global development policy should include. One of these, the Sustainable Cities Thematic Group, initiated the drafting of what would become the so-called "Urban SDG".

There are two dimensions to the urban focus of the SDG process. First and most obviously, and in line with UN policymaking processes, the Sustainable Cities Thematic Group led a public campaign throughout 2013 and 2014 to consult various actors in drafting and promoting the case for the adoption of a dedicated Urban SDG. As a result, the Urban SDG was finally approved in September 2015 by the 69th General Assembly as Goal 11, marking a commitment to "*Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable*". Second, the SDG process involves a wider debate on whether there will be subnational reporting on progress in pursuing all the SDGs from 2015 to 2030. This would entail a shift from the simple national statistical reporting and introduce the mainstreaming of a dedicated cross-sectoral spatial emphasis on cities. This debate remains unresolved, but will continue in the design of indicator frameworks through which all the SDGs will be implemented and evaluated. As the focus of policy arguments pivots away from the SDG process towards UN-Habitat's major global summit in 2016, Habitat III, it is evident that there is greater receptiveness to the more holistic idea that sustainable development issues, such as energy futures or food security, are shaped by dynamics of urbanization, and that urban processes in turn require much closer scrutiny as sustainable development agendas are shaped. But Habitat III will need to be more specific about how and why cities are important than was necessary in reaching the SDG agreement.

The success of the campaign for an Urban SDG is the outcome of a concerted mobilization overseen by international networks of local government organizations such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, in collaboration with UN-level organizations such as the Cities Alliance. It has also involved university-affiliated groups, such as the Mistra programme coordinated by the

Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research; networks of climate change governance, such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group; and commercial actors such as the Urban Land Institute, an international network representing real estate capital. The approval of the Urban SDG is a product of what one might call a fluid alliance of interests and organizations that generated a coherent pro-urban discourse through which to assert the importance of cities in future development policy agendas.[3] The intellectual drivers of the emergent urban agenda are networks that draw on scholars, activists, communities and professionals in a collaborative form of agenda setting that is quite distinct from previous rounds of urban leadership.[4]

Academic and non-academic knowledge are incorporated, combined and conflated in the emergent new urban agenda. In contrast to the opaque processes that generated the MDG agenda, an inclusive public consultation process shaped the SDGs. UN-Habitat's sponsorship of a global urban policy agenda (to be specified in the outcome document, "The New Urban Agenda") includes public engagement activities such as dedicated web platforms and social media profiles; a biennial World Urban Forum; and the establishment of World Cities Day, inaugurated on the first Monday of October in 2014.[5] The participating agencies involved in the Urban SDG campaign and Habitat III process have made extensive efforts to ensure that decision-making is legible and transparent. The nature of UN processes is to consult as widely as possible with the aims of finding coherence and overcoming divergence, leading to internationally agreed statements or more binding conventions.

The impulse towards inclusivity needed to galvanize the new urban agenda has had the effect, though, of gathering together what are in fact conflicting positions. In short, the agreement on the Urban SDG might well mask underlying differences in why and how cities matter, what should be done to advance the urban agenda, why cities matter for sustainability, and indeed what defines a city in the first place. It is hardly surprising that important differences in views were set aside or were obscured in the lead-up to the SDG approval, as it was always uncertain that it would be possible to secure the focus on cities in the agreement. The process in 2012–2015 can be likened to a form of *overlapping consensus*, in which parties to an agreement lay aside fundamental differences that divide them in favour of emphasizing common understandings in the pursuit of a contingent objective. But given the range of stakeholders who participated and the expectations around the implementation of the urban mandate afforded by the SDG process, it is likely that the conflicts of interpretation hitherto masked in the period of campaigning for an Urban SDG will become more explicit in future. It is for this reason that taking stock of the intellectual foundations and assumptions behind the apparent shared embrace of the new urban agenda is important. As academics, communities and practitioners in the urban field seek closer collaboration through knowledge sharing and co-production, and as academic ideas are influential in shaping the values and views of practitioners and professionals, it is important to acknowledge that academic perspectives on urban processes and sustainable development are plural and contested.

In this light, the following two sections seek to unravel some of these intellectual foundations and assumptions in order to affirm the breath and diversity of views on the significance of urban process. We do so because an appreciation of the complexity of the academic as well as political and practical issues at stake in implementing and monitoring the SDGs, in the global North and global South, can play an important role in mediating the emergent sectoral conflicts and prescriptive expectations in the implementation of the SDGs.

III. CITIES UNBOUND, CITIES EMPOWERED

There is no doubt that calls to acknowledge urban population growth and the urban drivers and consequences of environmental change were heard by policymakers in the SDG

deliberations. But the acknowledgement of urban growth and climate threats cannot alone explain the shift and overall support for a dedicated sustainable development focus on cities from the Northern member states of the UN. Endorsement of the SDGs also reflects a broader renaissance of urban thinking across a number of intellectual fields. In this section, we consider the understandings of cities and urban processes that have emerged in research fields that might be considered the traditional homes of urban thought, such as human geography, urban and regional planning, and urban studies. We present a preliminary review of the range of epistemologies at work in the urban field – that is, of the combinations of concepts, theories and methodologies through which urban processes are constructed as potential objects of both further inquiry and intervention. The ideas we identify are embedded in complex networks of policymaking through the foundational training of urban professionals, through popular dissemination of different schools of intellectual thought, and through practices of collaboration and consultation between academics and other professional and activist fields.

Various ideas from academic research fields were invoked in the SDG process of alliance building, compromise, conflict and negotiation. Likewise, academic ideas are also embedded in the forms of professional expertise and specialist knowledge that will be used in the implementation of the global development agenda. As the emphasis shifts from establishing the principle of the Urban SDG to the implementation and evaluation of the SDGs in general, the complex, multi-scalar and multi-sectoral composition of cities will bring these divergent ideas more clearly into view and competition. There is, in short, no single academic voice in urban sustainability debates or practice. Rather, different disciplinary perspectives, different theoretical traditions and different methodologies often jostle for traction.

Academic debates about cities and urbanization are currently undergoing revitalization across the world. In the global South, there is a burgeoning literature on the specificity of Southern urban experiences and an outpouring of detailed new empirical evidence tracking contemporary urban transformations. There has also been a conceptual resurgence of urban theory in affluent societies. We propose that this resurgence has played an important role in enabling the global endorsement of cities as a new and important focus of the universally applicable post-2025 agenda. The emergence of a new form of urban optimism in European and North American social science in the early 21st century has been significant in legitimating the claims made for the importance of cities in the SDGs and the post-2015 agenda. What is most significant about the so-called "new conventional wisdom" about cities is that it emphasizes urban processes as sites of opportunity and potential, not just as problems. In this new conventional wisdom, it is assumed that there is a series of positive feedback between urban development and economic *competitiveness*, social *cohesion*, and responsive *governance*, and, increasingly, environmental *sustainability* as well.[6]

The observable reassertion of cities in public policy in the global North since the start of the 21st century coincides with a series of vigorous debates amongst social scientists about the very status of the spatial objects at the core of urban and regional social science: concepts of the city, of the region, of territory and place. It is notable that the trend in contemporary urban theory across different fields of social science is the disaggregation of notions of cities or places as bounded entities into a series of constitutive relations of movement, flow and contingent association. This is a feature of debates in critical social science as well as in more applied and positive fields of urban research. Cities are increasingly conceptualized with reference to non-territorial spatial concepts, so that apparently stable objects such as locations or neighbourhoods appear, on closer inspection, to be constituted by practices and relationships that extend beyond and stretch across any identifiable boundary separating cities from, say, suburbs, or rural areas, or nation states. At its simplest, this shared theoretical

structure is indicative of a commitment to thinking of the relational constitution of objects of analysis and action – how the city works, not what the city is physically. It is an approach informed by a range of theoretical perspectives, including conjunctural forms of Marxist spatial theory and more poststructuralist perspectives such as actor–network theory and assemblage theory.

There are different strands of urban thought in which the unbundling of stable and bounded objects is conceptualized and investigated. Across them all, what is notable is the way in which the departure from previously stable ideas of cities and regions has been the occasion for the attribution of a greater importance to urban processes than was the case when cities and regions, as defined places, were subordinated to the foundational "methodological nationalism" of modern social science. The lack of a clearly definable and stable object of analysis has, in short, turned out to be the making of a revived urban studies concerned with the composition and re-composition of relations, movements, networks and flows. The conceptual unbundling of the city has the potential to free urban and regional processes from their longstanding policy and practical subordination to other "scales" of activity.

Although often associated with radical and critical traditions of urban theory, the critique of the obviousness of categories like "the city" or "the region" is also a feature of more applied or relevance-oriented strands of urban social science or even to calls for an enhanced urban politics. The destabilizing of stable concepts of city, region and territory can be integrated into quantitative styles of social science easily enough, and in turn is associated with highly assertive arguments about the transformative potential of urban spaces. The shared but differentiated unbundling of urban concepts can be seen across various fields of academic inquiry. Here, we identify three fields in which this destabilization and unbundling raises important questions for the implementation and monitoring of the post-2015 urban agenda.

The first field of academic research in which the unbundling of urban concepts is evident is in debates about scales of governance. The SDGs will generate a series of debates about appropriate forms, levels and linkages of governance that are already much discussed in academic literature. In academic debates, the emphasis is on the ways in which various competencies of states have been reordered away from national levels to subnational levels of the region, cities or localities. There is a strong implication in certain strands of spatial theory that concepts of "scale" should be abandoned altogether, on the grounds that they apparently lack "ontological" coherence. In urban political economy and urban political science, the emphasis is on the ways in which jurisdictional scales are products of temporary spatial fixes through which capital accumulation and state formation resolve contradictions between ongoing circulation and expansion of economic value, on the one side, and imperatives of social reproduction and the realization of value on the other.

In these fields, then, one finds arguments about cities as both bounded and porous spaces, combining territorial and relational dynamics.[7] The crucial lesson from such research is that the capacities to act, or forms of agency, available to place-based actors such as local governments, local businesses, growth coalitions and organized labour, by virtue of their embeddedness in places, are varied and will vary from place to place and issue to issue. Appreciating these capacities will therefore require sensitive local knowledge and astute political mobilization. Another key issue to emerge from these fields of academic research is the idea that global processes do not work "downwards" from "above", but work horizontally through places.[8] For example, the normative agenda of the Urban SDG in particular, and indeed of the SDGs more generally, necessarily depends upon the capacities of local actors both in places and across spaces. The place-specific selection of data and indicators through which the implementation of the new urban agenda will be pursued will depend on embedded

capacities and capacities to share and learn across contexts and to work collaboratively with different parties, not just government, in particular places.

While debates about scale, globalization and local governance are primarily informed by traditions of political economy, one can also find relational conceptualizations of cities in the very different intellectual milieu of quantitative social science. This the second key area to engage with issues central to the new urban agenda. It is an academic field that has already cultivated a direct and active engagement with the SDG process. The importance of debates about "big data" and "data analytics" in facilitating the rise of contemporary urban optimism should not be underestimated. The rollout of new digital networks inscribed in the fabric of material urban infrastructures has been hailed as inaugurating a revolution in both urban management and urban social science. These claims are based on the assertion that the generation of enormous amounts of data about the micro-interactions of city life, combined with increased computer processing capacity, heralds the possibility of forms of inductive scientific knowledge that supplant both "theory" and "modelling". Different communities, professional and academic fields are busily positioning themselves as leaders of new disciplines such as urban informatics and urban cybernetics.

What is most notable about the emergence of what has been called "the new science of cities" is its reliance on an argument that cities need to be conceptualized not as discrete locations, as in previous forms of spatial social science, but in terms of interactions, flows, relations and networks.[9] From this perspective, informed by complexity theory but also enabled by data-driven forms of statistical modelling and visualization, location and scale are understood to be emergent qualities of processes of interaction. And crucially, these interactions leave digital traces that can be recorded, stored and rendered into data for further analysis, forecasting and intervention. Complexity theory is also influential in a whole field of social science research investigating the relationship between climate change and cities. This field was mobilized to drive the shift away from a narrow focus on poverty in the move from the MDGs to the SDGs. Much of this work has focused on establishing the role of urban processes in generating carbon emissions. But this field of research has moved away from this problem-centred focus on cities towards a more positive view that identifies cities as potential surfaces of intervention for the transformation of global processes of environmental change. Cities are increasingly defined as experimental sites in which new forms of technology, new social practices, and alternative models of economy and governance can be tracked and refined. Above all, climate change research has led the translation of concepts of resilience into urban social science, mediated by academic debates and institutional promotions such as that developed by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Resilience Alliance. The resilience paradigm locates cities within wider processes of non-linear causality, ascribing particular localized spatial configurations considerable agency in shaping what are "global" processes and outcomes.

Developments in data analysis and conceptual paradigms of resilience have played a crucial role in reorienting policy debates in the global North around a renewed urban optimism. This renewed focus on the potential of urban processes to drive transformations has served as an important background to the emergence of the SDG programme and the post-2015 new urban agenda. The third area of academic research that resonates with these fields of global development policy can be found in the fields of urban and regional economics and the so-called "new economic geography". Here too, one finds a similar dependence of global processes on local dynamics. These fields have revived debates about the central role of cities in driving economic development processes. These debates are directly relevant for global policy debates about the decentralization of sustainability and development agendas. The influential 2009 World Bank Report, *Reshaping Economic Geography*, argued that urbanization, territorial development and regional integration were

pivotal to the generation of effective and equitable economic development.[10] It was an intervention that drew on and further provoked academic debates about the spatial dynamics of economic activities. Arguments about the positive effects of economic agglomeration have since become central to a series of popular arguments about urban futures. The work of Edward Glaeser and Richard Florida, for example, argues that local political actors can pursue supply-side policies to encourage the movement of segments of the labour force and promote improvement in urban amenities. Such local actors can also invest in transport infrastructure in order to coax economic activities to relocate and in turn to generate the inherent economies of scale that follow from agglomeration. These claims are heavily dependent on stylized interpretations of North American and Western European experiences. They represent a form of urban optimism premised on the argument that cities have become primarily sites of consumption and leisure. In contrast, there is a counterargument that holds that cities remain overwhelmingly defined as places of production. In this strand of academic research, it is agglomeration economies generated in firms and markets that remain central to the comparative performance of cities and that raise questions of equity and justice related to the spatial patterns of development.[11]

Arguments about the dynamics of economic agglomeration and the policy prescriptions that follow from them are key reference points for the debates surrounding the new urban agenda, and it is surprising that these dynamics did not receive more emphasis in SDG 11. Conceptual recognition of the interplay of the social and ecological dynamics of cities is evident in the final wording of the Urban SDG approved in 2015. By contrast, economic aspects are reduced to the notion of inclusivity, rather than questions of production and value creation. This is in part an effect of the assumed benefits of spatial agglomeration that are a feature of the new conventional wisdom noted above. But it is also an indication of the way in which certain issues central to urban processes were beyond the scope of the Urban SDG campaign, reflecting power differentials between different actors and interests within the UN processes themselves and between UN policymaking and other spheres of international decision-making. We have here, in the relationship of cities with industrialization and work, perhaps the key issue that will only become more explicitly contested as the new urban agenda shifts from assertion to implementation.

The causal and normative relationships between urbanization and economic development have influenced public policy in the global North, and in turn helped justify the emergence of the new urban agenda. But the patterns of contemporary urban growth and economic transformation in Africa and Asia might well undermine these assumed theoretical associations.[12] And it is here that we need to shift our attention, towards emergent forms of urban thought that address issues that will become more controversial as the new urban agenda unfolds.

IV. URBAN THEORY FOR A GLOBAL AGE

In the previous section, we identified three fields of academic research – on scales of governance, data and complexity, and agglomeration – that have played an important role in the emergence of the "new conventional wisdom" about cities in policy circles in the global North. Our suggestion is that they have also provided the intellectual context for the assertion of a central role for cities and regions in global development policy. Across these different fields of social science, it is possible to identify different understandings of the relational dynamics of urbanization, each of them defined by its own controversies and also by distinctive inflections of policy and practice. And traces of these debates are already identifiable in discussions about the SDGs and the post-2015 new urban agenda.

Most of the debates we have highlighted above as powerful in generating global support for cities are premised on distinctively (though not exclusively) Western urban contexts. These are contexts in which cities and regions are being restructured in the wake of deindustrialization, the neoliberal reconfiguration of local–central state relationships, or the development of data-saturated modes of digital social life. Not just the location but more specifically the experiences of urban change that have informed these academic discussions might give us pause before we presume that the theoretical models developed from them are immediately relevant to cities in Latin America, Africa or Asia. The question of the representativeness of urban theories has been explicitly raised in a set of academic debates in critical urban studies. Here, arguments about the relational constitution of cities and regions are attached to a strong normative claim that the concepts and methods of social science need to be reconfigured away from one-size-fits-all models that take Western experiences as a developmental norm. These arguments assert that the geographical sources and reference points around which urban thought has traditionally been shaped need to be expanded and relocated. The key intellectual sources informing such arguments are derived from a range of sources, including neo-Marxism, postcolonial cultural theory, and philosophies of vital materialism, as well as from arguments promoting "Southern theory", "theory from the South" and "epistemologies of the South". Although the theoretical sources are sometimes rather esoteric, the arguments being made in this strand of contemporary urban theory cut straight to the heart of how academic knowledge is mobilized in global fora of urban or any other policymaking. These arguments call into question the assumptions about the conventional models and application upon which academic authority in such fields often depends.

The most assertive of these radical theories of relational urbanism is associated with the idea of planetary urbanization.[13] This idea is associated with the claim that established concepts of urban and rural, city and countryside have been rendered redundant by the scale and generality of urban processes. It is an argument presaged in the 1970s by writers such as Henri Lefebvre and formalized by David Harvey's reconstruction of a Marxist narrative of the urbanization of capital and crisis. The strong claim of the new paradigm of planetary urbanization is not that everyone lives in cities or that every place counts as an urban settlement. It is rather that the continuing appearance of morphological differences between types of settlement is itself a function of deeper dynamics of both *concentration*, an established concern of urban theory, and *extension*. The argument goes as follows: to the extent that every place is now integrated into the system dynamics of urban processes of production, distribution and consumption – even the remotest of Alpine resorts or the smallest of African rural villages – then everywhere is urban in an expansive sense.

Arguments about planetary urbanization are one example of a shift away from thinking in terms of bounded and territorialized entities such as the city or the region, to focusing on the dynamic processes of urbanization. The emphasis is on "the city" or "the urban" as effects of dynamic processes rather than as names for discrete objects. Thinking of concepts as verbs rather than nouns is a feature of a great deal of contemporary urban thinking, and has important precedents in previous rounds of theory development, such as John Turner's proposal that housing be thought of as a verb.[14] It is a view that raises important issues about the relationship between academic analysis and imperatives of action. Planetary urbanism gives equal status to Northern and Southern urban realities, certainly, but it is less helpful for thinking practically about the opportunities of post-2015 local government – or for supporting the efforts of city-based actors seeking to use the new urban agenda to expand their influence and agency relative to national and international actors such as firms, political parties or governments. Discussions of planetary urbanization tend to be marked by a scholastic disdain for "naïve" concepts of the city or the urban setting that have

apparently been shown to be conceptually incoherent. In a sense, then, the urge to integrate global realities that animates conceptualizations of planetary urbanization risks overlooking the ongoing practical and political significance of place-based meanings and practices in most of the world. It is, for example, unlikely that civil society groups making claims to their right to the city under the rubric of the Urban SDG will find practical value in the argument that literally everywhere is urban.

Planetary urbanization is also closely tied to critical paradigms in which processes of neoliberalization are ascribed considerable descriptive and explanatory power in accounting for a range of global processes. Here, it runs up against a growing scepticism amongst some urbanists about whether all-encompassing models of urban neoliberalization are either descriptively accurate or explanatorily adequate for non-Western contexts.[15] The concept of planetary urbanization can be seen as an attempt to find some common ground between styles of urban theory informed by Marxist political economy and theories of state formation on the one hand, and, on the other, poststructuralist strands of spatial theory that emphasize processes of heterogeneous assemblage and contingent composition. These strands of urban theory emphasize the idea that cities are material configurations of heterogeneous elements – people and dogs, pipes and trees, water and electricity – contingently held together by more or less routine and more or less vulnerable practices and systems. This strand of work often draws from empirical analysis of non-Western urban contexts. The emphasis on the arrangement of diverse elements in new patterns is indicative of a postcolonial sentiment that enables non-Western cities to be seen as parts of wider processes, without reducing them to them to lower rungs of developmental scales or to pathological deviations from a single norm.[16]

At stake in the growing scepticism towards critical theories of neoliberalization is a key conceptual issue relevant to the formation of global urban policy. This is the question of the degree to which conceptualizations of the relationships between local places and global processes can and should be conflated with epistemological distinctions between particular cases and general explanatory variables. Should African or Asian cities be treated as examples of the diffusion of trends developed in the West? Or do they serve as models of novel forms of urbanization? It is this set of questions that characterizes a distinct set of discussions, running alongside but also in critical conversation with discussions of planetary urbanization, on the theme of "Southern urbanism".[17] Issues arising from this field are only likely to become more pertinent in the unfolding of the politics of the new urban agenda, which among other things will define an international indicator system to monitor the Urban SDG's implementation, over the next decade.

Debates about Southern urbanism are an explicit response to calls to develop ideas and resources that are appropriate to the experiences of Southern cities and the people who live in them. There is no single paradigm of postcolonial urban theory, it should be said. One strand of argument, referencing Asian urban development primarily, suggests that Southern urbanism prefigures a pattern of urban development that will become a new model globally.[18] According to the same argument, urban theory needs to attend more closely to so-called "ordinary cities". This latter position rests on the claim that a broader palette is required from which to draw comparative generalizations.[19] As with arguments about planetary urbanization, these discussions, although conducted at a high level of theoretical sophistication, rapidly devolve into arguments about methodological issues that are highly relevant to the forthcoming politics of the SDGs and the new urban agenda. In this case, the key issue is the possibility of conceptualizing and undertaking new forms of relational comparative analysis, ones that escape the normalizing assumptions of traditional styles of comparative analysis. Questions about norms of evaluation and axes of comparison are quite central to the design of indicators and monitoring systems through which the new urban

agenda will be institutionalized and implemented. And they are pertinent to the design of transferable instruments and programmes through which the urban agenda will be taken up in a range of very different contexts across the world. While these details of application are often presented as narrowly technical problems, the literature on Southern urbanism makes it clear that they are inescapably tied to normative issues.

V. CONCLUSIONS

We have argued here that the success of the campaign for a dedicated Urban SDG reflected a contingent, overlapping consensus on the meaning of "cities" in sustainable development. The relevance of cities in the SDGs is twofold, both in the specific content of the place-based aspirations identified in Goal 11, and in the more general issues of the scales at which indicators relating to urban development will be institutionalized. The suppressed differences between varied views of the city and urban processes are likely to become more explicit in the next decade as attention shifts to implementation, not just because of the huge diversity of city experiences and needs but also because of divergent intellectual understandings of the urban question and its relationship with sustainable development.

In this light, acknowledging the different theoretical traditions used to legitimize the new urban agenda is an overdue task. We have argued that the emergence of a "new conventional wisdom" about urban processes in the policy worlds of the global North has played an important background role in enabling the assertion of urban optimism in global development policy, infusing the SDG agenda with a rationale of urban optimism. A shared emphasis on the conceptual unbundling of stable, territorialized understandings of spatial objects has been the occasion for claims about the importance of cities and regions as hubs, sites and drivers of global processes. As the new urban agenda develops, however, we anticipate that the adequacy of these forms of urban theory will become more and more contested, not least by traditions of research that seek to develop theoretical ideas and models drawn more directly from Southern experiences of urbanization and urban living. Two issues in particular that have already emerged from the nascent field of Southern urbanism will increasingly form axes of controversy in the further development of the new urban agenda: questions of how to approach the possibilities and limits of place-based policy, advocacy and activism in shaping global development priorities; and questions of how to conceptualize and design practices of monitoring and evaluating ongoing processes of urban transformation along multiple axes of development.

The centrality accorded to cities and urban settlements in emerging development and sustainability agendas reflects a broadly shared reconceptualization of places as contingent associations of multiple processes operating over various spatial and temporal scales. Developing the architecture for monitoring and evaluating future urban transformations therefore involves more than technical challenges of rolling out data analytics and defining indicators. It also involves the conceptual challenge of keeping in view the dynamic relationships between place-based activities and dispersed outcomes, and the normative challenge of keeping in view the dependence of positive outcomes in some places on actions undertaken elsewhere.

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