

Michelle Espinal

GraduationYear:Senior

College:Engineering

Major(s):CivilEngineering

Minors(s):NA

ScholarshipMemberships:NA

Did you received other funding for this project?: N/A

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance?

Project Title: UN Habitat III - Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development

Project Location: Quito, Ecuador

ND Faculty Mentor: Alexandros Taflanidis

Project Type: Conference - Attendance

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Career discernment and/or preparation

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Not Applicable

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Yes

Tell us about your experience.

It was captivating to visit Quito, a city hemmed by mountain peaks and prominent volcanoes, for the first time. The closer I got to the Casa de Cultura Ecuatoriana (CCC), the more evident it became to me why the United Nations was hosting such a historic event in the capital of Ecuador. Quito is a vibrant city with noticeable urban trends, and with unique challenges that need to be addressed as its population grows. Currently, our perception of the “city of the future” is similar to the one pictured in the series Futurama -- one with modern looking buildings and advanced technologies like flying cars. However, it is also important that we understand that despite acknowledging that cities are “hubs for innovation,” they are also complex systems characterized by the interactions of people from different economic sectors, many of which do not have access to the more innovative technologies found in the urban centers. By 2050, the world population is expected to increase significantly, intensifying some of the most critical vulnerabilities in cities like Quito. From October 17th to the 20th, I had the opportunity to attend 20 different roundtables of discussion, plenary sessions, and networking events to discuss about a broad range of common challenges experienced by the so called “global cities.” In total, we were 30,000 accredited participants from 167 countries attending the event with “strongest participation of civil society, stakeholders, and local authorities in the history of United Nations conferences.” An event in which

an inclusive and action-oriented New Urban Agenda (NUA) was adopted.

Some of the most pressing topics debated were related to Affordable Housing and Informal Settlements. After listening to the efforts of organizations like Reall about how to tackle the demand of affordable housing in developing cities in Africa and Asia, it was evident that working with local governments is not easy. To them, the lack of organization in some of the governmental offices they have worked with became undeniable when these organizations' representatives were requiring building permits or clarifications of the conditions to be met in order to legalize land. Additionally, they also shared that in the past it has not been easy to engage investors to work in the bottom line housing market. In relation to Informal Settlements, similar challenges are encountered in growing cities. However, it is also important to understand the reasoning behind the creation of informal planning, which implies acknowledging the lack of culture on the importance of public space. A tendency commonly shared among different Latin American Countries.

Another main topic of conversation was identifying urban and rural linkages. Modernism trends in the 1960 reinforced the idea of having gated communities to guarantee privacy and safety. Unfortunately, this movement also created a sense of independency from surrounding neighborhoods—in part breaking the link between the rural and urban sectors which make cities flourish in the first place. France was the first country to acknowledge the importance of urban-rural linkages. Problems related to unemployment, land-ownership, food security, and clean environment are interconnected between these two sectors. Therefore, to develop successful strategies it is essential to have integrated planning.

Furthermore, different panels addressed the importance of implementing multi-modal transportation systems while emphasizing the importance of sharing any transportation innovation with communities living outside of the city. Personally, I was very impressed to see the variety of means of transportation available in Quito. From taxis to buses and streetcars, people are able to mobilize easily. During the time, traffic jams were inevitable due to the overflow of people present for this event. However, it is this type of open and forward thinking mindset that I am hoping to see adopted by other developing countries, especially in Latin America.

Understanding each of these challenges at a local level is complicated. Strategies cannot be developed without projecting their effect in the future. Furthermore, claiming that the government is the only actor responsible of develop solutions would be a reductive analysis. Policy reform will play a significant role in the implementation of some of the different tactics mentioned in the New Urban Agenda. Nonetheless, it is also important to think of practical ways in which we, the citizens, can measure and monitor resilience in our cities.

The global engineering firm, ARUP, with the collaboration of the Rockefeller Foundation developed an index called The City Resilience Index. This index is a self-assessment composed by a set of indicators, variables and metrics that can be used by cities to measure their resilience in terms of the factors previously discussed, while comparing their performance over time. An

online platform develops a profile that reveals a city's specific strengths and weaknesses, granting governments and partners to develop accurate solutions. An important point made by the Chief Resilience of Santa Fe, Argentina was that, "La percepción que la comunidad tiene acerca del problema es parte del problema pero también parte de la solución." In other words, the understanding that communities hold about the problem is part of the problem, but also part of the solution. So far, she has managed to get the local government and members from the community to use the index. That way, both profiles can be compared and solutions can be designed based on the overlapping results.

All in all, after 40 hours of listening and interacting with delegates, city mayors, architects and urbanist thinkers it is undeniable that the challenge of growing cities is multidimensional. This challenge demands multidisciplinary collaboration between people with mastery in specific domains, local government, and more importantly with members from the different sectors in the local communities. All working with the mission of strategizing tangible solutions while adopting a human centered design thinking. Such an action-oriented agenda demands its readers to take initiative. Therefore, for now it is my goal to discuss with professors and other classmates how to extrapolate some of the collaborative and forward thinking strategies discussed in this document.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

The New Urban Agenda discusses topics that we have heard before throughout the years. In different occasions I have been told, "You cannot do it all at once," or "the more you add to your plate, the less you will perform as expected." The New Urban Agenda is an ambitious document tackling multiple critical topics at once— topics that addressed by its own are already incredibly complex. However, after attending this event I came to realize how important it is to adopt a collaborative approach. I cannot do it all at once, but I can partner with others who know more about a specific issue while working towards a common goal.

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Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

Currently, it is of my intention to work in the Transportation Industry as a Civil Engineer. Many of the topics discussed in this conference line up with my interest of thinking of ways in which one can be productive in the office while also being innovative and socially responsible. Cities are often designed in terms of vehicle inflow/outflow. As the global population grows, it is important to guarantee that the accessibility to these urban centers is done more efficiently, while nurturing a more harmonious relationship between people and the shared environment.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

As an engineering student, it is often hard to learn about the topics addressed in the NUA in the classroom since most of our classes are meant to nurture our technical knowledge about this field. However, there is much to do and learn about each of the challenges addressed in this document. Therefore, I consider that it is our responsibility as global citizens to take initiative and learn about these issues so we are capable to identify in which way we can collaborate when designing solutions.

It's been the faculty that has taught me basic principles related to these topics. It's been the students from whom I've heard their perspectives and inquiries about these issues in/outside of the classroom. It's been my involvement in clubs, and organizations that have allowed me to get first-hand experience with some of the people that are directly affected by the challenges been discussed. It is thanks to each of these interactions that I have been able to nurture my interest in these topics on my own time. Therefore, my advice to students would be to actively look around for those opportunities and interactions that can reinforce or question their understanding.