



Conference report

African Forum for Urban Safety, UN-Habitat conference: Inaugural AFUS learning exchange, 29 June to 1 July 2016, Durban, South Africa

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In response to a number of summits calling for an integrated approach to ensuring urban safety on the African continent, the African Forum for Urban Safety (AFUS), with the support of United Nations-Habitat (UN-Habitat), was launched in December 2015 with the mandate of promoting inclusive, safer habitable areas for all citizens and visitors to the continent's cities (UN-Habitat, n.d.). The subsequent AFUS, UN-Habitat conference, on which this paper is reporting, was held at the Durban International Convention Centre with the purpose of launching a learning exchange between cities across the African continent.

The aim of the conference was for sharing of best, evidence-based practised, key lessons learnt, and a synthesis of different approaches used for advancing and promoting urban safety in Africa. The theme of this exchange was, "Towards Collective Action for Creation of Safer Cities Vision 2030" (African Forum for Urban Safety (AFUS) Learning Exchange, n.d.). Cities from a number of countries across the African continent were represented, including South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Burkina Faso. There was also an international presence with representatives from Microsoft, SafetiPIN (New Delhi, India), and Tallus (France) sharing their work in technological applications for monitoring urban safety.

Day one included a note from the deputy mayor of Dakar, Senegal, as well as keynotes from a number of African delegates. Prof Siphon Seepe, advisor to the Minister of Human Settlements in South Africa, delivered a note on how the implications of our colonial and apartheid history are still being suffered by South Africans through both material and spiritual displacement, especially by the poor and vulnerable citizens of our country. He further spoke about the need to rewrite our history to include our own African-centered narratives. Prof Seepe used a very powerful story of the hunter and the lion being hunted. He said as long as we tell the story from the hunter's point of view, the hunter will always be glorified. He ended by stating that safety must be engineered and co-produced by a wide range of stakeholders in order to ensure sustainable solutions.

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Dr Alioune Badiane, the Director of Programme Division, UN-Habitat, spoke about the key issue of rapid urbanisation and the challenges this presents. He spoke about the need to elevate safety concerns and initiatives as well as concerns about violence across the African continent (e.g., Boko Haram, xenophobia in South Africa, etc.). He raised the issue of gender violence and how we cannot exclude this from our dialogues around safety. Using examples from Latin America, he suggested how we could draw from experiences in these cities, and emphasised the need to learn from each other and exchange knowledge and solutions. He ended off by stating that we need not reinvent the wheel when these best practices already exist.

The first part of day one included presentations on urban safety and the profiling of safety risks from the South African Cities Network, eThekweni Municipality and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). An important highlight was the launch of the Urban Safety Report prepared by the South African Cities Network. The second part of day one featured presentations from Microsoft, SafetiPin, Tallus and the South African Medical Research Council-University of South Africa's Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit on the use of i-technology (internet-based technology), mobile applications, and data collection and statistical methodology for urban safety indicator development. Day one ended off with a thought-provoking presentation by the presenter for *West Africa Democracy Radio* on the role of the media in public violence, how violent acts are portrayed in the media, and how the media can contribute to crime prevention. Feedback from the floor highlighted the need to institute government structures that will verify data and that all stakeholders should safeguard against technological companies that are simply partnering with the objective of profit-making. A call was also made for ensuring a sustainability plan in resource-poor settings.

Day two started with a morning session in which Microsoft presented on urban safety strategies and how these are implemented. Case studies were presented from the Nairobi Safe Cities Initiatives, Kenya and Abidjan, Ivory Coast on their urban safety promotion strategies, key lessons learnt and recommendations for the way forward. Day three, the last day of the proceedings, focused on summarising the key lessons and recommendations drawn from the week's presentations and mapping a way forward for African urban safety and security. This review was followed by more case studies from Dakar, Senegal, Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa, and the City of Johannesburg, South Africa on their urbanisation policies and strategies, specifically their Urban Renewal and Safety and Peace Programmes. Dr Alioune Badiane ended off the discussions by showing a picture of the African continent taken from outer space (*'Africa at Night'*) that represented the darkness of our continent compared to the rest of the world. This image signified how Africa is not prepared for the rapid urbanisation it is experiencing and that cities without

sufficient light equals unsafe spaces for its citizens. He expressed the resistance of most African countries to urbanisation policies and strategies and the challenges presented by urbanisation including slums, a backlog on the provision of urban basic services, and the tendency toward urban sprawl. He used Rwanda and Ethiopia as examples of countries that implemented bold strategies in anticipation of rapid urbanisation. He ended off by stating that urbanisation models and strategy planning is not a 'one-size-fits-all' and that each country should devise their own strategies.

Dr Badiane's address was followed by a panel discussion by various national and international experts on urban safety. The main messages that emerged were that we need to change our language and how we speak of those at risk. Instead of calling women and youth vulnerable, we should use language that does not infer some inherent vulnerability. Women and youth/children are not vulnerable or weak within themselves, they are *strong women, youth/children* placed in *vulnerable conditions*. Finally, interventions and strategies that we use must be participatory and in agreement with the community and our work towards safer cities should also consider a human rights lens.

The final session was a practical one in which delegates broke into smaller groups to draw up the key lessons learnt from the entire week and to discuss which are priority areas for urban safety and possible strategies for safety promotion. The practical session was followed by a review of the proceedings and the key themes that emerged which included: 1) the need for verifiable data and data gathering tools; 2) the use of technology and mobile applications; 3) the importance of stakeholder engagement and a participatory approach; 4) collaboration and partnerships; 5) capacity building; 6) dissemination of knowledge and knowledge exchange. The conference was concluded by the conference secretariat assuring the delegation that a working document or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) would be drawn up that summarises the learning exchange and lessons learnt as well as a map for the way forward. This document will be circulated to all delegates for any amendments and signing if all are in agreement with the formulated plan. The key resonating message for the writer was that we are one continent, separated from our neighbours by imaginary lines and borders. In ending, we should learn from each other and work together towards an African continent that is safe and inclusive for all its inhabitants.

REFERENCES

UN-Habitat. (n.d.). African Forum for Urban Safety launched. Retrieved 2016, July 25 from <http://unhabitat.org/africa-forum-for-urban-safety-launched/>.

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