

REPORT FROM 9th WORLD URBAN FORUM

Contribution of older urban residents

Katherine Kline

General Assembly of Partners Older Persons Partner Constituent Group
kklineco@aol.com

UN-Habitat's biennial World Urban Forum (WUF9) took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia this year from 7-13 February. Following 18 months after Habitat III, its theme appropriately focused on "Cities 2030, Cities for All".

I participated as the co-chair of the General Assembly of Partners (GAP) official civil society group for older persons. Given very limited resources, we organized several panels with others: an official 2 hour Older Persons Roundtable; one with GAP Persons with Disabilities on accessibility and universal design; another representing older women as part of the Women's Assembly; a fourth contributing the civil society perspective to one by Business & Industry; and a fifth organized by City Space Architecture focusing on the importance of safe and accessible public spaces which can reduce isolation faced by many older urban residents.

Urbanisation and population ageing are century defining demographic trends. Over 500 million urban residents are older people. Yet cities everywhere are failing to address the changes brought about by global population ageing with increasing inequality and insecurity. Physical, social and economic barriers prevent older people in particular from fully enjoying their rights and living in dignity and safety in cities.

By 2030, older persons are expected to account for over 25 percent of the population in Europe and northern America, 17 percent in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and six percent in Africa. Over half the ageing population, 289 million, currently lives in low- and middle-income countries, and is increasingly concentrated in urban areas. Older persons are the fastest growing population group globally, expected to reach 22% by 2050 (UNDESA 2017). In 2015, 58% of the world's people aged 60 and over resided in urban areas, up from 50% in 2000.

At WUF 9, we sought to not only highlight key concerns of older urban residents but also to showcase examples of how some communities are involving their older residents in a substantial way to improve their conditions and to benefit from their knowledge, resources and activism. Using the 2007 World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities Initiative, Sustainable Goal #11 "Building Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Cities" and UN-Habitat III's *New Urban Agenda*, all of which call for age, gender and disability-sensitive urban strategies, significant improvements can be made.

With no UN funding, we (Sion Jones of HelpAge International and me representing SERR as GAP Older Persons co-chairs) were able include key global activists striving to improve the lives of older urban residents in more than 7 events: Robert Wong, a Hong Kong architect offered the example of how working closely and effectively with older urban residents in the renovation of a park they came up with innovations that others would

not have considered; Dr. Luisa Bravo, an Italian urban designer, president of City Space Architecture and a world renowned expert on public space, Dr. Tengku Aizan Hamid a female Malaysian gerontologist and Director of the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing described new work in two Malaysian cities which sought to become more age friendly and Emily Tjale, an older South African activist with the Huairou Commission, described local efforts to protect older residents from those who sought to take advantage of them. We had tremendous support and assistance from the GAP Persons with Disability group who were both well organized and well - resourced and from the Huairou Commission, a network of women's global grassroots organizations. The World Urban Forum 9 offered an incredible opportunity to meet professionals and activists with an interest in urban issues, to share ideas, and most importantly, to focus attention on the growing intersection of global ageing and global urbanization.

PANEL: Inclusion, Innovation and Partnerships

Promoted by GAP Older Persons Co-chairs Katherine Kline & Sion Jones



Fig. 1. From left to right: Robert Wong, Hong Kong architect; Emily Tjale, LAMOSA South Africa; Kathy Kline, General Assembly of Partners Older Persons Partner Constituent Group; Tengku Aizan Hamid, Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing; Sion Jones, HelpAge International.

Robert Wong, Hong Kong architect, spoke about “Implementing universal accessibility at the local level – showcasing practical actions for realizing an inclusive new urban agenda” using the example of his work with senior residents who he involved in the redesign of a nearby playground. The result introduced elements that he, a younger architect, did not consider – such as a small nearby playground for their grandchildren; hooks on the back of benches for bags and for hanging canes and curved benches, some with backs and some without that encouraged conversations as well as comfortable spaces to sit. In “Towards the Development of Age-friendly Cities and Communities in Malaysia”, Dr. Tengku Aizan Tengku Abdul Hamid, Malaysian gerontologist and Director of the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing, Universiti Putra Malaysia described how two Malaysian cities, Taiping and Kuching North, were dealing with challenges and

opportunities to improve their urban older residents' lives. Among their conclusions were: 1) acknowledging the diversity of cities and the implications for the 'age-friendly approach; 2) developing new forms of 'urban citizenship which recognize and support changing needs across the life course; 3) creating opportunities to involve ageing populations more effectively in the planning and regeneration of neighbourhoods.



Fig. 2. Top: Canteen in Hong Kong, before.

Fig. 3 and 4. Bottom: Canteen in Hong Kong: after. Booth seating in different layouts to suit the uses. A design project by Robert Wong.

Emily Tjale, community activist with the Huairou Commission, caregiver, farmer, grandmother and leading member of the Land Access Movement of South Africa (LAMOSA) spoke about working to organize and advocate on behalf of older persons' need for safety, protection and better health and most important, the need to be included in policy and decision-making processes. Tjale recounted the story of older women in her community who were being swindled by two teenaged schoolgirls who would approach them, offering to help them when they were drawing out their pensions and other social benefit money. Community activists identified the girls responsible and enlisted the help of the police to introduce better safety measures to protect the older people. They introduced 24/7 neighbourhood patrols and the authorities changed the system for

obtaining payments so that people who were unable to write no longer just had to sign with a cross, but had to make a finger or thumb mark. Older people have wisdom, knowledge, skill, and life experience, and should not be marginalised, Tjale says. I spoke at numerous sessions about the role and situation of older people. “Ageing,” I told participants, “is a positive, not a negative word. Older women should be seen as “active contributors to society, not necessarily as charity beneficiaries”. They are donating hundreds of hours of unpaid caregiving work, and contribute via the “silver economy”.

“Too many of them [older women] live isolated in their own homes and don’t have a safe, secure, and reliable space near where they live to go out and intermingle with the rest of the world and therefore they’re sequestered and they get depressed and it’s not healthy.”
(Kline, 2018)

Older persons need to be included in discussions, planning, and decision-making processes, “in coming up with constructing safety and security for the older people and also protecting them from violence, protecting them from other people who may abuse them economically, socially, politically, and otherwise”.

PANEL: Universal Design Principles & Applications to Urban Development Promoted by GAP Persons with Disabilities



*Fig. 5. Park renovation in Hong Kong.
A design project by Robert Wong.*

We recommended that the concept of “universal design” be applied to all urban design, and not seen just as a tool to remove physical barriers for those with disabilities. One example is the development of what is now a large home product company named OXO. It began in 1990 when Sam Farber noticed that his wife Betsey had trouble holding a peeler due to arthritis in her wrist. He created a simple, attractive substitute which is now one of more than 1,000 home products that the US based company produces and

sells not in a specialty part of a store but in the household section as they are seen by all as attractive, easy-to-use products.

Another design issue – that of accessibility - is typically associated with ensuring removal of physical barriers in order to provide “access” to persons with disabilities. But researcher Carly Dickson asks what about social and experiential access? What about the human need for engagement, for having fun, for making connections, for building relations? Robert Wong, Hong Kong architect, has helped create several environments that prove that making spaces accessible enhances social engagement, looks good and makes people feel better in their environments. He works directly with older home residents to find out exactly what they want and then works with them, to create pleasing solutions.



Fig. 6-8. Workshop ‘Be a park designer’ with older residents in Hong Kong, by Robert Wong.

PANEL: How the New Urban Agenda, SDG #11 and age friendly cities can improve the lives of urban older residents

Promoted by GAP Older Persons Co-chairs Katherine Kline & Sion Jones

Hosted by Next City World Stage

The *NUA* and SDG 11 call for inclusive urbanisation that enables older persons to participate in planning and decision making, have access to safe and affordable public transportation and enjoy safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces. Together, these global frameworks provide opportunities for governments and other stakeholders at national, regional and city levels, to make clear and firm commitments to create inclusive cities for residents of all ages. However, there are also gaps in these international frameworks which must be addressed to ensure cities are fit for purpose for ageing urban populations. Change must go further, including well-designed public spaces,

reducing air pollution, increasing investment in public transport, and ensuring older urban residents enjoy their full rights to humanitarian assistance.



Fig. 9. From left to right: Luisa Bravo, City Space Architecture / *The Journal of Public Space*; Tengku Aizan Hamid, Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing; Emily Tjale, LAMOSA South Africa; Sion Jones, HelpAge International.

Exploring and identifying links among these three agendas can energize activities that advance all three. Expert panelists outlined what advocates were able to get included in the SDG #11 on cities and in the *New Urban Agenda* which reflect lessons learned from the implementation of the Age-Friendly Cities Initiative. Others offered local, practical examples of planning and implementation of initiatives that cross artificial boundaries and had a positive impact on the shared environment, and on older persons' quality of life. The World Urban Forum 9 offered an incredible opportunity to meet professionals and activists who have an interest in urban issues, to share ideas, and most importantly, to focus attention on the growing intersection of global ageing and global urbanization and what that means for our future.

To cite this article:

Kline, K. (2018). Contribution of older urban residents. *The Journal of Public Space*, 3(1), 187-192. DOI: 10.5204/jps.v3i1.329

This article has been accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the journal website for further information.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License - <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>