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International Affairs

## The future of urban policy: How to make our cities work better for us

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With the recent opening of the new Light Rail Transit (LRT) system in our nation's capital, it is evident that urban development is emerging as a prominent area of interest for cities and countries alike. That said, Canadian urban affairs have often been overlooked despite a persisting need for more comprehensive urban policies.

Though urban policy is a crucial consideration for development of any kind, little is known about what it entails or the scope of its significance. In fact, Canada is one of the few countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that lacks a National Urban Planning (NUP) policy or framework, and the field of Canadian urban policy has been relatively stagnant since the 1960s.

Urban policy encompasses a variety of elements: it can be understood as the intertwining of economic and political considerations with regards to the technical development of a metropolitan area. Due to its multidisciplinary nature,

urban policy is hard to define, and this ambiguity has unfortunately resulted in the inept urban policies seen today. Canadian cities are not developing at the rate they need to be to match the growth of the country; as a result, development as a whole in the country is wavering.

Canada's NUP is constantly being put at the end of the public policy agenda because municipalities are not recognized by the constitution. Rather, they fall under the purview of provincial governments, thus making them "creatures of the provinces." Due to this structure, Canadian cities are severely disconnected from federal policy making, even though 81% of the country's population lives in metropolitan cities.

Since there are no federal departments dedicated solely to the NUP agenda, the majority of urban development initiatives must be implemented through subnational sectoral policies and are largely coordinated through the federal-provincial/territorial First Ministers'

Meetings. This process involves strenuous coordination, which can be very time consuming and fiscally restraining for both the provinces and cities involved. In addition, Infrastructure Canada is the primary funder for any major development initiative undertaken across the country; however, the indirect nature of their partnership compromises consistency in the planning process.

For the sake of consistency, coordination, and efficiency, the Canadian government should strongly consider implementing a firm NUP policy agenda and invest in a federal department dedicated only to urban development. The federal government is in a much better position to take charge of urban policy thanks to their ability to see the big picture, unify provinces and territories, and allocate resources accordingly – something that provinces and territories simply cannot do on their own. Furthermore, a federal NUP strategy would mean that there could be a direct relationship between the federal government and municipalities, which would eliminate many of the existing barriers.

Beyond improvements to efficiency and monetary considerations, a comprehensive urban policy agenda would also touch upon other issues of interest to governments and citizens alike – for example, environmentally

friendly alternatives and sustainable development. Urban policy has the power to change the landscape of cities to incorporate the sustainable attitude that is needed in development from this point forward.

Innovative alternatives in urban planning are constantly being pursued and implemented by cities around the world and are making a vast difference in the waste and emission output of cities. Political affiliations aside, sustainable development is emerging as a bigger priority for everyone, and urban planning is a crucial component of sustainable development. If the federal government were to be explicitly involved in the urban planning process, they could significantly contribute to the sustainable development agenda.

To find proof of the benefits of a NUP agenda, look no further than to several of the OECD countries that have successfully implemented a national framework to address urban policy. In the United Kingdom, NUP policies have been in place since the late 1960s to address disproportionate development and disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the country. Over the years, the UK has implemented various initiatives such as the Urban Programme (1968 – 1992); the New Deal for Communities (1998 – 2011); and most recently, the Local Enterprise

Partnership project (2010), which focuses more on the economic dimensions of urban policy.

Though the priorities of the NUP in the UK have changed significantly since the 1960s, the framework remains in place with strong partnerships between municipalities and the central government. France has also embarked on urban planning initiatives, including the *Politique de la Ville* (“City Policy”) initiative (1988), which focuses on eliminating social fragmentation in French cities by transforming the urban governance structure.

This shows how significant it is for a country to have a comprehensive NUP policy and how much of an impact it can have on the development and growth of the country at large. The countries that have adopted a national framework for urban planning have all seen improvements in how their cities operate and have changed the dynamics of municipal–central relations. These countries utilized the resources of both levels of government to maximize their efficiency.

Simply put, the current Canadian model of urban planning is archaic. It is hindered by bureaucratic barriers that obstruct the lines of communication between cities and the federal government. For continued growth and expansion, Canada cannot rely on the

same systems it has used for the last 50 years; it must immediately adopt newer and more innovative solutions to address the growing issues surrounding urban development.

As one group of advocates put it, “Canada is an urban nation without an urban strategy.” So long as Canada continues to operate without an urban strategy, there will always be a disconnect between the needs of cities and the federal government’s priorities.