CATCHING UP WITH OUR CITIES:
SUPPORTING INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

Jagan Shah
The subject of urbanization has begun to receive focused attention within the BRICS forum quite recently. The 4th BRICS Academic Forum, which accompanied the BRICS Summit in New Delhi in March 2012, recommended that “urbanization is both a common challenge and an opportunity for BRICS.” This statement echoed the priorities identified in the Government of India’s 12th Five-Year Plan (2012-17), recognizing the urgent need for capacity-building and enhancement of capabilities within urban governments. As priorities, the Forum identified the sharing of knowledge, policies, and skills in infrastructure development, investments in mass transport, and programmes for social transformation. There was also an implicit linkage with the goals of sustainable development.

With over 40% of the world’s population, it is imperative that the BRICS forum should focus more on cities. We would firstly acknowledge the fact that cities are effecting profound transformations on the world, in terms of their environmental and social impacts. Secondly, we would recognize the significant role of cities in the economic growth of the BRICS nations, which together account for around 25% of the world’s GDP. Each of our nations has experienced the concentration of investment and employment opportunities in cities, the key ingredients of urbanization, but more profoundly, our metros and megacities are commanding such vast amounts of resource and have such large spatial footprints—if you simply consider the distances travelled by our electricity, food, construction materials and labour—that what we call ‘country’ is becoming
merely a resource base for ‘city’. This interdependence and conflict between ‘city’ and ‘country’ is likely to preoccupy us.

While there are significant differences between the pattern, rate and scale of urbanization in the BRICS countries, it seems to be a common experience that metropolitan areas tend to be divided cities, with contestations over space and resources. In India, there is a clear tendency towards the exclusion of minorities and the poor from public spaces, which are captured by the elites. The more public nature of urban crime—a rise in delinquency, violence in public spaces, and riots—reflects these divisions. The low average Human Development Index for BRICS would need to be improved faster and more comprehensively if we are to deliver the promise of cities: the access to opportunity, the breakdown of crippling traditions and the enhancement of choice and capability.

The theme for today’s session is highly appropriate to the crisis emerging in Indian cities. On the one hand, the pace of urbanization is such that the governance and management structures are not able to cope, especially because of crippling shortages of trained and specialized manpower in the local governments. On the other, our cities are neither compact nor efficient, and the sprawl forces millions to commute to work centers, wasting precious time which would otherwise be devoted to social and recreational activities. An urban rural continuum can be witnessed along highways and growth corridors; however, there is also a severe urban rural divide due to disparities in services levels and quality of infrastructure, leading to unplanned and unmanageable expansion of urban peripheries. The demographic Census of India of 2011 has revealed an explosive growth -- from 1362 in 2001 to 3894 in 2011, an almost threefold increase – of the census towns, which have the characteristics of towns but are not officially recognized as urban areas. A paradigm shift is required in urban planning, which projects a future based on the evidence of today, and new knowledge and competencies need to be developed.
At the 2012 summit, the Delhi Declaration and Action Plan articulated the need for an *Intra-BRICS Development Platform* that would formulate more ‘calibrated collaboration’ on issues such as rapid urbanisation. In the 5th Academic Forum in Durban last year, the need for initiatives in education, research and skills development were discussed. The 1st BRICS Urbanisation Forum in New Delhi in February 2013 affirmed the goal of building productive and sustainable urban economies and safe, efficient and livable cities. BRICS has already recognized the importance of coordinated urban planning, effective urban governance through a ‘smart city’ approach, and creation of a sound fiscal base for the cities.

The groundwork has been done. We must now focus on actions, as time is not on our side. Let us strengthen our research collaborations, the friendship between cities and the cooperation between local governments. Let us concentrate on shared needs: participative planning, sanitation, mobility and ICT-based applications. In these areas and more, we must accelerate sharing of knowledge, transfer of technologies and partnerships in innovation. We must start with supporting research that analyses the evidence in our cities, by collating the data and documenting the models and practices that can be replicated. Difference and similarity are equally educative for those seeking solutions, and solutions produce results that are measurable and comparable, leading to new knowledge.

Each of us competes on the world stage with knowledge and skills, assets that are a product of legacy as well as modernity. While many of our citizens have become masters of their destiny, a much greater number are hapless victims of history and circumstance. The prosperity of our cities, and the immense promise and potential in our people, can be unlocked more effectively if we improve the average and ‘raise the bar’. The cutting edge of innovation is the sharpest when competition yields to cooperation.