# Viewpoint

# Challenges for international development planning: Preliminary lessons from the case of the Cities Alliance ☆

**Vinit Mukhija**

*Department of Urban Planning, School of Public Affairs, University of California, Los Angeles, 3250 Public Policy Building, Box 951656, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656, USA*

In 1999, the World Bank and the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS) helped launch the Cities Alliance. According to its promoters, it is a global association of development partners interested in improving urban living conditions in the developing world. This paper is a preliminary critique and focuses on three significant aspects of the Alliance's intentions and strategy: collaboration and synergy, decentralization, and implementation. Three key aspects of the strategy present significant challenges and need additional policy attention. First is a possibility of unresolved differences inherent in the Alliance's approach. Second, the city focus does not address metropolitan and regional coordination. And third is a lack of robust research to support some of the implementation initiatives. The Alliance's strategies and challenges are similar to the approaches and limitations of international development planning, and this paper is thus also an assessment of conventional practices in development planning.
© 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

The Cities Alliance is a global association of development partners. According to the Alliance's website, all its partners share an interest in improving the living conditions of the urban poor in developing countries.[1] The World Bank and the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS) – now known as the UN-Habitat – were pivotal in the formation of the coalition in May 1999. In addition, the bilateral development agencies and foreign ministries of many donor-countries, including the United States, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, Canada, and a few others, represent their governments as members of the alliance. Four associations of local authorities –

---

☆In the summer of 2000, through the World Bank, I had a short-term consulting assignment with the Cities Alliance. The views expressed in this paper, however, are my own.
E-mail: Vmukhija@ucla.edu.

---

[1] For more information on the Cities Alliance, please access its website, <www.citiesalliance.org>.

International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), United Towns Organization (UTO),[2] Metropolis, and World Association of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination (WACLAC) – are also founding members of the group. The Consultative Group of members is responsible for developing the Alliance's long-term strategy and approving its annual work program. The group is co-chaired by the Executive Director of UN-Habitat and by a Vice President (Private Sector Development and Infrastructure) at the World Bank. However, the Alliance operates through a small secretariat based in the World Bank's offices in Washington, DC, and the Bank may play a more prominent role because of this locational nesting.

A key premise of the Cities Alliance is that the world is in the midst of an urban millennium and that the social and economic future of countries is increasingly being determined in their urban areas: "the centers of productivity, knowledge generation, and technological innovation" (UNCHS, 1999a, p. 8). The Alliance's members hope to improve the efficiency and impact of urban development in developing countries. They are guided by the population projection that by the year 2020, 4.4 billion people or 60% of the world's population will be urban (UNCHS, 1999b, p. 2). Furthermore, between 1995 and 2015, the number of mega-cities (cities with populations greater than 10 million) is expected to double to 26 (World Bank, 1999, p. 25). The Alliance's associates, however, are also motivated by their desire to pool together their resources in the context of the existing environment of fiscal austerity and shrinking development budgets. The paper describes and critiques some of the underlying ideas and intentions of this new attempt at international development.

I focus on three key aspects and argue that the Cities Alliance's policies are likely to raise significant challenges. First, I explain the Alliance's intention to build consensus among various stakeholders, and its objective to develop a "win–win" strategy. But I suggest that there is a possibility of unresolved differences, including conflicts of interest, that are inherent in this approach and that need more attention. Second, I discuss the Alliance's focus on decentralization and policy action at the city-level, and caution that the city focus does not address the need for metropolitan and regional coordination. Third, I elaborate the Alliance's attention on "doing things", or implementation, including institutional reform. But I suggest that there is the likelihood of flawed implementation procedures due to the absence of robust empirical research to guide policy and practice. The Alliance may have embedded within its strategy internal contradictions, which if left unaddressed are likely to lead to conflict and potential ineffectiveness.

Moreover, because the three key approaches of the Alliance are analogous to the current beliefs and strategies in international development, I also suggest that conventional development planning suffers from similar pitfalls. In other words, the three-point policy emphasis – collaboration and synergy, decentralization, and implementation – has inherent within it the potential seeds of long term, detrimental effects. I also use the tripartite policy structure as an organizing framework for the main body of the paper. In the concluding section, I recapitulate the main arguments of the paper and suggest some recommendations.

## Collaboration and synergy

One of the guiding principles of conventional development planning is collaboration with the expectation of achieving synergy (Evans, 1997). A key outcome of this intention is the current emphasis on public–private partnerships and associations in development (Asian Development Bank, 1999; Payne, 1999). The premise of the approach is that different institutional actors bring different strengths and comparative advantages to cooperative and multi-institutional efforts in development projects. The Cities Alliance, "a global association", is also the result of such an emphasis, as it focuses on cooperation, institutional pluralism, and consensus building. Furthermore, such a collaboration-based strategic approach is also compatible with the prevailing focus on social networks and social capital (Putnam, 1993, 2000). In its own operations, the Alliance is explicit about its intentions, and claims that it will only fund partnership-efforts of multiple stakeholders. Its underpinning is that its funding and technical support will help to bring together disparate actors that are less likely to cooperate otherwise.

Another related arena is the public recognition of the role of civil society organizations and corresponding attempts to involve non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in development efforts (Sanyal, 1994). The Alliance is noteworthy in its commitment to more actively involving NGOs and other grassroots-based organizations. For example, its Community-led Infrastructure Finance Facility (CLIFF) – a new finance facility designed to work in partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs, and provide bridge-loans and loan-guarantees for urban upgrading projects – with Homeless International, a UK-based NGO, and its Indian NGO partners, Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) and the National Slum-Dwellers Federation (NSDF), appears to be an innovative and promising policy experiment.

More strategically, the Alliance has decided to emphasize its activities in two key areas:

(a) City Development Strategies (CDS) through comprehensive action plans focused on improved urban governance, fiscal responsibility and the establishment of clear priorities for action and investments. The development strategies are to be based on an assessment of each city's economic growth prospects and are aimed at enhancing its competitiveness.

---

[2]IULA and UTO (also known as the World Federation of United Cities) unified as a new international organization, United Cities and Local Governments, in January 2004.