

Sustainable cities in Latin America, a challenge or an opportunity?

Can sensible planning and better governance keep Latin American cities from falling through the cracks of social inclusion?



Barranquilla, Colombia is an example of a city where the ESCI is working.

By Susana G. Baumann

In the last two decades, rural to urban migration has caused Latin America's and Caribbean's cities to grow at unprecedented rates. Today, more than 80 percent of the region's residents live in towns and cities, making Latin America one of the world's most urbanized regions.

Although most Latin American economies depend on agricultural and mining for an estimated 65 percent of its Gross National Product (GNP), most of the region's inhabitants have been drawn to the region's large cities with the promise of a better life with access to clean water, electricity, and other necessary infrastructure. However, many have encountered that their only option is to end up in the large shantytowns, the favelas and villas miserias, surrounding these urban areas.

The number of cities has grown sixfold in the last 50 years. Half of the region's population, or 222 million people, now live in cities of 500,000 residents or less while another 65 million concentrate in megalopolises, according to the 2012 UN-Habitat report. The good news, according to the study, is that the process has almost reached its limit and it is now irreversible, creating some kind of demographic stability –although migration among cities and regions is still active.

The bad news are the challenges –and, in a way, opportunities – that local and national governments face in dealing with problems originated from high levels of human concentration.

In 2010, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) announced a new initiative that would help midsize or emerging cities to avoid the mistakes made by large metropolitan areas. The Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative (ESCI) was born: an ambitious plan to impact 50 cities in the ALC region within five years.

“The ESCI is a technical assistance program that focuses mainly on helping midsize or emerging cities’ mayors to identify, evaluate, prioritize and address issues and challenges that result from high demographic concentration and interaction without sensible planning,” Ellis J. Juan, general coordinator of the IDB’s ESCI, told LBC.

Working with small budgets and lacking technical tools and human resources to deal with an overwhelming and disorganized expansion of their cities’ urban footprints, mayors are running behind in attending top population concerns such as natural disasters, solid waste management, water and sanitation, connectivity and transportation, and crime and safety.

The initiative includes small cities such as Añelos, a city of 5000 inhabitants in Argentina’s Neuquén province, strategically located close to the oil reserve of Vaca Muerta–, to large country capitals such as Montevideo in Uruguay, a city of 1.3 million. Emerging cities such as Barranquilla (1.2 million) and Bucamaranga (525,000) in Colombia are also represented. Some of the participating cities have also been ranked among the 48 most attractive cities for investment in Latin America according to a study by Colombia’s Universidad del Rosario.

“The initiative helps our partner cities to develop an action plan around three main dimensions: environmental sustainability and climate change, urban sustainability, and fiscal sustainability and governance. The plan sets a vision for the city’s next 20 to 30 years through interventions that will improve the residents’ quality of life while involving vital local stakeholders,” Juan said.

The ESCI includes not only the technical and financial participation of the IDB and other international banks, governments, and foundations interested in development, poverty reduction, and inclusion, but also provides a national pipeline for local development banks that usually hold a great amount of resources but lack the guidance from local governments to invest them wisely and productively.

“After the first number of successful experiences, local development banks have approached us to integrate additional emerging cities to the program,” Juan said. ESCI has established strategic partnerships with, among others, Colombia’s Financial Institution for Development FINDETER), Brazil’s Federal Savings Bank

(CAIXA), Banamex and Banobras –the state owned development bank- in Mexico, and lately YPF –the oil and natural state-owned company in Argentina. An example of the work done by ESCI can be found in the Colombian city of Barranquilla. With a population of 1.2 million, Barranquilla is the fourth largest city in the country, and censuses reveal the city’s population has doubled since 1973. Located on a key transportation corridor, the city is trying to reposition itself as a key center to handle supply transportation and management systems at a national and international level. The city’s rapid growth, and expansion of Colombia’s middle class, has also seen vehicle traffic increase in the city, posing transportation challenges. These challenges call for two distinct solutions: one responding to residents’ transportation demands, the other supporting the industrial and port activities associated with international trade.

Through the ESCI, the city has diagnosed five key actions to be developed in the next 10 years. Main highlights include the development and implementation of a Transit Master Plan, coordination of the plan with metropolitan area authorities, mapping of different entities that affect or could affect mobility, the design and implementation of an urban control center, and the defining of strategies and parameters to evaluate initiatives that would provide infrastructure and services to support mobility. A pre-investment amount of \$2.62 billion has been estimated for completion of this phase of the action plan, of which \$284 million has already been pre-identified. The plan also includes plans for transport and mobility, rain drainage systems, environment and mitigation of climate change, competitiveness, citizen’s safety and governance.

“When presented with the idea to cover sustainable cities, I was skeptical at first,” said Chris Sabatini, editor-in-chief for Americas Quarterly. “I’ve seen too many ‘magic bullets’ before addressing the same problems. The difference, however, is that the ESCI focuses on local elected mayors and helps them prioritize their decisions according to technical expertise they provide together with real and potential private and public resources mediated by the IDB.”

His team interviewed experts and assigned journalists to research the impact of this and other initiatives in a number of cities. According to Sabatini, the results show a disjuncture between people’s demands and the initiatives local governments are pursuing. “We found that people’s number one concern is related to the increase in violent crime and their own safety. Many ask for a ‘mano dura’ (a hard fist) approach, but experience has shown that cases in which crime violence reduction was achieved, it was the result of good management and rational urban measures,” he said.

Local governments, on the other hand, might be more interested in interventions that bring them the most votes. Perception is an important factor in the success of any urban intervention, Sabatini believes. “Even in cases that ‘slipped back’ – such as Bogota-, residents still had the opinion that ‘something was being done,’” he said. In other cases, where direct intervention is only addressed to certain

city areas or issues, such as improving public transportation or recovering rivers, parks and green spaces for the city, residents might still have a positive perception about the intervention.

Beyond Latin America's macroeconomic and business success, and increasing indicators that the region is improving its poverty levels, Sabatini believes that the rise of a middle class cannot be defined by income only –as seen in this year's Brazil protests. "Social inclusion needs to consider sustainable housing, access to healthcare and education, mitigation of climate change and all other factors that make the primary engine for change in achieving sustainable cities," Sabatini concluded.