

UN forum didn't meet potential
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Several weeks ago, United Nations Habitat's World Urban Forum brought more than 10,000 people together for five days at Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre to ponder the future of cities.

The forum marked the 30th anniversary of the first United Nations conference on human settlements held in Vancouver in 1976, which led to the creation of UN HABITAT.

The experience of being one of 9,689 delegates from more than 100 nations was remarkable. Speakers sharing stories of community successes and failures engaged the delegates, 48 percent of whom were women.

In general, the mood was upbeat. You got the sense that people felt the discussions were productive; that by coming to the forum they were contributing, that progress was being made.

But amongst the feel-good also lurked a lot of rhetoric.

With so many sessions and so little time, things didn't seem to get beyond statements of first principles (e.g. urban slums steal human and community capacity) and anecdotal evidence (here's the experience of our community in trying to change that) to produce the target-setting statements necessary to turn talk into action (resolving to upgrade 20 percent of all urban slums by the year 2010).

Recognition that communities need secure and sovereign access to clean water supplies was consistent throughout the presentations, but never was this vision subject to the harsh glare of the trade lamp.

Forum delegates said communities want sovereign authority over their water supplies and the forum's web-posted summary report suggests public-private-partnerships are needed to rebuild infrastructure.

So, the first thing that has to happen is the removal of water from the World Trade Organization's harmonized commodity coding system, to which all international trade and trade agreements refer. If not, you can kiss sovereignty good-bye.

Today in Canada, farming next to a US-owned oil and gas rig means they have water rights under the North American Free Trade Agreement and you don't. Try winning that one.

I never heard water trade raised. If it was, it never made it to the summary report or any plenary discussions. Yet this is the single largest global policy issue of our time.

Similarly, the disconnect between urban eaters and rural farmers was painfully evident.

Yes, the forum was urban-focused. But one thing urban residents have in common is they all eat.

And while urban agriculture is an important part of community planning, it will never meet the food needs of urban residents. Sustainable and vibrant cities are completely dependent on sustainable and vibrant farm sectors.

It's such a simple concept. So why the major disconnect at the forum?

Out of 22 main sessions, not one focused on food, food security or agriculture. Out of the 171 breakout sessions, two focused on urban agriculture and food security and only one focused on "preserving the land that feeds the cities".

In typical Canadian fashion, we certainly put our best foot forward – describing in glowing terms steps B.C. province has taken to preserve farmland.

Afterwards, delegates were impressed. The problem is, the rosy picture in their mind was more reminiscent of a movie backdrop than of reality.

Enacted in the mid 1970's, B.C.'s Agricultural Land Reserve stripped farmers of their non-farm development rights in exchange for legislated guarantees of income protection.

Over time, farm income insurance was diluted to farm income assurance and then dropped completely.

A flood of applications to withdraw prime agricultural land from BC's Fraser and Okanagan valleys followed. Government ministers approved withdrawals and golf courses popped up like mushrooms after a spring rain.

A new provincial government strengthened the land reserve and promised support for farming, but little materialized. Right to farm legislation was enacted, but right to make an economic living from farming was again ignored.

Several years ago – under the auspices of “restructuring” - B.C.'s provincial government pulled the teeth of the land commission. A board once charged with looking after the provincial interest as disbanded and replaced by regional tables.

“Putting back land of equal value elsewhere” became a short-cut for withdrawal approvals.

Today, many B.C. municipalities are first in line to remove thousands of acres of prime valley bottom farmland. Between withdrawals and non-farm use (horse farms, country estates), B.C.'s agricultural land reserve has more holes than a hunk of good Swiss cheese.

Farm infrastructure is dismantled and land speculation has driven prices to \$60,000 an acre and climbing. As pressure intensifies, few can afford to farm anymore. For many farmers, their last crop will be houses.

The Emperor has no clothes. Yet the forum delegates bought the vision.

“You've sure done it right here in B.C.,” I was told time and time again.

Yes, the forum was impressive, but the potential of having so many capable people from so many nations together in one space focusing on big ideas for the planet left some of us wanting more. In the end, more was not delivered.

In its closing ceremonies, forum delegates were mesmerized by acrobatics and illusion. Missing were the acknowledgements of areas that had not been addressed and announcements of targets and timelines to move us ahead.

Missing, too, was recognition of the interdependence between farm and urban communities and the importance of respecting and supporting both as we attempt to move toward food security and community sustainability.

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