

## **Local communities hold the best knowledge about the issues on the ground thus they would better address those problems**

In this interview, we talk to Gulnoza Kuldosheva from Uzbekistan. She researches urban planning processes and the relationship between implemented policies and inequalities in the cities. She is due to start working on her Ph.D. in Luxembourg later this year. Gulnoza tells us more about her research, the different approaches to urban planning, and the problems of urban planning in Uzbekistan.



*Source: Gulnoza Kuldosheva*

**So Gulnoza, you work in the field of urban and economic planning in Uzbekistan. Could you share some insights from your work?**

I would describe myself as a researcher in urban planning and economic development, rather than being a practicing urban planner. I will soon embark on a doctoral research program in the Living Conditions department of the Luxembourg Institute for Socio-Economic Research in a relevant topic. My study involves the economic outcomes of interventions in the planning of cities and neighborhoods. Currently, I am investigating social inequality at a neighborhood level, caused by zoning and urban planning in cities. Those social aspects of inequality

include questions of well-being, such as health, and income measured by access to amenities in cities. I learn why some neighborhoods are poorer, and some are better off; also, I examine whether there is evidence if those heterogeneities in neighborhood amenities affect the individual well-being of residents, whether those inequalities are being transferred to younger generations, what interventions can help to cut that intergenerational mobility of poverty. I became interested in this area of study during my stay in South Korea, where I came to know about how urban planning and legislation can help bridge these divides and reduce inequality by observing planning initiatives and comparing them to other cities I had been to.

**Tell us more about the planning process. How does it make cities a better place to live?**

Livable places are characterized by their convenience both for people and the environment, embracing sustainability and livability. Ideally, places should be walkable, have enough green areas, and public spaces, able to accommodate all modes of mobility with minimum harm to the environment too. When faced with the question of how the planning process should be

arranged, Planner's dilemma comes to my mind. This is a dilemma over maintaining environmental sustainability, but also taking people's well-being into account balancing with economic development. Making only one domain a priority at the cost of others can't be an optimal solution. Imagine, a city that prioritizes only economic development and takes on urban renewal projects seeking higher economic growth, without integrating the sustainability concept. This strategy sooner or later cannot sustain itself as the longer-term costs of neglecting the environment will exceed the growth achieved by planning. Or a planning project which only targets people's wellbeing, but overlooks the environment and longer-term economic development would end up exhausting local or national budgets without reaching sustainable outcomes. There are two known approaches to planning to dilute this dilemma: rational and communicative. The first approach relies on quantitative data, models, and technical knowledge throughout the planning process, whereas the latter involves public participation in taking planning decisions. The application of each approach depends on the nature of a project, availability of expert knowledge and public involvement, and governance type in a particular country or context.

### **What are the biggest challenges in terms of urban planning in your country?**

Since the times when Uzbekistan was a part of the Soviet Union by 1991, the urban landscape was dominated by single-industry towns, and a high level of interdependence of cities within

region and industries in other republics of the Soviet Union, rather than with the domestic economy. The fall of the Soviet Union left the former countries, including Uzbekistan with pronounced spatial disparities, and weak ability to adapt to a new development path after centrally planned economic system. The dynamics of urban growth and underlying factors differ from country to country, yet the following challenges are common to all Central Asian countries, including my country:

- The vast stretched land in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, leaves their cities broke from major urban networks and overseas markets, which also leads to high transportation and communications costs.
- Relatively high population growth and lack of job opportunities in rural areas, which is leading to out-migration, and rural-to-urban migration, and pressured mid-size and large cities.
- Urban infrastructure is pressured by these changes and now facing the end of service



*Source: Gulnoza Kuldosheva*

life, which was established during the Soviet era and now approaching the end of its service life. It requires a substantial investment for a massive overhaul.

- Air pollution and extreme heat in cities caused by desertification and shortage of green land area, which in turn is expected to cause wider public health and environmental concerns.

**One of the biggest questions nowadays is how to engage citizens with the development of their neighborhoods, especially in big cities. Can you share some good practices in terms of creating a local community?**

Earlier we have mentioned communicative vs rational approaches to urban planning. The answer to the question as to which approach would work best for effective planning is it depends. Sometimes we need a bit of both when we can't solely rely on only one approach. There are times when the placemaking process requires technical expertise and rationality, rather than a popularity vote, where engaging citizens in the planning process would instead cause a challenge. But there are also times when urban planning projects should definitely take account of those who are directly affected by it, as projects should reflect their needs and values. In this case, public dialogue should definitely be integrated into the planning process. So, I would say types of planning projects should be carefully analyzed and appropriate planning approaches should be chosen.



*Source: Gulnoza Kuldosheva*

In Miami, where I completed my four-month research fellowship, I came across so-called Charrettes - a public hearing technique in urban planning that enables governments to involve different stakeholders such as residents, businesses, experts, and officials, in the design and implementation of urban development projects. Also in London, where I worked and studied for some time, I witnessed the London Plan Examination in public – a process of engaging citizens in urban planning projects. In these two cities, the whole planning process is transparent,

and the public is informed about any updates of project implementation on-site and through a platform. Of course, the Western practice of engaging people in the planning process can't be copied and pasted blindly into placemaking in transition countries like Uzbekistan. Governance type, institutional settings, demographic features, and resources should be taken into account.

**What are the primary efforts of the organizations in Uzbekistan to promote urban planning? Can you give us some examples of non-governmental initiatives in this direction? What about the role of the state - is it actively cooperating with other stakeholders?**

I would say that government dialogue with other stakeholders, namely with wider public and non-governmental organizations in urban planning has limited scope in Uzbekistan at the moment. This is due to the deep-rooted centrally planned approach inherited from Soviet times. Local authorities have little to say or they're dependent on the central government in terms of funding, and developing action plans. Only execution is carried out at the local level. But most of the time it is not for the quality, but for ticking the boxes for monitoring and evaluation by the central government.

In Uzbekistan, we have so-called Makhallas, historically developed autonomous social institutions representing a neighborhood and local community with its own public goods, social protection, and services. But Makhallas lack the execution power, funding, and expertise needed to participate in local planning initiatives. It's crucial to integrate this unique historical and cultural element into planning places and neighborhoods, where they can socialize and gain access to public goods. Best elements of western urban planning such as holding public hearings, and maintaining transparency in designing and implementing urban projects should be integrated into the current planning process in Uzbekistan step by step. Delegation of certain powers from central government to local authorities, such as Makhalla, would help to achieve better outcomes from local urban planning projects as communities hold the best knowledge about the issues on the ground thus better addressing those problems.