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As Asia's cities and populations grow, Professor Lily Kong says it is critical that city leaders engage citizens beyond just having exhibitions of city plans.

- By [Samantha Yap](#)
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An aerial view of Singapore's civic district. (Photo: Kane Benjamin Cunico)

SINGAPORE: Asia is in the middle of its steepest growth and it is crucial for city leaders to start fully involving their citizens in the early stages of development, said panellists on Channel NewsAsia's Perspectives discussion panel.

Professor Lily Kong, Provost of the Singapore Management University (SMU), for one, said city leaders should take time to sit down with citizens. Leaders need to understand what their citizens' needs are and take them on board when planning cities, because it will be the citizens who will benefit or be affected by top-level decisions, she explained.

"Master planning without public engagement, without community engagement, without involvement, risks a city without a sense of ownership," Prof Kong, who has written extensively on the social and economic aspects of cities, said.

She pointed to her experience in Japan, where she observed a sense of belonging in some neighbourhoods.

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Said Prof Kong: "I was walking along the Ueno region fairly recently. I saw 70- and 80-year-olds in the lake picking up pebble by pebble and scrubbing them. It was about a sense of ownership of the city; it was a sense of pride for the cleanliness for their immediate neighbourhood.

"That sense of belonging, to me, is admirable."

The SMU Provost noted that city leaders and planners should do more than merely have exhibitions of city plans conceptualised without adequate citizen input.

"It's not a case of: 'We've put out all these plans and we'll have an exhibition that's roving and you come and take a look', and (say) that's public consultation. I don't think that's public consultation. That's communication," she said.

PEOPLE AS AGENTS OF CHANGE: DR HEYZER

Prof Kong was joined by other academics and private sector experts as they addressed the urban challenges facing Asia's megacities during the discussion panel.

Dr Noeleen Hezyer, a social scientist and former United Nations Under-Secretary General, said that city planning should involve all parties, including the private sector, civil societies such as non-governmental organisations, and governments. In an ideal situation, they should find solutions to problems facing developed and developing cities, such as poverty and inequality, she added.

"People can no longer be seen as just beneficiaries of urbanisation. They need to be seen as agents of change," she said.

The UN predicted that by 2030, there will be 41 megacities – urban areas with a population of more than 10 million – across the globe. Asia Pacific will account for 22 of these megacities.

According to Professor Dr Stephen Cairns, Programme Director at Future Cities Laboratory at the Singapore-ETH Centre, Asia is "in the middle of the steepest growth of urbanisation", and in the next 50 years, "predominantly rural populations will become predominantly urban".

[Hanoi, for example, is facing an identity crisis](#) as spontaneous construction projects take place in older neighbourhoods to cater for its growing population. By 2030, its current population of more than 7 million is expected to grow to 9 million.

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(From left:) Dr Noeleen Hezyer, Dr Stephen Cairns, Professor Lily Kong and Mr Wong Heang Fine discuss how Asia's cities will grow with host Teymoor Nabili. (Photo: Samantha Yap)

SHOULD PRIVATE SECTOR TAKE THE LEAD?

Mr Wong Heang Fine, Group CEO of Surbana Jurong, said that as populations in Asian cities grow, planners will need to adjust their economic activities to suit their environment, and take in feedback from the community.

But he added that developing cities will face budgeting challenges and must find ways to do more with less, such as partnering with the private sector to take the lead.

“Each of the cities have limited capital budget, so you need to concentrate on using some of those dollars a bit better and let the private sector take the lead in some of the economic infrastructure.”

However, Prof Kong voiced her concerns over privatising urban development without involving the government because master planning with public engagement is still essential.

“Community involvement is critical in making cities work for the people who will actually live in the cities,” Prof Kong said.

Watch the full episode of [Urban Challenges In Asia's Megacities](#), along with past episodes, on the [Perspectives homepage](#).

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