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Indigenous Cities: Reframing Modernity and Our Cities

Cities and Urban Development



Foreword and Acknowledgements

2020 was a year like no other as the pandemic changed many aspects of our lives. In a sense, that made early 2021 an ideal time to ask the question: how would you address some of the biggest challenges in Asia in the coming decade? In January 2021, the Asia Business Council joined hands with Nikkei Asia and the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford to launch the Asia's Challenge 2030 Global Essay Competition, open to students aged 18-22 anywhere in the world.

Given the many obstacles facing young people pursuing their studies during a global pandemic, we did not know how many essays we would receive. Yet we were impressed by thoughtful submissions from universities across Asia and as far afield as California and London. We pored over essays on topics ranging from artificial intelligence and aquaculture to smart cities and virus sequencing and learned a lot in the process.

The essays reflect a generation that is asking hard questions about the challenges facing Asian societies and optimistic about the prospects for creating a better world through new modes of doing business and innovative approaches to policymaking.

Young people from Asia are increasingly globally aware. They want policymakers to adopt international best practices in public health and environmental protection, especially in areas like sustainable finance and mental health awareness. But they reject the uncritical adoption of Western models, from urban design to economic development. Many call for a celebration of their unique national and regional identities, whether through locally inspired architectural designs or the increased representation of indigenous perspectives.

Participants in the Economy, Trade, and Finance category want to improve existing economic models so that a balance is struck between economic growth and a fairer, more sustainable, and more stable world.

In the Public Health and the Natural Environment category, respondents called for holistic approaches to health. Concerns about mental wellness reflect the pressures brought about by increasingly competitive academic and professional environments, while essays about communications and interpersonal relationships demonstrate the desire for a more intentional focus on modeling healthy relationships. Still other submissions addressed the existential crisis posed by climate change and the complicated web of interrelated challenges, from plastic waste to fossil fuel use. Proposed solutions range from changes in consumer behavior to an entirely new model of development.

In the Cities and Urban Development category, the essays we received reflected a desire for smarter, more walkable, climate resilient cities, and urban environments that reflect their unique local character. Whether as consumers, as employees, or as entrepreneurs themselves, this younger generation will demand that businesses and governments adopt sustainable practices and modes of operation that benefit their communities.

This global essay competition would not have been possible without the support of the former and current Chairmen of the Asia Business Council, Lim Boon Heng of Temasek and Daniel Tsai of Fubon Group. We are also indebted to Vice-chairman Tak Niinami of Suntory Group and Council Trustee Nazir Razak of Ikhlas Capital, who made key introductions to Nikkei Asia and the Blavatnik School.

Special thanks must also go to Shigasaburo Okumura and Daisuke Akazawa, Editor-in-chief and Chief Producer of Nikkei Asia, and Ngaire Woods and Luna Sidhu, Founding Dean and Director of Development of the Blavatnik School, for making this competition possible.

We would also like to thank our judges who generously volunteered their time and energy.

Economy, Trade, and Finance category:

- Nobuyoshi John Ehara, Co-founder, Unison Capital
- Emily Jones, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Katsuhiko Hara, Chief Desk Editor, Nikkei Asia

Public Health and the Natural Environment category:

- George Tahija, Principal, PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya Tbk
- Maya Tudor, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Futoshi Kuwamoto, Business & Market News Editor, Nikkei Asia

Cities and Urban Development category:

- Zhang Xin, Founder and CEO, SOHO China
- Sir Paul Collier, Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Shin Nakayama, News Editor, Nikkei Asia

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ashleigh Au of SOHO China Scholarships and Ruth Collier of Oxford University in publicizing the contest.

There is no doubt that this generation will be profoundly shaped by the experience of living through the world-altering events of 2020 during their formative years. But most essays took the longer view instead of focusing solely on the pandemic, looking ahead to the challenges of the next decade and beyond. Policymakers and business leaders around the world should take note of their ideas as this young generation comes of age and begins to lead local and international development in multiple fields.



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Program Director
Asia Business Council



Colleen Howe
Program Associate
Asia Business Council

Award-winning Essays

Economy, Trade, and Finance

Krati Gupta (India)

Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law

The Three Pillar Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Responsible Financing:
Addressing Asia's Challenges in the "Decade of Action"

Chloris Jiaqi Kang (Singapore)

National University of Singapore

Private Money for the Public Good –
Unlocking Private Equity for Asia's Sustainable Finance

Henry Michael Mayhew (United Kingdom)

University College London

Asian Central Bank Mandates: What about Equality?

Public Health and the Natural Environment

Hanun Thalia (Indonesia)

Universitas Indonesia

KomU as a Strategy to Improve Family Communications

Yao Yuanchen (China)

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Meeting the Challenge of Plastic Waste Recycling in Japan and China

Suzu Yokoyama (Japan)

Tsuda University

Tackling Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Japan and South Korea

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Rya Jetha (United States)

Pomona College

Reinventing the Asian Megacity: Absorbing Climate Change with Sponge Design

Ranita Ma Tsz Yu (Hong Kong SAR)

Chinese University of Hong Kong

From a City-scale Beauty Pageant to a Continent-wide Diversified Gallery

Ashley Faith Santoso (Indonesia)

Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia

The Neglected Effects of Gender-based Violence towards Jakarta's Urban Walkability

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Indigenous Cities: Reframing Modernity and Our Cities

A Critique of the Status Quo

It is no secret that Asia faces many challenges. Home to many of the world's developing nations, it seems almost impossible to imagine where to start. In my little nook of Asia, as South and East of Asia as one can get, the Philippines is no stranger to the challenges all our neighbors face. From poverty to democracy, economy to peace, none feel so close or pertinent as the growing issue of identity. What I hope to achieve in this essay is to illustrate how the issue of identity is closely related to the development of our cities, and how a shift in perspective might make all the difference.

From a personal level, I have struggled to find what makes a Filipino. It is odd that despite the fact that I live in the capital of our country, I struggle to see from my surroundings markers of my national identity. And with the growing movement of a West-centered globalization, I believe it is a problem we face as one Asia. Highly urbanized cities are seldom high in cultural heritage or cultural celebration. Leading up to the third decade of the 20th century, it is a question in the minds of all academics and the politically-savvy among us: where and how do we see Asia in a globalized world?

This problem of identity is contingent on our view of modernity and development. Whilst modernity as a theory is often critiqued by scholars today, one cannot deny that it is in the name of modernization that our cities have been developed. Lampard notes how the years between 1750 to 1950 marked an “unprecedented urbanization of people and economic activity” in the development of cities all across the West. More than three decades after the beginning of aggressive development, the remnants can be found not in traces, but as a nearly intact framework of current development. For the layman, these cities that we live in stand as symbols of progress. However, here we find the problem: if our cities are symbols of modernity, our modernity a thrust of globalization, a globalization rooted in the West, then where in this model is there room for something that is indigenously ours?

Ask any local here in the Philippines what the most developed part of the country is, and they'd answer Taguig City. Ask them why, and they'd say, “because with tall buildings and cement floors, it looks just like New York.” Unfortunately, this is true in other nations as well. When you look at the “most developed” parts of any Asian nation, it is the same sense of buildings and cement with little to no greenery. The idea of “better” isn't local, but completely foreign and constructed. One might attribute such claims to the scars of a post-colonial nation--but I say it lies in our conception of modernization and development.

The call is not to go rejecting modernization. Quite the opposite, in fact. Cities, embodiments of modernity, whilst currently the symptom of a larger problem, are the key to changing the status quo. There is no doubt that these cities have provided countries with opportunities for growth in commerce and technology. However, as we discuss cities' successes, we must also recognize their numerous shortcomings. With high poverty rates, a lack of cultural celebration, and the threat of environmental challenges, it isn't hard to see that whatever growth accumulated in these spaces is far from inclusive. The rest of the nation might never experience the development offered by our cities. The marginalized members of our society that exist outside our cities are denied access to development.

Interestingly enough, there is one particular marginal community that is able to face the economic, environmental, and cultural challenges posed to modern cities. It is in the Indigenous People of Asia that we might find a framework that is not only sustainable and inclusive, but also uniquely ours.

Remember the Indigenous, Returning to our Roots

Asia is diverse, and a one-size-fits-all solution will not work. In Europe one can move countries, from Spain all the way to Poland, and see that the change is gradual. Each country is influenced by the last, and while not completely the same, they share the same cultural traits and values. In Asia the story is different; go from India to China to Indonesia and you will be met with very different peoples, politics, and cultures. It is that difference, however, that makes us the same: each nation has a unique indigenous culture that is alive, albeit constrained.

According to the International Labor Organization, about two-thirds (260 million people) of the world's population of Indigenous People (IP) are in Asia. But if so many indigenous communities are alive in Asian nations, where are they then in creating developmental plans? By the very foreign and "globalized" look of our cities we see the absence, rather the imposed silence, of indigenous people in the conversation. Sadly, it is also in this region, especially in Southeast Asia, that Indigenous People face high levels of exploitation and oppression. They are excluded from the conversation and often forcibly removed from their lands for development.

Oddly enough, in the diminishing areas where IPs do hold their lands, both nature and people flourish. 29 percent of Key Biodiversity Areas and 23.6 percent of Protected Areas here in the Philippines fall within the domain of indigenous people. Their role in preserving these areas is crucial. In my own encounters with indigenous communities, there are low levels of inequality amongst the people. The area around them is preserved and seemingly almost untouched despite centuries of occupation by their ancestors. This isn't to suggest that there is no framework of development present. However, their idea of development is centered not on the accumulation of wealth like in cities, but rather on the environment as humanity's sole provider – a fact that many cities have forgotten in their pursuit of wealth.

There are also economic challenges in IP communities that must be addressed. The UN Development Programme says that Indigenous People are most likely to experience poverty. While the lands they own are untouched, the world beyond has changed.

They once depended solely on nature for survival, but as urbanization entered their lands and exploited natural resources, nature is no longer as abundant as it used to be. IPs are faced with a lack of job opportunities as the main centers of opportunity – cities – have excluded them in their development. It is in this impasse where cities and IPs might be able to help each other. The call is a change in perspective, one that accounts for the benefits of cities and the knowledge of the indigenous.

This perspective is starkly different from the economy-oriented goals of our cities. But perhaps it is the reframing of this perspective that will solve our challenges, allowing our cities to be inclusive and sustainable, ready for the challenges of nature and time. Cities are often the most damaged during natural calamities, be it a typhoon, floods, or a global pandemic. In indigenous communities, by listening to the land and the application of indigenous knowledge, illness and death are low. It is clear that by centering development around our environment, the IPs are doing something right, thus we in the urban areas ought to learn from them. Many worry that a more indigenous model would reduce the potential of economic gain. But how long will that economic gain last with scarce resources and the displacement of those who protect them?

To change one's perspective is a great thing to ask, may it be on the individual to the social level. However great challenges require even greater efforts and solutions. All hope is not lost in Asia. As the region develops and solidifies its political and economic position on the international stage, there is time to begin, even in increments, that change. The knowledge is already accessible just right outside our cities. The tools are already present with legal frameworks across Asia allowing for policy changes. What is left then are people who believe in this change, in which development must be centered on nature and culture, not on cement and accumulation.

People, Policy, and Progress

The guiding principle for achieving this new perspective of development is grounded on this: including the indigenous people in developmental planning because of their invaluable knowledge. In the physical planning of cities, it is indigenous people who know the environment the best. They are aware of which soil is soft and prone to landslides, which areas are prone to flooding, and which trees and plants are crucial to the survival of the species of animals endemic to the area. Although there is a moral benefit in being considerate to land, there is also a clear benefit in creating cities that are both sustainable and disaster ready.

Sustainability efforts can also be increased by the mutual respect of city developers and indigenous peoples when it comes to land. IPs have never been selfish people and have been open to helping cities in their access to raw materials. Under their care, forests and rivers are prevented from abuse and allow generations of people, both indigenous and not, to have reliable access to them. Businesses in the cities can enlist the help of IP communities in ensuring a reliable supply of raw materials and addressing the growing economic challenges faced by a pre-colonial culture in a hyper-capitalist world.

Both efforts can be done with legal frameworks. In the Philippines, the Indigenous People's Rights Act stands as a landmark legislation for the international community as an example of how we can secure the rights of indigenous people. The use of land can only be granted through consultation with indigenous peoples. Policies like this can be implemented further, such as by pushing for IP representation in citizen councils. Cities are after all as political as they are economic. By creating policies that protect their rights, providing opportunities to participate in economic affairs, and passing laws that solidify their political capital as protectors of the land used, we include indigenous people in urbanization and make them partners in development: a form of urbanization and development that is not based on a Western framework, but one that is uniquely ours--uniquely Asian.

Metanoia: A Change of Heart

There is a sense of humility when one becomes open to learning from another. I believe that in our pursuit of modernity, our cities have forgotten that sense of humility. The people in them have forgotten what it ever meant to be more than just a member of a global society. I admit that the steps proposed, although grounded in legal action points, tend toward the abstract rather than the tangible. Most solutions today still operate under the paradigm of western urbanization, that cities are the apex of progress, and that the economy is all important. But under that paradigm, I doubt if we will ever find a way to solve our problem of identity, a problem that shapes our cities and the spaces where we exist. It is for that reason that I implore those who want to solve the problem of our cities to start with that paradigm shift, a shift that need not be foreign or highly academic. It is a shift towards humility, in which we can listen to those who see the world much differently than we do. Perhaps it is in the paradigm of indigenous knowledge that we might find the solution to Asia's biggest challenges. And it is only when we can include them in our cities that we can start that process. The issue is bigger than inclusion, bigger than sustainability: it is the challenge of how we will define Asia in a globalized world.

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