

> Ngalula Beatrice Kabutakapua

# Cities need to include communities in decision making

## *Abstract*

*Drawing on her own personal experiences, Ngalula Beatrice Kabutakapua ponders the role people and the concept of 'integration' play in urban development and the drafting of urban policies. She explores this issue in the context of common urban challenges such as dissatisfaction among residents, abandoned neighbourhoods, lack of cultural and creative activities, and scarcity of spaces for young people and older generations.*

> What is a city if not a thick net of relationships, cultures, politics, and languages pulsing thanks to its residents?

People. They are the pumping heart of cities. But like every organ in our body, they can be undervalued. We sometimes don't show concern about them, forgetting that if they are healthy, our entire body is. If they are cared about, our body is.

It took me three years to understand that urban policies should be nothing else but gyms for our cities, a way to keep the entire structure healthy by keeping its heart in good shape. Residents are the heart of cities, without them the city dies.

The first hint of this interdependence was discovered in the UK when filming the documentary series '(In)visible Cities'. We

were investigating the urban and social inclusion policies for migrants residing in multicultural neighbourhoods in Europe and the US. The evidence we collected was pivotal to start working on a diagnosis for the illnesses that hit many cities.

The first symptoms are common to many cities: residents' unhappiness, abandoned neighbourhoods, lack of cultural and creative activities, lack of spaces for young people and older generations... and these are only a few of them. These symptoms manifested themselves when we interviewed long-standing residents of Butetown in Cardiff, the first multicultural neighbourhood in the UK, which now risks disappearing in favour of commercial areas. People living in Butetown told us they hardly recognised their "hometown", and felt the need to be better included in the choices

made by their administration. Surprisingly enough, these were concerns voiced mainly by residents and not by migrants, who apparently felt very well integrated.

Integration. We tend to believe it has exclusively to do with foreigners, who need to adapt to the coming nation, city, and neighbourhood. But it is not the case. Integration is the lymph of cities; it runs through and to its long-standing residents and its recent ones.

The only problem is that nowadays 'integration' has become more a discussion topic than an objective for city administrations. Through conferences, debates, forums, the word is analysed and vivisected as if a dictionary definition could solve the main issue, which is: how do we achieve integration?

We hardly mentioned the word 'integration' to our interviewees for '(In)visible Cities', and when we did, we sometimes heard the answer "I don't know this word or concept". Integration is just a concept, but it's also a nirvana: an ideal status we should aim for. In order to reach it, it is necessary to observe the peculiarity of each city, interrogate its residents, compare it to other cities, communicate and exchange and eventually reach a conclusion on what would make the place better.

Integration is not only about refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. It is about the opportunities your city can offer. Hence, it is about the possibility of travelling from one side of the city to the other without using a car; it is about finding a job without having to move to another place; it includes the chance of having recreational activities. It is about finding your own place without having to move.

It took me three years to feel 'integrated' in Rome. That is because my neighbourhood is not well served by public transportation, I hardly had friends in the city, and was struggling to create a network. It took me less than a month to feel integrated in Istanbul, almost a year in Cardiff, a few weeks in Los Angeles, a few days in New York. The '(In)visible Cities' project

brought me to all these cities. It allowed me to have first-hand experience of what it means to start over in a new city. And what's more important, I could observe the city with my fresh eye, not tampered with having lived there for a long time.

What made my 'integration' easier in all these cities was certainly the ability to speak the language (I could learn a bit of Turkish in Istanbul), but mainly the communities that welcomed me. In the specific case, they were all African communities, but they still largely contributed to my introduction to the new environment and neighbourhood. Communities, we observed, play an unexpected role in the integration of people in new urban areas. And for this reason, they should be appointed as official counsellors for local administrations. Communities are made by people, the same who allow cities to pump, and the same who should be cared about.

In an ideal scenario, people are heard in local administrations, not only on city level but in each neighbourhood. From the neighbourhood the improvement should reach the city and eventually the entire municipality. There is no change that can be implemented without consulting the first beneficiaries. Or at least that is how it should be.

Unfortunately, residents have been lamenting a lack of communication between them and the administration. If cities are to survive the massive changes they are facing in the next thirty years, this is one of the aspects to change.

It is not enough to have political representatives, to organise forums and discussions in a language common people cannot understand. It is now the time to make good use of civil societies, of the residents and the youth. It is the time to build and shape cities around each individual.

The modus operandi can differ from city to city; still it is time to embrace the diversity of this body and exploit it to create a better environment for residents, whether long-standing or recently arrived.