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Grounded futures: A decade of planning through humanitarian and Southern lenses

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This reflective article marks the tenth anniversary of *plaNext – Next Generation Planning*, tracing its evolution as a critical platform for spatial planning discourse, particularly in humanitarian and Global South contexts. Drawing on personal editorial and field-based experience, the author explores how *plaNext* has shifted spatial planning discourse toward inclusion, ethics, and contextual sensitivity. Focusing on contributions from Volumes 9 to 11, the article highlights planning's potential as a transformative tool in humanitarian settings, centering community agency, participatory methods, and interdisciplinary innovation. The analysis further integrates non-Western ethical frameworks, advocating for planning as a reparative and care-based practice, especially relevant in post-crisis urban environments. Contributions from the Global South illustrate planning as a reparative practice rooted in justice, resilience, and relational well-being. Ultimately, the article calls for bridging academic and humanitarian spheres to foster responsive, interdisciplinary, and just planning. The next decade of *plaNext* offers a chance to consolidate many gains and push further. Thus, the journal's commitment to fostering a young researchers-driven process is vital for the future of spatial planning.

Keywords: humanitarian planning, Global South, participatory methods, inclusive planning, epistemic plurality, planning future

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Introduction: Marking ten years of critical spatial thought

As we commemorate the 10th anniversary of *plaNext – Next Generation Planning*, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the journal's significant contributions to the field of planning and its intersection with pressing humanitarian issues. For *plaNext*, this anniversary is more than a chronological checkpoint—it represents a decade of fostering critical discourse, inclusivity, and emerging voices in planning field. Founded in 2015 under the auspices of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), *plaNext* has provided a vital platform for young academics to engage in critical debates surrounding urban challenges.

As someone who has served as an editor for several volumes and worked in the humanitarian and planning fields, I write this reflection not only as an academic but as a practitioner shaped by the tensions and synergies between theory and humanitarian realities. The journal's evolution has mirrored shifts in the field itself—from technocratic paradigms toward an interdisciplinary, ethics-driven practice. This article examines key thematic developments in the evolution of *plaNext*, with particular emphasis on Volumes 9 and 10, to which I contributed as an editor, as well as Volume 11, which foregrounds perspectives from the Global South—an area that resonates strongly with my professional engagement in the humanitarian sector. These reflections are interwoven with insights derived from practice, offering a critical dialogue between academic inquiry and field-based experience.

Planning discourse diversity in *plaNext*

Over the past decade, *plaNext* has published 14 volumes, each addressing significant themes in the field of planning. The inaugural issue[1], 'Cities that Talk', set the tone for discussions on social inclusion and equality in urban environments. Subsequent volumes, such as 'Planning Inclusive Spaces' (Volume 10[2]), have further explored the complexities of urban life, particularly in light of recent migration flows and climate change (Dörder et al., 2020). The journal has consistently, and precisely in Volume 11[3], challenged the northern bias in planning theories, as exemplified by the contributions of the late Prof. Vanessa Watson, which have fostered new perspectives from the Global South (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2021; Watson, 2014).

Volume 9[4], titled 'Navigating Change: Planning for Societal and Spatial Transformations', highlighted the need for diverse planning approaches to address various forms of change, including environmental, technological, and political shifts (Silva, 2019). This volume underscored the importance of interdisciplinary exchange within planning-related research and practice, emphasising that societal and spatial transformations often reflect complex settings requiring tailored responses (ibid). The journal's commitment to inclusivity is evident in its thematic focus on inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, which align with the transformative promise of the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasising the principle of 'leaving no one behind' (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

Inclusive and participatory planning in humanitarian contexts: Lessons from *plaNext* volumes 9 and 10

Recent volumes of *plaNext* (9 and 10) offer a compelling array of scholarship on inclusive and context-sensitive planning, with particular relevance to humanitarian contexts. These contributions highlight how planning can respond to complex social, political, and spatial

[1] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/1
[2] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/10
[3] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/11
[4] https://journals.aesop-planning.eu/index.php/planext/issue/view/9

challenges by centring local needs, promoting participatory methods, and embracing interdisciplinary innovation. Together, they argue that planning must evolve beyond technocratic solutions to become a vehicle for equity, accountability, and empowerment in settings affected by displacement, marginalisation, and crisis.

Social sustainability and governance

A central theme is the operationalisation of social sustainability in urban development. Janssen et al. (2020) examine area development projects in the Netherlands, identifying the persistent gap between the concept of social sustainability and its practical implementation. They argue that community needs are often subordinated to market interests unless governance frameworks explicitly prioritise equity and inclusion. This insight is highly relevant in humanitarian urban planning, where interventions must avoid reinforcing pre-existing inequalities and instead support community cohesion, safety, and long-term resilience.

Migrant agency and adaptive design

Pesce and Bagaini (2019) contribute to this conversation by emphasising the agency of migrants and displaced populations in urban regeneration. They argue for an adaptive, modular architecture that accommodates both emergency needs and integration into the broader urban context. Migrants, they contend, should be regarded not merely as recipients of shelter but as co-creators of urban futures. This approach is particularly applicable in humanitarian responses to large-scale displacement, aligning with international frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees[5], which advocate inclusive, community-driven solutions.

Urban Living Labs and participatory experimentation

Du (2020) examines Urban Living Labs (ULLs) as collaborative platforms for experimentation in urban planning. He critiques the tendency to present ULLs as universally applicable solutions that are often lauded for their innovation. He argues instead for a critical, context-sensitive approach, particularly relevant in humanitarian settings where social structures, power dynamics, and resource constraints vary widely. Adapted thoughtfully, ULLs can serve as models for co-creation in crisis-affected areas, but only if grounded in local realities and community engagement.

This call for contextual sensitivity is exemplified by the UN-Habitat and MIT Urban Living Lab[6], which positions itself as a global platform for co-creating solutions with local actors in diverse urban contexts. By emphasising inclusive, interdisciplinary collaboration and capacity building tailored to local needs, the initiative aligns with Du's argument that ULLs must move beyond one-size-fits-all models. Rather than exporting fixed solutions, it facilitates context-specific experimentation rooted in community engagement and institutional partnerships, reinforcing the value of grounded, participatory approaches in both development and humanitarian planning.

Innovative methods: Games and art as planning tools

Several contributions explore creative participatory methodologies. Prilenska (2019) presents the use of 'serious games' as tools for civic engagement. In her study, role-playing scenarios allow participants to simulate planning decisions and collaboratively explore future

[5] https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/global-compact-refugees
[6] https://www.living-lab.center/

possibilities. Such methods can be especially valuable in humanitarian settings where traditional engagement may be limited by language, trauma, or mistrust of institutions. By enabling safe, accessible, and dialogic participation, game-based approaches help build trust and amplify community voice.

Hotakainen and Oikarinen (2019) examine art interventions as a means of community engagement and dialogue. Their study of a temporary installation in a public park demonstrates how artistic expression can surface local knowledge, foster connection, and humanise spatial issues. In vulnerable or under-served urban areas, including informal settlements and areas experiencing prolonged humanitarian need, such creative practices can support collective identity and contribute to inclusive place-making.

The power of narrative and framing

Krisch (2019) underscores the role of discourse in shaping planning outcomes. Her analysis of cultural planning in Vienna shows how different framings, such as culture as infrastructure versus culture as economic commodity, can lead to divergent strategies. In humanitarian contexts, language similarly matters: how terms like 'resilience', 'vulnerability', and 'integration' are used can influence everything from donor funding to the treatment of displaced groups. Krisch's work highlights the ethical responsibility of planners to be intentional and inclusive in their use of narrative.

Grassroots action and the role of the third sector

Privitera (2020) sheds light on grassroots-led public space regeneration in Catania, Sicily. In contexts where institutional support is lacking or slow to materialise, communities and civil society actors often step in to revitalise neighbourhoods through informal, cooperative action. These efforts, ranging from cleaning up public areas to organising cultural events, demonstrate the capacity of local actors to lead urban transformation. In humanitarian environments, especially those affected by prolonged crises or neglect, supporting grassroots initiatives through flexible policy and micro-level resources can strengthen social infrastructure and foster ownership.

Such work also challenges the conventional binary between formal and informal planning. Recognising informal urban practices as legitimate responses to need can open up new pathways for inclusive humanitarian planning and recovery, grounded in the lived realities of affected populations.

Implications for humanitarian urban planning

Collectively, the contributions from *plaNext*'s Volumes 9 and 10 suggest a shift in how we understand planning in humanitarian contexts. First, they underscore the importance of embedding social sustainability goals—equity, safety, cohesion—into planning from the outset. In settings marked by displacement, disaster, or systemic exclusion, these goals cannot be secondary to infrastructure delivery or logistical efficiency.

Second, inclusive participation must be central, not optional. Whether through Urban Living Labs, serious games, or artistic engagement, methods must not only invite but meaningfully incorporate community input. This means co-designing processes that are transparent, iterative, and reflective of the voices of women, youth, people with disabilities, and other often-overlooked groups.

Third, planners must recognise and enable the agency of grassroots actors. In many humanitarian contexts, formal planning mechanisms are slow, centralised, or disconnected from on-the-ground realities. Communities, NGOs, and local leaders are often already filling

critical gaps through adaptive and informal practices. Supporting and learning from these actors enhances both the inclusiveness and effectiveness of urban humanitarian response.

Finally, the power of narrative must be taken seriously. Planners and humanitarian professionals should critically assess how their language and framing shape policy, programming, and public perception. Who is seen as a stakeholder? What outcomes are valued? These discursive choices can reinforce or dismantle exclusion.

Volumes 9 and 10 of *plaNext* reflect a growing maturity in planning discourse, one that embraces inclusion, interdisciplinarity, and context sensitivity as core tenets of practice. Their lessons are particularly relevant for humanitarian contexts, where the stakes are high and the need for thoughtful, responsive planning is urgent.

As humanitarian challenges become increasingly related to the urban environment, whether due to migration, disaster, or socio-economic marginalisation, planners must move beyond conventional models. Instead, they must adopt approaches rooted in empathy, flexibility, and accountability. Inclusive planning is not an afterthought or a luxury; it is a fundamental tool for restoring dignity, building resilience, and fostering equitable urban futures in times of crisis.

Southern perspectives and humanitarian aspects: Lessons from *plaNext* volume 11

Perhaps the most transformative step for *plaNext* was the publication of Volume 11, focused on planning in and from the Global South. This issue challenged Northern-centric assumptions embedded in planning theory and emphasised the need for epistemic plurality (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2021). This epistemic plurality can be grounded through non-Western ethical frameworks that resonate deeply with humanitarian values. For instance, many Indigenous and First Nations traditions adopt an ecosystemic relational ethic, where humans are understood as part of a larger ecological community, bound by reciprocal obligations to land and non-human life, and emphasising reciprocity and stewardship (Tomateo & Grabowski, 2024).

In such views, decision-making is guided by restoring harmony and right relations, not merely by technical efficiency, which resonates with humanitarian ideals of care and community. Similarly, the Southern African philosophy of ubuntu enshrines communal care and solidarity: encapsulated by the aphorism ‘I am because we are’, Ubuntu emphasises empathy, mutual support, and justice in interpersonal and collective life (Muia et al., 2023). The Indian principle of ahimsa (nonviolence) further extends this logic of care: literally meaning ‘non-harm’, ahimsa calls for active compassion and avoidance of violence toward all beings. Each of these philosophies offers an alternative and complementary ethical lens for planning; one that foregrounds cooperation, stewardship, and healing, principles central to trauma-sensitive and protective planning (Schroeder, 2023; Marris, 2023). I will discuss them more extensively later in this text.

Thus, by engaging also with non-Western epistemologies, planners can diversify the values and methods of humanitarian planning and stimulate it to be more inclusive, community-oriented, and ecologically grounded.

Planning experiences from the Global South context capture the realities on the ground and highlight the importance of integrating humanitarian perspectives into planning practices. Effective planning can help rebuild communities, restore livelihoods, and promote social cohesion in areas affected by violence and displacement (IFRC, 2025).

Costa et al. (2021) discussed metropolitan planning in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, through the lens of critical theory and participatory practice. Their university-community collaboration exemplifies how Southern cities are generating theory through practice, not just applying imported frameworks. For humanitarian actors, this is an important reminder: interventions must be context-driven, and local knowledge is not supplementary, it is central.

Another important contribution was from Adelina et al. (2021), who examined urban environmental governance in small cities of the Global South. Often overlooked in both planning and humanitarian agendas, these intermediary cities are sites of innovation and resilience, offering models for decentralised governance and community-based adaptation.

These contributions make a compelling case for what can be called ‘cartographies of care'—mappings that are not neutral but embedded in ethics, justice, and politics. They also call for a people-centred planning practice, one that listens rather than prescribes.

In the era of a global polycrisis, where climate change, conflict, inequality, and other shocks intertwine, planning in Global South contexts has become a critical focus for humanitarian approaches. The Global South often bears the heaviest burdens of these shocks; Devex Editor notes, that ‘the global South is… where the effects of climate change are being felt most intensely’, these effects are driving severe disasters (e.g. tropical storms, floods) in low-income cities (Devex Editor, 2020). For example, Almulhim et al. (2024) estimate that about 143 million people in the Global South will be displaced by climate impacts by 2050, underscoring the disproportionate vulnerability of Southern populations.

In such settings, planning for resilience and aid must merge; Southern cities and communities routinely exemplify the convergence of poverty, environmental risk, and conflict, making them de facto arenas for humanitarian action. Those Southern urban areas often face compounding crises that demand integrated planning responses (Adam & Rena, 2024). At the same time, scholars stress that polycrisis is transnational, planning must ‘traverse the North–South dichotomy’, recognising that crisis and marginalisation also affect people in Northern contexts. In other words, the polycrisis is not confined to the ‘South’; similar dynamics of displacement, precarity, and social fragmentation are emerging within the Global North, making the Southern case both paradigmatic and globally relevant.

In sum, while humanitarian planning is urgently needed in the Global South, it should be framed in global terms. Southern cases illustrate many key challenges, but planners must also address systemic shocks wherever vulnerable communities exist (Almulhim et al., 2024).

Bridging academia and Humanitarian practice

As someone embedded in both academic and humanitarian spheres, I often witness a gap between theory and practice. Academic planning tends to valorise long-term visioning and spatial coherence, while humanitarian action is grounded in urgency, often amid fragmented governance and trauma.

Yet there is potential for convergence. In post-conflict reconstruction, spatial planning must grapple with displacement, destroyed infrastructure, and fractured social ties, issues that demand both technical skill and emotional intelligence. Humanitarian organisations, once focused solely on emergency response, are now engaging in area-based planning, co-producing settlement designs with affected populations.

Furthermore, humanitarian spatial planning aligns closely with contemporary care-based, healing, and trauma-informed planning approaches, which seek to repair harm and foster resilience in communities facing structural and episodic violence. There is a growing trend to

view planning itself as an ethical practice of healing and justice, not just technical design. For example, some U.S. cities have explicitly adopted reparative planning measures, following civil unrest over racial injustice: Minneapolis established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and St. Paul launched a Community Reparations Commission, both conceived as planning instruments to address historical harm and foster community healing (Williams, 2022).

At the same time, planning literature increasingly advocates trauma-informed approaches: planners are encouraged to recognise community trauma and design public spaces and policies that support safety, belonging, and recovery. As one recent planning brief observes, interest in trauma-informed planning is growing, emphasising that built-environment interventions can 'advance planners' work to promote the health, safety, and economic well-being of all people', especially those who have experienced chronic stress or violence (Schroeder, 2023).

In an era of cascading crises, bridging academic inquiry with humanitarian practice is not only timely but necessary. By fostering mutual learning, co-producing knowledge, and engaging in field-informed research, spatial planning can evolve into a more responsive, ethical, and transformative discipline capable of shaping cities that heal, protect, and empower.

These developments frame planning as a form of intentional care, a reparative practice that acknowledges past and present injustices and prioritises relational well-being. In other words, the humanitarian approach is increasingly understood as a duty of care: planners are called on to repair harm and build resilience by centering ethics, compassion, and community agency in their work.

The *plaNext* volumes underscore that spatial planning is inseparable from conditions of social precarity, spatial injustice, and historical contestation. The journal has served as a laboratory for ideas that challenge not only how we plan, but also why we plan, and for whom. Planning must engage with the complex challenges that shape contemporary urban and territorial realities, from climate breakdown and forced displacement to deepening inequality and informal urbanisation. These issues are not peripheral; they are central to the discipline's ethical grounding, critical relevance, and transformative potential.

Looking forward: Toward grounded futures

Reflecting on the past decade, several key lessons emerge from the journal's content and my experiences in the humanitarian sector. First, the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration cannot be overstated. The challenges of urban planning, particularly in post-conflict contexts, require the expertise of various stakeholders, including planners, humanitarian workers, and community members (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Second, the journal's commitment to fostering a young researchers-driven process is vital for the future of spatial planning. As the new editorial board takes over, it is crucial to continue prioritising emerging voices and perspectives that challenge conventional paradigms. This includes addressing gaps in current debates, such as the need for a more glocal vision that transcends Eurocentric frameworks.

As we navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic world, the principles of social sustainability and inclusivity must remain at the forefront of planning discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for planning practices that prioritise the most vulnerable (Hertel & Keil, 2020).

The next decade of *plaNext* offers a chance to consolidate many gains and push further. Integrating humanitarian planning as a core discourse within spatial planning comes as a key

priority. Furthermore, deepening collaboration with scholars and practitioners from the Global South would contribute to more context-sensitive planning and policy approaches. As well, supporting research on post-disaster and post-conflict urbanism would not only expand the field's scope but also foreground the lived realities of communities navigating extreme disruption and uncertainty. This could be achieved by enhancing practice-oriented research and integrating the lived experiences and practical humanitarian insights.

Reflecting on a decade back to looking forward to a grounded future, cultivating a space where justice and dignity are not peripheral values, but central planning principles is becoming increasingly crucial. Because ultimately, planning is not only about space, it is about people.

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