



The full interview from ICLEI publication **Connections #39**, which focuses on the upcoming Rio+20 Conference.

Jeb Brugmann, Founding Secretary General of ICLEI, leading the international community's adoption of the Local Agenda 21 initiative at the 1992 UN Earth Summit. Today, executive manager, innovation and new ventures consultant, and executive educator spanning the corporate, government, and non-profit sectors. Toronto, Canada.

Sustainable cities seem to have a lot to do with less fun, limiting freedom to take the car or a long shower, or having to share dense space with others rather than owning a single family house in the green. Is your vision of a 'sustainable city' one of a city you would personally really like to live in?

We early generations of homo urbanis are truly conflicted about our relationship with the city. On the one hand, we want the city's opportunities and its 'buzz' and vibrancy. On the other hand, we want some kind of bygone pastoral quality of life. In the effort to have both, we've created perhaps the most unsustainable kind of geography imaginable, both economically and environmentally: low density, highly capital intensive, auto dependent suburban sprawl. It is neither countryside nor city, and offers the benefits of neither.

The city I would like to live and raise my family in is one where we can be part of a neighborhood community that designs and uses urban space in customized ways that give us access, via foot or bicycle, to both nature and urban buzz and human diversity. It is also a place where our economic opportunities are accessed via convenient transit. I happen to live in such a neighborhood in Toronto. Now, because our community of densely proximate neighbors is a real city-building community, we also share the excitement of developing our little geography into a place of energy productivity using solar, wind, and geothermal technologies. What could be a better way to build quality of life for one's children?

Twenty years ago, you were calling for a 'Local Agenda 21', with the result that a mandate for local governments found its way into the final document of the UN Conference on Environment and Development. What should local governments come home with at the end of the Rio+20 Conference?

The 1992 Earth Summit process provided us with a platform for developing, testing, and scaling today's practices of urban sustainability planning. Now we have to apply those practices to develop, test, and scale the Man-Nature end-game: the transformation of urban geographies into truly functioning urban ecosystems, producing their own energy, nutrient, and materials. That's a huge ambition, but the only ambition worthy of the challenge of impending global economic collapse in the face of declining natural ecosystem services.

What can a UN conference, being a gathering of national governments, achieve, and how?

Perhaps the best thing that could happen at Rio +20 is that national governments will agree that their current beggar-thy-neighbour strategies are not in their self-interest. In a world of globalised interdependencies, where a failure in one major country or urban

region, due to environmental crisis or resource shortages, ripples through the global economy, we need to grow and not fight over the ecosystem services 'pie.' And the only way to do that is to grow ecosystem productivity, both in nature and in our cities.

Forty years after the 'limits of growth' had been presented the first time, still sustainability does not win elections. Why can't we just wait until natural resources will have become so expensive that reusing or replacing them will simply be our only choice?

That could be a very nasty future of hoarding, conflict and deprivation. But it could well come to that if we turn mainly to elections for the solution, considering the intransigence of governments and many industries over the last 20 years. The manipulation and misinformation of public opinion on critical challenges like climate change suggests that elections are a compromised democratic vehicle.

There are other democratic vehicles, including the kind of community-based urbanism that I have described, where place-based social communities literally re-build the energy, nutrient, and materials balances of their cities. When we first engaged in the Earth Summit process in 1990, many thought that Local Agenda 21 and urban climate action were strange ideas. What we need in 2012 is even stranger ideas.