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Bridging global and local agendas: Reflections on AESOP's engagement in GPEAN and HABITAT-UNI (2019–2025)**Paulo Silva**

This paper offers a reflective account of AESOP's engagement in GPEAN between 2019 and 2025, a period marked by intensified dialogue between planning education associations and the United Nations through HABITAT-UNI, the partnership initiative of UN-Habitat that connects universities and research institutions worldwide. Written from the perspective of AESOP's representative to GPEAN – and later its liaison with HABITAT-UNI, co-chair, and chair – the paper examines how collaborative knowledge production, network governance, and academic diplomacy can advance planning education in service of global sustainability agendas. It aims to contribute to an ongoing discussion within AESOP, GPEAN, and allied organizations about the evolving role of networks in linking educational practice, research innovation, and international policy.

Reflection on Source Selection

This reflection draws primarily on two documents: the United Nations Human Settlements Programme's *Global Report on Human Settlements 2009* (UN-Habitat, 2009) and Acuto and Huerta's 2023 report on linking universities with UN-Habitat. These documents were chosen because they provide complementary perspectives on global urban agendas: the 2009 UN-Habitat report outlines foundational policy directions and frameworks for sustainable cities, while Acuto and Huerta (2023) illustrate contemporary mechanisms through which universities engage with these global priorities. Together, they capture both the policy context and the practical engagement of academic networks, making them particularly relevant for reflecting on AESOP's cooperation with GPEAN and HABITAT-UNI. Other documents were considered, but these two offer the clearest, most concise insights into the evolution of global-local collaboration in planning education.

1 Introduction – Positioning the Reflection

Over the past decade, planning education and research have been reshaped by the growing interdependence of global challenges – from accelerating climate change and widening social inequalities to the need for just and sustainable urban transitions. These dynamics have also transformed the way planning schools collaborate, exchange knowledge, and engage with policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda. Within this evolving landscape,

networks like the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) and the Global Planning Education Association Network (GPEAN) have become essential interfaces between academia and global policy arenas, enabling planning educators to connect local pedagogical and research practices with planetary concerns. According to Acuto and Huerta (2023), networks like GPEAN “embody the kind of multi-actor collaboration needed to bridge global agendas and local implementation, positioning universities as brokers of urban knowledge” (p. 11).

This article draws on reflective and experiential insights accumulated through participation in network activities, joint initiatives, and leadership processes. It situates AESOP's contribution within broader transformations in global planning education: the shift toward transdisciplinary learning, the rise of digital and collaborative platforms, and the need to integrate social and environmental justice more explicitly into curricula and professional training (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2009). By tracing how AESOP has collaborated within GPEAN and with UN-Habitat, the paper highlights the mechanisms through which academic communities contribute to shaping global urban agendas – and, conversely, how engagement with those agendas reshapes academic priorities.

The discussion unfolds in six parts. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines the global context of planning education and the institutional landscape in which AESOP and GPEAN operate. Section 3 examines AESOP's specific contributions to GPEAN and the strengthening of interregional collaboration. Section 4 focuses on joint activities with UN-Habitat through HABITAT-UNI and their implications for bridging research, education, and policy. Section 5 reflects on lessons from network leadership and governance, drawing from practical experience in fostering inclusivity, continuity, and collaboration. Section 6 looks ahead to emerging priorities for global planning education, emphasizing the integration of decarbonization, digitalization, and social inclusion. The paper concludes with personal and institutional reflections on AESOP's role in advancing a more connected, just, and sustainable global planning community.

2 The Global Context: Planning Education in Transition

Planning education today operates within an increasingly complex and interconnected global landscape. The last decade has brought a convergence

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of crises and opportunities that profoundly affect how planning is taught, researched, and practiced. Climate emergencies, pandemics, widening socio-economic disparities, forced migration, and rapid digital transformation have all altered the conditions under which urban and regional planners operate. These dynamics demand new forms of knowledge – collaborative, adaptive, and globally-aware – that link local realities to planetary processes. For planning schools and their representative networks, this shift implies a transformation not only in curriculum and pedagogy but also in the ways institutions cooperate and share expertise across borders. The pandemic interrupted GPEAN's Council annual in person meeting (2020 and 2021), restarted in Bali (2022) during the World Planning Schools Congress, Chicago (2023), Paris (2024), and Istanbul (2025).

At the heart of this transition lies the recognition that the urban question has become a global one. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11 – “Sustainable Cities and Communities”, have placed spatial and territorial dimensions at the core of the development agenda. The New Urban Agenda (NUA), adopted at Habitat III in 2016, reinforced the need for integrated planning and participatory governance as tools for achieving inclusive and resilient urban futures. These international frameworks have reframed planning education as a contributor to global sustainability rather than as a discipline confined to local or national concerns. As a result, planning schools are increasingly expected to equip graduates with the ability to navigate transnational challenges – from climate adaptation to housing justice – and to collaborate with diverse actors, including communities, policy-makers, and international agencies.

Against this backdrop, planning education networks such as the Global Planning Education Association Network (GPEAN) have gained renewed importance. Established to connect regional associations of planning schools across the world, GPEAN serves as a platform for dialogue, joint research, and policy engagement. Its member associations – including AESOP, APERAU, TUPOB in Europe and beyond, ACSP and ACUPP in North America, ANZAPS in Australasia, and APSA and ASPI across Asia, AAPS in Africa, and ALEUP and ANPUR in Latin America – collectively represent thousands of planning educators and programs. This structure enables the exchange of diverse perspectives and pedagogical innovations while amplifying the academic community's collective voice in global urban debates. Through statements, conferences, and collaborations with UN-Habitat (via HABITAT-UNI, Planners for Climate Action and World Urban Campaign) and other networks such as ISOCARP, GPN, CAP, and CAA, GPEAN has become a bridge between educational institutions and international policy frameworks.

Within GPEAN, AESOP (the Association of European Schools of Planning) occupies a distinctive

position. Europe's long-standing traditions of urbanism, spatial justice, and regional planning have informed global debates on governance, sustainability, and participation. AESOP's members contribute critical theoretical approaches and methodological innovations that help balance the often-technocratic tone of international urban policy. At the same time, participation in GPEAN allows AESOP to learn from diverse planning contexts – from rapidly urbanizing regions to post-colonial and informal settlements – and to reflect on its own Eurocentric biases. In this way, the dialogue between AESOP and other regional associations within GPEAN represents a form of mutual learning, where diversity of practice becomes a source of intellectual enrichment.

A key dimension of this global engagement has been the partnership between GPEAN and UN-Habitat through the HABITAT-UNI initiative. HABITAT-UNI, the University Network Initiative, an academic and research branch of UN-Habitat, seeks to align higher education and research with the agency's mission of promoting sustainable urbanization. It provides universities and networks with opportunities to contribute to UN programs, thematic groups, and global events such as the World Urban Forum (WUF). Through this collaboration, planning educators have been able to influence global policy discussions on urban resilience, spatial equity, and capacity building, while also accessing international platforms to disseminate academic findings. HABITAT-UNI has thus become an interface for translating academic knowledge into policy-relevant insights – and for bringing policy challenges back into academic reflection.

However, this global integration is not without tensions. The relationship between academia and international policy bodies often involves navigating different logics: while universities prioritize critical inquiry and intellectual independence, organizations like UN-Habitat operate within normative and action-oriented frameworks. AESOP's role, therefore, involved mediating between these two epistemic cultures assuring that academic engagement retained its intellectual independence while contributing constructively to policy processes. The experience of recent years shows that collaboration can work effectively when based on mutual respect, clarity of roles, and a shared commitment to advancing sustainable urban futures.

As planning education continues to evolve, the significance of such global networks will only increase. They provide platforms for collective intelligence, enabling geographically diverse institutions to co-create knowledge, test new pedagogical models, and advocate for inclusive and just urban transformations. Within this broader context, AESOP's engagement in GPEAN and HABITAT-UNI illustrates how regional associations can act as catalysts for global dialogue—helping to shape an international community of practice that is both critical and action-oriented.

3 *AESOP's Role and Contribution within GPEAN*

AESOP's participation in GPEAN has been central to strengthening the collective visibility and coordination of planning education on the world stage. As one of the network's most established members, AESOP has played a leading role in facilitating dialogue across regional contexts, aligning educational initiatives with international agendas, and reinforcing the academic foundations of global planning education cooperation. The period between 2019 and 2025, when AESOP's representation included liaison responsibilities with HABITAT-UNI and later leadership within GPEAN, marked a phase of consolidation and expansion – one that tested the network's resilience while deepening its intellectual and institutional maturity.

GPEAN's mission – to connect regional associations of planning schools and promote global collaboration – has always relied on the commitment and diversity of its member organizations. Within this framework, AESOP contributes a combination of intellectual depth, policy experience, and institutional stability. It brings to the network a long tradition of integrating critical theory, spatial planning, and public policy, grounded in Europe's multi-level governance context. AESOP's expertise in European planning traditions – strategic spatial planning, participatory governance, and territorial cohesion – provides a valuable analytical lens that complements the pragmatic and context-driven approaches developed in other regions. Through dialogue and exchange, these differing perspectives enrich GPEAN's collective understanding of planning as both a profession and a form of civic practice.

During this period, AESOP's engagement in GPEAN unfolded through three interrelated areas of contribution: (1) strengthening interregional collaboration and knowledge exchange, (2) advancing education and policy dialogue through partnerships with UN-Habitat, and (3) supporting network governance and strategic continuity.

3.1 *Strengthening interregional collaboration and knowledge exchange*

AESOP emphasized creating platforms for cross-regional dialogue, including joint, webinars, and thematic roundtables connecting educators worldwide. Examples include sessions at the World Urban Forum (WUF₁₀ took place in Abu Dhabi, WUF₁₁ in Katowice, and WUF₁₂ in Cairo), Urban Thinkers Campus edition, international planning conferences, and discussions on decolonizing planning education and integrating sustainability into curricula, covering diverse topics through Global Urban Lectures.

In those contexts, AESOP representatives often acted as knowledge mediators, translating European research and policy experiences into globally relevant lessons and integrating non-European

perspectives back into AESOP's debates. Beyond events, AESOP contributed to joint knowledge outputs, such as policy statements, white papers, and shared research initiatives. This intellectual influence reinforced AESOP's reputation as a network that balances technical expertise with ethical reflection.

3.2 *Advancing education and policy dialogue through UN-Habitat partnerships*

AESOP's liaison role with HABITAT-UNI facilitated communication and joint action between academic networks and UN-Habitat. Initiatives included curating sessions at the World Urban Forum, contributing to policy dialogues on urban governance and education, and developing case studies linking planning curricula to the New Urban Agenda. AESOP helped define methodological frameworks for HABITAT-UNI's initiatives, emphasizing social innovation, community engagement, and policy influence.

3.3 *Supporting network governance and strategic continuity*

As co-chair and later chair, AESOP supported inclusive decision-making, mentorship, and documentation practices. These mechanisms reinforced network cohesion during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of institutional memory and proactive leadership. AESOP promoted a leadership style grounded in facilitation, trust, and shared responsibility, which became central to GPEAN's resilience.

4 *Collaboration with UN-Habitat and HABITAT-UNI*

The collaboration between GPEAN, AESOP, and UN-Habitat – especially through HABITAT-UNI – has been strategic and outward-facing, bridging academic knowledge and policy implementation. HABITAT-UNI mobilizes university expertise to support the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and SDGs, providing opportunities for joint initiatives, research, and policy influence.

Key milestones included AESOP participation in GPEAN-led sessions at World Urban Forums, contributions to joint publications, and participation in HABITAT-UNI's initiatives, which established indicators to capture academic contributions to global urban agendas. AESOP also mediated between academic and policy cultures, balancing methodological rigor with normative expectations.

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the need for digital collaboration. AESOP facilitated virtual engagement, expanding participation from the Global South and demonstrating the value of flexible, technology-enabled networks. The experience reinforced AESOP's role as a strategic actor in transnational academic diplomacy, translating academic expertise into policy-relevant knowledge while preserving critical independence.

A major collaboration with GPEAN, recognized by current UN-Habitat ED is the contribution to a global survey, for the understanding of which are the major trends in planning education worldwide. Human Settlements' challenges are crucial and from overcoming them, depend human life on Earth. To map and know how and where future planners are being trained can be a key element to informing this complex equation. AESOP is strategically placed as the largest planning school's association to be able to inform this mapping of planning education in Europe and beyond.

5 Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Future Directions

AESOP's engagement revealed coordination, expectation, and continuity challenges, including:

- Diverse institutional cultures and uneven participation.
 - Navigating the academic–policy interface.
 - Maintaining leadership continuity and institutional memory.
 - Supporting under-resourced institutions.
 - Managing virtual collaboration during COVID-19.
- Lessons learned from 2019-2025 period include:
- Knowledge co-production enhances relevance and impact.
 - Reciprocity and dialogue strengthen trust between academia and policy.
 - Interdisciplinarity and flexibility are key to addressing complex urban challenges.
 - Leadership development and structured governance support long-term network sustainability.

Future directions involve expanding digital collaboration, formalizing academic–policy linkages, mainstreaming equity and sustainability into curricula, and strengthening capacity-building for under-resourced institutions. Institutional memory, structured transitions, and evaluation frameworks are also essential for sustaining impact.

6 Looking Forward: Reflections and Future Directions

AESOP's experience highlights the transformative potential of transnational academic collaboration. Networks like GPEAN demonstrate that collective representation and structured engagement can shape curricula, inform policy, and foster professional and ethical development.

From this reflection emerge the following key priorities:

1. Consolidating global networks through documentation, mentoring, and transparent governance.
2. Integrating sustainability, equity, and resilience into teaching and research.
3. Leveraging digital tools for equitable access and global knowledge sharing.
4. Strengthening academic–policy interfaces to ensure relevance and impact.

5. Supporting under-resourced institutions to enhance inclusivity.

6. Cultivating leadership and institutional learning to sustain network effectiveness.

AESOP's engagement demonstrates that planning education is most effective when it is transnational, collaborative, and reflexive, capable of linking theory, research, and practice. By sustaining these forms of engagement, AESOP, GPEAN, and associated networks can continue to influence urban futures, reinforcing the essential role of planning education in achieving just, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities.

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