

## **The Finnish Urban Studies Conference 2026 – Session 22**

### **Building a Fairer Tomorrow upon Situated Practices: Decolonial Creative Regeneration after Trauma**

#### **The Paradox of Return: Landmines, Ecocide, and the Weaponization of Nature in Post-Assad Syria**

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In dominant post-conflict narratives, return is cast as the triumphant closing chapter of displacement. In the legal architecture of internal displacement — from the 1998 UN Guiding Principles to the 2010 IASC Framework on Durable Solutions — it is defined more stringently, as sustainable reintegration conditional upon voluntariness, safety, and dignity. In practice, it is routinely operationalized as camp closure and the crossing of a line in the opposite direction of flight, collapsing a process-based legal standard into a discrete event. This presentation interrogates that collapse through the case of rural Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, where the return of millions of IDPs is unfolding across landscapes saturated with landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) contaminating 11 of the country's 14 governorates and subjecting an estimated 65 percent of the population — children above all — to chronic, open-ended risk.

Building on personal and professional engagement, and drawing on field testimonies from returning families, mine clearance volunteers, and camp and aid workers across rural Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zor, the presentation advances two arguments. First, return in post-Assad Syria operates as a discursive artefact rather than a substantive condition: the language of "safe and voluntary return" legitimizes the dismantling of displacement infrastructure — through the withdrawal of humanitarian funding, camp closures, and landowner pressures — while the conditions that would give such language its legal weight remain structurally absent. In the vacuum left by the absence of a national

clearance strategy, underequipped grassroots teams absorb a burden the state cannot meet, while the informal marketization of clearance reconfigures safety as a commodified privilege stratified along lines of property, geography, and capacity to pay. Second, situating these dynamics within the political ecology of war, the presentation reads landmine contamination, agrarian dispossession, and the deferral of environmental restoration as ecocidal practices through which armed conflict is reproduced beyond its celebrated end. Building on the critique that return to the status quo ante may constitute a return to the very conditions that (re)produced displacement, it reads these practices as an intensification rather than a rupture — a continuum running from Ba'athist uneven development and rural marginalization through the territorializations of the ISIS wars and the armed actors that followed. Return, in this context, is theorized not as the terminus of displacement but as its reverse face: an open-ended confrontation with the afterlives of war in soil, rubble, and the everyday interiors of domestic life.

The presentation argues that the paradox of return cannot be resolved without redefining security beyond the cessation of hostilities — as spatial, environmental, and ecological justice — and, consequently, corroborating ecocide as an international crime.

### **Situated Regeneration in Latin America: Institutional, Cultural, and Environmental Entanglements**

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Drawing on a sustained body of practice-based work across Latin America, Africa and Central Europe, this contribution offer a reflection on the challenges dictated by the discrepancies between the functioning and requirements of internationally-funded projects and the realities on the ground.

The contribution will , provides a reflection that incorporates the relationship between the human and natural components, particularly building upon the experience with the VLIR-UOS-funded Designing

Inclusion and Comunidades Resilientes initiatives in Guayaquil's ecologically fragile riverbank settlements, the design-research collaboration Urban Andes addressing climate change in Andean cities, and ongoing engagement with indigenous communal territories and dwelling struggles in Quito's Metropolitan District.

The author will trace the dynamics and challenges encountered in complying with grant-imposed timelines, bureaucratic procedures, and performance metrics, when these encounter local time flows, cultural and institutional practices, and geographical specificities.

Rather than cataloguing these as mere implementation failures, the contribution reads them as productive opportunities from which to extract concrete lessons to address and improve international collaboration. The contribution sets perspectives on possible adjustments to the setup and governance of international funding frameworks: from more adaptive project timelines and locally negotiated indicators to the structural inclusion of indigenous and community epistemologies as legitimate methodological foundations.

The result is a practice-informed argument for how international cooperation can be reconfigured to become genuinely responsive to situated conditions, rather than reproducing the extractive dynamics it purports to overcome.

## **Bridging Voices and Spaces: Community Participation in Africa and the Arab World through Analogical and Digital Innovation**

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Drawing on practice-based experience across North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Arabic-speaking countries navigating political instability, economic constraints, and uneven technological access, this contribution examines how gamification and interactive tools can fundamentally reframe the relationship between communities and the institutions shaping their public spaces and peri-urban environments.

Against a backdrop where participation is frequently tokenistic, governance opaque, and institutional trust chronically eroded, the author presents an overview of her experiences experimenting with the integration of digital and analogical, site-based tools that leverage on playfulness and interactivity to create accessible entry points for communities traditionally largely excluded from formal decision-making processes. The narrative reflects on how this approach contributes to the creation of a two-way stream: feeding bottom-up community knowledge, priorities, and spatial practices upward into institutional decision-making, while simultaneously improving transparency, accountability, and the legibility of governance processes downward to residents.

The contribution reflects critically on the contrasts between this approach and prevailing participatory practices in the region, identifying criticalities, cultural resistances encountered, as well as the unexpected openings that emerged, closing with a reflection on the conditions under which these methods can be scaled — weighing the promise of broader institutional adoption against the risks of standardisation, and arguing for a model of expansion that preserves the situated, relational quality from which their effectiveness derives.