

10 ideas

About the contemporary urban
condition in Paraguay

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These opening words address two audiences: the general public, and scholars and other professionals that develop work in Paraguay (either Paraguayans or not).

For the general public, I aspire to provide basic information about the country, not exactly a portray, but rather a quick sketch.

For the audience of Paraguayans, or internationals interested in Paraguay, I will attempt to provide some initial reflections about narratives that are predominant both in and about Paraguay.

Although the following thoughts were conceived having in mind the discussion of urban and territorial development, perhaps at least some of these ideas will also be relevant to other panels in this conference.

I will present 10 ideas,
in two categories of the
contemporary urban
condition in Paraguay.

5 characteristics
and
5 challenges



1. Urban Country

CHARACTERISTICS

In spite of its predominantly rural background and history, Paraguay is today a predominantly urban country.

We still don't believe it, but it is. According to the DGEEC (General Directorate for Statistics, Surveys and Census), it has been so since 1992—27 years ago—when 50.7% of the population was living in urban areas and 49.3% was living in rural areas.

For 2019, the percentages have changed to 62.1% of the national population living in urban areas and 37.9% of the population living in rural areas.

These percentages can be even higher if we consider the ideas of authors such as Neil Brenner (*Urban Theory Without an Outside*) or Grammont (*The Concept of a New Rurality*).

A photograph of a modern office environment. Several people are working at desks with laptops and papers. The office has large windows that offer a view of a city skyline with many skyscrapers. A man is standing in the background, and there is a large mural on the wall. The overall atmosphere is professional and focused.

2. Young Country

CHARACTERISTICS

A significant part of the Paraguayan population is young. In 2015, 31% was 15 years old or younger, 63% was between 15 and 64 years old, and only around 6% was older than 65 years).

Furthermore, the nation is entering a phase of demographic bonus.

However, education is a challenge to capitalize this historic opportunity.

In general terms, we must consider the challenge that the poor results in PISA tests represent to our society.

Speaking specifically about urban development, we must ponder about urbanization patterns and access to public schools and other educational facilities.

Furthermore, it is imperative to assess the results of the investments of FONACIDE (National Fund for Public Investment and Development) in the quality of schools and educational infrastructure.



3. Diverse Country

CHARACTERISTICS

Paraguay is a country with a vast cultural and ethnic diversity, including 19 indigenous collectivities grouped in 5 linguistic families, and migrants from around the world.

At the same time, the country faces important challenges to deal with regarding segregation based on cultural and ethnic identity, especially with respect to native populations.

Urban policies can be especially relevant in promoting integration among group members of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds: public spaces and public educational infrastructure, among others, can contribute to create spaces that promote positive exchanges among Paraguayan citizens of different backgrounds.



4. Prosperous, Yet Unequal Country

CHARACTERISTICS

There are conflicting images and discourses
about Paraguay both as a
poor, developing country
and as a
rich country with a booming economy.

And perhaps a way to understand this paradox of the “poor rich country” is to focus on inequality as a lens.

Inequality, in spite of all the improvements in poverty reduction in the past decades, is still stark.

Inequality can be measured in aspects such as income or land property. It can also be measured by other equally critical criteria such as the right to the city, and the access to public services and to a healthy environment (which are collective rights, not individual rights).



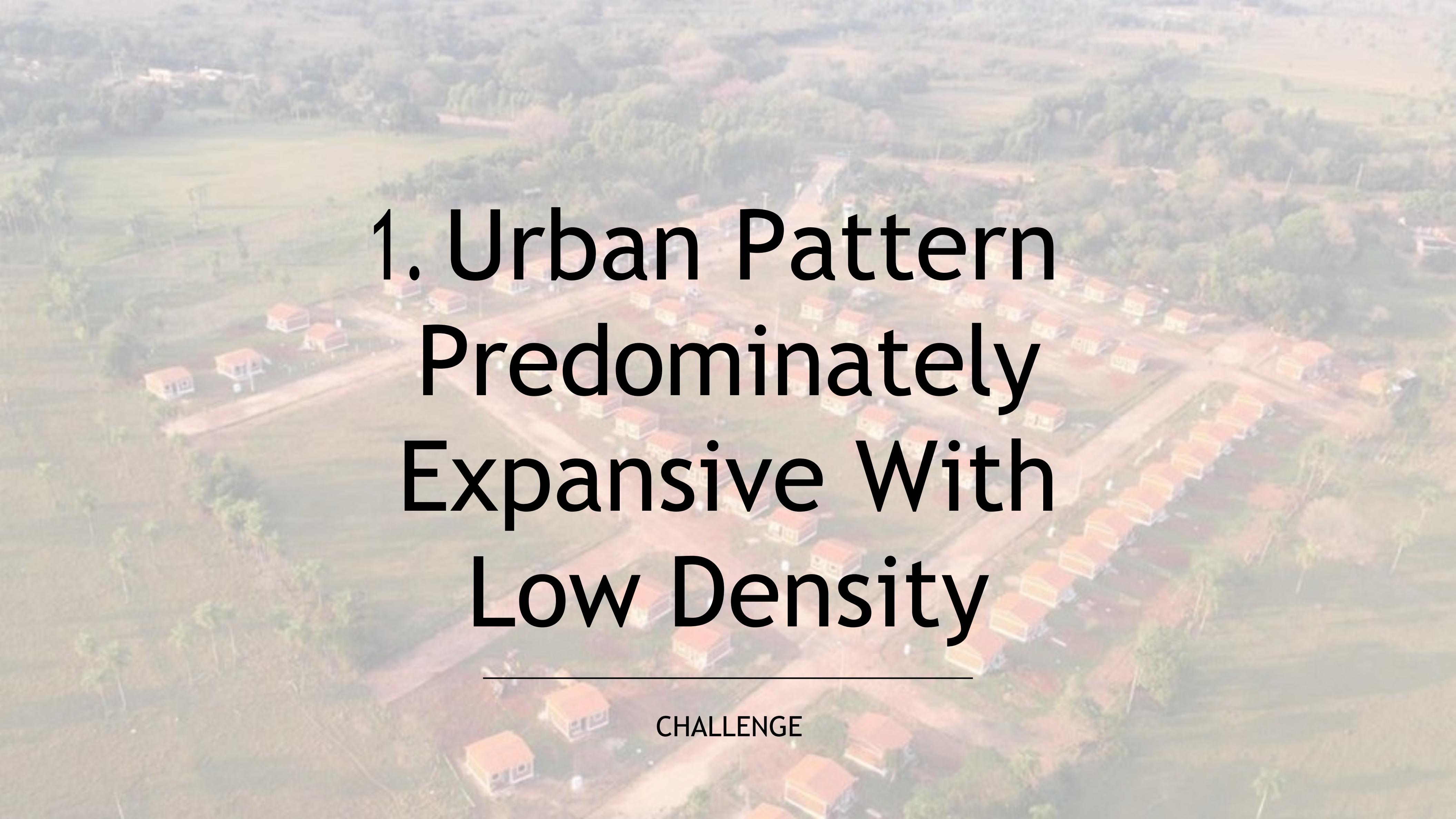
5. Country With Growing Economy in Need of Diversification

CHARACTERISTICS

The narrative of the rich country is based
on the significant economic growth over
the last years.

However this economic growth is heavily dependent upon commodities such as soybean and livestock breeding. Such activities are characterized by a high environmental impact, the displacement of peasant and indigenous populations, and the fragility vis-à-vis international price variations. Furthermore, in general terms, neither livestock breeding nor soybean are labor intensive activities, and their tax contributions are significantly low in the national budget structure.

Thus, the country faces the need to diversify its economy. In this regard, cities and the quality of available infrastructure are of paramount importance as spaces where talent can be developed and put into action, fostering new segments of activity, such as the creative economy.

A faint, semi-transparent aerial photograph of a rural area serves as the background for the text. The image shows a mix of green fields, some with small farm buildings, and a dense line of trees or a forest in the distance. The overall color palette is earthy tones of green, brown, and tan.

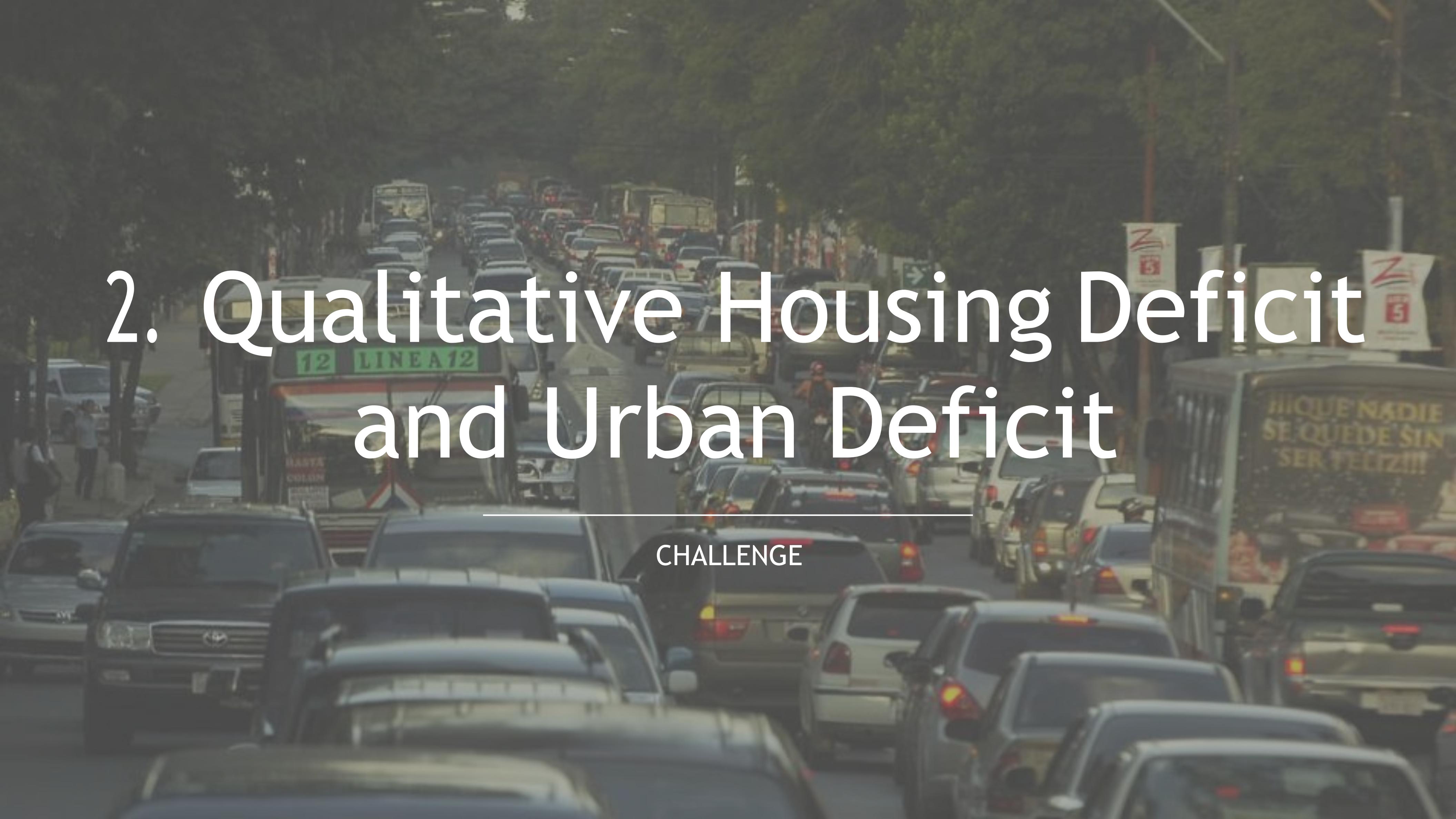
1. Urban Pattern
Predominately
Expansive With
Low Density

CHALLENGE

The country has witnessed a significant increase
in the real estate business over the last
years.

Yet, the predominant model is still one based on urban expansion, low density and lack of services and infrastructure. Low density expansion is coupled with emptying downtown central areas and historic districts.

This model (low density/no infrastructure) imposes higher costs (in time and money) upon low-income families, while producing inefficiencies that affect negatively all of our society.

A photograph of a city street, likely Mexico City, showing extreme air pollution. The sky is hazy and grey. The street is filled with a dense grid of cars, trucks, and billboards. One prominent billboard on the right side of the frame has text in Spanish: "HIQUE NADIE SE QUEDA SIN SER FELIZ!!".

2. Qualitative Housing Deficit and Urban Deficit

CHALLENGE

Quantitative housing deficit has been
controlled
(at least for now).

It is true, and we should celebrate
(and keep working!).

At the present moment, the most important deficit is qualitative (it represents 87.6% of the total deficit in 2012). Of the qualitative deficit, one part is related to specific housing conditions (overcrowding, poor quality of the buildings, etc.).

The other part of what is presently defined as qualitative housing deficit could actually be considered as an urban deficit: lack of sanitary infrastructure, paved streets, adequate schools and sanitary facilities, public space, etc.



3. Implementation Capacity in the Public Sector

CHALLENGE

Regarding urban deficit:
It is frequently expressed that
Paraguay lacks the financial resources
to face urban challenges.

However, there are important urban projects, such as Metrobus—a BRT initiative in Asunción and its metropolitan area—which has been stopped due to conflicts in management and implementation.

Furthermore, the deployment of urban infrastructure projects occurs, in general terms, without proper coordination. Thus, it is not unusual to pave a street to break it again just few weeks or months after, in order to build sewers.

Perhaps it is necessary to shift the emphasis from the pure concern about availability of resources to actively improve the quality of implementation capacity.



4. Strengthening of Local Governments

CHALLENGE

The democratic period, starting in 1989, has represented the opportunity to strengthen local governments.

However, to this day, and in spite of the relevant work that has already been done, significant efforts are required in order to build capacity on local governments and to train their staff.

5.

Better Data for Better Public Policies

CHALLENGE

Since the 1960s, Paraguay is in a process of change in urban and territorial configurations, and in the redistribution of its population at a national scale.

However, and in spite of the significant improvements, in many territories and fields of knowledge we still lack adequate information to capture such dynamics, in order to improve our understanding and be prepared for the arising challenges and potentialities that are related to urban and territorial change.

We need better demographic and geospatial databases in order to base the plans of projects upon evidence and reason.

These initial reflections are provided as a framework, which will be enriched throughout the conversations and exchanges we will have with the experts in the panel and members of the audience.

I hope that they may contribute to a critical re-elaboration of predominant narratives about Paraguay, and that, in turn, this enhanced comprehension of our potentialities and dilemmas may allow us to advance towards a more democratic, inclusive and sustainable urban future for the country.