

International co-operation in pursuit of sustainable cities

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Sustainability in the context of development is now generally understood to mean primarily *environmental* sustainability. This is rightly so, because environmental and, above all, resource problems of the future are issues that must be faced today. This paper, however, focuses attention more on the sustainability of the approaches adopted by external support agencies (ESAs) in their efforts to support projects and programmes in urban areas.¹ Of course, this does not exclude environmental sustainability which shares with the narrower concept a concern that successful urban programmes and projects should continue to yield results well into the future. But the intention here is to stimulate debate around the role of ESAs in their urban engagements, with the concept of environmental sustainability as a backdrop to the discussion.

The paper starts with a critical review of past attempts of international and bilateral agency to intervene in urban development. The recent refocusing of attention on urban development within the framework of 'sustainable development' has led to new kinds of initiative that are reviewed in the second part of the paper. As yet, however, these do not add up to anything like a coherent approach to support for urban sustainable development, and the third part of the paper attempts to identify new approaches and initiatives which relevant agencies might adopt to improve their performance. It will also be necessary for agencies to look seriously at 'bad practices' from the past that persist to a significant, if not overwhelming, degree among their activities in support of urban development. This is done with a view to undertaking thoroughgoing reform, not simply implementing a few 'best practice' projects that mask the realities of support for urban development. This issue is discussed in the final section.

Past problems in development agency support for urban projects

Northern 'development urbanists' and others involved in addressing problems in the cities of the South are generally aware that they are operating at the margins of the broad field of development. This seems increasingly perverse given that rapid urbanisation everywhere will lead to a situation within the foreseeable future where the majority of the world's population lives in urban areas and where urban problems become increasingly serious.

In the early years of what is now referred to as development work, in the context of the UN Charter and Bretton Woods agreement, it seemed clear that most attention should be focused on rural development. The majority of the population of the 'underdeveloped countries' lived in rural areas and the opportunities for improving their living conditions appeared to be great. Private international investment, as well as both public and private local investment, seemed to be concentrated in the cities (referred to at the time as 'urban bias') whereas the presumption – not without its detractors – was that improvements in rural productivity would be the foundation for a progressive development process.

Clearly, in this context little attention was paid to problems in urban areas. Many ESAs maintained a complete ban on urban projects and those that did fund them did so initially on an *ad hoc* basis in response to political exigencies. The first move towards recognising that urban problems also needed to be addressed by the ESAs was the 1976 Habitat conference, which led to the establishment of UNCHS (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, or Habitat), a *very* small addition to the UN family. There was little impact, however, on the policies and priorities of existing agencies. Arguably the most significant bilateral agency initiative was that of USAID in establishing Regional Housing and Urban Development Offices (RHUDOs). UNDP also became a presence in the field of urban planning and management, and World Bank projects were started up in the larger cities of some countries.

However, in spite of the world having changed radically in terms of the geographic location of populations and the economic development process as a whole, urban interventions have remained stubbornly on the margins of development assistance. According to Chapter 8 of 'Agenda 21', as recently as 1988 only 1 per cent of UN funding was assigned to projects relating to human settlements. Of course, a greater

amount was being spent in urban areas, but such funding (e.g. in health, education, roads, and energy supply) was not disbursed with any awareness of the particularities of planning and managing projects relating to urbanisation or in the urban context.²

Given this lack of interest in what might be the special characteristics of programmes and projects associated with urban areas, it is little wonder that the few activities that were supported encountered many problems. The tendency was for agencies encountering such problems then to retreat from involvement in the urban sector rather than increase resources to find out why projects weren't working and what might be done to improve matters. Essentially, funding decisions were based on internal agency prejudices about what was needed and who should be involved in determining how things should be done.

The first source of problems stemmed from the legal framework of the UN Charter, which required programmes and projects to be agreed, and generally controlled thereafter, by central government agencies. The centralised nature of most Southern governments, which inevitably meant that local authorities had little say in what was done – and other local actors even less – was a rather obvious reason for poor project performance: not only did corruption siphon off resources and distort priorities, but there was also a fatal lack of local knowledge on the part of responsible officers and, symmetrically, a lack of local understanding of why decisions were taken in the way they were.

There was an assumption among responsible staff and consultants that a significant reason for poor project performance was a lack of training of local authority staff, and some effort thus went into what were considered to be relevant training programmes. But in practice many of the staff knew well enough what to do in theory, but lacked motivation in situations in which they had little if any power to determine their own way of solving local problems.

In fact, until recently, ESA staff involved in urban programmes overwhelmingly assumed that what was needed was the consistent application of technocratic approaches to urban planning and management like those that had been successful in transforming European cities at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. These included the development of mechanisms to plan cities, the design and management of integrated urban traffic and transport systems, the installation of piped water supply and sewerage systems, the introduction of technically sophisticated solid waste removal and disposal systems, and so on.

Upon introducing these techniques to cities in the South, compromises were made to accommodate obvious differences, mainly stemming from what was perceived as lack of financial resources to implement the expensive approaches taken in Europe to solving urban problems. Ineffective management structures and processes, usually treated peripherally and often completely disregarded as a component of urban projects, were an ongoing weakness of these projects. Little or no thought was ever given to the possibility that cities might be fundamentally different organisms in different geographic and cultural contexts, and that they would therefore require, in large measure, locally developed approaches to solving urban problems.

Indeed, ESA urban development professionals appear to have been universally ignorant (or they decided to disregard the significance) of the way in which effective urban planning and management in European cities emerged from hard-fought political battles. In Europe, improved 'techniques' developed progressively on the back of social movements from the 'public health movement' in the 1850s in the UK, through the turn-of-century 'progressive movement' in the USA, to the current environmental movements and their insistence on raising standards to eliminate urban pollution. In this light, it makes little sense to import techniques unless there is genuine local demand and a deep political commitment to them.

The second major source of problems underlying such interventions was the assumption that governments were in control of the urban development process but that the laws and regulatory mechanisms were not yet working very well (i.e. in time, the development process would yield more effective controls). However, although the modern world insists that all countries be overseen by governments with a certain appearance of legal structures and administrative organs, in practice governments in different cultural contexts are different kinds of organism.

In practical terms, what this means in relation to urban development in many countries of the South (and we can draw a distinction between more coherent approaches to urban planning and development in cultures that have a longer history of urbanisation than in those with little such experience) is that governments have had relatively little control over the urban development process.

In few countries of the South has urban planning had much more than a marginal effect in guiding the development of cities. The placement of infrastructure has had a more significant impact in that

development is easier where there are, for instance, paved roads. But even the formal development sector has been able to disregard rules and follow its own path to profits, regardless of what might make a more pleasant and workable city for citizens as a whole. Meanwhile, a large proportion of urban development has been 'informal', following its own rationale – sometimes with harassment of governments and private landowners, but increasingly in a context of 'benign neglect' or even with some *post hoc* government and ESA assistance. 'Informal settlement upgrading' has by now joined the portfolio of a number of ESAs – although we should not exaggerate the extent of resources going into such projects, which nowhere reach even 5 per cent of official development assistance (ODA).

At the conceptual level, virtually no effort went into trying to understand the underlying processes and forces which created such cities and hence to discover what might be truly effective approaches to guide their development for the benefit of all. The overall concept seems to have been 'one day they will be like us', with a series of fragmented and contingent ways of dealing with the fact that these Southern cities and the processes of urbanisation were, rather obviously, *not* like those of the North.

New approaches in ESA support for urban development

Since the early 1990s, however, there seems to have been a gradual change of heart and understanding of what ESAs need to do to help improve conditions in cities of the South, and a growing commitment to becoming involved in supporting urban programmes and projects. Some agencies have produced policy documents that recognise the reality of rapid urbanisation in the South and the consequences of this in a situation of inadequate resources, powers, and capacities to guide the process. The best known of these are those produced by the World Bank (1991) and UNDP (1991). These were followed by many more policy and research publications by these agencies, including the World Bank Urban Management Programme (UMP) series, which was concerned with urban finance, land management, infrastructure, and the urban environment.

A number of bilateral ESAs, including those of Germany (BMZ 1995), Switzerland (SDC 1995), and Sweden (SIDA 1996) produced urban policy documents indicating a new interest in providing more

coherent assistance in urban development in the South. Habitat II in 1996 prompted many ESAs to focus attention on urban issues and to put out policy positions, led by the substantial *Global Report on Human Settlements* (UNCHS 1996).³ The World Bank, which picks up different themes in each report, focused major attention on urban development issues in 1999–2000 (World Bank 1999).

Urban research

There is evidence that ESAs are now looking for more detailed information that will help them to become more effective in supporting urban projects.⁴ Over a longer period, a number of Northern institutions have carried out research and published on issues relating to urbanisation and cities in the South. The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) are well-known examples – even if their work on urban issues is but a small part of their overall research activity. There are also academic institutions in the North that have long focused attention on urban problems in the South although, responding somewhat to the market, the focus has been mainly on training and practice, with little attention to research needs. In the South itself, there are many academic and research institutions that have been undertaking urban research, sometimes in collaboration with, or financially supported by, Northern institutions.

In the late 1990s, this area of activity has been opening up. A major review of urban research in the developing world under the title of Global Urban Research Initiative (GURI), funded by the Ford Foundation and co-ordinated by the University of Toronto, produced a string of papers and substantial books on Asia, on Africa, and on Latin America, plus a thematic volume (Stren 1995).⁵ Some of the bilateral ESAs have also expanded their research around urban themes. The focus of this research has varied greatly: from attempts to gain more coherent regional perspectives (e.g. the German Development Ministry's effort to analyse the state of play in participatory initiatives in sustainable urban development in Asia, see Samol 1999), to research programmes on approaches to understanding the processes of urban–rural interactions in the South (e.g. the Club de Sahel research into urban–rural interactions in West Africa, see Court 1998), to the DFID-funded peri-urban interface research programme, see DPU 1999).

The GURI programme focused attention on urban research being undertaken in the South, and aimed to strengthen networks among

such research groups. This, and the work of the UMP, while more oriented towards the immediate needs of practitioners, remained exceptional in their attempt to be coherent across a range of research areas. Most of the research carried out by Northern institutions and consultancies on urbanisation and urban issues in the South has been fragmented with inadequate dissemination (some of it for lack of translation) and poor networking among researchers.⁶ The Network Association of European Researchers on Urbanisation in the South (N-AERUS) was established to improve communication precisely in this area.

There has been an increase not only in general policy development and research, but also in assistance to relevant national agencies in certain countries, with a view to developing national urban policies and research capacity. UNDP and UNCHS have been the most active in this regard but there has also been some bilateral agency assistance. Clearly, such policy frameworks are important in order to facilitate a more coherent approach to ESA support for urban work, both to ensure support from the national government and also as an informational basis for providing perspective on the current situation and how assistance might be most effective.

'Good governance'

Until quite recently, the term 'governance' was rarely used and esoteric. Some would say it is still esoteric. Indeed, although it has become very widely used in development circles – many ESAs have adopted the achievement of 'good governance' as a major policy goal in development assistance – there is still a considerable lack of clarity as to what should be done under this heading. Perhaps this has to do with shyness about approaching the issues implicit in the term in a more direct manner, given that it points to direct interference in the politics of countries of the South. However, it ends up with agencies carrying out very different activities under the same rubric, and perhaps avoiding the ostensible aims of such support.

At one end, it has been assumed that the privatisation of public services and enterprises, which has also been an important policy goal of some agencies – especially USAID – is part of the more general promotion of good governance. This stems from the apparent 'inefficiencies' of government monopolies, which privatisation programmes are supposed to replace with 'more efficient' services provided by private businesses. While there are certainly success

stories in, for instance, water supply and solid waste disposal in Southern cities, there are also limits to the possibilities.

On the one hand, ineffective regulation and corruption (see below) easily vitiate the whole purpose of privatisation, simply making profits for those companies that manage to obtain contracts to supply goods or carry out services, without necessarily improving matters. On the other hand, the supply of services to poor urban neighbourhoods (in many cities of the South, these constitute the majority of households) does not lend itself to privatisation in the usually accepted sense. Community self-help is proving to be a more effective approach here. Finally, although productive enterprises are the main focus of privatisation programmes, a simplistic division of public and private obviously cannot be equated with a distinction between efficient and inefficient. It is well known that in some Asian countries it is precisely the close connections between government (and not uncorrupt governments at that) and private enterprise that have proved the key to economic success – notably in Japan and South Korea and more recently China and Vietnam. In the end, the drive to privatise has more to do with ideology than an improvement in governance or real proven benefit to urban citizens.

In some cases, equity and particularly gender programmes fall under, or are seen as closely related to, ESAs' governance programmes. Certainly, it is difficult to talk of good governance in a situation where large sections of the population are *de facto* excluded from the benefits of development: where self-help is the predominant mode of provision of goods and (urban) services, governance is evidently not fair in the way that it looks after the needs of all citizens. Perhaps 'poverty alleviation' (or, nowadays, 'poverty elimination') *should* be seen as essentially a governance issue.

In reality, it would seem that the central concern of good governance programmes is the issue of corruption. Some ESAs have programmes specifically to address this question, but it is the political sensitivity of the issue that leads to the tendency to avoid addressing the matter directly. One problem is that ESAs have, in fact, colluded in corruption, albeit usually indirectly (e.g. their contractors have to pay officials to facilitate their development activities). For instance, in Indonesia, after the fall of the Suharto régime, the agenda was for reform and against corruption, collusion, and nepotism (locally 'KKN'). The fact that the World Bank had colluded in corruption became open knowledge and the Bank had to respond – which it did by 'estimating' that perhaps 30

per cent of its loans had been siphoned off into accounts other than those that produced the intended goods and services (Manning 1999).

In fact, 'corruption' is rarely the result of individual acts of graft and extortion. Most of it is systematic and a real part of the way that not only governments but also societies work. The relative 'good governance' to be found in Europe today resulted from social movements of a century and more ago which separated 'public service' from personal – or extended family – interests. In many, if not most, countries of the South, extended family or other 'patronage' or 'clientelist' networks are still the 'real' way that politics and social relations work. Unless these are uncovered and unless social movements arise to push for transparency, things will remain as they are. Social and political changes *are* in motion – and it is clear how changes in the government, for instance in South-East Asia, have been a function of the changing nature of the societies (Atkinson 2000). In this perspective, it is difficult for ESAs to mount 'good governance' programmes that go to the heart of the matter and expect to have the governments acquiesce where this potentially means their own demise, given that these are precisely the people who benefit from the continuance of corrupt practices!

Participatory approaches

One of the problems which led in the past to the under-performance of ESA-supported urban projects was that they were run through central government agencies rather than local government. Part of the new approach to supporting urban projects and programmes involves ESAs funding projects in which local actors are more directly involved in project development and implementation. Various mechanisms are being employed to do this, some of which are described below.

First, some funding is being channelled more or less directly to NGOs working in urban areas. This includes the funding of Northern NGOs to collaborate with local NGOs and community-based organisations working at the local level. Some resources – the UNDP LIFE programme being a good example – are going directly to Southern NGOs working at the urban level. Such projects are always small in terms of resources, in most cases addressing specific local problems predominantly in poor areas, but in some cases adopting a broader community development approach.

A second approach, sometimes referred to as 'decentralised co-operation', is a mechanism through which Northern municipalities co-operate with their Southern counterparts (Douxchamps 1997;

Ringrose 1999).⁷ This has grown out of the ‘twinning’ (or ‘*jumelage*’) movement by which many Northern towns and cities became linked with one another in the decades following the Second World War. Increasingly, Northern towns and cities are twinning with Southern towns and cities (and sometimes institutions within these are forging links) with the intention of exchanging experiences and, in the process, attempting to improve the development processes of rapidly growing Southern cities. Some national municipal associations – notably in Canada, France, The Netherlands, the UK, and the USA – are providing advice and assistance to develop such links, and some ESAs are also funding such initiatives. The European Commission-financed URBS programmes (which promote co-operation between European and Southern local authorities) are a notable example of the latter.

Third, ESAs are finding ways of organising programmes and projects more directly with local authorities and communities without going through central government agencies. There are various formulas for this which include relatively traditional urban planning and management assistance projects, often focusing on particular sectors, lasting one or two years and operated by foreign consultants, but now working directly with local agencies. There has also been an increase in the number of longer-term urban projects that are developing in a more flexible way through local organisations and institutions. This new approach is not only being pursued by certain bilateral ESAs and UN agency programmes (such as the WHO Healthy Cities programme and the URBS programme), but most recently also by the regional development banks, including the World Bank. In all these cases, the watchword is ‘participation’. There has been a broad realisation of the need to involve ‘stakeholders’ more directly in projects in order to elicit a greater sense of commitment and ‘ownership’ of project outputs.

A final point about ‘participation’ concerns the way in which initial decisions are taken about programmes and projects. Traditionally, development co-operation starts through bilateral negotiations, whereby delegations from donor agencies discuss what activities should be financed with relevant government officials in ‘recipient’ countries. In practice, the tendency is that ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’: donor agencies are able to influence matters in favour of their own priorities, rather than those of the receiving countries. Furthermore, government officials who happen to be part of the negotiating process are likely also to favour projects that suit them, rather than representing broader constituencies.

Back in 1970, when the Canadian government created the International Development Research Council (IDRC), it experimented with providing a budget directly to a board, half of which was made up of representatives of Southern countries, which would determine the content of the programme. Later, similar arrangements have been attempted by other agencies including the Swedish Agency for Research Co-operation with Developing Countries (SAREC) (since absorbed into SIDA), the Dutch (for example, the Urban Waste Expertise Programme), and recently the French programme *Gestion Durable de Déchets et l'Assainissement Urbain*. The above-mentioned European-funded URBS programmes similarly are overseen by boards made up of experts from relevant participating regions. It cannot be said, however, that there is any rapid move to adopt such decision-making mechanisms.

Sustainable urban development

A further high-profile shift in priorities of ESAs has been to focus attention upon problems associated with the urban environment. This is often linked to a concern that, in future, projects must conform to the requirements of 'sustainable development'. This has had various, not necessarily linked, consequences. First, it should be noted that in many cases 'environment' is little more than a new term for certain kinds of traditional urban projects. When the environment came to the fore of public concerns in the late 1980s, it came associated particularly with fears about global pollution and the loss of resources such as tropical rainforests and fisheries. Those who had been working with urban infrastructure projects in the past feared that, yet again, budgets that should be spent in urban areas would be hijacked for non-urban projects aimed at addressing the newly urgent global environmental problems. Efforts were made, therefore, to ensure that the urban environment would also be seen as an important issue. The World Bank Urban Division coined the term 'brown agenda', asserting the importance of financing urban infrastructure projects, including (clean) water supply, sanitation and solid waste management, and air pollution controls, over the demands of the global environmental lobby.

On the other hand, growing out of the deeper concerns of the environmental movement and in particular the process emerging from the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development – specifically 'Agenda 21' – some ESA funding has gone into 'Local

Agenda 21' programmes and projects. In practice, these exercises look much like any other participatory urban development project concerned with improving living conditions and 'empowering' local communities. They do, however, effect a certain shift in focus towards environmental matters and attempt to link into 'Agenda 21' and its concern for environmentally sustainable development.

Despite the new rhetoric of environment and sustainable development, there is no clear indication that more funding is going even into traditional urban (environmental) infrastructure projects (Atkinson and Allen 1998). Further, projects explicitly concerned with sustainable cities (including 'Local Agenda 21' projects) have remained few and small (see articles by Kombe and Burian in this volume).

Contextual issues

In the light of these observations about the reorientation of ESA attention towards the field of urban development, it is useful to stand back and see how this relates to broader trends. The first thing is that, in spite of the apparently greater interest in urban problems and awareness of the need for more attention to be focused on addressing these, there is as yet no statistically significant shift in funding priorities of ESAs towards urban activities. Given that it is almost ten years since the World Bank and UNDP policy papers were circulated, and almost five years since Habitat II, we might have expected to see some change.

The second point concerns the rhetoric regarding ESA support for urban projects. Most agencies state as their first priority (or one of the first priorities) that they wish to contribute to the alleviation – or, more recently, the elimination – of poverty, which is in fact in many countries growing considerably faster in urban than in rural areas (UNCHS 1996). The channelling of resources to NGOs working at community level and the significant attention paid by some agencies to projects concerned with upgrading informal housing areas would seem to stem from this. However, little or no attention is paid to the way in which the wider conditions are undermining local efforts to alleviate poverty. In particular, the promotion of neo-liberal macro-economic policies and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) have had the effect of increasing poverty in a way that cannot be meaningfully addressed by urban community programmes (UNRISD 1995).

Given the varied impacts of neo-liberalism and the diversity of urban projects in different countries it is perhaps somewhat specious to take

just one example to illustrate the above point. Nevertheless, it is useful to provide some illustration and for this we shall draw on the author's own experience in Indonesia, which for many years has been the subject of a significant amount of attention paid to urban development by ESAs.⁸ This is reasonable given the rapidity of urbanisation in Indonesia, indicated the fact that by 1990 as many as ten metropolitan areas had populations of over one million.

Official figures show a steady reduction of poverty to a level of around 11 per cent in early 1997. However, with the collapse of the economy in July that year, poverty levels rose steadily over the following 18 months to over 50 per cent of the population. The immediate cause was massive speculation against the currency following deregulation of the exchange rate. There is certainly no proof that in the long run the exchange rate deregulation will lead to the enrichment of the Indonesian people: this action was carried out according to the ideology of global liberalisation.

Interestingly, it was realised immediately by the development agencies that the impacts of the sudden rise in poverty would be particularly evident in urban areas – and, indeed, many industries immediately came to a halt. Tens of thousands of urban workers were laid off, which affected them, their families, and all those supplying them with goods and services (Lee 1999). The ESA community reacted quickly, with most agencies present in Indonesia mounting emergency programmes (BAPPENAS/UNDP 1998), a significant number of these explicitly directed at alleviating urban poverty.

Most significant among these was a series of World Bank initiatives involving a programme of supporting community organisations to disburse funds to support local activities including infrastructure, health, and environmental improvement initiatives. There was much pragmatic logic to these programmes: to inflate the currency by inserting large amounts of dollars; to go directly to poor communities in order to by-pass that layer of corruption that could export illegal takings; and to go into urban areas because more money could be spent there more quickly than in rural areas.

In other words, an apparent conversion to decentralised urban community initiatives was actually mainly about macro-economic manipulation in an attempt to compensate for the dire effects of liberalisation. Implementation of these programmes ran far more slowly than envisaged (thereby presumably losing much of the intended macro-economic impact). However, implementation was

rapid enough to necessitate a very loose attitude towards the creation of local structures of accountability, and ran the risk of simply 'decentralising corruption' rather than creating any genuine community development or empowerment.

This attention to the context within which urban projects and programmes are implemented is, however, new and exceptional. Hitherto, these have been organised, as noted earlier, in a manner that was blind to the differences in the social, cultural, and political contexts into which they were being inserted. They were also insensitive to the way in which the wider political and indeed ideological context determined priorities both within and beyond the project in ways that might not, in the end, be in the interest of putative project beneficiaries.

Essentially, although a new orientation appears to have been entering into the definition of urban projects supported by ESAs, there has been relatively little reflection on the ideological context within which the new approaches are unfolding and the contradictions inherent in these. Nor has there been much reflection on the need to develop a more consistent 'paradigm' that will make sense of the new initiatives and provide a robust framework for evaluating the likelihood of success.⁹ It is no good supporting urban sectoral projects or even community development (or 'empowerment') projects unless steps are taken to combat a macro context that consistently leads to further impoverishment of local communities. At the same time, it seems that far more serious thought needs to go into the meaning of sustainable development and how to achieve it in relation to the ongoing process of urbanisation in the countries of the South.

Consistency in ESA support for urban programmes and projects

Below, we offer some thoughts in the direction of a new paradigm for ESA support for urban development programmes and projects. These grow out of our earlier critique, although we recognise that elements of a new paradigm are already evolving. Of course, we have selected particular themes and avoided or rejected others, with the aim of stimulating discussion.

Increasing ESA support for urban programmes and projects

This paper is premised on the view that a greater proportion of ESA resources should go into addressing urban problems, so no attempt is made here to argue the point in any detail (Atkinson and Allen 1998).

It is worth noting, however, a couple of points concerning the resistance of ESAs to making the necessary shift in resources.

The first reason seems to have to do with inertia within the agencies. Having been born in a world that demanded rural development, they find it difficult to adjust to the new realities. The experience and knowledge of the corps of senior professionals relates overwhelmingly to rural development or to sectors which do not relate directly to urban development as such, and they are not prepared to move into the unknown.¹⁰ The argument is reiterated that urbanisation is nothing but a bundle of problems and that rural development should be supported in order to keep people on the land.¹¹

A further reason is illustrated by cases where urban projects have been attempted by ESAs, but the complexity of working in this context, with the greater number of affected and involved actors and increased sensitivity to social and environmental impacts of even small interventions, has resulted in a decision to avoid developing projects in cities.

What general approach should be taken to developing urban programmes and projects?

Urban programmes and projects require a different orientation from the traditional short project with definite physical outputs. Here is a sketch of how an ideal type of urban programme developed by an ESA might look:

- It is extremely difficult to insert a narrowly defined sectoral project into an urban area without being involved in wider aspects of the way in which the city works. Urban projects need to be multi-dimensional. If they try to avoid being so, they are almost guaranteed to yield sub-optimal outputs with respect to their main aims.¹²
- It is also difficult to make a positive sustainable impact in a short period (short-term insertion of technical infrastructure, for instance, almost always ends in sub-optimal usage and management or even in outright failure). Urban projects need to be flexible and open-ended in terms of duration and scope, developing confidence and complex working relationships, and deciding what needs to be done. The project can then evolve and grow according to needs identified as it develops; alternatively, if insuperable difficulties arise, then the project can be taken in different directions or wound down.

- Working with local (poor) communities in this way can be effective in producing local improvements, but it also requires engagement with, and commitment from, the municipality and possibly also relevant national agencies.
- One programme that has attempted to create a model for urban intervention is the World Bank Metropolitan Environmental Improvement Programme (MEIP). This suggested a three-stage process: (i) starting simultaneously with local community projects, building confidence and working relationships, and at the same time undertaking strategic studies at the level of the city as a whole; (ii) followed by pilot projects on various issues, as determined by selected local communities and municipal decision-making processes developed in the first stage; and (iii) the development of larger-scale projects, possibly scaling up successful pilot projects or providing the larger-scale infrastructure necessary for local infrastructure to operate effectively.
- So, urban projects should ideally be projects for whole towns or cities. But what should be taken as the extent of the city? Given the tendency today for towns and cities to extend their influence (particularly economic and environmental) well into the surrounding countryside, and given the insuperable difficulty of organising suburban (peri-urban) projects without engaging the core urban areas, urban projects should ideally include a significant subregion beyond the immediate city boundaries.
- How should the cities be chosen? All too easily, urban projects are established through political exigencies so that it only later emerges that these did not correspond to the optimal choice. A set of criteria needs to be established and a longer process engaged in with national and local actors before decisions are taken on where to initiate urban projects. This suggests the need for a national urban programme with one or more city projects.
- Within a national programme, other activities that need to be undertaken include providing support for the development of national urbanisation policy and information systems, support for urban training programmes, support for research programmes, and so on.
- Of course, only the largest ESAs will become involved in all aspects of urban programmes in all countries. Just as many agencies choose a limited number of countries in which to work, so also with urban

projects. In fact it is imperative that agencies develop mechanisms to exchange experiences with one another regularly, and also decide upon a division of labour and possibly also of territory. For instance, several agencies might co-operate at the level of global regions, each specialising in what they do best and co-operating as necessary in national programmes and even in urban projects (e.g. through decentralised co-operation). Obviously, such collaboration needs to include relevant actors and stakeholders from the countries and cities in question, including in strategic planning decisions.

Some detailed considerations

There is a learning curve to all new kinds of initiative and many mistakes are made in the process of starting up what would appear to be excellent new approaches. It is to be hoped that lessons will be learned regarding how to go about these new approaches, and that they do not end in a retreat just because it seems too difficult to get it right. Here are a few thoughts regarding the new approaches discussed in the second part of this paper:

- It might be expected from the quantity of resources going into research on urbanisation and urban issues in the South, that useful information will become more available. This will not happen, however, unless there is a marked improvement in disseminating research findings among all involved actors, North and South, be they individuals, institutions, or agencies. There is an increasingly urgent need for networking between research institutions. But, above all, there is a need for the research to be oriented towards the needs of practitioners. This might mean more action-research in particular locations involving local stakeholders, and with researchers engaging more directly with agency staff responsible for developing and managing projects. Unfortunately, on the whole, agency staff 'have too little time' to indulge in reading either theory that might help them better organise their thought processes regarding what makes an effective project, or the outputs of practical research that provide information on the details necessary to understand what projects should be trying to achieve and how to go about reaching those ends effectively.

Because agency staff are assumed to have little time to read, it is assumed that they need to be spoon-fed with 'show-and-tell' guidelines on how to put together programmes and projects. In fact,

it is questionable whether such guidelines are any more useful to agency staff than more sophisticated research outputs. The real issue is that agencies need to be convinced of the importance of good research to good programme and project formulation and administration, and that agency staff are allowed the necessary time to absorb the findings from such research before coming to conclusions on programme and project design. Researchers need to convince agency staff of the usefulness of research outputs to the efficiency and effectiveness of their work.

- It has been argued above that 'good governance' is a cover for a multiplicity of development objectives. On the one hand, a grand word to elevate otherwise low-profile activities that were underway even before the term 'governance' came into currency in development circles. On the other hand, a code for efforts to combat corruption. In the case of privatisation as a means to improve governance, it is now clear that promoting the interests of the private sector has to be rethought in terms of the difficulties of obtaining the resources necessary to improve the level of services among the poor. Indeed, efforts to work laterally to develop the capacities of the 'informal economy' and to include in this methods, for instance, of promoting community-based infrastructure construction and maintenance programmes, seem more appropriate for much of the urban South than any conventionally inspired privatisation programme – and this is increasingly recognised by ESAs working on urban issues (Haan *et al.* 1998).

Regarding the combating of corruption more directly, it may help to involve sociologists and anthropologists in generating a better understanding of how the relevant societies and political systems work in practice. Such research may be contentious, but it is necessary to be more honest about the meaning of 'good governance' in order to address the problems more effectively. If the aim is to improve the quality of life of the majority of urban citizens in the South – therefore including the poor and hence aiming directly at alleviating or eliminating poverty – then work will have to go into bringing more accountable governments into being. This will mean encouraging efforts to create transparency and to undermine existing incentives that keep corrupt practices alive. But this will take more imagination and commitment on the part of the ESAs than they have shown to date.

- Decentralised co-operation holds much promise. A major problem with conventional development co-operation is that it is carried out by national governments on behalf of an electorate who – as with so much that governments do – are therefore deprived of the direct experience of what is done in their name. Further (and this is the author's personal feeling from many years working in this field), it often seems that there is a rather large accountability gap between the ostensible political reasons for development co-operation and the way it is actually put into practice. North–South town twinning provides opportunities for the electorate to participate directly in development co-operation. There has, for sure, been much to criticise about 'town twinning' where councillors have used it to enjoy themselves at the expense of local citizens. But there has also been a mass of good experience where ordinary citizens have been able to meet and collaborate with people in culturally diverse places, to their mutual enrichment.

Until now, most twinning has been between Northern towns and cities. Now that there is a significant growth of city-to-city development co-operation between Northern and Southern cities (and local institutions such as schools and hospitals), a new set of problems arises. Here also the potential is great for personal cultural exchange of citizen groups, of professionals from different sectors, and so on. However, in the first instance, the cultural gap is great and the assumptions about what people will find when they come into contact are often quite problematic. In particular, local government personnel from the North can easily come with ideas about the superiority of what they have to offer ('we are going to give them the benefit of our superior knowledge and abilities'). Or they are faced with situations where their knowledge of how to deal with problems is irrelevant in one or more ways – too expensive, or assuming different legal competences, or insensitive to cultural differences, or simply a major language barrier.

What is required is that Northern municipalities—and any other institutions with a significant reason to engage in decentralised co-operation – develop relevant training programmes for individuals or groups who are to participate in development co-operation. In practice, the municipal associations of some European countries are already providing a service to help municipalities wishing to engage in decentralised co-operation. In this context, bilateral ESAs should

provide assistance not only to individual co-operation projects but also to building up the necessary support infrastructure. In the long run, one could envisage a significant decanting of national development assistance out of the centralised agencies and into decentralised channels.

There is also space for South–South twinning or for consortia of Southern municipalities to study problems and their solutions among themselves and then to disseminate the results through municipal networks and associations. Some ESA support has been given to Southern associations (such as CityNet in Asia), and this has yielded exchanges that have had positive results (CityNet 1994, 1996). The URBS programmes, already mentioned, are concerned with establishing consortia of municipalities (Northern and Southern together) in order to improve their performance around particular themes and activities.

One more, perhaps tangential but nevertheless related, dimension of decentralisation of the development co-operation process concerns the decision-making processes of the ESAs. In recent years, some Northern governments have made discretionary funds available to their embassies, thereby shortening the bureaucratic chain that so often stymies small projects that need financial assistance at relatively short notice. ESAs are also tending to listen more carefully to local voices in formulating programmes and projects by decentralising more of the programme formulation to their own local offices.

- The need to apply participatory approaches to urban projects is now largely accepted, at least at the level of rhetoric. Getting it right, however, is not so straightforward. The first problem is that popular methods such as rapid appraisal can easily be used in a superficial way to obtain rough (and possibly erroneous) information that is then used in a very *un*-participatory way to determine what should be done and how. Such perfunctory approaches should clearly be avoided, but are, in practice, rather common.

A related problem concerns how representative these participatory planning activities really are. This is actually a very difficult matter to get right. Generally, there are political constraints on projects that easily trap such exercises into creating participatory forums that continue to exclude important groups because of schisms within the community. These divisions may be religious, ethnic, along gender or class or caste lines, or simply personal in nature.

Genuinely participatory planning exercises almost inevitably challenge existing social and political relations, and using the concept and mechanisms in an honest fashion requires practitioners to face up to this fact. They therefore need to be done over a longer period, working with communities and using an increasing number of tools available to the practitioner for accessing and incorporating otherwise 'silent voices'. This should help to ensure that the processes are at least more representative than is the case where participation is restricted only to 'official' and other vocal groups and individuals.

- A logical extension of the interest in promoting participation of beneficiaries in Northern-funded development projects would be to see more cases where boards including, or made up of, representatives from Southern countries oversee the disbursement of funds or the implementation of development assistance programmes. There is, however, little sign of any significant growth in such an approach.

Certainly, a general move in this direction would be politically unacceptable: in the end, much co-operation will remain a matter of steering political relations at least as much as solving developmental problems. It therefore needs to be argued how participation at the basic decision-making level in terms of projects should be done in a way that is relevant to particular programmes. No doubt there is scope for considering how participation can be brought further up the line, so that it does not merely remain a harmless sop to self-help initiatives. Of course, there is a real problem at every level that 'participation' may be there solely for ideological convenience, and that committees, councils, and boards are created that are denied access to real decisions or control over finances in practice, while the appearance of participation is maintained.

- Sustainable urban development is another heading whose intellectual content must be questioned. The sustainability of many initiatives is highly questionable by any definition of the term. 'Sustainable for whom?' is a very good question. As in the case of participatory planning exercises, the political context of many projects makes it difficult to raise the issue of sustainability in any serious way: immediate problems seem so urgent that it appears a luxury to spend resources in thinking about the more distant future, and about social and environmental problems beyond the immediate context of local actions.

But ill-considered actions that seem to solve local problems are likely to have longer-term consequences that make things a good deal worse than they were originally. Examples of this run the full gamut of self-help initiatives which serve to trap poor communities into a permanent state of subservient economic and environmental conditions, through to solid waste management systems that improve on the disposal of waste but do nothing to conserve resources, to solutions of transport problems that reduce air pollution while increasing the need for non-renewable fossil-fuel resources.

Sadly, while the literature on sustainable development, and specifically sustainable cities, is burgeoning (Satterthwaite 2000), there is as yet very little sign of any coherent approach emerging within the framework of urban co-operation programmes. Perhaps this requires more time, given the extent of the challenge posed by the concept of sustainability to almost all aspects of development. Certainly, attempts are being made, such as in the development of sustainable development indicators and in occasional sectoral approaches (e.g. ICLEI's CO₂ reduction programme). However, anyone using the term 'sustainable (urban) development' should be honest about the extent to which any project thus described is in reality taking any concerted or consistent approach to the issue.

- Regarding the changing international context within which urban programmes and projects are being formulated and implemented, there is certainly room for increased analysis of potential impacts on people at the local level within development projects. Unfortunately, there is little debate among staff of development agencies, and even less among consultants carrying out projects on behalf of these agencies, regarding the basic reasons why they are being employed to do this work. Needless to say, this is on the whole rather sensitive, as it potentially has an impact on promotion prospects and even on job security. And yet it would seem a labour of Sisyphus – not to say rather hypocritical – to be involved, for instance, in local poverty-reduction programmes where the very ideological and political context within which these are being implemented tends to create the poverty in the first place!

Of course, there has been much academic debate about these issues in the past: one merely has to think of the debates in the 1970s about 'centre-periphery' theories (which were too contentious to be

admitted and hence studiously ignored by the development agencies).¹³ All that needs to be added here is that there is an urgent need to renew these debates and not let the machinery carry on without critical insight.

Concluding remarks

We would reiterate the need to find whatever means to reorient ESAs towards the urban realities of today; and their responsibility, if they wish to remain relevant, to address urgent problems in urban development. In the author's experience, there is a far stronger desire on the part of Southern governments for bilateral resources to be directed to solving urban problems than is reflected in the resources allocated by the agencies.

But if greater attention is to be focused on urban development, then the way in which programmes and projects are constructed and managed needs to change. As noted, there are pioneering programmes that show the way towards flexible and open-ended ways of co-operating. But, in spite of moves by a few ESAs to acknowledge the problem and to reorganise their activities along programme lines, the 'project approach' remains dominant. In the way that ESA bureaucracies work, it appears to be more convenient to run projects over relatively short timeframes, and close the books within discrete funding periods. It is also easier to demonstrate project 'successes' not only in 'commodifying' them within short time periods, but also in producing hard 'deliverables' that can be shown – physically, if possible – to anyone who might be sceptical of project benefits. It is against this background that the new approaches have to be launched, if necessary by changing the internal goals and structures of the agencies themselves.

A further underlying factor is the complexity of the very reasons for development co-operation. While it is generally presented as a more or less philanthropic gesture on the part of the more fortunate North, where the electorate might feel some moral duty to assist the less fortunate, this is clearly naïve. There are many reasons for development co-operation (Atkinson 1995) ranging from national political aims to forge good relations between governments and with particular interests, through pressure from private industry to sell their goods, and also including public sentiment concerning the desire to alleviate poverty in the South. There is also opposition to, and sometimes public

scrutiny of, the content of co-operation programmes, to which governments must be sensitive.

The outcome is a complex compromise that cannot be dealt with through simple assumptions on the part of 'concerned citizens' with regard to what should be taking place. That does not, however, mean that concerned citizens (and development researchers and workers) should not continue to push for changes in the way that development assistance programmes (urban or otherwise) are identified, developed, and executed. Indeed, everyone concerned should be urged to spend some of their time distancing themselves from the immediate development tasks and making whatever contribution they can towards improving the way that things are done.

One more suggestion thus returns to the outline of a new paradigm for urban programmes and projects presented in the third part of this paper. The case needs to be put loudly, clearly, and frequently to the ESAs that urban projects should not be defined in terms of short-term sectoral inputs but that the typical urban project should be flexible, open-ended, and integrative of many aspects and many interests within those urban areas where they are located.

The second point here is that urban projects need participants who are socially (possibly anthropologically) and politically aware of the situation in which projects are developing. The pure administrators and technicians, while having a place, should seek good advice (and be prepared to take it) on the nuances of the situation in which the project finds itself. Finally, we can only hope that neo-liberalism will soon have run its course and that more attention can be given to the creation of more regional and subregional frameworks for development that protect local gains against the 'backwash' (the predatory nature) of the global economy.¹⁴

A closing plea (one that has often been made before and will continue to be made well into the future) is for greater collaboration between ESAs working in the urban field. While there are, unfortunately, strong political reasons for non-co-operation that stem from the competition between 'donor governments' and, with regard to international agencies, between agencies and even internally between departments, constant efforts need to be made to overcome these. In some fields and some countries, better co-operation has been forged and there are thus models that need to be promoted.

One model is of collaboration between agencies on a regional basis where each agency or type of agency contributes what it does best.

The METAP programme on the Mediterranean environment, co-ordinated by the World Bank but with the active participation of half a dozen other international and bilateral agencies, has succeeded in implementing some innovative projects. Some governments have forced co-operation between agencies or, in other cases where there were embarrassing consequences arising from lack of co-operation, forums have been convened by the ESAs themselves to minimise conflict and overlap. Such forums seem to have arisen only in areas where development co-operation has become crowded.

One such situation has arisen in Indonesia, noted in the second section of this paper, where ESA support of urban development programmes has indeed become crowded. The result has been a call on the part of the national planning agency, BAPPENAS, for all agencies involved or interested in supporting such programmes to meet regularly, to exchange information, and to co-ordinate their efforts. We would argue that some mechanisms for collaboration in urban development should become a standard part of the new approach to ESA involvement in urban development as and when resources are redirected in a more definite way into this field.

Notes

- 1 ESA is used here to cover UN agencies, multilateral development banks, bilateral development assistance agencies, and various foundations and NGOs.
- 2 Estimates in the mid-1990s put the average proportion of development assistance disbursed by European development agencies for urban programmes and projects at around 6 per cent, with the World Bank, investing in heavy urban infrastructure, spending about 18 per cent of its funds on projects in urban areas (Atkinson and Allen 1998).
- 3 The first *Global Report on Human Settlements* was produced by UNCHS in 1986 and regional reports were produced subsequently. But the 1996 report was altogether more substantial and, arguably, more influential.
- 4 In 1992 the Dutch Directorate-General of Development Co-operation issued a policy paper on research with one of the priority themes being research into how to combat urban poverty (DGIS 1992).
- 5 A significant amount of innovative urban research has been carried out by research institutions in the South, particularly in Latin America, without direct reference to, or connection with, Northern institutions.
- 6 Over the past three decades substantial amounts of information-gathering have been commissioned by ESAs. This has often been in support of the development of national urban policies and programmes, commissioned mainly from consultants, with few copies being produced, disseminated, or made available to other researchers within ESAs responsible for developing urban programmes and projects.

For a review of the French case, see Milbert (1992).

- 7 However, 'decentralised co-operation' is used in different ways by different sectors of the development fraternity.
- 8 The following paragraphs are from Atkinson (1998; 2000).
- 9 There has, however, been a growing critique of development programmes, which has included some attempts to construct a new paradigm. See Atkinson (1992), Korten (1990), and Schuurman (1993)
- 10 This is the problem which Chairman Mao, coming from a peasant background, had: fear of moving into those dens of vice, the cities!
- 11 Although it might seem incredible that this romantic notion should still be found among sensible people involved in development, it nevertheless appeared as a significant argument against support for urban projects that was put forward to researchers recently investigating the priorities of ESAs with regard to urban development, particularly in the cases of Belgium and Norway (Both ENDS/ENDA Tiers Monde 1997).
- 12 By 'main aims' is meant the intended benefits to those in receipt of stated project benefits. Unfortunately, there are always non-stated benefits to projects that in practice contribute to bringing them into existence. These include overt and covert political gains by individual politicians and government departments and also the incentives provided by the possibilities for graft.
- 13 With the notable exception of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL).
- 14 It is unfortunate that the rich debates about regional development that arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Stöhr and Taylor 1981) have gone

into abeyance, and we can only hope that a debate in this general area will soon be revived.

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