

Introduction

Sustainable Cities: Views of Southern Practitioners

David Westendorff

This volume brings together a series of eight papers arising from UNRISD research activities during the years 2000–2001 concerned with governance aspects of urban sustainable development in developing countries.¹ These activities included the Network Association of European Researchers on Urbanization in the South (N–AERUS) 2000 Workshop in Geneva, Cities of the South: Sustainable for Whom?, Geneva 2000 (the five-year review of the World Summit for Social Development) and Istanbul+5 (the five-year review of Habitat II).

The five core chapters of this volume are country/city case studies written from the perspective of urban development practitioners assisting in efforts to achieve dignified living and working conditions for some of the most vulnerable groups in large cities of the South. The authors were asked to reflect on actual content of sustainable development as practised in their cities and how they

¹ Three of the articles in this volume have been previously published (David, Joseph, Mahadevia) in D. Westendorff and D. Eade (eds.), 2002, *Development and Cities*, UNRISD and Oxfam, Oxford, and the May 2001 double-issue of the Oxfam journal, *Development in Practice*. The rest are new or have been substantially revised since the initial publication. Like those previously published, research for and/or revisions of the remaining five chapters in this book has been supported by a grant from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

personally would envision sustainable development for his/her city. What efforts, official and unofficial, are being made in the name of achieving sustainable development there? What are the shortcomings of the actors and institutions that are expected to partake in realizing this goal? What steps need to be taken to move forward? The remaining articles are by researchers who have worked closely with, or studied efforts by, the international community to influence urban development in developing countries.

In the first chapter, *Adrian Atkinson* compares and contrasts the evolution of urban sustainable development initiatives in three of Asia's more rapidly urbanizing countries: Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Decentralization and democratization are providing new openings as well as complicating the picture. In most cases, local and regional institutions are ill prepared to meet the new responsibilities implicit in decentralization, and central governments are reluctant to give up their power over lower level authorities. Effective democratization of decision making is also hampered by local political structures hostile to participation. In some cases, however, democracy is growing, and potentially serves as a focus for sustainable development planning and management. The author also questions the poverty alleviation powers of economic liberalization, pointing out that neoliberal policies undermine development efforts by weakening government responsibility in key areas of public concern. In addition, free-market reforms lack environmental sensitivity and encourage deep splits within communities, as income gaps grow larger. Indeed, these issues—decentralization, challenges to effective participation of low-income groups in decision making and the disappointing performance of economic liberalization to drive poverty alleviation—come up in each of the five subsequent country/city chapters.

In the first of these chapters, *Darshini Mahadevia* reviews the range of initiatives taken in India over the past decade to improve the urban environment or the conditions of life for the urban poor. These generally have not been promoted by the same groups in society and indeed their efforts have at times revealed sharp conflicts of interest between middle-class environmentalists and the urban poor. Nonetheless, efforts by the former to “green” the city, and the latter (and their intermediaries) to maintain livelihood and access to shelter by any means possible, typically get lumped together as “urban development initiatives” that, even more misleadingly, get classified as sustainable development initiatives.² In India, a more disparate

group of initiatives undertaken by central and local governments, civil society organizations and the judicial system are also identified by this label. For Mahadevia, the central government's lack of concern for co-ordination among the different programmes and actions makes positive synergy extremely difficult.

Among the largest and best known of India's sustainable urban development initiatives are those involving bilateral and multilateral donors/lenders. In Ahmedabad, for example, more than half the city's capital budget in the early 1990s came from World Bank loans. Other multilateral donor funded projects tended to concentrate in India's largest cities as these, in addition to need, were also more likely than small cities to be able to repay monies borrowed to finance project activities. This has tended to concentrate infrastructural improvements in a small number of large cities. In the absence of domestic investment to improve infrastructure in the smaller cities, the already large disparity between India's "metros" and its smaller underserved cities is continuing to grow. Mahadevia finds further fault with Government of India urban programmes, especially those using foreign funds, for seeing urban environmental problems almost entirely as an urban infrastructure problem. In her view, this rigid sectoral perspective prevents the government from linking poverty alleviation strategies to infrastructure development, decentralization of governance to questions of financing of urban development, and empowerment of the majority to extending basic urban services to the poor, etc. This "limited official vision" is further reflected in legislation aimed at protecting the urban environment, which tends to look for techno-managerial solutions. These have been difficult to implement, either because they might "drive away new investment" or "threaten the interest of certain low-income groups". Without dealing at length with grassroots urban initiatives or legal challenges to government policy from private citizens, Mahadevia finds citizens' efforts weak, lacking in synergy and having a "long way to go in making bottom-up urban development sustainable".

Mahadevia then argues that any effort to bring about an inclusive and synergetic approach to sustainable cities in the South

²Another example of conflicting interest in the name of sustainable development are large-scale urban infrastructure projects intended to improve the attractiveness of the city to foreign investors, and hence improve economic growth. Such projects may improve both environmental conditions and basic services for the wealthier sections of the city but have only rarely proven to reduce poverty or the proportion of urban residents exposed to dangerously degraded working and living conditions.

requires first dealing with the “prime development issues”. In India these are provision of, and access to:

- secure housing rights;
- civic amenities, and a clean, safe and healthy living environment for all;
- adequate public health facilities, basic education, safe and sufficient drinking water and food security;
- security against violence and intimidation on the basis of social identity;
- sustainable livelihoods; and
- adequate social security programmes.

Mahadevia lists four “pillars” supporting her concept of sustainable cities: environmental initiatives must be linked to employment, poverty alleviation and social equity programmes; micro initiatives must be linked with broader strategies; political empowerment must be comprehensive and extend from the local to international levels; environmental sustainability must not only manage the environment, but also the development model to the extent that the latter does not generate unmanageable waste.

In their study of current approaches to urban environmental problems in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), *Sebastian Wust, Jean-Claude Bolay* and *Thai Thi Ngoc Du* highlight some of the paradoxes of development in Viet Nam’s largest and most dynamic city. These are compounding efforts of the HCMC government to relocate a large number of households from dangerously polluted canal/riverside slums to newly constructed government housing or homes acquired independently by the affected families. In practice, the latter have tended to be at great distance from the original residence, or in more precarious locations.

The authors cite three policies driving economic and demographic growth in HCMC, which indirectly have had a major impact on the city’s urban environment: first, intensification of agriculture in the late 1970s and ensuing rural-urban migration; second, adopting “*doi moi*”³ or “structural reform” in 1986; and third, progressively by the 1990s, channelling the bulk of domestic investment into the country’s two largest cities, Hanoi and HCMC.

³ *Doi moi* translates roughly as “renewal” and was similar to the package of economic reforms adopted in China a decade earlier. The chief intent of the policy was to introduce new technology and management mechanisms into the economy through foreign investment, ease restrictions on petty production and commerce, and exploit export markets to increase domestic investment capacity.

Since 1992 HCMC's economic growth of 8 per cent per annum has fuelled sharp increases in consumption of manufactured goods, improved housing and all manner of services by a growing middle class. The overall proportion of poor in the city has dropped as well. At the same time, structural reforms such as dismantling the system of free health care, education and public services, and increasing the "informalization" of economic activity, have led to a rapid expansion in income inequality and worsening living conditions for those remaining in poverty.

The marked deterioration of urban environmental conditions during this period has further exacerbated the plight of the poor, many of whom live along the city's canals and natural watercourses. Because the government has not expanded or adequately maintained its existing technical infrastructure (for sanitation, water and waste disposal), the region's more than ample supply of fresh water has become perilously polluted. In consequence, overexploitation of subsurface sources has already begun, leading to salinization and further degradation of the phreatic layer from intrusion of surface pollution. Many canals, increasingly blocked with refuse, have become stagnant cesspools, overflowing into slum settlements when rains are heavy or tides abnormally high.

Ten per cent of the city's population live in highly precarious conditions, including 67,000 households living in "rat-holes".⁴ Of these, about one third are located along canals and waterways. The government began large-scale relocation efforts for these families in 1995. The authors participated in an evaluation of one such relocation effort involving 40,000 persons, as well as a research-action project to help develop on-site upgrading of housing and infrastructure for families that were likely to be too poor to benefit from similarly designed government relocation schemes.

Their research showed that nearly a quarter of the families relocated by the government project had experienced a drop in income after their relocation. Reasons for this included: relocation taking family members too far away from their previous employment to allow them to engage in it as before, or the loss of the entire economic network existing in the previous neighbourhood. Meanwhile, for families who borrowed money to purchase new flats, housing costs for some soared by 700 per cent. After two years, one quarter of the families had sold their new apartments and moved elsewhere—typically to more precarious neighbourhoods where

⁴ This is the term used by the government to designate the most insalubrious form of housing.

housing costs could be kept low as before. Another one third of the relocated families have also expressed a desire to leave their new homes, suggesting that the total number of families whose living conditions were sustainably improved could be well below one half. Among these, perhaps only a tiny fraction represented the most vulnerable families in the settlements.

To understand and demonstrate the possibilities for alternative solutions to the habitat problems of the poorest inhabitants of HCMC's precarious settlements, the researchers worked closely with members of several neighbourhoods to design means of improving—*in situ*—sanitation, refuse collection, surface drainage and access to drinking water. They relied throughout on bottom-up planning and implementation, technically appropriate expert assistance and continuous facilitation of communication among residents and between local authorities by community workers. Whether such activities will be adopted on a large scale in HCMC or elsewhere in Viet Nam remains to be seen.

Batilda Burian and *Alphonse Kyariga* describe the evolution of the Sustainable Dar es Salaam Project (SDP), the earliest and longest running component of the UN-Habitat's global Programme on Sustainable Cities (SCP). Conceived in 1990, the SCP aimed to promote the application of its Environmental Planning and Management principles and techniques—codifying UN-Habitat's understanding of state-of-the-art urban development practices—in cities of the developing world. Building on the lessons of the first five years of the SDP, the government of Tanzania decided in 1997 to extend the SCP to eight other cities in order to capitalize on the lessons learned in the SDP. The paper also offers an evaluation of some of the achievements and problems encountered during the programme's expansion.

The Environmental Planning and Management (EPM) approach in Dar es Salaam attempted to incorporate some of the city's hard-learned lessons on the weaknesses of traditional master planning in developing countries. Among these, the authors cite: optimal but unattainable design standards for services and infrastructure; an absence of detailed instructions to guide implementation of components that were feasible; control standards that could not be adhered to under existing conditions of 8 per cent annual increases in urban population growth; design by expatriates, who paid scant attention to ensuring that local planners could manage the implementation of the plan; and a dearth of local

institutions to co-ordinate management of growth or assembling the resources necessary to implement the plan.

Following the publication of the 1979 Dar es Salaam Master Plan—the third since 1949—the quality of public services continued to fall further behind the needs of the burgeoning city. By the 1990s, “disposal of waste, supply of water, development and maintenance of roads, etc., had become inaccessible for more than 90 per cent of the city residents”.

The aim of the SDP was to channel the kinds of technical assistance needed to restructure planning mechanisms and processes within the municipality. The principal focus of the intended changes was to “strengthen the City Council’s capacity to plan and manage its growth and development in partnership with the public, private and popular sectors parties and other interested groups on a sustainable basis”. The main vehicle for carrying out joint planning in the SDP was a series of *cross-sectoral working groups* comprised of all stakeholders who could materially affect implementation of “plans” produced by the project.

Indeed, the SDP did follow many of the EPM protocols. This yielded environmental assessments, action plans, demonstration projects and even a Strategic Urban Development Plan for Dar es Salaam, all prepared with the participation of a broader spectrum of local stakeholders than any previous master plan. This was an important step forward. Nonetheless, a variety of constraints resulted in significant shortfalls when measured against early expectations. These constraints consisted of in-built institutional conflicts of interest, inadequate financing by the Tanzanian government (national and local), difficulties in finding qualified staff, rapid changes of programme personnel, and the national government’s decision to revoke/undermine independent decision-making power at the municipal level. Some of these problems are replicating themselves in the provincial cities to which the SCP-Tanzania has been extended. In some cases, the absence of qualified personnel to lead the working groups has caused funding for demonstration projects to lie unused for lack of adequately designed projects.

Karina Constantino-David’s intimate experience in attempting to bring decent housing and habitat to Manila’s poor leads her to frame sustainable development in cities as a question of achieving “sustainable improvements in the quality of life”. At the macro level, she sees this quest as under threat because of the Philippines current “parasitic” model of development—the blind pursuit of

economic growth through global competitiveness and foreign investment.

While witnessing “respectable economic growth and the proliferation of urban amenities in Metro Manila” in recent years, urban conditions have continued to deteriorate for the poor. As Secretary of Housing and Urban Development for 15 months under the Estrada administration, she was instructed to devise and implement an equitable, yet attainable, solution to the seemingly intractable environmental and housing problems of some 32,000 families living along the Pasig River and its tributaries.⁵ The programme that her department designed would minimize forced evictions and return residents to their original locality in healthy affordable housing⁶ but with improved environmental conditions. The plan met strong opposition from groups whose interests were threatened. Without apportioning the exact extent of blame for the failure to overcome these interests and to achieve sustainable improvements in the quality of life more generally, Constantino-David cites five distinct, but overlapping, power groups: the state, business, the dominant church, the media and international aid agencies.

She saves some of her most direct criticisms for the part of the international assistance community that influences heavily the design of programmes to alleviate poverty and improve urban living conditions. Among these, she charges international donors for tending to offer aid for projects they want to design themselves. This typically involves a design mission that is paid for with grants from the donor, but which eventually results in the recipient taking on large loans for carrying out the project. Once an agreement is completed, the donor imposes costly procedures on the recipient, for example by requiring the use of the donor’s (highly paid) consultants to prepare studies and evaluations from data and analysis provided *gratis* by local officials in the course of many rounds of meetings and interviews. Donors are also found wanting for:

- attempting to apply standard solutions to local problems during the design phase when consideration of relevant aspects of local culture and history would clearly improve the chances of finding an appropriate solution;

⁵ The Pasig River and its tributaries drain much of Metro Manila. The river itself is technically dead, having been used as a sewer and repository for toxic and other wastes for most of this century. Each new administration for the past 40 years has promised and failed to clean up the Pasig.

⁶ Defined as being 15–30 per cent below market prices.

- imposing conditions such as structural adjustment policies as a prerequisite for loans/aid, which is inappropriate when the poor and the environment bear a disproportionate share of costs; and
- following not their own strictures concerning professional project management, but opting instead to manipulate aid projects by pulling strings in the background.

Finally, she notes that donors (official lenders) rarely suffer the consequences of their actions. The recipient government guarantees the loans, not the donor. Leaders and agencies in the recipient country face the political fallout of a failed project. The donors' staff members who negotiate questionable projects remain beyond sanction by the recipient country.

David's suggestions for bringing about more "sustainability" in Filipino cities entails: developing indicators of quality of life, in consultation with poor people, to be used in holding urban officials accountable to make improvements in defined time periods; implementing participatory processes in decision making so that policies and programmes will be informed by the special knowledge that the poor possess; applying, on a large scale, innovative housing and environmental improvement programmes that have been proven successful by diverse agencies and community organizations both in the Philippines and abroad; and allowing the poor to access the market through government interventions that offer "guarantees of and incentives for credit" and transparent subsidies.

Jaime Joseph prefers the term sustainable human development when discussing a better future for the residents of Lima's vast informal settlements. In this megacity, most families have built their own homes, and often the infrastructure needed to sustain life, even if only at subsistence levels. Repeated waves of structural adjustment in recent decades have made this a way of life for many. This fact must therefore be a premise for efforts to achieve sustainable development in the city, i.e., such efforts must take a decentralized approach, relying on grassroots organizations, their supporters in civil society, and the local authorities, weak as they may be. But, to Joseph, sustainable improvements in material and social life must also be built upon a culture of development and democracy, which, he argues, is being nurtured in Lima's "public spaces". He defines these as informal situations in which community organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and, at times, local authorities join in an ongoing debate about how to improve physical

and social conditions in specific neighbourhoods and districts. In his view, these are true participatory planning processes.

If “public spaces” are properly supported with information and debate, and decision making within these spaces is conducted ethically, then a nascent process of political development will take root and flower. For Joseph, this means that the diverse actors—including those in society’s lowest stratum—will learn to recognize that different groups have legitimate needs and demands, and that by debating the importance of these they collectively will find opportunities to establish not only solidarity but a common cause. Local authorities and government agencies operating in the neighbourhoods are expected to work within this process and arrive at the common cause with the residents.

Leadership of community organizations is crucial to the healthy development of this process. However, Joseph and his colleagues in Lima, who have been running a school for community leaders, feel uncertain about how to assist leaders to prepare themselves for full and ethical participation in emerging “public spaces”. The leaders themselves have reached their positions during an extended period of immense social upheaval, marked by political violence, structural adjustment, crushing poverty and a virtual collapse of confidence in both the government and political parties. What then are the personal characteristics and aspirations of leaders conditioned to stimuli of this nature? What special assistance do they need to build the confidence needed to work with others for the cause of collective improvement through ethical and democratic processes?

Even if these questions can be answered and programmes of training and acculturation can fortify the impulse to democratic behaviour among local leaders, Joseph fears the environment for positive change is sub-optimal. Economic hardship is set to continue, if not worsen again. Without having caught its breath from the hardship of the 1990s, the Peruvian economy is today further threatened by imports from a global economy that undercuts employment opportunities for the poor in Lima and the rest of the country.

Isabelle Milbert’s contribution describes the evolution over the past two decades of trends affecting the formulation and delivery of international technical assistance to cities in developing countries. Until the end of the 1980s, many cities had little autonomy in planning and fewer resources with which to undertake capital investments that might make significant changes in the functioning of the city or quality of life for the majority. Real decision-making

powers concerning cities typically rested with central authorities. Resources for international co-operation almost always passed directly through the central government. Sometimes their use at the local level would not be discussed with local authorities until the donor had disbursed the funds to the national government. In the last decade, decentralization and deconcentration processes have in many countries moved decision making closer to the cities—both in the provision and disposition of international co-operation resources. At the same time, international and domestic NGOs have begun to take on important roles as implementing partners in urban projects, along with the private sector, which has always been there. With so many new actors on the scene, and overall aid resources diminishing toward the end of the 1990s, there has been a growing tendency to co-ordinate aid programmes thematically and to combine scarce resources. All the major development actors now promote partnerships involving all the actors, from donors all the way down to community-based organizations (CBOs) and including the private sector. The author posits that such approaches may serve to blur priorities and approaches when the fragmentation caused by the entry of new actors should be having the opposite effect.

The final chapter by *David Westendorff* attempts to look forward at impending threats to the kind of inclusive and democratic “sustainable cities” that David, Joseph and Mahadevia envision in response to the actual plight of the greatest number of inhabitants in their cities. More than ten years after Rio ’92, living conditions continue to worsen for a growing proportion of urban dwellers around the world, even as “sustainable development” has become one of the most often repeated phrases in plans prepared for consumption by decision makers from the local to the global level. Neither market-friendly policies nor public-private partnerships, nor innovative efforts by civil society, have yet to show sustained “scale” improvements for the most vulnerable. At the same time, reform of the state—from the central government to the local—is going forward rapidly. This typically encompasses privatization of services, downsizing of the civil service and its functions, and deconcentration and decentralization of mandates without accompanying resources. Local government is becoming ever more dependent upon regressive forms of subsidies and taxation to support its own increasingly limited range of functions. This is fundamentally altering the local state’s interest in, and capacity to mediate, processes affecting the “public good”, not to mention its ability to plan and carry out long-term economic and social development projects. Recent cases of urban

development strategies in Chicago and Ahmedabad are used to illustrate this. Furthermore, with the vigorous lobbying by the World Bank, the United States Treasury and a host of transnational trade associations to solidify support for the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and other global free trade agreements, strict cost-recovery without redistribution/cross-subsidization in urban and social services is becoming more common, particularly following privatization. This is already having severe consequences for vulnerable urban groups who can no longer afford decent housing, sanitation, or adequate supplies of energy and clean water.

Westendorff suggests that governments, citizen groups and the private sector need to be made aware that such situations are tantamount to abuses of human rights, and should be treated as such. Without adequate information on the likely human rights impact of privatizations, global trade and investment agreements that will hasten such trends should be set aside.

To date very few cities have chosen explicitly to take human rights as a guide to urban planning and governance. Among those that do, some of the most successful examples—in terms of outcomes for vulnerable groups—are found in the MERCOSUR region of Latin America. The chapter describes recent experiences in this regard in Montevideo, Rosario and Porto Alegre. Whether these experiences and the positive trends they appear to engender can be sustained in the face of globalization remains unclear.

Because such comprehensive efforts to fulfil human rights obligations at the city level are so rare, these experiences need to be fully understood. This will entail research to verify the extent of different social outcomes among other cities in the region employing different forms of governance, and understanding the nature of the social forces that brought about alternative forms of governance in the region, the policies applied over time, and specific conjunctural conditions that have affected the efficacy of these. This research programme, developed at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), is being carried forward by a consortium of researchers and civil society groups in four MERCOSUR cities and in two Indian cities.