

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF INCREASING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF URBAN LIVELIHOODS?

Neil Whittingham

*Planning Contributions Officer, Lancashire Country Council, Preston,
Lancashire, England.*

Neil.Whittingham@property.lancscc.gov.uk

ABSTRACT. *This article places the challenge of rapid urbanisation throughout the world into a perspective that acknowledges inequalities due to economic history. As well as a brief exploration of the site-specific nature of challenges faced, this article seeks to outline the economic and structural obstacles that act as a backdrop to the lives of the poor. Such a perspective can inform attempts to improve the lot of the poor and help in outlining the moral obligation for the powerful to help the poor and vulnerable face up to the issue of Climate Change.*

Key words: Urbanisation, economic disadvantage, planning, sustainable urban management

ABSTRAK. Tulisan ini menempatkan tantangan dari urbanisasi yang sangat cepat di seluruh dunia ke dalam perspektif yang diketahui tidak sejajar dengan sejarah ekonomi. Seperti halnya dengan eksplorasi sepiintas dari situs khusus alam dari tantangan yang dihadapi, tulisan ini mencoba untuk melihat halangan ekonomi dan struktural bagi masyarakat menengah bawah. Perspektif seperti itu dapat menjadi sebuah informasi untuk meningkatkan taraf hidup masyarakat miskin dan membantu dalam merumuskan obligasi moral bagi penguasa. Hal ini tentunya dapat membantu masyarakat miskin dalam menghadapi isu-isu perubahan iklim.

Kata Kunci: Urbanisasi, kerugian ekonomi, perencanaan, keberlanjutan manajemen perkotaan

RAPID URBANISATION

Based on studies in 1995 and 2000, it is considered that if everyone in the world were to adopt consumption patterns equivalent to those of London, it would be necessary to have three planets to live on rather than just Earth (Girardet, H., 2007). Perhaps quite an arbitrary illustration, and yet with increasing urbanisation in the world, and the population living in cities now said to have reached 50%, there is increasing concern that western, consumption heavy, lifestyles, replicated around the world, could place the global ecosystem under great stress. Many lessons have been learned over the past hundred and fifty years over what the necessary ingredients are for successful urban management. London itself, from the early days of the industrial revolution, had experienced rapid urbanisation that had led to much overcrowding and squalor, with diseases such as cholera and typhoid rampant. From the mid nineteenth century, more effective sewerage systems and Public Health Acts were put in place, and from this, reforms such as the Town and Country Planning Acts enabled district authorities in the United Kingdom to have the powers to structure development with foresight, to allow for more integrated transport networks, affordable housing for the poor, and the provision of benefits to the community such as open space (Knox, 1995).

It is necessary to put such developments into perspective. Reforms such as these have enabled successful evolution of societies, whose industrial generation has contributed much to global warming. Also, the economic success of states such as the UK, has been not only built on the labour of its domestic population, but also through the establishment of colonial and post-colonial economic systems that have favoured the western, early industrialising nations at the expense of the resource rich South. Even within the UK, the benefits of development within its capitalist economy were unevenly distributed, with the urban poor generally only able to afford to live in the less desirable areas, often downwind from the Victorian 'dark, satanic mills'.

Developing countries then, which are now faced with rapid urbanisation, are in a global context of considerable economic disadvantage within which to try and deal with their booming urban populations (Webster, 1990). Within Africa, India and parts of South America up to half of the urban population now lives in

squatter settlements in what Girardet describes as 'extreme existential insecurity'. Many seek the opportunities that tend to be concentrated in urban areas; not only job opportunities, but access to health and education services and cultural and telecommunication networks. However, not only are there pressing matters of overcrowding, pollution and disease, in these emerging urban areas, the picture, increasingly portrayed by the international scientific community, is that the development of cities has to be conducted with a view to the implications for Climate Change. This is not just a desirable policy aspiration; many cities of the developing world are coastal and already under threat from rising sea levels and coastal storm surges. The costs of works to ensure port viability for shipping, for example, may lead to the diversion of valuable economic support to social services within cities, and to the rural poor.

THE NATURE OF URBAN GROWTH

In comparison with developed countries, cities in developing economies have a much smaller ecological footprint and yet have much more pressing environmental health problems. Sewerage systems are lacking in squatter settlements, and over the years, they have been seen by Governments as embarrassments, such as the infamous mass slum clearances by the Marcos regime in the Phillipines to make way for the Miss World contest. Also, large squatter areas were knocked or burned down in places such as Nairobi, with the government permitting settlements that were out of sight of potential tourists. Of course, every city is unique, both in terms of economic context, and its social, political and cultural geography. Also, its actual unique site specific characteristics has a bearing on the quality of life of its occupants, the nature of problems and vulnerability encountered, and the chances and costs for governments in seeking to facilitate sustainable livelihoods.

Within the developed countries, many of the rich have abandoned city centres and moved to more affluent suburbs, made viable by integrated transport networks. In many contrasting developing contexts, economic elites have maintained an, albeit highly securitised, foothold in city centres and squatter settlements have grown in vulnerable locations on the urban fringes, such as gullies that are prone to flooding. Their location can be led by a prestigious housing development, for example, from which there is the potential to tap into

supply lines for water or electricity. The character of the settlements themselves can also depend on the nature of materials to hand, perhaps discards from a factory or assembled items from a nearby rubbish tip. Earthquakes have revealed that shoddy workmanship can lead to devastating results, such as the huge number of fatalities in Mexico City. Even if more substantial materials could be afforded, a house could be in such a perilous location that it would be prone to sinking in mud or flooding. Cash strapped governments have tended to adopt a position of benign neglect over such poor housing conditions. Indeed, urban capital stands to benefit greatly from the labour of the residents, and often clearance has only been part of an isolated landmark modernisation project, with little expenditure put aside to cater for the displaced. This brief exploration serves to illustrate that the challenges faced within developing countries are extremely varied. Within the context of a very harsh global economic environment, exacerbated by unequal trade relations and debt crisis, enlightened managers and planners throughout the developing world have a huge task in seeking to improve the livelihoods of urban dwellers, and attempting to do so in an environmentally sustainable way.

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

A useful framework within which to view the necessary ingredients of a successful urban area is provided by Satterthwaite, D. (1999). He gives five broad categories to which managers of the urban polity both in the developed and developing worlds aspire. See Table 1.

Table 1.

Five Broad Categories of environmental action for assessing the performance of cities (based on Satterthwaite, D., 1999)

- A. Controlling infections and parasitic diseases and the health burden they take on city populations, including reducing city populations' vulnerability to them
- B. Reducing chemical and physical hazards within the home, workplace and wider city
- C. Achieving a high quality city environment for all city inhabitants – e.g. open space, and provision for sport and culture
- D. Minimising the transfer of environmental costs to the inhabitants and ecosystems surrounding the city
- E. Ensuring progress towards what is referred to as 'sustainable consumption', - i.e. ensuring that the goods and services required to meet everyone's consumption needs are delivered without undermining the environmental capital of nations, the world or future generations.

Such objectives are clearly sensible, regardless of culture. However for urban planners in poor countries, the economic feasibility for achieving these objectives has led to a more 'make do' culture. Certain authors have written of the necessity of capacity building in developing countries, and yet without more international co-operation in providing relief from the squeeze of trade agreements and debt, many aspirations will simply remain on the drawing board. Perhaps the Climate Change debate within developed countries, and the appreciation of the transboundary and global nature of environmental issues will focus minds on seeking to help developing countries meet their aspirations for sustainable urban management (Stiglitz, 2006).

In terms of housing, from the 1970s academics began to increasingly value the role squatter settlements were playing in establishing a foothold for the poor migrant, from which to organise a livelihood. In the increasingly pressured global economy, support for incremental development in situ, began to be seen as the appropriate way forward for cash strapped governments. This however, did not eradicate problems that arose from the random, or seemingly anarchic, urbanisation process of the grindingly poor. From the fall of the Berlin Wall, the strident blueprint approach to modernising urban development lost a standard bearer. However, post-modern policy ideas such as the sustainable livelihoods framework can help in identifying a clearer picture of what an actual migrant experiences, and so policies can be tailored accordingly (Hall, A. and Midgley, J., 2004 and Greig, A., Hulme, D., & Turner, M., 2007).

Encouragingly, examples of enlightened urban participatory planning have begun to take shape in developing countries. Curitiba in Brasil, is an example of a city government that has sought to engage with the population in the design and layout of its highrise housing, extensive parks and exemplary public transport network. Dongtan Eco-City in the Yangtze river delta has a long term plan to eventually house half a million inhabitants, with well distributed greenspaces, and mixed use layouts that reduce the necessity to travel far to work (Girardet, 2007). The urbanisation process in China is being followed closely given the vast numbers of people involved, however there are fears that the wider economic and industrial growth of China, along with India, maybe seriously accelerating Climate Change. As alluded to above, nations that industrialised earlier have been responsible for the vast majority of historical

impacts upon the global environment, and continue to generate a large proportion of atmospheric pollutants (Dow, K. and Downing, T.E., 2006). There is a moral imperative on rich nations to help in fostering international co-operation to help in working towards sustainable urban livelihoods throughout the world.

REFERENCES

- Dow, K. and Downing, T.E. (2006) **The Atlas of Climate Change**. Brighton:Earthscan.
- Girardet, H. (2007). **Creating Sustainable and Liveable Cities. In Girardet, H. Ed. Surviving the century: Facing Climate Chaos & Other Global Challenges**. London: Earthscan, pp103-125.
- Greig, A., Hulme, D., & Turner, M. (2007). **Challenging Global Inequality: Development Theory and Practice in the 21st century**. Palgrave MacMillan: Houndmills, Basingstoke.
- Hall, A. and Midgley, J. (2004). **Social Policy for Development**. London: Sage
- Knox, P. (1995). **Urban Social Geography: An Introduction**. 3rd edn. Harlow: Longman.
- Stiglitz, J. (2006). **Making Globalization Work: The Next Steps to Global Justice**. London:Penguin
- Webster, A. (1990). **Introduction to the Sociology of Development**. 2nd edn. London: MacMillan