

Setting the global urban agenda – a personal view by Geoffrey Payne

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Key issues

Looking back on over forty years of experience focusing on land and housing issues in urbanising countries sometimes feels like living groundhog day. In some respects, the world around us is changing at an ever increasing rate, yet some things appear to be as relevant and difficult to resolve today as when I started. For example, current concerns over the environment were raised decades ago by Rachel Carson (1962) and Barbara Ward (1973); on urbanisation and informal housing by Charles Abrams (1953) and John Turner (1968 and 1976); on our obsession with economic growth by Hodson (1972) and Meadows et al (1974) and; on the need for alternatives to mega-corporations by Schumacher (1973).

All these writers were publishing at the time I was studying or had just qualified as an architect. They all exerted a powerful impact on my generation, yet despite being as relevant today as when they first published, it is a sobering thought that our collective ability to address the issues they raised remain as difficult to face today as they were then; in fact, it seems clear that the challenges are increasing more rapidly than our actions to resolve them. In some cases, for example climate change, we may be at a tipping point where we have left it too late.

Why? What is it that has led us to a situation where a well argued case, supported by ample evidence, has failed to result in appropriate action?

A large part of the answer can be put down to the active and passive resistance of vested interests. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that as long as the political, administrative and commercial elite are comfortable with the status quo, they have no incentive to change. This applies internationally and nationally and has led to a situation in which despite the superficial increase in democratic systems of government, there has been an increasing concentration of wealth and power in fewer hands. If this assessment is in any way justified, it suggests that ultimately, real progress will only be possible by adopting one of two approaches; first by convincing elites that they will benefit even more from change than they do from the status quo and at minimum risk, or that 'champions of change' will need to be identified and supported.

These concerns are directly reflected in the ways in which urban growth continues unabated, but the key players – the political, administrative and commercial elite - are too often unwilling to address the challenge in a way which enables all sections of the existing or incoming urban population to benefit. This has left about one billion people, nearly one in six of the world's total population, living in some form of extra-legal, or substandard housing with limited, if any access to basic services.

Faced with the historically unprecedented levels of urban growth, and with restricted resources, governments deserve a great deal of sympathy. After all, it took the UK the best part of a century to develop an effective institutional response to urban growth when we were the most powerful country with a relatively small population. Countries experiencing this today have far

less resources and far larger populations. Nonetheless, too few have addressed the reality with anything like the urgency needed and some elites are openly hostile to the needs of the poor who they see as threatening the comforts of urban life they have realised for themselves. Ironically, this forces the poor into the very situations that the elites hate – slums and informal settlements – so that in practice, the victims become scapegoats for the inability of either governments or the private sector to meet their needs.

This is despite numerous examples of innovative and effective examples which have provided access to new or improved housing provision for even the poorest households¹. There is therefore no excuse for ignorance; either inertia or opposition have prevented these being adopted more widely and at the scale needed. A brief summary of the roles of key stakeholders follows.

Donors and the international community

The funding provided by international donors in addressing urban land and housing issues is minute compared to that of national governments, though their influence is considerable. To what extent has this influence been productive? Inevitably, the picture is mixed. Structural adjustment programmes were imposed on many countries by the IMF and World Bank during and after the 1980s which reduced resources for many social sectors, including housing and services provision.

Sadly, several bi-lateral donors, including both DFID and SIDA, reduced their direct funding for urban related issues at the very time that the world was becoming more urban than rural and the need for support increased. There has also been a tendency for donors to be seduced by theories that offer the possibility of simple solutions to complex problems, such as providing land titles to very poor households in the hope that they will be able to use their properties as collateral for obtaining formal credit to lift themselves out of poverty. The sub-prime crisis in the USA, together with empirical evidence from several developing countries² has demonstrated that property ownership does not in itself provide access to formal credit in any sound financial system.

A further concern is that the definitions of value for money, particularly in DFID, appear to be based on reducing administrative costs on the naive assumption that a greater proportion of funding will reach those needing it most. As a result, budget support policies have been widely implemented even though they have reduced oversight and opened opportunities for corruption

¹ UN-HABITAT World Urban Forums, World Bank Urban Symposia, UN-HABITAT awards, Dubai Best Practices, FIG conferences, academic literature and numerous websites, all provide examples of innovative approaches to inclusive, pro-poor urban development and housing developments for both upgrading and new projects.

² See, for example, Payne, G., Durand-Lasserve, A and Rakodi, C. (2010) 'Social and economic impacts of land titling programmes in urban and peri-urban areas: a short review of the literature', written with Alain Durand-Lasserve and Carole Rakodi. 'Chapter 6 in Lall, S.V.; Freire, M.; Yuen, B.; Rajack, R.; Helluin, J.-J. (Eds.), 'Urban Land Markets: Improving Land Management for Successful Urbanization' Springer, 2010, ISBN: 978-1-4020-8861-2 and Payne, G. Durand-Lasserve, A and Rakodi, C. (2008) 'Social and economic impacts of land titling programmes in urban and peri-urban areas: International experience and case studies in Senegal and South Africa', report submitted to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Norway, Global Land Tool Network, UN-HABITAT and SIDA.

or creative accounting. Similarly, the diverse range of research projects, providing opportunities for a large number of researchers and encouraging enormous innovation and learning experiences has been replaced by a smaller number of large research programmes employing an army of staff which are cheaper to administer – at least for DFID. Experience and common sense suggest that this institutionalised approach is unlikely to lead to theoretical breakthroughs or new insights as these are not the ways by which knowledge increases. For many years, DFID was a leading agency in urban lending, but repeated re-organisations have taken their toll and, on urban issues, it has lost this reputation at the very time it is most needed. In some respects it has even lost the records of earlier achievements, suggesting that it is suffering from institutional Alzheimer's.

Other donor agencies, particularly the World Bank, have the resources to deploy a large professional cadre globally and to recruit and retain highly capable personnel. However, the operational programmes of the Bank have occasionally demonstrated an excessive faith in the ability of market driven policies to address social and environmental problems, though this has gradually been replaced by a much more pragmatic approach and commitment to high ethical standards.

Compared to the World Bank and its regional partners, UN-HABITAT is responsible within the UN family of organisations for urban issues. Its more modest budget restricts its activities to commissioning studies, holding workshops, publishing reports and managing campaigns for issues such as urban governance, land tenure security, housing provision, climate change, gender equality and disaster mitigation. Whilst all these are vitally important issues, the agency has not been able to stem the increase in numbers of people living without adequate or secure shelter. There is also a tendency for it to focus excessively on conferences, such as the bi-annual World Urban Forums, which provide platforms to preach to the converted. If these could involve land owners, private developers and other key stakeholders willing to engage in open debate, these events could provide a more positive outcome. It is, however, working increasingly with the World Bank on joint missions and this offers considerable scope for increasing its impact.

Governments

It is often assumed that democracy is the best means of ensuring freedom and prosperity. However, as Hawkesley (2009) has noted, it has also been used by international powers to protect strategic interests and has sometimes led to bloodshed, poverty and disease. Even in more benign examples, democratic politics make long term planning difficult, reducing continuity as all too often a new government or mayor will cancel the policies or programmes initiated by their predecessors. This encourages approaches which offer a quick fix to complex issues. Similarly, pressure to decentralise urban development has often resulted in the devolution of responsibilities, but not resources or powers to achieve agreed goals.

A further consideration is that there are frequently conflicts between central and local government. In countries in transition from largely rural to urban societies, urban areas are invariably more politically progressive than the larger rural population, creating tensions between the two levels of government if these are from different parties. This can be seriously

exacerbated in cases where large cities provide a platform for a mayor to become a threat to the interests of the central government, leading the latter to starve the former of resources.

A final constraint on progress is the fact that staff in government agencies may be comfortable with existing working practices they have been employing for decades and which are enshrined in civil service codes. Innovation and risk taking may therefore be seen as a threat, especially if the new approaches fail to deliver the expected outcomes, exposing staff to potential criticism. Even assurances from senior staff may be insufficient if these may be moved to another department at any time, a situation which is common.

NGOs

The role of international and national non-governmental organisations has increased dramatically in recent decades. Many of these have moved on from their initial role of keeping government honest and are complementing and even replacing public sector agencies in delivering credit, services and shelter to those not served by government. They often attract highly committed young professionals unwilling to submit to the low salaries and less creative working environments existing in the public sector.

Many good NGOs exist and do a great job under difficult conditions. However, their rapid expansion raises genuine questions regarding accountability and transparency. International NGOs raise their funding outside the countries in which they operate and therefore have to impress this constituency to maintain their income flows. They become expert at marketing and promotion, but run serious risks if they make any failures public. This can easily discourage the openness which is essential if an NGO is to learn from experience.

Some NGOs are now strong enough to deliver services which were previously the remit of public sector agencies. Whilst an NGO may be less bureaucratic than a local government agency, the NGO cannot claim to be operating with a democratic mandate and, if very effective, may ironically result in a situation where the NGO becomes a non-elected competitor to local government. A situation in which a large NGO sector partially replaced the work of public sector agencies could result in further weakening the effectiveness of democratically elected governments, producing the worst of both worlds. Even in cases where an NGO agrees to work in partnership with government, this runs the risk of inhibiting it from criticising government later or on other issues. This is not to criticise any individual NGO or government, but to suggest that there are genuine dilemmas which all NGOs have to accept and deal with.

The professional community

Professionals like to see ourselves as part of the solution, not the problem, though we cannot escape a share of responsibility for the limited progress made so far. After all, it is professionals who collectively created the regulatory frameworks of planning and building regulations, standards and administrative procedures, which have effectively excluded the poor from accessing formally approved land, housing and services. High standards which impose unaffordable costs, restrictive regulations which prevent the operation of home-based economic enterprises and administrative practices which require people to submit to complex, time

consuming and ultimately uncertain outcomes, are a recipe for discouraging people from conforming to official norms. Even the language which such norms are written in are often not fully understood by those responsible for enforcing them.

A major cause of this problem is that the regulatory framework for urban development was either designed by: a) a colonial elite to reflect their needs and was then inherited after independence by national professionals understandably reluctant to reduce norms for their own people that had once been imposed on them, or b) was designed by the national elite to reflect their own aspirations rather than those of the new urban population they are required to serve. Reviewing and revising such regulatory frameworks is a key requirement to ensure that they facilitate conformity rather than frustrate it³.

Finally, the professions engaged in the urban and shelter sectors, namely architects, engineers, planners, sociologists, surveyors and urban designers, work far too much in silos rather than in collaboration. This can be seen particularly in the aftermath of natural disasters, such as the Asian tsunami or recent earthquakes. This suggests that greater collaboration and academic interaction during professional education courses, would be helpful in putting scarce professional resources to the most effective use.

So, what needs to change?

The first requirement to make a greater and more rapid impact is for donors, NGOs and professionals to adopt a political economy approach which identifies those likely to support progressive policies and those likely to offer active or passive opposition. Only by addressing these groups and assessing the room for manoeuvre in a given place and at a given time, can progressive policies be implemented. By realising early wins, confidence can be increased which can in turn accelerate progress.

It would be extremely helpful if donors such as DFID and SIDA would reconsider their approach to urban development and revive the levels of commitment they achieved until the early 2000s. There is a large pool of idealistic and competent young professionals in the UK desperate to put their skills to a good use who are presently unable to find opportunities. Given that DFID has been extremely fortunate in retaining almost all its budget, despite massive cuts in other government departments, this gives it a great opportunity to provide opportunities to maintain the UK's capability for realising the Millennium Development Goals – and helping reduce UK unemployment!

Considerable progress can also be achieved by strengthening collaboration between donors, professionals and local authorities, especially in cases where the latter demonstrate a willingness to commit to implementing practical and progressive (eg pro-poor) approaches. By showing what can be achieved in selected, but typical, cities, it can be easier to encourage (or pressure) others to follow. This would also be an ideal opportunity for UN-HABITAT to deploy its relatively modest resources to maximum impact.

³ See, for example, Payne, G. And Majale, M. (2004) 'The Urban Housing Manual: Making regulatory frameworks work for the poor' Earthscan, London.

Improving the links between policy and operations in the World Bank can also offer scope for progress. Large organisations such as the Bank are a little like super-tankers in that it takes a long time for those on the bridge formulating policy to influence the operations divisions in the engine room to change long term commitments. By encouraging mid-term reviews to include project objectives as well as progress in realising them, this time lag can be reduced. Other agencies would also do well to follow the lead of the Bank to establish independent panels to ensure compliance with ethical policies and procedures.

It will take at least another decade before we can hope that significant progress can be made in reducing the number of people living in substandard housing in expanding urban areas. However, the sooner we start the better.

(2,700 words)

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