

THE CONTEXT OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Summary

Today, around three billion people, or half of the world's population, live in cities, and two-thirds of the world's urban population live in the South. It is here that urbanization mainly takes place, often in the form of increasing urban poverty. World cities are transmission points of the global to the local. But the cities of the old industrial regions have been more affected than these world cities by the consequences of the restructuring process. This contribution begins by focusing on the underlying forces that shape the context of urban development policies. Several dimensions of the context can be distinguished, including demographic, economic, social, and ecological, and their relationship with urban developments is discussed. The concluding sections return to the context in its totality and refer to some current international concepts and initiatives for urban development policies. The poor are not passive recipients of urban problems, and greater space for poor communities to participate in urban development processes is advocated. Participatory processes are indeed important tools of urban management. Cities all over the world are having to cope with increasing social polarization and imbalances, including urban violence.

1. Introduction

The growth and development of cities is determined by a complex set of forces. For a long time, national and local governments were able to influence the structure of urban spaces to a considerable degree. Current policies guiding urban development, however, are taking place within a context shaped by the interplay of communication technology, globalization,

postmodern lifestyles, and widespread poverty. Globalization in particular is important. It implies that urban development policies have to adapt to processes outside the national and local spaces. Urban policies have also to take into account that changes in economy, politics, and culture occur at a rapid pace and that the boundaries between them are fluid.

This contribution begins by focusing on the underlying forces that shape the context of urban development policies. Several dimensions of the context can be distinguished, such as demographic, economic, social, and ecological dimensions. The relationship of each dimension with urban developments is discussed. The concluding sections return to the context in its totality and refer to some current international concepts and initiatives for urban development policies.

Two remarks should be made beforehand. The first concerns the dichotomy between the North (the rich countries) and the South (the poor countries). The metropolitan areas of the North are usually considered as representative of the post-Fordist era. However, two-thirds of the world's urban population live in the South. It is here that urbanization mainly takes place, often in the form of increasing urban poverty. In this contribution attention will be paid to the North as well as to the South. Using the notions of South and North means being aware of the great differences in urban problems and thus in urban policies. At the same time, the boundaries between North and South are becoming diffuse, and convergent processes can also be distinguished.

The second remark concerns city size. The examples given will refer to big cities and large metropolitan areas. However, the majority of the world's urban population live in cities and urban settlements with a population of less than one million. The bias in this contribution is justified by the fact that the major problems of urban development policies are in the big cities. However, similar processes as described, although on a smaller scale, will occur in regional and provincial centers.

2. Technology, Globalization, and Postmodernism

Castells asserts that this age is the information age. Technological innovations, particularly in information technology, are at the core of processes of economic development and social change. Computer science and telecommunication induce innovations in production processes and the development of new, marketable products. New means of communication, transport technology, and logistics are transforming the world into a "global village." Physical distances are becoming less important, thus creating more opportunities for international interaction. A free market ideology reinforces the existence of a single global economy. National economies are still identifiable but, with few exceptions, they are part of regional blocs and strongly connected to the worldwide network of trade and investment.

It has often been remarked that globalization as such is not a new phenomenon and had already accompanied the Industrial Revolution by way of an international division of work on a global scale. Only the pace and the intensity of the interactions are new. Since there are possibilities to integrate systems of production on a global basis, transnational companies are constantly searching for new centers of industrial production worldwide.

Production processes are transferred to new locations where the costs of production, and wages in particular, are less compared to the old production sites.

Owing to the global shift of specific manufacturing industries, a new spatial division of labor is accompanying globalization. No longer is the South the mere supplier of raw materials; it is also producing industrial commodities for the North. Cities are at the center of generating changes in the geography of production. On the other hand, worldwide competition and the new international division of labor (NID) have their impact on cities and restructuring of urban economies occurs all over the world.

Globalization and information technology have changed our societies. They have contributed to a new way of thinking, which is usually called “postmodernism.” It means that it is impossible to understand the multivariate and complex societies of today with the help of one great ideology or grand theory. Therefore, postmodernism emphasizes multiformity, flexibility, and change. The *postmodern cities* are full of contradictions and paradoxes, constantly moving and restructuring.

The spatial form of cities reflects the new trends. The postmodern city is diffuse and tends to be a collection of cores with urban characteristics. It replaces the urban area which has one clearly identifiable center and is visibly separate from the countryside. This polycentric city is highly individualized and social relations are fluid. Individuals search for collectivities with whom they can identify, such as groups defending nonmaterial interests (environment), or based on shared images of a larger world (religion), or referring to roots (gender, ethnicity). In the postmodern city diverse thoughts and interests have to be brought into line with each other. For this reason, it cannot be managed from one bureaucratic center but needs to be guided from a point that can coordinate a flexible network.

3. Towards an Urbanized World

The major demographic change in the world concerns rapid urbanization. Today, around three billion people, or half the world’s population, live in cities. Their number is increasing fast. Since no increase in the rural population is expected, it is estimated that by the year 2025 the urban population will make up more than 60% of the total population. Currently, around two-thirds of the urban population live in the South, so urbanization is unequally distributed over the world. During the coming decades more than 95% of the increase in the urban population will occur in cities of the South. Its increase will account for more than two billion, from 1,970 in the year 2000 to 4,050 in 2025.

In the industrialized countries of the West and in Latin America around three-quarters of the population live in cities, while in most African and Asian countries the urbanized part of the population is still below 40%. In China (total population 1.2 billion) it is around 25% and in India (900 million) around 35%. However, owing to massive migration from the countryside, in almost every country of the South, the urban population is increasing much faster than the population of the rural regions. This is particularly the case in sub-Saharan Africa.

Rural–urban migration is the result of stagnant development in the countryside and fewer prospects for the younger generations. Even where production and productivity do increase, as in the case of the Green Revolution in Asia, employment opportunities do not appear to increase. In many countries coping strategies encompass both rural and urban areas. Circular migrants leave their families in the countryside and regularly return to their home villages to help during harvest times or for other reasons.

A significant proportion of the world’s urban population live in small market towns and administrative centers. However, more than ever before a large proportion of the urban population are living in large cities of one million or more inhabitants and in mega-cities with 10 million or more people. The world’s largest cities have also grown considerably. In 1950, the average population of the hundred largest cities was 2.1 million, while in 1990 this figure had already exceeded 5 million. Again, the increasing importance of the cities of the South can be distinguished. In 1950, the largest city in the world was New York, with around 12 million inhabitants. The next four largest cities were London, Paris, Tokyo, and Shanghai. Among the 20 largest cities only a few were located in the South. By the year 2000 the picture was radically different. Mega-cities with 10 million inhabitants or more are predominantly in the South, with Mexico City (31 million inhabitants), Sao Paulo (26 million), and Shanghai (24 million) at the top of the list. These figures should be considered as rough estimates, since much depends on definitions of what is “urban” and the boundaries chosen for the urban areas. The population figures given for urban Tokyo, for example, vary from around 8 million (the number of people living in the central city of Tokyo, 598 km²) to 39 million (the inhabitants of Greater Tokyo Metropolitan Area covering 13 500 km²).

The second Habitat conference in Istanbul (1996) paid explicit attention to the problems of large cities and the fast urban growth in the South. It was pointed out that poverty in the countryside is being transferred to the urban areas. This creates many serious problems for urban environmental health. Indoor and outdoor air pollution, a lack of safe water and sanitation facilities, and uncollected solid waste are some of the most pressing problems in urban poor areas.

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Biographical Sketch

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He was consultant for the WHO-Healthy Cities program for developing countries during 1995–2000, and is currently editing a reader on Healthy Cities. He recently started a program focusing on Asian migrant-entrepreneurs in the European Union. He is a member of various professional associations, among others the Organisation of Dutch Development Geographers, the Centre for Border Studies of Nijmegen University and the Dutch Research School for Resource Studies for Development (CERES). Previously, he was a member of the editorial boards of the journal *Derde Wereld* (Third World) and *Journal of Economic and Social Geography* (TESG).