

KEY MESSAGES: TOWARDS A NEW ROLE FOR URBAN PLANNING

Even though urban planning has changed relatively little in most countries since its emergence about one hundred years ago, a number of countries have adopted some innovative approaches in recent decades. These include: strategic spatial planning; use of spatial planning to integrate public sector functions and to inject a territorial dimension; new land regularization and management approaches; participatory processes and partnerships at the neighbourhood level; new forms of master planning that are bottom-up and oriented towards social justice; and planning aimed at producing new spatial forms such as compact cities and new urbanism.

However, in many developing countries, older forms of master planning have persisted. Here, the most obvious problem with this approach is that it has failed to accommodate the way of life of the majority of inhabitants in rapidly growing and largely poor and informal cities, and has often directly contributed to social and spatial marginalization. Urban planning systems in many parts of the world are still not equipped to deal with this and other urban challenges of the twenty-first century and, as such, need to be reformed.

The major factors shaping twenty-first century cities that future urban planning must address are: firstly, the environmental challenges of climate change and cities' excessive dependence on fossil fuel driven cars; secondly, the demographic challenges of rapid urbanization, shrinking cities, ageing and increasing multicultural composition of cities; thirdly, the economic challenges of uncertain future growth and fundamental doubts about market-led approaches that the current global financial crisis have engendered, as well as increasing informality in urban activities; fourthly, increasing socio-spatial challenges, especially social and spatial inequalities, urban sprawl, unplanned peri-urbanization and the increasing spatial scale of cities; and fifthly, institutional challenges related to governance and changing roles of local government.

As a contribution to the reform of urban planning systems, a few broad and a number of specific policy directions are suggested below.

Broad policy directions

Governments, both central and local, should increasingly take on a more central role in cities and towns in order to lead development initiatives and ensure that basic needs are met. This is increasingly being recognized and, to a large extent, is a result of the current global economic crisis, which has exposed the limits of the private sector in terms of its resilience and future growth as well as the ability of the 'market' to solve most urban problems. Urban planning has an important role to play in assisting governments and civil society to meet the urban challenges of the 21st century. However, urban planning systems in many parts of the world are not equipped to deal with these challenges and, as such, need to be reformed.

Reformed urban planning systems must fully and unequivocally address a number of major current and emerging urban challenges, especially climate change, rapid urbanization, poverty, informality and safety. Reformed urban planning systems must be shaped by, and be responsive to the contexts from which they arise, as there is no single model urban planning system or approach that can be applied in all parts of the world. In the developing world, especially in Africa and Asia, urban planning must prioritize the interrelated issues of rapid urbanization, urban poverty, informality, slums and access to basic services. In developed, transition and a number of developing countries, urban planning will have to play a vital role in addressing the causes and impacts of climate change and ensuring sustainable urbanization. In many other parts of the world, both developed and developing, urban planning should play a key role in enhancing urban safety by addressing issues of disaster preparedness, post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation, as well as urban crime and violence.

A particularly important precondition for the success of urban planning systems is that countries should develop a national perspective on the role of urban areas and challenges of urbanization, articulated in some form of national urban policy. This is not a new idea, but, as the world moves to a situation in which urban populations dominate numerically, it is more important than ever before that governments accept that urbanization can be a positive phenomenon and a precondition for improving access to services, economic and social opportunities, and a better quality of life. In this context, a reformed urban planning will have to pay greater attention to small- and medium-sized cities, especially in developing countries where planning often focuses on larger cities. Countries will also need to integrate various aspects of demographic change in their urban planning policies, particularly the youth bulge observed in many developing countries, shrinking or declining cities, as well as the rapidly ageing population and increasingly multicultural composition of cities in developed countries.

Capacity to enforce urban planning regulations, which is seriously lacking in many developing countries, should be given very high priority and should be developed on the basis of realistic standards. The regulation of land and property development, through statutory plans and development permits, is a vitally important role of the urban planning system. Yet, in many countries, especially in the developing world, outdated planning regulations and development standards are, paradoxically, one of the main reasons underlying the failure of enforcement. They are based on the experience of the much more affluent developed countries and are not affordable for the majority of urban inhabitants. More realistic land and property development standards are being formulated in some developing countries, but this effort must be intensified and much more should be done to improve enforcement as well as the legitimacy of urban planning as a whole.

Specific policy directions

■ Institutional and regulatory frameworks for planning

In the design and reconfiguration of planning systems, careful attention should be given to identifying investment and livelihood opportunities that can be built on, as well as pressures that could lead to the subversion and corruption of planning institutions. In particular, urban planning needs to be institutionally located

in a way that allows it to play a role in creating urban investment and livelihood opportunities, through responsive and collaborative processes. In addition, corruption at the local-government level must be resolutely addressed through appropriate legislation and robust mechanisms.

Urban planning can and should play a significant role in overcoming governance fragmentation in public policy formulation and decision-making, since most national and local development policies and related investments have a spatial dimension. It can do this most effectively through building horizontal and vertical relationships using place and territory as loci for linking planning with the activities of other policy sectors, such as infrastructure provision. Therefore, regulatory power needs to be combined with investment and broader public-sector decision-making.

To command legitimacy, regulatory systems must adhere to the principle of equality under the law, and must be broadly perceived as doing so. It is important to recognize that regulation of land and property development is sustained not just by formal law, but also by social and cultural norms. In designing planning systems, all forms of land and property development activity, formal and informal, must be taken into account and mechanisms for protecting the urban poor and improving their rights and access to land, housing and property must also be put in place.

The protective as well as developmental roles of planning regulation must be recognized in redesigning urban planning systems. Statutory plans and permit-giving regulate the balance between public and private rights in any development project, as well as providing the authority for conserving important community assets. Protective regulation is necessary for safeguarding assets, social opportunities and environmental resources that would otherwise be squeezed out in the rush to develop. Regulation with a developmental intent is necessary for promoting better standards of building and area design, enhancing quality of life and public realm, and introducing some stabilization in land and property development activity, particularly where market systems dominate.

■ Participation, planning and politics

Governments need to implement a number of minimum but critical measures with respect to the political and legal environment as well as financial and human resources, in order to ensure that participation is

meaningful, socially inclusive and contributes to improving urban planning. These measures include: establishing a political system that allows and encourages active participation and genuine negotiation, and is committed to addressing the needs and views of all citizens and investment actors; putting in place a legal basis for local politics and planning that specifies how the outcomes of participatory processes will influence plan preparation and decision-making; ensuring that local governments have sufficient responsibilities, resources and autonomy to support participatory processes; ensuring commitment of government and funding agents to resource distribution in order to support implementation of decisions arising from participatory planning processes, thus also making sure that participation has concrete outcomes; and enhancing the capacity of professionals, in terms of their commitment and skills to facilitate participation, provide necessary technical advice and incorporate the outcomes of participation into planning and decision-making.

Governments, both national and local, together with non-governmental organizations, must facilitate the development of a vibrant civil society and ensure that effective participatory mechanisms are put in place. The presence of well-organized civil society organizations and sufficiently informed communities that can take advantage of opportunities for participation and sustain their roles over the longer term is vitally important if community participation in urban planning is to be effective. Mechanisms for socially marginalized groups to have a voice in both representative politics and participatory planning processes must also be established.

■ Bridging the green and brown agendas

In order to integrate the green and brown agendas in cities, urban local authorities should implement a comprehensive set of green policies and strategies covering urban design, energy, infrastructure, transport, waste and slums. These policies and strategies include: increasing urban development density, on the broad basis of mixed land-use strategies; renewable energy and carbon-neutral strategies, principally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as part of climate change mitigation measures; distributed green infrastructure strategies to expand small-scale energy and water systems, as part of local economic development that is capable of enhancing sense of place; sustainable transport strategies to reduce fossil fuel use, urban sprawl and dependence on car-based transit; eco-efficiency strategies, including waste recycling to achieve fundamental

changes in the metabolism of cities; and much more effective approaches to developing ‘cities without slums’, at a much larger scale, focusing on addressing the challenges of poor access to safe drinking water and sanitation and environmental degradation in cities of the developing world.

Many green innovations can, and should, be comprehensively integrated into statutory urban planning and development control systems, including planning standards and building regulations. Introducing strategies for synergizing the green and brown agenda in cities will not be possible without viable and appropriate urban planning systems. Recent experience has also demonstrated the effectiveness of combining such a regulatory approach with partnerships between government, industry and communities in the development and implementation of local sustainability innovations and enterprises.

■ Urban planning and informality

Governments and local authorities must, unequivocally, recognize the important role of the informal sector and ensure that urban planning systems respond positively to this phenomenon, including through legislation. A three-step reform process is required for urban planning and governance to effectively respond to informality: first, recognizing the positive role played by urban informal development; second, considering revisions to policies, laws and regulations to facilitate informal sector operations; and third, strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of planning and regulatory systems on the basis of more realistic standards.

More specific innovative and tried approaches to land development and use of space should be adopted and implemented if urban policy and planning are to effectively respond to informality. The first approach is pursuing alternatives to the forced eviction of slum dwellers and forced removal or closure of informal economic enterprises. For example, regularization and upgrading of informally developed areas is preferable to neglect or demolition. The second approach is the strategic use of planning tools such as construction of trunk infrastructure, guided land development and land readjustment. The third approach is collaborating with informal economic actors to manage public space and provide services, including through recognizing informal entrepreneurs’ property rights, allocating special-purpose areas for informal activities and providing basic services.

■ Planning, spatial structure of cities and provision of infrastructure

Strategic spatial plans linked to infrastructure development can promote more compact forms of urban expansion focused around accessibility and public transport. This will lead to improved urban services that are responsive to the needs of different social groups, better environmental conditions, as well as improved economic opportunities and livelihoods. The importance of pedestrian and other forms of non-motorized movement also requires recognition. Linking major infrastructure investment projects and mega-projects to strategic planning is also crucial.

To enhance the sustainable expansion of cities and facilitate the delivery of urban services, urban local authorities should formulate infrastructure plans as key elements of strategic spatial plans. Transport–land-use links are the most important ones in infrastructure plans and should take precedence, while other forms of infrastructure, including water and sanitation trunk infrastructure, can follow. The involvement of a wide range of stakeholders is essential to the development of a shared and consistent approach, but the infrastructure plan itself also needs to be based on credible analysis and understanding of trends and forces. The plan should also provide the means for protecting the urban poor from rising land costs and speculation, which are likely to result from new infrastructure provision.

Regional governance structures are required to manage urban growth that spreads across administrative boundaries, which is increasingly the case in all regions of the world. Spatial planning in these contexts should provide a framework for the coordination of urban policies and major infrastructure projects, harmonization of development standards, comprehensively addressing the ecological footprints of urbanization, and a space for public discussion of these issues.

■ The monitoring and evaluation of urban plans

Urban planning systems should integrate monitoring and evaluation as permanent features. This should include clear indicators that are aligned with plan goals, objectives and policies. Urban plans should also explicitly explain their monitoring and evaluation philosophies, strategies and procedures. Use of too many indicators should be avoided and focus should be on those indicators for which information is easy to collect.

Traditional evaluation tools – such as cost–benefit analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis and fiscal impact assessment – are still relevant, given the realities of local government resource constraints. Recent interest in performance measurement, return on investment and results-based management principles means that the use of these quantitative tools in urban planning practice should be encouraged.

All evaluations should involve extensive consultation with, and contributions by, all plan stakeholders. This can be achieved through, for example, participatory urban appraisal methods. Experience has shown that this can enhance plan quality and effectiveness through insights and perspectives that might otherwise not have been captured by the formal plan-making process.

Most routine monitoring and evaluation should focus on the implementation of site, subdivision and neighbourhood plans. The outcomes and impacts of many large-scale plans are difficult to evaluate because of the myriad of influences and factors that are at play in communities over time. It therefore makes more sense for monitoring and evaluation to focus on plans at lower spatial levels, i.e. site, subdivision and neighbourhood plans.

■ Planning education

There is a significant need for updating and reform of curricula in many urban planning schools, particularly in many developing and transitional countries where urban planning education has not kept up with current challenges and emerging issues. Planning schools should embrace innovative planning ideas. In particular, there should be increased focus on skills in participatory planning, communication and negotiation. Updated curricula should also enhance understanding in a number of areas, some emerging and others simply neglected in the past, including rapid urbanization and urban informality, cities and climate change, local economic development, natural and human-made disasters, urban crime and violence and cultural diversity within cities. Capacity-building short courses for practising planners and related professionals have an important role to play in this.

Urban planning schools should educate students to work in different world contexts by adopting the ‘one-world’ approach. Some planning schools in developed countries do not educate students to work in different contexts, thus limiting their mobility and posing a problem for developing

country students who want to return home to practice their skills. The ‘one-world’ approach to planning education is an attempt to remedy this and should be encouraged. A complementary measure is the strengthening of professional organizations and international professional networks. Such organizations and associations should be inclusive, as other experts with non-planning professional backgrounds are significantly involved in urban planning.

Finally, urban planning education should include tuition in ethics and key social values, as planning is not ‘value-neutral’. In this context, tuition should cover areas such as the promotion of social equity and the social and economic rights of citizens, as well as sustainable urban development and planning for multicultural cities. Recognition and respect for societal differences should be central to tuition in ethics and social values, since effective urban planning cannot take place and equitable solutions cannot be found without a good understanding of the perspectives of disenfranchised and underserved populations.

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