

Preface

Deborah Eade

This *Reader* is based upon the May 2001 double issue of *Development in Practice*, guest-edited by David Westendorff of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). Now based once again in China, he was from 1991 to 2001 a research co-ordinator at the UNRISD office in Geneva, where his work focused on the related themes of urban governance and civil society and social movements. Prior to this, he co-ordinated research projects on urban development and planning issues in Brazil, China, Mexico, India, Peru, South Africa, and the USA.

Among development agencies in general, and specifically in the NGO sector, there is a continuing reluctance to engage fully with issues of urbanisation. The prevailing attitude is either that cities are a problem in and of themselves and shouldn't be encouraged, or that their residents enjoy better facilities and so are less 'needy' than their rural counterparts, or that the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation are simply too big, too expensive, and too complicated to handle. A glance through the grants lists and literature of some of the best-known international NGOs suggests that, in part because of their short-term or project-bound focus, if they get involved at all, most find it easier to deal with the specific problems of specific population groups in the towns and cities of the South – street-children and sex-workers topping the list – rather than getting involved in the messier processes of urban management, such as housing or transport or public amenities. Ironically, the largest human settlements in which many NGOs take a more holistic approach to the planning and management of basic services are refugee camps – usually cramped and often squalid settlements that earn their description as 'rural slums' – but again their involvement is characteristically short-term rather than open-ended or processual.

Of himself, David Westendorff comments that his formal training – in architecture in the mid-1970s, and city and regional planning in the early 1980s – allowed him to ignore these topics until real-world experience began to show him who the real builders and planners were. In his introductory essay, he therefore underlines the importance of making discussions about sustainability in the urban sector accessible to those institutions of civil society that (potentially) have a pivotal role to play in influencing policy debates and shaping practice – the grassroots activists, community- or neighbourhood-based organisations, social movements, and NGOs, among many others. We, in association with UNRISD, are pleased to help in disseminating the enormous breadth of professional and practical experience, and cultural backgrounds, reflected here. We trust that this *Reader* will help to break down some of the barriers and prejudices that so often limit our understanding of and approaches to urban problems (and their solutions), and to stimulate new thinking in this area.