Sustainable cities of the South:
an introduction

David Westendorff

This *Development in Practice Reader* builds upon the May 2001 double issue of *Development in Practice*, which comprised approximately half of the papers initially prepared for presentation at the European Science Foundation's annual N-AERUS Workshop, held on 3–5 May 2000 in Geneva.[1] Its title, 'Cities of the South: Sustainable for Whom?', reflects concern within the N-AERUS and the host institutions – UNRISD and IREC-EPFL – that urban development processes in many cities of the North and South are being guided by superficial or misleading conceptions of sustainable development in the urban context. As will be seen in the contributions to this *Reader*, the aims of different groups proposing strategies for the sustainable development of cities tend to skew their arguments about what this means and how to achieve it. Environmentalists who see the pollution-free city as the only sustainable one may be willing to sacrifice the only affordable form of mass transport for poor people, or dirty low-tech jobs that provide them their meagre living. Those pursuing the globally competitive city may succeed in attracting foreign and domestic investments that boost economic growth and productivity, but which concentrate the benefits of growth very narrowly, leaving an increasingly large majority to live in penury at the foot of glass skyscrapers. Beleaguered bureaucrats attempting to improve or extend public infrastructure may adopt financing mechanisms that weaken poorer groups' capacity to benefit from the newly installed infrastructure, even though they bear a disproportionate share of the costs of paying for it. International organisations seeking to promote more effective governance of cities may encourage decentralisation processes that fragment responsibility in the absence of legal, administrative, and institutional frameworks to organise and finance governmental responsibilities at the local level. Such a vacuum may be filled by local bosses or other power brokers who have little interest in the common good.

In different ways, our various contributors focus on these contradictions.

The contributions are grouped into four partially overlapping categories. The first group comments on different aspects of the international challenges to achieving sustainable cities. In the second group, researcher-practitioners from Africa, Asia, and Latin America offer their understanding of the principles that would have to be followed in order to achieve sustainable development in their cities, and the current set of constraints against doing so. These chapters necessarily touch on the contested roles of international agencies and bilateral donors in shaping national strategies for urban sustainable development. The next five contributions discuss issues of housing and land-use management in cities of developing countries. The next group, comprising two contributions, provides updates on new information technologies that may play important roles in planning for sustainable development, whether in cities, their regions, or countries. This collection ends with a salutary reminder from **Hélène Rivière d'Arc** that planners' solutions to the problems of poor people have long been formed by a technocratic vision and expressed in a technocratic language. These rarely reflect the language or the approaches to the problems the marginalised groups themselves elect to use. The misapprehension of the meaning and role of 'community' remains a crucial 'dis-connect' for many planners and urban officials.

In the first of the two papers on the international context for urban sustainable development, **Adriana Allen** chronicles the impact of the increasing internationalisation of Argentina's fishing industry on the city of Mar del Plata. This process included the transition from small-scale producers catering for local markets to larger highly capitalised international fishing enterprises producing for export markets. As neo-liberal policies of deregulation pushed catches to unsustainable levels in the 1990s, Mar del Plata's native fishing and canning industries became progressively sidelined by foreign competitors operating in Argentinian waters. Over time, Mar del Plata's unions could provide less and less protection to workers, enterprises cut back on investments in plant and equipment, and the city's tax revenues began to fall, affecting its ability to provide infrastructure and enforce environmental standards in the port area, etc.. Today, the prospects for sustaining decent livelihoods and living conditions for Mar del Plata's residents are as uncertain as the fate of the fish from which it has drawn its sustenance for decades. In the second of these papers, **Amitabh Kundu**

reviews the recent experience of a number of large Indian cities in financing infrastructure through domestic and international capital markets since the imposition of structural adjustment policies in the early 1990s. One of the author's major concerns is that the stringent mechanisms for assuring repayment of loans increasingly take decision making about the design and implementation of infrastructure out of the hands of local governments and place it with entities whose chief concern is an adequate rate of return to investors in the short run. This transfer of decision making is modelled largely on the experience of the USA and is being promoted through international institutions such as the World Bank and regional development banks, and with the support of like-minded bilateral donors. Its suitability to the Indian context is challenged because it appears to exacerbate intra- and inter-regional disparities in infrastructure and service delivery, thus reinforcing already unacceptably high levels of social segmentation.

The first of the six contributions discussing regional experiences in achieving sustainable cities is the review by **Wilbard J. Kombe** of efforts to revitalise urban planning and management in the Tanzanian capital Dar es Salaam during the 1990s by means of the Environmental Planning and Management (EPM) promoted by Habitat (UNHCS) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Sustainable Dar es Salaam Project was established in 1992 as the vehicle for guiding this effort. Kombe focuses on the functioning of two of the nine working groups established to propose solutions to the most pressing habitat problems in the city and to facilitate and monitor their implementation. The working groups were an important innovation in that they were designed to include all the parties that could materially affect the success of the proposed solutions. While both working groups appear to have mobilised new collective forms of problem solving, their most important proposals could not be implemented. Vested interests among stakeholders, institutional inertia, bureaucratic in-fighting, and a lack of political will at the central level all stood in the way. **Diego Carrión** then paints in broad brushstrokes how Latin American geo-political processes of democratisation, structural adjustment, state reform, including decentralisation, liberalisation of economies via privatisation, etc., are bringing about a sea-change in the way cities are governed. This transforms the processes for deciding how to proceed towards sustainable urban development. The author's particular concern is that civil society organisations (CSOs) – especially those at the grassroots – and local authorities are assuming many of the

responsibilities for sustaining society and its habitat. To move in this direction requires that local authorities facilitate community participation in ways that have rarely been adopted before. Carrión proposes six principles to guide local authorities' efforts to include CSOs in the planning and implementation of new development strategies.

Jaime Joseph prefers the term 'sustainable human development' when discussing a better future for the residents of Lima's vast informal settlements. In this megacity, most housing is constructed by those who live in it. These same residents have often provided themselves with the necessary infrastructure to sustain their living conditions, even if only at subsistence levels. Repeated waves of structural adjustment in recent decades have made this a way of life for many. This must be a premise for efforts to achieve sustainable development in the city, i.e. they must take a decentralised approach, relying on grassroots organisations, their supporters in civil society, and the local authorities. But sustainable improvements in material and social life must be built upon a culture of development and democracy. This is being nurtured in Lima's 'public spaces', informal opportunities in which community organisations, NGOs, and sometimes local authorities, join in open debate about how to develop their neighbourhoods and districts. If properly supported with information, ethical practices in debate and decision making, and legislative support, the nascent process of political development will take root and flower. The environment for this is not optimal, however, as the Peruvian economy, weakened by structural adjustment and civil strife in the 1990s, is today further threatened by imports from a global economy that undercut employment opportunities for poor people in Lima and the rest of the country. Without a respite from this desperate competition, positive change may be stymied.

Karina Constantino-David's experience of attempting to bring decent housing and habitat to Manila's poor leads her to frame sustainable development in cities as a question of achieving 'sustainable improvements in the quality of life'. Standing in the way of this aim in the Philippines is the country's current model of 'parasitic' development – the blind pursuit of economic growth through global competitiveness and foreign investment. This process is driving the deterioration of the quality of life in Filipino cities. Five distinct but overlapping power groups – the state, business, the dominant church, the media, and international aid agencies – share

responsibility for this. In Constantino-David's opinion, the only possible path out of this morass is to pay more attention to the earth's 'carrying' and 'caring' capacity. She furthermore highlights the often negative role that foreign assistance plays in curtailing attention to these issues in the Philippines.

Darshini Mahadevia reviews initiatives taken in India over the past decade to improve either urban development or the urban environment or the conditions of life for the cities' poor. These are a disparate range of initiatives undertaken by central and local government, civil society organisations, or the judicial system. Sometimes external assistance is involved, sometimes not. But these efforts are rarely conceived with a view to the possibilities of mutual reinforcement or synergetic interaction. Nor do they attempt to take a 'people-centred approach' in which the concerns of poor people take precedence in a model that relates all development concerns in a holistic manner. In his chapter on the growing urban crisis in India, **P.G. Dhar Chakrabarti** identifies several of the most important causes behind the failure of sub-national governments to halt the decay of living conditions in the country's cities. More important than the absence of funds for upgrading urban infrastructure and services is the lack of capacity of government agencies and authorities to use the resources available for this purpose. This absence of capacity continues despite constitutional amendments of 1992 which, in theory, give local authorities far greater powers to administer and finance their own affairs. Indeed, the kinds of reforms and improvements in local government capacity that were expected to follow the constitutional amendments have been abysmally slow. As evidence of their continuing weakness, the author cites the failure of local authorities to take up highly effective and affordable technologies for rainwater collection, sanitation, and building materials. He calls for a 'reform of the reform process' as a first step in the right direction.

At the mid-way point of this collection, **Adrian Atkinson** surveys the evolution of external assistance agencies' (bilateral and multilateral donors, UN agencies, the development banks and foundations, and international NGOs) support to programmes and projects in cities of the South. These agencies have only very recently taken on an explicit concern for 'urban sustainable development', and tend to reflect variable and often specious understandings of what the concept means. The main international urban co-operation programmes, such as in transport, sanitation, and water supply, have been fragmented and often politically, socially, and technologically unsustainable, even in the

short term. New forms and approaches to external assistance are emerging, albeit slowly, tentatively, and on a small scale. The author highlights some of the most pertinent to urban sustainable development, but notes that they are being attempted in a particularly adverse international environment. For example, programmes and projects to alleviate poverty within cities may be being implemented within a political and ideological framework that tends to generate more poverty. **Banashree Bannerjee**'s paper on the Andhra Pradesh Urban Services for the Poor (APUSP) project describes a state-of-the-art partnership between a bilateral donor and the state government of Andhra Pradesh to promote sustained improvements in living conditions for the urban poor.[2] The project does not overtly promise to deliver the sustainable city in Andhra Pradesh, but it does acknowledge and require a series of inputs from other sectors of society that are necessary if not sufficient conditions for achieving this goal. The programme attempts to bring these inputs and conditions together by making explicit a framework for strengthening grassroots civil society and for creating incentives for municipal authorities to achieve the same. Indeed, AP-USP appears to have been formulated to address, among other concerns, the lack of planned synergy among existing anti-poverty and urban development programmes in India (see also Mahadevia in this volume), the weakness of local authorities in raising or using available resources and innovations to the benefit of urban residents (highlighted by Chakrabarti), the lack of effective grassroots participation in decision making, either because of weaknesses in CSOs themselves (referred to by Joseph and Constantino-David) or the failure of the process to be opened to representatives of low-income or marginalised groups (issues also raised by both Kombe and Brown).

In the first of five contributions concerned with urban housing and habitat, **Erhard Berner** argues that because the large majority of housing in cities in developing countries is self-constructed, government-run schemes to provide adequate housing are too small-scale to serve the growing demand, and its products are too expensive to be affordable for low-income groups. He presents two brief case studies of efforts to integrate practices of informal housing markets – particularly incremental structural upgrading by the residents – into government programmes. These were aimed at making the housing provided under government programmes more affordable. In the case of the Community Mortgage Programme in the Philippines, the programme succeeded for about two thirds of the residents in

upgraded slums. The poorest third tended to be forced out, however, because they were eventually obliged to pay a rent in the upgraded neighbourhood that they could not afford. In a different approach attempted in Hyderabad, in Pakistan, the scheme worked well economically but failed for other reasons: namely, stiff resistance from those accustomed to profiting from informal and formal land markets.

Geoffrey Payne approaches the question of the 'costs of formality' from a different angle. In many countries, some even within the European Union, a large proportion of housing is constructed outside formal regulatory frameworks, i.e. the dwellings are illegal to some extent. This is done to avoid the costs of meeting official standards that are deemed unaffordable by homeowners. Often these standards are remnants of a colonial past and were never intended to be applied to the population as a whole. In other situations, standards and bureaucratic formalities persist because they yield formal income (fees, service charges) and informal income (graft) to interested parties within the government. The author proposes that where standards are set artificially high, they should be lowered in order to help lower-income groups continue to provide and improve housing for themselves without threat of legal sanctions. Understanding what constitutes artificially or unnecessarily high standards in a given national context is a theme on which research is needed. In the following paper, **Alison Brown** shows that the continuing impact of apartheid land-use planning and regulations in Harare impedes convenient access by poor people to public spaces that provide both economic opportunity and affordable leisure activities. Planners need to recognise the limited alternatives available within the city for these groups and guide future changes in the urban fabric in a way that enhances opportunities for poor people to help themselves.

The last two contributions in this group describe innovative partnerships to bring about better and more affordable housing to the residents of the cities of Cuba and Buenos Aires in Argentina. In the first, **Carlos García-Pleyán** describes the process by which a consortium of Cuban architects, planners, and government administrators is attempting to assist in the transformation of low-income urban neighbourhoods and housing provision processes on the island. The group began developing its efforts in the 1990s as Cuba's economic and technological support from Eastern bloc countries disintegrated. This process stimulated new thinking about how to manage with existing resources the transitions needed in Cuban cities. For

Habitat-Cuba this means doing things that have not been done before: mobilising residents of low-income areas to participate in the transformation of their neighbourhoods; establishing economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability of proposed solutions; and stimulating both interaction and co-operation among all the social actors involved in the transformation processes. According to **Fernando Murillo** the approach to government-sponsored low-income housing provision in Buenos Aires could not be more different: with the encouragement and technical assistance of the World Bank, the city developed a programme, *Casa Propia*, that would rely on a public–private sector partnership to finance new low-income housing. Indeed, the private sector's contribution was to be large: scarce land for construction, the design and construction of the apartments, and the bulk of the mortgages. The city's contribution was to identify qualified 'low-income' buyers and to act as guarantor of their mortgages. In practice, the private developers of *Casa Propia* targeted the project to the top end of the low-income bracket, as higher-cost apartments would yield higher absolute profits than lower-cost apartments. Indeed, most of the buyers tended to be at or slightly above the income barrier separating the eligible low-income groups and the ineligible lower-middle income groups. True low-income households could not afford the monthly mortgage payments for *Casa Propia*. And while low-income families could not gain entry into the programme, many living in the communities in the immediate vicinity of *Casa Propia* were forced to leave because of rising rents in the area. Other nearby low-income residents lost their local green spaces, and experienced greater traffic congestion and other environmental inconveniences. These and other less positive outcomes forced the city and its private partners to reconsider the validity of this form of partnership, and to halt the project after only approximately a third of the total apartments planned had been built.

The debate on the capacity of information technology to help poor, marginalised, or isolated groups to leapfrog gaps in knowledge and hence development will continue for a long time to come. The two papers included on this subject discuss technologies that are undoubtedly of interest to the major actors in the sustainable development debate. From the perspective of both grassroots and formal sector urban planners and decision makers, Internet connectivity is proving a boon in the North, as **Cesare Ottolini** argues. However, the evidence of its use in developing countries is patchy and inconclusive, especially with regard to urban grassroots actors in the housing and local

development fields. New research should be undertaken, involving these actors, to find out how the technology may become more accessible and useful to them. Earth observation technologies, on the other hand, have by virtue of their development costs been limited to use by Northern countries and even then by the better-resourced planning and development agencies. **Carlo Lavalle** *et al.* report on efforts by the European Commission (EC) Centre for Earth Observation of the EC's Directorate General Joint Research Centre to apply earth observation technologies to the understanding of urban development patterns and their consequences for sustainable development as defined by the EU. These efforts have recently been extended to the analysis of a number of cities in countries that will be joining the EU and megacities in several developing countries. The authors believe this technology will be useful and inexpensive for developing countries both because of its ease of use and the availability of EC funding for technology transfer.

While it is impossible to sum up the lessons to emerge from the collection in a few short sentences, certain points are repeated. The meaning of 'sustainable cities' or 'sustainable urban development' is frequently manipulated to meet the ends of the agencies or persons using the phrase. Yet most of the authors in this collection, and indeed attending the N-AERUS Workshop, tend to agree that the sustainable city is one:

- that genuinely pursues improvements in livelihood and habitat for all in the short, medium, and long run without damaging in the process the carrying capacity of the city's hinterland or other regions;
- in which decentralised governance, democracy, and non-exploitative community participation are necessary but insufficient conditions to move cities in this direction;
- in which adverse macro-economic environments – and especially unfettered international economic competition – are likely to retard movement in the right direction; and
- in which a strong, just state is an essential asset for pursuing true social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Less clear are the value of external assistance (foreign aid) in promoting sustainable development when the basic needs of the population remain grossly unmet; the promotion of partnerships for implementing sustainable development strategies and programmes in

the absence of a willingness on the part of the most influential partners to share power and information with the least powerful partners; and the decentralisation and privatisation of state responsibilities in the context of vacuums of power and capability at lower levels.

On balance, the reading of this volume suggests that sustainable cities in developing countries will have to be built upon broader and deeper local-level and national civil society organisations than exist today. These organisations will, moreover, need far more access to and preparation for participation in decision-making forums, including at the international level. While national and sub-national governments have a responsibility to heed the will of their people, and to prepare them for active citizenship, some countries' willingness to do so remains in question. It will therefore be crucial for agencies of international governance and for bilateral donors to assist countries in acknowledging their responsibilities in this regard and to ensure that as external actors their own actions do not hamper the development of vibrant CSOs in developing countries.

David Westendorff
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

Acknowledgements

The N-AERUS Workshop – for which drafts of these and other papers not included here were prepared – was supported by grants from the European Science Foundation (ESF), the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC), the French Ministry of International Affairs, and UNRISD. Special thanks are owed to SDC for its grant to enable participants from developing countries to attend the workshop, while the Institute for the Built Environment of the Federal Polytechnic of Lausanne and ESF also contributed intellectual and organisational support.

On a personal level, I would to thank my co-organisers, Alain Durand-Lasserve and Jean-Claude Bolay, for the collaboration, guidance, and collegiality they offered before and during the workshop. I would also like to thank colleagues at UNRISD who facilitated many aspects of the workshop and its follow-up: Wendy Salvo for her able handling of liaison with the United Nations Office in Geneva, where the meeting took place; Liliane Ursache for preparing multiple agendas, participant lists, and other essential documents, and for helping with logistical concerns; Janna Lehmann for administrative backup during and after the workshop; and Rachael Mann and Katy Agg who assisted in preparing the annotated resource list at the end of this *Reader*. I would also like to thank Deborah Eade for allowing N-AERUS, through the journal *Development in Practice*, and this *Reader*, to reach audiences whose contributions to promoting sustainable development in cities are increasingly crucial but who would not necessarily follow debates on

the subject in more technically focused journals on urban planning or urban studies. Translations from French and Spanish where necessary were undertaken by Deborah Eade and myself. Last, but not least, I would like to thank all the contributors to the issue of Development in Practice on which this volume is based for their willingness to undertake the multiple and sometimes substantial revisions requested by me in my role as guest editor.

Notes

1 Network-Association of European Researchers on Urbanisation in the South (N-AERUS). A brief description of the ESF, N-AERUS, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), and the Institut pour Recherche sur l'Environnement Construit-Ecole Polytechnicque Fédérale de Lausanne (IREC-EPFL) – can be found on page ix.

2 For reasons beyond the control of the author and editor, this paper did not appear in the May 2001 issue of *Development in Practice*.