Thinking about Urban Inclusiveness

The most important urban policy questions have to do with the very unequal conditions in which people live in cities around the world.

Social inclusiveness is just, it contributes to development, it is democratic, and it is productive.

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When agencies like Habitat, or professors like myself, try to get others’ attention with respect to the great importance of cities in the developing world, we often start with a numbing barrage of statistics. Based on the aggregate tables and prognostications prepared by the demographers at the United Nations Population Division, we try to show how the world is relentlessly urbanizing, how the largest cities in the world are more and more located in the south, and how quickly southern cities are growing. Since you know all this, I will spare you the formalities. Once we have established the pervasiveness and dynamics of urbanization and the spread of urban settlements even in the most rural countries, policy questions abound. The most important of them, from my point of view, have to do with the very unequal conditions in which people live in cities around the world.

There is now a very substantial body of literature, in books, articles and reports, about various experiences around the world in attempting to improve the physical, social and economic conditions in cities, particularly in poor countries. Much of this literature is relatively new, having been written over the last ten years. The themes of this literature are eminently practical. One major theme is the challenge of building, providing and maintaining infrastructure and services so that those most in need of clean water, public transport, electricity, decent shelter and security can obtain these services at a minimum level; and so that there is a structure of urban management in place adequate to the task. Another theme is the large and complex question of urban poverty, how to understand it, and how to deal with it; another is the question of urban finance; another revolves around the physical and natural environment of cities and how to safeguard it. At a higher level there is the question of governance of the city, or of metropolitan governance when we are dealing with a very large urban agglomeration. While these important themes and issues are related to each other, we tend to treat them somewhat separately, partly because we cannot speak of everything at the same time, and partly because each question is complex and both experts and practitioners become specialized in one or another area.

I recently co-edited, with Dr. Mila Freire of the World Bank Institute, a book of readings in “policies and practices” aimed at an audience of municipal managers and elected officials. The book contains a general introduction and nine sections. The sections were decided upon after polling participants at a major workshop – who were mayors, planners, urban administrators and research directors – what were the key issues they would like us to address. The workshop took place in mid-1999, so the ideas should still be current. Essentially, there were nine major areas of interest, which in
turn led us to subdivide our readings, case studies and commentaries into nine groups: metropolitan issues, urban strategies, municipal financial management, raising local revenue, private involvement in the provision of public services, land and real-estate markets, urban poverty, managing the urban environment, and transportation. More specialized topics such as employment creation, the preservation of security, and planning with gender in mind, were contained in the main sections. While we (and our participants) could have produced other themes and issues, this modest list certainly includes most of the key issues in the current management and governance of cities in the developing world.

Since the subject of this panel discussion is “social inclusion,” I must remark that one subject that was not mentioned by our potential workshop participants two years ago was social diversity. I don’t think I would be exaggerating if I were to say that, until recently, the question of how to respond to, and to effectively incorporate social diversity, or social inclusion into our cities was relegated to the “back burner,” if it was even on the stove in the first place. There are a number of reasons for this but two, it seems to me, are central. The first has to do with ideas, the second with politics and administration. I will start with “ideas” first, because, although it is not immediately evident that ideas drive policy (in fact, many critics would say it was the opposite!) development ideas are part of the overall context within which agencies and national policy communities set their agendas.

Following the discussion of development ideas and the political impetus to decentralize, I will mention two additional reasons why we consider diversity and inclusiveness to be important: the first has to do with globalization and new approaches to strategic planning; the second is the “productivity of social diversity.” But let us begin with the framework of development ideas.

1. Development Ideas and Urban Policy

In the urban sector, what was driving policy for many years was the emphasis on the supply of basic needs as a strategy to respond to the problems of massive poverty in both rural and urban areas. Basic needs programs required substantial investment in organizations and state bureaucracy in order to supply required infrastructure and such necessities as food, housing and education. While diverse groups needed to be taken into account, the larger issues were “supply driven” rather than “demand driven” from the point of view of agencies and governments. In the 1970s, the typical urban project that responded to this development logic was the large-scale “sites and services” project. Large-scale projects which needed to deal expeditiously with many thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people at one fell swoop, had little ability to look at the very complex reality of how people, and small groups of people at that, organized themselves in real life. This is the so-called “top down” problem that James Scott has called, in his book, “Seeing Like a State,” although it is a problem we have all been familiar with for a long time. The 1980s saw the ascendancy of “urban management,” originally a technical approach to improved management of urban services.

Issues of social policy did not become prominent until the late 1980s and 1990s. And, in the urban field, social policy issues were promoted more in Latin America than in other regions, possibly because of the more substantial importance of sociologists and anthropologists in that region in setting the agenda for research and thus, our understanding of the basic issues facing the people in that region. Gradually, however, issues of social breakdown, homelessness and unemployment, family distress, child employment, violence and even inter-community strife became even more pervasive. These problems were exacerbated in many countries by the withdrawal of the state from social support programs as structural adjustment policies gained ascendancy.

But the policy environment began to change as the severity of social distress on the ground began to fit into a framework of ideas that was more compatible with social, rather than largely physical development concerns – as important as these concerns were, and still are. Here, I would stress the importance of the increased interest by economists and others in human capital. Nobel Prize laureate Gary Becker with his path-breaking work Human Capital; Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen with his rich body of work on institutions and freedom; and the work of the prominent political scientist Robert Putnam who popularized (but did not originate) the notion of social capital – these major intellectual leaders, and their colleagues, set the stage for a new approach to development. Thus, by the mid 1990s, many social scientists began to talk seriously about social capital, or the valuation of networks of social relations and associations – based on trust and reciprocity -- which supplement state activity – particularly at the local level. How to operationalize social capital, to strengthen it, and to connect it with appropriate local institutions, became a big concern. The greatly increased international interest in demography over the last decade is perhaps also a reflection of this greater interest in human capital, or in
the assets and productive potential of people and groups of people, for development. After all, the study of demography is the study of how people reproduce, where they do it, and why. Without these basic facts, we cannot study human capital formation in any meaningful way. Of course, since one of the key functions in the development process is education, demographers help us to understand which parts of the population are young, how many are girls and women, and who are disadvantaged by physical location or country or district of origin. Through the famous DHS surveys that supplement the census, demographers can also identify the poor, and relate poverty to indicators of good and bad health.

2. Decentralization and the Opening of Local Political Space

As social questions began to take their place as an integral part of the development discourse, an independent, but parallel process was taking place in the field of administrative and policy reform. Beginning in the late 1980s, many countries began to adopt plans for the decentralization of important functions and powers from the national to the local level of government. By the early 1990s, most countries with a population of over a million had begun such a process. These decentralization plans varied tremendously, from new policy emphases at one extreme, to entirely new constitutions or constitutional amendments empowering local authorities, on the other extreme. By the end of the decade, a large number of developing countries had undergone real decentralization, in the sense that their cities and local governments not only had more substantive powers to provide for their citizens, but also were beginning to gain financial resources to make these powers meaningful. A substantial opening of political and economic space had taken place at the local level.

What of the new functions of municipalities? Many of the new powers and responsibilities of elected mayors and municipal councils centred on what we could call the “care and feeding of human capital,” or to put it another way, the strengthening of the capacity of the local population to engage in, and benefit from the opportunities offered by, urban-scale economic activities. Important functions of education, primary health care, and planning were everywhere devolved to local governments. The “Seeing Like a State” problem of large bureaucracies failing to deal with the complexities and nuances of localities and small number of people was seriously undermined, as smaller local government groups, whose elected members would have more reasons to respond to their constituents (much fewer in number than at the national level) took over important policy functions. Of course, this implied that democratic choice and real local participation went along with decentralization. In many cases it did, though in some cases it did not. But many of the new municipal councils, particularly those with elected mayors and councillors, where so-called democratic choice was exercised through alternative parties or groups of councillors, began to take a special interest in the plight of the poor and other vulnerable groups. This interest was strengthened by the electoral process in some countries (such as India, some have argued), and in others, reinforced by new constitutions that enjoined local governments to take their “developmental” responsibilities seriously. In the current Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, article 153 states that a municipality “must...structure and manage its administration, budgeting, and planning processes, to give priority to the basic needs of the community, and to promote the social and economic development of the community.” This comes very close to virtually ordering municipalities to look after the interests of the poor and most vulnerable in their communities. How it actually works in practice is perhaps another question.

3. Globalization and Strategic Planning

A third major factor that has strengthened the tendency of municipalities and local governments to pay more attention to social differences and inclusivity in their policies is globalization. Whether or not it is rational to do so, cities and city-regions all over the world – in both the north and the south – act as if they must compete with each other in the international arena if they wish to prosper. They must compete for hard investments (such as plants, commercial and financial centres, loan funds for municipal infrastructure), as well as for prestige of place. As a British writer puts it, “The acceleration of the globalisation of economic activity and the growing internationalization of investment flows have accentuated competitive pressure on businesses and led many cities to seek competitive advantage in the urban hierarchy...Cities are now part of an increasingly competitive world and place marketing has become an important part of economic development strategies. This emphasis on inter-area competition and place marketing has become clearly articulated and transparent” (N. Oatley, Cities, Economic Competition, and Urban Policy, 1999, p.5). In his introduction to a book entitled Competitive Cities: Succeeding in the Global Economy, the former mayor of Seattle says, “successful cities of the future, both large and small,
and regardless of where they are on the world map, must use all their resources if they hope to compete and prosper in a new world economy” (C.Royer in Hazel Duffy, Competitive Cities. Succeeding in the Global Economy,1995, x). Since the late 1980s, many cities have been undertaking “strategic planning” in order to achieve these objectives. Strategic planning, as we now understand it, is very different from “master planning.” In general, the more the strategic planning exercise is carried out by local people and their elected representatives and municipal officials, rather than by outside consultants, the more useful the exercise should be. Successful strategic planning should involve all the important stakeholder groups in a local community. Since in many cities in the developing world, large numbers of people are poor and/or vulnerable to economic shocks, this includes the poor, disadvantaged ethnic and religious groups, and other so-called “marginal” social formations. The logic of current versions of successful strategic planning strongly argues against “top-down” or “exclusive” decisions that favour only powerful economic elites.

4. Diversity and Innovation

If we expand our concern from the poor and vulnerable to the whole population, there is another general reason why cities – especially those cities concerned with their place in the larger economic system – should be concerned with inclusiveness. We might call this “the productivity of social diversity.” Around the world, in both the north and the south, cities are more socially and economically diverse than small towns, villages and rural areas; and large cities are more diverse than small cities. Urbanization as a process brings groups of diverse peoples together, producing, argue many economists, “agglomeration economies,” or economies which operate at a higher level of complexity and sophistication because they contain more specialized economic and social functions. Often it is particular social groups that connect with the outside world in a particular way, or develop a highly valued specialty, who lead the way economically in big cities. This process adds value to national economies, to the extent that the largest cities typically account for a very high proportion of the GDP of most countries – including the United States. According to a recent estimate, the largest cities in the United States (defined as “metropolitan areas”) generate more than 80% of the nation’s employment, income and production of good and services, and are the gateways for 83% of the country’s merchandise exports. As a colleague has reminded me, major North American cities (and the same would be true of large Brazilian and Argentinean cities) passed their adolescent years in absorbing a huge number of very diverse immigrants, in the process digesting incompatible cultures, and finding economic and institutional pathways for their energies and talents. Managing diversity is both an old and a new subject.

Throughout the centuries, cities have been a source both of social stress and of innovation – the latter is the chief strength of the city, the former its greatest challenge. In his important book, Cities and Civilizations, Sir Peter Hall argues that, contrary to gloomy predictions of decline, many of the largest cities of the Western world have also served as platforms for the highest levels of innovation and creativity. While “no one kind of city, nor any one size of city, has a monopoly on creativity or the good life … the biggest and most cosmopolitan cities, for all their evident disadvantages and obvious problems, have throughout history been the places that ignited the sacred flame of the human intelligence and the human imagination” (Peter Hall, page 7). This benefit of nurturing innovation in our increasingly knowledge-based economy notwithstanding, cities are notoriously difficult to govern. And, it seems to me, larger cities are more difficult than smaller cities. Greater social diversity brings inevitable conflict, higher and more aggressive levels of civil society organization, and more political contention. All things being equal, there is more crime and violence in bigger cities. This tension between diversity and productivity, on the one hand, and political conflict, on the other hand, must be managed if we are to obtain the maximum benefits from these massive social experiments we call cities. This brings me, finally, to governance.

5. Governance and “Socially Sustainable” (or Inclusive) Cities

With my Canadian colleague Mario Polese, and a number of other researchers, I have tried, in a recent book, to address the question of urban governance from a perspective of social inclusiveness. The title of our book is The Social Sustainability of Cities. Our assumption when we started to work on the book was that the effective integration of diverse social groups into the political and policy framework is absolutely essentially if cities are to be sustainable over time. Not only is the proper treatment of social diversity essential to economic productivity (and thus economic sustainability), but it is also essential to environmental sustainability, since the recognition of and sensitivity to diversity is part of the same mind set as the preservation of the natural environment. And all members of a community,
including the poor and disadvantaged, must be brought into any city-level dialogue having to do with environmental questions. Social diversity, for us, includes both the range of economically deprived and vulnerable groups, as well as groups which, because of their culture or social origins, may not partake fully of the values and behaviour of the majority.

Our approach to governance is parallel to our approach to social diversity. As a concept, or idea, governance means the relationship between state agencies and governments, on the one hand, and communities, civil society and even private sector groups, on the other. ‘Governance’ is thus a broader and more inclusive term than ‘government’, and has come into general use since the 1990s because we are living in a world in which a much wider range of stakeholders and social actors takes part in the policy-making process – whether this is at the international, national, or local level. Of course, there can be “good” or “bad” governance at any level, depending on the extent to which the process is transparent, accountable, protects freedom of choice and the rights and freedoms of citizens, and is sensitive to the needs of a wide variety of groups that make up the political community. And “socially sustainable cities,” which are very similar to “inclusive cities” must be managed in a fashion that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population.

Inclusive cities (or socially sustainable cities) are therefore cities in which all citizens are incorporated in decisions and policies; none, but in particular the poorest and most vulnerable, are left out; and all may both consider themselves, and be considered by others, to be full and first-class citizens. This definition sounds simple, and as a mandate it is incontestable, but it is exceedingly difficult to accomplish, even in wealthy cities where resources are available for many initiatives. In our book we looked at local urban policies through six different lenses: the lens of governance, the lens of social and cultural policies, of social infrastructure and public services, of land and housing, of transport and accessibility, and of employment and the revitalization of public spaces. We arrived at these policy areas because they are classically the responsibility of municipal and local governments, and because they represent some of the key areas within which cities define their approach to inclusiveness and social sustainability. In the case studies our colleagues carried out of 10 cities – two each in Canada, the United States, Europe, Africa and Latin America – we showed how different areas of policy, depending on the circumstances, may be central to the definition and effective operation of inclusiveness. All the case studies of our cities were written by researchers who lived and worked in the countries they were describing.

Some examples may help to illustrate the range of policies and initiatives that cities are taking to deal with social diversity. In the case of Toronto, for example, the researchers argued that major fault lines between the rich and poor have been mitigated by the location of mixed-class public housing throughout the municipal area, and by the adoption of one-fare public transit. The city also supports major cultural events every year which validate the fact that some 46% of its population was originally born outside the country. In the case of Montreal, the researchers say that the national government plays an important role in redistributing income between rich and poor; but that both housing and transit policies under the control of the local government are also significant. The case of Rotterdam, where an economic downturn threatened to exacerbate social, spatial and ethnic divisions among the population, demonstrates how an active local council can act to moderate and even to reverse polarizing trends. The city purchased a great deal of central city housing from private owners, and in recent years has worked through nonprofit associations to manage this social housing. In Latin America, we have numerous examples of innovation by local governments in the area of inclusiveness, but in our book the case is described of the active social housing policies undertaken by the Mayor of Sao Paulo, Luisa Erundina, during her term of office from 1989 to 1992. For Nairobi, we learn of the important role played by NGOs in providing local services to socially excluded groups; and from Cape Town, we learn about various transport planning initiatives that should have the effect of connecting formerly segregated parts of the city, and their populations, with each other.

Based on our detailed comparisons, few of our 10 cities were successful in all areas, and virtually none could reasonably argue that social sustainability was never a problem. No city was a “best practice” case in all areas. Perhaps one reason for this is that, in democratic political systems with a choice of parties or groups of elected officials at regular elections, different social groups naturally gravitate towards different coalitions, and when one coalition or the other is elected, in spite of best intentions, not every group feels it is equally served. Other reasons for the failure to achieve perfect
social integration through local policies include limited resources and the lack of support of higher-level political authorities. As to the first, many cities in Africa and the poorer parts of Asia operate with extremely limited revenues; as a result their ability to improve public services to make them more accessible to the poor and the marginal, or to construct housing for the poor, is so limited as to be almost non-existent. But the less governments can do for their citizens, the less their citizens will be prepared to pay taxes and grant them legitimacy. As for the second, many reform mayors have been elected under a new political and democratic dispensation, but the real test of their ability to effect change is how much freedom they are allowed, or how much support they may be given, by higher levels of government once they begin to carry out their electoral promises. While we may wish to focus on local policies responding to locally defined problems, municipalities are often very much under the legal and political influence of higher levels of government, whose leaders may have very different interests. This reminds us that cities, particularly large cities in developing countries, are an integral part of a larger national system, and that their citizens are also subject to the laws and the political biases and tendencies of the nation.

6. Conclusion

In short, and to conclude: Social inclusiveness is an important goal for municipal governance for a number of reasons: it is just, it incorporates many of the most important elements contained in new ideas of development, it is democratic, and it is productive. It is equally important in northern and southern cities. As a response to social diversity, inclusive governance is most difficult to achieve in large cities, where it may be hamstrung by both local and higher level political influences. But as the world globalizes, diversity is going to be more, not less important. And the successful governance of diversity will distinguish the most accomplished and creative cities from all the rest.

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