

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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This issue of *Regional Development Dialogue* (RDD) is devoted to poverty alleviation in the context of urban and regional development. The contributions stem from two international conferences on poverty reduction held in Asia during the second half of 1998: the UNCRD-supported International Forum on the Role of the Private Sector in Poverty Alleviation through Social Efforts and Balanced Regional Development, held in Beijing, the People's Republic of China (hereinafter, China), on 1-2 July 1998, and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) (Habitat) /Urban Management Programme (UMP)/UNCRD-supported Regional Symposium on Urban Poverty in Asia, held in Fukuoka, Japan, from 27 to 29 October 1998.

The issue of poverty and its reduction is treated from a rural, urban, or regional perspective by the different authors. It is refreshing to observe that they do not see these perspectives as contradictory or competing, but rather as complementary, with considerable emphasis on the importance of rural-urban linkages, on the city within its rural hinterland, and on rural dependence on nonagricultural pursuits. In my view this is only appropriate, as, at the onset of the new millennium, around 50 per cent of the world's population lives in cities.

Urbanization has been rapid throughout the globe, particularly since the Second World War. It is expected that by the year 2025, the urban population will have grown to two-thirds of the world population. This should come as no big surprise, and, in itself, is no cause for concern, as it is the spatial expression of a powerful, positive socioeconomic transformation: the quest for increased wealth creation through productivity increases which, since time immemorial, have been accompanied by shifts in the relative shares between the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, both in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and overall employment.

Unfortunately, this global trend, while positive in itself, has not been without problems: with urbanization, poverty urbanizes, too. While it is currently estimated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank that the number of urban poor is around 650 million, the World Bank expects that this figure will be two to three times as much, at 1.5 billion, by 2025.^{1/} Similarly, environmental degradation also urbanizes: the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that currently about 600 million urban dwellers, most of them poor, live in life-threatening environmental health conditions; unless governments somehow manage to reduce environmental infrastructure deficiencies in the face of some 5 per cent urban population growth globally, this number,

too, will have increased dramatically by the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

In the process of urbanization therefore, the risk of a widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots is real, leading some authors to speak of the "divided city". This year's theme of World Habitat Day, the "City for All," reminds us of the need to be mindful of the distribution of the benefits of urbanization, and to enhance its equity. This point is graphically illustrated by Arif Hasan's contribution in this volume on the informal city, which uses Karachi as a case study.

Yet, the growing and urbanizing world population also needs an adequate supply of food, and safeguarding food security is inherently a rural issue, albeit that marketing, storage, and distribution also bring the regional dimension into focus.

While the individual articles display their different origins, it is remarkable how much they have in common: (a) all share an explicit or implicit concern with poverty and its reduction from a subnational perspective, and consider what can be done to reduce poverty at such a level, deliberately bringing in a spatial dimension, be it rural, regional, or local/urban; and (b) all come down in favour of decentralized approaches, involving localized priority-setting with maximum stakeholder involvement. While one may agree to these generic ideas, these questions are not easily addressed in practical operational policy terms, and it is here where each of the authors display their widely differing vantage points.

The opening article by Mary Racelis, "Cities for Twenty-First Century People: A Regional Perspective on Urban Poverty in Asia," builds on the author's strong belief in the value of low-income urban communities being able to determine their own destinies. The article develops several injunctions for planners along these lines, i.e.: (a) develop governmental mechanisms able to respond to, and support, strong participation of the organized urban poor in decisions about their communities, their cities, their nation, and their world; (b) foster environmentally- and socially-sound neighbourhoods made up of people who care about one another and about their surroundings; (c) support women's participation in community-based organizations (CBOs) and in the economy; (d) encourage local government authorities to prioritize actions benefiting the poor as being critical for building their human resource capacities and eradicating poverty; (e) establish a national policy framework favourable to human settlements and sustainable development, incorporating appropriate implementing and monitoring mechanisms; and (f) promote worldwide learning forums committed to understanding and disseminating information on the impact of globalization on cities and to devising the actions needed to mitigate its negative consequences on livable cities, and in particular on the urban poor.

Racelis ends with a philosophical note of caution for professionals which sums up her position decisively:

Because poverty represents an indivisible whole to those people living in it, we who are on the outside need to join the urban poor in viewing poverty from within the system and helping them break out. We are also in a privileged position to discard the vast array of externally-imposed constraints that affect the poor and prevent them from escaping poverty. In solidarity with them, it is incumbent upon us to forge new arrangements that will raise their economic and social well-being as proud citizens with full honours, and once and for all accord them the dignity that is their right.

While Racelis thus puts the spotlight on the poor communities themselves, my own article, which follows, draws attention to the opportunities that exist for positive poverty reduction action at the local government level, taking the commonly accepted roles and responsibilities of local governments as a starting point. Not that this is easy: local government is more commonly seen in the role of municipal services provider, rather than possibly contributing to (urban) poverty reduction by deliberately undertaking pro-poor (or refraining from anti-poor) actions within its domain. A major attitudinal change on the part of local government officials is required to make local governments more development- and more pro-poor oriented. Indeed, the evidence is mounting that this is possible, spurred by the fact that local governments themselves are increasingly confronted with poverty and the need to (be seen to) take positive action.

In that light, it is all the more worrisome that international action on this front since the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul from 31 May to 14 June 1996 (which highlighted this as a major area requiring external support) has not really been forthcoming. In spite of the high hopes that Habitat II would result in an adequately endowed global plan of action, three years down the line we see a decline in international interest in urban issues, in spite of the above trends. While this may be explained by international conference fatigue combined with declining official development assistance (ODA) budgets, there remains a real risk that the international community misses the boat in terms of focus and direction.

Therefore, the UNCHS (Habitat)-supported initiative to establish the International Forum on Urban Poverty (IFUP) in late 1997 must be applauded as an effort to turn this around. However, considering the paucity of resources, it is clear that the IFUP's objectives cannot be achieved in isolation from similar global efforts undertaken by others; similarly, there is a need to recognize regional diversity in the effort: are globally prioritized themes automatically also the highest priority themes for Asia or Africa? The article argues that the international community, including the IFUP, needs to think of low-cost, high pay-off actions vis-à-vis urban poverty and its reduction that sensitize actors, enhance understanding, build capacity at the local level, and which are linked to one another in a mutually reinforcing way.

Kadmiel H. Wekwete reports on the urban poverty discussion in Africa and comes to very similar conclusions, focusing on the need for mainstreaming urban poverty reduction and adopting an action planning approach in which consultations and stakeholders' involvement are the keywords along with local capacity-building, while very explicitly acknowledging rural-urban linkages as essential ingredients in an African context.

Several of the articles in this volume address the issue of the private sector's role in poverty reduction. Bijayanand Misra cautions against overoptimism in this regard, particularly in the rural context in India. Elenore A. Cousart is more optimistic from the regional development perspective of Southern Tagalog Region in the Philippines, as is Wang Huijiong with respect to urban poverty reduction in China. Utis Kaothien and Douglas Webster point out the areas in which the private sector can help, provided the policy framework is right and underlying assumptions are realistic with respect to market-driven regional development, using Thailand (and the long-standing efforts to divert economic development away from Bangkok) as a case study. What is clear from all these contributions is that growth-oriented policies will help in efforts towards market-oriented

poverty reduction, but that this by itself is not enough — the capability of local, regional, and central governments to establish and enforce a regulatory framework providing the right types of incentives for the private sector stands paramount among the conditions for success. There is also still a shortage of actual success stories in this area: too much is still an article of faith. The need to identify, document, and exchange more cases of good practice is therefore clear. This is indeed one of the objectives to which groupings such as the IFUP could usefully address themselves.

Paul A. Barter in his article “Transport and Urban Poverty in Asia” addresses a very important but often forgotten issue, namely, that the design and implementation of transportation networks have a decisive influence on the options for poor communities to lift themselves out of their poverty. Barter makes a convincing case for the need to sensitize transport planners to this issue and for mainstreaming poverty reduction in urban transport sector policy-making and programme priority-setting. Again, the pivotal role of local government is clear. The final contribution by Hasan provides a sobering perspective of how difficult it is to bring about such attitudinal changes for in spite of a wealth of information and experience, Karachi today is as divided as it was twenty-years ago, if not more so.

In their aggregate, the articles in this issue of *RDD*, each of which is accompanied by the informed comments of scholars and practitioners, form an important contribution to the ongoing debate on poverty and poverty reduction, including cases of both good and bad practice. It is the hope and expectation of this guest editor, that if nothing else, they will facilitate a common understanding among us of the way forward in this important pursuit.

NOTE

- 1/ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), “A Strategic View of Urban and Local Government Issues: Implications for the Bank” (Draft) (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1999).