

**More is Not Enough:
Urban Scale and the International Community**

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ABSTRACT

International development assistance agencies are celebrating their growing support for housing in cities in developing countries. This support is welcome but it is still insufficient in scale and composition to make a significant difference in the shelter and infrastructure needs of growing urban populations. This article identifies various aspects of scale and complexity in cities which suggest the need for alternative approaches to urban assistance.

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By

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Prologue:

In the World Urban Forum III sponsored by the United Nations in Vancouver in June 2006, two years after the Forum in Barcelona, representatives of the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Asian Development Bank proudly presented the recent achievements of their institutions in the field of housing assistance for developing countries. Each representative noted the growth in the demand for assistance in the housing sector from the governments of developing countries and the new approaches of their respective institutions. These new approaches were resulting in growing levels of official lending for housing. The presentations of all of the financial institutions shared a focus on lending to housing finance institutions and a relative shift away from lending for low-cost housing and urban services for the poor. In a celebratory statement about the fact that housing was finally recognized as legitimate within the World Bank, its representative commented

that “the genie is out of the bottle”, a phrase also used as a chapter heading in a 2006 Bank publication on housing.¹

There is strong economic and social justification for celebration for more assistance to housing. But the argument that “more” support, in the form of new lines of credit for mortgages and housing construction, is simply not commensurate with the magnitude of the demand for housing in cities in developing countries. The numbers supporting this judgment are well known. In contrast to urban population estimates by the United Nations in 2000, by 2020 there will be an additional 2 billion residents in cities in developing countries. Most of these people will be poor people, many in Asia, and they will add to the existing slum population estimated to be 924 million in 2003 by UN Habitat.² Assuming that some proportion of these slums will be improved between 2000 and 2020, it is safe to argue that at least 2.5 billion urban residents will be living in slum conditions by 2020. This is a staggering figure, with the growth alone amounting to building a small city of 1.6 million each week – roughly half of Barcelona!

Against this figure, which has been confirmed by other studies, including the 2003 report by the US National Academy of Sciences, Cities Transformed:

¹ Robert Buckley and Jerry Kalarickal, eds., Thirty Years of World Bank Shelter Lending: What have We Learned?, (Washington: The World Bank, 2006).

² UN Habitat, The Global Report on Human Settlements: The Challenge of Slums, (London and Sterling, Virginia, 2003).

Demographic Change and its Implications for the Developing World,³ the United Nations' Millennium Summit of 2000 endorsed Millennium Development Goals. One of these goals, the only one specifically addressed to urban residents, is to significantly improve the living conditions of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.⁴ While this number may appear large – and indeed a whole book has been written showing how such a target might be met – in fact the target is less than 5 percent of the 2 billion expected additional urban residents. I believe that this formulation of a goal by the international community is disappointing and professionally irresponsible. It is simply not serious when placed within the context of the problem as a whole. How can one really presume to have made an impact on living conditions in the developing world if the selected target is only 5 percent of the problem? It is a remarkable example of cynical or not very serious thinking! It also reveals a serious lack of understanding of urban phenomena and their urgency.

Understanding Urban Scale:

The issue of urban scale is not simply one of magnitude. The Argentine educator, Alberto Croce, has recently identified three dimensions of scale: magnitude, depth, and viability.⁵ Magnitude is a concept we can readily

³ US National Academy of Sciences, Cities Transformed: Demographic Change and its Implications for the Developing World, (Washington: National Academies Press, 2003).

⁴ See for example, The Millennium Project, A Home in the City: Report of the Task Force on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers, (London and Sterling, Virginia: Earthscan, 2005).

⁵ Alberto Cesar Croce; "Learning About Scale", (Buenos Aires: Fundacion SES: Sustentabilidad, Educacion, y Solidaridad, November 2003).

understand: it refers to quantities. Depth, however, is more complicated and as defined by Croce refers to “the consequences of those problems upon the life of the persons involved and their communities, the damage they generate or the hindrances to growth they pose.” Depth in the case of cities is all the secondary and tertiary effects of urban growth or the demand for shelter and infrastructure, as well as the factors which exist to either facilitate or hinder its resolution. When applied to the city, depth refers to all the positive and negative externalities of urban phenomena and the range of positive and negative multipliers which form and sustain urban life. Viability, the third issue, involves both the existing conditions under which efforts are undertaken and those changes which would allow sustainability in the future. Viability, therefore, is both analytic and normative as it captures what is necessary to continue to exist but also identifies changes needed for the future.

While these proposed dimensions were elaborated in relation to increasing the impact of development programs, they provide a suggestive entry into the issue of urban scale. On one side we know the following:

- Urbanization is continuing at a rapid rate in developing countries.
- Many cities are large and continue to grow.
- Growth increases the demand for incomes, employment, shelter, infrastructure and social services.

- More people create more opportunities for income-generation and the growth of the service economy.
- More people also increase externalities in the form of congestion, impacts on the environment, public health, public space, land use, and many other public goods.
- Cities have become both spaces of hope and the loci of poverty and despair.
- Cities have established norms and living standards, yet increasing shares of their residents live without the requisite facilities.
- Cities have also become sites of vulnerability: to crime and violence, disasters, and forced evictions.
- All of these problems place growing strains on the limited capacity of public institutions to guide growth and to solve pressing problems.

If these indicators of magnitude are taken for granted, the depth of their impacts is less understood. For example, knowing about “more” tells us very little about the following features of the city:

- Interdependency: how aspects of city life depend upon one another.

- Complementarity: how for example housing and infrastructure are connected and reinforce the benefits each provides.
- Sequencing: how the steps in doing things matter, for example building drainage systems before building a road.
- Differentiation: how the city has become the site of growing differences of all kinds, from ethnicity to culture to income.
- Varying levels of absolute deprivation (poverty) and relative deprivation (inequality).
- Vulnerability to external shocks, whether from disasters or global economic volatility.
- The stock and flows of goods and services, people, or information within cities.

These concepts help us to understand the dynamics of cities: how well they function, their levels of productivity, efficiency, and welfare, the quality of their governance, and ultimately the satisfaction of their citizens. These concepts also help us to appreciate the role of time in the evolution and lives of cities, over what periods they grow, how one layer is built on top of previous layers of physical construction, cultural identities, or institutional forms.⁶

⁶ David Harvey, *Space of Hope*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

As Henri Lefebvre has reminded us, cities are the intersection of space and society.⁷ So these phenomena do not simply exist simultaneously, but they exist in specific locations and in relation to one another. These relational qualities and specifically their spatial relations with one another determine, among other things, their productivity, their cultural value, or their social meaning. Ultimately the spatial ordering of urban phenomena determines the distinct qualities of cities and the degree to which they provide opportunities for human and social welfare.

The issue of viability is also important. As scale increases, so do the magnitude and complexity of institutional capacities required to plan, build, and operate urban shelter and infrastructure services. Here we know that the public sectors of no societies except China and Russia during the Soviet period were ever able to provide more than 15 percent of the housing stock in a given year. Viability must therefore take into account the performance and role of diverse actors, including private and public sectors, as well as civil society organizations. Viability reminds us that we must assess the performance of existing actors and also imagine and support the changes needed to achieve greater scale.

International Urban Assistance

All of this leads to the observation that efforts to increase the stock of housing in developing countries may be spurred by additional efforts by the international community, but housing by itself is a very limited dimension of the

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, La droit a la ville, (Paris:Anthropos, 1968).

urban challenge facing developing countries. Entering the city through the house and residential infrastructure is lacking in several respects:

- It fails to address the city within the national development efforts of developing countries.
- It ignores the essential spatial and locational dimensions of urban policy.
- It ignores productivity, employment, and income-generation aspects of the urban economy.
- It ignores the municipal and institutional aspects of urban management.
- It is not explicit in addressing the issues of poverty and inequality.
- It does not recognize the role of culture in determining the quality of urban life.

Indeed, while the institutions can celebrate that “the genie is out of the bottle”, the real test is what is happening with the Gini coefficient, measuring the level of inequality within those cities.

In conclusion, if the international community wishes to provide effective assistance to cities in developing countries, it will have to invest more in understanding specific urban contexts, how they work, their origins, their spatial

relationships, and how channels of causation operate in the processes of urban transformation. A recent visit to Dakar, Senegal, where I worked 35 years ago, underlined the point that thinking about cities in the long and medium term is a good test in evaluating individual policy and investment projects. A sites and services project for 100,000 persons, designed in 1971, is inhabited by from 350,000 to 500,000 people in 2006. The project had been criticized as too big in the 1970s. Today it is clearly too small and crowded. It suggests that urban spaces and efforts to work in them need to be placed within a temporal context as well, reminding us of the question posed by Kevin Lynch, What Time is This Place?⁸

Urban design parameters are not only spatial and temporal, not only economic and social, and not only symbolic and physical. They are all of these together and it is their ensemble which gives cities cultural identities and political meaning. To do “more” means “much more” than simply “more”. It means that “more is not enough”.

⁸ Kevin Lynch, What Time is This Place?, (Boston: MIT Press, 1976).