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Approaches to the Solution of Urbanization Problems

by Dr Karl Wolfgang Menck, Hamburg *

The presence of some 4,000 delegates from about 150 countries showed what great interest the Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat) held by the UN in Vancouver from May 31 to June 11, 1976, had evoked in many countries. This conference in Canada which was the largest ever to be arranged by the UN dealt with a problem which has manifested itself all over the world.

Many experts considered a discussion of the subject of "human settlement" by the United Nations to be overdue since industrialized and developing countries alike have to contend with mounting difficulties in tackling the problems entailed in urbanization. In the wealthy states sociologists and architects, politicians and financial experts have been warning that the towns must not be allowed to become too big. The poor countries are witnessing the spectacle of uncontrolled urbanization and rapidly deteriorating housing and living conditions in the rural areas.

Growing Trend towards Conglomeration in Developing Countries

A great deal of information, especially about the extremely strained situation in the developing countries, was collated in preparation for the conference¹. Between 1973 and 1980 the world population will have grown from 3.9 bn to about 6.5 bn² of whom about 5.0 bn — 2.8 bn in 1973 — will be living in the poor countries. Most of them will be settled in rural areas but even so the number of town-dwellers is expected to increase from currently 25 p.c. to about 40 p.c. of the total population. In the more advanced of these countries — such as Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Algeria, Egypt and Malaysia — this trend towards urbanization, which has been evident for some considerable time³, will only begin to recede towards the end of this century. In the poorer and far less developed countries urbanization is expected to gather speed in the next century, so that overall the conglomeration tendencies will

increase rather than decline⁴. There are striking examples of this happening now: The number of large cities has notably increased in the poor countries: Of 75 cities with a population of over 1 mn in 1950 24 were situated in developing countries — in 1985 they will probably number 145 out of a total of 270. In 1970 there were two metropolises with more than 10 mn inhabitants — London and New York; for 1985 their number may be estimated at 17 — including 10 in poor countries. It is likely that these big cities will have far more than 10 mn inhabitants each; projections for the year 2000 put the population of Mexico City at 30 mn and Calcutta at over 30 mn⁵.

Beside these conglomeration centres there are other towns growing rapidly, as emerges from analyses for various Latin American and other states. The number of towns with more than 250,000 inhabitants will increase in 1960–1980 in Mexico from 8 to 27, in Brazil from 8 to 25 and in Venezuela from 1 to 8⁶. Although it is not quite true that in the year 2000 there will be "200 Calcuttas"⁷, the totality of consequences of urbanization must give rise to apprehensions. There is above all the rise in the population density in the conglomeration areas which coincides with a falling-off of public services.

Dualistic Urban Structures

The UN survey of housing conditions in 1971 revealed already a relatively high housing density in the developing countries⁸. Additional data

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¹ Cf. Habitat, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver, May 31 to June 11, 1976, Global Review of Human Settlements, Item 10 of the Provisional Agenda, A/Conf.70/A/1.

² Cf. UN, Demographic Yearbook 1973, p. 81; ILO, 1975 World Population Year, Bulletin of Labour Statistics, Special Edition, Geneva 1974, Appendix (Tables) 3 A.

³ Cf. P. Bairoch, The Economic Development of the Third World since 1900, London 1975, p. 144 ff.

⁴ Cf. M. A. Cohen, Cities in Developing Countries: 1975-2000, in: Finance and Development, 13th year, 1976, No. 1, p. 12/13.

⁵ Cf. (no author), The Global Crisis in Human Settlements: A Symptom of Planetary Malaise, in: Survey of International Development, Vol. 13, 1976, No. 2, p. 3.

⁶ Cf. R. W. Fox, Urban Population Growth Trends in Latin America, Washington 1975, p. 15.

⁷ Cf., i.a., K. R. Schneider, The Urban Implosion of the Population Bomb, in: International Development Review, Vol. 14, 1972, No. 2, p. 16.

⁸ Cf. United Nations, Compendium of Housing Statistics, 1971, New York 1974, p. 43 ff.

prepared for the Vancouver conference bear out these findings⁹. While the population per square kilometre of urban area is constant or showing a slight downward trend in the industrialized countries, the rate for the developing countries has gone up in many cases — sometimes by over 50 p.c. In most developing countries the ratio of inhabitants to dwelling rooms is far above 1; the comparable figures for the wealthy countries are in part substantially below 1. Other surveys have revealed that water, sanitation and electricity are services which in most towns of developing countries are available only to a fraction of the population. Moreover in many cities there is a lack of schools, hospitals and public transports which offer their services at rates within the means of everybody. Primitive dwellings are erected illegally (without the permission of the property owners and municipal authorities) in very large numbers. In Bogota for instance the number of such structures was found to have risen in 1960–1970 at an annual average of 12 p.c.

Such average figures usually mask a fact to which experts drew attention at the Habitat conference: The rapid urbanization has brought about a dualistic structure of the urban population — well cared-for residential quarters for the well-to-do middle and upper class exist side by side with poverty-stricken slums in which conditions grow worse and worse.

Neglect of Rural Areas

The analysis of the living conditions in the developing countries would be incomplete without a reference to the housing situation in the rural areas. These have not been surveyed as extensively and carefully as in the towns. Several country studies and analyses by the FAO show however equally that the housing conditions are as a rule no better than in the towns. The purchasing power is invariably low and limiting the number of potential customers for public and private utilities supplying running water, electricity and sanitation. No such services can be provided for a considerable section of the population even if they are subsidized; a World Bank analysis shows that the charge to be borne by the consumer in this case would still be more than most inhabitants of rural areas can afford¹⁰.

The Vancouver conference concentrated in a very one-sided manner on the problems of the big cities, so much so that complaints were made that "little more than lip-service ... was paid to the millions of rural settlements in the developing

countries. Not only did the conference ignore the living conditions of the peasants in the Third World, but it apparently forgot that towns ... are dependent upon their rural hinterland"¹¹.

One of the reasons for the emphasis given to the distress in the towns may be that few delegates and experts were willing to attach any special significance to this problem. Besides, the conduct of the politicians in the developing countries is dominated by fears about the preservation of political and social stability. There is a consensus of opinion that urbanization has given rise to a situation wrought with conflicts which may hamper economic progress unless counter-measures are initiated quickly. Moreover, the continuing flight from the land shows that the dangers springing from urbanization are increasing all the time while the problems of the rural areas will become less acute, at least in the long term.

The affirmation in the Charter of Human Rights of the right of all human beings to decent housing, work, social security and medical services is ignored however if the towns receive special attention because of this perspective. The narrow interpretation of the subject at the Habitat conference makes it at least a matter of some doubt whether the conference was really intent upon safeguarding the basic rights for *all* people.

Conference Results

Although the final resolutions and all the protocols are not yet available, the outcome of the Habitat conference can be indicated in outline. A basic declaration consisting of a preamble and 55 articles contains standards for the future settlement policy and improvement of living conditions. Steps to be taken on an international and national plane for the achievement of these objectives were discussed and adopted. Efforts were made to evolve operational concepts, especially in the international and national action programmes.

On the international plane it was proposed to create "human settlement regional training institutes", "human settlement regional research centres", "human settlement information programmes", "human settlement advisory teams" and "human settlement recruitment units"¹². The conference material does not make clear whether and to what extent these measures are to be carried out within the framework of existing UN programmes. Even when this question has been clarified, there will be a danger that new institutions will be set up and work parallel to one another.

⁹ Cf. Habitat, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements ..., *ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. World Bank, Rural Development (no place of publication), February 1975, p. 27.

¹¹ Cf. J. Tinker, Warnung vor den „zornigen achtziger Jahren“ (Warning against the „angry eighties“), in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, No. 127, June 14, 1976.

¹² Cf., i.a., Habitat, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements ..., A/Conf.70/PC/25.

The national measures provide for: Improvement, intensification and increased efficiency of settlement planning with special regard to population policy, existing resources, avoidance of regional imbalances, control over land speculation, creation of social and other infrastructural facilities and domestic social structures, technologies and forms of life. In regard to building measures priority is to be given to the need for suitable housing for the population rather than to the implementation of technical ideas. Every inhabitant has a right to housing accommodation at a reasonable cost. National objectives for the provision of infrastructural facilities and social services are to be determined in accordance with the same considerations. Aided by land reforms and measures to avoid profits from speculation, the necessary land is to be made available according to general requirements. The institutional framework for the instruments of the national housing policies is to be created through suitable institutions and organisational forms with the participation of the inhabitants concerned¹³.

Some observers have rated these proposals as "very precise directives" which are "in advance of the present planning practices in many of the participating countries". The conference decisions are to be given a binding character by requiring reports on the progress of the efforts in the individual countries. "The countries are to report periodically how far they have gone in complying with the recommendations and adapting their legislation and practice to the directives"¹⁴. It was stressed by all delegates "that the government programmes of the developing countries are unsuitable for overcoming the shortage of housing for the poorest sections of the population". Unplanned settlement on the outskirts of towns should therefore be sanctioned and furthered by self-aid measures and the inhabitants' own efforts¹⁵ as has already been done successfully under several "site and service" programmes¹⁶.

Whether the need for more active development planning extending to all economic and social problems could be allowed to be satisfied to the detriment of "the free interplay of market forces" was apparently a matter of contention. Although huge profits can be made from the private ownership of land, agreement was reached only on the vague formula that the land utilization "should be

subject to public control" and speculative profits "should revert to the community in an appropriate manner"¹⁷.

Importance of the Building Industry

It had already been stressed by experts before the Vancouver conference that there exists a close correlation between the shortage of suitable accommodation and the low productivity of the building industry in the developing countries¹⁸. Modernization and enlargement of this industry would probably help to create jobs and reach other economic objectives. The delegates in Vancouver decided against the thesis that the building industry is of little importance for the development process. They questioned the calculations based on traditional analyses of capital-output ratios. Other economic indicators which reflect inter-sector ramifications, effects on employment, etc., should in the view of the Habitat conference be taken into account as well. The large demand for building services when costs are low and the possibility of drawing on domestic resources should also favour an expansion of the building sector in the developing countries. To achieve this objective, suitable building techniques and processes should be developed which would create more jobs, utilize domestic resources and provide low-cost housing in the developing countries.

World Bank experts found that in the rural areas in particular efforts to stimulate building activities tend to run into difficulties. Because of the low purchasing power there demand is inadequate, and it often happens that suitable measures of regional planning and housing policy are neglected. Many experts therefore take the view that special measures are needed, such as

□ development programmes for rural regions with special attention to economic and social targets, and

□ promotion of building projects in rural areas.

As however the Vancouver conference did not deal with this subject any further, it did not discuss proposals to consider models for cooperative village land distribution and utilization in the context of the problems in urban areas and smaller towns. For the same reason the delegates failed to examine the applicability of the new measures which have been tried out in Tanzania and the PR China.

¹³ Cf. Habitat, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements . . . A/Conf.70/PC/26.

¹⁴ Cf. E. Y. Galantay, Das UNO-Programm für Siedlungspolitik: Ergebnisse der Habitat-Konferenz in Vancouver (The UN programme for settlement policy: Results of the Habitat conference in Vancouver), in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, No. 165, July 18/19, 1976.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Cf., i.a., F. P. Hosken, Urbanization in Africa: Site and Service Programs, in: International Development Review, Vol. 17, 1975, No. 1, p. 20 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. (no author), „Habitat“ fordert mehr Bürgerrechte („Habitat“ demands more civil rights), in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, No. 136, June 15, 1976.

¹⁸ Cf. Habitat, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, *ibid.* p. 70 ff.; D. A. Turin, The Role of Construction in Development Strategies, in: International Development Review, Vol. 16, 1974, No. 3, p. 13ff.; Habitat, United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver, May 31 to June 11, 1976, Physical Elements and Mobilization of Resources, A/Conf.70/A/3.