



# UN HABITAT

FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE



## GLOBAL REPORT ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS 2009

### BACKGROUND

#### THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING IN INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION

The provision of transport networks, water, sewerage, electricity and telecommunications infrastructure play key roles in the development of efficient, healthy and sustainable cities. Amenities such as schools, health and social services, markets, places for gathering, worship and recreation are also important.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF INFRASTRUCTURE ON URBAN SPATIAL STRUCTURE

- Access among the various forms of urban infrastructure, **transport networks and systems** are generally acknowledged to be the most powerful in shaping urban spatial structure.
- **Residential developments** also seek accessibility, thus the development of new routes and transport systems provide important ways of structuring cities over the long-term. The relationship between accessibility and value, however, means that high-income groups are more able to pay for access.
- **Highways** also help determine the suburban style of development and encourage urban sprawl. The resulting low densities associated with such sprawl means high-levels of car usage.
- The structure of **public transport systems** can also shape the spatial organization of cities in important ways, and has been a crucial element of attempts to restructure cities spatially, for example in Curitiba (Brazil) and Portland, Oregon (United States).
- **Heavy rail systems** in large dense cities (mostly the subway/metro systems in central areas) are critical in supporting good interconnections in central areas, as well as links between central and outlying areas.
- **Buses** are more adaptive, and require lower densities to operate, but are also slower and less efficient.
- Major infrastructural systems for **water, sewerage, electricity and telecommunications** have also structured cities spatially in important ways.
- The spatial form of cities, their **liveability and inclusiveness**, is also shaped by access to a broader range of infrastructural facilities and amenities, such as schools; clinics; crèches etc.
- Ideally, local planning should create places that meet the **everyday requirements** of diverse groups of people: men and women; old and young; the disabled; different cultural groups, and so on.

#### THE COMPACT CITY DEBATE: SUSTAINABILITY, EFFICIENCY & INCLUSIVENESS

The compact city has been offered as an alternative to urban sprawl. Some countries such as South Africa, and cities such as Curitiba, Brazil, and those linked to the 'smart growth' movement in the United States, have adopted this idea as policy, although implementation often falls short of intentions.

#### FOR COMPACTION:

- Arguments in favour of compact cities revolve around claims that they are more efficient, inclusive and sustainable. The costs of providing infrastructure are lower, there is better access to services and facilities since thresholds are higher, the livelihoods of the urban poor are promoted and social segregation is reduced. Commuter time and cost is also lower. Compact cities are less reliant on cars and minimize distances travelled and hence fuel use, and have less impact on farmlands and environmental resources.

#### AGAINST COMPACTION:

- Critics, question several of the above claimed benefits. They maintain that compaction is contrary to market forces towards sprawl, contrary to the decentralization of work, and residents' desires, and, hence, is not politically feasible — or even desirable. Higher density, they maintain, is associated with congestion and pollution, higher crime rates, and puts greater pressure on natural resources. Research indicates that it is difficult to provide efficient public transport in cities with lower densities than 30 people per hectare, but the actual threshold varies by transport type as well as in terms of contextual factors such as spatial organization and topography.

## PLANNING SUSTAINABLE CITIES

## BACKGROUND

### PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION

Urban planning involves proactive and regulatory interventions: proactive in the way which urban areas are developed; and regulatory in that these shape how others undertake their own activities. Protective regulation is justified on the basis of safeguarding assets, social opportunities and environmental resources that would otherwise be squeezed out in the development rush.

The justification for regulation with a development intent is that it promotes better standards of building and area design; enhances quality of life and the public realm; and introduces some stability in land and property development activity, especially where market systems dominate.

However, regulations change the balance of private, collective and public rights in development. They alter rights to develop land and property in particular ways. This may have major consequences on land and property values and on who can access land and property.

### DISTRIBUTION OF FORMAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- Who does what within planning systems vary. Formal systems specify, in law, who has the power to use the different planning tools, to change them and oversee their use by others. At one end - in Australia, Canada and the United States - the national level merely provides enabling legislation or adjudication, allowing municipal or regional-level government to develop their approaches. At the other – in Britain, Cambodia, China and Japan – national governments keep tight control over the planning system and its practices.
- In cases where the local government has considerable autonomy, the municipality and its planning office take a lead role. The energetic transformation of Barcelona, Spain, is such a case, as is the introduction of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

### DECENTRALIZATION & LOCAL CAPACITY

- Emphasis has been put on decentralization of power and responsibilities to the local level. Empowering local government has been considered a basis for democratization, which, along with accountability and markets, made up the three “development themes” of the 1990s in developing countries. The desire for local empowerment was partly due to emerging consensus that local government is best placed to seek urban solutions and urban participation.
- A study undertaken in the early 1990s showed that of a sample of 25 developing and transitional countries with populations of more than 5 million, most claimed to be undertaking decentralization.

### LOCATION OF PLANNING AGENCIES

- Unlike Europe and Japan, Canada and the United States lack national legislation regulating local and urban planning. Rather, such responsibilities lie with states and provinces with a high-degree of autonomy assigned to municipalities. However, even then national governments usually control substantial budgets for urban development and can, therefore, influence the direction of planning.

### REGULATORY MEASURES

- There are different areas of planning regulation. Where property rights are nationalized, regulations revolve around managing issues, such as where particular forms of development may take place; the particular mix of land uses on a site; and the quality of building expected on such sites. Such regulations are often combined with those for building, which are important in encouraging more sustainable building practices and in recognizing the role of appropriate building technologies in less developed countries. In such countries, regulations are used in tandem with development plans in which areas to be developed are determined.
- Planning is seen as a key promoter of good governance, which has become the mantra for development in developing countries since the 1990s. At the same time, it is increasingly recognized that urban governance processes are, apart from managerial ones, heavily politicized struggles over distribution of resources and quality of places.

GRHS/09/BK4

**This is a UN-HABITAT Feature/Backgrounder. Please feel free to publish or quote from this article provided UN-HABITAT features is given credit. Suitable photographs are available on our website. For more information, please contact:**

*Spokesperson & Head of Press & Media Relations Unit, or Media Liaison, Tel: (254 20) 7623153; 7623151; Fax: (254 20) 7624060; E-mail: [habitat.press@unhabitat.org](mailto:habitat.press@unhabitat.org); Website: [www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org).*