Towards more sustainable cities: the “Urban Management and Sustainable Development Project” in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Abstract

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), trough its Sustainable Development and Human Settlement Division is carrying out a technical cooperation project for the development of Urban Management Strategies.

The development objective of the project is to strengthen the ability of local government in order to address the issues of territorial development and the problems of urban management, with particular reference to urban poverty, in the context of regional economic development and articulating changes in productive patterns with social equity.

The changeover from a marginal society to a participatory one, from the form of democracy to real democracy, from a society whose citizens are apathetic and lacking in social responsibility to one where they are active and interested in their common destiny, involves a long and patient effort to recast and re-form the relationships of society and the political system from within; an effort by citizens to educate themselves, and institutional restructuring to promote and foster this participation.

1 Conceptual framework: urban settlements in the region

Over recent years the process of urbanization and spatial concentration of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean has revealed the increasing importance of the role played by cities in the context of social and economic
development. The impact of globalization in changing the economy of cities, from a predominantly industrial base to a service-based economy and the massive introduction of telecommunications, mean that the city, at present, is not only the outcome - no matter how good or bad - of economic actions linked to development processes but is rather the condition for achieving superior goals. Actually there is a change in the traditional way of understanding the allocation of resources for urban development. Today they are understood as investment and not necessarily as expenditure.

Under the conditions described above, the urbanization process is paradoxically associated with an increase in urban poverty as experienced in the region. It appears that, on the one hand, economic growth is increasing if looked at in terms of the great macroeconomic aggregates. On the other hand mounting polarization and social inequality at local level in the cities and on rural areas mean that growth and development in the region cannot by any means be considered equivalent. Again, in terms of the process of consolidating democracy, there can be no situation more threatening than increasingly widespread hunger, marginalization and poverty.

It is certain that, in many cases, situations of poverty are not automatically done away with by forms of progress entailing consistently high rates of economic growth. Specific policies, programs and projects need to be implemented within the context of a commitment to sustainable and equitable human development. This, in the final analysis, is how the relief of poverty and deterioration in urban areas links up with new forms of action; and it is these challenges, as various forums in Latin America and the Caribbean have pointed out, that are emerging as the main ones for urban development as the century draws to an end.

In Latin America, poverty has become primarily an urban problem: in 1970, 37% of the poor were resident in urban areas: by the beginning of the '90s, this proportion had risen to 57%. Global economic restructuring affects national economics in general, but it particularly affects people in cities and urban centres. The consequence of these processes is growth that expresses itself in unbalanced development and polarization within the great urban spaces. Thus, the poorest not only suffer from lack of income and of access to basic goods and services, but lead out their existence in highly degraded and marginalized living conditions in the urban space. This situation reinforces the economic and social condition of poverty and makes it harder to improve the situation. A preliminary examination of the characteristics manifested by urban poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean brings to light a structural condition: the urban poor are not a homogeneous group; there is a multitude of different situations expressing themselves in strategies - in many cases survival strategies - with strong local roots. In fact, if we look at urban areas, we find an habitat of poverty that changes as we move from the central areas of the city to its suburban or outlying areas. Any attempt to improve living conditions in these sectors must be based on different methods and means of dealing with adverse conditions.
In this scenario, municipalities (Municipios) emerge as the local institutions best able to develop effective strategies and programmes for reversing situations of poverty, balancing these actions with those aiming at ensuring the sustainability of urban economic development. These situations of poverty are in many cases prolonged by the efforts of national bodies and institutions. Poverty requires rapid responses by the administrative system, because it is both a brake on and a determining factor in urban development.

Action in this area entails precise channeling of resources that are difficult to plan for and monitor; the targets for action are short term and the needs recurrent, and diagnostics methodologies do not necessarily throw up proposals that can be directly implemented.

It is in this context, then, that local government has to take on a central role in the effort to reduce poverty, addressing it in its different aspects. Poverty is a widespread condition that produces discrimination among the population in terms of access to land, basic services, jobs, etc., and that furthermore differentiates by sex, age and ethnic origin.

If poverty is to be reduced and informal living conditions transformed, Municipios will have to take on new tasks, handle different information, work in non-traditional areas using unconventional methods, bring together forces that are generally dispersed, evaluate their actions using indicators that are not physical and may not even be quantifiable, and link up their projects with the objectives of social development, among other things.

As the “Recife Declaration” of March 1996 puts it, the challenge presented by poverty and informal living conditions in human settlements calls for greater efforts to lay down guidelines for action by local authorities, so that the issue can be addressed in a consistent and effective way.

1.1 Urban management trends

In Latin America, the process of decentralizing functions and responsibilities to local government has been implemented to varying degrees. In recent years, important innovative schemes have been developed in this area. Local authorities are taking on a role as the agent of local development, something that requires them to make significant changes in their operating structures, and to devise new operational tools. Municipios are modernizing and increasing their ability to act, chiefly by developing processes that strengthen their institutions from within. To achieve this, Municipios require supporting action from outside to assist them in devising suitable urban management procedures and methods, (the results of the project underway are specifically focused on the production of various systems and models for urban management). It is also required the assistance and training of municipal technical staff and the dissemination of the results and experience attained in different areas, both national and local.
1.2 An updated view of the objectives of urban management

If a city is to live and function, it is indispensable for it to have an adequate system of infrastructure and public services. In the urban environment, the system of infrastructure and public services consists in a distribution network for drinking water, electricity and piped gas, sewers and rainwater drainage systems, and collection and disposal of solid waste; more broadly, it may also include public transport, health and primary education. If these services are available to the population, obvious benefits are reaped in terms of quality of life, relief of poverty and environmental sustainability.

Over the last 15 years, new infrastructure investments in developing countries have amounted to 4% of national product (1994 World Development Report, World Bank), but in Latin America and the Caribbean there are still around 130 million people who do not have access to safe drinking water (Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, World Health Organization and UNICEF, 1993); furthermore, some infrastructure systems constructed in inner cities to very high technical standards and at high cost are now overloaded and on the verge of collapse, because the technical knowledge and resources needed to maintain them are lacking. Growth rates in Latin American cities, contrary to the predictions of the ‘70s, have declined, but local institutions in charge of urban management are still faced with the urgent need to improve the quality and cover of infrastructure and services, partly in order to improve quality of life for their populations, especially in outlying areas, and partly in order to attract new investment.

Thus, it appears that action to tackle the most pressing issues linked to urban poverty, based in efficient management of housing, infrastructure and services, is a necessity and a precondition for human development at the local level.

Thus too, it has been found, in the context of analyses of urban management policies in Latin American and Caribbean cities, that one of the issues that is having to be faced with greater and greater frequency everywhere, is the need to reclaim and revitalize historical or central areas [1] and resolve their relationship with the rest of the city. This subject is one of great importance for urban development at the present time, and often results in various economic activities being re-launched at the municipal and state level, whilst also stimulating the local activities of both the formal and informal sectors.

In many cities, important initiatives have been undertaken to reclaim these areas, with different objectives and results. It would be useful for all those local authorities that need to undertake activities of this type, to be aware of the projects that have already been implemented and of the experiences and practical results, be they positive or negative, that have been generated through this type of action, as this would enable them to economize their efforts and eliminate errors of management. Here, once again, there is an evident need to devise and implement systematic schemes for municipal action that are specific to these areas. In this case the regulatory character of public institutions and the
role of the private sector will be different to what they are when action is taken in outlying sectors.

Generally speaking, measures taken in city centres act as catalysts in reinforcing decentralization and the role of the municipal institution; they foster economic, social and cultural revitalization; they stimulate improvements in the stock of housing and infrastructure and, in general, improve the quality of life of their inhabitants and the quality of the environment, relieving poverty in these areas.

The need to recover these central urban areas arises from a requirement that has been manifested not only by cities with important historic centres, but by all those cities whose central areas are run down and operating under capacity in terms of their potential to contribute to the economy and development of the city. It seems important, therefore, to foster a specific approach to the historical or central areas of the region's cities.

1.3 Previous work on the subjects and institutional linkage

To effect improvements and overcome limitations such as those referred to, a range of bodies and institutions has been implementing initiatives and projects aimed at strengthening those local government authorities that have been identified as the ones best able to tackle and resolve specific problems of varying types and dimensions that the cities have to deal with in their progress towards development. A substantial amount of experience in devising systems and models for urban management has now been accumulated [2], and these have enabled local government to deal with the rapid changes that their powers and functions have undergone.

A number of large-scale international schemes have recognized the key role of local government in interpreting local demand, organizing and coordinating the different agents, and setting itself up as an indispensable link with the centre. Thus, local authorities are recognized and taken into account when specific national policies are being devised.

A number of international projects, meetings and summits have highlighted the importance of increasing efforts to strengthen local government. Among these may be mentioned the Recife Declaration, the HABITAT II, Latin American and Caribbean Regional Plan of Action on Human Settlements, and New Directions for Human Settlements: Addressing Sustainable Development Goals contained in the 1996 Global Report on Human Settlements.

International financing authorities likewise recognize the importance of acting directly through the municipality as an agent of urban development in the countries of the region. It also needs to be borne in mind that, despite the differences between the regions of the world, similar problems exist, and there are common responses and replicable methods to address these. In this respect, Latin America and the Caribbean can offer a wealth of positive experience in
constructing and managing cities [3], the importance of which transcends the regional scenario.

It is important, therefore, to foster greater dialogue and exchanges of South-South experiences between Latin America and other countries.

2 The Urban Management and Sustainable Development Project (UMSD)

The development objective of the UMSD project is to strengthen the ability of local government to address the issues of territorial development and the problems of urban management, with particular reference to urban poverty [4], in the context of regional economic development and articulating changes in productive patterns with social equity.

2.1 Immediate objectives

To give Municipios access to systems for modernizing methods of urban services management and making these more efficient, with particular emphasis on the design and implementation of tools and strategies for consistent action in areas of poverty.

To help local government decide on policies, programmes and action to improve quality of life in human settlements, in particular in lower-income households, and to reclaim rehabilitation in central areas of cities as a local economic development strategy.

To train municipal officials in the design and management of efficient urban management systems. This training programme will be one of the practical instruments to respond to the need to build up a system of permanent diffusion of findings and results.

To design a diffusion strategy and implement actions for the dissemination of accumulated experiences in previous projects [5] and findings and results of this new project. To this end, the project is setting up a task group for these dissemination activities, including the organization of seminars and meetings, and most of all introducing these topics in other spheres of state action, specially regional governments, public and private corporations and community based organized groups.

To reach its objectives, the project intends to develop two essential methodological components: strategic planning and participation. Urban and land development can achieve sustainability only if all the sectors and agents involved support it. The issue of strengthening institutions and participatory mechanisms in the context of urban management policies simply
must be addressed if any action aiming at urban development is to be implemented.

The numerous participatory schemes implemented in different countries of Latin America reveal that this way of approaching the development of technical cooperation projects and their subsequent implementation really does produce results. The participation of the beneficiaries themselves, in this case the community and the Municipios, not only enables clear and achievable objectives to be defined, but brings further benefits in the form of cooperative efforts when the time comes to implement the proposals that have been developed. When previous projects were put into effect, the Municipios decided unanimously to concentrate efforts towards improving the efficiency of the whole municipal structure on the objective of strengthening participation by citizens, whilst incorporating into municipal management the concepts, methods and tools characteristic of strategic planning schemes.

The outcome of a strategic planning process is not the implementation of a physical development plan for the city, but a set of strategies for public and private agents, the purpose of which is to promote urban growth, provide services for the population and improve the quality of urban life and the environment. In strategic planning, the Municipality is not the only agent of urban development, but needs all local agents to become involved and share responsibilities: the private sector, companies, community groups, non-governmental organizations, institutions at other levels, etc.

The changeover from a marginal society to a participatory one, from the form of democracy to real democracy, from a society whose citizens are apathetic and lacking in social responsibility to one where they are active and interested in their common destiny, involves a long and patient effort to recast and re-form the relationships of society and the political system from within; an effort by citizens to educate themselves, and institutional restructuring to promote and foster this participation.

The process of encouraging participation advances in step with that of stimulating strategic planning as a form of management, since it is only when all urban agents are involved in taking action and accepting responsibility on a shared and concerted basis that a strategic plan can have legitimacy and be implemented in practice. The implementation of a strategic plan enables long-term action programmes to be developed, and these can incorporate subsequent short-term projects without losing their common point of reference.

Experience shows that local government can be genuinely strengthened by the implementation of these plans, and that the participation of social groups that these processes involve leads to the values of shared citizenship and belonging becoming more widely accepted among the population at large.
2.2 Outputs

2.2.1 Comparative analysis
Comparative analysis and systematization of urban management systems are carried out so that they can be used by interested Municipios and other agents, in the sectors of:

- Municipal services management: in the framework of privatization of municipal services, institutional reengineering requires that Municipios spell out an entrepreneurial policy for services which imply a new way of public-private articulation for the provision of good services under marginal market conditions.

- Coordinated action on urban poverty: there is a diversity of actions provided they adopt an approach which is basically multi-sectoral where the poor communities are both object and subject of actions. There is a search for municipal intervention systems that may warrant not only the efficient allocation of subsidies but also the adequate insertion into territorial development processes.

- Rehabilitation of central areas in cities: such areas may become urban spaces with high intensity impulse for change. There is a contrast between a significant occupation in terms of activities and persons, with an extremely low level of market investment. Rehabilitation demands the development of mega-projects with strong urban impact and with a special concern for the redesign and the use of public space. These urban interventions must be set in the framework of strategic municipal development plans. The approach used in this case will be mainly of a socio-economic nature rather than the architectonic traditional one.

In brief, the aim of all the above is to prepare and implement a strategy for the dissemination and systematization of experiences. It is necessary to build up a list of strategic cities were the project findings could be disseminated more easily. In this regard special attention has to be put on the instruments of dissemination and diffusion specially those ones that are designed on a permanent basis (leaflets, bulletins, forums, network, etc.).

2.2.2 A Manual with Guidelines for Sustainable Urban Governance
An Action Manual for Municipios is being written, dealing with urban management procedures in relation to, services urban poverty and rehabilitation of central areas.

A usual deficiency in proposals for change in relation to instruments and modalities of local urban management is the translation of concepts, criteria and objectives in handbooks and procedures that could be easily understood by
municipal officials. The project intends, in this case, to devote a sizable effort to produce material suitable for effective use by the Municipios that may so request. Two main steps are being followed:

a) Compilation and publication of a Manual containing a package of methodologies and tools for municipal action;

The work is organized according to thematic areas in each type of system. The idea is to give response to each sector inside the Municipio, also including technical considerations on the structural requirements for implementation. It is particularly important in these cases, to recognize the interaction and articulation between each part and the whole, as management is concerned. The work done for compilation will allow the establishment of hierarchies and priorities in consultation with the interested parties themselves.

b) Preparation of instructions for changing municipal procedures and/or software packages for urban management. The work described in a) would be worthless if not accompanied by a set of instructions and procedures of a gradual nature in order to organize a process of change inside the Municipio. Flow diagrams and implementation charts are being provided for setting up a monitored system for change without compromising the normal functioning of the entire system.

2.2.3 Implementation of the urban management systems

An Implementations of what mentioned above is being worked out in at least three cities of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Both the work of systematization as well as the results of previous projects are being transformed, more extensively, in actions and concrete products. Thus, this new project will organize and develop in a precise form the implementation of systems and models of urban management in three case studies. Cities will be selected in attention to various criteria: among others, importance of the city in the regional development, and Municipal support to the project. In each of them it will work on one of the three main areas of the project: management of municipal services; coordinated action to reduce urban poverty; and rehabilitation of central areas of intermediate cities. The cases will be selected at the beginning of the project taking into account the specific conditions that will be found at that moment in the Municipios of the region.

2.2.4. Education and training of municipal specialists.

The introduction and adoption of new instruments and systems of urban management requires varied and continuous training programs for municipal personnel. One of the most important results of previous projects was that each proposed system in different cities was complemented with a design of training programs. The incorporation of new procedures and their correct use are thus warranted.
References


