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Can cities be made to work?

Barbara Ward

This article is reproduced from Populi, Journal of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, vol. 2, no. 3 (1975). It is taken from Barbara Ward's keynote speech to the Exploding Cities Conference. A book based on the conference has also been published: The Exploding Cities by Rosemary Righter and Peter Wilsher (Andre Deutsch, London, and Quadrangle Books, New York).

Let us begin with the digits. I would point out very briefly that in the developing world, rural population is probably going to go up from about 1,300 million to 2,800 million between 1950 and the year 2000. Urban population will rise from 250 million — and this is the astonishing jump — to 2,200 million. In the developed world, rural population is actually going to drop, probably from 350 million to about 250 million. Urban population would edge up from about 500 million to just over 1,000 million.

The number of the world's cities with a million and more inhabitants is going to increase from about 75 cities of over a million in 1950 to 273 by the year 2000 — another quantum jump. And again, the significance for the developing nations is this: of the cities that get into the 10 million plus mark, 10 will be in the developing world and only six in the developed.

These figures give you the clue to the relative slowdown in the developed world, and the overwhelming concentration of the problem in the developing societies — and in particular, the vertiginous growth in the developing city.

The cumulative effect of changes in both developed and developing societies is that by the year 2000, for the first time in human history there will be slightly more people in urban areas than in rural areas. And the interesting thing which I would like to pick up as we go along, is that this change will nonetheless be accompanied by a very sharp increase in rural numbers. One of the difficulties in our Western approach to this problem is that we have always assumed that the transfer to the industrial, technological, highly scientific society leads to a fall in rural population. We are now confronting a situation in which this will not be true. The movement into the highly urbanized society will be accompanied by an absolute increase in rural population. So this is one of the discontinuities that we have to notice.

Re-examining assumptions

These are the explosive figures; and I think in dealing with them there are two things that we must first examine. One is the assumption that the unfolding of the technological order is a single continuous process. The second assumption is that the kind of urban pattern that has developed in the technologically advanced societies is the "urban norm." I would like to suggest that both major assumptions have to be re-examined.

Urbanism in the late twentieth century is not contiguous with the patterns of the nineteenth; something quite different is happening. And many of us are beginning to have some questions about the workability of the ultimate model, in other words, about the Metropolitan Region: is it inevitable, is it workable, is it compatible with the kind of energy constraints, the kind of food constraints which, with the first cold chill of possible limits on resources, we begin to sense? Since the city on the whole is a very involuntary thing, have we inadvertently grown ourselves into something that does not necessarily work? If this is the case, the course of wisdom for those who have to build, in the next 25 to 30 years, the equivalent of all the building that exists in the world at present, is surely to take a long cold look at this model and ask themselves whether other patterns would not be more desirable and, if so, whether it is possible to work them out.

Over the last five years, the assumed workability of the metropolitan area has begun to be questioned more and more sharply. Can the degree of social division be tolerable in the long run? Are there ways in which the community can be recreated on a multiclass basis? Are there ways in which, by the designing of communities, we could end the enormous wastage of energy in movement and mobility? These doubts go to the very heart of the question: is this a good model? Is the "inadvertent city" with which developed societies are burdened, a wise or possible precedent for those whose major building programs lie ahead?

Blockages in the system

The transfer process to the city is simply not occurring in a tolerable way in the late twentieth century. We are looking at a "system" that is not adding up to a workable strategy. It is this relatively

blocked system we must grasp if we are to do anything about our explosive cities.

The first “block” I would pick out is the fact that, owing to colonial and imperial control in developing lands, big cities existed well in advance of any industrial development. In Europe, by the eighteenth century, the capital city usually had the beginnings of commercial and money markets. But very few of the other settlements numbered much more than 5,000. In fact, when America was settled, apart, I think, from 30,000 people in New York and 50,000 people in Boston and Philadelphia, every other settlement had not more than 2,500 inhabitants. In fact there were only about 5 million people in the whole vast continent while there were already 100 million people in India.

The sudden expansion of city after city — Pittsburgh, Manchester, Dusseldorf, Milan — reflected the concentration of power and people in new *industrial* centers. But look at the developing continents; their vast cities — many of them already far beyond the million mark — are nearly all ports. This is the key. They grew up in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century to serve the commercial and imperial interests of Europe. They were the transmission belts for mines and plantations, transferring out the raw materials and bringing in Western manufacturers for a small urban elite. At the beginning of this century, Latin America was more urbanized than Europe when not even five percent of its people were employed in industry.

Besides, the colonial system only changed that part of agriculture that produces materials for export. Food production continued to be organized on feudal or tribal lines with little or no surplus for the market. There was thus no large increase in productivity available to cushion the transfer of workers to a growing industrial system. The great cities could be said to be plugged into a foreign circuit and to bypass most of the potential growth in the local economy. When independence began to loosen the old ties, they became magnets for migration — but without the economic dynamism to sustain it.

This new feature of urbanization — the city existing *before* the transformation of the economy — is reinforced by another contradiction, the profound disproportion between the factors of production. No longer do unsophisticated machines need “hands.” One hundred and fifty years of technological development have left far behind the labor-intensive industry of early Japanese or early Manchester textiles. The new investment patterns in industry are of sophisticated machines and capital-intensive methods. Similarly the “Green Revolution,” hailed as the great breakthrough to agricultural productivity, is oriented to capital and machines, not to maximizing labor. The result has been a transfer out of the country into the cities of an explosive kind in which rising unemployment is a characteristic of both communities. This reinforces the results of the sanitation and health

measures introduced first by colonialism and then World War II. The ending of the colonial regime coincided not with high death rates but the beginnings of the “population explosion.” Also, it should be added, nearly all migrations were *internal* because there was no longer open land overseas to which migrants could go.

Put all these factors together — cities before industry, population exploding, capital-intensive technologies in labor-rich societies without any outlets for migration and we can see the degree of blockage in the system. Critical linkages are wholly different from the nineteenth century. The process is not working to create out of a preexisting agricultural society the beginnings of a workable urban technological order. Instead we have massive pressure of people moving into relatively unprepared cities. There is no final mystery about our exploding cities. What we are seeing is a particular set of historical circumstances working themselves out in a transfer of population which does not work, which bears little relationship to what went before and which is forcing us to recognize just how unsatisfactory it will be as a base for future urbanism.

Nor are the pressures connected solely with the obstructed transfer from rural to urban society. In addition to the unemployment, the illiteracy, the lack of opportunity created by overmigration, developing cities are showing signs of adopting some of the more unworkable aspects of the fully modernized metropolis.

I would particularly underline all the strategies which, in still constrained societies, imply a lavish use of energy — cars and highways before five percent of the people have cars; high-rise buildings and air conditioning before the poor even have piped

Fig. 1: One hundred and fifty years of technological development have left far behind the labor-intensive industry of early Japanese or early Manchester textiles. The new investment patterns in industry are of sophisticated machines and capital-intensive methods. (ILO photograph)



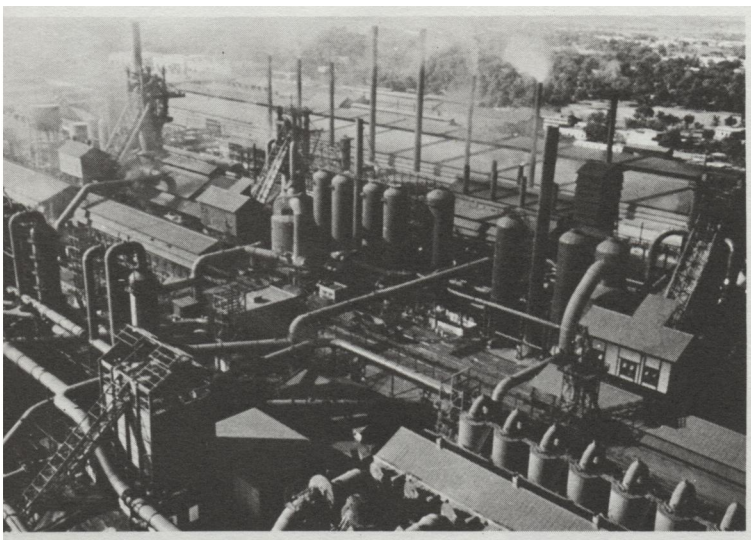
water; all the energy-wasting tactics which are becoming questionable in the richest societies and are certainly unsustainable in the poor.

I am distressed, I must confess, by the degree to which the feeling that nothing can be done is becoming an excuse for doing nothing. Inertia, nourished by lack of hope, is then turned into a certain cynicism which dismisses even those policies that have been effective on the grounds that they are not relevant or not normative or not possible to repeat. But we do not need to be defeated in advance. Inventiveness and imagination have not been expunged from our human resources. We may not have expected the urban crisis, but it is beginning to work on us. Whether the issue is the unsatisfactory nature of the urban model or the "obstructed system" underlying the developing world's urban migrations, there is far more awareness of the problems and dangers than was the case even five years ago. And the new processes of recognition can be mutually reinforcing. If developed societies start changing their models and the developing world starts mastering the transfer of populations, the urbanism of the next 30 years could be incomparably more creative and human than the inadvertent city building of the past. And there are signs that the sorting out of models and systems has at least begun.

The unintended city

There is a certain weakening in the traditional notion that the whole of a nation's urban pattern can develop as the byproduct of other decisions — on industrial location, on transport, on trade routes.

Fig. 2: The Tata iron and steel plant created Jamshedpur, India — "the city of steel." Now there is a certain weakening in the traditional notion that the whole of a nation's urban pattern can develop as the byproduct of other decisions — on industrial location, on transport, on trade routes. (ILO photograph)



Above all, there is growing scepticism about allowing urban patterns to go wherever land speculation may lead.

This concept of control over land use is linked with another change. Over the last four or five years a growing interest has developed in the idea of recreating multicultural communities within the urban spread. Is it necessary to endure megaregions which are so separate, so spread, so thin in the suburbs, so neglected in the centers, so overloaded in their office districts, so given over to all the strains of mass commuting that they become the focus of rejection, anomie — and even violence? The decentralized community, within a region determined by patterns of mass transit, looks much more interesting than was the case only five years ago.

New urban models

The concept of the derivative city has to some extent given way to the idea of the city which is planned and thought of as actually being a habitation for human beings. Instead of being the place where the "hands" are put in order to supply industry, it becomes a place where employment is developed to support the community.

Questions about the proper use of energy have a direct bearing on new thinking about urban models. The idea of decentralized communities within a wider "urban region" served by mass transport acquires an added validity when scarcity of energy may compel us to think of more journeys on foot or bicycle — a better mode to match our diets — and fewer in the car.

Underlying all our questions about energy, about diet, about city patterns, there is a wholly new uneasiness over careless standards of rapacity, of greed, of wastefulness obviously incompatible with a good life even for those who are on the planet today, which cast a darker and darker shadow over our future, if, by the year 2000, a whole other world is to be added to the one we have now.

I do not pretend that any of these new concepts — land-use planning, decentralized development, energy conservation, the workable and walkable community — yet add up to a total program for the new urbanism. But I do believe they represent a very sharp break from the accepted wisdom of the last 50 years which has given us the "unintended city" and with it something that does not by any means fit all the human intentions we bring to our urban ideals.

Land-use planning

If we look at the chain, something can be done about each link. First of all, the overwhelming primacy of the inherited big city can be countered if land speculation is checked and land-use planning

is systematically developed. Socialist models have encouraged the trend. Many developing societies now look far more carefully at the siting and distribution of population. They may not have been able to do much about it yet, but at least it is firmly on the agenda of development. Land-use plans, land-use maps, the idea of the nation's endorsement as a whole as the basis for planning appears to me at least to have started to emerge in the development picture in the last decade. As a result of this emerging acceptance of physical planning, urbanization as a process is also beginning to figure in development plans and to cease to be a "residual."

This change can have a direct effect on another link in the fatal chain — the lack of sufficient agricultural employment and productivity to balance migration to the cities. In earlier planning, agriculture, too, has often been left out of the central focus of planning. Small farmers and their families make up 40 percent of the world's peoples and it is on their small farms — five hectares and less — that productivity is low enough to make a tripling and quadrupling of world food supplies possible, provided output can be increased.

This, in turn, helps with another link in the chain of obstruction—the Gadarene rush to the big cities. It could help in two ways — by slowing down the movement thanks to the possibility of more employment on the farms and more work in intermediate centers; and by increasing the demand for consumer goods of an unsophisticated kind which can be produced by labor-intensive workshops and small factories in the cities — as they were, for instance, in the early stages of Japanese industrialization.

And all these policies together can begin to have some impact on the rate of population growth since one rule at least does seem to prevail among all the uncertainties about the Malthusian dilemma — and that is that population begins to stabilize as hope and opportunity increase. Any policy that neglects the interests of the 40 percent of the world's population who live on the frontiers of destruction is certain to have no answer whatever to the problem of explosive growth.

If some of the intolerable pressures of continuous deluges of migrants can be taken off the cities, there, too, policies are available to lessen the tragedy of unemployment and the loss of hope. It is a labor-intensive and income-generating task to accelerate the rehabilitation of many of the shanty towns along the lines of providing them with elementary sanitation and water services and then encouraging, by security of tenure and the right kind of loan associations, the people's capacity to build for themselves. We already know from a number of settlements how much this approach can achieve.

None of this work is possible without control over land use, without an end to urban speculation, without the highest possible priority to the citizen's work and shelter.



Fig. 3 and 4: As a result of the emerging acceptance of physical planning, urbanization as a process is also beginning to figure in development plans and cease to be a residual. This, in turn, helps with another link in the chain of obstruction — the rush to the big cities — by making intermediate centers more attractive. San Antonio, Texas (top), and Curitiba, Brazil, have effective physical planning departments which help make these small cities workable and walkable.



Planetary justice

Nor is it simply a question of social justice within the developing societies. The issue is also posed at the planetary level. The difficulty in taking the optimistic view is that the whole development process, with greater decentralization and stronger emphasis on agricultural productivity, on efforts to build up the whole range of smaller industry needed for the rehabilitation of urban areas, is extremely expensive. Energy now costs three and four times as much as it did before — adding US \$1,000 million a year current deficit to India's balance of payments.

The 40 poorest countries in the world — they include the whole Indian subcontinent — are also crippled by the tripling of grain and fertilizer prices that have added \$5,000 million to their balance of payments since 1973. They can, less than ever, afford the whole investment package. But the developed world can. It still has 80 percent of the world's resources for 20 percent of the people. The ratio of rich to poor has been slightly enlarged to include oil producers, but generally speaking the distribution of resources of the planet is not very much changed. The combined national income of the OPEC countries is about \$2,000,000 million. But for developed societies it is nearer \$3,000,000,000 million. There is still a margin. Indeed, the United States earned \$2,000 million from the poor in 1973 by selling high-cost grain.

Between our food concentrations and our energy concentrations, there are problems of planetary management which we have to confront in quite new ways. And we must do so in the context of a new era of doubt and anxiety. It becomes clearer that the stock of resources is moving towards the state of strain which, in a finite planet, it must ultimately reach. We have to reassert our faith in the transfer of resources and creative development and investment at a time when people are going to be less willing because it could mean some sacrifice for them.

We are not going to get through the next 25 years on the basis of the systems, the policies, the interests — and the disloyalties — that have brought us to where we are now. If they were enough, then we would not have to change. But the policies that we need now are policies to confront crisis: and they include justice, sharing, all the things which in our domestic society just contrive to contain our drives and our dreams. But they are absent at the planetary level and therefore we are getting a largely unworkable planet.

Let us realize that with the blocked system of faulty urbanization and planetary injustice, we are not going to drift into solutions. We are not going to slide through a series of adjustments and just come out happily on the other side. We have to have policies, we have to have justice and we have to have a vision. It may be difficult to say it because it has to be said again and again and again — there is nothing more tedious to people than thinking they have heard it all before. Yet from the beginning of time they have heard this "still, small voice" of obligation and brotherhood. When they have listened, society has worked. When they have refused to listen — in Babylon, in Ch'ang-An, in Rome, in Agra — society has broken up. Whatever our conscience may say, the voice of realism is going to accept the fact that by the year 2000 there will be 3,000 million more people here whatever we do. Either they are going to make this into a planet of hellish confrontation, of total disruption and technological disaster, or we are going to feel our way towards a society in which people can be neighbors and friends. I think it is as simple as that. The people are going to be there, the changes are going to come; cities are exploding, resources are under constraint. Either we have policy and generosity or we have disaster. I think it is the voices of reason, of realism and of conscience that all urge us to choose that generosity shall prevail.