BASIC NEEDS AND THE URBAN POOR

The Provision of Communal Services

Edited by
P. J. Richards and A. M. Thomson

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PREFACE

This study is intended to investigate means by which the levels of basic needs satisfaction of the urban poor can be improved by the conscious application of public policies and programmes. It looks at a number of specific fields, including housing policy, building codes, water supply, sanitation, transport, health and education and, for each one, reviews the specific situation of the urban poor and the actual and potential means available to improve their lot. It also includes an overall chapter on the role of the public sector and a short concluding chapter.

The study refers specifically to Asia. However, the contributors have also amassed experience of urban poverty problems, and their possible solutions, in other parts of the world. Thus reference is made to urban poverty problems in other continents. The focus is also mainly on the larger if not primary cities. If their problems can be eased then very probably those of smaller towns can also be solved.

The editors would like to thank R. Szal, E. Gutkind and C. Maldonado to their helpful comments on this study. I. Pearson and T. Viale, who prepared the final typescript, deserve special thanks.

P.J. Richards
A.M. Thomson

Geneva
February 1984

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1 INTRODUCTION

by P. J. Richards

The World Employment Conference of the International Labour Organisation, meeting in 1976, adopted a Programme of Action[1] which, under the heading "Basic needs", begins as follows:

> 1. Strategies and national development plans and policies should include explicitly as a priority objective the promotion of employment and the satisfaction of the basic needs of each country's population.
>
> 2. Basic needs, as understood in this Programme of Action, include two elements. First, they include certain minimum requirements of a family for private consumption: adequate food, shelter and clothing, as well as certain household equipment and furniture. Second, they include essential services provided by and for the community at large, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport and health, educational and cultural facilities.

The Conference therefore assumed that basic needs satisfaction would be ensured by a combination of two factors: private consumption expenditure, and the provision of essential services by the community at large.

The Programme of Action of the World Employment Conference does not specify where target levels of basic needs satisfaction should be set (nor, indeed, in what form they should be set) beyond stating that the concept of basic needs is country specific and dynamic.[2] Target levels, must, however, be set at above subsistence levels and, presumably, be revised in the course of economic development. The text of the Programme of Action gives a few directions in setting broad priorities in the operation of government services: thus primary education should be given priority over secondary and tertiary education (paragraph 21) and landless labourers should be assisted in building their own homes (paragraph 12).

This volume concentrates on the provision of services for the urban poor, including the special problems attached to carrying out such programmes and the specific characteristics of urban poverty which condition the need of the poor for these services. The volume does not tackle the first component of basic needs identified by the World Employment Conference, namely, the generation of employment at sufficiently productive levels for employment incomes to purchase food and other consumer goods for workers and their dependants. Nevertheless, the division between private consumption on the one hand and essential services on the other is artificial. Essential services also require consumption expenditure and generally households with the highest levels of private consumption enjoy the highest levels of "essential" services. To the list of sectors given above this volume adds housing and subtracts cultural facilities.

The volume concentrates on Asian experience although it draws examples from other continents. Cairo, for example, is frequently drawn on to provide corroboration or illustration of a point. The volume also concentrates on major cities where indeed most knowledge of urban poverty and of the operation of communal services has been acquired. In fact poverty in smaller cities may be as acute and, as the chapter on water supply shows, the level of services provided may be extremely low.

In discussing Asia the volume naturally draws partly on the experience of Hong Kong and Singapore. Of course, their income levels are high and some may feel that the policies they follow now may be of little relevance in India or Bangladesh. Hong Kong and Singapore are also hardly affected by internal migration by the rural poor and what migration flows there are, are controlled. They are thus spared the dilemma that improving the level of urban services may stimulate rural-urban movement. Nonetheless the means which these two city-states have used to solve their problems over the last 25 years are of some general interest. However, the inclusion of wealthier countries in the study does serve to demonstrate that the level of services available must depend largely on average income levels. It is the access to those services and their distribution between income groups which can be changed in all countries.

The reference to services provided by (and for) the community is misleading. As the various chapters show, some services, e.g. some forms of sanitation, are not generally provided by any official agency and require self-help. Schooling and health care are provided by what are usually nation-wide agencies. Water and transport may be provided by urban specific and semi-self-financing bodies.

The object of this study is to provide a knowledge base and recommendations which can serve to upgrade the level of services provided for the urban poor. This may require a change in policy, e.g. on land tenure, or a switch in investment priorities or different means of delivering educational and health care programmes. Action may be taken piecemeal or as part of an overall urban strategy. However, what is likely to be generally necessary is for a better means to be found by which the urban poor can express their own feelings and priorities and be consulted on policies and programmes. A working democratic framework is the first necessity, backed up by other means of educating and mobilising the urban poor.

One problem in using a sectoral approach for this study, apart from the next chapter which examines issues related to poverty and to the role of the government in providing services, is that intersectoral linkages are apparently underemphasised. Clearly better shelter, better sanitation, better health care, etc. all interact and to provide better shelter but ignore sanitation, or more water and ignore sewerage, to quote a real and common example, may be an extravagant means of moving in the right direction. Readers should not therefore feel that treating each subject separately means that inter-sectoral linkages have been forgotten.

There is also the question of the level of basic needs satisfaction to aim for. This has been discussed elsewhere and a few quotations can be made.[3]

> Attempts to set unimpeachably fair, absolute levels are fruitless in all but a minority of cases. In conditions of urban overcrowding there is likely to be a minimum level for sanitary provision (still above certain current levels) below which the achievement of all other targets is threatened. But once this subsistence level is reached it ceases to be useful as a target. In other areas, education for example, target levels

are determined solely by society and not by individual or group subsistence needs.

There are, however, three characteristics which basic needs targets should share: (1) they should be dynamic, i.e. they should be set in a relative manner (see below) although expressed in absolute terms; (2) they should be expressed where possible in terms of outputs rather than inputs (or a mix of the two), and of improvements in personal well-being rather than the coverage provided; (3) they should be the predictable results of programmes which are known to be effective.

A relative concept of basic needs implies that the target level for a given future year should be set in relation to that currently enjoyed by some other population group. This frees policy-makers from a dependence on possibly specious calculations of minimum needs. It also implies (i) that the degree of basic needs satisfaction of all population groups needs to be investigated before setting targets, in order to know how many groups currently fall short of the alternative levels envisaged, and (ii) that equity is a principal consideration in target setting. To what extent equity also implies egalitarianism depends on whether those already enjoying basic needs satisfaction above the target level can make further progress.

The second point is that output targets are far preferable to input targets. Targets should refer, for example, to safe births (not to attended deliveries), to the development of mental abilities (not to a certain number of years of schooling), to mobility (not to the building of so many kilometres of all-weather roads) and to storm-proof housing (not to the production of galvanised sheeting or waterproofed thatch).

The above may seem undeniable. However, the third point concerns precisely the relation between inputs and outputs. Some government programmes are well known to be effective, in the sense that ensuring satisfactory coverage of the population concerned (an input target) practically guarantees a particular level of basic needs satisfaction (an output target). Vaccination campaigns are an example. Other programmes are believed to be effective, some are ineffective.