



An Introductory Perspective

The eye of the beholder

Some years ago, when almost all politicians and professionals regarded urban settlements built by low income people as 'slums', 'eyesores', 'cancers' and so on, two Englishmen were standing on a hillside overlooking a huge 'barriada', or self-organized and rapidly developing squatter settlement, on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. One Englishman was myself, an architect in the process of being de-schooled and re-educated by the experience of working with these city builders. The other was a visiting Minister of the British Government, who had asked for a guided tour, to see for himself what he had heard about such settlements. Working with the 'barriada' builders had already taught me much of what I know about housing and local development, and they had affirmed my faith in the immense capabilities of people, however poor they may be. I naively expected the visiting Minister to be as encouraged as I was by the sight of so many people doing so much with so little. But the Minister was appalled. He viewed it as a monstrous slum, threatening civilization itself, while I saw a vast building site and a developing city. We returned to the Embassy in mutually bewildered silence. Only some time afterwards did I realize that what we see depends on where we stand. One person's problem is another person's solution.

The cases in this book describe the activities of similar people in all parts of the world. They are presented as evidence of the immense, but largely ignored and often suppressed, potential of people with hope for the future. The personal experience described above illustrates the viewpoint which I shared with the other members of the HIC Project Steering Group in selecting the case studies in this book. The selection illustrates ways in which this potential can be realized – especially with the institutional support of governments and the often essential assistance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Today, more informed people share this appreciation of the vast achievements of low- and very low-income people who are actually building most homes and neighbourhoods in many Third World cities. Yet even now, twenty-five years after the episode in Lima, and the first publications suggesting that the so-called 'problems' are also solutions, there are still many who feel disgust and pity for the poor, rather than respect for how they survive, and admiration for what they do despite truly appalling

hardship. Those who know, at first hand, the people whose actions are described in this book will also know that they do what they do because they have hope. However, many governments still fear people's own organizations and actions, on which real development and the world's future depend. The overt suppression of local initiative by openly repressive regimes, and its inhibition by covertly repressive government are to be expected from those who equate development with centralization of power and wealth. Those who are genuinely concerned about global and local inequities can be truly caring by supporting people's hopes and their own action – by far the greatest resource for overcoming despair and grinding poverty.

Most donations from the general public are still given mainly in response to images of despair. Using patronising titles such as 'Give Me Shelter', the media still tends to present the poor as objects of pity, clutching begging bowls, and in helpless, dependent poverty. These insults to the poor probably do extract larger gifts from the conscience-stricken but uninformed populations of rich countries. Until awareness of both sides of the reality is more widespread, fund-raising for development and emergencies may still depend on such appeals. But increasingly, the mass-media have been communicating what many voluntary aid organizations already know and what bi-and multi-lateral agencies are fast learning: that relieving sudden emergencies and the on-going disaster of poverty depend on complementing, instead of ignoring the victims' own resources and priorities.

People do more with less

The cases in this book show that the continuing disasters of generalized poverty and vulnerability can be mitigated and eventually eliminated. They point to ways and means by which the more dramatic forms of homelessness following earthquakes and floods, famines and wars can be drastically reduced, even if they can never be eliminated altogether. By concentrating attention on the human resources of the poor, rather than on their often appalling conditions, the cases highlight the necessity of supporting locally self-managed action. Only through government policies which enable people can the immense potential for development by people be realized. Knowledge of what even very poor people are capable of doing and of what even very rich states fail to do for those who cannot afford market prices, undermines the false claims of those who would have us believe that either the



state or the market can substitute for the community-based initiative of the people. Those who sacrifice people on the altars of the marketplace or the state can no longer claim that happiness tomorrow depends on frustration today. In fact, policies that inhibit personal and local initiative about the community-building on which our very future depends.

The poor build for themselves an enormously greater number of homes and neighbourhoods than can ever be provided by public welfare and private charities. Between half and three-quarters of all urban settlement and homebuilding in the rapidly growing cities of the Third World are built by and for the poor themselves. This majority, usually four-fifths of the population, have no access to new housing supplied by commercial developers or public agencies. Donors to housing charities vastly outnumber those who are eventually sheltered by their gifts.

Most of the well-off, in rich and poor countries alike, must still be confronted with these simple facts. And these facts must be seen against the backdrop of one, overwhelming fact: that all life on our already badly-damaged planet depends on all of us doing far more with much less. When we see great numbers of low-income people building and improving their communities, and at costs three or five times lower than those built for them, we must admit that we have a great deal to learn from those builders and from their enablers.

Current policies usually frustrate and disable people. As an Argentinian squatter-builder once said, and as millions more, squatters or not, know only too well: 'There is nothing worse than being prevented from doing what one is able to do for oneself.' Enablement is the key. Neither bureaucratic mass-housing nor the uncontrolled market can build communities and eliminate homelessness. But **people** can, when they have access to essential resources and when they are free to use their own capabilities in locally-appropriate ways.

The word 'people' means everyone: infants and children, youth, the aged, and women as well as men. The achievements described are mainly community initiatives, not the products of any one age or sex group. The cases show that specific needs according to gender, age, health, ethnicity or culture are far more likely to be served through community-based programmes than through commercial developments or through government schemes in which people have no significant part. The

cases also show how home and neighbourhood building depend more on women than on men, who almost always dominate the paternalistic forms of market- and state-based housing provision. Centrally managed organizations tend to be hierarchic and authoritarian. Community-based organizations, on the other hand can be directly democratic, and have little need for elaborate lines of command or representation. As long as their territories are clearly defined, community organizations have more to gain from co-operation than from the competitive pursuit of empire building or from internecine communal conflicts.

Only people can build community

By approaching housing as an activity, a process involving everyone, along with most of the resources on which life depends, we have a paradigm for the world as a whole. This may seem far fetched to those whose views are limited to the political and economic rivalry of market and state-based systems. But the perspective through which these Third World initiatives are viewed reveals that there are three interlocking and interdependent systems, not two. The cases show us clearly that the answer to the housing question is no longer simply a choice between or combinations of speculative commercial developments and categorical government programmes (that is, programmes that supply officially determined categories of goods and services to officially determined categories of consumers). The conventional view of politics simply as conflict and compromise between free markets and central governments is a gross oversimplification of reality, leading to incomprehensible explanations. It is impossible to paint realistic pictures of the world as we see it with two primary colours, but with all three, it is relatively easy.

A true perspective shows all three dimensions. The new politics are about new relationships between the three interdependent systems: state, market and community-based systems which are non-governmental and non-commercial. The perspective and principles can be seen more clearly in the harsher realities of the Third World, and they are the same as those now widely reported and discussed in the fields of food production and nutrition, medicine and health maintenance, education and other spheres of vital human activity. Many terms coming into current use already refer to the emerging third system, or to aspects of it: 'civic society', 'the voluntary sector', 'the informal sector', 'la société civile' and 'el sector popular' among others. It may not be a mere coincidence that our



political vocabulary has no widely recognized term for the 'third sector' or system and that pyramidally-organized societies inhibit and largely ignore the role of women – the natural leaders of the vital third system. A new balance of powers at all levels and in all basic social activities is vital, for a workable and sustainable future.

As in any other view of real experience, the cases confirm the generally overlooked fact that most human, material and even financial resources are invested in homes and neighbourhoods. Dwelling environments occupy the greater part of all built-up areas. Most lifetime is spent in the home and neighbourhood. More energy is used for servicing, maintaining and building homes and local facilities than for everything else together.

Collectively, of course, we spend more money on and in the home and neighbourhood than everywhere else combined. So how we build and live locally is inseparable from the issues of human, economic and environmental degradation and development. 'Housing', conceived as a sector, like a slice of cake, is a dangerous abstraction. It is part of the mystifying jargon so effectively used by those who can profit from it, as long as the third system fails to express its autonomy and allows the state and market to take over.

When housing is usurped by commercial and political interests and powers, quantities are all that seem to matter. The qualities of housing, what it does for people, as distinct from what it is, as a commercial or political commodity, have to take second place and are often ignored altogether. This is not due to corporate or bureaucratic perversity but to the fact that no large, centrally-managed organization can possibly cope with the extreme complexity and variability of personal and local housing needs and priorities – demands that must be met if the housed are to invest their own time and effort in the acquisition, improvement and maintenance of their dwellings and surroundings.

It is only when people have sufficient choices and are free to make their own decisions as to where they shall live, in what kind of dwelling, and with what form of tenure, that a sufficient variety can evolve. And it is only when people exercise these necessary freedoms that the planning and building or the improvement, management and maintenance of homes and neighbourhoods can become vehicles for community building.

The evidence presented in this book endorses the claim that my co-authors and I published some years ago

in **Freedom to Build** (Macmillan, New York, 1972):
'When dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contributions in the design, construction or management of their housing, both this process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being. When people have no control over nor responsibility for key decisions in the housing process, on the other hand, dwelling environments may instead become a barrier to personal fulfilment and a burden on the economy.'

Housing economy depends on local autonomy

If the satisfaction of a society's housing needs depends on the economic use of available resources, then it depends on people's own personal and local knowledge. As politicians are fond of saying, people are society's principal resource. But as politicians are less inclined to declaim, the use of that resource depends on enabling policies that free and encourage people to use what they know and to do what they can. Individual and collective satisfaction depends on the release of personal and local knowledge, skills and initiatives.

Knowledge depends on one's experience and, as stated earlier, on what one can see from where one stands. What an insider sees, looking outwards and up from a personal and local situation, is quite different from what an outsider sees, looking down from the expert's professional altitude. While the connections between one small place and its surroundings are clearly seen from above, they are not easily seen from within. Conversely, the vital details are difficult to see or too numerous to cope with when seen from above. When outside experts are responsible for making detailed housing decisions for centrally administered multi-family developments, they are bound to generalize, however much they may have studied their 'target populations'. The managements are also bound to limit the variations, in order to minimize their costs. These are the so-called 'economies of scale', which become diseconomies when inappropriate scales are adopted for the job. On the other hand, when people make their own personal and local decisions without due regard for the larger environment, substantial losses may also occur, for them, for their neighbours, or for the city and society as a whole.

These complementary kinds of essential expertise must work in co-operation, in order to achieve an economic, convivial and environmentally sound use of non-polluting, renewable or long-lasting material resources. The



relationship between the insiders and outsiders is critical. As their influence or effective authority over resource use is complementary and equal in practice, there must be sufficient equality to ensure mutual respect.

Local autonomy depends on central supports

Autonomy means inter-dependent self-management, not independent self-sufficiency, as those who confuse it with autarchy believe. People's own underused capacities and those of community-based organizations cannot be used as excuses to off-load governmental responsibilities. When government fails to use its unique powers to ensure access to resources and services so that people cannot provide for themselves or through their own local organizations, their essential contributions will be inhibited or even perverted. And the same happens when government abuses its powers through centrally administered provision, instead of supporting and enabling locally self-managed production.

The fact that so many people have done so much with so little in low-income countries, while so little is done for low-income people with so much by their governments, demonstrates the necessity of the radical policy changes which are already taking place. Increasingly, with some and perhaps vital assistance and encouragement from international agencies and NGOs, Third World government policies are changing over from vain attempts to supply public housing to the support of locally self-managed initiatives. The necessity of enabling policies is not so obvious in countries whose governments can afford to subsidize all who cannot pay current market prices. But as the longer-term social and economic costs of depriving people of their freedom of choice and responsibilities turn people's demands to be housed into demands to house themselves, we become increasingly interested in Third World experience and what it can teach.

In his address to the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements in Istanbul on May 5, 1986, Dr. Arcot Ramachandran, Executive Director of the UN Centre for Human Settlements, declared that:

'Our agenda for the next 10 years must be to find the necessary capacities to apply (these) enabling strategies: (while we cannot be sure of success) we can only give a guarantee of failure for any other kind of strategy.'

Internationally, there is a growing acceptance of the fact that market-based, state-based and mixed housing supply

policies have failed. The only alternatives are those based on the third sector or system which can be supported and enabled, instead of being suppressed and disabled by market and state monopolies.

In the necessarily general and question-begging terms that one has to use in a summary, an enabling policy has to create a new balance between the complementary powers of the three systems – even where the third, people and community-based system is badly eroded and weak as in Britain and most other highly industrialized and institutionalized countries. Dr. Ramachandran's agenda implies a recognition of local capacities for deciding what to do locally, and of central capacities for enabling local self-management by ensuring access to resources and for setting the limits to what may be done by people and their own community-based organizations and enterprises. Partnerships between these kinds of authority involve negotiation. The existence of mediating structures is therefore a pre-requisite for an enabling policy.

NGOs and the community-based organizations (CBOs) which they serve are essential. Only they can build up the necessary political pressures and only they can successfully balance opposing interests. Individuals and small groups are generally dependent on mediating organizations for successful negotiation. Ideally, these are their own community-based organizations, but more often, people and their own CBOs depend on third party NGOs to assist in two vital ways:

- to help people to organize, to articulate their demands, to assess their own resources, to plan and implement their own programmes and to manage and maintain their own homes and neighbourhoods; and
- to act as mediators between people and their CBOs in their negotiations with the commercial enterprises and government agencies.

Only very small minorities can depend on NGOs to provide them with homes or to improve their communities – even smaller numbers than those who can expect government to do the same. In other words, NGOs can and do make essential contributions to changes of policy, through the demonstration of alternative ways and means of home and neighbourhood building – ways and means that show what industry and government can and must do in order to enable people to build a just and sustainable society.

John F.C. Turner, London, January 1988.