

# **The Moral Challenge of Urbanization in Less Developed Countries**

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## **Abstract**

The severity of poverty and the deprivation of opportunities in the urban South constitute a profound moral challenge in which human dignity is assailed. Given this situation, is there an argument for attending to morally important factors such as social justice, human flourishing, the common good, participation and inclusion, and safety and security? What moral obligations, if any, do we as individuals and governments – North and South – have to overcome deprivation in the urban South?

This paper argues that urban residents are becoming more attentive to normative ideals, articulating common values and aspirations in a new moral dialogue with decision-makers.

## **The Moral Challenge of Urbanization in Less Developed Countries**

### **Introduction**

For many, life is extremely tough in the urban areas in the less developed countries of the world (the South). The severity of poverty and the deprivation of opportunities in the urban South constitute a profound moral challenge even if seldom approached from that perspective. To a large extent, the rich and powerful in the South and in the advanced, industrialized and post-industrial economies of the world (the North) tolerate this degradation of human dignity; there exists a tacit acceptance of two very different standards for human dignity – one for “them” and one for “us”.

Yet what moral obligations, if any, do we as individuals and governments – North and South – have to overcome deprivation in the urban South? And why are we only now beginning to hear about the moral dimensions of urbanization in the South?

That answer may rest in a failure of both moral voice and moral imagination. Until recently, overt moral vocabulary was seldom part of any urban development dialogue, and the premise of value neutrality or value-free technical thinking dominated urban planning theory and practice. Urban development and governance challenges were seen as problems to be solved through the application of appropriate technology and scientific methods, and powerful techniques of probability theory, modeling, and statistics were developed and advocated as the correct response to problems as they were encountered and perceived in the urban environment. As noted by Jane Jacobs, in her scathing attack on American city planning techniques of the 1960s:

By carrying to logical conclusions the thesis that the city, as it exists, is a problem in disorganized complexity, housers and planners reached – apparently with straight faces – the idea that almost any specific malfunctioning could be corrected by opening and filling a new file drawer (Jacobs 1961).

In the 1960s, American and European planners and those involved in urban development policy and urban governance gradually began to broaden their focus, considering issues outside the traditional technology-focused approach by tackling such challenges as urban amenity, social equity, and community. Despite this tentative expansion of horizons, urban growth and development conceptually remained rooted in the premise of top-down management, planning and design, in which the rule of law, the weight of authority, and the influence of experts would shape cities to conform to an imposed masterplan. Planners and city managers in the North viewed themselves as expert authorities, whose role and duty was to impose their (probably well intentioned) vision of urban growth upon the residents and stakeholders of the city. These planners and city managers were hardly value-neutral – they brought to their work their middle-

class sensibilities and high standards of education – yet they often failed to connect with the on-the-ground realities and values of the poor. The situation was further exacerbated in the South, where governments (often operating at the national level) generally engaged foreign urban experts in this capacity. This tendency added yet further cultural and experiential distancing factors between the planner and the people.

The results of this top-down, expert-led and non-participatory urban development approach were far from satisfactory. A fundamental change in perceptions was needed, as illustrated so poignantly in Lisa Peattie's work as an anthropologist in the early development stages of the new city of Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela. Dr. Peattie described the lessons learned through that experience as follows: (1) the planner cannot *will* a world into existence - planning does not carry its own power or authority, and hence planners should become facilitators, allying themselves with local stakeholders, institutions, and social forces, (2) the techniques of planning are not *value neutral*, since every system of representing desirable future development serves some interests and goals better than others, and (3) planners must view their work as a form of action embedded in society having a time dimension, conscious of being a part of *complex and continuing processes* of creation (Peattie 1995, 170 - 171).

Many planners, and those involved in public policy formulation affecting urban development, considered Peattie's approach both radical and profoundly refreshing. Planners challenged other planners within their profession to become reflective in their deliberations, involve citizens in the planning process, and – more generally – to come to terms with ethical means and ends in their work. As advocated by Norman Krumholz (planner) and John Forester (planner and academic):

When we speak of ethics in planning, we refer to a capacity to argue about what to do, to a capacity to think about, evaluate, and judge alternative courses of action. We should prize ethical thinking in planning not because it will magically promote consensus or coherence in the field, but because it can help us understand more sensitively just what is at stake in public decision processes and in our own actions. To put it more simply, by enriching our capacities for judgment and questioning, ethical thinking can help us become more insightful evaluators and analysts, better planners, better actors. Ethical thinking concerns ends and means alike. If planners are to pursue something they regard as 'the public interest,' surely they should have some articulate conception of what that involves (Krumholz and Forester 1990, 253).

Does this new sensitivity towards ethical thinking extend from the North to the South? Do morally compelling reasons exist for the North to come to the aid of the urban South, or to enter into a more equitable partnership with the South? Before that larger question can be considered, we must first understand the character and severity of need in the urban South.

## Urban Context in the South

The rapidity, scale, and intensity of urban growth in the South is alarming,<sup>1</sup> More than fifty percent of the population of the South is expected to be living in urban environments by the year 2015. By 2030 the projections jump to sixty percent of the world's population, or 4.9 billion people living in cities - and nearly all of that population growth will be in the cities of the South (Johns Hopkins University 2001, 1). Urbanization of this character is difficult to comprehend, let alone explain.

Present day conditions in the urban South, where a significant proportion of existing urban populations are impoverished, are hardly wholesome. According to a recent *World Resources Report*, "an estimated twenty-five to fifty percent of urban inhabitants in developing countries live in impoverished slums and squatter settlements, with little or no access to adequate water, sanitation, or refuse collection. A fifth of the world's population currently lives in cities where the air is unhealthy to breathe" (USAID 2001, 1). Degraded urban environmental quality of this severity gravely threatens human health and well being (World Resources Institute 1998) (Max-Neef 1992, 49).

The capacity of cities in the South to cope with such very rapid growth is typically weak. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development declared that simply to maintain the conditions from 1987 until 1997, the developing world would need to increase by sixty-five percent its capacity to produce and manage its urban infrastructure, shelter, and services. This obviously has not happened (Johns Hopkins University 2001, 2). To a considerable extent, the burgeoning urban growth is beyond the control or management of any government, South or North. New urban growth is largely unplanned or poorly planned – more than half of all new houses in cities in the South are built without formal approval, on unserviced sites (no or minimal infrastructure), and without clear title to the land (World Bank 1998, 18). The result is increasing deficits in the provision of even basic infrastructure and social services, a situation further exacerbated by the spatial implications of territorial isolation of the poor within cities in the South. The slums and squatter areas of the poor are often located on the urban fringe, periurban areas, or in isolated pockets in inner city locations. These areas of settlement receive significantly less in the way of formal urban infrastructure and services than do the more affluent neighborhoods. The per unit cost of provision of essential resources such as water and fuel are significantly higher in poor areas, where middlemen – for a fee – provide what the formal infrastructure does not. For example, one-fifth of the household expenses of squatters in Port-au-Prince, Haiti goes to such private vendors, who charge people between seventeen and twenty-five times the going rate for municipal drinking water in areas with piped service (Annez and Friendly 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> This trend is already acknowledged through various statistical analyses of a wide number of international institutions, development agencies, think tanks, and academic centers. Examples include the World Bank, the United Nations, USAID, DFID, the Central Intelligence Agency, International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, Population Information Program at the Center for Communication Programs of the School of Public Health at the Johns Hopkins University, the Overseas Development Institute (UK), and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The ability of urban governments to cope with rapid growth depends in large measure on their authority to act and their capabilities to perform, yet many urban governments lack effective authority or capability due to political and administrative controls being vested at the national government level. While decentralization of governance is a growing trend in the South (United Nations Development Programme 2000b, 8), many developing countries still retain considerable power at the national level over the affairs of cities (World Bank 2000, 50). This concentration of political power and regulatory authority at the center disempowers the urban governments (even – or especially – in the capital city), and undercuts whatever limited credibility the weak institutions of local governance may have been able to generate. National governments in the South, generally well removed from direct accountability to local urban residents, have been unwilling to yield their powers and their prerogatives to local governments – particular with respect to access to resources. Where decentralization has yet to occur, municipal “governance” exists in only a limited form that is neither institutionally structured nor expected to provide civic leadership, generate any policies, carry out any integrated strategic thinking on quality of life issues, or offer opportunities for any form of effective and significant local participation in local affairs. In cities and towns such as these – by far the rule and not the exception in the South – the role of urban government is limited to a very few service-delivery functions and remains highly dependent on centralized national-level controls, financial disbursements, and top-down management policies. These cities and towns lack effective political or administrative autonomy; as presently instituted and legally empowered it is unrealistic to expect them to be responsive to the general demands of rapid growth, much less the moral demands of accountable, inclusive, participatory local governance.

### **Whose Responsibility?**

There are many who argue that the social, economic, environmental and political impacts of urbanization in the South only affect those in the South and that those in the North should not be concerned. But the North is not immune from spillover effects from these conditions. Poor urban governance, increasing urban poverty, and unplanned urban growth in the South lead to conditions of political instability, environmental degradation that respects no boundaries, and increased South to North migration. The deleterious effects of urban air and water pollution can extend enormous distances. Politically unstable and poverty-stricken cities create conditions favorable to the growth and spread of global terrorism. Unhealthy urban environments of the South can spread diseases, as travelers to the North inadvertently transport such diseases with them.

### **The Demise of Value-Neutrality**

In the North, the planner’s role has evolved more towards facilitator and guide in a complex urban growth and planning process dedicated to serving the public interest. The days of planner as heroic, authoritarian mastermind of an imposed masterplan are fortunately largely past. The value-neutral technical school of planning theory still persists, but the concept of the city as “disorganized complexity” has been persuasively challenged by an opposing view, in which certain kinds of urban complexity – even if they might appear to be chaotic – are still seen as well organized (with respect to their humane consequences), although cause and effect are not easily discernable (Waldrop

1992). Largely as a result of the input of the life sciences, anthropology, social sciences, and philosophy, the city has come to be viewed as a complex social, cultural, economic, political, and physical phenomenon, subject to a multitude of interactions and interrelationships. Some of these interactions and relationships are still best understood through the scientific lens, and powerful high-technology tools such as computerized geographic information systems (GIS) allow for effective analysis and planning – up to a point. The complexity of human societies and the developmental needs of human well being or flourishing within urban environments does require more than a scientific and technical approach. This awareness has opened the door to a richer and more integrated urban planning. The ideal of dialogue and the awareness of power relationships – as well as other social, cultural, environmental, and moral values – characterize this new approach.

The visibility of foundational moral and ethical issues has increased with the new emphasis on public participation and on integrated multisectoral approaches to planning and managing the urbanization process. Examples include a growing concern and dialogue about land ownership rights, environmental and ecological integrity, inequitable distribution under “trickle down” theories, and rights of vulnerable indigenous minority populations. More attention is now being focused on principles of democracy and participation, mainstreaming gender concerns, and a relatively new focus on understanding and reducing corruption. So too is the example of the important role of culture in development, and the affirmation by the poor of their own values, both of which have attracted growing attention from the international development community (Kliksberg 2000, 13, 20, 25).

Along with the gradual spread of democratically inspired principles of governance, decision-makers progressively are becoming more attentive to such normative ideals as quality of life, empowerment, participation, and citizenship. Residents of many cities in the less developed countries now have more opportunities – and sometimes their first opportunity – to identify and articulate some common values and aspirations, as stakeholders participating under the banner of the “common good” or the “public interest”.

### **The Emergence of Explicit Ethical Principles**

For most in the urban South, the prospect of large-scale external assistance from the North any time soon is unrealistic. Instead, initiatives to eradicate urban poverty and improve urban governance will continue to depend in large measure on the quality and effectiveness of their own local and national leadership.

Moving power and resources closer to the urban residents by means of decentralization is part of the solution, but good governance at any level also requires political leadership that is ethically responsive to the broader context of sustainable human development. Urban development and planning must recognize, respect, and respond to the principal of human dignity, and the moral obligations that arise from this recognition. Recognition and acceptance of our common human dignity – our moral

equality – is the prerequisite for determining what it means for political leadership to be “ethically responsive,” and what ought to characterize the “good” of good urban governance. The urban development challenge is not just to bring about economic growth, for growth is but a means to something else. It is human dignity that is fundamental, but social justice, human flourishing, the common good, participation and inclusion, and safety and security variously suggest the objectives (ends) of development as a moral endeavor. Human dignity, however, is the appropriate starting point.

### **Human Dignity**

What justifies the labeling of the challenge of urban development as a moral challenge? One answer is to argue that the “development for what?” questions ought to be answered with ideals of human and social well-being. What might such ideals be?

The concept of human dignity has its roots in the idea of social honor; *dignitas* in Latin means just this - honor. The Israeli philosopher, Avishai Margalit, in his work on portraying the attributes of the “decent society,” claims that the achievement of such a society depends on universal acceptance throughout society that everyone deserves social honor in equal measure, which is best expressed in the concept of human dignity. Dignity, according to Margalit, also constitutes the external aspect of self-respect, and the tendency to behave in a dignified manner that attests to one’s self-respect (Margalit 1996, 43).

Margalit, as well as Rousseau and Kant before him, offers many reasons for respecting human nature, a concept closely associated with human dignity and intrinsic worth. Kant, for instance, listed many attributes of humanity that give it value, including (but not limited to): (1) being a creature who gives things values, (2) having the capacity for self-legislation, (3) having the ability progressively to pursue perfection, (4) having the capacity to be a moral agent, (5) being rational, and (6) being the only creature able to transcend natural causality (Margalit 1996, 63).

But Margalit makes another sobering observation, of particular relevance to the life of the poor in the South: “Survival takes priority over dignity” (Margalit 1996, 136). For the poor in a society to achieve the most basic level of human dignity, they must also be able to meet their most basic needs. Without acceptance of the moral right to human survival, discussions of human dignity become merely theoretical.

### **Social Justice**

Social justice is associated with fair, even-handed treatment of all individuals and groups within a society. An alternative formulation, indebted to John Rawls, is that conceptions of distributive justice<sup>2</sup> clarify and defend how major social institutions should distribute burdens and benefits (however conceived) (Rawls, 1971, 62, 177 – 180). The important point at this juncture is to indicate that different conceptions of

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<sup>2</sup> Distributive justice is a principle of social justice that requires the distribution – according to some pattern or process – of some good, for instance, resources, wealth, or opportunities (Chadwick 1998, 755). This contrasts with retributive and compensatory justice that are concerned, respectively, with justified punishment for perpetrators of bad deeds and justified reparation to victims of bad deeds.

justice have different conceptions of burdens and benefits as well as different conceptions of the proper principles of distribution.

On social justice, Thomas Pogge remarks:

Its current most prominent use is in the moral assessment of social institutions, understood not as organized collective agents (such as the United States government or the World Bank), but rather as a social system's practices or "rules of the game," which govern interactions among individual and collective agents as well as their access to material resources...Prominent within our political discourse, then, is the goal of formulating and justifying a criterion of justice, which assesses the degree to which the institutions of a social system are treating the persons and groups they affect in a morally appropriate and, in particular, evenhanded way (Paul, Miller, and Paul 1999, 337).

Both Thomas Pogge and Douglas Rasmussen make reference to the close relationship between social justice and human flourishing. According to Rasmussen, social justice is the prerequisite for the achievement of human flourishing (Paul, Miller, and Paul 1999, 27).

Manfred Max-Neef, an economist and noted development practitioner, considers that social justice has become, in some instances, conflated with economic growth. He criticized the prevalent thinking that simply by "growing" the economy there will be more to share, without having to tackle the more thorny issues of distributing or redistributing the proportions of the total. Max-Neef contends that it is ineffectual to focus on the maintenance of static distributive proportions while growth proceeds; the reality is that the poor usually get less and less: "even with growth, the poor's share of the cake diminishes" (Max-Neef 1992, 51).

Some feminists offer an interesting view on the issue of social justice. Carol Gilligan notes that from a social justice perspective, the individual as moral agent must judge the conflicting claims of self and others against a standard of equality (e.g. the Golden Rule). As an alternative, she proposes that the *caring relationship* becomes the determinate of self and others, under which the self as a moral agent perceives and responds to the perception of need within and around her. The moral question shifts from "what is just?" to "how to respond?" (Kittay and Meyers 1987, 23).

### **Human Flourishing and Well-being**

The notion of human well-being, sometimes but not always identified with human flourishing, is intuitively understood by each of us. For the sake of urban planning and development strategies, this intuitive understanding may suffice. Yet many philosophers have wrestled with this notion, formulating and justifying their varying conceptions, which in turn are challenged by other philosophers.

No one concept of human flourishing is wholly relevant for all, and each person's sense of the good life may differ in many respects. To a considerable extent, the notion depends upon knowledge of the possibilities open to one, and the availability of freedoms and resources essential to pursue those opportunities. Despite individual's differences in

conceptions of the good, there may still be a defensible cross-cultural conception of *basic* well-being or at least of a human life not going badly.

A range of views exists on well-being and its relationship with human flourishing and even ethical perfection. The philosopher and Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen identifies well-being with enlightened self-interest (Sen 1999, 74 – 76). Feminist philosophers typically view flourishing as both self-directed and individually defined, but also as a product of our inter-relatedness with others.

For John Rawls, human flourishing is best portrayed as the formulation and successful execution of a rational plan of life, by which the person determines the good for himself or herself (Rawls 1971, 408). Pogge explains flourishing as a composite of experience, success, character, and achievement, and offers an encompassing definition of human flourishing:

That human persons are flourishing means that their lives are good, or worthwhile, in the broadest sense. Thus, the concept of human flourishing, as I understand it, marks the most comprehensive, “all-in” assessment of the quality of human lives (Paul, Miller, and Paul 1999).

### **The Common Good**

In its most general sense, the common good may be said to consist of the policies and actions that best serve to promote the essential components of human well-being or flourishing for all. Identifying the “common good,” or its equivalent phrase, the “public interest,” is a controversial issue because of different conceptions of human well-being or flourishing. In utilitarian thinking, the common good is the best net score of individual interests in the community – a concept that obviously sacrifices some people’s interests to that of others. Others contend that the common good can be articulated only roughly, and is often subject to moral disagreements. On this view, it is through a deliberative democratic process of reasoning together that the common good can be agreed upon and mutually acceptable decisions can be made (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson describe a process in which people in conflict reason reciprocally, recognizing the moral worth of the opposing person, even when they consider his or her position to be morally wrong. Under this concept of “deliberative democracy”, there exists a mutual obligation of respect towards opponents. From this respect a common good, acceptable to (almost) all, often can be agreed to.

In serving the public good, Richard Flathman has observed that a moral demand is placed upon members of a society to regard themselves as morally obligated (but not physically coerced) to obey particular commands and to conform to particular policies that they may regard as contrary to their personal interests. A moral justification must be provided to justify this sacrifice of perceived self-interest, and not simply the weight of majority interests. The fact that many individuals present such a demand does not alter the situation. Number – that is, force – is not a criterion of right (Flathman 1966).

## **Safety and Security**

Safety and security refer generally to conditions of stability, order, predictability, and freedom from bodily harm. Within the urban context, these concepts can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways. They may be reflected in public health and environmental concerns, such as being able to live within a city without becoming ill from a grossly unhealthy environment, or being subject to environmental disasters. These concepts may extend to economic security, in which access to employment and/or other forms of welfare ensures access to adequate resources for human flourishing, or at least human survival.

In human rights terms, security encompasses many negative rights and freedoms. Achieving a sustainable sense of security involves certain critical freedoms, such as the freedom *from* poverty and *from* violence. Positive rights and freedoms are also included - the ability *to* achieve a decent standard of living.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) makes the point that no other aspect of human security is more vital as security from physical violence. It lists several sources of threats of violence, including (1) the state (torture, arbitrary arrest and detention), (2) other states (war, support for oppressive regimes), (3) other groups of people (ethnic conflicts, street violence, crime), (4) threats directed at women (rape, domestic violence, trafficking), and (5) threats directed at children (child abuse) (United Nations Development Programme 2000, 35).

## **Participation and Inclusion**

There are many kinds and intensities of participation, ranging from Gutmann and Thompson's deliberative democracy ideal to routine voting, from open and advisory public hearings to visioning workshops. Each has its benefits and limitations. I argue for a model of *deliberative participation*, less idealized than Gutmann and Thompson's ideal version, claiming that the notion of a truly deliberative, participatory process is important to the achievement of sustainable urban development. In this respect, a deliberative participatory process either assumes or includes – through a partially structured or facilitated dialogue – the ideals described above: human dignity, social justice, human flourishing and well-being, the common good, safety and security, and similar ideals. Deliberative participation also offers a way to specify, weigh, trade-off, and sequence (the realization) of these ideals.

This quest for an effective means – a deliberative participation model – by which some but not all stakeholders might be able to improve their chances of achieving agreement on a workable articulation of “the common good” raises many moral concerns and values. As stakeholders reflect upon and deliberate over the means and ends of development and “good” governance, they begin to question who ought to decide what “good” development and “good” governance mean, why these concepts are important, and what should be done when they clash with other values. If stakeholders accept rights-based claims, then what should be done when rights-based claims conflict with other popular development goals? How can and should decision-makers respond when rights-based claims demand scarce resources? How can and should popular participation in

governance be balanced with the role of representative democratic institutions of government? How can and should values be weighed one against the other in deciding urban development priorities? How can and should stakeholders be assured that the full range of important development values has been comprehensively addressed within an urban development planning or governance process? In short, how should stakeholders conceive and make critical decisions regarding the achievement of a sustainable, livable city, pursue those ends, and find motivation to do so?

### **Opportunities for Participation**

The questions above require careful attention to moral concerns. When decisions are made in response to these questions, the decision-maker's moral legitimacy, credibility, and motivation deserve scrutiny. I argue that this scrutiny should begin by, but not be limited to, assessing the extent to which opportunities for popular participation exist, the degree to which decision-makers view themselves as influenced by and accountable to that participatory process, and the fairness, representativeness, and effectiveness of the participatory process itself. Effective participation is an excellent means to morally based decision making, but it is not the only means.

If all human beings are regarded as equally dignified and valuable, all human beings within a society ought to be empowered to participate in the critical decisions that affect them - that limit or create opportunities and freedoms for each to flourish.<sup>3</sup> Including all people in all aspects of all decision-making is not practical, particularly at the scale of most cities, so societies and cities have developed various forms of political leadership and representative decision-making. Under this conception, political leaders and elected or appointed representatives act on the presumption of a vested public trust, to which they are accountable. The delegation of decision-making authority to political leaders is not by necessity absolute – where possible and appropriate, opportunities ought to exist to allow all citizens and residents of any given society (including cities and towns) to be well informed about the issues, and to participate in identifying priorities, strategies, and desirable actions.

In practice, political leadership in many cities and towns in the South is top-down or even autocratic – neither accountable to or inclusive of the residents. Some try to justify top-down leadership as a way to avoid the difficulties and expense in structuring and sustaining a deliberative participatory process sufficiently robust regularly to register, discuss, and reason through the various concerns, aspirations, claims, and demands of residents and stakeholders. These “difficulties” may be only self-serving excuses, but equitable, inclusive, and – certainly – deliberative participation is hard to accomplish, and often expensive. The problems begin with the stakeholder identification process, in which usually the elected and/or appointed decision makers in a city or town government invite a range of participants to join in the formulation of specific development priorities, policies and actions. It is seldom possible to select a representative body of stakeholders that reflects a reasonable approximation of the diverse interests, demographic and social

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<sup>3</sup> The only exceptions to this general rule are those people not competent to participate in a rational manner, such as children and people with certain mental disabilities, or those people whom society has decided to exclude, such as convicted criminals.

characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.), and power structure of the area under review. If stakeholder selection can be accomplished to the general satisfaction of all, without the exclusion of any one group, further difficulties ensue. The participatory process must be time-sensitive but ought not to be rushed. Participants ought to have the opportunity to be informed on the issues, to be heard by all, to engage in a give and take of reason giving and assessing, and to have conflicts resolved in terms of outcomes to which all can give their consent. Ideally, the participatory agenda will be rich enough so that participants are not simply being polled, but instead have an opportunity to engage in a deliberative process in which all stakeholders are able to put forward their own arguments and ideas, to seek common ground, to demand reasons, and to record disagreement. In some cases, participants may need training to learn necessary public speaking skills, and/or to find assistance from trusted, articulate advocates.

Credibility demands a participatory process that has a procedural rationale, justified in language that the average stakeholder will easily understand. In some cases, such as in more radical models of participation, outsiders and experts are intentionally excluded. In other situations, particularly where participation addresses complex technical and/or procedural issues, the stakeholders as well as the experts shape the final process. This participation rationale – the rules and objectives of the participatory game – should persuade stakeholders that a framework is in place through which participants (stakeholders) will be respectfully encouraged to reflect upon, evaluate, and express their considered views – and their reasons for such views – on a wide list of development issues. Some of the values and principles that the larger society (the nation) already has formally agreed upon or accepted as universal – in treaty, law, or policy – may need to be restated. Those values and principles that are relative to that particular group of stakeholders may need to be articulated openly – perhaps for the first time in a public forum. In this sense, “careful structuring” of the participatory process should mean ensuring that principles of fairness and a commonly agreed upon agenda are adhered to, and not that the participation is manipulated towards predetermined outcomes. Participants should be exposed to and consider different views of means and ends within the larger context of a holistic view of human well-being, human development, and good governance, but those participating will first need to agree on *process* – how best to resolve disagreements and accommodate dissent.

Very few cities or towns in the North, and exceptionally few in the South, have engaged in a participatory process leading to the outcome of a comprehensive urban development strategy. Very few people have experienced this sort of participation at this level of intensity. It is time consuming and expensive, gives rise to conflicts and/or exposes existing social divisions, and – unless very well executed – can easily become politically disruptive, even volatile. For these reasons, outside experts are sometimes involved to help facilitate the participatory process. There are no effective, proven, off-the-shelf models of participation for urban development strategy formulation that would *ensure* that the process remains constructive in all situations. Threats to success abound. For example, some special interest groups may perceive some direct benefit by making sure that this larger participatory process fails. Stakeholders may perceive deliberation as only political rhetoric, lacking credible assurances that the outcomes of the process will

actually guide policy and direct implementation. To counter such threats, those entrusted with public resources and decision-making authority will need to demonstrate their accountability and responsiveness within and through the participatory process, and the expertise of trained facilitators may be required.

### **Complicating an Already Complex Process?**

It might be argued that given the many procedural and logistical difficulties in participation, adding moral concerns such as concepts of social justice, the common good, human dignity, human rights and freedoms, civic virtue, and caring will only make the entire process more difficult and therefore less likely positively to influence public policy and planning.

First, many people consider moral issues to be largely arbitrary and subjective in nature, changing in scope and intensity depending on which individuals are participating (or not) in any particular public deliberative forum. The forum itself may be problematic; the choice of agenda, chairperson, and/or social and cultural constraints may greatly constrain the quality, honesty, depth, and subject matter covered.

Second, seeking common ground on moral concerns risks upsetting the status quo. Those in power may never have had to justify the moral source of their authority, and may shrink from the moral obligations implicit— but seldom clearly articulated — in public service. Those who are most affluent may be morally challenged by those less affluent to justify why the gap between rich and poor should exist at all, or why it should widen even further in pursuit of short-term “development” goals. Cities or towns may be morally emboldened to demand greater autonomy from the central government.

Are some questions best left unasked?

Third, the quality of a moral dialogue on substantive issues depends upon tolerance, reflection, mutual respect, and a deliberative ethos representative of the diversity of stakeholder interests and concerns. These attributes are moral ones that individual participants ought to bring to the process or acquire through it. Situations may exist, however, where such virtues are in scarce supply, and the quality of the moral dialogue consequently deteriorates.

Fourth, many consider moral values and systems to be largely unreliable in policy making; many values are discounted because they are relevant only to a particular culture, time, and context, or are mistrusted as imposed by outsiders in the name, for example, of moral universalism<sup>4</sup>, skeptical realism<sup>5</sup>, or cosmopolitanism.<sup>6</sup> On the other

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<sup>4</sup> Universalism is the view that values or norms, and associated obligations apply equally to all people and all cultures. Utilitarians and Kantians, for example, argue that the correct or justified ethical principles apply to all societies and all individuals. A variant is “minimum universalism,” which accepts some moral diversity but contends that there is a universally valid body of values which can be accepted by people from different moral and religious communities (agreed on, not discovered) that can be used to judge public policy (Dower 1998, 43, 155).

hand, some values are questioned as being too focused on the interests, concerns, and perceptions of a particular community or society, rejecting claims of a broader moral obligation or accountability.

Fifth, moral values, along with many qualitative factors in development, are extremely difficult to measure, monitor and evaluate, so the impact of policies intended to respond to such concerns are hard to gauge. For this reason alone, many public policy makers avoid reliance on hard-to-measure moral justifications for allocation of scarce public resources.

### **A Moral Response**

These five objections apply to participatory processes specifically, but also to morally-based approaches to development. If left unanswered, they undercut my fundamental premise of the importance of moral appraisal in the definition, formulation, and implementation of development means and ends. I therefore offer the following brief responses.

The first objection is the claim that moral issues are largely arbitrary and subjective in nature, and that attending to moral issues in a participatory process is fraught with procedural difficulties. In practice, this objection has merit. Moral issues, if raised at all in participatory workshops, are seldom addressed explicitly in a rigorous, unrushed manner through deliberations, reasoned justifications (and challenges to these justifications), and dialogue addressed at reducing disagreements and consensus-building. Common models of participatory practice largely ignore moral issues, or at best channel moral concerns into narrow outlets such as vision statements. Morality is not, however, arbitrary, as the systematic and critical study of moral beliefs, values and concerns – ethics – makes abundantly clear. In ethics, our values and beliefs are organized into various (and to some extent, competing) systems, each of which exhibits coherence more or less internally and more or less matches our considered judgments and deeply felt beliefs. In this way, individual moral concerns are given context, so that they can be argued from a systematic, well-reasoned set of relationships based on principles that in turn can be argued and justified. It is not practical or appropriate, however, to use the limited time and resources of a participatory workshop on urban development to justify a complete ethical theory (much less compare it to other contending theories, from first principles). Instead, I argue that various process tools can be derived from several well-established theories within the field of *development ethics*. These tool-based approaches, yet to be developed, could be applied in a time-constrained participatory process without

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<sup>5</sup> Dower defines *skeptical realism* as the calculation of power and national interests, as often used in evaluating relations between states within a competitive framework. These norms of international relations are more maxims of prudence than moral norms – they are abandoned whenever prudence dictates, but are often used in moral rhetoric that Dower claims is generally hypocritical (Dower 1998, 18).

<sup>6</sup> *Cosmopolitanism* is an ethical approach based upon the moral premise that the world is one moral domain, out of which arise certain universal or global moral obligations, values, and responsibilities (Dower 1998, 20).

preliminary philosophical justifications, using language accessible to the diverse range of stakeholders engaged.

The second objection is the claim that attending to moral concerns risks upsetting the status quo by challenging the existing economic and power relationships within any given society. This claim is accepted and may serve as sufficient (but not publicly stated) reason for politically insecure city leaders to avoid a participatory approach. Whether through participatory processes or by recourse to other means such as the courts, I argue that challenging the status quo is often important to the moral approach to development. The existence of widespread poverty, corruption, injustice, and the lack of universal respect for human dignity demand a challenge, and the moral approach offers some fresh insights into the means and ends of changing the status quo in ways which lead to more just, compassionate, and decent societies, and to the protection of the status quo when it is judged to be reasonably just. The changes need not be immediately radical or revolutionary – for example, progressive positive change towards sustainable development through the assertion of human rights-based claims, fulfilled over time, may be sufficient. The fulfillment of such claims will, however, *ultimately* entail radical changes to the status quo.

The third objection is the concern that moral issues must be addressed and deliberated by participants who exhibit moral virtues, and that such participants may be few in number. If this claim were accepted, it would be difficult to imagine a society's moral progress over time. The leadership of morally virtuous persons may well inspire and motivate others towards being receptive to the deliberation of moral issues, but that leadership is not a necessary condition. The commitment of social, political or religious institutions (and, by treaty provisions, even nations) to moral principles goes some distance in bringing the moral approach to the participatory process. If the participants are able to accept the credibility of an ethical framework, such as a human rights approach, and a way can be found to apply this (such as through a derived set of participatory process tools) to the urban development agenda under discussion, then the requirement for a wise and virtuous person to preside over the proceedings no longer pertains.

The fourth objection is that asserting values in public policy, whether within a participatory forum or through other operations of governance, is inappropriate because values vary in their moral justifications, from the universal to the relative. This dichotomy between the universal and the relative is a venerable old chestnut of philosophical debate, and a great deal is written and argued in the literature on this subject. I argue for an approach that accepts certain values as universal and fundamental to human nature, while also accepting that the local culture, tradition, and context ought significantly to influence and shape the implementation of development initiatives responsive to these universal values.

Finally, the fifth objection to morally-based approaches to urban development is that the qualitative dimensions of moral values makes them impractical in the public policy context. This, I contend, is a superficial argument. Measuring moral performance

may be more difficult than monitoring nonmoral criteria through gathering empirical data and identifying trends. But empirical data can say a great deal about the changes in achieving morally desirable goals, and the presentation of such data in participatory workshops can be informative. The birth weight of babies is a good proxy for measuring the shortcomings in the quality of life of people and the need for better nutrition and health care. An extensive amount of work is being done around the world to identify appropriate empirical indicators that measure quality of life. The degree to which national laws reflect internationally recognized human rights principles is also measurable. Qualitative factors in the experience of poverty, the enjoyment of basic freedoms and opportunities, and the prevalence of respect for human dignity are all subject to meaningful evaluation through a variety of techniques, from focus groups to surveys. The claim that moral issues should not influence public policy or be raised in participatory workshops because they are troublesome to monitor and evaluate speaks more of a failure of political will or methodology than of a basic fault inherent in ethics.

### **Conclusion**

No formula or recipe exists to achieve the ideal of the livable city. Certainly political leaders, civil servants, and all stakeholders need constantly to improve their conceptual and management skills, their abilities to integrate technical approaches across many sectors with the quality of democratic processes and political leadership. Stakeholders also need to improve their participatory skills, and open the door to new innovations and creative approaches to urban problems. Even all of these tools are not sufficient - the goal of a sustainable, livable city cannot be credibly pursued without attention to moral values of the sort just adumbrated above. The World Bank's new urban strategy itself hints at this moral focus in its definition of "livable":

If cities and towns are to promote the welfare of their residents and of the nation's citizens, they must be... *livable* – ensuring a decent quality of life and equitable opportunities for all residents, including the poorest (World Bank 2000, 8).

In the South, the attainment of the goal of the livable city appears even more remote than it is in the North. Based on significant first-hand experience in conducting many participatory planning workshops in several countries in the South, my view is that public participation is seldom conceived by the local political leadership as a process to involve stakeholders in working towards deliberative agreements (and disagreements) about the ends and means of a "livable city". The concept of the "livable city," at best, is simply assumed to be a shared and universal goal, yet in reality it translates into very different priorities among and between politicians, civil servants, business people, the poor, women, the unemployed and under-employed, academics, professionals, and so forth. While there is often significant commonality between such interest groups in the identification of issues, the ranking of priorities varies – sometimes greatly. Without an opportunity for deliberation, in which views can be openly challenged and justifications offered, stakeholders are denied the opportunity to reevaluate their priorities and concepts and work with others to forge agreements that (most) everyone can accept.

An appreciation of social dynamics is also important to effective public participation. When confronted with ingrained cultural or social constraints, an interest group might become more conscious of social cleavages and hence become more entrenched and intransigent. But the alternative is also true; such an interest group might change its stated priorities. Zulu women – when consulted outside earshot of Zulu men – will allocate priorities quite differently than when consulted in gender-mixed assemblies. Mayors of small towns in the Philippines – often outspoken, passionate advocates for their constituents in meetings with their peers – will avoid an “unseemly” public conflict in formal meetings with high ranking provincial officials, even if it means that their silence will pave the way for policies that run directly counter to their espoused interests (Schwenke 1995, 6 - 8). Central governments, often with the technical advice of international experts, have been seen to impose a top-down image of the livable city that is alien to local sensibilities (Peattie 1995).

In practice, progress towards an ideal like the World Bank’s vision of the livable city suffers through lack of a local interpretation of this vision. Cribbed (“boilerplate”) language and ethical clichés can usefully camouflage action opposed to genuinely ethical development. Instead, active stakeholder participation in formulating a consensus on both common development goals and the means to achieve them – that city’s sense of its “livable city” ideal – is essential. If it is possible through participation to articulate such an ideal, the active and strategic pursuit of the ideal remains dependent on the ability of the local governments. At this stage, the quality and motivation of the political leadership of that city or town is a major determinant of success; if a mayor or a majority of city councilors share the livable city ideal – which hopefully they participated in shaping – the mission of that city’s government may become oriented to achieving the vision set by the leadership. On rare occasions an inspired and able political leader may possess his or her own vision of the livable city, achieved outside of a participatory process (or when such a process fails to achieve positive results), which he or she then builds a consensus around. A classic case is the positive impact on development of the visionary leadership of Mayor Jaime Lerner in Curitiba, Brazil. Mayor Lerner visualized a city based on cooperation and partnership, characterized by attractive public spaces (commercial areas, parks), excellent access to public transport and social services (child care, health care, etc.), effective poverty alleviation, and a beneficial relationship between urban and rural interests. He thought of many cost-effective and innovative ways to achieve these goals, such as creating a pedestrian-only downtown, making vast improvements in a public bus system, involving the poor in recycling of trash in exchange for basic foodstuffs, and creating a park system that doubled as a groundwater drainage system in times of flooding. The city now thrives, and has moved significantly closer to the “livable city” ideal not initiated but now “owned” by a large number of stakeholders there.

The ideal of the “livable city” is at least a set of morally relevant standards by which citizens and others may evaluate their city in terms that speak to their own quality-of-life aspirations and concerns. As such, the articulated “livable city” ideal can qualitatively influence development strategies and provide the essential motivation for beneficial change.

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