

Social sustainability of large cities

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Interpretation of the term "sustainability"

Since the Brundtland report entitled *Our Common Future* was published in 1987, the concept of sustainability has spread all over the world and a vast amount of international literature has been written on its interpretation and feasibility (ENYEDI, 1994). According to this report, sustainable development is "to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Let us disregard for the moment that it is very difficult to assess the needs of future generations and that the conflict arising between the protection of the biosphere and the continuous demand for growth in the market economies does not seem to be resolvable. Let us also ponder over the developments witnessed in the past one and a half decades which have increasingly drawn attention to the *social* conflicts regarding the environmental sustainability of nature.

Sustainability of the environment is not just a technical question; without generous social conditions it cannot be realized. As there has been a new period of significant growth of urban centers in the world since the second half of the 1980s, the intertwining of social and environmental conflicts takes place primarily in large cities.

In the developing world, for example, the environmental considerations cannot be made acceptable if they are not coupled with an efficient program of easing primarily urban poverty. A minimum requirement in these places is to improve urban infrastructure, education and health care services, but this cannot be done without giving equal rights to the poor and other disadvantaged social groups, or without recognizing their organizations. No environmental policy can be efficient without a social policy.

In the large cities of the developed world the situation is similar, despite the fact that these cities differ greatly from the former ones in many respects. The dynamic metropolises that

control the world economy and accumulate ever increasing wealth are at the same time the sites of the marginalization and social exclusion of significant masses, and it is precisely these latter groups of society that suffer environmental risks to the greatest extent.

Environmental sustainability is inconceivable without social sustainability. Social sustainability could be defined as such a kind of progress that entails the harmonic development of local society, shapes such a surrounding that ensures that the various social groups, also those of different cultural origin, can live peacefully together; enhances their integration; and finally, improves the living conditions of all groups of citizens. Social sustainability is reflected in the easing of inequalities and social cleavages. The responsibility of a city government does not only lie in achieving a good position in the global economic competition, but also in successfully treating the disadvantageous social consequences. A city where poverty is on the rise, and where the environment and human security are deteriorating, can expect both capital and the successful strata of society to flee from there.

Six areas of urban policies

Seen from the aspect of social sustainability, we can distinguish six areas of urban policy, which are at the same time the main spheres of activity of urban self-governments. This aspect is based on the consideration that local affairs are important. In other words, the social sustainability of cities does not only depend on national sectoral policies, but also on urban policies responding to local problems, sometimes in such sectors that are not significant on a national level.

These six areas of urban policy are as follows (POLESE and STREN, 2000):

- urban governance;
- social and cultural policy;
- social infrastructure and public services;
- urban land use and housing issues;
- urban transport, urban accessibility; and,
- employment and the enhancing of economic growth.

Urban governance

Urban governance has come into the center of attention in the last one and a half decades. It covers the relations among the organizations of the governments (local governments, national government agencies) and those of local civil society (various social groups), the harmonization of their activities, and the distribution of labor among them. Whereas earlier urban policy and planning used to be the privilege of political decision makers and professional urban planners, today it is generally ac-

knowledge that the solution of urban social problems requires the participation of social groups and their organizations. The introduction of the concept of and frequent study of urban governance can be traced back to the worldwide spread of the administrative decentralization of centralized states and the multi-party, democratic character of local governments (e.g. in the former socialist countries as well as in Asian and Latin American former military regimes). At the same time, the local social movements and organizations have become stronger, also because they have got support from experts. By carrying out decentralization, i.e. by transferring part of the decision-making power from the central government to the regional or local ones, the developed countries set a good example of modernization, e.g. the EU to the applicant post-socialist countries. The environmental movements have played a significant role in organizing grass-root society, as their activity was directed to local problems and thus they were able to mobilize people with different political affiliations for common action. Good urban governance shapes co-operation between the local government and grass-root society according to the characteristics of the given problems.

Social and cultural policy

The quality of governance depends on the quality of its two co-operating elements, i.e.

- the formal institutions of the government; and,
- the self-organizing units of society.

It was Putnam (1993) who introduced the term "social capital." He interpreted social capital as something based on the characteristics of social organizations, like trust, keeping to the rules, strength of internal relations, as these help in acting in a co-ordinated way and in making society function efficiently. Putnam believes that the success of regional and local decentralization depends on the quality of social capital. We can experience how the lack of practice and other deficiencies in co-operation can hamper the functioning, based on the reconciliation of interests, of Hungarian regions or of agglomerations of large cities – thus assisting the centralizing efforts.

Urban policy might help in reinforcing social capital. This can be promoted by organizing and/or maintaining or supporting – or providing urban space for – events and institutions which make it possible for the different strata of society to meet, to get acquainted with each other and to have discussions. The cultural policies of cities can further social cohesion and the pride of local patriots. At the same time, cultural economy is a prime competitive factor in the international competition of cities for knowledge-based economy.

Social infrastructure and public services

Social infrastructure (kindergartens, schools, hospitals, community houses) and municipal services (public utilities, mass transport, telecommunication) are of vital importance for the success of cities. First, these are essential economic factors: e.g. high-level infrastructure attracts capital, whereas poor public services increase the costs of the enterprises working there, thus weakening their international competitiveness. I have myself experienced it in Lagos, for example, that because of the unreliability of the electric system, the industrial plants all used their own generating stations, which has significantly increased both their investments and their running costs. The second problem is that municipal services can be accessed by certain social strata only with difficulty, if at all. In the large cities of the developing countries, for instance, the poorest people and the immigrants live outside the modern city. In the areas they live, public utility services are minimal, health service and educational institutions are lacking, and as

there is no mass transport there, they cannot reach the existing ones. The tax income of cities is usually not sufficient for larger scale infrastructure development, and the widespread practice of privatization – also supported by international financial organizations – leading to rising prices deteriorates the situation. As a result, the number of families unable to pay for the public utility services has been increasing even in affluent countries. Poverty is frequently coupled with ethnic isolation – we also experience this in Hungary with the Gypsy population – hence the integration of urban society is not a social issue only.

Urban land use and housing issues

Controlling urban land use and housing policy are crucial issues of city management all over the world. It is the functioning of the real estate and housing markets that makes it possible for families to choose their residence according to their needs, thereby becoming members of the city community. Proper control of the use of urban space contributes to the environmental sustainability of cities.

In today's capitalism deregulation is an overwhelming tendency and, as a consequence, government interventions are being less frequently applied. This happens despite the fact that social inequalities are strong and poverty has appeared in a new, extreme form, namely that of social exclusion. Its spatial appearance is housing segregation: at one end the upper classes in their separated and guarded gated settlements, at the other crowds of homeless people (who are excluded from the housing market). Although urban policy cannot eliminate these phenomena, depending on its knowledge, political attitude and means (competence), it can improve (or worsen) this. Housing policy and construction regulations – sometimes consciously, sometimes only as an unwelcome consequence – can significantly influence social segregation or integration. Construction regulations, e.g. prescribing the minimum size of a plot or a house, or the public utility requirements, automatically exclude from certain areas of the city the poor working people who could undertake to build simple, cheap houses. Exactly this is what happened at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Budapest when workers' houses had to be built in the neighboring villages (most of them to the east-southeast of the capital). The construction of low rent housing estates – albeit directed by an intention to help – segregates the poor, by so to say "collecting" them in one place. Segregation was successfully eased only in a few consistent welfare states (e.g. Holland) where social solidarity is very strong, tax incomes of the state and the local governments are large enough to provide adequate social assistance, and where a great part of the population lives in rented flats. To help social integration, they did not build low-rent flats, instead they give a rent allowance to those who are in need of it to be able to pay the free-market rent.

In the large cities of the developing world a great part of the population – sometimes several million people – live "outside" the official housing market. They are mainly rural immigrants who leave the overpopulated rural zones but cannot find a job on the labor markets of large cities. They usually settle down in self-made huts on pieces of land the ownership of which is uncertain (mainly public areas). They cannot get access to urban public utilities (from drinking water to public transport), and they are excluded from urban society as well. They often bring about a peculiar self-organizing marginal society.

Generally, the housing policies and physical planning in large cities contribute to the increase or the upholding of social and/or ethnic inequalities. The global competition of cities encourages steps that lead to the exclusion of non-competitive social groups, albeit in the long run nothing can do more harm to competitiveness than the accumulation of social tensions.

However, the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by restless haste and the lack of long-term thinking.

Urban transport, urban accessibility

In most cities there is a mixed system of public service transport (either owned by the state or the city, or operated privately but controlled by a city authority) and the individual use of the community infrastructure (public roads, streets, pavements, cycle tracks). In almost every large city individual transport is realized by using passenger cars. The organization of urban transport, i.e. support given to one or another mode of transportation, influences how the various groups of the population can get to their workplace or to different (cultural, educational, medical) public institutions; it also has an impact on whether women can undertake to go to work and how mobile elderly and disabled people can be. Among the specialized urban policies, transport policy might have the greatest indirect (and often not even presumed) impact on the spreading of social exclusion and discrimination.

From the point of view of sustainability, the most important question is whether mass or individual transport is favored. The large cities in Europe make much effort to develop mass transport, but at the same time they also try to serve the growing number of passenger cars. Outside Europe, however, mass transport is rather weak and is losing importance. Apart from a few exceptions, the large cities of North America and increasingly those of Latin America and Asia support transport by passenger cars. The logic of engineers is simple: the increasing number of cars requires the construction of urban roads and speedways. However, urban policy supports the richer strata of society by this. Namely, as a result of the reduced use of mass transport, its maintenance costs increase and this additional sum will appear in the urban (or state) budget. One can find it too much, but at the same time almost nobody thinks of the road construction and maintenance costs as a subvention given to car owners. They would most probably be surprised to hear that they were given a subvention by the simple fact that they did not have to pay for road construction and maintenance, for the additional costs of growing traffic or environmental pollution.

Cities based on passenger car transport usually spread over vast territories, and mass transport actually cannot be organized in their sparsely populated suburbs. Hence, families not having a car (whose ratio in large cities in the USA is low, but in the developing countries is very high) are practically confined to their living area. They can use the local services and make use of the local employment opportunities only. On choosing the living area, the poor have to pay attention not only to the cheapness of their flat, but also to the accessibility of their workplace. The lower classes are actually segregated from the middle and upper-middle classes in the same way as the latter are segregated from the upper classes. That is, the social groups are getting far from each other also in space in today's large cities, which might lead to the disintegration of urban society, to consist of divided elements that do not communicate with each other. Let us emphasize it again: it is a hardly recognized fact that urban transport policy might play a crucial role in lessening social exclusion and increasing the integration of urban society.

Employment and the enhancing of economic growth

The employment and income situation of urban population depends primarily on enterprise decisions, but it is influenced by urban policy as well. First, local governments also provide employment opportunities, second, by developing the infrastructure and through physical planning and tax policy, they can do much to attract services and industrial production. The location of certain activities in the city might play an important role. The strengthening or revitalization of the traditional role of the city center as a meeting place (shopping, entertaining functions) might slow down the imminent depletion of the old city centers and can provide new employment too. An urban policy which levies high taxes in the center of the city for short-run interests may have an adverse effect in the long run, as it might prompt the entrepreneurs and thus employment to move out from there. On the other hand, a lively city center is the meeting place of the various social groups, and thereby it promotes the integration of urban society. Shopping centers built on the outskirts weaken the functions of the city center; neither its planners, nor its owners or renters deal with the subsequent social impacts. This should be the responsibility of urban policy.

Conclusions

One of the conclusions of this short paper is that if we intend to make cities socially sustainable, it is not enough to deal with social policy alone. The various urban policies – from transport policy to the taxation of real estate – might all have serious consequences for local society, consequences that are rarely reckoned with.

Another conclusion is that it is not the sole task of the government – or the self-government – to achieve social sustainability. It can only be achieved in co-operation with various social groups, civil organizations and professional interest-representing groups. Urban progress – the results of which are shared but among few – can only last for a short time, as local society will disintegrate and social conflicts will become aggravated. Eventually, the consequences of urban social conflicts – from worsening public security to the physical deterioration of the “ghetto” areas of large cities – undermine the economic competitiveness of these cities.

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