

## **Cities are People**

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WIEGO, StreetNet and the University of KwaZulu Natal have organized this colloquium well in time when half of the developing world's people live in cities, and, the rate of migration from rural areas is swelling in many urban areas.

Whether cities are monsters or engines of growth, let the citizens say. Cities are called galloping engines of economic growth in our region (Mumbai wants to be Shanghai). Investment in urban growth, especially in urban infrastructure is top priority for the national governments and city authorities.

However, when it comes to low-income citizens of the city, such as those engaged in the informal economy, they are considered dirty, backward, obstructions, nuisance, antisocial, unwanted – I am talking of street vendors, rag pickers, rickshaw drivers, slum dwellers – they are literally removed from their markets, roads and homes. Otherwise, they are considered beneficiaries of the macro urban infrastructure investments, even when studies show that they contributed to the city's and nation's economic growth as much as large corporations combined.

And yet this is not understood sufficiently in the public mind, or, more significantly, in development planning and policy. The poor as a group are an absolutely indispensable part of the city and of society as it is presently structured. The rest could not survive without them. The urban city is, in fact, totally dependent on the poor – as dependent or perhaps more so than they are on it.

But today's city is not made for the people, the poor. It has evolved not to reduce dependency but to take advantage of it, the city is not made so as to enable the poor to improve their condition, but rather to serve certain vested interests and allow them to enjoy and increase their advantage.

There is no genuine attempt to accept the poor and disadvantaged as part of the city development process – despite their substantial economic contribution to the city economy and services – to accept them as equal and integral citizens. Quite the opposite, not only are they exploited, but their lifestyles (rural) and livelihoods are often made illegal, and then even the illegality is exploited (by local political parties). Even the few 'uplift programmes' which exist aside from being expensive, welfarish in approach, and corrupt are ineffective because they tend to make the people dependent, helpless and thereby poor.

But when we have visions of 'world class cities' let us ask, how urban are cities anyway? That a city should be urban sounds quite self-evident, but it is a question of how 'urban' the cities in developing countries, in fact, are.

The ample evidence suggests that a 'new' type of city is emerging, in the urban city when the whole population of city, including all of the metropolitan reaches, and their people's lifestyle and activities and cultures as well as their vast numbers is envisioned, the persistently rural nature of the lives of this huge number of citizens becomes dramatically evident.

This makes our 'new cities' – the cities of the developing world, very differently from cities of the West. The western cities evolved under conditions of rapidly expanding economy based on heavy industry. While this is hardly true of cities in developing countries when we see the way in which their populations are growing and the lifestyle and economy which is sustaining them. Yet planners and policymakers in India still draw their lessons from the models of Western cities. The planners, policymakers, urban middleclass residents, criticize, condemn, try to destroy the emerging 'new cities' or try to remake them in these terms.

What is demanded is a new view of cities: urban development for whom and how.

It would not be too much to say that it is the rural-minded poor who are in reality literally creating the 'new cities'. Given that they are the new and growing majority of city populations, this should surely be of central significance to urban planning and development policy of world class cities.

Actually, this process is taking place all the time and all around us. It is shaped by forces of rejection and affinity at the same time: rejection as exclusion and exploitation by the urban centers and affinity as direct linkage by the city dwellers with their villages. It is not a transient or passing phase in city development. This is the nature of every new Indian city.

On the other hand, development policy and planning continue to separate village from city. This is now another classic division between 'urban' and 'rural', like employment being divided into 'formal' and 'informal'. Such separations are extremely damaging and misleading for the development of the people. As we realize, urban and rural development are also inseparably linked.

It is observed that the rural migrant poor are not flooding the cities and staying there permanently – simply because migration very much depends on the health of the city's economy.

It is also observed that the flood of migrant poor that does take place on a regular annual basis (e.g. in Mumbai), is at the outset of the disaster season in rural areas. However, most of them return after the disaster. This factor also has led to the emergence of a new type of temporary city. If we are planning for development, a sensitive response to this situation is needed.

How can development occur if dependence remains constant. Development is first about people. Instead, development, most often, is measured in terms of economic growth, rates of production and consumption, material values; rarely being considered in terms of human beings and their ability to deal with the world around them.

It seems planners have lost contact with the majority of the people of their country. Planners, not understanding the reality of those for whom they plan, results into schemes and projects most often irrelevant to the majority of citizens – in fact deprive them of their existing homes and livelihoods.

There is continuity and rejection going on at the same time. Don't we see every month, long queues at the city's post offices sending money orders to support their village households. Or, a man comes into town to substitute in his brother's job as a watchman, so the brother can take sick leave without fear of losing his job. Or, whole families of construction workers migrate out to their villages to work on their land, at harvest time, leaving one member to hold their city fort which may be a small kiosk at the corner of the street. Or, a man goes to his village to be married to a girl

from home, complete the ceremonies, leaves the bride at home, and returns to the city to earn the family bread.

There is abundant flows and exchanges between villages and the city. The result of all these activities is that the city is extensively and intimately related to their villages. In the process of such dual citizenship, villages are urbanized, cities are ruralized and the fabric in-between is also in-between.

The point is that neither 'the problem' nor the 'solution' lie in either cities or villages. The solutions live in the continuity, not rejection, of people urban or rural. It is the people who make the city.

Unfortunately the relationship between these unwanted citizens and the urban city is very limited. It is for the most part only economic, and on an exploitative and dependent basis.

The city uses and exploits them and they in turn use the city to their ends, indeed they use it ways that the urban middle class considers 'abuse'. They live crudely on the edges of roads and canals and railway tracks, they carry all their private lives publicly, without regard or shame. They seem to show little respect for the city, they display no allegiance. There are, therefore, conflicts and antagonism between rural-minded poor and the urban-minded citizens. The difference between the two is the relationship to the land and to the means of production.

Another relationship is residential. Excluded by the land market system from any possibility of owning land, the working poor, have to pay an extremely high price, often paying more rent in slums in terms of area per person than the wealthy do for their homes. It should not be surprising, therefore, that many of them i.e. the 'unwanted' are forced to live on the street or to squat illegally on private or public land.

Needless to say, the poor or those who seem poor do not want to live permanently in their poverty. They do not wish to improve their situation. Poverty does not mean lack of intelligence or the ability to make decisions.

Urban laws and regulations too prevent them from making their lives and livelihoods in the city. Their lives are made difficult and even illegal sometimes, all because of conflict with the codes of the ruling urban citizens. The use of the word 'illegal' is clearly wrong and immoral, 'extra-legal,' outside the present law is really the condition. But if the lives of such a large proportion of citizens are defined as illegal, then surely it is time to look at how relevant our laws are to the people.

Many public institutions and services are in reality just not available to the working poor. Banking, hospitals, the poor too rarely use; sanitation and parks largely remain limited to another world. Even use of facilities by the working poor remain restricted: for instance, pushcart workers can now only use the streets at certain times of day, rickshaws always have to give way to cars in street parking. Public institutions and services, to serve all citizens of today's city, need to be redesigned. Of course, cinema is the exception, that caters fantasy to all, equally.

The net result of all such exclusion is that the poor, the working poor, rural poor in the city live separately, unwanted citizens, in an unintended urban city, which is in fact a 'new city'.

Certainly, integration is desirable; but for integration, why is there a singular rule that they must change and 'become like us'?

In the face of all this exclusion, prejudice and disadvantage, and of sheer necessity of survival in the city, a world of poor should emerge new systems of a 'new city'. How does this new city relate to the vision of world class city?

The important lesson is that planning and development are very ordinary human processes, not 'special' so they can be managed only by experts. Every citizen can and must have an opportunity to take part in planning and development in their city.

Another lesson is that, in reality, actually every person does take part in his or her own way. Far more of a city or any settlement is built by people's own initiatives than by planners and their plans. Self-building is basic and natural to a good environment. And accept the process as part of good governance, why not?

If it is accepted that the responsibility lies with the people, the emerging city must be different, decentralized, multicentered, and that planning needs to be alive in the lives and needs of all people. If their latent powers are encouraged to develop, the new citizens will show they way to a more viable future.

The Indian reality is its multiplicity: formal-informal, modern-traditional, literate-illiterate, rural-urban-tribal. So, here governance and planning are not for uniformity but for multiplicity.

Our cities have diverse economies existing simultaneously – the vendor with a basket of fruits on her head moving in the streets, selling from door to door; the is a vendor with a push cart; the small corner store or kiosk; and the large supermarket exist because they are parts of several mini-economies. They are the checks and balances that keep an economy vital for all strata of society. Unfortunately, we have not developed that kind of ways and structures of planning and governance. So, the working poor suffer.

We are here trying to convince the city planners and developers that by investing in their community and their trade infrastructure, we are investing in sound economic base of our city. We hope the planners realize that governance of our cities and their community infrastructures (not more flyovers, roads and big convention halls) are a big opportunity not only for building economic base but also making democracy work at the city level where it matters the most.

Otherwise what is left for us is hunger and violence.