

## **Sustainable Urban Development and the Urban Poor in Rio de Janeiro**

David J. Edelman, Paul Procee and Claudio Acioly Jr.

*Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Rotterdam, The Netherlands*

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### **Introduction**

Environmental degradation resulting from cities is not primarily a result of either the urbanisation process or a shortage of environmental resources such as land and fresh water. It is rather caused by economic and political factors. In many cases, local governments lack the means and instruments to manage the process of urban development effectively. Poor governance is at the root of the resulting problems, which include failures to control industrial pollution, to provide basic sanitation services to city-dwellers, to ensure that sufficient land is made available for housing development, to generate resources and investments and mobilise the participation of key actors, to maintain green and recreational areas and to enable the appropriate disposal of wastes. This ineffective governance is often linked to economic weakness and an unstable political situation characterised by a short-term planning perspective and, moreover, corruption.

### **Urban Environmental Management, Cities and Sustainable Development**

Urban environmental management is best seen as a subsidiary process taking place within the overall process of urban management. It is an all embracing concept covering not only the physical environment, but also issues related to the urban economy, incomes, infrastructure, investments and institutions, all of which must be seen in relation to the political, social and cultural environment of any urban area. Conceptually, all basic principles of urban management also hold for urban environmental management.

The density of many different kinds of human activities taking place within a relatively small location, attracting resources from far beyond the administrative borders of the city, has obvious advantages or potential advantages for meeting the goals of sustainable development (Miltin & Satterthwaite, 1994) and tends to maximise the benefits of economies of scale. These include:

- Effectively responding to social and health needs.
- Minimising the use or waste of non-renewable resources.

- Sustainable use of renewable resources.
- Keeping wastes generated by city producers and consumers within the absorptive capacity of local and global sinks.

However in the absence of effective urban governance, the advantages and potential advantages pointed out previously can be transformed into enormous problems, especially when local governments are not well-equipped to deal with the complexity of urban development. The high concentration of industries near households can generate health problems that can be easily be transmitted to a large number of people. Problems with water management and flooding can be substantial since the water from large catchment areas flows into single streams whose volume can increase tremendously and cause disasters in and around cities. In addition, poor and illegal settlements are often constructed in flood plains and on steep slopes in many cities of developing countries as a result of the absence of a planning framework. Inadequate housing supplies can induce informal urbanisation and overcrowding, leading to the occupation of land unsuitable for human settlements. Thus, for these and many other reasons, cities are indeed hazardous to the world's ecological system if not properly managed.

### **Urban Governance in Brazil**

Brazil's municipalities have enjoyed a significant level of autonomy since 1934 and which have the power to adopt laws, to levy and collect taxes, to organise their administrations, to define budgets and priority areas for investment, to conduct of urban planning and provide housing and urban services to their inhabitants and to oversee the welfare of the population. Municipalities also have the right to formulate and approve their own organic laws, which act as municipal constitutions, as long as they do not conflict with the federal and state constitutions. Furthermore, the mayor, vice-mayor and the councillors of municipal legislatures are democratically elected. Aside from the period of military rule (1964-85), this level of responsibility and authority places cities in Brazil among the most powerful of those in developing countries vis-à-vis their national governments.

In 1996, local governments invested 35% of the total financial resources of the public sector nation-wide, were responsible for 25% of the consumption generated by the governments and accounted for 17% of the total expenditures of the three levels of government (JB, 1996a). Since the 1988 constitution was enacted, Brazil's cities have had unprecedented revenues and have spent heavily in the social sector. As a consequence, a number of innovative forms of municipal management and participatory planning have emerged in Brazil. Some valuable experiences are the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brasilia, Vitoria and Belo Horizonte; the popular councils in Vitoria and Fortaleza; the

management of solid waste and recycling with "social fares" in public transport in Curitiba; the self-management of mutual aid housing in São Paulo, and the paid mutual aid and reforestation programme in Rio de Janeiro, just to name a few.

### **The Municipality of Rio de Janeiro**

While Rio de Janeiro with a metropolitan area population of more than 10 million and a GDP which is twice that of Egypt's is a thoroughly modern and professionally managed city known for its natural beauty, it is, at the same time, well known for its *favelas* or squatter settlements. During the eighties and beginning of the nineties Brazil suffered a severe recession. The housing situation deteriorated and the favelas and clandestine settlements - illegal land subdivisions undertaken by private developers in peripheral areas - mushroomed and rapidly increased in density. In 1991, 33% of the registered housing units in the municipality were located in favelas, illegal land subdivisions and low income public housing estates, providing accommodation to more than 2 million inhabitants (IPLANRIO, 1993).

In addition, high inflation and disparities of income during the recession aggravated social tension and economic insecurity, and they resulted in a sudden and uncontrolled increase of violence and criminality never before experienced before in the city. Local government administration was absent in favelas, and the needs of the urban poor were neglected. The favelas were gradually taken over by outlaws and criminal organisations involved in drugs and weapons and various other illegal activities. In the absence of the State and the law, parallel and informal structures of power were established in several low income settlements by criminal organisations. This phenomenon was exacerbated by a weak and often corrupt police apparatus. The residents' associations - so active during the 70's and 80's - were intimidated and lost influence; sometimes people were murdered if they did not co-operate.

In addition to these socio-political difficulties, Rio's urban environment is characterised by a unique and vulnerable topography. Its 86 km of coastline are dominated by mountain ranges and massifs which delineate specific limits for the areas suitable for human settlement. A severe and long lasting housing shortage, coupled with land speculation, have pushed human settlements towards extremely vulnerable sites, which represent the only options left for the poor. The metropolitan area's 926 squatter settlements and illegal subdivisions have spread throughout the region according to IPLANRIO (1993); and many have been built on vacant land, subject to flooding, and on sloping areas up to 100 meters above sea level. The process of deforestation in these areas has further affected the retention capacity of the soil and the stability of slopes, and the increased erosion has resulted in sedimentation of rivers and streams.

