The role of knowledge generation and dissemination in Urban Poverty Reduction

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In a moment that the international community is reviewing what has been accomplished with the implementation of the Habitat Agenda endorsed in the Istanbul conference in 1996, it is paramount to look at the role that knowledge can play in improving the way cities are planned and managed. This small note is originated by a request I received from Fabio Poelhekke, who assisted RAWOO – Advisory Council for Scientific Research of the Dutch Government - in developing a short policy statement to be presented to the Netherlands delegation participating in the Habitat II + 5 Conference, in New York, June 2001. The comments are based on my experience as practitioner in Brazil, The Netherlands, Guinea-Bissau, Egypt, Albania, Moldova, Mozambique and Bolivia. My view point is from someone who has been working in between the practice of theories and the learning from practice, evolving from community-based housing processes towards the mechanisms to make cities work right from the entrails of local governments but not without the enabling of civil society participation. Thus my viewpoints are urban-biased and influenced by a strong belief that the empowerment of civil society and community-based organisations is a pre-condition for tackling poverty and social exclusion.

1. **The role of knowledge in capacity building, emancipation processes, policy development and policy dialogue, in a technical as well as in a socio-political sense.**

Policy reforms and institutional changes are wearisome processes requiring an enduring effort of knowledge building and information dissemination. The development of knowledge becomes useless if it is not properly disseminated and shared among those who must use it as a tool to transform ideas into actions. Acquiring knowledge without guaranteeing its wide dissemination looses its vigour in influencing, persuading and bringing about the adjustments and gradual changes that policy makers, decision makers and the political decision must undergo in order to build responsive institutions and result oriented strategies and policies. Development changes depend on a great deal on how knowledge is actually produced, appropriated and disseminated. Furthermore the appropriation of knowledge by society and particularly by the urban poor and its grassroots organisations is a pre-condition to built equitable societies and socially just cities. Thus the seizure of knowledge and its wide dissemination can be potentially a mechanism to break social exclusion and to combat urban poverty.

Applied research has the potential to unveil the practical and empirical evidences of the success and failures of particular policies and development approaches. The findings and results of this type of researches are powerful device in bringing through the necessity for change but it is not enough to put it into practice. Comparative studies help to disseminate lessons learned with good or equivocal policies, programmes and projects in similar or totally different development contexts establishing some kind of policy dialogue. But it is equally not enough to bring about changes in traditionally very rigid institutions and hardheaded individuals and professional cadre. Capacity building in its broader sense has a lot to do with the way knowledge is disseminated and internalised – meaning appropriated –within organisations and individuals who are responsible for these organisations to function and exist as such. Only a smart combination between knowledge building and information dissemination and capacity building efforts – training being an indispensable element of that – herein called "knowledge triad" can have a positive impact on organisations and people, paving the way to institutional changes and fundamental policy reforms required to start resolving social exclusion and poverty.

However, one must never loose sight that policy reform is a function of the political process. It is equally important that all that has been said above is geared to the political elite in the countries – both recipient and providers of development assistance – because after all the political processes will determine whether knowledge and the information acquired find echo within the decision making.

This entire cycle of knowledge building is in fact a paramount issue in the process of empowerment of civil society organisations, grassroots organisations, CBO's and NGO's. It cannot be dissociated from it since in the end of the day it will be through these channels that political processes can be moved towards policies geared to resolve social exclusion and urban poverty.

2.   Creation of a knowledge infrastructure at the crossroads of practical policy, action and science

The concept of knowledge infrastructure implies the existence of knowledge-based institutions, processes of knowledge development and instruments to knowledge dissemination and the capacities to manage knowledge production and its wide dissemination in its broader sense e.g. people, organisation, structure, means and resources. This is a pre-requisite for building indigenous capacities to propel development and good policy making and action.

On one side there is the academia and its institutions geared to scientific development and knowledge production and on the other skill development oriented institutions committed to applied research and training in support to policy development and institutional and political reform. These two types of institutions must co-exist if development changes are to succeed.

The vocation of higher education institutions and knowledge-based institutions are different. The former focuses on the development of universal types of knowledge and theories to explain social, political and technological processes and on the development of primary skills generating individuals who are critically and professionally prepared to play roles that society assigns to his/her expertise. The latter focuses on the development of practical knowledge to understand underlying development problems and its complexity and on the development of policies, strategies and solutions generating action oriented and problem-solving practitioners. These are important organisations to bring about changes in attitude and shifts in policies through their intrinsic activities e.g. applied and action researches, training and capacity building.

Finally, the use of ICT-Information and Communication Technologies must be an integral part of the process of building knowledge infrastructures. At least a strategy to have it developed must exist. Network resources provide benchmarking and essential means for policy dialogue in a totally different environment for local governments as well as for non-governmental organisations. Lessons learned, appraisal and assessment results, processes, documentation, etc. becomes easily accessible and shared, particularly in countries where this infrastructure and technology is already disseminated. Unfortunately, not all developing countries are at the same level regarding ICT.

3. The role of strategic comparative research in support of policy dialogue and policy development (including the documentation of best practices).

Needless to say that there is an added value in comparative research. The analysis and documentation of local development processes taking place in different societies and political settings show the peculiarities of institutional and implementation arrangements for a particular policy, program or project to succeed under these conditions (showing HOW things actually took place and the results accomplished). The issue to be resolved is how the knowledge and particularly the lessons learned can be incorporated into the processes of policy development and how it can become an effective tool to policy reform and institutional change. The challenge is to resolve the dichotomy between experiences that are locally bound and what can be transferred and applied elsewhere. What can be called a best practice in a context can be considered a timid if not an example of a bad practice in another society and development context. Comparative research – if it is placed within a dynamic environment of policy dialogue between institutions, individuals and entities directly involved with their formulation and implementation – can become a vehicle for shifting actions and policies towards poverty reduction provided that dissemination and capacity building are properly addressed ("knowledge triad").