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THE SITUATION OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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THE SITUATION OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The series of documents submitted by the Secretariat to provide background for discussion of item 1 of the agenda */ was prepared by a group of experts from the HABITAT CEPAL/CIDA Project and the Area of Population and Development of the Latin American Demographic Centre (CELADE). The papers endeavour to interpret a highly complex phenomenon which rests on the wide range of socio-economi issues in the region but which, in contrast to the traditional subjects of concern to CEPAL, has a direct spatial projection.

If one examines the relationship between development and settlement, one can appreciate that the forms in which space is occupied, organized, equipped and used are historically determined by the characteristics of production and their implications for the social structures. This aspect is fundamental in recognizing the difficulty of changing the material structures of the habitat without fundamentally changing development policies, especially when it is necessary to accept the difficulty of introducing the structural transformations in society in the short term and the resistance of human settlements to change - which is easily understandable in view of the permanent nature of their material basis. In the documents entitled Human Settlements in the Development of Latin America and Population,Urbanization and Human Settlements, an attempt is made to demonstrate that the pattern of settlement should be conceived as a by-product of the style of development, the forms and modes of production, their agents, products and destination, the means whereby production is controlled and its benefits distributed. However, there is no absolute determinism, since substantial variations may be observed in the quality of the habitat in societies which have had similar economic histories, and,

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*/ Human settlements in the development of Latin America, E/CEPAL/Conf.70/L.3; Population, urbanization and human settlements in Latin America, E/CEPAL/Conf.70/L.4; The process of human settlement in Latin America, E/CEPAL/Conf.70/L.5; The material basis of habitat, E/CEPAL/Conf.70/L.6; Human settlement policies for Latin America, E/CEPAL/Conf.70/L.7

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conversely, one may observe the persistence of material characteristics in situations where social, economic and political macro-structures have undergone profound changes. The conclusion is that a socially fairer environment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a more satisfactory habitat.

The document entitled The Process of Human Settlement in Latin America examines some characteristics of the settlement of population in the region, and the contrasts which may be observed from the historical viewpoint with other regions, especially some regions in the developed world. Specific regional features raise specific problems and contribute new potentialities for a form of development which is different from the traditional form, and this calls for original political attitudes and innovations in the interventions of the public sector. Urban concentration, shanty settlements, explosive growth and rural dispersion are realities which cannot easily be changed, and which should not be regarded as negative in all cases. The primacy which is evident in the national human settlements systems is not necessarily dysfunctional in all cases, nor at all stages of development. In the same way, shanty settlement may be regarded, as a specific form of coping with the problems of occupying, organizing and equipping space adopted by certain groups which have insufficient means to meet their needs for land and housing through the conventional market. Explosive growth may be used as a means of decentralizing important social and administrative functions and as an instrument for the incorporation of new areas in the economy. Rural dispersion is a direct result of the low level of development in agriculture in most of the countries of the region which, by means of a feedback mechanism, places a substantial brake on economic growth and gives rise to migratory flows which, if present trends continue, will hinder any efforts to improve the urban habitat.

The document entitled The Material Basis of Habitat studies the operation of the systems for the production and distribution of housing, infrastructure and services within the free property market, in the subsidized market, and in the informal systems which serve shanty settlement. Some major distinctions are also drawn, all of which have different but equally important implications for the perception of social needs, the planning of

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supply, applied technologies, available resources and distribution machinery. This novel way of examining the problems of housing, infrastructure and services is likely to give rise to important discussions concerning the traditional methods which place emphasis on the availability of finance and regard human settlements technology as a constant rather than as a variable susceptible to political influence.

When dealing with the problems of the supply of housing, infrastructure and services, it is impossible not to examine the question of land and building materials, two undoubtedly fundamental aspects in any effort to improve the quality of the habitat. Here more than in any other case, the formidable problems created by the existence of oligopolistic markets and the presence of speculative forces demand political interventions which, even though they may appear radical, are not all incompatible with the socio-political structures of the countries of the region. The document entitled Human Settlement Policies for Latin America studies the theoretical and practical implications of public sector intenvention in the process of human settlement and outlines some alternative strategies, less as real options than with the aim of prompting discussion concerning their possible practical consequences. It should be understood that this document does not aim to propose policies to governments, but to call attention to those fields of action where intervention by the State is required. State intervention would appear to be necessary at various levels: general policies for human settlement; specific policies for urban development; policies to deal with explosive growth, shanty settlement, rural settlement, and housing, infrastructure and services policies. In addition, it is deemed necessary to formulate and implement policies designed to broaden the base of popular participation, and to put into effect policies for training human resources for habitat.

The aim of the first four documents is to offer an overall view of the situation of human settlements in the region, on the basis of specific information arising from a special study of the subject and the general knowledge of the Office of the Executive Secretary on related issues. All these papers make a special effort to identify the critical variables which

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are of decisive importance in the origin and evolution of human settlements, so as to identify more objectively the problems of human settlements and the relative efficacy of the corresponding policies.

When considering state action in the process of human settlement, a number of fundamental issues inevitably arise. The first is related to the real possibility of intervening usefully to deal with such a complex phenomenon which arises from national policies for general development, employment, population, distribution of the product and social welfare, each of which presents its own conceptual and operational difficulties. The idea that the spatial factor is a variable common to these policies which should be analysed within a single conceptual unit, and that this conceptual unit is the raison d'être of human settlements policies, should be discussed in the light of the relative importance that the States Members of CEPAL attach to it.

In the view of the Secretariat, human settlements constitute a specific political issue whose justification lies in the importance of habitat for society as a whole and which requires deliberate and specific intervention, since: (i) equitable spatial distribution of opportunities is an essential element in development which does not result from the free play of economic forces; (ii) the quality of the habitat is not merely the result of better general socio-economic conditions, but of a deliberate effort to improve the material, spatial and institutional foundation of human settlements, and (iii) the improvement of the habitat can be achieved only through measures which enjoy the full support, co-operation and participation of the people.

Another important aspect relates to the content and scope of human settlement policies. If they are to bring together and unify the general development policies and sectoral policies - for employment, income distribution, population and social welfare - it is necessary to ask how far it is possible to modify the trends in the location of economic activity and in the spatial distribution of investment in basic social capital in order to create deliberately new concentrations of public and private investment to guide the distribution of the population. It is also necessary to examine real possibilities of reorienting housing, infrastructure and services programmes at the local level so as to adapt allocations by the central government more effectively to the specific needs of each place.

/The discussion

The discussion will undoubtedly give rise to different possible strategies. The document under discussion contains a series of suggestions which might serve as a basis for the discussion, although it should be borne in mind that these are not specific recommendations but a series of options designed only to stimulate debate by citing specific examples of possible courses of action. In reality, the sole recommendation which the Secretariat could make would be to emphasize the desirability of making human settlement policies - of whatever type - explicit in order to ensure that they can be implemented.

When considering political intervention as a fundamental factor in the processes of human settlement, the question once again arises of the nature of habitat and its relationship with development.

It is clear that one cannot conceive of a satisfactory habitat in conditions of chronic unemployment, widespread poverty, the absence of political participation and social injustice, even though its material foundations may have attained a high level of efficiency. Conversely, as happens in some centrally planned economies, the social environment offers better general conditions but does not succeed in modifying the habitat alone.

The style of development and its impact on traditional structures are decisive factors in shaping this social environment, and thus the habitat, although this determinism is not absolute. There is always a certain margin of freedom which permits discretionary action in the organization, equipping and use of space. A fairer social environment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of a favourable habitat for human development.

Accepting this margin of freedom, limited though it is, means recognizing that there exists a differentiated field of activity which is that of human settlements. This discretionary margin may explain the diversity of environments in countries and settlements with similar political economic histories. Conversely, when the need to handle spatial variables is not borne in mind, the characteristic inertia of material structures offers strong resistance to the transformation of the habitat, whatever substantial changes may have occurred in the socio-economic structures.

/The discretionary

The discretionary margin referred to is basically manifested in the technology applied to the organization, equipping and use of geographical space, and the institutional organization with which these processes are controlled. Nevertheless, these factors are not always recognized as variables which are dependent on political will. This recognition appears to be essential to permit the use of the limited freedom referred to above, which constitutes the basis for action in any effort to improve the quality of the human habitat.

In arriving at an operational definition of the sphere of activity of human settlements, it is necessary to differentiate between the action of settling a population within a given territory - in other words, occupying, organizing, equipping and using the space - and the results of action: human settlements proper, or habitat.

The action of settling the population, as a deliberate act, has profound political implications which cannot be separated from the habitat. Hence the importance of designing and applying explicit settlement policies. These policies, however, are not independent of the general development policies, specially those which deal with employment, income and the social needs of the population. Human settlement policies essentially group together the spatial aspects explicitly or implicitly contained in these more general policies. The location of economic activity and the settlement of population, as well as the spatial distribution of the infrastructure and the investment in basic social capital, are accordingly the basic components of this policy.

Human settlement policies are naturally national policies and turn on the decisions of the central government. Their definition and operational instruments are superimposed on a political complex which, although different, is directly linked with human settlements qua material structures. What is involved is management of the habitat, in other words, the handling of the technologies and institutional means which are needed to organize, equip and use space. Management of the habitat essentially requires consideration of ecological and cultural data which can only be dealt with at the local level. Human settlement policies could not by themselves be translated into material structures designed to offer satisfactory environmental solutions for the diversity of climates, topographies and cultures which make up the national mosaic of regions and localities.

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In short, the study of human settlements can justifiably be viewed as a specific activity for political and professional purposes. Recognition of the need to design and carry out definite human settlement policies, on the one hand, and the need to create the materials and operational instruments which are appropriate for management of the habitat, on the other, was the most important message of Habitat: United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, which was held in Vancouver in 1976. The Conference prompted new approaches to the old problems of housing and urban, rural and regional development, and also promoted renewed interest in the population and environment policies with which it shares its spatial preoccupation.

In recognition of the many and complex factors which play a role in the field of human settlements, the United Nations decided, through General Assembly resolution 32/162, that in examining the subject the following sectors should be considered: "Settlement policies and strategy; settlement planning; institutions and management; shelter, infrastructure and services; land, and public participation".

The policy definitions adopted at various United Nations conferences offer a backdrop for the political and ideological support of CEPAL activities in this field. This backdrop is made up of the new international economic order, the protection of the environment and the safeguarding of human values. Some of its concrete implications refer to objectives such as interdependence among nations in the place of economic, political and cultural dependence; self-assertion by countries and cultures; special attention to the demands of national majorities; the conservation of the natural resources patrimony of present and future generations, and an increase in popular participation in policy decisions and their implementation.