

SEMINAR ON URBANIZATION PROBLEMS IN LATIN AMERICA

Santiago, Chile - 6 - 18 July 1959

Conference room paper N° 2

PROGRAMMES OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES
CONNECTED WITH URBANIZATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Document prepared by the Programme of Planning,
Housing and Building, Department of Economic
and Social Affairs, Pan American Union

It has become fairly clear in the last few years that urban expansion has been taking place in Latin America, but it is no simple matter to ascertain the underlying reason for the growth of the towns and for the rural population shifts.

The hitherto uncontrolled phenomenon of urbanization, whose catalysts are social and technological change, is revealed in the decadence of the environment favouring collective association, the deterioration of rural living and the proliferation of communities lining roads and highways. It has often happened that rural workers migrated to the towns because urban life attracted them or because the salaries real or imaginary, were higher there than in the country. This is not the whole truth, however, since it has been proved that the years when urban expansion was at its peak coincided with those of agricultural depression. As a result, it is impossible to determine whether such shifts were due to the strength of the towns' attraction or to the fact that the rural environment has become so economically inhospitable that its inhabitants have no other choice than to emigrate. Or perhaps both factors complement and reinforce each other. Furthermore, if the first alternative is favoured, it is difficult to decide whether the migrants were attracted by the urban way of life or whether they were ready to tolerate it in order to draw the higher wages or work opportunities that the village and countryside were unable to offer them.

/If the

If the situation is analysed from a different angle, it is clear that the towns expanded because there was sufficient manpower demand to induce the people to settle there. The economic foundation of a town should of course be sufficient to support not only those who earn a day wage in the production of goods and services, but also those who, directly or indirectly, depend on them. In short, contemporary society has evolved a type of culture which lays emphasis on the type of values and activities which can only develop in the setting of a big town.

The consequences of economic development bring radical changes in their train, in both the physical environment of the town and its zone of influence. In some way or another, the large masses of people that converge on the populated centres have to be provided for. The families that are annually incorporated into urban life need houses, schools, work and recreation centres, commercial facilities, public utilities and community centres, means of transport and, in general, all those services and facilities which constitute the town, community or suburb. In addition, the geographical redistribution of the work centres and employment opportunities which accompanies technological and industrial progress urgently calls for the efficacious utilization of urban land, the balanced distribution of the population and the functional organization of the town.

Urbanization means an increase in the urban population and social mobility, whether spatial or horizontal, occupational or vertical. During the initial stages of the process, the motivating forces operate free of control and without the guidance necessary to channel the population currents and direct the ordered growth of the towns. This weakening of the social and economic base leads to the functional disorganization of the urban structure by marginal expansion and the disintegration of its central areas.

The number of dwellings to be reconstructed in Latin America's towns and capital cities amounts to some 4.5 million units at the present time; this is approximately the same as the number of families living in the urban slums and marginal shanty towns, which have been improvised in the vicinity of the population centres. Even without considering the dwellings needed for the families that arrive every year in the towns and for the vegetative

growth of the population, the mere reconstruction of these housing units would represent such an enormous investment that it would have direct repercussions on our impoverished national economies. This is the reality of the present situation; it may well be asked what is the future of Latin America's urban areas; whether the population shifts can be checked; and whether the municipalities have the financial and technical means to shoulder the tremendous burden of urban rehabilitation and renovation.

The fact that millions of people have been assembled together in a single population centre represents a mighty effort. But there is no limit to the effort required in organizing the centre so as to provide these millions with food and livelihood, work and entertainment. In these days, the town is in itself a very serious problem because of its haphazard growth. It does not conform to the degree of progress that it should have achieved in view of technological advances in recent years. Its physical structure is not capable of absorbing with any speed the effects of urbanization and industrialization. Its natural social organization begins to break up when the primary groups disappear, the secondary groups become atrophied and the community instinct is absorbed by social stratification.

This natural process cannot be checked by the application of direct force. On the contrary, it is essential to investigate its causes in order to eliminate or control them so as to regulate industrial development and transport and make use of technological advances. In most cases, population shifts do not come equally from all directions but have a particular point of departure. In such circumstances, it would seem logical to work directly on the cause and create a new centre of absorption for the population surplus. In other cases, the policy of building new centres and of industrial decentralization might be a solution.

The urbanization movement and mushrooming of towns are not unavoidable in future nor need they continue indefinitely. Urban built-up areas may expand and have done so a hundred times over without the emergence of institutions which denote a "town" in the exact sense of the word, i.e. a place in which the social inheritance is concentrated and where the possibilities of trade and inter-action give man a greater potential of activity.

/There is

There is no need to analyse statistics to demonstrate that virtually 70 million Latin Americans are living in urban areas and that about half that number is concentrated in 67 large metropolitan built-up areas of over 1,000 inhabitants each. In the last 25 years, the population of Mexico City has increased from 1 million to 5 million; São Paulo has added a further million inhabitants to its total population every ten years for the last two decades, and between 1940 and 1955, the population of Caracas increased from 400,000 to 1 million. Urbanization in Argentina and Uruguay is even more marked, since a quarter and a third of their respective total populations live in Greater Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

This growth is accompanied by innumerable and extremely serious problems which include the lack of any conscious expansion of the economic basis, the existence of overcrowded streets and highways, inadequate transport systems, insufficient public utilities, taxes which do not reflect municipal needs and, as a result, artificially high prices for urban land which prevents families in the lower-income groups from obtaining housing and public and community services. Industrialization, one of the foremost causes of the urbanization phenomenon, is necessary and unavoidable in Latin America. It has been estimated that the active population would increase by some 38 million between 1955 and 1975 and that this increment would be absorbed into productive activity, only 5 million going to agriculture and the remaining 33 million to industry in the towns and cities, which means an approximate population of 150 million in the urban areas and the consequent aggravation of existing urbanization problems.

There is no way of deferring these dynamic effects of economic development on the physical and social environment of communities, but, up to a point, they can be anticipated, and the process channelled or programmed in the direction of long-term targets or objectives, consistently with the resources at the disposal of the communities in question. So far, however, the method of tackling the problem has been fundamentally wrong, inasmuch as the "object" of town planning has been taken to be the physical structure of urban areas, the lay-out of the streets, the distribution of land use, the building alignment. The crux of the problem lies in the restoration, by means of organization of the urban environment, of a more natural way

of life for the population. Thus, town planning should not consist in a merely regulatory technique or set of techniques - something borrowed, static, inflexible. Current techniques are apt to be circumscribed by their own limitations, to fail to see the wood for the trees. Planning has been unduly dominated by borrowed techniques which give it claims to recognition, but have little to do with the human ends it is called upon to serve.

We have no science of human settlements, we have no theory by the light of which we can work out the salvation of the urban area. We lack specialists who are methodical and scientific, who base their proceedings on analysis and synthesis, on programmes, policies and strategies. We have more than enough tactics at our disposal for specific cases, which are of no help in winning the battle of urbanization, but we lack the well-planned strategy of which the groundwork is the conception of the town as an organic whole, growing not in isolation but deep-rooted in the area from which it draws its sustenance and with which it must be unified.

Hitherto, scant attention has been devoted to these problems by public administration (at the national, provincial and municipal levels) and by the advanced institutions for teaching and research. What is more, training of professionals specializing in the various aspects of urbanization and town-planning is virtually unknown in the Latin American universities, and in no country is such a study recognized as an independent profession.

The Organization of American States, cognizant of this situation, has established two activities of which the aim is to develop a science of human settlements. The first of these is the Inter-American Housing and Planning Centre in Bogotá, which since 1 January 1959 has constituted a standing activity of the Pan American Union, under the Planning, Housing and Building Programme of the Department of Economic Affairs.

One of the objectives of this Centre is to provide training, at the highest level, for professionals from all the American countries desirous of specializing in the technological, economic, social and administrative aspects of housing. Another of its aims is to conduct research and carry out experimental work using mainly indigenous techniques and materials which, applied to construction, help to reduce production costs. A scientific

document and exchange service and another of an advisory character broaden the Centre's radius of action and transmit the conclusions reached in studies and research to all those that may find such information useful.

The second of the activities mentioned relates to the creation of Regional Town Planning Institutes under the Technical Co-operation Programme of the Organization of American States. In 1952, the Pan American Union was authorized to launch this project. Twelve countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and United States) expressed interest in participating in the project at that time, and four of them (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Peru) offered local facilities in the event of their being selected for its headquarters. With the installation of this project in a Latin American country, technical assistance will be provided for the establishment of regional town planning courses in institutes of higher education. Their aim must be to train professionals not for a single country, but for a whole region. Besides helping to strengthen existing institutions, these courses can be used as a model for the organization of similar study programmes in other higher education centres in countries members of the Organization of American States.

The project will pursue the following three fundamental objectives: research, professional training and civic guidance. The training programme will be designed to give trainees a complete over-all picture of urban and regional problems, and of the administrative instruments of the planning process. Research will be concentrated on the relations between urban and metropolitan areas and their zone of influence, and among communities within the said areas. The focal point of this basic programme will have to be the analysis of the economic and social forces affecting towns, and will consist in predetermined projects which take into account the specific problems of the students' countries of origin.

With these two activities the Organization of American States has taken the first steps towards the formulation of a science of human settlements and towards the training of professionals who will restore the reign of common-sense that must succeed this growth crisis.

/In conclusion,

In conclusion, the Planning, Housing and Building Programme of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Pan American Union hopes that this Seminar on Urbanization Problems on Latin America, for which it prophesies well-deserved success, will leave behind it deeply-engraved lessons of specialized knowledge and experience; and that a group of such highly-qualified technical experts will reassure others that they are not alone in their strivings and in the world of their own creations.

