

Committee III  
Human Beings and the Urban  
Environment: The Future Metropolis

Draft --  
For Conference Distribution only

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

by

**Sumet Jumsai**  
Director  
S.J. Associates-Planners  
Bangkok, Thailand

on

Peter Wyss's

**THE ASIAN METROPOLIS**

The Thirteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Washington, D.C. September 2-5, 1984

© 1984, Paragon House Publishers

ICUS - XIII

"The Asian Metropolis"

Dr. Sumet Jumsai, Discussant

Dr. Wyss has left his paper open-ended, staying clear of defining future directions and trends for the Asian metropolis. Yet if one were to read between the lines they are there: all the existing urban problems will continue well into a foreseeable future - in-migration, failure of municipalization, the inability of national governments to even follow events etc., so that the informal sector with its informal urban structure and housing will either swamp or become more than ever prominent in Asian cities of the future.

The above, however, is not all negative a picture and Dr. Wyss' paper has pointed out that the phenomenon is in fact indigenous and an expression of the Asian sense for community and family tie which is absent in the urban West.

People who deal with macro statistics at the UN and other world organizations will continue to produce staggering figures of the urban poor and hence slum population in Asian cities. The purpose, besides telling the truth to a large degree, is probably to shock donor countries into giving more money to the international organizations concerned and to shock governments at the receiving end into some sort of action usually relative to the world bodies' own thinking and terms of reference.

The influence world aid or loan agencies have on poor countries is obvious and it is just as well to look into the agencies' thinking on matters of development strategy especially as it affects urban programmes.

In the past decade or more, a new attitude towards economic development in general has taken shape, for economics has for the first time taken morality into account. Thus whereas before grant and loan projects were based on cost-benefit and return rates, the terms of reference now asks for social and environmental components. Excellent rural programmes have since been carried out and slum upgrading and self-help projects have taken root in many developing countries.

This is not to say that all the projects associated with international agencies automatically include social and environmental components. These are still very much wanting in many cases. When a world body makes a loan to a government, for example to expand port facilities, it might still ignore the overall impact the programme has on urban decentralization, the logistics of infrastructures and the thousands of slum families facing eviction in the area. Simply stated many such programmes are still sectorial and lack comprehensiveness, causing unnecessary suffering and other negative effects.

The moral side in economic development, while producing good work, has its pitfalls. It has on occasion become dogmatic. Thus urban investments such as the mass transit (to take up Dr. Wyss' complaint) is not encouraged, while anything "soft" is insisted upon: improvement of traffic management, more one-way streets, more computerised traffic lights, more bus-lanes, etc, even if such alternatives have all been exhausted.

Perhaps all this is due to an inverted compassion for the poor, which means that if you are poor, high-tech is out and you are required to conform to a certain image.

This dogmatic attitude seeps down to the national governments in dribs and drabs, and in the meanwhile other equally capital intensive and high-tech urban programmes are implemented.

On the whole, however, planners at the national level do not know how to face the scenario of the urban poor swamping their cities. The shock effect has succeeded. But the dilemma is also due to the planners' rigid training in economics so that everything is costed in terms of hard cash which has to be accountable in the national balance sheet.

To accommodate the urban poor is therefore seen as a huge investment which no one can afford. (The odd thing in this case is that when roads are paved and pipes put in well-to-do areas of the city they are routine expenditure and not "investment", but when miserable walk-ways and meagre infrastructures are put in slum areas they become "investment" so that what money goes in must come out complete with interests!)

Then there are other attitudes, more blatant, towards the urban poor ranging from "we must not encourage in-migration by improving the lot of the slum dwellers", or "we must ignore the city and go to the root of in-migration by diverting all the funds to the countryside first", to simply delegating any concept of slum upgrading to "creating permanent slums " in the city, a term which has a clear disdain attached to it.

To remedy such warps in the mental attitude, which is a prerequisite to solving the slum problem, international agencies might start by presenting facts and figures without the shock element, that is to say, without being themselves evangelical. Instead the slum problem must be presented with its positive aspects - and Dr. Wyss' paper has already listed a number of them.

Acceptance of and coming to terms with the urban poor, hence the informal sector of the Asian metropolis, means the beginning of a real and long term solution. However, the solution will be different from that of the past for the urban poor must be looked at as an indispensable economic component of the Asian city, and slums when upgraded as areas which are no longer depressed and to be despised, but an asset in terms of their potentially indigenous and beautiful character. All this can be and must be part of the future Asian metropolis standing side by side with the necessary latest and most efficient urban transportation and other infrastructural networks.

In spite of what is said above, urban decentralization is still necessary. Bangkok (pop. approaching 6 m. including the surrounding conglomerations) is probably the most extreme case in point here: it is 25 times bigger than the next largest city, Chiang Mai, and almost 300 times bigger than the average municipality in the country.

Failure of decentralization is in part due to the planners concentrating on physical (infrastructural and industrial) and financial

aspects. In the latter case a vast amount of funds is diverted to the countryside only to find that the banking system is such that it absorbs the money back into the capital city and more. The fact is that decentralization is really an issue outside the planner's jurisdiction. Decentralization clearly begins with the nation's power base which must be first decentralized. Money then follows power and the rest follows money.

Because of the hinterland problem that most developing countries face, Hong Kong and Singapore cannot be considered for urban comparisons. In fact Singapore cannot and should not be regarded as a model. To adopt it as such would be disastrous for the rest of the 80% rural poor.

Yet this is precisely the dilemma, for both Hong Kong and Singapore are fashionable yardsticks to politicians, bankers and developers in the region so that among them there is a keen sense of competition. If Singapore can build a 70-storey building, so can Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta are watching with similar aspirations.

Future cities in this region will no doubt try to outdo or at least partially follow one another, and flashy high rises will fill their skyline. But below the skyline and behind the high rises there will be hovels, that is if reason cannot prevail.

---

7