



The Great Promise of Urban Environmental Policy¹


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The anti-urban bias in environmental policy must end. To fulfill its great promise to turn cities toward social and environmental responsibility, urban environmental policy must address four neglected areas. Processes and institutions of governance must be democratically transformed to include a large number and diversity of people. Scientific, technical, and social forms of knowledge, communication, and action must be employed. Explicit attention must be given to both basic needs and a common vision of sustainability. Finally, we need to incorporate regional and historical rural and indigenous perspectives as we realize new sustainable urban settlements.

Introduction: The Case for Urban Environmental Policy

The environmental movement rose in the 1960s against threats of global species extinctions and natural resource depletion. In the 1970s, the movement began to confront global pollution and waste problems, such as ozone depletion and climate change. Resulting laws and international environmental conventions have brought some remarkable benefits to many Western cities: urban air pollution is down, toxic releases and disposal are better regulated and recycling has become an institution. At the same time, particularly in cities in poor countries, “the absolute quality of the urban environment continues to deteriorate in terms of depletion of natural resources, pollution of neighboring areas through disposal of urban waste, and weaknesses of environmental governance” (Cohen 1992: 23).

Cities and their residents are rarely consulted about environmental policy and infrequently have the power to pursue environmental improvement on their own. Instead, they have “a global agenda for local governments to inherit and be expected to act upon . . . [which is] quite different from a locally conceived agenda” (McCarney 1995: 230). Urban activists and social justice organizations often have considered themselves in opposition to mainstream environmentalism. For example, Carl Stokes, mayor of Cleveland and prominent Black civil rights leader, said “the nation’s concern with the environment has done what George Wallace was unable to do: distract the nation from the human problems of black and brown Americans” (in McGurty 1997: 305).



A good deal of environmental thought has classified cities on the side of environmental evil. Ecologist William Rees (1992: 125) characterizes cities this way: “However brilliant its economic star, every city is an ecological black hole drawing on the material resources and productivity of a vast and scattered hinterland many times the size of the city itself.” But this thinking is changing. Environmental philosopher Andrew Light (2000), for example, tells a personal story of an ordinary evening in Manhattan, rejoicing as the stars come out and only later realizing that they are not stars at all, but the electric lights of the financial district embellished by the camera flashes of tourists. Light suggests that cities should be treated as real rather than artificial lived environments and as the most promising sites of human inspiration for the development of useful environmental ethics.

Both ideas are true. Cities are environmentally destructive; their resource requirements and outputs stress surrounding regions and their structures modify and deplete the ecosystems in which they sit. At the same time, cities are the places where their residents experience the natural environment; it is here that society and nature intersect. For these reasons, cities can and should inspire environmentally ethical societies. To achieve this, however, cities must develop their own urban environmental agendas.

The global environmental agenda is strongly influenced by the theme of sustainable development, that is, development that does not deplete long-term economic, natural, human or social capital. Locally conceived urban environmental policy does not deny

the importance of global environmental problems but rather considers their effects on urban people and the challenges that urban residents face, such as urban food supply, waste disposal, transport, health, water, energy use and shelter (Stren 1992).

Sustainability is also a call to recognize our moral obligation to future generations, but this “has a terribly hollow ring if it is not accompanied by a moral obligation to protect and enhance the well-being of *present* people who are poor and deprived” (Anand and Sen 2000: 2038). Thus, the great promise of urban environmental policy lies in improving the lives people lead in cities, without discriminating between groups alive today and not yet alive.

An urban environmental agenda would include policy questions about how cities should respond to environmental problems, and empirical questions about the relationship between cities and the natural environment. The policy questions revolve around the need for an inclusive, democratic process and a mix of technical and humanistic methods. These are discussed in the first two sections of this paper. The empirical questions center on the selection of critical issues and alternative perspectives on the meaning of sustainability. These two questions are addressed in the final two parts of this paper. In essence, the task of urban environmentalism is to hold cities as both hopeful and realistic sites for a global move toward sustainability.

No urban environmental agenda will have a large effect without human and financial investment, critically important in cities suffering from greater stress and degradation. Achieving this will be no easy task.

This paper, however, is concerned with the highest and best purposes to which more power and resources could be put. I hope to show that a focus on urban environmental decision making is more than pollution management, poverty containment or provision of green amenities in rich cities—instead, urban environmental policy can transform urban environmental governance and direct cities toward an ethical, sustainable future.

The Process of Urban Environmental Policy: The Promise and Problems of Democracy

At the national scale, democracy is widely recognized as the most legitimate system of governance. Democratic political institutions give citizens the ability, the right, and the responsibility to participate in governance. Similarly, at the urban level, democratic processes provide the most reliable guide to urban environmental action. It is the best method so far conceived to address differences among people of diverse backgrounds and interests. In addition, involving people meaningfully in planning for urban sustainability is the surest route to cultivating urban environmental citizenship.

Sustainability can be achieved in two ways: by expanding the world's ability to absorb the negative impacts of development or by setting new limits on activities that have such impacts (Meadows 1972; Tarr 1996). How to decide between these approaches, and who chooses the particular issues to focus on within each approach, are procedural questions rarely addressed by national governments and international bodies. At the municipal level, many officials and citizens alike have either lost or never learned the

habits of democratic citizenship (Gleeson and Low 2000).

National governments and large environmental organizations commonly ignore the importance of democratic processes when determining environmental policy and provide neither resources nor guidance to local governments and groups best placed to implement policies. For instance, the national level practice of environmental impact assessment exists primarily to assuage the public that all possible problems already have been considered in order to ensure the implementation of projects (Leis 2000).

The history of large environmental organizations is no more democratic. In 1971, the Audubon Society reasoned: "Naturally the well-to-do are often best equipped to press [environmental] issues because [this] take[s] time, know-how and money. But this does not make the results less applicable to the people as a whole" (1971: 35). But, poor and urban people are no less natural environmentalists than the wealthy and non-urban dwellers.

Continued experimentation with local-level democratic approaches to urban environmental improvement can build more efficient, innovative and inclusive democratic practices, improving in turn the resulting environmental policies. Currently, in countries without a political commitment to democracy, raising environmental concerns can be dangerous or impossible. To take one example, the Nairobi-based Green Belt Movement was undermined by the government when its leader spoke out against plans to build a huge office building in place of a public park

(Pearce 1991). For many countries, environmental problems are recognized and can begin to be addressed once a democratic political climate is established. This has been the case in Cubatao, Brazil, for example, where uncontrolled industrial emissions and the consequent air pollution could only be regulated once democratic politics had been restored in the 1980s (Di Pace et al. 1992).

Greater involvement of underrepresented groups in government is much more likely to facilitate action at the local level. Further, involvement of underrepresented poor groups in policy concerns is likely to bring about an increasingly comprehensive approach to urban planning, including the interrelated issues of economy, society, and environment. In Cebu City, Philippines a critical mass of non-government organizations allied in 1996 to push watershed protection onto the city landuse policy agenda, as well as to establish task forces on health, nutrition, sanitation, women's issues, education, street children and community information. This has led to improved access for the urban poor to social services and to greater empowerment of the poor residents through better information about their rights and opportunities (Etemadi 2000).

To municipal officials and technical staff, democratic approaches can be threatening because they yield unpredictable outcomes. They also are perceived to be slow and tedious. Democratic negotiation tends to bring conflict to the surface, gives voice to dissent and requires conflict to be addressed. It is not always the case, however, that openness and inclusiveness must slow the implementation of effective policies.

In Quito, Ecuador, for example, officials initiated a Machángara River quality indicator project in conjunction with local residents. Information sharing through this process has convinced residents that solutions exist superior to the prior practice of sealing off the river with concrete, and has brought about official recognition of the legitimacy of experiential knowledge. Residents now see that what they do affects the state of the river and that acting as the river's guardians is in their best interest. Local officials have learned to respect poor residents, who now provide a cheap and effective river monitoring system, and government information and action has become more publicly accountable. While complete rehabilitation of the river remains a distant goal, the democratic process of addressing the problem has provided a fast and effective start (Vásconez 1999).

The Means for Urban Environmentalism: Technical and Social-Humanistic Approaches

Experts, particularly scientists, are defined by their privileged use of a specific vocabulary and narrow worldview in their area of expertise. Specialized knowledge is important and provides many beneficial tools for action but it cannot handle the most complex social aspects of environmental issues. In urban environmental problem solving, political representation—and the social learning, trust and common interest that develop within the process—is at least as important as scientific evidence or technical means (Dryzek 1987). That is, the most important problems of urban environmental policy are communicative rather than scientific or technical: “the secret of any negotiation therefore resides in the cor-

rect dimensioning of the communication space so that no one can be misled with impunity” (Leis 2000: 104). Approaches that include both social-humanistic and technical approaches lead to a higher probability of implementation and acceptance.

Cities have a long history of technological innovation in municipal service provision; better sewers, solid waste disposal systems and water supply have made urban growth possible (Armstrong, Robinson and Hoy 1976). Scientific and technical means to address environmental degradation may be more prevalent simply because these are easier to implement than decreasing the consumption patterns of the wealthy or transferring resources to the poor (McCarney 1995). Attention to the social and environmental consequences of urban technology is relatively new, although these effects have always been substantial (Melosi 2000), and in some cases, the centralization of services has stifled household level innovation (Goldman 1997).

With the roots of environmentalism in ecological science (e.g., Carson 1994), most attempts at environmental policy have either consisted of technical means for isolated solutions, such as chemical treatments, pollution abatement technologies and recycling facilities, or have targeted complex and fragile natural ecosystems. However, equal attention should be given to the fragility of cities and what this implies for urban dwellers. Cities around the world are characterized by dynamic instability on demographic, political, cultural, economic and environmental fronts (Gleeson and Low 2000). New cities in poor countries are gaining population wildly, without suf-

ficient economic growth or basic infrastructure provision. For some poor residents, long-term investigations into ecological planning approaches may seem incompatible with their dire needs for potable water and sanitation service. Many environmental regulatory mechanisms used in older cities in richer countries, like pollution standards and environmental impact assessments, are ineffective and inappropriate in new cities in poor countries where much of urban development is unregulated.

In some situations, a humanistic approach may be more effective than a scientific approach. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, for instance, waste and pollution became a source of livelihood for poor people. Street Scavengers, a program that provides public waste drop-off and warehouse sorting facilities for recyclable materials, worked with an association of homeless people, ASMARE, that gained the right to collect and receive compensation for sorting the city’s recyclable materials. The program takes scavenging and sorting off the street, develops a comprehensive and less polluting solution to solid waste disposal and offers employment to and raises the social status of some of the city’s poorest residents. From an initial membership of thirty-one scavengers in 1993, the cooperative has now grown to 235. Overall, recycling has increased from fifteen tons to 500 tons per month. Total local funding for this project, ongoing since 1993, is just over \$4 million in local government funds (ICLEI 1999).

Leis (2000: 103) proposes the creation of “environmental negotiation spaces” as a means to gather the different actors in urban environmental decision

making into a team representing many diverse interests and areas of expertise. Scientists, government bureaucrats from various agencies, environmental groups, business people, trade unions and other civil society groups would be represented on a board, and together would establish environmental regulations. Collaboration between scientists and nonscientists in environmental decision making needs to occur to determine in which situations technical and scientific solutions are appropriate and when social programs will better accomplish the stated goals.

The Goals of Environmental Policy: Critical Environmental Issues

Urban environmental policy would have moderately scaled, direct benefits. Its approach emphasizes environmental problems and their intersection with local, lived environments. It offers the potential for short-term economic gains and small environmental improvements, and through this, encourages greater attention to environmental quality. Urban environmental policymakers must not only consider what improvements are needed, however, but also who will benefit from the changes.

The costs of degradation and benefits of environmental action are not distributed equally along race and class lines. The environmental justice movement first addressed the extent to which the poor and people of color disproportionately bear the costs of environmental pollution and are systematically excluded from environmental decision making. An urban focus in environmental policy takes up the environmental justice task to correct these disparities

in the process of improving environmental, social and economic development in cities (Gorman 1997).

Many aspects of the mainstream environmental research and action agenda have been driven by the middle- and upper-class citizens of rich countries, addressing problems that threaten or impair *their* health or *their* access to natural resources. Environmental consciousness in poor countries also reflects these issues. Thus, for example, chemical agents are emphasized more than biological agents in the water, air and soil, although the latter are responsible for most sickness in poor countries. Indoor air pollution is not considered a major environmental problem compared to tropical deforestation, although on a global scale, it is equally destructive to human life (Hardoy, Mitlan and Satterthwaite 1992).

The global environmental bureaucracies, in emphasizing such issues as reducing population growth and implementing “clean” production processes instead of limiting consumption and waste generation, blame poor people for much environmental degradation. In an urban environmental conception, by contrast, poor people may be found to hold many solutions. For example, some produce their own food, which may save energy, reduce vulnerability, produce income and improve the landscape. Urban agriculture is a large and important urban phenomenon, a strategy possibly undertaken by over two-thirds of urban households in much of the developing world and parts of Europe. Furedy (1990) reports on “informal” or “incidental” greening in at least twenty Asian cities, where people grow

vegetables in ghettos, keep animals for food and recycle wastes into fertilizer.

Forgotten places in cities revert back to wild places that serve important ecological functions and rouse people's sense of belonging in the world. When Utah naturalist Terry Tempest Williams, for example, visited the Bronx's Pelham Bay Park with a local resident, Williams saw "an urban wasteland" but the resident "saw the beauty inherent in marshes as systems of regeneration. ... When she motioned us down in the grasses to observe the black-crowned night heron still fishing at dusk, she was showing us the implacable focus of those who dwell there" (Williams 1994: 30-31). Places like this serve as sanctuaries to people whose city lives offer little memory of wilderness.

Programs for basic needs provision can concurrently address human fulfillment, environmental and lifestyle issues. This potential is demonstrated by the Kampung Improvement Program (KIP) in Surabaya, Indonesia. Kampung is urban indigenous settlements that house sixty-three percent of the Surabayan population on seven percent of its land area. The KIP, begun in 1969 and locally financed since 1990, provides an example of urban development that benefits the city's poorest residents while improving and building appreciation for a clean environment. KIP projects, such as concrete footpaths, side drains, public washing and trash facilities, halls, schools, markets and recreational fields, are designed in progressive steps according to existing local conditions. Community members have

control over all aspects of the projects, including the determination of which houses and properties will be affected by improvements and how to compensate the property owners (Jessup 1995).

One of the keys to the success of the KIP is its gradual approach. Widespread attitudinal change in favor of environmental respect and improvement will require small steps and tangible benefits. A promising strategy for increasing environmental considerations in urban policy is to begin with those aspects already included in physical planning processes. In addition, policies with benefits that can be achieved within politicians' terms of office are the most likely to be implemented and to overcome the general political apathy to long-term environmental threats (Oosterveld 1999).

The Proper Ends of Environmental Action: Alternative Knowledge and Sustainable Cities

Cities have the potential to provide fulfilling and sustainable lives for people, but existing cities are not equipped to teach mutual respect, commonality of purpose or the sacredness of life and diversity. On the contrary, most if not all cities have depended on the subordination of their hinterlands and natural resources for their growth and development (Tarr 1996; Wackernagel and Rees 1996).

If the ultimate end of urban environmental policy and action is not merely to clean or green current practices but to develop richer, more rewarding human societies, attention must be paid to human history and diversity, and relationships between people and with the natural environment. Many non-indus-

trial cultures offer alternative notions and institutions: collective rather than individual identity, non-proprietary and transgenerational knowledge, common ownership, tenure and access to property, and limits to consumption and trade (Abram 1996; Mander 1991).


Some of the primary lessons from rural history are economic. Small, cohesive groups have the potential to operate gift economies either alongside or in place of market economies. In gift economies, the most socially valuable commodities, such as arable land and food, are viewed primarily as gifts to be exchanged so that surplus flows toward need rather than wealth accumulation. Gift exchange is intended to establish and maintain emotional ties among people. The process requires the coordination of group bonds (Hyde 1983). For example, the First Nations of the Pacific coast of North America had rules of reciprocity to ensure the equitable allocation of resources. These rules were manifested in part through potlatches “commonly held by many groups, [as] a mechanism for sharing the surplus of their fishing activities . . . and a disincentive to accumulate wealth” (Berkes 1999: 50).

Global commodity exchange markets offer undeniable advantages and market relationships make sense given predominant assumptions of individualism, privatization of common property resources and the emergence of the state (Scott 1998). Gift economies, in addition to paying heed to the sacredness of life and individual diversity, offer the possibility of increasing social cohesion, responsibility and continuity, whereby “knowledge, values, and identity are

transferred to succeeding generations through the annual, cyclical repetition of livelihood activities based on traditional ecological knowledge” (Berkes 1999: 24). Market relations are not incompatible with sustainable cities but neither are they spaceless or timeless; the workings of markets need to be subsumed under social and ecological limits through strong local, national and international policies. As the role of the gift economy decreases, legal contracts replace social bonds and the imposed structure of law and policy replace the structure of faithfulness and gratitude (Hyde 1983: 137). These changes alienate people from their environment and from one another and therefore are a root cause of environmental degradation.

Lessons from traditional and indigenous cultures include valuing specific knowledge in addition to abstract knowledge. All successful traditional institutions and management strategies for common resources such as fisheries, forest resources and water rights have depended on close experiential knowledge of the particular resource, along with a sense of common purpose and shared future (Berkes 1999; Ostrom 1990). Settlements could be designed with this in mind, according to what Orr (1994: 2) calls ecological design intelligence: “The capacity to understand the ecological context in which humans live, to recognize limits, and to get the scale of things right; the ability to calibrate human purposes and natural constraints and to do so with grace and economy.”

In the James Bay Cree worldview, the world “has a unity and an integrity that is Creator-given, and it is the task of humans to discipline their minds and



actions to recognize and understand its workings” (Berkes 1999: 91). Trosper (1995) argues that there are four commonly, though not universally, shared attitudes of respect toward nature: a community-of-beings view with social obligations and reciprocity, connectedness, concern for future generations and humility. With the right institutional structure and philosophical focus, cities can incorporate these attitudes. They can teach people to live within limits, encompass both urban and rural activities and emphasize the importance of species other than human beings and of generations other than those present. They can be based on quality and dignity, not only quantity and grandeur.

Conclusion

The great promise of the urban environmental policy agenda is universal: “To design and manage human settlements in such a way that all the world’s people may live at a decent standard based on sustainable principles” (White and Whitney 1992: 36). This challenge will only be met through specific measures designed in place by strong urban governments and citizens.

In this paper, I have described the four areas in which cities may gauge their progress toward urban environmental policy that legitimately seeks to free all people in cities, today and tomorrow, to live fulfilling lives. First, cities need democratic institutions, engaged in environmental decision-making processes that are inclusive both in terms of the number and the diversity of people involved. Second, social-humanistic approaches to solutions should receive as

much attention as scientific and technical issues and methods. Cities need the technical and scientific capacity to develop and implement solutions to local problems and the sensitivity to recognize which problems cannot be solved by such means. Third, the priorities of environmental policy must include basic needs and the quality of local, lived environments, and integrate environmentally sustainable ethics and values. Finally, to find new sustainable development patterns, cities need to include the perspectives of non-urban traditions and cultures. We need to use this added perspective to foster non-exploitative relationships within the city, with other cities, with the surrounding region and with ecological systems. Attention to these four areas will help cities find their place as potential and realizable sites of environmentally ethical societies.

Cities everywhere have much learning still to do. Legitimate urban environmental policy needs to consider the who, the how and the why of urban environmental decision making, as well as what life might look like when we get the process right.

Endnotes

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