

The urban challenge: a question of knowledge

Half of the world's population lives in cities. One third of the urban population – one billion people – live in slums. The number of slum dwellers is set to increase to two billion within 30 years. In other words, poverty is urbanising. RAWOO, the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council, recognises cities as engines of economic growth and socio-economic opportunity, but is concerned about the effects of current trends on people, the environment and society at large.

Past experiences show that neither the living conditions in slums nor the level of service delivery can be improved unless the efforts are part of a comprehensive set of complementary international, national and local urban policies. Although this idea is not new, it is yet to be implemented. Since urban development is an inherently conflictive process, certain stakeholders, for instance local elites, project developers and local governments, are reluctant to share information. Research, as an instrument of innovation and learning, has a major role to play both in the required institutional reforms in policy making and service provision, and in the empowerment process of the poor.

Apart from the need for research that informs policy makers, there is a need for research that is an integral part of the urban governance process. Therefore, innovation is needed in the roles of research, the researchers and other stakeholders in the urban governance process. This is necessary to make the process demand driven and effective.

An example

The municipality of the city of Santo André (São Paulo, Brazil) formed a citywide network of many different stakeholders to develop a 'social inclusion map', which includes a set of indicators of social inclusion/exclusion. On the basis of a pilot project covering four slum areas and 16,000 persons (20% of the total slum population of Santo André), a programme of social inclusion was developed. The programme was implemented through a partnership approach involving 14 different local, national and international stakeholders.

It does not suffice that knowledge is equally accessible to all stakeholders: knowledge must be locally produced or adopted, transformed and thereby owned. People working at the grassroots level need to be enabled to master research and to gain access to research outcomes to which local governments and donor policies often refer. They should be enabled to compare locally produced knowledge with knowledge and experiences from elsewhere, and with knowledge about regional and global trends.

RAWOO concludes that:

- A significant effort is required to stimulate new forms of knowledge production and knowledge use, namely for city governance and for the empowerment of the urban poor.

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- Not all national governments are aware of the need to strengthen municipal and community level capacities to do so.
- Support to capacity strengthening efforts should be based on principles of ownership, equity and local capacity enhancement.
- The Netherlands has the potential to make a significant contribution as a result of its long-standing, internationally recognised experience in regional development, whereby urban and rural development are successfully integrated despite the country's high level of urbanisation.

Recommendations

RAWOO realises that the Dutch government is only one of many players in this area. Reflections and policy options must take into account the complementary roles of the different players. An approach that takes local people and local institutions as the starting point for analysis, dialogue and action should be adopted. The Council believes that, in addition to multilateral efforts, bilateral cooperation between countries, cities, people and knowledge institutions will remain of extreme importance in the fight against poverty.

RAWOO's **general recommendations** to the Dutch government and Dutch knowledge institutions are to:

1. Help to develop a comprehensive, future-oriented approach to sustainable urban development and poverty reduction.
2. Help to make research an integral part of urban governance.
3. Facilitate innovative partnerships between stakeholders.
4. Facilitate the strengthening of poverty-focused sustainable institutional reform.
5. Enhance new thinking about the role of the researcher.

Since these recommendations require a long-term effort, RAWOO's **specific short-term recommendations** to the Dutch government are to:

1. Establish a task force within the Dutch government.
2. Facilitate a knowledge-based international dialogue on the urban dimension of poverty alleviation policies.
3. Set up a fund of two million euros per year (for five years) for collaborative research on urban poverty issues, aimed at feeding this dialogue.
4. Facilitate a workshop to see how the urban and regional experience of Dutch knowledge institutions and non-governmental organisations can help to gain more insight into the urban dimensions of development cooperation policy. This should lead to setting the first steps towards new initiatives.