SOCIAL POLICY AND SOME MAJOR URBAN POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Philip O.Sijuwade

School of Urban and Public Affairs

University of Texas

Arlington,Texas.

Abstract

Urban life is a complex and ever changing phenomenon. By the time one understands some of the forces that have been shaping the urban present, the even less well-understood forces that will shape the urban future are already underway. Predictions about the urban future by philosophers, scientists, Planners, and ordinary citizens abound, ranging all the way from optimistic projections of a problem- free brave new urban world to the most pessimistic prophesies of doom for urban civilization. Of course, nothing is absolutely certain about the direction of the urban future. But since current human activity is to a large extent based on anticipation of the future, it is important to look at some of the urban social policies.

A fairly common model for the policy-making process includes the following steps: 1) an accurate description of the existing conditions to be changed: 2) a careful and honest description of the end condition to be achieved:3) a division of the project into successful stages and a description of the conditions to be achieved at each stage:4) practical methods for getting from each stage to the next.

The enormity of one's task in world development is inspiration and conception, not achievement.

KEY WORDS: Social Policies; Planning; Social fragmentation; Urban Policies; Political Power: Wealth Re-distribution.

There are several fundamental issues to address in any serious consideration of future urban social policies.. One very basic issue is whether or not to do long-range planning at all. If so, how much planning is acceptable? For example, are plans to be as complete as early or are they to be simply loosely defined guidelines to be considered when making choices? Most of the urban past was not a result of rational and deliberate planning, but rather the result of many factors occurring spontaneously. The few occasions when either physical designs shaped building programs or social policies actively directed social change in predictable directions are probably the exception rather than the rule. Also, there are those who strongly believe in a laissez

faire system in which the best results are those that are left to the free play of the marketplace. To the extent that planning disrupts these natural forces, it is seen by some as highly undesirable. The advocates of inclusive, strictly defined plans argue that they are necessary to make it possible to impose a pattern or order on circumstances. But urban and social planning might not be flexible enough to incorporate new ideas, or might be too frozen to permit necessary adaptation to changing circumstances.

If there is some disagreement that planning should occur, one major issue is who would do the planning and for what time periods should plans be made? Should be ways to veto plans by dissident groups, and what, if anything, should be done to encourage active participation in the planning process by interest groups and the public at large? It has often been alleged that too often in the past planning has consisted of technical or physical schemes devised by technological elites, implemented by a narrow power structure, and imposed on the powerless masses. But broad citizen participation, on the other hand has not been easy to establish. Numerous experiments in community development projects have demonstrated how difficult it is to obtain participation by a majority of the affected population. To combine political values of citizen participation with the kinds of expertise required to anticipate and plan for complex future environment is a formidable task.

Another important related issue is within what boundaries or political jurisdictions should planning take place? Should planning be done at the national, state, regional or strictly local levels? One of the main difficulties is the lack of fit between the ecological, political, and social communities that make up urban society, which has important consequences for the decision-making structure of the urban community, particularly for metropolitan regions. It means that no local government decisions applying to all parts of the metropolitan area are possible because of social and political fragmentation into many autonomous,

Competing units. Yet many of the social problems of urban areas can only be controlled by an area wide political system, which has the support of the many diverse groups of people scattered throughout the area.

If government and social fragmentation has not actually caused such problems as traffic congestion, pollution, and urban plight, it has nevertheless made solving these kinds of problems much more difficult. Perhaps, at least in part, this helps to explain the increasing involvement of the federal government in the many problems of metropolitan areas. But national urban planning remains highly controversial and is strongly resisted by those who argue for stronger local self-sufficiency and social control. Because of its history and tradition of states' rights and local autonomous, the United States has had more difficulty in resolving this issue than most of the of the other technologically advanced countries of the world.

Conditions Established To Deal These Issues.

If conditions are established to deal with these issues, the next series of issues revolves around values and priorities. For example, by what criteria will alternative policies be established/ What are the most important and least important goals for urban development? Since values will determine the priorities established for future policies, it is essential to make clear what these values are and to assess how widely they are shared. For example, to what extent is there consensus that existing gaps between the rich and the poor be reduced or eliminated, and to what extent should social policy insure that a uniform quality of life be made available to all, regardless of their ability to pay?

Gans (1973), for instance, argues for a detailed policy for redistributing wealth and political power, to produce not only equality of opportunity, but also what might be termed equality in the areas of income, political power, education, and the social worth of jobs. To Gans' goals of equity, one could easily ad proposals to provide greater economic parity between cities and suburbs. If, for example, the mix of low-, and middle-, and high-income groups were the same for both city and suburbs, regardless on individual differences in the distribution of wealth, individuals and families would have greater freedom to choose between city and suburban living. Likewise if cities and suburbs contained similar mixes of socioeconomic groupings, some of the current strains and conflicts between cities and suburbs conceivably could be minimized. With greater equity, Gans(1973), more generally argues, internal political antagonisms would decline because "conflicts best be compromised fairly if the society is more egalitarian, if differences of self-interest that result from sharp inequality of income and power can be reduced."

But there are a number of reasons why egalitarian goals are extremely difficult to achieve . First, the vested interests that profit from the status quo are highly likely to resist any policies that threaten their present advantages. Moreover, the individualistic ethic and the striving for individual economic advancement in competition with others are deeply ingrained in the value system. More generally, any conscious effort to produce major changes in the institutional structure of the society, including changes in the current system for distributing economic rewards, must contend with institutional inertia as well as consciously organized opposition. For all these reasons, the possibility of a smooth transition to a system of greater equality, no matter how desirable, is highly unlikely. But these are still issues that must be confronted before future urban policy can be established.

Finally, how can urban policies be part of a comprehensive plan, and yet be so constituted that they may be changed with relative speed ease when it is prudent to make these changes? In summary, how can there be the desirable combinations of order and flexibility short-range strategies; freedom and social control; elaborately designed futures and open-ended tomorrows?

These largely unanswered questions illustrate just a few of the fundamental difficulties faced by policy makers and social planners as a prelude to the pursuit of any given policy or particular issue. The obvious difficulty of the task, however, does not mean that it is impossible. Caplow (2005) for example, notes that the improvement of society is not a forlon hope—because many societies have deliberately improved before; nor is it an apocalyptic triumph to be accomplished once and for all—human nature being what it is. But it is not a matter out of our control since modernization can proceed under a variety of institutional arrangements, and seems to be compatible with both despotism and freedom.

He accompanies this optimistic appraisal of prospects for controlling the urban future with a fairly common model for the policy-making process, which includes the following steps: 1) an accurate description of the existing condition to be changed; 2) a careful and honest description of the end condition to be achieved; 3) a division of the project into successful stages and a description of the condition to be achieved at each stage; 4) practical methods for getting from each stage to the next;5) estimates of the time, personnel., material resources, and information required to get from each stage to the next; 6) procedures for measuring goal attainment at each stage; and 7) procedures for detecting unanticipated results at each stage.

The problem of implementing alternative future policies, according to Schneider (2008), is not as difficult as other parts of future development. Instead, "….the enormity of our task in world development is inspiration, and conception, not achievement.

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