

Creating an Urban Movement for Sustainable Living

By Shobhakar Dhakal

The breakneck pace of urbanization in Asia is putting increasing strains on available resources, pushing sustainability to the top of the list of priorities for city governments. Environmental expert Shobhakar Dhakal details the challenges of creating sustainable cities, a process he says will require determined policymakers.

ASIA'S HEADLONG DRIVE toward urbanization is unprecedented and has resulted in the region hosting almost half of the world's urban population — a figure that is rising inexorably and shows no sign of slowing. This fact makes the challenge of creating sustainable Asian cities of paramount importance.

Unfortunately, urban growth is outpacing efforts to create sustainable urban spaces. Traditional farm life is losing its appeal to the lure of the city, rural employment opportunities are shrinking and widening income-gaps between rural and urban areas contribute to the virtually uncontrolled growth of cities in nearly every Asian country.

Perhaps more than other regions, Asian cities tend to grow denser faster as the pace of change accelerates in places like China and India, where lifestyles seem to be changing overnight as incomes grow. This dizzying transformation of traditional cultures often combines with the lack of adequate infrastructure and poor management to blur our ideal image of a sustainable city. Academic experts often see urban growth as an opportunity for efficiency — which Asian cities possess — but this possibility can be shattered when the negative side effects of population density become unmanageable.

It's not that there is a shortage of lessons from past experience. Yet, there is so far little political will to pause from the pursuit of economic opportunity at a time when cities are still seen primarily as income-generating powerhouses. The result is that in the process of getting rich, we also create pollution, chaos and growing

numbers of the urban poor, compromise safety and security and threaten many aspects of sustainable urban life.

The debate in Asia over what constitutes a sustainable city is actually rather paltry. Development professionals often revert back to the key mantra of sustainable development coined at the 1987 conference of the World Commission on Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission. In the commission report, “Our Common Future,” the goal became “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In reality, as popular as sustainable development has become as a slogan, scholars often display greater affection for the romantic jargon of the concept than the real life work of achieving sustainable development.

The concept of a sustainable city draws inspiration from lofty concepts but coping with the reality is another matter. The task is to find ways to ensure social equity, reduce environmental degradation and boost economic well-being — these are the pillars of sustainable cities, with quality of life the ultimate goal. Sustainable cities need to consider current and future needs while trying to guarantee that the actions taken by policymakers do not compromise the lives of others and the fate of the earth.

In Asian cities, the crux of the problem is the rapidly widening gap between rich and poor. This may be more pronounced in sprawling mega-cities like Mumbai and Jakarta, but it is rapidly worsening in places like Ho Chi Minh City, Beijing and Shanghai. Fortunately, safety and security in most Asian cities has not reached the desperate levels seen in many Latin American and African cities but the danger signs are there and must be addressed.

From an environmental viewpoint, traffic congestion, air pollution linked to non-industrial sources, burgeoning solid waste management challenges, the shrinking of urban green spaces and the rising demand for better sewerage systems are all formidable challenges. Rising automobile dependency, greater energy use, and

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urban warming contribute to related problems such as carbon dioxide emissions and the high ozone concentration in cities. These remain unsolved issues even in Seoul, Tokyo and other well-developed Asian cities. In developing cities these issues arise in the process of attempting to meet basic human needs, while in developed cities — as in the West — they are the result of over-consumption and too-much infrastructure. One can always argue about what constitutes over-consumption, but the bottom line is that we need to do more to preserve the environment or we risk our very survival.

AVOIDING THE WRONG PATH

Josef Tainter’s seminal 1990 book, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, analyzes a number of ancient civilizations, many of which were essentially urban, and explores the complex intersections of war, resource depletion, disaster and political disintegration that led to their fall. The lessons are accelerated for our modern cities. Historically, cities largely depended on the rural hinterland for resources; when that resource-base is depleted, society is in trouble.

Modern cities rely on multiple layers of trade and interaction that make the immediate hinterland less crucial in achieving sustainability. Today's massive cities influence the global resource-base and their sheer size affects the global environment as rising incomes and wealthier lifestyles put added demand on water and energy use, intensify pollution and add to greenhouse gas emissions. Analyses show that urban areas contribute three-fourths of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. Remember again, Asia's has half the world's urban population, a figure that is expected to rise significantly in the future. In cities like Beijing and Shanghai, energy use and per capita carbon emissions have doubled and quadrupled in the last two decades. Without contradicting the argument that Asian cities need to grow economically to have a better quality of life, we also need to focus on quality of growth to make sure that we do not follow the same path of development that industrialized countries followed and that can no longer be sustained by the planet.

There *are* opportunities. Cities in Asia are still at an early stage of development; their physical infrastructure is not optimized in terms of energy and material uses. In this era of rising oil prices, there are financial incentives for renewable energy. As we grow we need to create integrated urban systems that reduce local environmental degradation and global environmental burdens. This can be done, but if we do not act at this relatively early stage of development, the cost to society will only increase in the future.

The United Nations estimates that the world's urban population will further increase by 3.2 billion people by 2050 from now; close to 60 percent of this increase, or 1.9 billion people, will be in Asia. While some observers may naively point to the historical evolution of older cities in currently industrialized countries that followed the path of "development first and clean up later," that paradigm may not be applicable to the modern era. Even in the past, the "development first" model inevitably imposed suffering on earlier generations. In today's rapidly developing Asian cities, we are facing a multitude of problems

simultaneously — from income generation to population pressures to pollution — that many mature cities in developed countries confronted in stages over many decades or even centuries.

GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL WILL

Our quest for sustainable development in Asia demands that policy priorities be set:

- Economies have to grow but quality of life must move toward center stage;
- Social harmony must be preserved;
- Over-consumption has to be avoided;
- Integrated urban systems must be developed with less dependence on the automobile, more energy conservation and lower energy use and carbon emissions.

These are enormous challenges for governments that are defined by complex webs of institutions, with physical infrastructures that in most cases trail far behind the speed of population and economic growth. As a result, our planning and policy response to burgeoning urban problems have been largely reactive until now.

In reality, Asian cities have earned a failing grade in urban planning. This is a failure of governance that can only be redressed by rethinking the way urban planning has been approached. Creating a sustainable city is not an agenda for a four-year mayoral term. It is a process and a commitment that requires all stakeholders to fuse awareness, knowledge, vision and leadership into a new way of formulating policy and action. There is sometimes a belief that action towards sustainable development requires great financial resources. This is only partially true; a great deal can be achieved with limited resources as long as there is a firm commitment to good management.

STREAMLINING DECISIONS

Political and administrative decentralization can help to create sustainable cities because local problems can be more easily understood and solved by local people rather than a distant and complex bureaucratic machine. In recent decades, Asia has seen a rising trend toward empowering local bodies, partly stemming

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from the fact that national governments are frequently over-stretched, resource-poor and lacking in both efficiency and effectiveness. In many countries in newly emerging East Asia and less developed South Asia, urban authorities have considerable power to tackle local problems. However, decentralization is not a panacea and it does little good to transfer responsibilities to local officials without giving them the technical, financial and human resources to meet the challenges they face.

On the financial side, national governments must implement tax reforms that give cities greater fiscal autonomy and flexibility as a precondition for shifting governance burdens to metropolitan areas. And while urban authorities should play a major role in governance, policy mechanisms have to be coordinated between urban, provincial and national bodies. Coordination by all stakeholders — including non-governmental organizations — is essential.

I recently asked an expert from New York City, what percentage of carbon dioxide emissions could actually be affected by policies implemented at the local level? The answer was perhaps 20 percent. Irrespective of the accuracy of this number, it highlights the fact that cities are governed in a complex fashion and the coordination at all levels is vital if results are to be achieved.

In the current drive toward market-based solutions and privatization in some western countries, government is sometimes largely a facilitator, establishing the rules of the game but having a limited role on the field. However, in developing Asian cities, government generally remains a major player, since few public and municipal services are outsourced to the private sector. This fact means the role of government remains crucial in our region.

In addition, economists might argue that we have yet to properly value the ecosystems that govern the quality of life in our cities. Perhaps the proper valuation of environmental factors in a market-based system would fix many urban sustainability problems. However, we should not forget that rather than creating sustain-

able cities within given market conditions, we should strive to create a sound market system within the concept of sustainable urban development. This means that the market itself needs to be regulated because developing Asian countries are far from the ideal of a perfect market. The issue of establishing the right price for basic human services such as water and sanitation is crucial. However, economic concerns should be treated as one factor among many that can help us shape sustainable urban development.

SHOW US THE WAY

In Asian cities, the financial crunch for those trying to manage unwieldy metropolitan areas is evident. Given the lack of financial resources and the enormous need for infrastructure, there are a number of mechanisms that could be mobilized. One economic tool for the mitigation of both traffic jams and air pollution is to use congestion pricing and vehicle licensing, a system used by Singapore successfully since the 1970s, which has since been adopted by the City of London. Shanghai also uses a Singapore-style vehicle licensing system to limit crowding. While road pricing has been used in many cities on expressways, congestion pricing could be a way to alleviate automobile dependency and also to generate revenues to pay for the development of public transport infrastructure.

Cities such as Manila, Jakarta and Bangkok have long avoided congestion pricing and vehicle licensing despite chaotic traffic problems, on the grounds of political feasibility. However, available studies show that the cost of congestion is enormous; one estimate shows Bangkok loses 6 percent of its economic product due to traffic congestion. Asia can learn from the growing number of cities outside Asia, especially in Europe, that are experimenting with congestion pricing.

But would a city official jeopardize some political support for the cause of easing traffic pressures and pollution? Would a Chinese or Indian mayor agree not to compromise on environmental standards despite intense competition for foreign investment? If the right momentum can be created for sustainable values, these

decisions can be made. Similarly, pricing can be used as an incentive on solid waste management, water and other sectors and may be able to help shift public attitudes towards conservation and recycling.

In addition, public campaigns — such as charging a nominal fee for plastic bags in supermarkets as has been done in South Korea — can generate both awareness and revenue for sustainable development. Financial resources can also be generated through Public-Private-Partnership programs at a community level and in large investment areas. To be successful, these efforts boil down to effective governance and committed regulatory systems that enhance a variety of sustainable urban strategies.

Generating the administrative and political will to address sustainability issues also requires public pressure from citizens who are aware of what is at stake. The role of media and civil society is thus paramount. The media have the ability to help create an environmentally friendly urban culture. Informed urban dwellers create positive pressure for entrenched establishments to act.

Creating sustainable cities is a lengthy process. Each city in Asia is obviously unique in its social, economic, political, and geographical setting. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. But there are many simple steps that can be taken to help our cities breathe cleaner air and enhance the quality of life that is at the heart of the movement for sustainable policies. In the simplest terms, we have to reconcile economic growth with the equally important need to care for the environment we create in our cities. We need to raise awareness, give people better choices and create political will. It will require champions, wisdom and flexible partnerships between the people, business leaders and government. As we are often told, this is the Asian century and there should be no doubt that we can succeed.

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