



# Rethinking urban development in Latin America: A review of changing paradigms and policies



Paul van Lindert

Utrecht University Department of Human Geography and Planning, Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

Since the early days of the self-help construction school that gave a definite switch to the urban housing debate in Latin America, the urban development discourse has shown some marked variations. Major multilateral agencies – especially the World Bank, UNCHS (UN-Habitat) and UNDP – played a key role in the evolution of this discourse. These institutions have also dominated the normative agendas that have brought about some definite shifts in urban policies and planning practices. Allowing for the differences between these international agencies' discourses, consensus was reached on the desired enabling roles of national and local governments. This article systematizes the switches in paradigms, central concepts, and planning approaches as witnessed by experience in the cities of Latin America over the past four decades.

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## 1. Introduction

Four decades ago, in the year 1976, the first UN Habitat Conference was held in Vancouver. In the next year, as a follow-up of 'Habitat-1', the *United Nations Centre for Human Settlements* (UNCHS-Habitat) was founded in Nairobi. It is no exaggeration to state that these two events have been very important milestones in the gradual shift from a principally rural-focused development model towards a paradigm that allows for more attention to the urban question in development. Before the 1970s, both national and international institutions had always primarily targeted their development strategies at rural development. For a long time it had been held that by creating better work and living conditions in the rural areas, the peasant households would stay where they were, and stop migrating to the ever-growing cities. The logic of this approach was as simple as it was misleading. The migration to the cities was seen as the most important cause of urban poverty, and thus it was held that the allocation of more resources to the rural areas would strike at the root of the structural poverty question. However, in reality it was proved that massive investments in agriculture and other rural-based sectors did not diminish the flow of migrants from the countryside.

In addition, it became more and more obvious that the inflow of migrants into the cities was no longer the prime cause of the

urbanisation process in developing countries. Certainly, in many intermediate cities and small towns it is still the case that the demographic increase is primarily caused by an influx of migrants who arrive from the surrounding rural areas. In the large metropolises, however, the natural increase of the population has had a larger impact on the population growth than the net effect of migration. By now it is generally recognized that the growth of urban poverty in these metropolises and primate cities, where the largest share of the national urban population lives, has become a primarily endogenously driven process.

One of the key forces behind the gradual reconsideration of the urban problems in developing countries was the World Bank. In 1972, the World Bank formulated its first urban programme. In the following years, its role was important because it rejected the traditional notions of blueprint planning in the developing countries and their use of western models of social housing. The World Bank quickly became the most authoritative international development institution that formulated urban development policies, and as such it has had an undeniable impact on the ongoing international debate on urban development (Zanetta, 2001, p. 514). Indeed, with their urban lending programmes, the World Bank, and especially the various regional development banks that jointly form the World Bank Group, set the scene for the urban planning and management approaches of the many developing nations that contracted such loans.

The focus of this paper is on the recent history of international development thinking with respect to urban development and

E-mail address: [p.h.c.m.vanlindert@uu.nl](mailto:p.h.c.m.vanlindert@uu.nl).

urban policies in Latin America. This history only spans about four decades, but yet there are a number of interesting variations over this period that go hand in hand with changes in the overall development paradigm. Important landmarks on the historical map of the urban development debate are some major UN conferences that aimed at devising new strategies to solve the increasingly complex problems in this urbanizing world. In addition to the first Habitat Conference (1976), two major conferences in the decade of the 1990s have been the most important for the agenda setting of the urban question: the Earth Summit (1992) and the City Summit (1996). A distinction will be made between the various decades, each of which is characterized by its own core

concepts, strategic foci, and actual urban policies and practices (Box 1).

## 2. Self-help housing and settlement upgrading

The first urban programme of the World Bank originated from the growing awareness that the governments in developing countries, by following the traditional Western models of social housing in combination with self-developed policies for squatter settlement removal, were utterly incapable to offer adequate housing solutions for the urban masses. Building upon the fresh insights of self-help housing pioneers like Charles Abrams (1966), William Mangin

### Box 1

The changing views on urban development and policies.

Agenda Setting	Concepts	Strategic Focus	Policies & Practices
1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modernization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physico-spatial planning and public sector social housing</li> <li>• Spatial engineering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blueprint planning</li> <li>• Housing supply for the middle classes</li> <li>• Eviction of squatters</li> </ul>
1970s 1976 <i>Habitat -1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-help housing school</li> <li>• <i>'Housing as a verb'</i></li> <li>• Affordability</li> <li>• Cost Recovery</li> <li>• Replicability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing priorities</li> <li>• Housing needs</li> <li>• Support for self-help initiatives</li> <li>• Security of land tenure</li> <li>• Recognition of the informal sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sites and services</li> <li>• Settlement upgrading</li> <li>• Subsidies for land, housing, transport</li> <li>• Tolerance of squatter settlements</li> </ul>
1985			
1986	<b>Urban Management Programme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening of markets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urban management</li> </ul>
1990	<b>Global Shelter Strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening of financial sector</li> <li>• Private sector construction</li> <li>• Neighbourhood-based enterprises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity building</li> <li>• Institutional strengthening</li> <li>• National Housing Banks</li> </ul>
1991	<b>The Urban Agendas for the 1990s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-based action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public-private partnerships</li> <li>• Participation of civil society</li> </ul>
1992 <i>Unced -1</i> <i>(Earth Summit)</i> 1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State withdrawal</li> <li>• State as 'enabler' – not 'provider'</li> </ul>		
	<b>Local Agenda 21</b>		
1996 <i>Habitat -2</i> <i>(City Summit)</i>	<b>Habitat Agenda</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic planning frameworks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urban governance</li> </ul>
<i>Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing rights</li> <li>• Decentralisation</li> <li>• Good local governance</li> <li>• Sustainable urban development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poverty reduction</li> <li>- Urban productivity</li> <li>- Environmental management</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nation-wide and city-wide strategies instead of project- and neighbourhood focused interventions</li> <li>• Collaboration between local governments and with central government</li> <li>• Institutionalised multi-stakeholder, multi-sector consultation mechanisms</li> <li>• Best practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metropolitan municipal cooperation</li> <li>• Integrated development planning</li> <li>• Strategic planning</li> <li>• Capacity strengthening</li> <li>• Participatory planning</li> <li>• Partnerships and networks</li> <li>• Microfinance</li> </ul>
2000 <i>Millennium Summit</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)</li> <li>• <i>'Cities without Slums'</i></li> </ul>	<i>"Slumfree Cities"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>'Scaling up of slum upgrading'</i></li> <li>• <i>'Right to the City'</i></li> <li>• <i>Evictions &amp; resettlement</i></li> </ul>
2001 <i>City Summit+5</i>	Urban Development and Local Government Strategy		
2002-2014 <i>World Urban Fora</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liveability</li> <li>• Good governance and management</li> <li>• Competitiveness</li> <li>• Bankability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environment, Safety, Security, Health</li> <li>• Integrity of local government</li> <li>• Efficient factor markets (land, capital, labour)</li> <li>• Municipal finance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-subsidised service provision</li> <li>• Performance based urban management</li> <li>• Improvement of productive environment</li> <li>• Competent and transparent management of municipal budgets</li> <li>• Participatory budgeting</li> </ul>

Sources: Pugh (1994); UNCHS (1997); Smets (1999); World Bank (2000); Zanetta (2001); Harris & Giles (2003); Jenkins, Smith & Wang (2007); Huchzermeyer, (2011).

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