

## Urban environment, spatial fragmentation and social segregation in Latin America: Where does innovation lie?

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### Abstract

To “review the urban question” in terms of sustainable development, the premise is formulated that improving infrastructures, equipment and services to preserve the natural and built urban environment is costly and generates expenses of all kinds—at economic and social levels. Without the introduction of equalisation mechanisms, these expenses will increase inequalities between different parts of the urban population.

As confirmed by 2 Latin American case studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and La Paz Bolivia, the quality of urban environment depends directly on improving living conditions for the resident population. The aim is to assist the poor in developing a rubbish disposal service for the families living in the informal settlements of La Paz, or to extend water supply to the poorer areas on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The collective benefits of these “innovations” are self-evident. However, understanding the environmental issues involved, and evaluating the social impact of these innovations, means examining what motivates their implementation.

The first difficulty was in finding financial and economic information on the global cost of the new technologies, due to the lack of managerial culture and the discretionary attitude of private enterprises and public administration.

A second observation is that the social dimension of the environmental upgrading process in Latin America cities has been neglected by the main urban decision-makers. In all the contexts, the evolution of the projects’ implementation clearly demonstrates that social issues cannot be dissociated from political

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ones. Although the players themselves often find it difficult to estimate economic costs, these are nonetheless real and represent burdens that should be distributed equitably among the beneficiaries of services; but which are, in practice, often viewed in terms of profit. This leads to conflicts between different population groups, the political authorities and private intermediaries.

Rather than viewing technological action as an unique “source” of innovation, we must consider its global dimension via the social practices it generates. On the other hand, we should reposition every specific event in its immediate environment and see how it reflects contemporary macro-social processes, in a world of “globalisation”.

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## **Sustainable development for the urban environment**

Societies have long been based on a mythological and religious order, and only later on a political and technical one. Over the past 20 years, contemporary societies have found a new order to strive for: *sustainable development*. This concept, which today enjoys great popularity in scientific, political and administrative circles, often seems more like a magic incantation than an analytic tool. This prompted the present research, which investigates the concept in terms of the urban environment, which authors have been studying for quite sometime.

Grounding investigations in urban reality, an attempt is made to decipher the “meaning” of sustainable development, as to both its theoretical content and the methodological options it proposes to renew. Since this is a vast objective for the research team’s relatively modest means, the focus is directed at one specific aspect of urban change, which plays a vital role worldwide—the environment. The paper examines the interaction between environmental innovations implemented at the technological and process levels, their economic consequences (what is the cost of these interventions and how are expenses covered?), and their social impact (what are the repercussions of these investments on consumers, users, residents, citizens or customers—whatever name they may go by?).

The urbanisation of the so-called “developing countries” leads to two apparently contradictory trends. On the one hand, there is the introduction of ever more sophisticated technical and institutional environmental protection mechanisms. On the other hand, it is obvious that environmental protection operates in parallel with the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.<sup>1</sup> These observations are valid at the national level, between rich and poor countries, and within each society and its social stratas. Caught up in the movement of ever more globalised economic exchange and technical progress, the persons concerned, their leaders, cultures, the countries and regions of the world, find it impossible to elude this “single path”, a path considered right and beneficial by its proponents, inequitable and destructive by its opponents (Baricco, 2002; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Klein, 2001). As stated by Leff (2001), without a new theory to guide

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<sup>1</sup>The newest figures from the international organisations, including the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation, show that disparities have grown strongly over the past decades, in spite of the steady rise of economic development indicators (Stern et al, 2002; Nordström, 1999)

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