THE QUALITY OF URBAN LIFE:
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES *

Chairman, Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (1966-68)

Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a rapid increase in the urbanization process especially in some of the developing countries. Urban centres continue to attract more people, notwithstanding deteriorating environmental conditions. Various attempts have been made to detract the population from major urban centres, such as construction of new satellite towns, disincentives for industries and extensive rural development. People are attracted to major urban centres for better and more varied job opportunities, richer cultural facilities, more stimulating intellectual activities, better entertainment amenities and a more sophisticated life-style. In developing countries, millions have been attracted to major urban centres for better job opportunities as well as better educational and health facilities, though job prospects may be illusionary in many instances.

Urban centres will continuously set the pace in adopting higher level of technology, acting as catalyst for the introduction of new ideas and increasing the pace of economic development. If major urban centres appear to be an economic burden with expensive infrastructure and higher standard of living, the population in these centres have also achieved a higher level of productivity. Statistical balance sheets should show positive economic contribution by most major urban centres. Even if this is not the case in some of these centres, the contributions toward the process of change are invaluable and cannot be easily measured. 1

To assess the quality of life in urban centres, it will be necessary to identify and evaluate some of the major components which constitute the ingredients of urban living. This exercise has been made particularly difficult by ideological differences between the communist countries and others, and the different stages of economic development of countries. As the communist countries present a fundamentally different social, economic and political framework, different criteria of assessment will be needed. For the purpose of this exercise, the


*A revised version of a paper read at the 2nd South Pacific Seminar on "Living in Town" on 15th July 1971 held in Suva, Fiji.
Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science Volume 1 Number 1
assessment will be confined to the non-communist countries. As the basic issues affecting urban centres differ between developed countries and developing countries, the quality of urban life in urban centres of these countries will be fundamentally different. However, there are many overlapping values especially in countries now going through rapid economic development. These countries will soon obtain other characteristics similar to developed countries. There are also other exceptions, such as the small states of Singapore, Kuwait and Hong Kong.

Crisis Theories

With industrialisation, mechanisation and automation, the capacity to consume has vastly increased particularly in developed countries. The effectiveness of utilising mass media to generate the escalating appetite for consumption has resulted in the need for endless search and exploration to obtain new sources of raw material supplies. The growth of Gross National Product has now become a universal obsession. It is assumed that major world problems can be substantially resolved over a period of time with continuous economic growth and increase in productive capacity.

In 1970, the total world population was 3,584 million - 1,082 million in developed countries and 2,502 million in developing countries. The total agglomerated population (i.e. localities of 20,000 inhabitants and over) was 1010 million - 546 million in developed countries, and 464 million in developing countries. In other words, 50% of the people in developed countries are now living in agglomerated centres and 19% of the population in developing countries are living in agglomerated localities. In projecting for the year 2000, the total world population will be 6112 million - 1441 million in developed countries and 4,671 million in developing countries. The corresponding figure for the total agglomerated population is 2,337 million - 901 million for developed countries and 1,436 million for developing countries. In other words, by the year 2000, 63% of the people in developed countries and 31% of the people in developing countries will be living in agglomerated localities. Demographic forecasts will always need to be qualified, as there are many unknown factors. However, the magnitude and speed of the urbanisation process in developing countries will be even greater.

Recently, there have been many doomsday predictions. Man