

Episode 1 - Sustainable Cities

Hello, I am Barry Clarke. This is Radio Australia and welcome to the opening program in our series 'Sustainable Cities - Challenges for the Asia Pacific'. As cities continue to grow what can we learn from one another to make them more liveable?

From Beijing to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur to Karachi and Melbourne to Mumbai, cities face similar threats, challenges and opportunities. The issues range from urban sprawl to waste management, pollution to poverty, to strategies that deal with transport and limited resources like water.

ALLEN WILLIAMS: In the mid 60s, about one person in five in Asia lived in the city. By the late 90s that had risen to one person in three, and we are forecasting that by 2020, 50 per cent of all Asians will live in a city or an urban area.

CLARKE: Allen Williams is Chief Urban Strategist at the Asian Development Bank.

ALLEN WILLIAMS: The reason that cities are so important is because they really are the economic engines, the economic powerhouses of most country economies. Even countries that have a large agricultural sector still really need the type of activities that go on in cities to have vibrant growing economies. So all of these things make cities really economic powerhouses.

CLARKE: There are some 25 economic powerhouses around the world that are classed as mega cities - broadly defined as a continuous urban area with a population of at least 10 million. Tokyo, with around 26 million inhabitants, is the world's largest and is expected to remain so. But as Allen Williams points out, almost half the world's mega cities are in the Asian region.

ALLEN WILLIAMS: Twelve of those cities are in Asia and are in Asian developing countries. So we have places like Bombay, Dhaka, Karachi, Calcutta, Jakarta, Delhi, metro Manila, Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Seoul and Hyderabad. So you can see that all of those are in developing countries and many of them are on the Indian subcontinent and several are in China, Peoples Republic of China.

APRODICIO LAQUIAN: One of the challenges and the most important one, really, is urban sprawl. Many of these mega cities, so-called, of 10 million population and above are really mega urban regions, and you cannot talk anymore about Beijing. You have to talk of Beijing and Tianjin together. So instead of a city of 12 million, you are talking of a region of 56 million.

CLARKE: Aprodicio Laquian is Emeritus Professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

APRODICIO LAQUIAN: And one of the positive developments that I am seeing is that many of these mega cities are developing other nodes around the mega city, so that there are concentrations of people in these other settlements and they are able to live autonomously in these settlements. So there is less traffic and there is less commuting between the central city and these urban nodes. And so it is a very positive development.

CLARKE: Professor Laquian points to the north east of China as a good example of an attempt at containing urban sprawl.

APRODICIO LAQUIAN: For example, you know, Tianjin is about 85 kilometres away from Beijing, and these are the two connected cities in the northeast of China. Now, the Chinese planners decided that the commuting between the two areas can be shortened by creating a city between them, so they created an instant city called Langfang, which is designed to be autonomous, to have

its own job places, housing, entertainment and so on. So, in the past 20 years, they have a city there of more than two million. So with these nodes of development far enough from the city to act autonomously then you have less commuting between the city and the suburbs.

It is similar to what you call in Melbourne ‘activity centres’, we call them in Canada ‘regional town centres’, where the key is to develop these self-contained areas that have jobs, housing, entertainment, schools, hospitals etc. And that is the current trend all over Asia, and all over the world actually, and this is what is making all of these mega cities more sustainable and more liveable.

The biggest mistake really is the design and planning of these so-called nodes of development too close to the city. And that has happened in New Delhi, it has happened in Calcutta and in Mumbai, or Bombay, where you locate these nodes of development too close to the city. Eventually the urban sprawl just takes over and swallows up, and you have got instead a macro urban area rather than one with several nodes of development. So, that is one big mistake.

CLARKE: Urban sprawl began in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, as many Asian countries embarked on a process of industrialisation. And industrialisation combined with increasing mechanisation in the rural sector, saw large numbers of people migrate from rural areas to cities. With few possessions and very little money, many were forced to become squatters. These migrant poor presented city planners with a new set of challenges. Ken Fernandes, co-ordinates the Asia Pacific program of the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions.

KEN FERNANDES: With the sudden explosion large numbers of people coming in, they were just not able to manage and deal with the problems that started developing. The second thing was also that the institutions... was that many of the bureaucrats were still stuck into a particular type of thinking: that squatters, poor people, were no good, they should go back. They still kind of believed that squatters were not contributing anything to the city.

That is contrary to a lot of the studies that were done later on to show that the city engine and the power of the engine was these very poor people, you know. They provided labour; they provided a whole range of services that made the city really affordable. So, not understanding these issues, many of the bureaucrats could not deal with the problems of the squatters and slum dwellers during the 60s and 70s. And with the result that the cities just kept on growing and growing and growing.

ALLEN WILLIAMS: It is almost a paradox, that if we look at large cities we see all of the modern development, the skyscrapers, the shopping malls and extreme wealth, but also within that significant pockets of poverty. In some cities there can be... up to 50 per cent of the population actually would be classed as being poor. But the fact is that people, once they have come to the city, that there is very little sign that anybody ever returns to the rural areas. Most people make conscious decisions and very rational decisions to come to the city and when they are there they feel that their best opportunity is in the city.

CLARKE: Allen Williams.

SOMSOOK BOONYABANCHA: I work with the urban poor for more than 25 years, almost 30 years now.

CLARKE: Somsook Boonyabancha from Thailand is founder and director of the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, a coalition of professional and civic groups concerned with issues relating to the urban poor.

One of the reasons people live in squatter and slum settlements is their inability to gain security of title to land in the cities.

SOMSOOK BOONYABANCHA: People who live in the low-income communities say for 20, 30, 40 years, you do not have sufficient security. And when the landlord wants the land, they can evict the people who live there for so long, using the legal means or whatever. So, insecurity of land tenure becomes one very serious problem for the slum dweller. And this would show to everybody when you go to a city you see a group of houses not developed properly, very dilapidated and so on. This is due to the fact that the people do not have security, so they do not want to invest because you may be evicted any day. So, if you invest you may lose your investment and so on. So this is the general problem. Land, infrastructure, security is the common factor emerging in many of the slum communities in the region in several countries.

CLARKE: As we will hear in a later program in the series, Thailand through its 'Baan Mankong' or 'Secure Housing' project is addressing some of these issues.

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JONATHON HARLEY: "The damp New Delhi night is grey and dense, the thick wintery haze makes it impossible to see beyond the bonnet. The driver feels his way through this soup packed with blurring trucks, farting auto-rickshaws and doddering cows. When a cyclist spins out of a side street into our path he swerves unfazed and barely seems to notice the towering truck almost scraping my side."

CLARKE: Jonathon Harley, reading from his book, 'Lost in Transmission' recounting his arrival in the Indian capital in December 1998.

JONATHON HARLEY: When you are talking about a city growing by something like 1,000 people a week or so, just from migration from rural areas, they have got to go somewhere. I mean, a lot of them will be cousins or brothers or sisters who have grown up and they have come to live with their relatives, so it will be another person in the room. And just near this very comfortable suburb where we lived you just had to walk across the major road, which was called the ring road, to see this very dense slum. I mean this was maybe 100 metres from our house where there would have been in each little hut. It was almost a rural setting actually, it was bizarre. You would have cows and chickens and all that sort of thing and maybe six, seven, eight, nine people to a room. That is where the people are going. There is no more infrastructure for them, there might still only be one tap for that whole community of four or five hundred people. It is an extremely hard existence for a few more rupees every day, but that is a lot for a lot of people.

CLARKE: Jonathon Harley.

CLARKE: Somsook Boonyabancha is on the committee set up by the UN [United Nations], which has a goal to facilitate the upgrading of slums for 100 million people by the year 2020. But for this to be achieved, she believes we need a new model to replace the old top down approach to development issues.

SOMSOOK BOONYABANCHA: If we think of the new millennium, it means this is a millennium of people compared to the past millennium. I would say, past millennium is the millennium in which the institution or the system is the one who brings change for the people, which has been regarded as recipient of different sorts.

Here, because of the media, because of inevitable democracy and so on, we have to look at people as key actors in the new process of change. If we understand it very well it means every urban poor person could be an actor in itself, and how it links together into a system in which people come together and build their communities. And they are the ones who start the process, saving, getting information, planning and discussing among themselves what will be the solution they like, what could be a new secure and improved and better environment, better jobs, better welfare system, better consolidated kind of social system in the community, and so on.

How this process would be possible by people right? So let people be the driving force, think for themselves and we provide the tools, which is flexible enough for the people to start the development by themselves, together with the partners in the local area or in the city.

CLARKE: In Pakistan, another of the region's mega cities, Hyderabad, has its share of rural migrants. But an innovative way of dealing with squatters has seen a slum area of the city turned into a decent housing settlement. The idea was proposed by Tasneem Siddiqui, a Pakistani public servant.

KEN FERNANDES: A very innovative government servant who is truly a government servant, that he sat down with the people, tried to understand what were their needs, and worked out a very good process where he says ok, we give you land and if you are really serious about it you can then squat on it. So he targeted the poorest of the poor in the city, and if they were very serious they had to wait on that land for ten days. So only the very desperate who had no other options would stay on that land. So it would weed out all the ones who were speculative.

And poor people develop incrementally. So he used the psychology of the poor people that they develop incrementally. But if they were given that security of tenure, that they would not be evicted, then that would be the stimulus for growth and for development. And that proved right. And over a period of time, with the correct amount of support, people actually converted that settlement from literally thatched huts to now concrete houses and a good living area.

CLARKE: Tasneem Siddiqui also works in the Sind province of Pakistan where he is making it easier for people to negotiate the bureaucracy.

KEN FERNANDES: First of all he has reduced the time period of people acquiring a lease. He has reduced the number of procedures from 25 to just three or four. Instead of people coming to the office, he has taken his office to the people. And basically, it is all about giving security of tenure to people.

And he has linked up with another very well known project called the 'Orangi Pilot Project', which has helped and assisted people to develop sanitation, because what differs a good settlement from a bad settlement or a slum is basically sanitation. And again if you have good sanitation, which people can lay themselves, you have a very, very good settlement. And 'Orangi', which has over a million

people, 98 per cent of the settlement has now underground sanitation, which the people laid themselves. It is now a very good settlement.

CLARKE: While Allen Williams agrees that urban poverty can be extremely harsh because of high land prices and the difficulty of securing land tenure, he also points to the phenomenon of 'professional squatters'.

ALLEN WILLIAMS: There are many, many recorded incidents of where a government project is announced and overnight the land for that project is occupied by professional squatters in the expectation that they will be paid off in some way to go away and leave the site available for the intended development purpose.

Again, if you look at many land areas that were originally earmarked for basic infrastructure like roads, railway lines, these have all been squatted or a lot of them have been squatted, and squatted for many, many years, to the extent now that it is virtually impossible to get those land areas back for the intended use without making some very significant provision for the people who have occupied it. It is political, it is social and it requires a great deal of patience and goodwill on all sides to come up with solutions.

CLARKE: In the 1970s, the Malaysian government faced the issue of squatters head on. Datuk Mohammed Shaid Taufek is the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur.

DATUK MOHAMMED SHAID TAUFEEK: The policy in 1974 and the 70s was house-owning democracy. The government was determined to make sure everyone has got a house for everybody in the city. They created a single-room house. The idea was they come to these houses, pay rent, then as they grow up, the economy grows, they would buy their own house. Subsequently we created two-room houses and now three-room houses, so that we do not have a social problem. You know, a family with children, boys and girls they cannot share just one room or even two rooms. So now they are very practical.

As we go along, when they become more affluent, the government, even City Hall, expect them to graduate from that temporary house. That is why we will never sell the houses; we just rented them out to them. At the same time when private sector housing developers developed their land, the government and City Hall required them to build at least 30 per cent for these squatters. That is the policy. Those earlier programs in the 70s and 80s, the one-room and two-room houses, they will be demolished and rebuilt into proper three-room houses. These can be offered to the second, third generation.

CLARKE: According to Ken Fernandes, it is the children of the squatters who claim the right to live and work in the city.

KEN FERNANDES: The first generation of migrants are generally very adaptive. They are very hard working and they are very innovative in terms of trying to find jobs for themselves, you know it is all survival. The second generation, the children who are born in the city, they may go back to their rural areas, maybe once or twice a year. And the third generation, they have the stakes in the city and they will fight for it.

And a lot of the problems we actually see if you see violence in the city, it is people struggling and striving for their rights and their claim to that city. And it takes shape in many forms. Unfortunately

in some places it has taken the form of ethnicity, in some places it has taken the form of ideology, in some places it has taken the form of sectarianism. So religious groups, political groups, every group has manipulated this kind of group because they want their rights. And I have seen and I have spoken to many people who are in this place and they say look, they would like their jobs, they would like decent places to stay, basically they want their right to enjoy the city as much as everybody else.

DATUK MOHAMMED SHAID TAUFEEK: What is more interesting is that by now the second generation, some even third generation, these are the people whose children become the professionals, medical doctors, lawyers, surveyors, engineers, accountants. Also, they work in the corporate private companies and some in the government. So, it is actually the government program, I can say, that is very successful placing them in the proper houses.

CLARKE: Professor Laquian says governments need to see housing as a basic human right.

APRODICIO LAQUIAN: The biggest challenge is very simple, it is affordability. What can the people afford? If you leave the housing to the housing market, and this is one of the biggest issues that we have. In metro Manila, where I grew up, 40 per cent of the people live in slums and squatter areas. Bangkok, Jakarta, probably 25 - 30 per cent [are] slum squatters. The capacity to pay for the squatters and slum dwellers is very low. Now, if you try and put up housing the way Hong Kong and Singapore have provided housing, you would have to subsidise. And the governments either are not willing or not able to subsidise this housing.

On the other hand, you take a look at what has happened in China since 1979. Would you believe 92 per cent of families in China right now own their own homes? Eighty per cent of the public housing stock in China has been sold to the residents. Now, if China with 1.3 billion people can deal with their housing problems, why can't we in other Asian countries? But what was needed was for the government to say housing is a basic human right. It could be a commodity, it could be sold and speculated, but basically every human being should be entitled to shelter, to water, to electricity and so on. And the Chinese government decided to do that.

CLARKE: As China embraces capitalism, people pay much more for their housing, but the trade off is better housing.

APRODICIO LAQUIAN: And when I first lived in China in 1984 the average family paid three per cent of income for housing. Now most of the people are paying 30 per cent to 50 per cent of their income for housing. But they have got better quality housing. It used to be, [in] Shanghai or Beijing, the average family had four square metres of living space. Now they have got 12 square metres of living space. Now, they used to live in the inner city, but 20 per cent of the city dwellers were moved to the suburbs.

At first, we as planners thought, well, people would not want to move from the beauty of the inner city to go to the suburbs. But when they saw that in the suburbs the apartments were 12 square metres of living space, their own toilet, their own kitchen and so on. We did a survey of people who had been relocated to suburbs and 85 per cent said their life is much better. So it takes a lot of political will, the government just saying this is what is needed for a good human life, this is what is needed for liveable city and let's do it.

CLARKE: The emergence of 'gated communities' in cities is a growing trend and one that Professor Laquian believes is a big mistake.

APRODICIO LAQUIAN: Many cities in Asia are worried about violence, terrorism and all of this, and rightfully so because they have got so many squatters and slum dwellers. Now the solution of the developers is to build sub divisions surrounded by 12-foot fences with razor wire and armed guards at the gate. And so they cater then to the elite, and this growing distance between the masses of poor people and the elite I think is one of the biggest threats in Asian cities. The Philippines, where I originally came from, is noted for this. You have got these so-called exclusive sub divisions; they are independent settlements among themselves. And yet they are living cheek by jowl with all of these poor people. So outside the gates you have got the real city, and then inside is this highly artificial westernised community, well served, good water, good electricity and so on. But it is an island of affluence in the midst of all this poverty.

CLARKE: Jonathon Harley's experience in New Delhi confirms the divide between rich and poor.

JONATHON HARLEY: The city's water supply is extremely scarce; there is no adequate water infrastructure. Anyone who can afford it has basically sunk their own tube wells in the city, the water table below Delhi is falling at something astronomical like a metre a year. What you have got in New Delhi is basically anyone who can afford it buys their own infrastructure. So you have got, as we did, as the wealthy and well to do in New Delhi, we effectively lived in a privatised suburb where we too were contributing to the falling water table, where we had our own generator, a beast of a machine, which kept my office going, kept the air conditioning going when the power failed through the summer, which was for usually a few hours at least every day. The challenge for a city like New Delhi or Bombay is to try and catch up to those incredible pressures and I do not know how you do it. It takes a lot of money and it takes a lot of time and it takes a really major political commitment.

CLARKE: Jonathon Harley.

PAUL BARTER: One of the very interesting contrasts we can now see between places that did restrain private vehicles and places that did not, is what has happened to the urban fabric. What shape has the city taken? It turns out that transport has a very strong influence on the way the city can develop.

CLARKE: Paul Barter from the National University of Singapore. In the second program in our series, we explore other challenges for cities, including traffic management and the control of limited resources such as water.

This series is produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke, from Radio Australia.