

# **International Planning Aid: A Short Discussion Paper**

Jon Talbot  
School of Science and Computing  
NEWI  
Plas Coch  
Mold Road  
Wrexham  
LL11 2AW

Telephone No: 01978-293281  
e-mail [j.talbot@newi.ac.uk](mailto:j.talbot@newi.ac.uk)

## **Introduction**

I have been involved in Planning Aid since I was a post graduate student at the University of Nottingham 1979-81. Whilst there I was involved in a Planning for Real exercise and became active in two community groups. Since then, I have maintained my involvement. Last year (1999), I saw an appeal for planners to undertake VSO placements in Johannesburg, to help plan for Soweto. I contacted the authority to say I could only manage a few weeks, not 12 months. and on this basis spent five weeks there during August/September. So successful was the visit, I returned for a further month in January 2000. During my time there, I produced an Enterprise Zone scheme, a Tourism Development Strategy and the basis for an economy development strategy for Soweto. I met other UK planners there doing something similar to myself. We all paid our airfares but our accommodation costs were met. It was always my intention to begin what I hoped would be a long-term relationship but local government reorganisation in Johannesburg has made a return trip this summer impractical.

As a result of my trip, two further developments occurred. First, I received some funding from the Welsh training agency CELTEC. Second, Judith Eversley from RTPi asked me to attend the CAP Conference in Belfast in June.

The money I raised is enabling me to attend the ISoCARP Conference in Cancun, Mexico in September 2000. The theme of the conference is public participation and I will be presenting a paper on the UK's experience of Planning Aid. However, as the Yucatan peninsula is close to Belize, I have volunteered my services as a planner there. I have been asked to devise a Development Control System for Belize City and anticipate creating a simple system of deemed consents. The cost for all of this is being borne by the funds I raised.

At the CAP conference I happened to be sitting next to Cliff Hague and I asked him briefly, at the end of the meeting, about an agenda item written on his notes which has not been able to raise in the time available. The item was simply called 'International Planning Aid'. I asked him about it and he said he had briefly discussed it with Robert Upton whose idea I believe it to be, but there had been no other discussions. He then suggested I write a paper, given my own experiences, which, although not named as such, can be best described as International Planning Aid.

## **International Planning Aid: Issues to Be Discussed**

### **Identifying Recipients and Donors**

I would assume that in the first instance the 'donors' are likely to be UK based professional planners and 'recipients' likely to be developing nations, possibly within CAP nations, possibly wider. Keeping the system within CAP would reduce language difficulties and build upon existing networks. The benefits to CAP would be even greater: it would provide a means for CAP to provide practical assistance, obtain external funding and encourage eligible countries to join.

The second issue in relation to recipients is who, within the nation, should receive aid. Since, the ethos of Planning Aid is about meeting social need, recipients should be restricted to community groups, NGOs, Local and Central Government. Within that category, the criteria for assistance should normally be, like domestic Planning Aid, where the use of consultants is either impractical or beyond the financial means of the recipient.

### **Demand for the Service**

Demand in this sense refers to a ready supply of suitable volunteers and recipients, who fit the broad criteria of 'need'. It is probable that some form of formal investigation needs to be carried out to assess the viability of the idea but from personal experience I know there are a number of individuals in the UK who are willing to act as volunteers. The bigger issue is perhaps demand from recipients, who may doubt the expertise of volunteers or who may feel their needs are already catered for.

### **Relevance of Skills**

Whilst knowing there are volunteers likely to appear, there is an issue in relation to skills. A recipient will gain nothing from the experience if a volunteer cannot usefully contribute within a short time, into what is an alien culture and administration. I know from personal experience that not all volunteers have the skills required to meaningfully contribute, even following interview. These are simply personal observations but I know of volunteers, who, steeped in a lifetime of operating within the framework of the UK planning system see it as the only way to operate. We may need an induction process.

In many ways, I think this is the most crucial issue facing the development of International Planning Aid. Any system which is to be of value must correctly identify the transferable skills and knowledge of volunteers and match them with the requirements of recipients.

## **Suitability of Task**

The majority of Planning Aid work in the UK consists of short telephone conversations, mostly, in my experience, advising individual members of the public on how the planning system operates. A glance at Planning Aid Review 1999 reveals outreach activities in single figures only - four Planning for Real Exercises, three Community Group Training Sessions etc. Whilst this may under record the amount of such activity (I have done training sessions and not recorded them), it is clear that most Planning Aid is an office based activity, explaining a system practitioners well understand.

International Planning Aid involves considerably more challenge. Whilst in some circumstances there may be a need for routine work (eg dealing with planning applications), most work is likely to be project based, or involve plan making. An effective service must ensure that the task is appropriate and satisfying for the volunteer and from the recipients point of view, meets a real need which could not be met from another source.

## **Putting Donors in Touch with Volunteers**

A newly established system will receive publicity and probably spark off a number of projects. How that momentum can be maintained is an important consideration. Key sources of information are likely to be Planning Magazine and web sites. Of crucial significance here is likely to be the CAP site, or the sites associated with the Annual World Planning Day on November 8th.

## **Administration**

Within the UK there is an established Planning Aid administrative structure, underwritten and overseen by the RTPi in London. In principle there seems to be no reason why the existing arrangements cannot be extended. Where there are additional resources required, external funding may be forthcoming from bodies like DFID. Resources are likely to be required for induction of volunteers, debriefing/monitoring of performance, and maintenance of a network of volunteers and recipients, insurance indemnity etc.

## **Next Steps**

This short paper is simply a personal reflection based on a few initial thoughts and my own experience. A proper investigation of the viability of the idea requires a small feasibility study, to investigate some of the issues raised here. Doubtless there are other issues people will wish to raise and these can be incorporated with the study.

**Ian Silvera, the RTPI's National Planning Aid Co-ordinator replies with his thoughts on the development of International Planning Aid.**

Jon Talbot's paper makes a very useful contribution to the debate on developing International Planning Aid, particularly the establishment of a skills exchange programme which will surely be of benefit to local communities and individual planners involved in the programme. Allied to this programme, I think that the Institute should be looking to work with existing structures such as CAP to enable member Institutes and organisations to set up their own Planning Aid services. The following are my initial thoughts on developing international Planning Aid, a new area of activity for the Institute. I hope they generate a lively debate on the subject matter.

**The context for International Planning Aid**

The traditional focus for international aid and development has been the provision of basic amenities (food, shelter, and medicines) and direct investment in development programmes. Poor people in developing countries, particularly the urban poor, have been seen as passive recipients of aid and not active participants in managing the development of their settlements and communities.

This view is changing. Planners, governments and NGOs now recognise and accept what local communities have been saying for a long time: that openness in decision making, active community participation and enabling policies at the local level can have a greater impact on reducing poverty than investing huge sums in large development programmes. These ideas are also prevalent in UK regeneration programmes where investment in physical regeneration takes place alongside long term programmes to increase community capacity.

Within the UK, the network of Planning Aid services, operated and supported by the RTPI, is seen as an important resource for increasing community capacity and enabling participation in local planning and decision making. So much so, that Planning Aid is becoming increasingly integrated into the fabric of the planning system and services work with local planning authorities to deliver a complementary planning service. Some services are taking this further, and are developing new models for delivering Planning Aid based upon outreach to local communities and a holistic programme of training, advice and development work.

The RTPI's vision is to create a strong network of Planning Aid services, which is capable of supporting and enabling active community involvement to secure social, economic and environmental equity. To achieve this vision, the RTPI has had to prioritise action to increase the resources and capacity of the UK Planning Aid network. Nevertheless, the RTPI recognises that Planning Aid operates within a broader international context, particularly within the development of participatory techniques and good practice, and is keen to explore the idea of an international Planning Aid network.

## **Why develop International Planning Aid?**

It is important to ask why the Institute would want to develop international Planning Aid and to examine the benefits that would result. Broadly speaking, there are three main reasons for developing this.

First, the RTPI believes that Planning Aid is a 'good product' with an established track record. It has a unique and potentially powerful role to play in the planning and development process, and this applies not only to the UK but also the wider international community. Also, Planning Aid can be flexible in its delivery and appropriate to local circumstances: in other words it is capable of being exported.

Second, the RTPI's role in establishing and developing Planning Aid has been central and many governments, Institutes and NGOs can learn from our experience. Although Planning Aid is not unique to the UK: informal networks of professional planners providing a pro bono service have operated in the USA since the late 1960s, the organisation and the level of institutional support that Planning Aid receives in the UK is not replicated elsewhere. This support is Planning Aid's strength, and the RTPI can use its position, particularly with institutions such as the Commonwealth Association of Planners, to facilitate the expansion of Planning Aid, and extend the benefits that accrue to the profession and local communities to the wider international community.

Third, the development of international Planning Aid is not a charitable programme, as the RTPI would learn a great deal from engaging with professionals and local communities in the international arena. For example, Planning Aid volunteers would learn from practitioners and local communities in countries such as South Africa about engaging disadvantaged groups in the planning process.

## **Aims and objectives**

The following aims and objectives of the programme are suggested:

### **Aims**

- To facilitate the effective involvement of local communities in the planning and development process, both overseas and within the UK, through the provision of professional assistance, mutual learning and the exchange of information.

### **Objectives**

- To set up an effective international network of Planning Aid services, particularly within developing countries in the Commonwealth and to provide adequate assistance to sustain them;
- To facilitate the exchange of ideas and professional expertise between the RTPI and other Institutes, governments, NGOs and local communities;
- To increase the knowledge base and the capacity of the RTPI, other Institutes, governments, NGOs and local communities;

- To work closely with other partners to set up development programmes capable of matching both the supply and demand for international Planning Aid and securing the necessary resources from external funding sources to support the programmes.

## **Principles**

A set of principles governing the development of international Planning Aid is required and the following are put forward for discussion. These are to:

- Use existing structures and agencies where possible
- Develop effective partnerships with relevant bodies
- Prioritise the Commonwealth, particularly less developed countries, making use of CAP and use of common English language
- Base programmes on self help and sustainability
- Attach equal value to all parties
- Maximise use of external funding streams in developing the programme

## **Elements**

Combining the skills exchange ideas identified in Jon's paper with the proposal to support the development of host Planning Aid services, the main elements of the programme are:

- A support programme for overseas Institutes, professional associations and other relevant bodies to develop their own Planning Aid services;
- An exchange programme, including a VSO type programme where planners would be posted overseas to provide advice and assistance to governments, NGOs and local communities.

## **Programmes**

There is a need to develop discrete programmes in order to work effectively with partner organisations and attract support from sponsors. Initial programmes could include:

### **Planning Aid support programme**

The main elements of the Planning Aid support programme would be to provide a tailored programme of assistance to individual associations and organisations incorporating:

- Advice
- Guidance
- Moral support
- Funding (secured from external sources)
- Visits/exchanges

## **Skills exchange**

The skills exchange programme could involve:

- Overseas postings of Planning Aid volunteers
- Short term exchanges between practitioners
- Knowledge dissemination and exchange through IT/World-wide web
- Establishment of an emergency/disaster response group

## **Research**

A research programme is also proposed to underpinning the Planning Aid support and the skills exchange programmes. This could focus on:

- Appropriate mechanisms for delivery of Planning Aid
- Capacity building among local communities
- Development of appropriate participatory techniques

## **Way forward**

A range of partner organisations is required to develop this programme and external funding is needed to support its development. These ideas represent initial thinking and the paper provides an opportunity to start an initial discussion on how international Planning Aid can be developed and funded. Any thoughts or comments should be sent to:

Ian Silvera  
National Planning Aid Co-ordinator  
RTPI  
Unit 319, The Custard Factory  
Gibb Street, Birmingham B9 4AA  
Tel/Fax: 0121 693 1201  
E-mail: [planaidcoord@rtpi.org.uk](mailto:planaidcoord@rtpi.org.uk)