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Viewpoint

***Planning in the Commonwealth***

*No sustainable development without sustainable urbanisation. No sustainable urbanisation without effective planning.*

The mantra above defines what the Commonwealth Association of Planners (CAP) stands for, and this Viewpoint argues that planners, necessarily concerned with urbanisation and sustainable development, need to think and act internationally and need institutions that can cross boundaries and engage policymakers. The Commonwealth can be a force for progressive change in planning, and this Viewpoint, while reviewing the origins and early work of the CAP, focuses on more recent developments in the current decade and highlights current challenges and proposals for action.

The Commonwealth is 60 years old in 2009. Of course, its origins coincided with the de-colonisation of the British Empire. Indeed some critics still perceive the Commonwealth as a leftover from the era when British military engineers laid out garden suburbs and cantonments in far-flung places for exclusive occupation by ex-patriot administrators, their servants, clerks and soldiers. Paradoxically, it is actually this blinkered view that is outdated and misses the fundamental point. The modern Commonwealth accounts for almost a third of the globe's population, and includes some of the richest and some of the poorest countries, some of the largest and over 25 small island states. Urbanisation, climate change, food security and energy – the most pressing issues of the age – are only resolvable by international action. In the twenty-first century we need the Commonwealth and its institutions, and could make much more use of them.

The legacy of colonial town planning should not be swept under the carpet. Indeed, it is central to understanding the problems of today's rampaging urban tragedy. The high noon of empire saw the export of a form of town planning from Britain (and other colonial powers) that with hindsight was deeply flawed and inappropriate (Hague, 2008). Generalisations can inevitably be challenged, but colonial planning showed scant regard for indigenous traditions of urbanism, and was typically discriminatory in intent. Its mental models of anti-urbanism and urban containment linger, but are dangerously irrelevant in a rapidly urbanising world. Recognising the failures and the dark side of the Commonwealth's planning legacy is an essential step to re-inventing planning as a pro-poor practice for today.

**The Commonwealth Association of Planners**

In the early 1970s, the UK's impending membership of what was then the European Economic Community prompted a general reconsideration of the nature and role of the Commonwealth. A number of Commonwealth Associations were formed around that time, including CAP. The inaugural meeting was held at the Town Planning Institute (TPI) in London, 21–24 September 1970, and attended by delegates from 17 Commonwealth countries. Philip Rathbone, the TPI's long-serving Secretary, was appointed interim Secretary for the fledgling Association. CAP was then formally established at a meeting in Accra in October 1972.

At this time, the planning profession was racked with insecurity and bent on establishing its uniqueness and independence from other construction professions. Like many other professional bodies, CAP tended to look inwards. For almost two decades it ran successfully enough as a way of bringing together at its conferences the leaders of the professional planning institutes in the Commonwealth. However, problems linked to administrative and financial difficulties mounted, and by the mid-1990s activity had dwindled.

In 2000, after a conference in Belfast convened by the RTPI with support from the UK Department for International Development, CAP was re-launched. The RTPI made available 'at cost' administrative support and CAP entered the age of the Internet by setting up its website ([www.commonwealth-planners.org](http://www.commonwealth-planners.org)). More fundamentally, the focus shifted. The first issue of CAP's Newsletter included the following message:

We need to change CAP for two reasons. First there is the global significance of urbanization; second is the need to support member organisations and the planners who belong to them ... professional planners have an important role to play, but they need to rethink the scope and nature of their practice. Rapid urbanization has rendered obsolete the techniques, policies and instruments of much traditional town planning. Planners have been slow to recognise the imperatives of poverty alleviation, community empowerment, and to create opportunities for women in development. Nor has planning practice been sufficiently involved in the knowledge economy and informed by research. CAP by itself cannot deliver a transformation, but it should be a focus for ideas, innovations and mutual learning (Hague, 2000).

What has CAP done to progress this agenda? First and foremost, it has been able to persuade the planning institutes from some 26 countries to pay an annual subscription to be members. Some of these are large institutes, such as those in Canada or Nigeria, but others in countries where planners are thin on the ground have less than 100 members. Then there are countries where no planning institute exists at all, there are no planning schools and no critical mass of professional planners. One success has been to help bring together planners from the Pacific island states into their own organisation – the Pacific Islands Planning Association.

### **Urbanisation – a global challenge**

Such Commonwealth diversity is undoubtedly CAP's strength. Being a Commonwealth body forges an international mindset. This is unusual within the planning profession. The pioneering phase of planning professionalism, in the early twentieth century, was quite international. Thomas Adams, for example, played a key role in the establishment

of the town planning institutes of the UK and Canada as well as being Director of the Regional Survey and Plan of New York. However, as planning became a practice defined by national or provincial legislation, so the horizons narrowed. Statutory blinkers remain an obstacle to internationalism, and planning has been an 'under-globalised' profession. None the less, within the Commonwealth, the shared use of English and a common legacy of institutions and procedures that originated in the UK facilitate the sharing and transfer of ideas.

Having an international mindset means recognising that rapid urbanisation linked to the urbanisation of poverty is a global challenge on a par with, and closely connected to, climate change. Each day of every week there are almost another 200,000 people living in urban areas. Transport and buildings are major generators of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Urban areas are mainly located in flood plains or on the coast. Urban spread predominantly eats into better quality agricultural land and contributes to deforestation. Most of the world's poor now live in cities, where the potential for wealth creation, but also for crime and organised unrest, is far greater than in the countryside. As UN-Habitat (2006) observed, slums are now the dominant form of settlement in many cities. Already, a billion people live in slums: the total is likely to double over a generation. Such urban inequality is a killer: under-five mortality rates in the slums of Nairobi are 151 per 1000 live births, compared with an average of 62 for the city as a whole and just 13 for rural Kenya (APHRC, 2002, xvi).

Town planners, whose historical professional roots are in the struggles against slum conditions in Europe, and for social reconstruction, have stunningly failed to grasp the significance of their profession to the world of the twenty-first century. Their global bodies such as the International Federation for Housing and Planning or the International Society of City and Regional Planners have been more like members' clubs than campaigning organisations linked to international political institutions. The large professional institutes who accredit planning education programmes do not require that students are taught about the lethal cocktail of rapid urbanisation and the urbanisation of poverty. Few of the academics teaching on planning courses in rich countries spare any time to think about how planning needs to be made quick, affordable and effective so that it can begin to address these problems.

Long ago, international donor agencies embraced neo-liberal ideologies and so have little time for urban planning with its obsessive regulation. Privatisation of public utilities and land will lead to an optimal equilibrium it seems – so why don't the urban poor get potable water and basic sanitation? However, campaigning non-governmental organisations also tend to have little time for planners and planning. They observe the use of planning powers by an elite to protect and advance their own property interests. While an extreme case, the use of planning legislation to 'clear out the trash' by eviction of some 700,000 poor people in Zimbabwe demonstrates how traditional planning concerns for amenity could be used against the poor (Kamete, 2007).

### **Reinventing planning**

In 2006, CAP played a key role in the preparation of a paper 'Re-inventing planning' (Farmer et al., 2006), which was the focus for one of the Dialogue sessions of the UN - Habitat World Urban Forum. The paper set out 10 principles of New Urban Planning. These are:

- (i) sustainability;

- (ii) integrated planning and budgeting;
- (iii) planning with partners;
- (iv) transparent and accountable planning;
- (v) subsidiarity;
- (vi) market responsiveness;
- (vii) access to land;
- (viii) pro-poor and inclusive;
- (ix) use of appropriate tools; and
- (x) allowance for cultural variations in how the principles are applied.

An accompanying text bearing the CAP logo (Hague et al., 2006) was launched at the Forum by the Executive Director of UN-Habitat. The outcome was that the Forum placed a strong emphasis on planning as a tool for urban development and environmental management, and as a means of preventing future slum growth. This view was accepted not just by government officials and urban planners themselves, but also by civil society groups that wanted planning to be more inclusive, transparent and ethical.

Following from this, CAP worked with the RTPI and the Lincoln Foundation for Land Affairs during 2008 to create an on-line self-assessment tool to help planners across the globe to review the situation of planning in their own country (French and Natarajan, 2008). Over 1250 responses came from 113 countries, making it the most international piece of information collection from planners to date. The exercise revealed a strong consensus that the potential of planning as a way of tackling the challenges posed by urbanisation and climate change is not being adequately exploited. Across the globe, practising planners are frustrated at the missed opportunities. Too often, political will and basic awareness are lacking. In many countries there are few, if any, opportunities for planners to develop their skills through lifelong learning. The need for global advocacy and demonstration of the practical relevance of planning to twenty-first-century urban management is fundamentally confirmed by this study.

CAP also took forward work on gender in planning. A review of practices across the Commonwealth (Todes et al., forthcoming) was presented at the Gender Roundtable in the 2008 World Urban Forum. This shows that despite many countries having published substantial official guidance about the need to address the gender dimension in planning development, there is little follow through. This finding will be the basis for further action for CAP in the next couple of years.

At its first meeting in 1999, the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements (an intergovernmental group of Commonwealth Ministers responsible for habitat and settlements) committed to the goal of 'demonstrated progress towards adequate shelter for all with secure tenure and access to essential services in every community by 2015' (ComHabitat, 2005). However, so far, there has been no systematic analysis of what is happening in Commonwealth cities. In 2007, CAP's calls for action were endorsed by the Commonwealth People's Forum in Kampala. The Communiqué from the Forum called on Commonwealth Member States, and the Commonwealth Consultative Group on Human Settlements to produce a 'State of the Commonwealth's Cities' report for the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, which would assess opportunities and threats of urban growth in relation to poverty alleviation, sustainable and people-centred development and reducing

disparities in living conditions, and would recommend inter-governmental actions (Commonwealth Foundation, 2008, 15–16).

In December 2008, with support from the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation, CAP and the RTPI commenced a study to fill this gap. CAP is also working closely with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum to build the Commonwealth Network of Inclusive Cities during 2009. This work will feed into ministerial and senior government official meetings through the Commonwealth Secretariat.

## Conclusion

Planning has traditionally been a rather insular profession. Its institutions – the base in local government, national legislation and nationally based professional bodies – have helped to reproduce a local and procedural outlook. There has been a failure to internationalise the perspectives. At a time when urban development is a critical driver of change globally, this amounts to a *trahison des clercques*. If planners cannot articulate a vision of equitable cities and balanced regional development, then whom else should we look to for leadership in this field?

The work of the Commonwealth Association of Planners shows how an institution that embraces the diversity of the modern Commonwealth can act internationally as an effective advocate for planning. It has built strong institutional links through Commonwealth networks and with UN-Habitat. CAP is perhaps unique amongst professional planning institutions in being able to link to governments through the political structures of the Commonwealth. It is committed to an agenda of 're-inventing planning' as a means of tackling one of the great issues confronting humanity in this century – urbanisation.

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