

MYTH 11 (semi-myth): “New national and global policies and institutions are needed to address urban problems”

Many of the discussions about how to deal with urban problems (or environmental problems in general) focus on national strategies and better governance nationally. But most urban problems need local institutions to address them and to do so in ways that are accountable to local populations. In part, this is because of the phenomenal diversity between urban centres, which makes any generalised solutions invalid or of limited effectiveness. While tables that have urban population statistics for different nations may seem to show broad trends towards increasingly urbanised societies in much of the world, the scale and nature of such trends and their underlying causes differ greatly from country to country. There are also differences between regions and cities in the same country and over time. Even if globalisation and the legal and institutional changes it brings are an increasing influence in most urban centres, it is important not to forget how unique social, economic, political and demographic structures are influencing urban change within each location. Or the different resource bases in and around each city. Or how different the impact of globalisation is on each city.⁹² Or how undemocratic it is to impose ‘solutions’ that are not supported and developed with local populations.

Effective local governance is more important in the lives of most urban dwellers than good national or global governance,⁹³ although to be brought about it often requires changes in government at provincial/state, national and global levels. National governments and international agencies cannot meet their ‘global’ responsibilities without effective local government institutions as partners. For instance, how can biodiversity can be protected, malaria and other diseases reduced and greenhouse gas emissions kept down, without effective and representative local governments? Most global environmental problems will only be resolved through the aggregate impact of actions undertaken by local governments – yet local governments are rarely given much consideration in global conferences and global action plans. Given the key role of local governments in ensuring that both environment and development goals are met, it is surprising to find so little recognition of local governance in most discussions of sustainable development or deliberations of how to meet global targets such as the Millennium Development Goals.⁹⁴ The ‘big’ issues such as greater equity, greater justice (and protecting human rights), protecting key resources, reducing greenhouse gases, achieving greater democracy, reducing poverty, and managing globalization are often discussed, without considering the local institutions needed to ensure progress in these areas.

In Europe and North America, we have become so used to a web of local institutions that serve, support and protect us that we forget their importance. We do not question the fact that we get water of drinking quality piped to our homes, and sanitation and electricity 24 hours a day and that garbage is collected regularly - with the costs

⁹² See the special issue of *Environment and Urbanisation* on Globalization and Cities (Vol. 14, No 1, April 2002).

⁹³ Satterthwaite, David (2002), *Reducing Urban Poverty: Some Lessons From Experience*, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series Working Paper 11, IIED, London, 40 pages.

⁹⁴ The Millennium Development Goals grew out of the agreements and resolutions that most of the world’s governments endorsed at world conferences organized by the United Nations in the past decade; they set explicit targets related to expanding education and basic services, reducing poverty, reducing gender inequality, improving health (especially child and maternal health) and improved environmental management and many international agencies are now using these to focus their efforts and assess progress. See http://www.developmentgoals.org/About_the_goals.htm

representing a very small part of our income. There are schools and health centres to which even the lowest-income households have access. There are emergency services available to all, when needed. We have local politicians through whom we can make demands and voice grievances. Legislation and courts protect us from eviction, discrimination, exploitation and pollution. There are safety nets for those of us who lose our jobs or fall sick - and pensions for our retirement. There are lawyers, ombudsmen, consumer groups and watchdogs to whom we can turn if we feel that we have been cheated. And all of this is possible because of local government institutions overseen by democratic structures. Even if some services are provided by private companies or non-profit institutions, the framework for provision and quality control is provided by local governments or local offices of national or provincial governments. While coverage for some services may be sub-standard and some groups ill-served, the broad web of provision adequately serves the vast majority of the population.

The problems associated with urban growth in low and middle-income nations can only be addressed through the development of a comparable web of accountable local institutions in cities and smaller urban centres. Such institutions are also needed to ensure that the investments and interventions of national governments, international agencies and private companies recognise, respond to and are accountable to local needs. This certainly needs national action but much of this is to enable and support competent, effective, accountable local government – and to ensure a more equitable division of public resources among local governments.