



Serge Allou (*Gret*)

Combating poverty and negotiated urban management: one practitioner's viewpoint

Programmes to combat poverty today figure significantly amongst the approaches used by multilateral aid bodies active in the urban areas of the countries of the South. Strictly speaking, a practitioner called upon to assist in the implementation of such programmes is concerned not so much with considering why they exist (although he or she may have some ideas on the underlying reasons for them), but rather with contributing to how they unfold, in other words considering the manner in which they should be conducted.

On this point, contrary to what one might expect, apart from stating a few general principles, funders are relatively silent on how the objectives set should be achieved. Of course, the now familiar constraints are often trotted out: people's participation, the involvement of women, the role attributed to local authorities, the inevitable partnership between stakeholders or even using micro-credit schemes, to cite but a few examples. But this therefore leaves the field relatively open to the practitioner with regard to the suggestions he or she might put forward on the implementation of such programmes. And to be fair, Habitat (Nairobi) is certainly more explicit than the European Union.

My experience is that of assisting with the design and monitoring of the introduction of a pilot programme to combat poverty in three cities in Morocco: Casablanca, Marrakech and Tangiers, a programme co-financed by UNDP and the Moroccan Ministry of Social Affairs. The programme is in its early stages and it is not therefore possible at present to assess the efficiency and impact of the proposals which we have made on renewing existing urban management practices and policies. This said, at the design stage, we deliberately chose to position ourselves with a view to doing just that.

With the full agreement of Habitat (the executing agency) on this point, from the outset we rejected the idea of identifying *a priori* the key activities to be undertaken in the three fields of activity of the programme (i.e. the social integration of vulnerable population groups, income generation, and access to basic services), which was expressly requested by the contracting bodies, UNDP and the Moroccan Ministry. In other words, we did not set the number of microcredit loans which might be allocated here or there, nor decide that in a given informal settlement priority should go to upgrading rather than to household waste disposal (or *vice versa*), nor suggest that the construction of a home for street children - long delayed through lack of resources - should commence without delay. All the more so, given that each of the social and institutional bodies which we were called upon to meet at the identification-design stage of the programme believed that their stated priorities were the most pressing and that they (and they alone, naturally) could make best use of the modest funds available (2 million dollars, nevertheless).

Our proposal, which was both a great deal more modest and infinitely more ambitious, consisted in recommending two things:

- setting up bodies (and their operating procedures) for dialogue and negotiation between the stakeholders being required to identify a joint set of priority actions and to forge the institutional and financial links which implementing these would require;
- setting up a fund with no *a priori* allocations, (a fund which we intended to be equivalent to at least half the

funds available, i.e. one million dollars), to finance feasibility studies or to cofinance the implementation of projects conceived in the course of this dialogue. The idea underlying this is that implementing concrete actions is both a vector for learning and a *sine qua non* condition for giving dialogue practices a firm footing.

In other words, designing a programme to combat poverty led us to lay the foundations of a programme of negotiated local urban development management (albeit a partial one, since it benefits only certain underprivileged sections of the population of the three cities in question).

Clearly, at the time of writing a number of questions remain unanswered:

- Can one justify giving priority to institutional development issues in comparison to introducing concrete and immediate improvements to the living conditions of population groups facing often extreme conditions of exclusion and poverty? Is it legitimate to do so? Are we not setting excessive and inflexible targets given the scale of activity characterising such programmes?
- Will the joint approach we are advocating produce any significant results in terms of combating poverty as such?
- Will the assumption that actions will be more effective if they have been negotiated and implemented in the framework of allied action be proved right?
- Can one conceive of a new way of handling urban production and management without drawing up a consistent policy framework beforehand, in other words without having a global vision for the city?
- Can the few projects (and very specific ones at that) which will see the light in the context of this programme to combat poverty, become a genuine reference (a springboard?) for the renewal of traditional practices of local development management? And of course, in what conditions?

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home page: <http://www.naerus.org/venezia/>

e-mail: esf_pvs@brezza.iuav.unive.it