



Multiple deprivation: a unique and special problem of its own

INNER AREA AGENCIES

By DES McCONAGHY

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The rescue of inner areas will depend on how we perceive the problem and on our ability to evolve effective policies within prevailing political situations. The poor are increasingly concentrated in specific territories which, without effective bureaucracies of political power, become potential battlegrounds. Urban society cannot opt out. New solutions must be devised to deal with the unique dilemmas; both militancy and complacency can obscure the need for custom-built agencies.

In spite of considerable expenditures by some local authorities, and sometimes because of them, the decline of inner residential areas has now become an established trend. Our inability to deal with this circular and cumulative causation is all too evident. From physical planning strategies to the whole range of welfare benefits, subsidies and social services, public action has not been effective in reversing trends which seem a tragic counterpart to the growth of cities and the development of the economy as a whole.

Traditionally the initiative for dealing with this problem, and much of the burden, has fallen on the city ratepayer and his local government institutions. These institutions have not been required to address themselves to the problem of multiple-deprivation as such and, in most cities of Western Europe and the United States, this simple fact has exacerbated the social problems of deprived areas. Even where large public programmes have been promoted they have proved either insufficient or of the wrong kind to counteract the downward spiral of decline, neglect and blight.

The effect of intervention in any single problem tends to be negated by the collective pressures of inner areas. Puzzled councillors incur vast expenditures and often end up with worse problems than they sought to solve. In 1966 Liverpool decided to knock down 78 000 houses which was most of the residential area within the suburbs. This programme, praiseworthy in itself, dislocated whole communities, demolished both confidence and the possibility of improvement and, as a practical matter, blighted large sections of the city where there was no immediate prospect of public action.

Planners have always tended to see the improvement of cities solely in terms of the large scale manipulation of public resources. Such programmes, like large scale clearance, have often led to grave social and economic consequences. Generally public action has lacked fine-tuning at the distribution end and has done little to solve the intractable and interactional malaise of the inner areas. We have not been consumer-orientated because, in the first instance, we have not perceived the real nature of the consumer and his special problem.

We still use incredibly crude physical devices. Possibly the first basic concepts of urban renewal linked with new and expanded towns contained such a high intrinsic merit that they inhibited any new vision. But it could now be said that the consumption of housing as a specific merit has not necessarily increased the objective level of living: overspill policies have not significantly alleviated the problems of the inner areas and have probably exacerbated them by increasing the proportion of inadequate families in specific areas. No real progress can be made until the unique difficulties of inner areas are clearly recognised and the machinery is found to go in and tackle the worst problems where they actually occur.

Advocacy

Nothing could be further from reality than the notion that all inner areas need are legions of hot-rod sociologists, architects or spell-binding activists to voice hitherto unspoken requirements. Part of the dilemma of inner areas is that such pressure is permanently outside the political process.

Radical social activists eventually demand a quite unacceptable redistribution of resources and power in the way the area chooses—or more probably—in the way they themselves choose! They gain useful publicity in highlighting problems and score isolated successes but cannot secure consistent or co-ordinated programmes. Indeed, inasmuch as this type of game polarises issues, it can have the



Troops in action in Belfast. "As conditions in the inner areas become worse, symptoms of deprivation, such as crime and vandalism, assume exaggerated importance and remedies also shift from normal municipal programmes to the imposition of law and order"

cumulative effect of inhibiting public action.

In Britain, radical activists concentrate on specific issues. Militant, direct action was encouraged by Jim Radford in his first battles for the "squatters" at Redbridge. But having brought national publicity to the supply of neglected short-term accommodation, the radical means can obscure the essentially non-radical nature of the solution. Successful "squatting" operations depend on tighter programming and more detailed housing management, both being the responsibility of any local authority facing its obligations in the maximum utilisation of all viable housing stock. Now there is some danger that the legal squatting movement can obscure the issue of responsibility and divert local authorities from facing such obligations. In the Republic of Ireland, where the polarisation of militant "squatting" continues, the Government quickly turned to punitive legislation which was not in the interests of housing authorities or, of course, the "squatters".

The administrative social activists, such as official community wardens, favour a gradualist approach. Dyckman notes that the administrative advocate "wants the clients to transform themselves so that the whole game will work more smoothly, even if the chief beneficiaries of smoother functioning prove to be the more powerful". So inner area "community councils" are encouraged to make applications and mount petitions as an alternative to basket-weaving. Again individual successes will be gained and they provide useful forums. Administrative advocacy, however, conforms to those patterns of middle class charitable traditions of social therapy more appropriate to the early industrial city.

Extreme examples of both types of advocacy can be found in most inner areas. Each presses for change but both tend to assume that the public sector is unlikely to take them seriously. Ineffectual groups can be further compromised by being utilised by those seeking quite narrow electoral advantage and where forums seriously wish to innovate they are unlikely to be welcomed by "twilight" elected representatives or circumspect community officers.

Advocacy therefore tends to ennoble planning schools and enliven professional journals rather

than effect any shift of resources to those in real need. Davidoff never really answered his own question "Who pays for plural planning?"² The question becomes even more rhetorical when planning is understood as programmes of meaningful events, all of which must be paid for, shaped and ordered by bureaucracies not themselves dedicated to problem-solving in minority areas. The really deprived ignore community councils with neither resource nor power and, while savaging each other in the survival game, will reject also the advocate planner whose advocacy does not produce the goods.

The Centre for Environmental Studies, on receiving a sizeable grant from the Department of the Environment, seemed anxious to point out that a substantial cheque to a formidable research agency does not purchase a recovery programme. There are certainly dangers in any British foundations and charities being seen to assume such a role.

Dyckman illuminates: "The dilemma for social planning leadership is clearly not bureaucracy or grass roots", but "what bureaucracy?"³ When society perceives inner areas as special territories requiring tailored programmes, advocacy will acquire the means for effective leverage for those at the bottom of the barrel.

Political realities

It is a hard fact of electoral mathematics that, in any democratic city, a minority will be relatively deprived and in a bad bargaining position. The closer one gets to the action the more conscious one becomes of profound powerlessness, lack of liberty and choice. At the moment it is inner area politicians who would appear to have most to gain from social planning, since they are badly placed as innovators and comprise small minorities in their own council chambers. These councillors do not usually influence city budgets which, regardless of party politics, have regard to the majority of rate-payers. They cannot even depend on solidarity within inner areas due to party alignments and competition between city wards. Often they are reduced to the role of voluntary case-workers having the additional doubtful privilege of making speeches after the caucus decisions are taken. "Nuisance" councillors continue enthusiastically but where major innovation and resources are the issue, the inner areas are, as a rule, unrepresented and unheard.

Unfortunate people drifting between adjacent "twilight" areas or uprooted by large scale urban renewal find difficulty in relating to local councillors who, in turn, find it easier to relate to the constituents who elected them than to the most transient and therefore the most underprivileged levels. Unhappily those in greatest need tend to reject or ignore elected members whose influence on policies is negligible. The apprehension of inner area councillors about vigorous community development projects in London and elsewhere is both unfortunate and understandable. Much confusion will be avoided when leaders recognise the case for fresh political, management and financial resources. In the meantime David Donnison, commenting on local government reform, warns that while larger and stronger authorities will result, it is top councillors who will run major services and we could be "as far away as ever from solving the central problems that local government must deal with". He went on: "In future it should also be a matter of pride to represent smaller areas . . . and to develop and manage the whole range of services which could transform such neighbourhoods".⁴

Clearly political initiative for inner area recovery

must come from the top if the areas are not to continue their process of social disintegration. This will require vision beyond normal political horizons, and, in their turn, city leaders will need the most positive encouragement and assistance from central government. In the long run there can be no sustained diversion of effort in minority areas without some relief for the burden on the general body of ratepayers. Inner area agencies will require "political heavyweights" and ultimately access to the Treasury through city councils.

Departmental barriers

For the tasks facing inner areas, agencies will have to achieve a unity of purpose. The inability to cope with lateral communications between traditional functional departments has prompted new groupings under single directorates. This is now the case in social services although it is significant that Seebohm did not quantify resources or clarify objectives. The test for PPB systems will be in district budgeting but, while the general drawbacks of departmentalisation are well known, the effect in the inner areas is catastrophic.

F J C Amos, Liverpool's Planning Officer, finds that problems of the interrelationships of services are apparent in almost every aspect of local authority life, "but they become most apparent where substantial change is occurring. Very often the worst cases of social deprivation are found in those parts of the city where there is the most decayed urban fabric. Local authorities, consequently, find that they are having to face a multitude of social problems, together with the complex task of physical redevelopment. It seems strange that when special agencies in the form of new town corporations have been created for the relatively simple task of completing a new town on a virgin site, so little attention has been given to creating the right kind of machinery to deal with the vastly more complex problems of the physical and social development in urban areas".

But over large areas of cities, society finds no compelling reasons to demand maximum co-ordination of government departments. The middle class commuter does not lock his Bentley in the garage to complain to his wife about the inability of departments to work together. For the majority of the electorate it is simply not a burning issue. Moreover comprehensive planning and integrated services are an overriding goal for planners but often alien to diverse professionals conscientiously pursuing their individual statutory roles within the vast labyrinth of local government legislation. As far as the wider city is concerned we are unlikely to approach a utopian degree of co-ordination while the general public finds things ticking over reasonably well.

The situation is radically different where tasks are emphatically developmental rather than administrative. The case for project-orientated management structure for the inner city is overwhelming if chaos, waste and frustration are to be avoided. The efficient supply of services has been impeded and lack of interface with an effective bureaucracy has negated those attempts to attract private capital effectively into inner areas. Even charitable housing associations cannot operate at any scale in areas of multiple-deprivation without a counterpart local government organisation concerned with detailed housing programming and welfare services.

As a major element in the economy, the contracting industry needs renewed investment in the inner areas and building societies will require to deploy their resources at the lower end of the real-estate market. The Development Committee of the



Association of Building Societies might well anticipate an investment crisis but in the lack of an effective interface with the problem, prominent individuals, such as Lord Wakefield, have been producing their own plans for "Urban Renewal Corporations as a method of channelling funds into an area of great need".

All interests seem to come together in demanding that the barriers between departments with differing functions are demolished to face the comprehensive tasks of inner area development. Once the public perceives the overwhelming social case, the creation of adequate agencies must be imminent.

Half-measures

It is salutary to work in one inner area after enjoying the freedom of new town planning where a single corporation's annual budget for capital works can exceed the whole of the government's annual Urban Aid allocation for Britain. When we find local groups, community councils and local government departments competing and grubbing around for a few hundred pounds here and there, it is evident that the dispersal of Urban Aid's small budget can register negligible impact in any one area.

The Home Office has established Community Development Projects in Southwark, Coventry, Liverpool and Glamorgan. The first three have registered a most serious attempt to improve services in areas of high social need. Here again "participation" is the word of the moment, but residents could be forgiven for asking, "participate in what?". Theoretically, joint working parties ensure that the resources are channelled into such areas by major programme administrations as required but, in real terms, they can have little impact on local or central government budgeting. These projects are the only official attempt by the government to explore the improvement of the existing machinery for inner area recovery but their status and scope is rather limited. Traditionally working parties can achieve very little without overall control and the complete dedication of all the parties represented.

Because the Home Office did not accept an *a priori* case for resource-handling comprehensive agencies, even as a basis of research, their directors

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will find themselves in quite a difficult position as they attempt a level of co-ordination found impossible by departmental chief officers. In these circumstances departmental liaison or co-option may tend to be the half-hearted deployment of the almost superannuated. Unless the government is re-briefed, decision-makers will begin to look at such projects as academic and, without underestimating the valuable contribution of these projects, their thrust will be too little and their conclusions too late!

Whitehall Under-Secretaries will be aware that the inner areas of our cities are often served by officers sharing the underprivileged status of their clients. Dr Pahl has said that the dehumanising effect of urban managers on the urban poor is worthy of investigation at all levels. Certainly there are local offices of government departments which lack even reasonable sanitary amenities. If local city housing managers become brutalised they can surely be forgiven if the alternative is to go insane.

The Plowden-orientated Educational Priority Areas suffer the same constraints as CDP but to a vastly greater extent. Promoted entirely from within one local government department, basic concepts such as "community school" suffer from the lack of a comprehensive development context. The fine quality of research will suffer from the limitations of their initial brief and their impact on the problems of inner areas must be slight.

The direction of any action-research for inner area recovery should be coherently conceived, not only locally, but also at Whitehall. This is not the case at the moment and representative working parties are no substitute for the creation of a specific administration dedicated to this problem. As Professor Townsend has suggested, rationalisation of government departmental involvement in social policies, and surely this must concern the Department of the Environment, should be one of the first priorities of the central policy review unit at the Cabinet Office.⁶ At city level, the prospect of inner area agencies would remove much of the feeling of hopelessness from which so many officers suffer and would bring prestige to all those areas of public service where the best talents are so urgently required.

Agencies and action programmes

As conditions in the inner areas become worse, symptoms of deprivation, such as crime and vandalism, assume exaggerated importance and remedies also shift from normal municipal programmes to the imposition of law and order. In Liverpool perhaps the keenest agency sponsoring new initiative is the constabulary since they sense the dangers of present trends and further alienation. Our failure to perceive the unique nature of the problem and the political, management and resource constraints have bedevilled all attempts to achieve an on-going process of recovery.

New initiatives must be capable of combining the traditional planning of such areas with corporate planning for overall resource allocation and programme areas. Adequate pilot studies should be placed clearly in this context. They should be able to anticipate local government development agencies where local district staff would be responsible to the agency rather than co-opted.

If the pattern of new town development corporations were followed, the future agencies would have a chairman and board but with only two or three appointed by the Minister the rest comprising local government leadership and the city remaining the ultimate policy maker and decision maker. Establishment would not be any great additional burden since, beyond essential chief officers and

their secretariat, the establishment in district functional departments would be transferred. Indeed, it may be possible to effect establishment reductions as the benefits of lateral communications at a district level are realised.

The agency, commission or corporation would be responsible to the city for the submission of annual budgetary statements and would be able to "top up" city expenditures, currently on the rates, by loans from the Treasury with the approval of the city council. This provision does not imply vast expenditures being passed on to the taxpayer; on the contrary, it would be sufficient only to provide that element of initiative and flexibility missing from the present administration of inner areas.

The recent publication of the *Manual on Development Plans* left planners without a practical methodology to implement the early visions of the Planning Advisory Group.⁷ But studies of social indicators have developed sufficiently to allow a reasonable structuring of comprehensive and robust action programmes. While problems of definition and "cause and effect" will remain, such linked programmes give a theoretical basis for a major leap forward in district process planning. Thus major correlations of social indicators will suggest varying programmes from one district to another. For instance in Liverpool 8, the main programme areas might be housing, health, employment and education, judging from an inspection of the City Planning Officer's study of social malaise in the city.

The structuring of such action programmes, relevant performance standards and targets within short term common budgetary periods will not only permit comprehensive technical control but, possibly for the first time, will create the opportunity for the meaningful participation of residents.

There will always be inner areas and there will always be areas at the bottom level of real-estate and always areas of relative deprivation. Webber defined the historic role of such areas as that of an educator. Clearly they no longer function as such and no longer help the underprivileged to improve their status and mobility. Inner area agencies would be dedicated to alleviating the misery of such areas, arresting their decline and reasserting their historic role as educators.

Ultimately the wider implications of inner area agencies lie, to some crucial extent, beyond the fiscal competence of local government. Immediately we can only hope that city leadership will show enough vision to mount vigorous experimental pilot studies and it is not forbidden to hope that the government will not be too far behind. In any case: what is the alternative?

References

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