RECONCILING SELF-URBAN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

We live in a world that is full of contradictions, of multiple positionalties, and of highly contested meanings and aspirations. Trying to position oneself in this complex world requires an understanding of the power, constraints, possibilities and strategies to perform. From the 1990's the movement of socio-economics has challenged the established theoretical process of development practice. In planning practice changed role of planners has delegated him or her the responsibility to act as advocates for particular communities; as technical research staff who study issues long before they appear on decision-making agendas or as skilful mediator. The discourse of urban development practice in Bangladesh especially about reducing poverty is dominated by professionals- the staff of NGOs, government departments and international agencies rather than the affected people. In this essay I tried to define 'me' in the practice that gives me the opportunity and challenge to look at the trend of development practice and myself in different domains. To define my position I wanted to look at myself from three perspectives: in the domains of national, professional and social world. With them I wanted to determine some 'code of practice' that can be of any person's interested to be a professional working in the urban development sector in Bangladesh to get the best possible option to become a linkage to establish social justice.

Key words: reflective, urban, development, practice, social justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that is 'full of contradictions, of multiple positionalties, of necessary flights of the imagination translated into diverse fields of action, of uneven geographical developments, and of highly contested meanings and aspirations.' Harvey (2000) suggested that the sheer enormity of that world and its incredible complexity provide abundance opportunities for the exercise of critical judgement and of limited freedom of the individual and collective will. Trying to position oneself in this complex world requires an understanding of the power, constraints, possibilities and strategies to perform.

In this essay I tried to define 'me' in the practice that gives me the opportunity and challenge to look at myself in different domains. Being an architect definitely has given me an identity, different from urban designer or urban planner. My post graduation in building and urban design in development has given me a new dimension. I want to look at this dimension by trying to look at the development practice, my position in the practice: socially and professionally. With them I want to determine some 'code of practice' that can be of any person's interested to be a professional working in the urban development sector in Bangladesh.

My quest is to know 'who am I?….architect, urban designer or development practitioner?

II. THE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

A profession is usually understood as an occupational group, which has achieved a position of control over the content and application of a body of expertise and skills developed through the increased scale of organisation and specialisation of activities (Healey, 1985). The development of expertise of a professional take the path of constructing realities in pursue of seeking order and make sense of their experience, and to make it 'manageable in their own alien analytical terms, seeking and selecting the universal in the diverse,

the part in the whole, the simple in the complex, the controllable in the uncontrollable, the measurable in the immeasurable, the abstract in the concrete, the static in the dynamic, permanence in flux' (Chambers, 1997).

From the 1990's the movement of socio-economics has challenged the established theoretical process of development practice. Even organizations like the World Bank talks more of human capital, social infrastructure; embracing the concept of participation, keeping in touch with 'the real world' of people. Schon (1991) argued that in the traditional professional-client contract, the professional acts as though he agreed to deliver his services to the client to the limits for his special competence. The movement to create 'citizen professionals' has become an effort to replace the professional-client contract by a new contract in which exchanges of service and remuneration would occur between laymen.

In planning practice we confuse "planners" and "decision makers", even when we speak of the planners "informing the decisions" of elected official. Because "deciding to do the right thing" is only one small part of actually doing the right thing". Planners do much work before decision makers act. Now we might think of planners as advocates for particular communities, or as technical research staff who study issues long before they appear on decision-making agendas (Forester, 2000).

The current status and influence of traditional professional planners is limited and probably declining in general. The changed role of working as skilful mediator, planners' job now is to ensure that affected voices not only speak but actively craft mutually acceptable agreements together, avoiding exclusionary deal making as they go. Forester (2000) described one such planner as 'a participant in the moral world she perceives, a participant who must be sensitive to the political structuring of others' claims of value. Listening and learning, she must interpret and reconstruct problems, probe strategies that 'do justice' to what she sees, and encourage deliberate working agreements that enable citizens to act together'.

Satterwaite (2001) argued that in the development practice the discourse about urban development (and within this discourse about reducing poverty) is dominated by professionals- the staff of NGOs, government departments and international agencies. Perhaps the single most important factor in the limited success or scope of many housing and urban projects supported by governments and international agencies over the last 40 years is the lack of influence allowed groups of the urban poor in their conception, location, design, resource mobilization, financing, implementation and management, and evaluation. This is also a tremendous personal challenge for all professionals working in these agencies as it challenges the way they work- that is, to learn to support the representative organizations formed by the urban poor. The training hardly teach the professional how to listen rather talk.

Development process is not just a technical activity or at least not an activity in which any technical competences can be specified in a political neutral way. Taylor (1992) suggested that practices like town planning is unavoidably, a value-laden political activity. He also added that, a commitment to democratic planning still leaves room for dispute about different 'models' of democratic decision making, from more passive modes of representative democracy at one end of the spectrum to more active participatory democracy at the other'.

In the development profession 'any radical alternative, if it is to succeed, must find ways to negotiate between the security conferred by fixed institutions and spatial forms on the one hand and the need to be open and flexible in relation to new socio-spatial possibilities on the other' (Harvey, 2000).

III. URBAN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN BANGLADESH

Development practice especially in urban sector in Bangladesh is dominated by the public sector in national level, more oriented towards policy making rather than implementation. More to that most of the local government organizations have very little role in planning and development. A very small number of professionals are responsible for planning the development of a large and rapidly urbanizing population. The city and community level NGOs have a limited involvement though they may have the capacity to work more responsively towards formulation or implementation of any programmes cater to the needs and context, through innovative approaches

and participatory techniques. Rahman (2002) identified the two reasons for less involvement of NGOs as the lack of appreciation of the professionals' role and a lack of qualified professionals.

A major challenge the development practitioners face in the urban issues is accepting the urban poor as an essential part of urban life and that with access to opportunities to improve themselves they rapidly start to make a positive contribution to urban development. According assumptions made by Islam (1996) by 2010, 40 percent of the urban poor would be under 'absolute poor' level and 25 percent under 'hard core poor' level having difficulties to have access to land, housing and services. Since urbanization in Bangladesh has taken place largely due to migration urban population especially the urban poor do not form a homogeneous group that can influence the development and planning process.

In most of the suggestions put forward for the development practitioners concerning the planning and urban development strategies emphasis are given on considering the reality of the presence of vast multitude of urban poor in the urban areas and demands a non-conventional type of city planning and urban development approach targeting the beneficiaries. The recommendations include a changed role of government and NGOs not to "do" things for people but to create conditions whereby they are able to help themselves and in the process ask the questions "Who is participating in whose programmes and projects?" and whether "are we asking people to participate in "our" projects or are we participating the "their" projects?"(Islam & Nazem, 1996, Rahman, 2002, Slingsby, undated).

IV. SELF-ANALYSIS

To define my position in the practice I want to look at myself from three perspectives. As a person I belong to these different domains of national, professional and social world.

In the long-run perspective study for Bangladesh in 2020, the World Bank and Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (1999) identified that one major transformation that is bound to occur over the next 25 years is the spread of urbanization. Whereas approximately four out of the five inhabitants are now country people, by 2020 nearly every other man, woman and child will live in an urban area. That transformation can bring either prosperity or decline depending largely on the degree to which the existing mega cities and towns manage to host the monumental change. Unguided by a coherent strategy- now completely lacking in official policy- urbanization will be so chaotic that its attendant congestion and pollution will be likely to choke growth. The test of an urban strategy in the face of such challenges and opportunities will be how well it responds to the needs for efficient land use, adequate housing, serviceable infrastructure, responsive urban services, competent and accountable governance, socially just distribution system and reliable, public and private financing in urban investment.

In a developing country the simple definition of the bad condition-poverty- is made, not by the poor, from their experience, but by the well off, for their convenience or even by the people of different country and social background. This was a reason for me for expecting to build my career in the development sector targeting the urban poor and evolution of anti-poverty policies and interventions in urban areas. I believe that local professionals familiar about the context, people and system can develop better urban development plans with the knowledge of basic intervention policies. For me, it is a challenge, which I am looking forward to take as a development practitioner.

As a woman my other challenge is to establish myself as a 'professional' in a male- dominated society. Chambers (1997) argued the in the things-people contrast, the gender dimension is pervasive. Men are socialized more to deal with things, and women are socialized more to deal with people. Empirically, men dominate the 'things' and 'numbers' professions and activities (for example, engineering, physics, chemistry, accountancy, economics) and the senior posts, while the proportion of women in higher in the 'people' professions and activities (the so called 'caring' professions- nursing, social work) and in the lower posts. Added to this universal idea of women's profession, most of the people in the society in Bangladesh are accustomed to see women as 'worker' rather than a 'professional'.

Presently I work as an academician as well as working in the private sector. As a university faculty I am interested in professional practice, not only as a source of problems for study or internships for students, but as a source of access

to reflective practice through field work, consultation, and continuing education. Schon (1991) suggested that when a practitioner becomes aware of his frames, he also becomes aware of the possibility of the alternative ways of framing the reality of his practice. Frame awareness tends to entrain awareness of dilemmas.

V. CONCLUSION: 'CODE OF PRACTICE'

Usually a code of conduct provides a statement of the fundamental ideals and ethical principles which individuals should strive to attain in their professional work (Taylor, 1992). I would like to define my code of practice in the perspective of my potential work prospect and knowledge of the urban development process.

A development practitioner has the opportunity to work for a greater equality of opportunity with respect to improve the quality of life. Forester (2000) argued that the practicing planners and policy analyst must be moral. They should not be blind to the claims of the powerless or ignore the needs of those most in need. 'It does not mean that they must be women and men of judgement; they must be perceptive, probing, engaged, attentive to the blinders of power and the suppression of the voice; they must have enough moral imagination to be able to listen, to recognize and respect difference; they must have enough political imagination to be able to foster real deliberations, real considerations of common, interdependent destinies, identities and possibilities'. To my judgement any urban development practitioner of our country should follow the Forester's way.

In Bangladesh, the attitude between professionals in the public sectors and private sectors varies significantly. Professionals in the public sectors are usually trained to work in ways that disempower and which tell other people what they should do and think (Rowlands, 1999). On the contrary the work of the private sector and the NGOs reflects greater flexibility, 'compared with the more rule-bound culture of most bureaucracies and consequently their greater ability to respond to the lessons of experience. It also reflects their face-to-face interactions with their grassroots constituencies, compared with the more remote, formalized modelling exercises undertaken in the upper echelons of bureaucratically-managed planning institutions' (Kabeer, 1999). Organizations like Grameen Bank, Bangladesh

Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) are involved in multi-sectoral development programmes for the rural poor, in which special emphasis is given to women. They are now extending their activities in the urban areas. Since I am working with the academic institution run by an NGO, it offers me the flexibility and opportunity to work in the grass root level.

'Unreflective practitioners are equally limited and destructive whether they label as professional or counter-professionals' (Schon, 1991). The idea of reflective practice leads to a demystification of professional expertise. It leads us to recognize that for both the professional and the counter-professional, special knowledge is embedded in evaluative frames which bear the stamp of human values and interests and that the scope of technical expertise is limited by situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and conflict. Through encouraging the interchange of experience and cultivating the inter-connections between the academic and practical communities, coupled with the confidence and ability to express clear views to government and society, I want to work as a reflective practitioner.

Finally, I want to mention Nabeel Hamdi, lecturing about the position of a development practitioner in the planning process. According to him in the planning process an action plan follows the steps of problems and opportunities, goals and priorities, options and trade-offs, resource and constraints, project teams and task and at the end evolution and monitoring. The strategic plan follows the step of data, analysis, options, evaluation and plans. These two processes can be combined to form a continuous process for becoming more effective. A development practitioner should position him or herself in the middle of these two separate processes, rather than becoming an integral part of any of them. He or she might be in a lonely, probably in a shaky position, but this is the best possible option to become a linkage to establish social justice.

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