BARBARA WARD LECTURE

Outstanding women in development

GUEST SPEAKER
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Republic of South Africa

DATE
15 July 2008

LOCATION
The Law Society, London

Distinguished guest
Ladies and gentlemen

It is indeed a great privilege to be invited to deliver the Barbara Ward Lecture and to be able to address people in this audience many of whom are amongst the most eminent moral and intellectual voices in the world today. Barbara Ward achieved many things in her illustrious career and whilst she is perhaps best known for her pioneering work on the linkage between environment and development, the subject of my lecture tonight was indeed one of her passions. She wrote brilliantly and quite extensively on the subject.

The topic of my lecture tonight is the relationship between the state and the urban poor, particularly those living in informal settlements. My central concern will be to try to unpack why it is that the state and the urban poor often found it difficult to work together. The lecture is the third since the inception of the series in 2006. I am indeed honoured to be associated with it and thereby with one of the most inspirational women of the twentieth century: Barbara Ward. I should also mention the tremendous value that I have found in the recent work undertaken by members of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), which Barbara Ward established in 1973. Its work has helped me to think about and contextualise many of my own experiences at the interface between government and the homeless.

A voluminous recent document on the challenges and opportunities associated with quantifying, understanding and dealing with urban poverty in the developing world, drafted by David Satterthwaite and Diana Mitlin is particularly pertinent in this regard. Staff in my Department of Housing; speak glowingly of the relevance and quality of the work being done by people such as the two researchers. Your work makes a real difference in practice. And in so doing you contribute

in exactly the kind of way that I believe Ms Ward would have done, had she still been alive today. Thank you for having me.

It should be noted at the outset that in many countries of the developing world, it is difficult to get governments to pay any attention at all to urban slums and informal settlements. This lecture takes on board those countries where governments are in fact trying to make a difference. Such governments often find the experience a chastising and stormy one and it is important that we reflect critically on this.

I am relatively new in the field of housing, having only been at this post for four years. In all that time, established concepts such as sustainability became pivotal in our discourse. Barbara Ward was thus also an institution in this environment. As we crafted our policies, within the framework set by this environment, we developed a certain self-congratulatory attitude. We were quite convinced that we were at the cutting edge of new thought on housing, consequently very smug. Imagine therefore my shock when, in preparing this lecture, I took time to refresh my memory on some of Barbara Ward's work, specifically her seminal work: Home of Man. Every single one of our cutting edge views she had elaborated on - thirty years ago! With such eloquence and clarity that my ego has not recovered after suffering a huge battering. Whatever made us think we had anything new to add? We might come from Africa, but this time it did seem there was nothing new from that quarter.

But I knew that I was reading a phenomenon that seemed even then to read my mind, when I read this phrase from her book:

"What author – including this author – has not at times echoed the uneasy complaint of an Egyptian writing over two thousand years ago: Would that I had words that are unknown, utterances and sayings in fresh language."

Would that I had words, views that are unknown for that is what I need right now to incite you to something I have now become quite evangelical about. What fresh language would I need mastery over? I have none of these … so I would have to be content with the fact that I come here to emphasise the known. And that is good enough for me, for it is a message worth repeating over.

But for now I am content with a mere emphasis of the known.

The known begins in the present: that urban poverty is one of the biggest threats facing the developing world. The growth of slums in recent times has been unprecedented – throwing up challenges we had not imagined nor could we have anticipated.

Recent events in Kenya and under different circumstances, in my country, have showed in starkest relief the urgency in dealing with the condition of slum dwellers. Very specifically in Kenya, earlier this year, the violence that followed the declaration of the election results left more than 1 000 people dead and 600 000 homeless, the majority of these, slum dwellers from Kibera, etc. More recently, my country experienced a shocking wave of xenophobia, unheard of in our history, that led to 60 deaths. Again, these attacks were in slum areas. Among people who had endured poverty at its crudest, have nothing to lose and whose patience had worn dangerously thin.

It is, in my opinion very clear that this will be a site of struggle, unless we resolve the problems as a matter of urgency.

Conditions of slums is a matter that will define present day politics in a rapidly urbanizing continent. Because this has become the crucible of all the problems of poverty. Current sociological analysis of poverty has over the last decade, talked about the urbanisation of poverty. In fact, the truth, is the process correctly captured: would be that poverty now wears a Slum Dwellers face.

The issue of the relationship between the state and the homeless therefore assumes fundamental importance. The State of the World's Cities Report 2006/07 notes that the growth of slums in the last 15 years has been unprecedented. Whereas in 1990 there were 715 million slum dwellers in the world, by the year 2 000 the figure had grown to 912 million. Today the world slum population is estimated at nearly a billion and United Nation (UN) Habitat estimates that if current trends continue, it will reach one comma four billion by 2020. The report further indicates that life in urban slums is becoming as severe and dehumanising as rural poverty. In fact, my I add, in some countries far more dehumanising than rural poverty. In countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Nepal and Niger, four out of ten slum children are malnourished. Moreover, the high child mortality rates in the urban slums is attributed not so much to lack of immunisation, but rather to inadequate living conditions in urban slums. And recent data on HIV/AIDS show that HIV prevalence in sub-Saharan African countries is significantly higher in urban than rural areas, and substantially higher still in urban slums.

The challenge is assuming enormous dimensions and governments in the developing world ignore populations living in urban slums at their own risk.

Whilst homelessness is unquestionably a global issue requiring a global response, what I am going to say tonight derives largely from reflections on real experiences in South Africa, and as Chairperson of the African Ministerial Committee on Housing and Urban Development and in my role as Chairperson of the International Poor Fund. How government can work effectively with the very poor, in informal settlements is one question that has both fascinated and frustrated me. I have been amazed at the way in which the urban poor sometimes have been able to mobilise themselves to address housing and other needs - this is nothing short of miraculous. On the other hand, the way in which the urban poor sometimes are unable to shake off an inherent mistrust of government, has been a source of real frustration.

It should be noted that the issue of whether or not the homeless should engage with government at all, is a highly contentious one amongst some homeless people's movements. Some hold the view that engagement dampens the militancy of homeless people's movements and robs them of key weapons in their struggles against exclusion – such as land invasions. Because, you see, the essence is that one of the pre-conditions of engagement is that people's organisations have to agree to play by the rules, and the moment they do that they believe they are effectively disempowered.

It is worth pointing out that whilst there may be substantial debate on the issue, evidence internationally seems to suggest that in any case, land invasions by the urban poor are increasingly less effective as mechanisms for achieving major gains. For example, it has been noted, squatting has become an increasingly rare mechanism through which people get access to land in rapidly growing African cities. In the years leading up to and immediately after independence, squatting was widespread. But today it is generally not tolerated. Instead, informal subdivision and densification of existing squatter areas is a major mechanism of land supply for the urbanising poor in Africa. Moreover, even if poor people's movements are successful in seizing land, improving the circumstances of those who live on it depends crucially on engagement with the state in respect of service provision and necessary commitment to security of tenure.

In any event, militant strategies and avoiding engagement with the state obviously makes things very difficult for both sides. Nor does it distinguish those governments who might genuinely want to co-operate. By definition such strategies see the state and other formal institutions as the "enemy".

I represent that sector that is often called "the state", stereo-typically characterised as cold, uncaring, with no political will to change the lives of the poor. I have no doubt we deserve such characterisation. For indeed, the most significant achievement governments have had: the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), remains largely a tool empowering governments and the private sector to joint declarations for collective efforts aimed at ending degrading poverty and deprivation. Since then, poverty has worsened and the downward trend in human development indexes of poor countries continues.

But we need to move beyond either being dazzled or frustrated by the actions of the urban poor as they interface with government. We need to better understand the often very complex dynamics at play in slum communities and learn how to intervene more effectively. Moreover, those living in slums also need to organise and systematically learn how to engage more effectively for their own sake. In my view, this is precisely what Shack Dwellers International (SDI) has succeeded in doing and I laud them for it.

African Ministers, myself included, have taken a conscious decision of engagement, we have joined the small band of countries that are set to chart a new path. The major catalyst in our case was the Slum Dwellers International.

My own induction into this complex world is an interesting story that I tell any who cares to listen. It happened at the World Urban Forum in Barcelona. I had been invited to address a roundtable discussion on the plight of the poor. After giving, what I thought was the most rousingly emotive speech, the first hand that shot up was from an irate South African woman. "What", she asked, gave me the right to come all that way to speak on their behalf.

This is a highly successful people's movement that does not have an "anti-engagement" stance. The Strategic Development Initiative (SDI) has been in existence for almost 16 years now and has grown into an international network of urban poor Federations in 24 countries, on three different continents. The centrepiece of the SDI's strategy has been a commitment to engage formal institutions, especially the local state. Their approach has been to try to broker deals that secure tenure and provide decent housing for vulnerable groups and to do so in ways which set precedents and which can be scaled up.

For the most part their engagement with governments is often very robust and differs from one context to the next. In my experience with the SDI, the nature of their negotiation and engagement politics offers the greatest possibilities of achieving real gains for the poor. I commend them and their strategies as one of the surest ways we can achieve success in this work.

But now I must return to the pivotal issue - the nature of the relationship between homeless people and the state is not just a tactical one about whether the poor should engage with the state or not. It is about an entire range of quite awkward relationships, about which I shall give a few examples which speak to positions that are easy to overcome, ultimately.

- It is true too that government officials are often very bureaucratic in their dealings with homeless people's organisations and often lack the understanding and empathy to engage properly.

- On the other hand, poor people's movements are not particularly good at following procedural requirements. Government has, for good reason, to account for the public money it spends. This has been a source of substantial frustration in the relationship between government and people's housing movements in my country.
- Governments are tied to budget cycles and the general rule (internationally) is that line function department's must use the funds allocated to them for a financial cycle or lose the funds. Generally in projects driven via a people's process, spending is seldom in accordance with the budget cycle and this is often a source of embarrassment for government who have to report under-spending, against a backdrop of a huge and growing backlog.
- Whilst the urban poor have been good at providing basic shelter for themselves at scale (in the form of shacks), the moment people's movement's get involved in providing more substantial houses supported by subsidies, the process of delivery has generally been very slow and very limited scale has been achieved. This is often a problem for government. In South Africa, people's movements can access housing subsidies for projects in the same way that local government or the private sector can. However, people's movements have been comprehensively outperformed when it comes to rate and scale in production, accounting for a miniscule proportion of the units produced as we sit with huge impatience from the people.
- Social dynamics in informal settlements are often extremely fluid. People's movements are generally quite good at dealing flexibly with these dynamics. But they are not good at dealing with fundamental discord or with disruption from elements of the community whose interests are not served by their housing projects.

For many in the academic community the awkward relationships described above stem largely from a mismatch between the 'modernist' imaginations that governments in the developing world have inherited from the global North, and many different kinds of rationalities that drive poor people in their quest for survival in developing countries. Economists especially, argue for less government intervention in the housing sector. Most have, at least qualified faith in the efficiency of markets and argue for government intervention only insofar as it oils the wheels of the market mechanism. In this formulation, the principal roles of government with respect to housing should be to enable housing markets to work and to ensure adequate provision of infrastructure and other public goods such as water and sanitation and a healthy environment. One may question whether homelessness is consistent with human dignity, and reasonably maintain that governments should bear responsibility as the landlord of last resort.

In most developing countries formal housing markets are unfortunately overregulated. Permits for the construction process are expensive and may take several years; and zoning standards are often unrealistic. Overregulation makes formal housing unaffordable for the poor; it is also dysfunctional, since by encouraging the construction of compliant housing, it reduces the power of planners to shape and influence the spatial development of cities. In the past, many governments in developing countries were hostile to informal and squatter settlements and undertook aggressive slum clearance programmes. One reason was to discourage excessive urban-rural migration, another was to deter illegal settlement of land; and yet another was to prevent unauthorised housing. However, the tide seems to be changing. The ideological pendulum has been swinging away from the state attempting to micro-manage the economy to harnessing and channelling market forces and providing the impetus for markets to work. Accordingly, many governments in developing countries view slums and squatter settlements and more generally informal housing, as an inevitable albeit unwelcome by-product of economic growth. In this sense, slums and informal settlements are increasingly being viewed in a more benign fashion as nascent communities.

Typically, therefore, governments have scant information about slum communities since these are largely undocumented. This makes diagnoses of housing needs and the formulation of effective housing policy inordinately difficult. The defining characteristics of slums and informal settlements are that they violate land ownership laws, zoning regulations, building codes, and evade property-related taxes. Thus, almost by definition, local governments and municipalities have limited influence on informal housing by way of taxation and regulation. Just as informal economic activity erodes the tax base, so too does informal housing and slums erode property-related taxes. The limited fiscal capacity of governments in developing countries, especially those in Africa, makes the provision of urban infrastructure very difficult. This explains the underdeveloped nature of transportation systems, water, electricity, solid waste disposal, sewerage, and fire and police protection and so on. In slums and informal settlements, these problems are magnified and compounded by government's lack of knowledge of their current state and inability to control how and where they emerge.

Governments face a perplexing policy dilemma in deciding on the quality of infrastructure that should be provided in informal housing complexes. If it turns a blind eye to violations of regulations and provides the same level of services as is does for formal housing, it de facto encourages the development of more informal settlements. This dilemma is particularly acute in squatter settlements since governments are averse to implicitly endorsing settlements that were established through the expropriation of government or private property and often in uninhabitable areas. But, informal settlements also contain the bulk of poor households who would benefit considerably from the provision of even very basic services. The absence of these basic services encourages crime and disease which are externalities that hurt all residents, and produces neighbourhoods that would be blighted for years, as we very well know.

In the global north, over the last five decades or so, the pressures on city centre infrastructure have diminished. Their levels of urbanisation have reached an equilibrium point, their demographic transitions have been completed, and rising automobile ownership has resulted in the decentralisation of residence and employment. By contrast, the urban populations of developing countries have been growing at historically unprecedented rates. As developing countries have not passed through their demographic transitions; as their rural or urban migrations are still underway, as per capital incomes are likely to grow steadily, and as only a fraction of the population own cars, there is every reason to believe that pressure on urban infrastructure will become more intense over the next fifty years. Most cities in developing countries are in abominable condition: choked with traffic, foul with pollution, overcrowded, and afflicted by disease, a sitting fire hazard, beyond the reach of the help of the police. This existential misery especially affects the lot of the urban poor and the homeless.

The main point is that the provision of basic infrastructure in informal settlements 'regularises' them. By strengthening property rights, regularisation stimulates investment in housing. This may have the effect of encouraging more housing that is informal and illegal, unsightly and poorly planned, but surely this is better than an untenable status quo. In most developing countries, because of large informal sectors, household income cannot be measured accurately, which effectively precludes broad based, income related, demand driven housing programmes. This consideration by itself suggests that supply-side subsidy programmes might be relatively more effective as a redistributive tool. But fiscal constraints in developing countries limit the scope for redistribution. The poor in urban slums might be better assisted by stimulating economic growth through channelling market forces - as a rising tide lifts all boats.

The World Bank has been an influential player in shaping housing policy in developing countries. Its policies have gone though three stages since the 1970s. First there was a focus on 'sites and

services' and slum-upgrading projects. Between 1972 and 1981, 90 percent of World Bank lending for shelter went to slum upgrading and site and service projects. The second stage gradually shifted the emphasis to housing finance development under the principle of subsidiary and extensive community participation; and more recently, there has been a concentration on the utility of 'housing finance development' loans which includes the provision of urban infrastructure and public-private partnerships. What the bank's experience shows is that macroeconomic and regulatory environments are important; the informal housing sector has significant contributions to make and the housing sector as a whole must be the focus of attention. However, housing finance development has not been very effective in stimulating informal sector housing. Banks are usually not interested in getting involved because informality is inconsistent with prudential management and serving the poor is unprofitable. The role of government is more directed at housing finance liberalisation, deregulating and promoting financial innovation.

Another recent development has been microfinance. For example, Chapters 6 and 7 of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2005) contrast four types of loans: mortgage finance by banks; micro-enterprise finance; shelter microfinance; and community funds. Micro-enterprise finance is targeted at small entrepreneurs, shelter microfinance at households with land who wish to improve their structures, and community funds at those without secure tenure for the construction of basic housing and infrastructure. A dominant theme is that shelter microfinance agencies and community organisations need links to the state to provide funding on the required scale.

Even though governments in developing countries face severe constraints in the design of effective housing policy and in managing the problematic interface with the homeless, the picture is not altogether bleak. Formal and informal housing markets respond to market and policy stimuli. Central government should take the lead in enabling markets to work. Governments can also promote policies that increase participation in the formal housing sector and play an important role in redistributive housing policy by ensuring minimum standards for houses and basic infrastructure services.

A key implication of these observations is, of course, that development practitioners need to understand the nature of informal and sub-altern rationalities much better. Moreover, they need to understand the way in which these rationalities intersect with their own development designs. Hence, public interventions which acknowledge and understand existing informal arrangements and protocols tend to succeed, whilst those that don't tend to fail. However, we must note that uncritical "accommodation" of informal social practices can be very problematic. This is particularly the case when these informal practices threaten to undermine democracy and are a threat to ordinary citizens. This warning notwithstanding, the work of the post-modern school challenges us to proceed more humbly, to understand and acknowledge the many rationalities at play and to develop new and hybrid forms of intervention which are appropriate to our context, but from which the rest of the world might also begin to learn.

That said, we should be mindful that mistrust and resistance underpins much that is government initiated, for various reasons, but primarily because it destroys established survival strategies. What has become evident in our case is the conflict that arises within a community where one sector, who democratically choose a path of development is opposed by those who eke out a living as informal landlords. Where these tensions manifest themselves, there is a public will which invariably contradicts the survival strategies of some in the communities. Here develops a contradiction between the public will and various accumulative agendas of some in the community. The contradiction generally becomes manifest in a variety of activities and there is a resultant split in the community. The role of the state in such situations is less about

'accommodating' informal sector social relations and practices, than it is about finding the right balance between standing up against such informal practices when they are perverse and anti-social and supporting and developing them when they contribute positively and additively to both individual and social well-being.

What is important about the kind of conflict I am referring to here, is that it is not a conflict at the intersection of the rationality of modernist planning design and the multiple rationalities of informal social practices (although it may be this in part). More fundamentally, it is a conflict at the intersection of a democratically determined and rational 'public will' and the multiple rationalities of others in the same community. Thus it is not about externally imposed modernist design on a community, but might very well be about an internal tension between the logic of the collective and that of particular interests.

The importance of the state playing a strong role in ensuring that the public will is upheld and given expression in implementation, is something I feel rather strongly about. On many occasions people's movements argue that we do not understand the complexities of the dynamics on the ground and the survival strategies of the poor. In our view it is precisely because we understand that some of our ways of thinking have to change and precisely because we are developing a better understanding of dynamics on the ground, that we insist that poor people have us much right as anyone to have their democratically decided will protected by the state!

There are some incontrovertible truths that we should bear in mind: uncontrolled informal settlements should be a concern to all. They are of concern to governments because these practices have a direct impact on government's housing policy. Active government intervention is needed to strike an appropriate balance between the rule of law and ensuring that the poor and homeless can still lead lives consistent with dignity. Economic justice for them also means providing a minimum level of public services.

The kind of tensions described above are, however, not uncommon in social formations of the global North. There is an impressive literature on how to reconcile, as far as possible, the tensions between sectional and public interests. What is different in informal settlements is the intensity of the tensions, the fluidity of the players involved and the stakes involved in not winning. What is also different is the likelihood of being able to resolve differences easily through democratic discourses. The result is an extremely stormy and often bewildering existential experience for development professionals involved in the process – to say nothing of the politicians!

It should be evident that there is a very complex dialectical relationship between governments, the homeless and their representatives.

Given the scale of the problems, rationalist interventions guided by the public interest may undermine a multitude of other rationalities and survival strategies of the poor. Governments need to proceed with great sensitivity and need to support the survival strategies of the poor as long as these are not pernicious and are not anathema to the foundations of democracy. But government can never simply surrender the terrain of improving the lot of the urban poor to multiple rationalities and survival strategies. Indeed, the very essence of the development challenge is to ensure that the trajectory of interventions made on behalf of the urban poor is mediated via democratic processes in the public interest (however imperfect).

I believe, perhaps still with some degree of arrogance, that our partnership as government, with the SDI, provides us with exactly this conduit of a democratic process in the public interest. Through this partnership, I believe we have managed some of these complexities. It would be

fitting therefore at this point, that we as a government are greatly indebted to such organisations as the SDI, their local affiliate, the Federation for the Urban Poor and in particular Jockin. At a personal level, their patient guidance has given me strength.

The partnership we have forged has allowed me in my capacity as Chairperson of the African Ministerial Committee on Housing and Urban Development to boldly make the matter of the urban poor a central point of our programme.

Having accepted the issue of slum prevention and slum upgrading at the top of the agenda, we, as African Ministers resolved not only to prevent new slum formations, but to also look into the existing policies, legal, institutional and regulatory frameworks that hinder our abilities to deal with slum formation in ways that affirmed and strengthened our relationship with the poor. We therefore resolved to review the frameworks that exist to enable an environment where the full capacities of community organisations and non-governmental organisations were utilised. In practice, amongst other things, this will mean the promotion of community-led development processes in slum prevention and slum upgrading and the identification of ways to assist initiatives relating to savings.

We resolved that we have to restructure our interaction at local government level, including participatory decision-making, building bridges and partnerships between officials and citizens, transparency, participatory budgeting, fostering and nurturing grassroots movements, paying attention to what needs to change in governance to improve the lives of the poor and the development and utilisation of assessment tools to measure urban governance performance and make the necessary corrections.

In our case, through our partnership, SDI has brought into our collective pool, critical skills of communication and enumeration. SDI has shown their confidence in us as a government that has committed to make a difference. We welcome the confidence and we are certain that through our joint cooperation, we might offer answers to some of the impediments that bedevil our progress on so urgent a challenge.

It was with a sense of real achievement and pride that we co-hosted the very successful Slum Dwellers conference in Cape Town on 19 May 2006, where we were able to forge a formal relationship with those communities whose daily lives are plagued by the elements, by insecurity and poverty. Together we forged a new way of doing things and we have formed a partnership, built on an understanding that we, each of us, have a responsibility toward changing the fortunes of the poor.

This is a marriage that has worked for me, and like all good marriages, there is a dominant partner …

Let me acknowledge, at this point, the work that some governments and organisations are already undertaking in working to find solutions to upgrade slums into habitable settlements that restore dignity and create a better life for all. In particular, I pay tribute to three donors for breaking the mold and funding slum dwellers organisations, directly. The Sigrid Rausing Trust for funding innovative solutions devised by urban poor federations since 2001. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that is supporting slum dweller and government partnerships. And finally, the Allachy Trust

We have to go beyond raising consciousness. As Barbara Ward's illustrious work shows, it is the consistent effort at advocacy and the generation of what many may regard as radical ideas and even the emphasis of the known that will make our collective objectives achievable, finally.

There is therefore need to ensure that our created partnerships of ideas and practices that directly relate the living conditions of the urban poor find sustenance and further development during our time. A tragedy in the world would be enacted, if it were not to do so!

I also acknowledge the International Institute for Environment and Development for the role it has played since its establishment including the Slum Dwellers International.

Today we have a much better understanding and more information and knowledge about our daunting and intractable challenges. But as the great philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, has reminded us: "To know the worst is not always to be liberated from its consequences. Nevertheless, it is preferable to ignorance" and all credit to Barbara Ward for lifting the veil of ignorance.

I thank you