Urbanisation:  
A Challenge to Socialism

by JACK MUNDEY

When one talks of human settlements we see a rapid urbanisation of the world. In 1950 it was 30 per cent urban, in 1975 40 per cent urban and it is anticipated to be at least half urban by the year 2000. This, in fact, means 3½ billion people in the urban areas of the earth.

If these huge agglomerations occur - for example, Mexico City is expected to reach 30 million by the year 2000 - what are the chances of providing sufficient food, the necessary increase in energy, and sufficient productive employment in the cities?

In order for people to move from the countryside to the cities, a surplus of food must be produced in the rural areas which can be used to feed the dependent urban populations. These surpluses may come from domestic supplies or from foreign sources. From the first urban settlements several thousand years ago, until the middle of this century, cities were sustained largely, if not entirely by the food produced in the surrounding countryside.

In the last quarter of a century more countries have become dependent on food imports. The world food pattern has altered profoundly in recent decades.

This year the USA and Canada will export an estimated 94 million tons of grain. In consumption terms, these Northern American countries are exporting enough grain to feed, at their respective consumption levels, 560 million Indians or 115 million Soviet people.

A generation ago, Western Europe, which was the most urbanised region of the world was also the only importing region. Now, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe (including the Soviet Union) are net grain importers. A great amount of the food imported into these regions is to feed the cities. So the rapid rate of urbanisation has exacerbated the food problem and its mal-distribution.

Today, not only are nearly all countries food importers, but a growing number now import over half their grain supplies. Among these are Japan, Belgium, Senegal, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Lebanon, Switzerland, Algeria, Portugal, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, South Korea and Egypt.

As rising import needs throughout the world have come to exceed exportable surpluses, both the US and Canadian governments, in order to avoid politically unacceptable rises in
domestic food prices, have restricted access
for some countries. Most recently, Soviet and
Polish grain buyers were excluded from US
grain markets late last year. The Canadian
Wheat Board banned any new wheat sales
from mid-July of 1975 until the harvest was
completed.

Anticipating future difficulty in gaining
access to US food supplies, some industrial
countries have negotiated long term
agreements which are intended to ensure
access to North American grain supplies.
Japan, the Soviet Union and Poland are
among these.

After a quarter of a century of burdensome
food “surpluses” and keen competition among
exporters for markets abroad, the emerging
competition among importers for assured
access to supplies, represents an ominous
reversal and a deepening food crisis.

Those countries remaining important
exporters at a global level can be counted on
the fingers of one hand. Australia is one.

If the trends of the past several years
continue, the collective import needs of the
100-plus importing countries will greatly
exceed the total exportable supplies,
particularly when harvests are poor.

This creates a “politics of food” - a type of
food diplomacy. The hostages in this game are
the cities of the world which are sustained
with imported food. They are living literally from
“ship to mouth” as Lester Brown, of the US
research organisation “Worldwatch”, points
out.

Surely many countries would do well to
consider whether rapid urbanisation is in
those countries’ interests, considering the
growing dependence on distant food supplies.
It was noteworthy at the Human Settlement
Conference that there was a tremendous
respect for the magnificent performance of the
Chinese in feeding and clothing its huge
population, its self-help example, and of the
socialist application and enthusiasm of its
people in this regard.

Energy and Urbanisation

Urbanisation and the availability of energy
are closely related. The emergence of the first
cities appears to be closely associated with
agricultural breakthroughs such as
harnessing of draft animals, the domestication
of new agricultural plants, and the
development of irrigation systems. This
enabled humans to harness more energy for
their own purposes ... to capture more solar
energy on plants, or in the case of draft
animals, to convert otherwise unusable
roughage into a form of energy that could be
used to increase the food supply. Important
though these new energy resources were, the
agricultural surpluses they made possible
were never enough to support more than a
small proportion of the population living away
from the land. Indeed, as recently as 1800, only
2.2 per cent of the population in Europe
resided in cities of 100,000 or more.

The energy breakthrough, which permitted
much larger populations, even majorities, to
be sustained in cities was the discovery of
fossil fuels, initially coal and later oil. The
harnessing of fossil fuels to generate steam for
industrial power, gave birth to the industrial
revolution, permitted the concentration of
economic activity and ushered in a new era of
urbanisation.

The large scale migration of people from
country to city requires an abundance of
energy. In an urban environment, additional
energy is required to satisfy food, fuel,
housing and transport needs. Assuming no
change in consumption levels, each person
who moves from the countryside to the city
raises world energy requirements.

With food, urbanisation raises energy
requirements on two fronts. As the urban
population increases, relative to the rural food
producing population, additional energy is
required in agriculture to generate this
requisite food surplus. At the same time, more
energy is needed to process the food and to
transport it to urban areas.

As more and more people move into the
cities, each person remaining in agriculture
must produce an ever larger surplus. This, in
turn, requires broad substitution of
mechanical energy for labor in food
production.

It is customary to point with pride to the
small percentage of the population living on
the land in industrial nations such as the
United States, where 5 per cent of the society
living on the land provide food for the
remainder. Nelson Rockefeller was recently
boasting about this, but as Professor David
Pimentel illustrates, this level of labor
productivity in agriculture requires vast
amounts of energy. He said "If the current 4 billion population were to be fed at US consumption levels, using US energy intensive agricultural production techniques, and if petroleum were the only source of energy, and if we used all petroleum resources solely to feed the world population, the 415 billion barrel reserve would last a mere 29 years."

Until recently, it was assumed that the world would move from a fossil fuel era into the nuclear age. After a quarter of a century the world is beginning to have second thoughts. Failure to devise any satisfactory techniques of waste-disposal, and the inevitable spread of nuclear weapons along with nuclear power, are raising doubts in the minds of increasing numbers of people in all countries, who are mounting opposition to a nuclear "solution". Besides the seemingly insoluble waste disposal problem, the economics associated with nuclear power are becoming questionable. In 1975, in the USA, there were 25 times as many nuclear reactors cancelled or deferred as there were new orders placed. The nuclear industry is sick and it is far from a foregone conclusion that the world will move from the fossil fuel era to a nuclear one. There could be a growing reliance on solar energy.

If the world moves towards a solar age, it means among other things, that the population will need to be more broadly distributed, for the simple reason that solar energy itself is broadly dispersed. The mechanisms for capturing solar energy vary widely. They include solar collectors, which are used for bath heating and cooling; photovoltaics, which convert solar energy into electrical energy (the form that powers COMSAT's international communications satellites) and indirect forms of solar energy such as wind, water and firewood. All forms of bioconversion including firewood are of course solar based. The great attraction of solar energy is that the source is safe, sure virtually endless and rather widely available. It is imperative that governments must be forced to have massive amounts of finance channelled to solar research.

If the world goes solar, the optimum size of human settlements is likely to be far smaller than it would otherwise be. People and planners should be considering the prospect of numerous relatively smaller communities, widely distributed for energy efficiency, rather than the continuing massing of people in enormous cities.

**EMPLOYMENT**

The depth of the crisis of capitalism can be shown by the International Labour Office's figures on the projection of employment by the year 2000.

It claims the industrialised countries will need to create 161 million additional jobs - an increase of 33 per cent. In the same period the Third World countries must attempt to create a massive increase of 922 million new jobs - an increase of 50 per cent.

With an estimated 300 million people unemployed now, there is every likelihood that 1 billion could be unemployed by the turn of the century. The majority of these will be in Third World countries, on the fringes of giant cities of 20-30 million people each. Surely it is with these stark realities that there must be a genuinely new revolutionary approach to employment; that it should not be seen as an end in itself, but that its benefit to society is seen as first and foremost, and the consequences of all labor undertaken are considered in the light of the needs of society now, but even more importantly for the needs of future inhabitants of this planet.

**FINITE NATURE OF THE WORLD**

There are at least three reasons why urbanisation trends may not be able to continue as projected until the end of the century: one, the inability to produce sufficiently large food surpluses; two, the disappearance of the cheap energy needed to underwrite the urbanisation process; and three, the near impossibility of creating enough jobs in urban settings under present social and political systems.

It is with these factors in mind that China's experience of the last 30 years should be drawn upon. While there has not been a spectacular increase in total food production, there has been great success in stopping the previous mal-distribution of food, and there has not been the on-rush to urban areas as has happened in nearly every other Third World country.

In many Third World countries it is not uncommon for a country with 70 per cent of its people in rural areas to allocate only 20 per
Professor Michael Lipton, in his book, *Why Poor People Stay Poor*, points out that a child from an Indian city has 8.5 times the chance of going to university than a similar child from a rural area. A similar situation exists in medical care in the cities/rural conflict in most Third World countries.

**REAL URBAN-RURAL BALANCE ONLY POSSIBLE UNDER SOCIALISM**

Food, socially beneficial jobs, and rural restoration, are all tied together, and most of the blame for the neglect of the urban and rural areas rests with those who have exploited the workers and the peasants over centuries - solely for exploitation and profit.

However, during the past several years the global environmental crisis has been defined in industrial or rich country terms - in terms of pollution. The two have become virtually synonymous, but there is another, perhaps even more serious facet of the environmental crisis. Eric Eckholm, in his book *Losing Ground*, describes it vividly:

"In the world war to save the habitable environment, even the battles to purify the noxious clouds over Tokyo and Sao Paulo, and to restore life to Lake Erie, are but skirmishes compared to the uncontested routs being suffered in the hills of Nepal and Java,"
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and on the rangelands of Chad and northwest India. A far deadlier annual toll, and perhaps an even greater threat to future human welfare than that of the pollution of our air and water, is that exacted by the undermining of the productivity of the land itself through accelerated soil erosion, creeping deserts, increased flooding, and declining soil fertility. Humans are...out of desperation, ignorance, short-sightedness or greed, destroying the basis of their own livelihood as they violate the limits of the natural systems."

Perhaps the single most helpful effort in arresting this deterioration and restoring the countryside would be the mobilisation of the population for massive reafforestation projects. Reafforestation serves several important ends. It reduces runoff, reduces soil erosion, lessens the frequency and severity of flooding, slows the silting of reservoirs and canals and over the longer term provides an important source of fuel and building materials. There is so much to be gained from a large scale reafforestation project in virtually every Third World country that it is difficult to understand why more governments have not initiated programs for this purpose.

In a number of countries, particularly in Africa, and to a lesser degree in Asia and Latin America, desert expansion poses a serious threat to agriculture. Reafforestation also provides the possibility for employment for huge numbers of people, which is certainly socially beneficial, as it provides for future inhabitants of the globe. Here again one has to point to China's performance in the rather massive restoration of the countryside (particularly reafforestation, water conservation works, and terracing) in the last 25 years, to demonstrate it can be done.

In our day to day preoccupation with problems and events we tend to forget the fateful arithmetic of population growth. Occasionally we need to remind ourselves that a 3 per cent annual rate of population growth on a present population of 15 million would find itself with 285 million just four generations hence. Similarly, Mexico with 60 million now, will have more than 1.1 billion people in a century. This would exceed the present population of the USSR, India and Bangladesh combined.

I raise these projections not because they must materialise, but to emphasise the urgency of reducing birth rates where they remain high.

Many politicians, planners and citizens believe the tide from rural to urban cannot be slowed or stemmed. Often we say socialism will solve all problems. And what a sweeping generalisation that statement covers. The decisive and paramount consideration is what sort of socialism.

The usual priority for day to day economic considerations, not that such considerations are unimportant, consume an inordinately large amount of time of the thinking and actions of most socialists. Yet in the area of ecology, environment and related issues of burning importance, these are relegated to the background. Some of the more sectarian and dogmatic socialists scorn ecology as not being a "class" question and of no great importance in winning socialism.

It was noticeable that socialists from the workers' movement, union leaders and rank and file unionists were in fact at a minimum at the UN Habitat conference and Habitat Forum, yet what subject more than "human settlement" should concern the workers' and socialist movements?

The massive movement from the countryside to the cities in the last 25 years has been based on conditions which do not appear to be sustainable in the future. Under socialism, correcting this imbalance should not be an impossibility. Of course, in suggesting that there must be a checking to the urban bias, for very obvious reasons, is not to suggest that the city has to be abandoned.

The evolution of cities represents an important facet of the social evolution of our species. As Barbara Ward has pointed out so effectively in The Home of Man, "cities are an integral part of contemporary civilisation, both repositories and custodians of culture". Thus any real urban-rural balance must be a socialist one.

While self-help, revolutionary actions in each country, must be the main struggle of the people to win socialism and a better life, this must not be posed against an increasing need for more global considerations of human problems, and the the need to see these international problems as our problems, which we can do something about by increasing awareness, improving communications, raising consciousness and by co-ordinated actions of people concerned with retaining a habitable planet.