

INTEGRATIVE PLANNING:

A Regional Approach to Urbanization in Thailand

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Introduction

Given the high urbanization rate of the capital city of Bangkok and its perpetual context of situation, hardly any optimist can be assured that its population growth could be delimited to 6.5 million in 1990, the target anticipated by the Town and Country Planning Office. Unless drastic changes occur in the existing machinery for planning formulation and implementation, the present, if not worsening, form of agglomeration will proliferate. Among the many shortcomings in the planning process¹, the following two are critical but have only been slowly recognized in planning practices:

1. Lack of planning coordination at various levels — national, regional and urban.
2. Lack of coordination in sectoral planning—economic, social and physical.

The present study takes into account these two related types of coordination as a framework of integrative planning. It portrays the lack of coordination in connection with the orientation of planning practice in the present planning administrative structure. In emphasizing the need for coordination, regional planning is put forward as the level on which the most effective integration of planning could occur. This study further relegates the two problems of coordination, in part, to the acute shortage of well-suited and competent planners, professionals and administrators.

Context of Urbanization

Urban planning is local, regional and national in scope and interrelationship. Urban problems transcend city limits proper. This fact, however, has rarely been given sufficient recognition in practical planning work. Consequently, during the early stages of economic development, Bangkok metropolitan area became even more notorious in its "primate city" phenomenon. And at present, its population is about 40 times larger than the second largest city, Chiangmai.

Though migration is necessary for economic growth, it can also be a disturbing element. There are increasing worries about the negative effects of such rapid urbanization. The time may come for Bangkok when the concentration of population and economic activities may actually impede economic growth, breed social unrest and disorder, and threaten to become national liability.

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¹ Mainly, the existing bureaucratic system gives rise to the various organizational weakness and administrative inefficiencies.

The rapid expansion of deteriorated environment and high social costs are the most obvious and immediate results of this overconcentration process. Eventually, the public investment on the expansion of urban infrastructure will reach a point of diminishing return. Urban problems can bring national development to the edge of failure. This would be an appalling situation, indeed!

Only recently, are we moving from dealing with the symptoms to the causes of urban problems. In the Third National Economic and Social Development Plan for 1972-76, the Thai Government has more rigorously emphasized a decentralizing development strategy which attempts to redistribute population and economic activities into other areas of the country yet to be developed -- in the potential growth centers or "growth poles" of regions. Like Bangkok, these centers can become essential dynamos of development offering new market opportunities for labor supply, resources, goods and produce from the surrounding countryside as well as for economies of scale, technological progress, accumulation of capital and entrepreneurial talents. By strengthening the socio-economic base as well as improving the physical environment of existing big cities of the wider regions through deliberate public action, they could be the growth poles which are mature enough to attract the flow of migrants.

Another parallel measure to reduce the pressure on Bangkok metropolitan area is to increase the holding power of the rural areas. The strategy deals directly with the immediate economic and social causes of urban-oriented migration. Evidently, part of the problems that generates rapid urban population increase is to be found in the rural areas themselves. The low level and the uncertainty of rural activities together with the staggering rates of natural increase of rural population result in excessive surplus of labor. Following the rule of thumb, early economic development plans have not been given sufficient impulse to increase agricultural productivity, but have tended to be more concerned with industrialization.² Improvement of the rural situation by introducing better agricultural methods and facilities as well as reinforcing economic opportunities for agro-industries can help to create better living opportunities. Thus, the large migration flow to the central city can be prevented and the process of urbanization can be slowed down.

Gradually, the corrective measures to tackle the rapid urbanization of Bangkok metropolitan area have been conceived on the basis of plans to reduce the 'push' from the rural areas as well as to increase the 'pull' of other regional centers.

Problems of Coordination

As urbanizing process advances, urban development more and more influences the national development strategy, if not actually determines it. Urban problems should be considered as incidents of the broader process of development. The impact of urbanization on socio-economic development should be taken into account in formulating national policies and plans.

² From 1961 to 1971 the share of agriculture in Gross Domestic Product decreased from 37.4 per cent to 29.8 per cent. During the same period, industrial product (manufacturing, construction, mining and quarrying, and electricity) increased its share from 20.1 per cent to 26.2 per cent. See P. Pakkasem, *Development Planning and Implementation in Thailand* (Micrographed for Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group), National Economic and Social Development Board, Bangkok, March 1974, p. 16.

Yet in practice, the actual link between urban development and national development planning is rather weak. The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) is primarily concerned with adopting national economic and social development plans. And as a matter of fact, the social program has seriously been taken into account only in the Third Plan.⁸ The NESDB has basically concentrated on the mobilization of resources, sectoral planning, and individual large projects. The coverage and emphasis of development plans varied according to the emerging priority of needs and developmental process. In general, the national economic development has been construed mostly devoid of spatial dimension. On the other hand, the Town and Country Planning Office (TCPO) mainly undertakes the physical aspect of urban planning focusing on the optimal arrangements of land use pattern and the requirements for urban infrastructure. The scope of planning has basically been limited to individual cities. Its involvement is national in geographical context but local in content.

As in other developing countries, national planning and urban planning have been initiated as separate activities without an intimate link. The problems and approaches chosen for planning by the NESDB and the TCPO are relatively different. Of course, the respective characteristics of the professionals working in the two offices are considerably different. While economists dominate the NESDB, mainly architects and physical planners work for the TCPO. Their professional biases nurture specific planning orientations--economic and social planning on the one hand and physical planning on the other. To be sure, the intention behind the undertaking of a decentralizing strategy and the improvement of rural areas on the part of the NESDB is not a direct reflection of the attempt to relieve the urban crisis of the metropolitan area. For instance, the early North and Northeast development plans were initiated basically for establishing political stability in those regions.

At present, some penetration between the two domains of planning is slowly going on mainly because of the scope of urban problems. Increasingly, there is a need for an integrated system of planning which coordinates different levels of planning as well as the three mainstreams of planning--economic, social and physical. The integration of the latter three aspects is the fundamental goal of development.

The present situation of inadequate integration of economic, social and physical planning reflects the lack of coordination of the various levels of planning. With the present framework of planning administrative structure, the focus of planning practice is on either the socio-economic or the physical aspect and not on both simultaneously. Yet, planning surely must be integrative. The full coordination of the various levels of planning will provide for meaningful integration of socio-economic with environmental development. The necessary increase in the coordination of levels

⁸ From the First to the Third Plan, there is an indication of a shift of emphasis in sectoral priority from economic to social sectors. In the Third Plan, the combined share of the social sectors in public development expenditures has reached 56.7 per cent in comparison with 43.3 per cent for that of the economic sectors. See *Ibid.*, p. 8.

implies that more spatial aspect will be introduced into the national and regional development planning; and at the same time the urban planning will be more concerned with social and economic factors.

It should be recognized that the ultimate purpose of development is to create better qualities of life. The integration of socio-economic planning with physical planning must be concerted if the social impact of economic development is to be fully obtained. Economic interventions must occur in proper physical settings so that their social consequences may play crucial role for a balanced and sufficiently rapid economic growth. Inappropriate and inadequate environmental development will jeopardize not only economic goals themselves but also social progress. For instance, inadequate and unsanitary housing conditions, insufficient public utility services, congested traffic and poor public transportation system, including air and water pollution have become current social and economic issues of public interest. It should be noted that these serious problems of Bangkok metropolitan area substantially arose in the Second Plan period. The imbalanced development was partly effected by the unproportional public investment in the physical development during that period. Admittedly, it was negligibly low.⁴

It would be unfortunate if we continue to determine plans and policies for urban development mainly on the basis of physical planning consideration or if national development policies are largely based on considerations of an economic nature while neglecting human and environmental implications. It should be recognized that the three aspects - economic, social and physical - are constituents of the same reality.

Significance of Regional Planning

As economic, social and physical aspects are closely interdependent, at what levels of planning can these three mainstreams of development be most effectively integrated? To answer this question, one needs to realize that different geographical areas of a country vary with respect to economic, technological, human and natural resources, their rates of productivity, their endowment with the essential physical and social infrastructure, living standards as well as ways of life and cultural values. A region defines such unique economic, social and physical characteristics of a geographical area.

Regional planning, in general, provides for socio-economic development in a given geographical area for a given period of time.⁵ The regions offer a spatial framework within which the gap between national and local efforts of development can be bridged. The process of regional planning provides greater opportunities for coordination of various levels and sectors of planning.

⁴National Economic and Social Development Board, *The Third National Economic and Social Development Plan (1972-1976)*, Bangkok, Government House Printing Office, 1973, p. 205.

⁵See John Friedmann and William Alonso (eds.), *Regional Development and Planning*, Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1965.

It not only designates viable physical locations for specific projects and programs but also establishes linkages and interrelationships among them. Regional planning helps decrease the conflicts and imbalances among development projects and programs as well as among levels of development of various regions within a country. It can help formulate a coherent national policy for urban development by establishing guidelines for better distribution of population, resources and economic activities, and by setting up major physical and social infrastructure, as well as adopting a national urban land policy for a coherent pattern of settlements.

Thus, a planned region will emerge as an environment blended with intensive agriculture, effectively operating industrial complexes, and lively residential communities, complete with cultural and recreational facilities. Such a region will achieve economic efficiency as well as ecological harmony in accordance with national and local development policies. Regional development planning can readily be responsive to the problems of increasing economic, social and physical mobility of population like those we are facing in the urbanization of Bangkok metropolitan area. For instance, it can reduce income disparity gap between urban center and rural periphery, relieve physical congestion and social depression.

Recently, both the NESDB and the TCPO have independently initiated their concerns for regional planning. Regional implications of development which were ignored in the First Plan (1961-66) of the NESDB have been given more and more attention in the Second Plan (1967-71) and the Third Plan (1972-76) with emphasis on balanced growth and social justice. Planned economic growth at the national level which has accelerated regional growth brought forward the need for coordinated economic and regional planning. Regions and space are an often neglected but necessary component of the theory and practice of economic development. The regional and spatial dimensions of the national socio-economic policies and programs are yet to be made more coherent. In this regard, the NESDB is extending its responsibility to cover more regional and urban context. Regional planning was initiated for the North and Northeast during the Second Plan period as a tool to accelerate regional development during the Third Plan period. Regional emphasis is relatively much stronger in the Third Plan. More attention is also drawn to the development of urban and local government in the policy of the Third National Economic and Social Development Plan.

In parallel, the TCPO also found it increasingly necessary to extend the scope of comprehensive planning to cover the areas directly influenced by or in turn influencing the city's development. The necessity has led to gradual extension from the city proper to the metropolitan area and the immediate region and other regions of the country. The latter two concerns are still in their infancy. As a matter of fact, the regional approach to urbanization was recommended by Litchfield Whiting Bowne and Associates in the Greater Bangkok Plan 1990. Now, a decade later only a few more pages of strong emphasis on regional significance can be found in the recommendation for national urban development policy added to the First Revision of Greater Bangkok Plan 1990.

In general, it can be concluded that both planning agencies are rather slow in embarking upon the regional context. It seems that the fuller recognition of regional significance is impeded by the Thai political authorities in whose minds the concept of regional planning is very slow to mature. And, to some extent, those economists and city planners who tend to have limited spheres of interest are also detrimental to the advancement of regional approach.

It is urgent for the Thai Government to establish a central planning unit to be responsible for the integration of planning at various levels--national, regional, and urban--through regional planning process. It should be an integrated planning agency with a team of planners and professionals of various disciplines, with adequate powers and competency to exercise planning functions in the fields of socio-economic as well as physical development. As such, all coordinations can be secured under one policy and decision-making coordinating agency. The duplication of effort as well as rivalry can be avoided. Greater cooperation should also exist among other related agencies which are virtually independent. This can be achieved by strengthening the common interest of these agencies with competent regional-oriented professionals, planners and administrators.

Manpower in Planning

At present, there is only a limited number of professional people who are adequately trained and experienced and who are willing to cope with the complex problems of planning formulation and implementation.

A short-termed measure to overcome such constraints is to promote effective training or orientation programs. The objective is to make the fullest use of existing skilled manpower in the fields related to planning and development. Different but related types of training should be introduced for policymakers and administrators, for economists, sociologists, engineers and architects, for professional planners as well as for technical assistants. It has become evident that a great number of high-ranking officials and top executives including politicians need a thorough understanding of planning process in order to engage themselves to a much higher degree in the formulation and implementation of development plan.

There is indeed an acute shortage of competent regional planners who were formally trained. However, more likely than not, a pool of professionals of various disciplines who have some experience in tackling regional development problems is available. On the basis of well-conceived training programs, they should be able to undertake responsibilities in the preparation and execution of regional plans, perhaps in an equally positive way as young graduates.

In Thailand, attention should be given to the types of planners most needed, as a few urban planning schools and institutions with related programs will be set up in the near future. In fact,

quite a considerable number of professional planners are now available, but they are rather unsuitable for the task. They have been trained in western schools of architecture and engineering and have acquired knowledge of physical planning and the so-called 'urban design' skills with aesthetic emphasis. These skills are undoubtedly ill-suited for solving the core problems of urban and regional planning of a developing country like Thailand. Courses and training of planning programs should be relevant to the heart of our own planning problems.

The great emerging need in Thailand is for regional planners since the country is undergoing transformation into an industrialized country, as John Friedmann suggests from a vantage point for transitional societies.⁶ As the urban planning programs are being shaped, it should be realized that much more emphasis should be placed on regional planning. It is becoming a subject of serious public concern.

Conclusion

The problems of rapid urbanization of Bangkok metropolitan area can, in part, be explained by the lack of coordination of planning at various levels and, consequently, by the lack of coordination of economic, social and physical planning. The increase in the integration of these three mainstreams of planning can be effectively obtained through regional planning, the process of which calls for coordination up and down the hierarchy of planning levels. For a better balanced development, it is necessary for the Thai Government to provide an intimate link between national socio-economic planning and urban physical planning. This can be achieved by establishing a central planning agency to focus on regional planning as a triggering mechanism for integrative planning. Regional planners as well as professionals of the related fields must be substantially increased to fill the present gap of planning orientation.

Urbanization as a concept should be an instrument of social change, economic growth and environmental improvement, and not just a process of urban agglomeration. The principal means to this end is integrative planning.

⁶Friedmann has made a distinction between the need of regional planning for transitional societies and that of metropolitan planning for an industrialized country like the United States whose economics are well integrated. See "Cities in Social Transformation", *Ibid*, p. 343-360; also in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol. IV, 1961, p. 86-103.