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Basic services in peri-urban areas

M.D. Smith, M. Sohail and D.L. Saywell

1.0 Abstract

Provision of basic services for peri-urban areas creates various problems, and often receives less priority than similar work in rural or urban areas. This paper describes some of the characteristics of peri-urban environments and outlines some of the means available for provision of services. Various social, technical, institutional and economic problems that may be encountered when planning projects to provide basic services for peri-urban areas are then identified. Finally, some possible solutions are proposed for overcoming the various problems.

2.0 The peri-urban environment

2.1 Characteristics of peri-urban areas

Peri-urban areas, those areas on the edges of towns, are areas of transition. In England peri-urban areas are often referred to as the 'outskirts' of town, suggesting that they form the outer limits of the town, but have different characteristics from the more central urban districts. Peri-urban areas have a dual identity: their residents are dependent on the town for employment opportunities and services, yet they retain close links with rural areas for social contact, often sending money to relatives in rural areas, and receiving foods and other materials from rural areas.

It is difficult to define what is a peri-urban area, partly because peri-urban areas display aspects of both urban and rural characteristics. All peri-urban areas are unique, yet they often display certain similarities. Housing and employment opportunities in peri-urban areas are often in the informal sector, distinguishing these areas from the more formal urban sector. Although it is difficult to define what are peri-urban areas or urban informal sectors, there is general agreement that they are settlements that are marginal to the physical and regulatory boundaries of the formal city (WASH, 1993). This definition, however, assumes that it is possible to define both the physical and regulatory boundaries of the urban areas.

Peri-urban areas are often areas of rapid population growth, with variable population densities, and with little or no planning for land-use. Compared to both rural and urban areas, peri-urban areas lack clearly-defined boundaries, both with respect to physical boundaries between plots and districts, and also with respect to municipal and administrative responsibilities. Local and national governments consider the urban sector legitimate, but may not approve of settlements in the peri-urban or informal sector (WASH, 1993). Occupancy of land in peri-urban areas may be illegal or of dubious validity (WASH, 1993), and residents may therefore lack any security of tenure. Plots may be divided, either to provide additional income from rents, or to accommodate family members, and this contributes to the frequent high population densities in peri-urban areas.

The lack of recognition of peri-urban areas by local and national governments means that there is usually minimal or no infrastructure, and these areas have a lower profile for development projects than either rural or urban areas.

2.2 Provision of basic services

The peri-urban sector may not attract as much attention or funding for development projects as either rural or urban areas, yet peri-urban areas should not be neglected. Justification for development projects can be based on a variety of factors. Peri-urban areas contribute significantly to environmental pollution; and provision of sanitation, solid waste, and drainage services is therefore desirable. Provision of improved water supplies, electricity supplies and roads is desirable for social reasons to improve living conditions; and some improvements may be motivated by political reasons.

Cotton *et al.* (1998) identified the three main methods by which improvements to neighbourhood (tertiary level) infrastructure are made for peri-urban areas as being:

- upgrading works carried out by urban government;
- donor funded development programmes;
- programmes initiated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Provision of improvements requires careful attention to the *procedures* or organised system within which projects are conceived, planned and implemented; and the *contract* or legally binding agreement between parties. In order to avoid any possibility of corruption in development projects it is important to ensure that provision is made for transparency in all decision-making processes, and accountability in the way in which public funds are spent (Cotton *et al.*, 1998). In addition, it should be possible to establish whether works are completed within budget, within the contract time scale, and to an acceptable quality (Cotton *et al.*, 1998).

3.0 Difficulties of service provision

Provision of basic services, or upgrading existing services, in peri-urban areas is difficult for a variety of reasons. Each situation is unique, yet certain common features are identified in subsequent paragraphs. The problems identified are not comprehensive: it is not possible to identify all possible problems, or to adequately explain them, within this paper.

3.1 Social difficulties

A frequent characteristic of peri-urban areas, as has already been mentioned, is the uncertainty of land ownership and, consequently, a lack of security of land tenure by people living in peri-urban areas. Residents may be squatters, who have occupied land without permission, and have no legal tenure. Others may have bought the land, or been given it, by the government. In some case, migrants may have bought the land from people claiming to be developers or land agents, only to subsequently discover

that the vendor did not own the land that was sold. Residents may therefore be reluctant to invest in service improvements unless they are certain that they own the land on which they live, and are not going to have the land confiscated and lose any investment spent on improvements.

People living in peri-urban areas are frequently poor, settling on the edge of towns, where living costs are relatively cheap. The cost of providing services to peri-urban areas is, however, considerable, and residents may be unable to afford to pay for any planned provision of services, or improvements to services. People may also be unwilling to invest in improvements if they consider the peri-urban area to be a temporary place to live, from which they aspire to move to somewhere better.

Peri-urban areas tend to be populated by people who have migrated into the area from different locations. They frequently have little in common with their neighbours, and have no traditional or established community leaders. There is therefore frequently little sense of community in peri-urban areas, making it difficult to introduce community participation in development projects.

3.2   Technical difficulties

The lack of planning in peri-urban areas creates difficulties for provision of services. There may be limited space to construct roads between unplanned houses, and it may be very difficult to identify suitable routes for drainage, water and electricity services. These services may need to follow winding routes between existing buildings which were constructed without any thought of how services could be laid.

The unplanned nature of peri-urban areas also creates difficulties for access, in that residents often build without any consultation with neighbours or authorities, and will therefore erect buildings to suit their own personal requirements. In so doing they are unlikely to give any thought to the access needs for refuse-collection vehicles, latrine-emptying vehicles or other service vehicles (ambulances, fire-engines, etc.).

In many cases, peri-urban areas occupy land that is undesirable, and which is of little value. Such areas may be on steep slopes, on soft or rocky ground, or in areas that are subject to natural hazards such as flooding or land-slips. Such conditions add to the expense of to service provision, because solutions must overcome the technical difficulties posed by ground conditions.

3.3   Institutional difficulties

Local authorities may be unwilling to provide services to peri-urban areas, because any provision of services could be interpreted as acceptance of the legitimacy of the residents' claims to land tenure. Provision of services may also attract or encourage more people to migrate towards the peri-urban areas. Authorities may also realise that peri-urban areas require different standards of service (such as public stand-posts instead of household connections for water supplies) from other urban residents. Selection of appropriate alternative service levels may therefore pose problems which the authorities would prefer to ignore (WASH, 1990).

Work in peri-urban areas is frequently more difficult and more expensive than work in urban or rural areas, and it may be difficult for authorities to recruit and retain experienced staff of suitable calibre. Those organisations which recognise the problem of providing services to peri-urban areas, and wish to make improvements, find that there is relatively little knowledge or experience about how to address the problems adequately.

3.4   Economic difficulties

As has already been mentioned, those living in peri-urban areas are frequently poor, yet provision of services in areas which have already been developed in an unplanned way is expensive. Residents may be unable or unwilling to invest money in improvements for services, especially if they have no security of tenure. Authorities may also be unwilling to spend money on expensive projects in areas for which their regulatory powers and responsibilities are vague, and where there are no simple solutions to problems.

Sources of funding for development projects in peri-urban areas are limited, both for provision of basic services and upgrading of existing services. Possible sources of funding include the government, NGOs, and the community. Possible sources of funding are considered further in section 4.4 (below).

4.0   Possible solutions to problems

The previous section (Section 3.0) outlined some of the problems which may be encountered when planning services for peri-urban areas. The problems are numerous and significant. yet there are various initiatives which can be taken to help overcome specific problems. Some of these possible solutions are described below. Lessons can be learned from study of past projects, both from projects which have been successful (showing approaches which have worked) and from projects which have been unsuccessful (showing approaches which should be avoided). Recent studies by Cotton *et al.* (1998) identify lessons from various projects in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, and suggest guidelines which can be applied to new peri-urban projects.

4.1   Possible social solutions

The unplanned nature of many peri-urban areas creates both technical and social problems. A programme of phased re-blocking can help to reduce the problems, by building a planned development in place of unplanned areas. Re-blocking needs to include granting legal tenure to the residents, so that they have assurances that they can legally continue to occupy properties. During re-blocking it may be desirable to arrange houses or apartments in 'clusters' or small distinct communities built around communal open areas, rather than in formal, conventional rows. The cluster approach helps to create, or reinforce, a sense of community among the residents of each cluster.

4.2 Possible technical solutions

Lessons learned from other projects can suggest technical solutions which are appropriate to the specific needs and circumstances of peri-urban areas. It is seldom true that technical solutions as originally proposed are suitable, and modifications are often necessary. A phased approach may therefore be desirable, with work starting in one area, and gradually extending to other areas. This allows designs to be adapted, altered or refined on the basis of experience, with work being limited to well-defined areas at any one time. Choice of technical solutions should also adopt an incremental approach, incorporating provision for potential upgrading in designs for services.

Services for peri-urban areas are often different from the needs of urban or rural areas, and planners should consider whether to extend existing services into the peri-urban areas or to provide stand-alone services independent of the existing urban services.

4.3 Possible institutional solutions

The problem of attracting more migrants into peri-urban areas is difficult, and is similar to problems associated with other disadvantaged groups, such as refugees. The level of service should be sufficiently good to encourage people who have settled to stay, yet not so good that others are attracted into the area. Provision of basic services is therefore desirable initially, with provision for upgrading the services in the future. A phased approach is also desirable for the implementing authority, so that they retain control of the work at all times, without taking on more work than they can manage and supervise at any time.

Services provided should be chosen following discussion with members of the community about their expectations and ability to pay for services. Provision should, where possible, be led by demand, following (where appropriate) the World Bank's 'Demand Response Approach' or, for (sanitation provision), the 'Strategic Sanitation Approach'.

4.4 Possible economic solutions

Projects to provide services for peri-urban areas attract less funding than similar projects in rural or urban areas, and funding strategies therefore need careful consideration. A phased approach again has potential benefits, because funding is provided gradually, being spread over a longer period. Cost recovery for development projects is important, but people living in peri-urban areas are often poor. It may therefore be necessary to consider adopting an integrated tariff structure for services to both the urban and peri-urban areas, including cross-subsidies to ensure affordability.

Three possible sources of finance identified by Cotton *et al.* (1998) as in use currently for provision of basic services in peri-urban areas of Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka are:

1. Government money is used to finance the works, and community groups are paid for the services which they provide.

2. Government money is not involved, and finance is raised internally by community groups.

3. Funding is split between government and community groups.

The first and third of these inject money into the local economy; and both the second and third use money from the community, with this money being recirculated within the local economy. These are not the only possible sources of finance, and funding could come from NGOs instead of from governments, although the NGOs would need the approval of the government for their planned activities.

5.0 Conclusions

Provision of basic services in peri-urban areas is difficult, and frequently receives low priority from funding agencies. The problems posed by development in peri-urban areas are significant, but service provision is necessary for social, environmental and other reasons. Agencies should not neglect peri-urban areas simply because of the difficulty of the work, and can learn from the experiences of other agencies working in the peri-urban sector.

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