

New challenges for territorial planning and sustainable development: a compared perspective

Diego Sánchez González

Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, México / diegosanchezglez@hotmail.com

Boville Luca de Tena, Belén and Diego Sánchez González (2007),
*Planificación territorial y desarrollo sostenible en México:
perspectiva comparada,*
Madrid, 463 pp., ISBN 978-84-611-9500-8.

The book is an approach from Mexican and European geography, economy and sociology to some of the most polemic subjects of territorial planning and sustainable development in Mexico and Latin America. Recently, the model of economic growth experienced in these countries is observed with preoccupation, as it particularly affects the present and future generations. In this sense, the different authors start from a methodological and practical reflection applied to the complex and heterogeneous rural and urban Mexican contexts, with a stressed environmentalist, human and social vision.

The present work provides an eclectic vision from the social sciences on the main aspects that influence on the development of Mexico and Latin America, approaching the lack of rural and urban planning, which has contributed to the generation of greater poverty and social exclusion. The picture taken from this region reflects a crucible of human spheres close to chaos and desperation, to tragedy and hope of the peoples to build their futures. We face the progressive loss of the traditional structures, which marked the quotidian pace of rural societies, nowadays excluded and on the brink of survival; the dehumanization of the phenomenon of migration; the breakage of the urban spaces turned into spheres of the private; the city as a symbol of chaotic growth and product from the cultural representation of the Latin-American modernity; and the obsessive political discourse of economic growth without development and a predatory use of the environment.

The current political and technical contexts are dominated by the lack of prevention and permissiveness before the populations at risk, as well as the absence of professionals of planning in the decision-making organisms. Below are described the works included in the present work, whose contributions to territorial planning and regional development are criticisms to the *developmentalist* model, from the new propositions of sustainable development and management of complex systems.

After so many mystifications and postmortem decrees of the rural world, we are offered "Latin-American agricultural growth" by Christian Tulet (National Center of Scientific Research, France). Tulet presents us an enlivening panorama on the Latin-American rural world and the changes

that have occurred in recent years. From the considerable increment of production to the appearance of national markets with a very important consumption; hence, the transformations in property or the modes of exploitation, remaining as a result a broad peasant sector, which exploits small properties whose maneuver and flexibility margins allows facing all the crises and besides is benefitted from this supposed globalization by means of laboring as a migrant, this enables them to improve the performance and conditions of their agrarian exploitations. An exciting world that, reflected on the aforementioned work, introduces and breaks many of the beliefs both ideological on the American agrarian sphere.

The work by Oca Baradad (Polytechnic University of Catalonia, Spain) on “Management of water and rural development” describes which the evolution of the models of the management of water has been, from the old policies based on the widening of the offer with an important stress on the creation of infrastructures to the models of environmental management and/or markets of water. Very interesting are different proposals, applied in different countries and environmental and political conditionings. Planning understood not only from a point of view of projection, but also aware of the terrain on which determinate models and policies function. In this case it is necessary to observe the evolution of water as a paradigm of a scarce and absolutely vital resource.

Developing an intellectual work close to a poetics of life, of sustainable life, the proposal by Mateu I Giral (University of Barcelona, Spain) on the “Historic and current thinking on sustainable development” faces the disquieting “sustained growth”. His critical vision with *economicism* makes us long for that ecological ethics that would secure our permanence in the planet, but also, and mainly, a fair distribution of its resources. The work unfolds from Plato’s classical philosophy to the last concepts inside the theories of complexity and chance; undoubtedly, a political essay that suggests and gives food for thought aplenty.

Social development is totally measurable and comparable; because of the comparative studies, the needs of the communities and the historic delay of the rural world can be diagnosed, which seems to fit very well into

“Development and eradication of poverty” by Luzón Benedicto (University of Barcelona, Spain). The documented proposal puts forward strategies of intervention that provide the politicians with instruments to reverse or eradicate poverty. The work by the social researcher is disconcerting, not because it makes the reader lose their cardiac rhythm or becomes dangerously stressed, but because on occasions the object of study is a community in a dramatic situation and with scarce possibilities of solution.

In the chapter titled “Determining factors of the process of emigration toward the United States in rural migrants” by Izcará Palacios (Autonomous University of Tamaulipas), we approach the grave problem of migration. The situation of precariousness of the rural environment, low wages and familial needs boost many youths to go “to the other side”. There has been an evolution in the character of national migration toward the United States of undocumented people who come mainly from the cities. Nonetheless, in states such as Tamaulipas, it is still the rural worker with serious economic problems and with some relative or friend “on the other side”, the one who migrates and risks their life. A very interesting contribution that sketches a terrible panorama, and as well-known as it is, it always presents the personal drama behind the decision of migrating.

An important sector in Mexican agrarian production and with a tradition dating back to the Colonial times is the sugar sector. De La Cruz Rock (Autonomous University of Mexico) gives us an account of the transformations both in production of the sugar cane and the management and working of the sugar refineries, as well as the changes in the workers of the sector—from slaves to syndicated laborers—. The sector is a paradigm of the changes occurred in agricultural production of commercial ends and destined to alimentation. It is very interesting as it perfectly outlines all those changes thus far, and it pictures a sector that if were not so polluting, could be easily sustainable. Once again, such as other works appearing in this volume, there is a lot to be done. However, the researcher states biotechnology as a sector that would foster said sustainability of production, both of sugar cane and its transformation in the refineries. In addition to this contribution, the author also considers the social factors and the transformation of workforce.

Sánchez González (Autonomous University of Tamaulipas) reflects on demographic aging and the situation of elderly people in rural Mexico and Latin America. Globalization still propitiates a migratory trickle which depopulates regions and marginalizes their aged residents. In this context, the need to generate alternatives of local and regional development based on tourism is stated. Probably ecotourism or alternative tourism (that which is out of reach of the large touristic companies) might be a true alternative for the rural sphere to be still inhabitable and inhabited. In this context, tourism exercises a complementary economic activity and very relevant for the development of the regions and their populations ever older. Politicians have not yet grasped the importance of tourism as a motor for social development and the inclusion of their aged abiders in planning, so better training of public managers is indispensable as well as the diffusion of works that propitiate the planning and boosting of the centers and their tourist attractions in the different regions.

The same author, as in previous works (Sánchez-González, 2005 and 2007), reflects on inequality and the problems of inhabitability of the cities for the elderly in the chapter “Planning of the historical centers of the cities before the aging of population”. The processes of degradation that accompany urban historical centers are the collateral effect of the globalization process that invades the cities, dominated by vehicles and shopping centers. Real-estate speculation ejects youth population and makes demographic aging acute in urban centers. This demographic dynamics is associated with social exclusion factors, such as poverty and solitude. In this context, the author proposes the recovery of historical centers of the cities, fostered by the law of the jungle of speculation: not so much in function of the requirements of the elderly, but of the revaluing of the centric urban ground susceptible to be re-constructed and re-humanized.

The absence of planning is perceptible in many of the Latin-American urban sprawls and it is the expression of large part of the Mexican metropolises, save seldom exceptions. Demographic growth and the need for lands have led to occupy urban zones considered as highly risky. In the face of incapability to control territory and planning and urban order in

Mexico, and since the correcting measures are unviable, a good risk-prevention system, as well as its infrastructure, are indispensable to confront the floods that more often than not occur with greater intensity.

Pérez Sánchez (Juarez University of the State of Tabasco, Mexico), author of “Challenge of urban planning”, focus this research in Villahermosa, capital city of Tabasco; a Mexican city that became the word of the day because of the recent disasters from the floods of the Grijalva River (November 2007), which have cause numberless human and material losses. Indeed, the negative effects of the lack of urban planning in Villahermosa are warned, as well as the high risk of vulnerability to floods of the population, housing (of different socioeconomic level), agricultural zones, urban and inter-urban roads, school facilities, medical units and other (among which distinguishable are live-stock areas, attention to emergencies, potable water supply, electricity and communications). The researcher, influenced by European urbanistic models, based on sustainable development, grants proportional importance to all of these issues, although it is difficult to match, given the deterioration extent and anarchical growth of the Latin-American cities, planning sustained on these criteria with an utterly different reality. And it is not any longer a matter of the urbanist or planner, but of a complete political system.

All in all, the book is a suggesting contribution from the social sciences and a multidisciplinary and multicultural referential viewpoint on the topics of territorial planning and regional development in Mexico, disavowing fallacies and inviting to the open and reflective debate on reaching the awareness that leads to political determination. Indubitably, a book that does not leave anyone unmoved and that awakes critical will.

Diego Sánchez González. Geographer and Historian and Doctor in Geographical Analysis of the Territory and Environment from the University of Granada; from the same university, he holds a Master in Social Gerontology. He has been researcher-professor in the Aula de Mayores de la Universidad de Granada (Spain), from the Autonomous School of Direction of Enterprises (University of Wales) and currently from the

Autonomous University of Tamaulipas. Likewise, he has been guest professor in Spain in the Polytechnic University of Madrid, and in Mexico in the National Polytechnic Institute, Autonomous University of Nuevo León, Autonomous University of Durango and the University of the Northeast. Currently, he is the coordinator of the Department of Urban Planning, Territorial Ordering and Environment in the Institute of Research on Engineering of the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas. His main research lines are: human and social geography of demographic aging; urban geography and urban planning; territorial planning and regional development; planning of tourist spaces; and systems of geographic information applied to territorial ordering. His most recent publications are: “Urban demographic aging and their socio-spatial repercussions in Mexico: challenges of Gerontological Planning” (*Envejecimiento demográfico urbano y sus repercusiones socio-espaciales en México: Retos de la Planeación Gerontológica*), in *Revista de Geografía Norte Grande* (2007); and with Belén Boville, “Territorial planning in Mexico and Sustainable Development in Mexico: Compared Perspective” (*Planificación Territorial y Desarrollo Sostenible en México: Perspectiva Comparada*) (2007).