

INTRODUCTION TO URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

The transdisciplinary confluence that forms the Urban Environmental Management has been consolidating in its theoretical aspects, but mainly practices in managing "city" in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, especially in the southern municipalities.

This report is to reflect, as this type of approach is called configured as articulating tool responses to environmental problems and conflicts in various urban scales, involving in the social, natural, economic, political, and ultimately environmental in its wider sense.

To demonstrate this situation it becomes relevant definition, the context of its emergence and several of its features, among which should not fail to mention the training at the National University of Lanús.

Key words: management, city, environment, urban planning development, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Urban environmental Management has a complexity hard to represent when it comes to circumscribing its disciplinary fields as well as its scope. Its field of action and its limits are closely related to different disciplinary conceptions, even political and ideological, mostly conditioned by the perspective and academic training of the observer.

Moreover, the wide range of possible actions can easily divert us from the focal point due to the fact that from the wastes of a building to the most ambitious Metropolitan Urban Environmental Plan are Urban Environmental Management in the first place.

Given the range and complexity of interpretations, in the following lines I will try to deal with a series of considerations about Urban Environmental Management from the viewpoint of an Urban Environmental Manager who has been educated in the National University of Lanús and who is committed with its institutional project and the community he belongs to.

EMERGENCE CONTEXT

As it is widely known, environmental matters are relatively new in the history of humankind. They had their beginning back in the 60's of the last century.

There were several facts and studies that put relevance on this matter in local and global agendas together with the confirmation of the unfairness the appropriation and use of resources among different states and social groups. Each of these studies, analysis and conventions confirmed that the man was behaving towards his environments was not sustainable due to the fact that resources are used in an unlimited way in a limited world.

Additionally, people started to become aware that such behavior meant to put in the environment amounts of sub products or elements, which are not being used, that condition the amount and quality of the environmental services provided by our biophysical environment; thus, seriously affecting human well-being².

These affectations of life quality and future possibilities are not identical among all communities and territories, like in other aspects such as globalization, there are winners and a wide majority of losers. However, it is thanks to globalization that we can approach this subject with “astronaut vision”. This vision let us appreciate differences as regards causes and consequences of that problem which is, unbelievably, not yet a world conflict.

In that global context appears Sustainable Development³, term which seem to summon up a desired horizon; however, I will define it, to the aim of this article, as a type of development that allow the satisfaction of basic human needs with a rational use of natural resources as much as for this generation as for the following ones in terms of fairness of use and enjoyment; to achieve a just balance among social, environmental and economic aspects.

URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT AS A PROFESSIONAL RESPONSE

Different social responses have been and still are created where Sustainable Development is the desired scenario towards which may be sensible to lead society. Government agencies in its different scales, NGO, International voluntary agreement and a whole series of educational responses have been created among which there are the creation of different professional careers specifically connected to environmental matters. It is relevant to highlight that there are not careers in this field that have more than 25 years of age, in the case of the National University of Lanús, the “Licenciatura en Gestión Ambiental Urbana” (Bachelor Degree in Urban Environmental Management) is about to become 15 years old and its first graduates do not have yet 10 years of graduation.

I have chosen to make clear these temporal matters, mainly because of two phenomena concurrent to the consolidation of the profession as an effective response to most of the environmental problems established in the surrounding community.

The first phenomenon arises in the fact that being the profession so recent, there were and there are a whole range of other professions which had to act in environmental topics. Thus, it is common to see in charge of environmental management from anthropologists to chemists including biologists and architects who have found an unsatisfied demand in the labor market and who, in the best of cases, have reconverted their professions with postgraduate environmental studies. Therefore, we can speak of an “invaded” field of discipline.

Moreover, there is a second phenomenon; the field of action of Urban Environmental Management is still forming, in principle for its complexity and wide range of aptitudes linked to the different profiles of graduates but reinforced by the scientific and technological advances that move horizons of possible actions but above all, change the circumstances and tools used to carry out the activity.

As all the aforementioned were not enough, in most of the cases where an Urban Environmental Manager is needed, entrepreneurs, politicians, environmentalists, etc., do not correctly identify that this type of professional can give an answer to their needs and ends up employing professionals that may not have the wide view to properly comprehend certain phenomena and to conceive a proper response consistent with the situation.

As expressed above, I have to make a stop and highlight my conviction that Urban Environmental Management is made and is expressed in transdisciplinary collaboration⁴, in workgroups or ad hoc enquiries, with professionals from other disciplines. It is a necessary condition, to an Urban Environmental Manager who wants to make a positive influence in the surrounding reality, to know how to request, relate and interpret what contribution he can get from sociologists, architects, economists, ecologists, etc. It has been proven in many opportunities that environmental matters cannot be anymore just an area to take into account or check, whether it is a project or in order to design a government scheme.

It is here, in a transdisciplinary and holistic approach, where Urban Environmental Management can be understood as articulator of the intervention of the man-mean or society-nature relations.

In this understanding “environmental” should not be part of the proposal, but the frame of it.

However, there may be professionals who develop their tasks in the way of the old liberal professions, but those developments are more linked to specific studies; for example, environmental impact assessments or voluntary certifications of Environment Management Systems. Working in these matters surely required a deeper specialization.

SIGNIFICANCE OF URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

In order to analyze thoroughly the meaning and significance and its implications we need to review superficially the notions of the terms Management, Environmental and Urban.

We can define Management as “the execution of actions for a certain purpose”. Such definition covers a wide universe as for example the actions to perform, which in addition, in accordance with the pursued objective can be expressed in different scales.

As regards the notion of “environmental” and just in order to justify the choice of the definition I should say there is a whole specific literature genre that links in different ways the relation between Environment and Systems, some of which match the definitions so much until they almost blend. That is the reason why Theory of Systems is so important to urban environmental studies.

Roberto Fernández⁵ analyses such interrelations in his theoretical formulations of which I allow myself, for this writing, to choose a definition of Gilberto Gallopín⁶ that states the following: “the system “environment” will therefore be constituted by problems, facts, events, episodes, relations, organizations, communications but also by its particular basis, that is to say men, devices, ground, air, water, plant life, fauna.”

This section is meant to analyze the terms separately, but in the case of “urban” is used subject to the previous terms; therefore, we can say it is referred or related to the city. Such reference implies no less than to put under the spotlight the quintessential development scenario of social life and which has been reinforcing its pre-eminence through the passing of time.

It would not be possible to try to split from urban matters different implications as regards the flows existing between the city and its surroundings which show us how the city affects or is affected⁷.

Once the individual meaning of the terms has been analyzed we shall have set the basis to begin enquiring what mean the different combinations that can be made between the three terms. What is more, we should not forget that they form and give sense to a wide but well defined field of action.

In such sense there are varied definitions which blend the use of a pair of terms, for example, Environmental Management.

In a general sense, environmental management is understood as the set of actions aimed to reach the utmost rationality in the in the decision making process as regards preservation, defense, protection and improvement of the environment, based on a coordinated multidisciplinary information and on involvement of the citizens” (Estevan Bolea, 1994)⁸.

Although there are other definitions for environmental management, we acknowledge the fact that the author highlighted such definition in a “general sense”. Thus, an endless stream of minimum actions would still constitute environmental management.

Therefore, we can sense there is “generic” and “specific” environmental management although it is not specified in the definition. Furthermore, such definition conditions the actions to rationality in the decision making process which, apparently, can be made by someone who has the power or authority regardless the fact that it involves society with accurate criteria and wide range of perspectives.

As a contribution to the analysis, I allow myself to state that I believe urban management is made by each of us every day. Decisions we make in many aspects of our lives have implications in environmental matters, some of which we are not aware of as we may be of the economic implications of our behavior. For instance, I invite the reader to think where the inputs that constitute their

consumptions come from. The efficiency of the latter as human needs satisfiers and lastly the relevance of such needs seen through an unsustainable world.

Resuming the possible combinations of pairs of terms that constitute a sense in itself we may analyze Urban Management by its result, due to the fact that it has been conditioned by the pressure of economic and social interests in a State that even though it tried to plan the development and occupation of territory has not managed to impose over the market forces seeking the collective benefit of society. Although we refuse to recognize, the most unknown real estate investor, who builds and apartment to sell it and not to use it as a dwelling is making and conditioning Urban Management.

Concurrently, “environmental urbanism”, as is usually denominated the integration of the principles of sustainable development in State policies of planning and territorial arranging, tries to make way in the path to sustainability, especially in European visions of urbanism reformulation. Furthermore, there are authors who state that environmental issues have come to redefine “urbanism” as regards the scarce results that could be shown in this field.

Having highlighted some sectorial definitions we can start thinking in the mixing of these three terms as a unity of thought and actions; for that, we shall analyze the following definitions.

“Urban Environmental Management is a joint action between the State and social actor, which is articulated wit territorial managements, environmental policies and sectorial plans that are related or affecting the environment in the urban regional field. Such managements demands selective and combined use of legal, technical, planning, economic, financial and administrative tools to achieve the protection and functioning of ecosystems and the improvement of the quality of life of population within a frame of sustainable city.”⁹

“Urban Environmental Management, as has been defined, is not a technical formula of a policy of action. It is a political – technical attitude of management of urban reality. In its conception, there converge learning which comes from the miserly results as much from traditional planning as from the sectorial management of urban matters. As regards the technical aspect, it recreates a new globalizing rationality that outstand the stagnant behaviors of the academic learning. Related to politics, it implies to reassume the roles of the State, as arbitrator of the diverse and contradictory interests of the different segments that form urban community”¹⁰.

The main features of the conception of Urban Environmental Management, in the style of “UNLa”, lie in the coming together of both definitions. This convergence has its most relevant characteristics in the following, to wit:

- Actions that should be carried out by the State and different social and urban actors as well.
- The State as main promoter and having an active role as the creator of balance as regards sectorial interests.
- Articulator of management and transdisciplinary knowledge.
- Selective and combined use of tools.
- It is not a formula but a technique or model.
- It is acknowledged as chaser of intra and intergenerational balance.
- It is based on sustainability and sustainable developments principles and hypothesis.
- It is far from being a finished work. It adapts itself, changes, reformulates and feeds back within every action.
- It is an attitude, it is innovation.

Additionally, I would add that it should never lose its position as regards the different range of action and its relation within wider action programs, even at a planetary scale.

CONCLUSION

Well into the XXIth century, there are still few officials or work-teams who determined to manage urban environmental matters have achieved to frame social behaviors inside of what we would call sustainability. What is more, most of them go deep, without wanting, in this almost perverse relation of man and his natural support.

Surely, those scarce results are linked to the imposition and consolidation of the neoliberal capitalistic economic model which has caused great inequalities among societies, whether in their incomes or in the wide range of having people who cannot meet their basic needs to people who live in over-consumption. Besides, increasing inequalities in the exploitation of man by man, this model is based in the extraction and use of natural resources no matter planetary load capacity.

In the light of the performances of excellent professional groups in the past and the prevailing ideas in our current I must provide context for my words and express that I do not believe that Urban Environmental Management can neither provide us with the solution to the severe problems and conflicts of urban environmental management nor to the pessimistic future scenarios. Nevertheless I do reaffirm its suitability as a valid field of action and of alteration of reality.

A field in which every professional of Urban Environmental Management, independently from his/her specificity or generality, can become a reference as regards how to focus and articulate solutions that selectively combine its best capacities with those of other professionals of different disciplines and through this dialogue of “knowledge”, act in an accurate in its immediate reality.

Additionally, each of our professionals will have the moral obligation to become forwarder of the urgent need for a cultural change towards more sustainable patterns.

The last consideration was deliberately reserved and it is connected to the need of becoming political subjects of this change, not as candidates of any party or coalition but as activist that pursues that distinct future in the Society – Nature relation. We should not forget that environmental issues often have political solutions regardless how technical or specialized our work may be.

Endnotes

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²Health, basic needs satisfaction, social cohesion, physical integrity, etc.

³Special attention should be put to the definition of Sustainable development and understand the different interpretations according its approximation to the term. Most frequent mistake is to interpret that what should be Sustained is the “development” or worse yet, Economic Growth.

⁴Not just an addition of disciplines but as a dialogue of the different disciplines.

⁵FERNANDEZ, ROBERTO. “Conceptos básicos acerca de la noción de ambiente”. “La ciudad verde”. Buenos Aires. Ed. Espacio. 2000. Page 12.

⁶GALLOPÍN, Gilberto C. “El Ambiente Urbano y la Planificación Ambiental”. Medio Ambiente y Urbanización. Buenos Aires, CLACSO/CIFCA, 1982.

⁷Its most relevant examples can be as regards energy, production and consumption as well as city nets.

⁸Extracted from a statements of policies of the Ministry of Mining and Energy of Colombia. Ver en: http://www.upme.gov.co/guia_ambiental/carbon/gestion

⁹There is a very strong adoption between Official organisms of the Republic of Colombia to work with urban environmental management. In this case the quotations belongs to an Urban Environmental Management Policy of the Housing, Environment and Territorial Development Ministry.

¹⁰Extracted from an essay about Urban Environmental Management de David Kullock and Luz S. Velázquez (1994).

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