

Agropolitan Development: A Territorial Approach to Meeting Basic Needs (JOHN FRIEDMANN)

Our proposed approach to meeting basic needs through application of territorial power begins with five assumptions. First, most of the world's population live at unacceptably low levels of material consumption. Second, most of the world's population are engaged in the production of use values outside the exchange economy. Third, every territorially integrated national community must be able to meet the basic needs of its members or eventually lose its claims to legitimacy. Fourth, the strengthening of territorial power that is implied in a basic needs approach to development does not exclude the necessity of judiciously using transnational power in meeting national needs. Fifth, the basic-needs approach is intended as a general model of development in which production and distribution are treated as facets of the same process of equal development. It is not meant to be an instrument for containing poverty in a context of transnational development.

Basic needs refer to the sum of reciprocal claims in a territorially integrated society. In such a society, everyone is regarded as simultaneously a producer and consumer. Needs are basic to the extent that their satisfaction is regarded as essential for a dignified human existence. As such, they represent an entitlement: each member has a rightful claim on his community for their satisfaction. But this entitlement implies a reciprocal claim. The community can ask for useful contributions from each member of its work.

Basic needs, in the sense of survival, may be further regarded as a variable subset of a more general category of human needs. Two additional types of need may be distinguished: social and individualized. Social needs are needs of the collectivity (they are regarded as essential for the collectivity's survival and well-being). Transportation, for instance, is such a need and requires an allocation of resources. So are universities, even though not everyone may be able to attend one; they are not, yet a survival need. Finally, individualized needs are those for which the collectivity assumes no specific responsibility. They remain each person's own concern, such as his/her choice of companionship, travel, or taste in food and clothes. Within certain bounds, intended to safeguard the wider interests of the collectivity, they are an expression of personal preference, and the collectivity remains silent about them.

These distinctions are derived from the historical experience with resource allocation in the Jewish kibbutz. There the historical path in the evolution of human needs may be briefly described as follows. In the early days of the movement, nearly all the needs of kibbutzim members were those of survival, thus they were satisfied collectively. As the kibbutzim movement grew more prosperous, a category of social needs was added, expanding more rapidly than basic or survival needs, which tended to level off. Operationally speaking, social needs were those whose satisfaction was hedged in by certain rules and procedures, reflecting communal preferences. Individual members had to apply for them to the kibbutz. But as the movement

became still more prosperous, individualized needs began to appear and to establish their own claim on the community's resources. Provision was made for them by paying each member an allowance in money for which no account needed to be rendered. In recent years, individualized needs have increased more rapidly than either social or basic needs and so has the cash economy of the kibbutz. Whether this trend should be allowed to continue unchecked has become a major issue of ideological debate.

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It is clear from this account that the satisfaction of basic needs will not for very long remain the sole objective of national development. It is merely a first target in societies where the majority of the people fall below an absolute level of poverty. In a comprehensive sense, development may be regarded as a process of individuation. As basic needs are met, social needs appear, and as these, in turn, are satisfied, individualized needs become relatively more significant.

Basic needs must not become a fetish for planners. The object of planning is to create those conditions in the real world that will nourish human beings who are "rich in needs".⁶ This requires the continued development of the productive forces and more particularly the development of the bases of communal wealth: land and water, good health, knowledge, and skills.

The Agropolitan Approach to a Basic Needs Strategy

In the following pages we set forth guiding principles for a territorial approach to a basic needs strategy. We shall call it the "agropolitan" approach. The specific setting we have chosen is that of densely populated, agrarian societies characterized by low profiles of social development, high rates of population increase, incipient urban-based industrialization, high external dependency, and rising indices of inequality. Such societies are typically found in Asia and parts of Africa. Outside the appropriate geographical setting for agropolitan development, other forms of territorially-based planned development would be more fitting.

We propose agropolitan forms as an approach to the development of large segments of the world periphery—the new regions of economic backwardness and dependence which have always been a concern of regional planners. Additionally, our discussion is intended to break the current impasse in regional studies: a new paradigm is needed.

The reader will undoubtedly perceive some similarities between our version of agropolitan development and China's experience over the past twenty years. This is the result, not of a conscious effort to hold up the Chinese example for universal emulation, but of structural

features that obtain from working within the same framework of assumptions: for instance, that the first-stage objective of development should be the satisfaction of basic needs; that development should be organized on a territorial basis; that questions of production and distribution should be jointly solved; and that the resource base for the development of productive forces must be continuously expanded.⁸

We will discuss the major elements of the agropolitan approach under four headings, including (1) the basic conditions for its realization, (2) the territorial framework, (3) the expansion of production, and (4) the role of the state.

THE BASIC CONDITIONS

Three conditions are essential to successful agropolitan development: (1) selective territorial closure; (2) the communalization of land and Water resources; and (3) the equalization of access to the bases for the accumulation of social power. They are difficult conditions to fulfill; yet, without them, only limited progress can be made.

Selective territorial closure refers to a policy of enlightened self-reliance at relevant levels of territorial integration: district, region, and nation. This condition flies straight in the face of the ideology of free trade and comparative advantage and the attempts of transnational enterprise to organize a functionally integrated world economy under its tutelage. Selective closure is a way to escape from the fetishism of growth efficiency; it is an expression of faith in the abilities of a people to guide the forces of their own evolution. It means to rely less on outside aid and investment, to involve the masses in development, to initiate a conscious process of social learning, to diversify production, and to pool resources. It means learning to say “we” and to assert a territorial interest.

The communalization of land and water resources is the second condition for agropolitan development. In poor agrarian societies, productive wealth occurs chiefly in the form of land and water. Communalizing this wealth means that the power to determine the ultimate uses and disposition of land and water rests with the appropriate territorial community. In most peasant societies, this is an ancient practice, vestiges of which may be found to this day, as in Mexico’s indigenous tradition of the ejido.

Communalization may take a variety of forms. All that is asserted here is the priority interest of the community in the basic conditions of its sustenance. Whereas individuals seek short-term gains, territorial communities must ensure the long-term survival and well-being of the group. Communalization legitimizes the expression of this interest.

In the context of a basic-needs strategy, communalization is essential. Only the community can guarantee the satisfaction of the basic needs of its members, and to allocate benefits accordingly it must have access to the fruits of its own labour. The full mobilization of available resources, which agropolitan development implies, is possible only where the benefits from such an effort are understood to flow in roughly equal measure to everyone in the community. Where benefits are appropriated primarily for private use, so that the gains accrue unequally, even the initial effort is not likely to be made, and the productive potential of the community will be realized only in part.

The third condition for agropolitan development is the equalization of access to the bases for the accumulation of social power. Social power is here conceived as a resource capable of raising the individual's sense of potency. Where access to the use of social power is unequal, the power of the few to dominate the many is enhanced. Where it is more equally distributed, the ground is prepared for entering upon freely co-operative relations.

It is freely co-operative relations that are the well-spring for an active life. They release new energies, generate new ideas in practice, and are capable of transforming what would otherwise be burdensome chores into work that is joyful.

Social power is an inexhaustible resource whose potential capacity increases with use. The long-term development of the human race must be based on this remarkable Product that flows more freely the more we use of it. But it becomes truly available only to those who help to produce it!

There are many bases for the accumulation of social power. They include:

- productive assets in land, water, and tools
- financial resources
- relevant information
- knowledge and skills
- social and political organization

The next question is more difficult: what is intended by the phrase, "equalization of access?" In the present context, it means that within territorially integrated communities, everyone is to have an equal chance of gain-ing access to the use of common resources for production and adaptive use. This emphasis on a probability calculus is intended. Whereas resources of social power may be placed within the reach of everyone, not everyone may wish to use them, or to use them for the same or even similar ends. Complete equality of outcomes can only be enforced by resorting to Draconian measures. Human beings are diverse in their nature, and a mechanical egalitarianism is contrary to the very essence of what it means to be human."

The Territorial Framework

Agropolitan districts are the smallest territorial units that are still capable of providing for the basic needs of their inhabitants with only marginally important resource transfers from outside.”

In view of the need for face-to-face encounter in the governance of agropolitan affairs— a form of governance that concerns questions of both production and distribution, and mindful of a population density criterion that would require at least 200 persons per square kilometre of cultivated land — agropolitan districts may be designed to have a total population of between 15,000 and 60,000. The inclusion of a country town within the district would raise their total by an additional 5-20,000 people. Speaking in rough numbers, we suggest agropolitan districts that would range in population size from 20,000 to 100,000.

This derivation of agropolitan districts applies only to rural areas. In cities, agropolitan neighbourhoods may be variously defined within approximately the same overall population limits.” According to this procedure, many smaller towns will obviously fall within rural agropolitan districts, while medium-sized cities would constitute districts in their own right.

THE EXPANSION OF PRODUCTION

Applying the principle of territoriality to problems of economic organization means strengthening the territorial economy at all relevant levels, above all, the agropolitan district and the level immediately superior to it, or the region. And strengthening the territorial economy means to encourage self-reliance in the management of economic affairs.” From this, a number of correlative principles may be derived:

- development should aim at diversifying the territorial economy;
- development should aim at the maximum development of physical resources consistent with principles of conservation;
- development should encourage the expansion of regional and inter-regional (domestic) markets;
- development should be based as much as possible on principles of self-finance;
- development should promote social learning.

These five principles of a self-reliant territorial development will now be separately discussed.

Diversifying the territorial economy. In predominantly agrarian societies, diversification has two possible meanings: first, diversifying agricultural production (e.g. food crops where industrial crops are common and vice versa); and, second, augmenting the level of industrial production

and service activities in rural areas. (In urban areas, this would take the form of facilitating the growing of agricultural crops and small livestock.)

The diversification of area economies is a way of overcoming the contradictions between city and countryside. It is also a way for making agropolitan districts and regions more capable of dealing with adversity, more ingenious in overcoming difficulties, and also- because more interdependent -more communally oriented.

Michael Goldberg has argued that the lowest units in a hierarchically structured system tend also to be the most specialized, the least adaptable, and the most readily replaceable units.¹⁵ Although his language is borrowed from ecology, Professor Goldberg is speaking of the small enterprise or firm in a capitalist economy. This firm, indeed, is replaceable. But an agropolitan district with tens of thousands of inhabitants is not; it must survive. And if it is to survive, it must diversify its economy; it must become rather like one of Professor Goldberg's "higher" units where adaptability facilitates resilience to changes in environment. But in stressing resilience, Professor Goldberg fails to mention that the most adaptive human systems are also the most likely to display a high order of creativity in problem-solving. Polivalence in economic structure may thus be highly correlated with innovativeness, social learning, and development.

Diversification in rural agropolitan districts will, at a minimum, require electric energy, radio or telephone communication, regular water supply, drainage, and year-round, all-weather transport to other areas.

Can it be assumed, however, that non-agricultural activities could be efficiently located in rural areas? Experience in both China and the advanced industrial and post-industrial regions in Western Europe and the United States has shown that the answer to this question is affirmative. Urban-industrial concentrations are an historical phenomenon; they are not necessarily the lowest-cost locations. For many industries, especially those oriented towards mass markets, generalized labour skills, and agricultural raw materials, decentralized locations may be as economical or more so. The same may be said of convenience services that are best located within walking or bicycling distance from their potential clients. These considerations suggest that the existence of economies of scale (and thus of economies of concentration) has been vastly overstated. The lowest level of a real economy may be efficiency integrated on a pedestrian or bicycle scale, that is, on the scale of a typical agropolitan district.

Maximum physical development constrained by the need for conservation. The need to develop the physical quality of life is obvious and essential. But physical development is difficult to accomplish, because what needs to be done is often -not valued by market economists.

The remuneration of work tasks in the process of production must be evaluated in a social rather than market perspective. Where a sufficiency of livelihood is guaranteed, and labour is not fully

used, every contribution to production represents a gain, however slight, to the community. And in an economy in which survival is still the major issue, everything contributing to this objective represents a social gain.”

But the maximum development of physical resources does not mean, as it does under industrial capitalism, that resources may be exploited with a view to maximum immediate gain for individuals. The territorial community has a history that translates forward into time. Future generations are nearly as important as those living, the only difference being the uncertainty of future knowledge (technical innovations, emergents). For this reason, territorially organized communities tend to value the future more highly than communities which are integrated primarily on a basis of function. This holds as well for agropolitan communities, where resource use must be managed in perpetuity.

Application of this principle raises the important question of use-value production which we discussed earlier in this chapter. In almost all agropolitan districts, there will be unused time during at least some part of the year. To the extent that work can be mobilized for the production of use values for the community, in return for a guarantee of basic needs, the productive base of the community can be expanded. This may be regarded as the classical form of primitive accumulation. Its major initial object in rural areas would undoubtedly be land and water management (anti-erosion controls, small flood control and irrigation projects, land reclamation schemes), the development of local energy resources, transport improvements, and the construction of various social facilities such as schools, clinics, assembly halls, and recreation areas.

Expanding regional and interregional (domestic) markets. Under the prevailing doctrine of unequal development, the only way to expand domestic markets is something like the following sequence:

foreign demand→ manufactured exports→ expansion of secondary and tertiary employment→ increased demand for agricultural products → increased demand for domestic manufactures→ increase in domestic production and employment.

In this sequence, everything follows its “natural” course. The only trouble with the sequence is that it is wrong. Domestic mass markets are created, not by foreign demand for the products of low-cost labour but by increasing the productivity of the masses through agropolitan development! The new industry should be devoted to the production of wage goods, or simple products, including tools in daily use. The variety of such goods is small and the technology of their production is straightforward. Wage goods can be manufactured in small enterprises that are dispersed among agropolitan districts. In this way, people get experience with inventing and with making things. They learn about machines and common business practices.”

To build up wage-goods production at home, mass production with advanced technology must be severely limited.²⁴ Jet planes cannot be matched with gliders in a race!

Successful home production of wage goods will eventually create a demand for machinery and simple transport equipment. This, too, can be produced at home. The new sequence will, therefore, look like this:

increased agricultural productivity + industrial diversification in de-centralized locations (principally wage-goods production) → increased occupation of labour → increased demand for wage goods → increased demand for machinery and simple transport equipment technological and product innovations → enhanced capacity for export of domestic manufactures abroad.

Agropolitan development builds strength from within, based on its own resources, its own skills, its own discoveries and learning. It does not expect a transfusion of strength from “donor” countries abroad. It does not count on miraculous transformations, nor on results without effort. And so it begins with a development that will satisfy basic needs as, in doing so, it creates new ones.

If the countryside is endowed with basic infrastructure—for instance, if an internal communications and transport network is built up that will connect agropolitan districts and regions with each other—large cities will lose their present overwhelming advantage. The economy will then turn inward upon itself, discover its hidden energies and assets, and, in a “natural” learning progression, modernize itself from within.

Manufacturing industry will be second in a logical sequence of steps. The first is the continuous upgrading of agricultural productions, starting with overall increases in the physical volume of food and basic fibres, followed, in due course, by increases in the productivity of farm land and the productivity of workers.

The development of industry will be tied into this sequence, beginning with agricultural processing and going on to the manufacture of tools and other equipment of use to peasants and workers in their daily lives. Dispersed among the villages and fields, small industries will provide a source of work and income, in a mode of production that is intimately related to the emerging agropolitan structure of society in which the contradictions of industrial capitalism—between city and countryside, production and consumption, work and leisure— are progressively resolved.

Following principles of self-finance. Self-reliance implies some form of self-financing. Yet it is said that poor people, who perforce must provide the bulk of resources, are incapable of saving. Engel’s law is invoked to prove this, showing that most of poor people’s income is spent on necessities, especially on food. This is true, of course, and not particularly surprising. But if they

are properly motivated, even poor people — that is, the great mass of the population in agrarian societies—are capable of extraordinary efforts—witness the remarkable investments in self-built housing throughout the world,²⁶ or the substantial village-bound remissions of money earned by relatives in the city,²⁷ or the amounts saved by poor people to finance the education of their children. When poor people do not save, it is usually for one of three reasons: because they live below the threshold of subsistence; because family obligations are more immediately pressing; or because what they have managed to put aside is forcibly taken from them—for instance, when the government bulldozes self-constructed housing in shanty towns, landlords extract exorbitant rents, moneylenders collect astronomical interest payments, or the terms of trade with the city are rigged by government against the countryside.

The first and foremost rule of self-finance is therefore this: to establish conditions that will secure for the benefit of oneself and one's family the effort saved out of present consumption. Peasants are not more altruistic than other people. Yet they are capable of exceptional sacrifice if the benefits to them, including improvements in the territorial community that yield a common benefit, are clear and direct.

To ensure that effort given up to the community results in benefits to the masses, the basic conditions of agropolitan development must be fulfilled: selective territorial closure—to prevent the outbound transfer of resources; the communalization of wealth—to prevent the appropriation of communal benefits for private gain; and the equalization of access to the bases of social power—to prevent the accumulation of social surplus in the hands of those whose access is privileged.

A further condition for self-finance is that the employment of local resources in different tasks should be left, as much as possible, to the decisions of the appropriate institutions at district and regional levels. Not only is the central allocation of resources for local benefit a virtual impossibility, but the democratic doctrine that the people have a right to share in the decisions that involve the collective use of their own resources must be respected. In principle, local, regional, and national plans should be dove-tailed into each other. But particularly at district and sub-district levels, what the people want, as opposed to what the state would like to happen, constitutes a proper subject for discussion between them and, indeed, for extensive negotiation. Agropolitan planning, along with other forms of planning, requires a substantial margin of uncertainty.

Promoting social learning. Social learning occurs whenever the institutions comprising the agropolis show an enhanced capacity for dealing with the problems that confront them. It is not, strictly speaking, a descriptive term, referring to a modality of institutional performance. The social learning approach to problem-solving points instead to both structural forms of social relations and to specific practices that will promote it.

The practice of group evaluation and self-criticism is an especially valuable technique. So are campaigns whose principal purpose is to encourage social learning. Such campaigns would be conducted periodically with the full panoply of group discussions, field observations, experimental trials, and interdistrict contests. Suitable topics would include improved irrigation practices, environmental sanitation, youth culture, small livestock production, group decision-making, marketing, infant care, afforestation, and water management. Follow-up work would be done by local cadres. For the idea is not to teach some set of abstract skills, but to induce new practices. And for this local village cadres are essential. They will provide the link to supporting central services and encourage those innovative practices through which effective learning will occur.

Care should also be devoted to the design of channels for the routine exchange of information among agropolitan districts themselves. Some information exchange will happen spontaneously, of course, as limited functional relations develop among districts and regions, but special measures to promote the sharing of information on relevant local experiences will make this evolutionary process more effective. Officers might be appointed for each district to develop information networks and to facilitate cross-district learning. For example, regular visits to neighbouring districts might be organized to observe livestock breeding techniques, the results of new hybrid strains, bio-conversion technology, solar energy production, improved methods of grain storage, and so forth. The inauguration of a new school, or the completion of an irrigation or small hydro-electric project might be cause for region-wide celebration, dramatizing the event and encouraging its emulation. The object of all these activities would be to improve actual practice and to teach the general principle that development is not “imported” but produced through one’s own efforts.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Each agropolitan district is a self-governing unit whose authority over its own productive and residentiary activities, considered jointly, is restrained only by the concurrent needs of all other districts and the combined needs of the larger community of which they form a part. This limitation on autonomy is balanced by the requirement that the level of development of productive forces across all districts shall be approximately equal.

Self-reliance requires self-finance, and self-finance calls for self-government. The political autonomy of agropolitan districts is a fundamental principle and may be exercised through assemblies, with delegates sent by component functional and territorial units, representing productive and residentiary interests respectively. Planning and other technical personnel should be attached to the assemblies in order to bring all possible formal knowledge to bear on their decisions.

But even though they are autonomous, agropolitan districts are not sovereign units. They are parts of a larger territorial system—the nation — that, in turn, is linked into the all-embracing functional system of the world economy.

In social formations that are organized on the basis of agropolitan principles, the role of the state is at once protective, developmental, facilitative, regulatory, and redistributive. It is protective by securing territorial boundaries against outside, predatory forces and keeping the peace among the constitutive units of the state. It is developmental by co-ordinating national policies for both structural change and growth, and by undertaking projects of common benefit which exceed the ability of agropolitan districts. It is facilitative in that, through its own resources, it stands prepared to support agropolitan districts (and regions) in the realization of their own projects. It is regulatory by maintaining those critical balances within the system of social relationships that will permit both change and growth to occur without excessive disruption of the system as a whole. And it is re-distributive in that it takes surplus resources from rich districts to equalize redevelopment possibilities in less favoured areas.

In agropolitan society, the central state is a strong state. Increased power at district and regional levels requires a growth of power at the centre. It follows that a system of agropolitan governance is not without its own sources of conflict. Conflicts will arise among territorial units (districts and regions), each with its special interests to defend, and there will always be differences in local and/ or personal viewpoint. But agropolitan governance is not intended to sublimate conflicts into a greater harmony; it is to provide a legitimate forum for articulating conflicts and searching for appropriate means of resolution.

The Parallel Economy

The foregoing description of the agropolitan approach to development is an attempt to set forth the conditions of a better life for the billions of peasants and urban workers in the periphery of the world economy. It is an approach that tries to bring together questions of production and distribution in the same solution by shifting the bulk of developmental activities to where the people are, an approach which stresses a development from within in which human energies are released in freely co-operative relations. Starting with basic needs, it is also a development which, in parallel with the general development of productive forces, allows for the gradual emergence of individual needs.

It is therefore necessary to point out that the agropolitan approach is not intended to achieve a maximum level of self-sufficiency, or to expand the use-value economy to the virtual, exclusion of values in exchange, or to oppose an urban-based industrialization at all costs. In emphasizing

those elements which have been overlooked or neglected in traditional doctrine, we do not wish to suggest that they become the only elements.

Nor does an insistence on selective territorial closure mean an hermetic isolation from the world economy. The world economy exists, and if its further integration along functional lines is to become workable, the urban-based, corporate economy must be restricted to a non-competitive and, if possible, complementary realm. Corporate industry is non-competitive when it produces commodities that do not substantially duplicate the production of decentralized agropolitan industries. It is complementary where it develops backward and forward linkages with the thousands of small industries in agropolitan locations.

So long as corporate industry and business exist — and they will not only continue to exist but will probably expand — the movement of people from rural districts to the cities will also continue. The agropolitan approach is not meant to freeze the existing pattern of settlement. Its sole purpose is to make possible a development that is geared to the satisfaction of evolving human needs.

Over time, cities that are organized on agropolitan principles will grow, extending their reach over vast areas. But instead of destroying rural life, 'they will absorb it and, in absorbing it, transform it. And even though the exchange economy will expand relative to the economy of use values, at least for a time, the production of use values will continue to contribute importantly to national development. The agropolitan approach is a dynamic form of development. Except for a few basic principles, it does not follow any formulae but pursues the logic of its own evolution in specific settings.

Starting with an emphasis on basic needs—a sufficiency of livelihood— its ultimate purpose is to facilitate the satisfaction of emerging social and individualized needs. Only the initial conditions have been specified. Once begun, agropolitan development will pass through its own historical transformations.