

GEOGRAPHY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING: LINKING UNDERSTANDING TO ACTION

by
Henk Huisman and Karmono Mangunsukardjo*

ABSTRACT

*The interest in regional development planning in Indonesia as well as in many other Third World countries is growing rapidly since the early 1970s. However, the subject matter of regional development planning is still in the process of taking shape. As a consequence, considerable differences exist regarding the interpretation of this field of enquiry and action. The present article aims at addressing three basic questions, i.e.: (i) What is the rationale for the introduction of planning for development on a regional basis? (ii) What types of regional development planning do exist and what are their respective characteristics? and (iii) What are the various implications of the spatial dimension of regional development planning for professional practice? As the understanding of the dynamic situation in an area in a holistic way is a *sine qua non* condition for the planning of effective development intervention, the input of geography in the regional planning process is indispensable.*

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s disillusionment set in regarding the achievements of development planning. One of the main causes held responsible for the crisis in planning was the persistent gap between the planning goals and the actual results

* Drs. Henk Huisman is Manager of the Regional and Rural Development Planning Programme at the Faculty of Geography, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Dr. Karmono Mangunsukardjo, MSc., is a geomorphologist and now the Dean of the Faculty of Geography, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

of action taken on basis of the documents produced. Experiences gained demonstrated, among others, that a bridge was required between the national and local levels of planning to properly guide and coordinate the numerous individual development project activities. However, with the growing acceptance of the need to start planning on a regional basis, widespread confusion could be observed as to the meaning of the concept of regional planning. Part of this muddle should be attributed to the fact that, for the first time, development planning now had acquired a spatial dimension. Spatial aspects have been rather neglected in development theory. In turn, this can be explained by analysis of the history of geographical thought. The last few decades geography has developed towards a problem-oriented discipline. Nowadays, it is able to offer sound methodologies and considerable experience regarding the analysis and synthesis of a wide range of phenomena in their respective temporal and spatial contexts.

The text is subdivided into three sections: A first one which focusses on the main aspects relating to the origin of regional development planning, a second one which deals with the persistent terminological confusion and the underlying causes, and a final one which aims at a clarification of the potential role of geography in the complex field of regional development planning.

BRIDGING A GAP

Some two decades ago the field of development planning was in great turmoil. The optimistic belief in planning as a highly powerful and effective tool to obtain rapid economic growth rates and modernization of society in the third world seemed to have been very naive. Waterston (1965: 293), in a text on the promise and performance of planning, observed:

"By far the great majority of countries have failed to realize even modest income and output targets in their plans, except for short periods. What is even more disturbing, the situation seems to be worsening instead of improving as countries continue to plan."

In the early 1970s, the general disillusionment with development planning as instrument to solve problems appeared to have reached the proportions of a crisis. (Faber and Seers, 1972).

The various disciplines active on the development scene did not wait long to come up with explanations for the disappointing record of development planning so far. Unfortunately, the consensus about the existence of serious problems soon appeared to be matched by "dissensus" about the causes. (Jolly, 1977). Careful analysis of commentators' texts, however, learns that frequently the

observation is made that in many developing economies a wide gap can be found between the intentions behind the development plans and the objectives as formulated on the one hand, and the actual results of implementation of plans on the other hand (Conyers and Hills, 1984). The observed discrepancy between goals and outcomes of plans is partly attributed to the structure of the planning machinery as present in many developing countries. Often, one finds that planning is relatively well developed and institutionalized at the national, or macro level and at the project, or micro level of authority, while it is virtually absent at other meso levels, of authority (Stöhr and Fraser Taylor, 1981). From this, the conclusion can be drawn that apparently the macro level planning machinery itself is in general not adequately geared to provide for a reasonably effective framework that can guide and coordinate the execution of the numerous local level development programmes and projects. Consequently, there is a need to develop such a framework at the regional or intermediate level to straddle the gap between national and local level development planning activities. Luning (1981: 13), in a publication evaluating planning activities in the Philippines, summarizes it as follows:

"It is the region which presents a useful intermediate level that abstracts from precisely these operational difficulties implicit in aggregate/sectoral planning at the one extreme, and the individual project planning at the other. Project planning without a regional framework often leads to haphazard, unsystematic selection whereby a bias towards highly visible, capital intensive projects can be observed".

Since the late 1970s, the number of developing countries which have taken first steps to introduce some sort of regional development planning has grown with a remarkable rate. Experiments with meso level planning have been carried out successfully in the Southeast Asian context as well. The last couple of years, countries like Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia appear to have made considerable progress towards establishing a first foundation for regional development planning (MacAndrews *et al.*, 1982). However, with the general acceptance of the need to introduce regional planning, substantial problems have arisen as to the actual interpretation of the regional planning concept. To cite Glasson (1978: 9): "Regional Planning means many things to many men(...). It tends to be something of an enigma and is often regarded as an intruder in the planning fraternity".

INTERPRETATION PITFALLS

Some of the prevalent confusion regarding the concept of regional planning may be taken away by the acceptance of a number of basic distinctions be-

tween types of regional planning. In the first place, one should point at the fact that regional planning is used both to indicate the planning of allocation of resources and activities between the regions or areas of a country and to the planning of these aspects within a certain subnational spatial unit. Where the former type refers to inter-regional planning, the latter type is dealing with intra-regional planning.

Decisions on inter-regional planning are usually taken on basis of a set of alternatives formulated by the central planning agency in the country. In most cases, the process of allocation is purely a top-down affair. In the Indonesian context, where regional imbalances are very large, the need for inter-regional planning is most apparent (Hulsman, 1986). Obviously, inter-regional planning always is a politically sensitive affair, which, for that reason, seems to explain the considerable publicity which frequently surrounds this type of planning activity.

Intra-regional planning, on the other hand, concerns problems of resources allocation and activities within a certain area. Here, another distinction is in place, i.e. between intra-regional planning activities directed to selected regions, and intra-regional planning which covers all regions in a country. In literature dealing with intra-regional planning, most of the attention has been paid so far to the former type of planning. Cases like, for instance, Bicol (the Philippines), Mahaweli (Sri Lanka), Guyana (Venezuela) and Damodar (India), are all relatively well documented. Nation-wide intra regional planning exercises, however, are less well described and analysed. Most probably, because the results of planning activities in all regions at the same time are much more difficult to assess; not only since nation-wide exercises are very recent phenomena, but also because of the comprehensiveness of such an exercise.

In the second place there is considerable confusion as consequence of the concept of a region. Regionalization efforts can be undertaken on the basis of territorial variations of a given indicator or criterion (uniform or homogeneous regions), or on the basis of interdependence of parts, usually of a polarized nature (nodal or functional regions).

To complicate matters further, there is a great variety of the scales at which regionalization efforts take place. Especially in larger countries, such as Indonesia, regionalization often results in tiers. As consequence, (intra) regional planning activities may refer to a range of scales from micro-regional plans to macro-regional plans.¹ Some countries have even adopted a complete hierarchy

1. After a subdivision of the country into four major development regions (i.e. macro-level), Indonesia has set up regional planning boards at the provincial (i.e. meso) level in 1974. From 1979 onwards, regional planning organizations were extended down to the district or kabupaten (i.e. micro) level of administration. Presently, various intra regional plans are being formulated at both meso and micro levels.

of planning regions. In India, for instance, the so-called multi-level planning plays an important role in the process of guiding development efforts. Usually, in such cases, the level of elaboration, i.e. the extent in which details are included in the plan, is inversely related to the scale to which the plans refer.

Most of the terminological confusion as observed above appears to be related with the term regional. This is not very astonishing if one considers the fact that development planning for a concrete spatial entity of sub-national scale is something rather recent: Development Planning activities have long been carried out in an "abstract" and "spaceless" fashion in the developing world. Gore (1984: x), in a recent publication on regional development theory, states forthrightly:

"... space is a neglected dimension within development studies (and social theory in general) ... Theories of social and economic change which treat societies as if they were some spaceless aggregate are at best incomplete, and at worst misleading".

Therefore, it is a logical step to now turn to the specific spatial basis of regional planning in order to be able to form a clear idea of the consequences hereof for the carrying out of meso level planning activities directed at development.

UNDERSTANDING SPACE

Space is the domain of geography. However, this discipline only showed real interest in developmental problems at a relatively late stage. Analyses of spatial aspects of development on the basis of development theory are of a relatively recent date. Hinderink, in an article discussing geography and the study of development, gives two reasons for this late interest. In the first place, he points at the long tradition of the ideographic orientation in research. This orientation implied a continuous emphasis on the "uniqueness" of places and regions by lengthy descriptions of the various individual characteristics. This prevented geographers to give wider relevance to their studies and this type of orientation thus implied an obstacle to the analysis of specifically spatial consequences of development processes. As a second reason the author points at the debate on the object of geography as a discipline (Hinderink, 1981). The obsession to carve out an independent academic territory has absorbed much energy for a long time.

Nowadays, the ideographic mode of analysis has been largely abandoned and the debate on the assumed object of geography has finally come to an end with the general acceptance that the discipline does not have a specific material object, but that geographers have in common a formal object—a specific way of looking at things: The so-called "spatial view". Among the principal characteristics of this formal object one finds most prominently the question where things are

located. The location of phenomena refers to geographic space. The adjective clearly implies concreteness. Therefore, geographic space is distinct from other types of space with which sciences may be occupied such as, among others, economic space, personal space, social space, or perceptual space. These types generally refer to something rather abstract. In addition to the attention to the distribution or spatial patterns of phenomena, the object of geography implies a specific interest in the ecological integration of phenomena in space. In other words, there is a concern for aspects of absolute location. Furthermore, geographers' focus is on matters relating to the interaction of phenomena over space, i.e. a concern for aspects of relative location. The study of phenomena in their spatial and temporal contexts obviously requires due attention to both human and physical aspects in real world situations. Therefore, geography as a discipline implicitly is of an integrating nature. In Coffey's words:

"... because every process or event has some sort of spatial manifestation, geography may be conceptualized as a discipline which transcends the conceptual and empirical boundaries of compartmentalized knowledge about reality, and integrates that knowledge in a useful and meaningful way. Geography is, indeed, an integrating science and the theme around which the knowledge of the processes and objects of the real world is integrated is that of space". (Coffey, 1981: 35).

Modern geography thus collects, records and analyses data over a wide range of studies, including, for instance, soils and lands, climate, hydrology, population, primary, secondary and tertiary production sectors, physical and social infrastructure; to mention a few.

These data are ultimately integrated, fused together, to describe and explain the various relationships as identified over space and time. It is in this basic objective of geography (synthesis of a range of data concerning a spatial unit into a cohesive whole), where the great value of geography for regional planning activities can be found. Especially in developing countries, where reliable statistical data are often not available, geographers can fulfill an important task, to collect and present information on spatial differentiation, both as situation as well as process. Such information should also encompass an integrated overview of spatial units' development potentials and constraints. Furthermore, a dynamic analysis should be made of the past development trends that brought about the present situation. In this way, geography can provide a valuable contribution to realistic, problem-oriented regional plans.

CONCLUSIONS

Intra regional planning is similar to other types of planning in that it possesses the same basic feature. However, as it takes place at an intermediate

level in a well defined spatial entity, it is a typical areas-based approach to development. Regional planning has emerged as response to the view that a region must be treated as a whole, not as a haphazard collection of sectors and attributes. A required greater emphasis on the implementation of plans according to region specific characteristics is possible through a regionally based horizontal planning organization. In addition, the knowledge concerning the region's potentials and constraints allows for a realistic translation of national goals into regionally coordinated project-bundles. The other way around, an identification of projects with due regard to local needs and views is also possible. In this way, regional development planning can fulfill the much desired bridge function between national and local level. The problem field of regional development is of such magnitude and the range of crucial physical and human factors involved (including the extent and critical weight of their intricate relationships) is of such complexity, that a regional planning exercise can only be successfully carried out if work is done on an interdisciplinary basis. This implies intensive cooperation between various disciplines according to a purposeful pattern of interrelations. In our opinion, neglect of the spatial dimension of development processes accounts for many of the disappointing results of development efforts. Therefore, geographers, although frequently specialized in a number of facets of their discipline only, are indispensable as participants in such exercises, since they are the professionals trained in the analysis of problems within their spatial contexts. In addition, many geographers do possess relevant experience to present a picture of the dynamic situation in a synthesized way.

In sum, it seems clear that interventions which are directed to change the spatial distribution of physical infrastructure, population and human activities within a territory should be preceded by a thorough understanding of the situation. This quality can be found precisely among geographers. Their input can ensure that regional plans are better geared to the regional conditions and are more implementable.

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