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Citizens, Local Government and the Development of Chicago's Near South Side

Discussion Paper No. 90, November 1997

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and Judy Meima

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Preface

As one of their contributions to preparations for the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, March 1995), UNRISD and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) undertook a project on **Social Integration at the Grassroots: The Urban or “Pavement” Dimension**. Its purpose was to survey and highlight the current and potential contributions of volunteer effort towards social integration at the local level. Between July 1994 and March 1995, local activists prepared case studies of innovative or especially instructive efforts by community organizations and volunteer groups to combat grave urban social problems in 17 cities on four continents.

A common theme to emerge from these city-level case studies was that community responses to urban social problems could achieve much greater multiplier effects if they occurred in a context of genuine support from a stronger, more open local government. UNRISD and UNV therefore embarked on another project with the aim of better understanding the successes of and constraints on collaboration between community organizations (including volunteer groups) and local authorities. This project, **Volunteer Action and Local Democracy: A Partnership for a Better Urban Future** (VALD), presented its preliminary findings from eight cities — Chicago, East St. Louis, Ho Chi Minh City, Jinja, Johannesburg, Lima, Mumbai and São Paulo — at the Habitat II Conference (Istanbul, June 1996).

This Discussion Paper combines a series of contributions from the VALD project in Chicago: an overview study of the social, political and economic forces that tend to limit the influence of community organizations on decision-making in the city of Chicago; three case studies on the interaction between Chicago authorities and community organizations around urban redevelopment issues in Chicago’s Near South Side neighbourhoods of Chinatown, South Loop and South Armour Square; and the reactions to the main themes of the study by a Chicago Department of Planning and Development official and a prominent NGO activist.

The central questions posed by this study are where are poor people in Chicago to live, and who has the right to decide? The authors assert that, in spite efforts by low-income and marginalized groups to organize to defend their interests, their housing choices are determined largely by powerful business coalitions that have little incentive accommodate the interests or preferences of low-income groups. This is a result of several factors, including the legacy of institutionalized racism, the complexity of the urban development process, the inequitable use of taxpayer subsidies to finance housing and infrastructure serving the middle and upper classes, and the City’s abdication of responsibility to regulate the use of urban space for the benefit of all citizens.

Furthermore, according to the authors, when citizens become developers by creating community development corporations (CDCs), a tension arises between using CDCs in the interests of poor people and the fact that the development process itself is designed for contrary class interests. The authors point out a need to change the decision-making process by placing limits on abuses of state power, such as those highlighted by the case studies, and to make community organizations — particularly CDCs — accountable to the poor people they are chartered to serve. The authors also argue that coalitions addressing poor people’s interests should not focus all of their energy on gaining power in local government. The electoral victory of such a coalition in Chicago, and the subsequent administration of progressively-inclined Mayor Harold Washington, Chicago’s first Black mayor, did not significantly change the nature of urban property development. The case studies point out that poor people’s issues must be articulated from both class and race perspectives. In that regard, the mixed income community has not offered a viable solution to the problems outlined in the case studies. If the mixed income community is used for the benefit of dominant political

interests, it can eliminate affordable housing and facilities for the very poor and erode their political power by dispersing them.

A key conclusion drawn by the authors is that strong class-based community organization and an organizing agenda that confronts the biased nature of the urban property development process are of crucial importance. The authors outline a number of specific rules and regulations that need changing, emphasize that an organizing agenda must address both race and class if progress is to be made, and claim that alliances that go beyond neighbourhood boundaries can be more effective than organizations that are confined to a particular geographical area.

Anecdotal evidence from VALD case studies in Lima and Mumbai suggest that recent liberalizations of urban land markets are forcing similar choices on low-income centre-city residents in these cities.

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Director

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