

One third of the world's urban population lives in a slum

Simon Whelan**17 February 2004**

Late in 2003 the United Nations reported that one billion people—approximately one third of the world's urban dwellers and a sixth of all humanity, live in slums. And it predicted that within 30 years that figure would have doubled to two billion—a third of the current world population.

“The Challenge of Slums” argues that without active intervention by national governments, rapid unplanned urban expansion will greatly exacerbate what is already a human disaster.

During the 1990s the urban population across Asia, Africa and South America grew by a third. There are at least 550 million slum dwellers in Asia, 187 million in Africa, 128 million in Latin America and the Caribbean and a further 54 million in the world's 30 richest countries.

The failure of governments to provide affordable housing has forced the bulk of the urban population into inner city slums, peripheral shantytown slums and—for the most desperate—the sidewalks, traffic roundabouts and every conceivable form of shelter. Slum life consists of insecure employment, state persecution and extreme poverty.

The biggest ever study of international urban conditions discovered that one billion people live in absolute squalor, without water or sanitation, public infrastructure or security of tenure. The research was carried out by the UN human settlement programme, UN-Habitat, based in Nairobi, Kenya. The Kibera district of Nairobi is the largest slum in the world, containing approximately three quarters of a million people. The Dhavari area of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and the Orangi district of Karachi, Pakistan, are only slightly smaller. In West Africa the Ghanaian city of Tema harbours the Ashaiman slum, which has grown larger than the city proper.

Poverty, once predominately a rural issue, has become an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon now that city dwellers are the world's majority. The 1990s witnessed phenomenal urban growth, with the worldwide urban population increasing by 36 percent. The report predicts that in addition to the growth of giant cities in all continents, up to three-quarters of future anticipated urban population growth will occur in some of the world's smaller cities, defined as those with current populations between one and five million.

Africa holds 20 percent of the world's slum dwellers, while South America has 14 percent. In Asia more than 550 million people live in slum conditions. While the largest economies are

responsible for just 2 percent of slum dwellers, an incredible 80 percent of the urban population of the world's 30 smallest economies live in slums.

The UN-Habitat report blames both national government inertia and what it describes as globalisation and neo-liberal economic policies imposed upon nations by the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation over the last three decades. The report's authors describe how rural dwellers are drawn to the cities by factors like the privatisation of public services, loss of rural employment or homestead, the removal of subsidies and tax breaks from national industries.

The report details how the emergence of globalisation over the last 25 years has exacerbated already desperate social and urban conditions for slum dwellers, who have seen their precipitous social position further undermined by free market policies. The wealth created by deregulated markets has not “trickled down” to slum communities, it states.

This type of critique of globalisation is a political red herring, in that it portrays what is the essential feature of modern capitalism as a subjective policy of certain institutions that can be reversed, or at least its worst effects ameliorated, by government intervention and regulation. But such appeals invariably fall on deaf ears. Governments today represent the interests of the giant transnational corporations that dominate the global economy and exploit its resources and peoples—and of the super-rich financial oligarchy that dictates political affairs throughout the world.

Only an independent policy articulating the social concerns of the broad masses of the world's population and mobilising them as a political force can offer an alternative to the nightmarish conditions that unplanned economic development, carried out in the interests of a privileged elite, has created.

That phenomenon which the UN simply identifies as a problem—the vast expansion of the world's urban population—contains within it the solution to the present catastrophe.

What the UN research has actually revealed is that the world's cities are swelling under a demographic explosion of the international working class as an inevitable result of the globalisation of capitalist production.

The urban infrastructure across the entire planet is collapsing beneath the weight of a burgeoning global proletariat, whereas the peasantry is a class in rapid decline, both numerically and politically. Peasants are being transformed into an urban working

class, as across the world larger and larger cities become home to an exploding population. It is this social force created by global capitalism that must liberate itself and humanity from the oppressive and exploitative social relations on which the profit system depends.

To give an indication of how rapidly the social weight of the urban working class is expanding, *The Times Atlas of the World* predicts that by next year there will be 19 cities with populations above 10 million. Lagos on the west coast of Nigeria and Cairo, Egypt, are the most recent to reach what is called “mega-city” status. By next year Tokyo, Japan, the world’s largest city, will be home to 27 million people while Sao Paulo, Brazil, will reach 20 million and Mexico City just one million less.

In 1950 only New York City had a population of 10 million. By the mid-1970s the number of mega-cities had increased fivefold and five years from now is expected to exceed 20.

Asia is leading this international growth of the working class, already containing 10 mega-cities, compared to North America’s two—Los Angeles and New York. By 2015, Dhaka, Mumbai and Delhi will be among the top five largest world cities and Asia will account for 12 of the world’s mega-cities.

Asia is becoming overwhelmingly urban in a half the time it took Europe and North America. Rome was the first city to reach a population of one million in the year 5 B.C. It was not until 1800 that London became the second. In 1950 just one third of the world’s population lived in cities.

By 2015, Asia alone will contain 267 cities with one million or more inhabitants. It is estimated that these cities, locations of vast commodity production for a world market, will contribute at least 70 percent of East Asia’s growth over the next 20 years.

Asian cities are growing at the rate of 3 percent a year and African ones at 4 percent. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, groans under the weight of 1,300 new arrivals every day.

Today city dwellers account for 75-85 percent of the populations of Europe and the United States. Should the rest of the world display similar patterns, then African cities will become home to a further 100 million people while Asia will recruit a further 340 million residents before 2010—the equivalent of a new city the current size of Bangkok every two months.

Under capitalism the vast majority of these vast urban populations are condemned to the most degrading conditions.

At the end of 1998 the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation reported that in African and Asian cities up to 1 billion people experience severe malnutrition and food shortages—with workers spending anything up to 80 percent of their income on food. Urban food prices in Africa and Asia are rising faster than the cost of living and wages. What food is available is frequently contaminated because of pollution and unhygienic conditions. Dilapidated infrastructure renders 30 percent of all merchandise inedible.

A mega-city with a population of 10 million requires approximately 6,000 tonnes of food every day. Such a grand operation requires massive investment in infrastructure as well as an unprecedented degree of cooperation and planning. The capitalist free market is incapable of fulfilling this most essential task.

Similarly, as cities have expanded transport infrastructure has virtually collapsed. Cities require more sophisticated and affordable transport networks, necessitating investment in trains, trams, metro systems and buses. Poor public transport increases reliance upon cars and taxis, bringing the road system to a virtual halt for hours every day and poisoning the cities’ inhabitants. For some living in the most peripheral slums the journey to work into Sao Paulo, Brazil, starts at 3.30 a.m. and takes four hours in either direction. The cost of workers commuting to Harare, Zimbabwe, is anywhere from 22 to 45 percent of their total income.

In Nairobi, Kenya, approximately 60 percent of its two and a half million inhabitants live in slums. In the gargantuan Kibera, the streets are unpaved, rubbish strewn and potholed. Hundreds of people might share one small toilet block and a couple of water outlets. When it rains storm water washes the accumulated waste into the water sources. While the population of the city grows by 5 percent per year, municipal waste collection rates fell from 90 percent in 1978 to 33 percent in 1998.

Internationally, 6,000 people every day die from preventable water-borne diseases.

In mid-January a huge fire in a Philippine slum highlighted the dangers of unplanned housing. The blaze in the Manila slum of Tondo injured scores of people, razed 2,500 homes and rendered an estimated 25,030 residents homeless. It raged for seven hours before it was extinguished, burning down 18 hectares of the 53 hectares of the former shipyard site where the slum has mushroomed.

During the 1990s the growth of social inequality was unprecedented in human history. Access to decent, affordable housing is a basic requirement for human well-being, yet across the world millions live under the most inhumane conditions. Even in Europe, formerly the home of the welfare state, 6.2 percent of the population eke out their lives in slums and more than one in twenty families live in slum conditions.

The lack of media coverage concerning the UN’s revelations is indicative of an international elite mired in self-satisfaction and concerned only with the immediate pursuit of material gain. Just how blinkered the ruling class has become is epitomised by the response of the *Economist* magazine, which offered as its prescription for the rise of slum cities giving slum dwellers title deeds to their shacks. They blithely argued that “awarding a title to slum dwellers can be seen as a fair way to establish property rights, the bedrock of any prosperous society.”

The growing international prevalence of slum communities and the neglected human potential they symbolise is a grotesque expression of the failure of a system driven by the profit motive, rather than by the requirement to satisfy elemental human needs. It points to the necessity to replace the anarchy of the capitalist free market with a rational system of socialist planning.



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