



# HABITAT

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on Human Settlements  
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## VAST AREAS OF SLUMS A CHALLENGE FOR HABITAT

by Moira Farrow

In some countries they are called squatter communities, or spontaneous settlements. But what they really are, in spite of the fancy words, are slums.

Throughout the Third World, squatters are rapidly becoming a tidal wave of humanity on the outskirts of virtually every major city. Their self-made shacks, a festering mess of dirt and disease, sprawl over endless acres.

These are slums of such horror and on such enormous scale that any similarity to a North American slum is merely coincidental. And it is this sort of degrading existence, a monstrous reality to millions of people, that is one of the main reasons for the United Nations conference on human settlements.

The UN estimates that more than 200 million people moved into cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America during the 1960s. One half or more of the world's population will be living in cities 30 years from now.

The people move to the city from the country in search of jobs. Even begging in a city is better than starving on a sand dune. Sociologists call this phenomenon rural-urban migration, but identifying the problem has done almost nothing to solve it.

North Americans may wonder why these country folk don't stay on the land and farm to at least provide food for their families.

But what we on this continent don't realize is that land in the developing countries is often arid. It needs a reliable water supply and fertilizer to make it bloom and that takes money. And money, of course, is the last thing rural villagers are likely to have. So the relentless march to the cities continues at an ever-escalating rate.

Urban Affairs Minister Barney Danson, the cabinet minister in charge of Habitat, recently made a trip to Africa and the Middle East. He had a close look at slum housing in only two countries. Senegal and Kenya, but that was enough to get an idea of the magnitude of the problem.

Dakar, the capital of French-speaking Senegal, is a port city with a population of about 650,000 which has all the classic problems associated with squatters.

Its population is expected to be 950,000 by 1980 but it is already battling with the fact that half its people live in low-standard housing where sewage, drainage and water facilities are limited or non-existent.

About half of these low-standard districts consist of illegal squatter settlements where shacks cover 70 to 90 per cent of the land.

In Dakar, unemployment is about 70 per cent and much of the countryside has been suffering from continuous drought for several years. The average family size is 10 people.

All these statistics add up to the reality that much of Dakar's population lives in the streets. They retreat to their wooden shacks only at night.

In the dirt roads around the shacks, men play cards, women do their weaving, babies are breast fed, washing is hung up and goats scabble for food scraps.

Refuse is dumped into a huge, stinking open sewer and the water supply is a public tap round which there is always a crowd of women waiting their turn. In the wet season, most of the shacks are under water.

Just across the street from these miles of slums are small villas where civil servants, considered the elite of Senegal, live. On the waterfront are the mansions of the very rich surrounded by barbed wire and watched over by security guards.

Housing — if you can get it — sounds cheap to Western ears because a two room flat costs about \$20 a month. But when you consider that some 40 per cent of Dakar residents earn less than \$50 a month, that rental doesn't sound low any more.

According to the driver of the car taking Danson's group for a tour of the city, it takes at least a year to get an apartment. Bribes help a lot to get a family moved up the waiting list and, unless a man has all the necessary documents (from birth certificate to marriage certificate), he can forget the idea.

Dakar made the same mistake that many other cities have done when trying to cope with their slums. The city fathers called in the bulldozers, knocked over the shacks like a pack of cards and moved the people to a new area a long way from the city and its job opportunities.

In the new town, the government provided "sites and services" — a system of establishing low-income housing that is unknown in Canada but is becoming very popular in Africa.

It means that the squatter family is provided with a lot and basic services such as water, sewers and electricity. Then it's up to the squatter to build his house himself with whatever materials he can get his hands on.

The result looks pretty messy to Canadian eyes but at least it is healthier than a slum with no services. And after seeing the size and fierce poverty of some African slums, Danson and his fellow travellers soon realized that building North American-style low-income housing is economically impossible in Third World countries.

The provision of basic serviced lots and then leaving the squatters to get on with the job is the best bet for developing countries with tiny budgets.

But, as Dakar found out too late, the newly-serviced areas for squatters must be within reach of employment.

Dakar's new community of Pikine is a bus ride of more than an hour to the city. Workers have to get up as early as 5 a.m. to go to work because the tightly packed buses are not adequate to cope with demand.

It is the custom of Senegal for all businesses to close at 1 p.m. for a mid-day break of several hours and then re-open until 7 or 8 p.m. But workers living in Pikine can't go home for lunch and, therefore, have to waste these midday hours sitting in a public park or cafe.

It's too late now to do anything about Pikine's location and hundreds more Dakar residents are being moved out there every year. The only hope is an industry establishing there amidst the sand, the scrub and the cactus plants.

Monteal architect Moshe Safdie, whose first African project is a new town 100 miles north of Dakar to service a massive petro-chemical development, is figuring out how to deal with his squatter problem.

It is inevitable that squatters will be attracted to the new town as soon as construction starts.

"They'll build shelters for themselves all over the place unless I do something about it," said Safdie. "My solution will be to provide a section of land with services and a supply of building materials where the squatters can channel their energy into putting up homes for themselves. It will be a self-help project for people with the lowest incomes."

Danson was greatly impressed by the "sites and services" idea and said it is one of the best ways in which Canada can spend its foreign aid dollars.

"You can never build enough housing for all the people you displace if you try to get rid of slums with bulldozers," he said. "At Pikine, you can see how the community developed spontaneously. It is disorganized, but I'm impressed by the way the government has helped the people and the quality of the housing can improve in time as the people do things for themselves."

Nairobi is the last place one would expect to find bad slums. It's an attractive city, full of gardens and parks, and houses the headquarters of the UN Environment Program.

The city has many elegant hotels and is visited by 20,000 to 30,000 Canadian tourists a year, most of them in search of camera safaris in Kenya's magnificent wildlife parks. Air Canada will have scheduled flights to Nairobi next year.

But the population of Kenya has doubled in 21 years and is expected to reach 16 million in 1980. The population of Nairobi is 500,000 and growing fast.

The obvious answer, birth control, is not a solution. Women who drink to blot out their miserable surroundings usually forget to take the pill. Internal devices require good hygiene and that's lacking in any slum.

And then there's the mental attitude to children here.

"If you ask poor people to limit their families they think you don't want them," explained social worker Mrs. Wanjiku Chiuri.

"It takes me all day to explain to one woman about family planning. The woman is so poor that she thinks the only thing she can do for her country is to have children."

Mrs. Chiuri, who will be part of Kenya's delegation to HABITAT, said it is not unusual for a slum dweller to have two wives and 12 children. Therefore, it's not surprising that Nairobi's slums are growing fast.

A 1971 survey of the city showed that one-third of the population lives in "temporary," illegal structures.

These shanty towns fill every inch of undeveloped land on the outskirts of the city but most Nairobi residents never go into the worst slums, even though they may drive past them every day for years.

The slum residents resent intruders and it is not hard to understand why. No man living in a stinking cardboard shack would want people peering at his misery.

When Danson's car weaved its way along a dirt trail through Nairobi's most notorious slum, Mathare Valley, children waved and smiled but some adults shook their fists and shouted angrily.

But most people ignored the Canadians because they had started on the evening party of home brew swigged out of empty oil cans.

Many of the squatters are unmarried mothers and many are slum landlords. The need for income is so great that the squatters will rent out even the smallest corner of a shack to get a few shillings a month for it.

One of the most practical approaches to the problem is being taken by the National Christian Council of Kenya, for which Mrs. Chiuri works.

This no-nonsense organization has tackled the root of the problem — unemployment — by starting a cottage industry of craft shops right in the Mathare slum.

In these workshops the slum dwellers learn to make jewelry (copied from old designs in the city museum), leather work, shoes and clothing. One entire workshop is devoted to toy making. The products of the non-profit workshops are sold in a Nairobi store or exported.

The hundred or so jobs that the workshops provide may seem negligible in a slum with an estimated population of up to 100,000. But it's a start.

"To work here you have to be destitute and education is unnecessary," said Mrs. Chiuri. "But, without this work, most of these people would be existing on charity."

The council is also involved in a "sites and services" housing project in cooperation with Nairobi city council. In this scheme, serviced plots are allocated to needy families and the squatters form themselves into groups to build concrete block houses.

This is housing at its most basic. The houses have only two rooms — one occupied by an entire family and the other rented out to bring income. Outside toilets and taps are grouped together to serve several houses.

But when one compares these simple little dwelling with the alternative — the sordid, cardboard shacks where the squatters live until they've built their new homes — the new improvement is obvious.

Nairobi council is also at work on a sites and services project of its own in partnership with the World Bank, which is hoped to provide homes for 60,000 people by 1980. But even this low-income project requires some financial contribution from the home builders and will be out of the reach of most of the inhabitants of Mathare Valley.

So what about the future of the big slum? Isaac Wanjohi, manager of the city council's project, just shrugged.

"That's a good question," he said. Then he admitted that all the new project can do is prevent new slums from forming. It seems that the people of the Mathare Valley will be living in their cardboard shacks for many years to come.

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