

Serving Slums

Has the mission community largely ignored the most important demographic shift of the past 100 years? by Tom Pratt



Beginning in the middle of the last century rural peoples from all over the economically underdeveloped world began migrating into major cities in search of a better life. Extreme rural poverty, natural catastrophes, environmental degradation and the lure of economic opportunity drove this rural to urban exodus.

The urban migration trickle of the 1940's soon turned into a torrent as hundreds of millions of previously rural people jammed themselves into exponentially growing megacities like Mumbai, Mexico City and Cairo. With few material resources and no place to live, these migrants 'squatted' on any available land around the cities and began creating the vast slum communities that now surround so many of the mega-urban centers.

In the early years of the 21st century this trend shows few if any signs of slowing, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, India, the Middle East and Central Asia. Over 500,000 people now live in Kibera, a huge squatter slum about the size of Denver in the middle of Nairobi, and tens of thousands more move in each year. Nouakchott, the capital city of Mauritania in northwest Africa, grew from 50,000 residents as recently as 1990 to a burgeoning city of almost 1.5 million today with most of that growth occurring in the squatter slums that surround the city.

As older 'informal' communities like Kibera become increasingly overcrowded, new informal communities spring up to meet the demand for housing, often so quickly that local authorities struggle to keep track of the new growth. Some studies estimate that as many as 1 billion people now live in the slums and squatter communities of the world's mega-cities. Many observers believe the rural to urban migration of the past 60 years is the greatest and most important migration in human history as the world shifts for the first time from a primarily rural to a primarily urban identity.

Yet in spite of the size and importance of this shift and in spite of the unique opportunities for mission this relatively new mission field provides, very few mission agencies focus their efforts on the evangelization and transformation of the world's urban squatter communities. Only a very small fraction of the world's mission force serves among the urban squatter poor.

Some mission organizations and movements, however, have responded to the opportunity. Servant Partners, an international mission committed to church planting and community transfor-

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mation among the world's urban squatter poor, ministers in Africa, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Servant Partners missionaries live incarnationally among the squatter poor, sharing life with their neighbors and taking on the challenges of ministering in that difficult context.

Life in the Squatter Community

Squatter communities share most of the characteristics of any urban poor community. Though the economies of many megacities like Mumbai and Bangkok continue to boom, most suffer chronic unemployment and underemployment. Many rural immigrants have little or no formal education or marketable skills and are forced to compete with the huge number of fellow squatters for work as unskilled laborers. If they are members of an ethnic minority group or a despised caste—which is common—they may face outright discrimination which intensifies the challenges of finding consistent employment. Squatter communities rarely have formal schools, so the children often have little opportunity to gain the education or skills that might help them move up.

Most squatters build on land owned by private landowners or by local governments, so squatters have no legal title to their make-shift homes. In fact, squatter residents rarely have the opportunity to own land or their own homes in most of the developing world. This means they lack material collateral and can't get loans to start small businesses or pay for the kinds of training or health care that might help improve their lives.

Some national and local governments pursue positive policies toward squatter residents and communities, investing over time in developing those squatter communities by bringing in paved roads, schools, electricity, better sanitation, and improved building materials. But many simply choose to eventually bulldoze the informal communities in order to use the land for lucrative development projects. As a result, most squatter residents live with almost constant uncertainty about the future.

Crime and violence centered on gang activity plagues many squatter communities. And the densely crowded, often highly unsanitary conditions mean that diseases spread easily and rapidly. Chronic illnesses, alcoholism and drug abuse all take their toll. Yet there is another side to life in a squatter slum.

Families struggle courageously and lovingly to create a decent community and to give their children better opportunities for the future. Grass roots, community-wide leadership often arises and groups of active squatters work to improve conditions in their communities. The victories, particularly early on, may be as small as getting a single water spigot for a neighborhood, but little by little the confidence of local squatters grows that they have some control over their own lives and living conditions.

Squatters bring their vibrant cultural traditions with them and do their best to apply them to their new urban context. Parents work hard to scrape together enough money to 'upgrade' their corrugated metal shacks to small, cinderblock homes. People

look out for each other and celebrate each other's advances and blessings.

And in spite of all the daunting obstacles that squatters face, most squatter communities are fundamentally hopeful places. After all, rural people come to the city to look for a better future. Because squatters leave behind their old rural social networks, they are often more open to new ideas, including the gospel.

Squatter Ministry

Servant Partners missionaries, along with other 'incarnational' squatter slum workers, tend to focus on three key ministries:

Incarnation

Effective squatter slum workers live among the people as close to the conditions of the squatter residents as possible. This builds trust and helps workers contextualize the gospel to the specific squatter slum community.

Evangelism and Church Planting

Creating cell and house churches builds on existing social and family networks in squatter communities. The intimate size of these fellowships creates a good context for discipleship and allows budding Christian leaders to gain confidence. The goal is to develop a movement of evangelism and church planting across entire squatter slum communities.

Community Organizing and Transformation

Assisting squatter communities to organize themselves into formal community action groups gives squatters confidence they can change their living conditions. As squatter groups identify key issues such as job training, or improved sanitation, or access to loans, effective squatter slum workers can then aid local squatter leadership in creating programmatic approaches to deal with these challenges. In one community that might mean developing a micro-credit organization and in another it might mean setting up a health clinic. Eventually, these local action groups become sophisticated enough to begin engaging with local authorities to bring about necessary changes and to lobby for the interests of the community.

By pursuing this three-fold approach, missionaries have an opportunity to impact squatter communities in deep and relevant ways. A 'spiritualized gospel' which doesn't address the severe social and economic challenges of a squatter slum is misleading and irrelevant. An approach to development that ignores the critical need for spiritual transformation will be ineffective and ultimately powerless to bring long-term, sustained change. And an approach that works from 'outside' the squatter community runs the risk of imposing a faith without context.

The harvest among the world's squatters could be great, but the mission community continues to overlook this opportunity. To respond all we need is the will and the workers. ■

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