

DISPOSSESSED

Life in Our World's Urban Slums

MARK KRAMER

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Introductions Are in Order

Meeting One Billion Squatters

EVERY STEP CLOSER TO GATE twenty-nine at the Mexico City International Benito Juarez Airport ushers me more into comfort. I begin my journey home from a hostel near the Monumento a la Revolución, just west of the city center. Lugging along my intrusive backpack and a handbag, I ride the metro for two pesos in the morning rush. The metro cars are packed. It's hot and I'm sweating. But the crowds disperse as I make my way to the city outskirts via several line changes, and I'm finally able to sit.

After more than an hour of riding, I exit the metro and walk a couple city blocks to the airport entrance and am glad to be among other travelers, glad to be less self-conscious about my luggage. I pass domestic departures, some arrival gates, money changers, and finally find the international concourse. The floors seem cleaner. There are more restaurants, a McDonald's, a Mexican cantina where a Coca-Cola costs several times more than it did in the city.

After checking in, passing through security, and trekking toward my gate on moving walkways, I feel air conditioning. I begin to see watches, cologne, perfume, leather, bottles of Tequila, and so much else that is "Duty and Tax Free." I sit down and am surrounded by more Caucasians, more English, and more cell phones than I have seen in almost a month. Across from me a man reads a J. R. R. Tolkien novel. I look around and see laptops and cups of coffee and American passports in white hands. I breathe clean air.

Just ninety minutes ago, while on one of my last metro legs, a boy of six or seven had approached me, had silently reached out his open hand. He had a deep scar, two inches long across his cheek, oil- and dirt-stained clothes spotted with holes.

I'd emptied my pockets of change, metro tickets, and candy and anything else I could find, a catharsis for me but hardly a noble act, as I only then knew that my ride was paid for, that my way was secure, that I had an airplane seat ready for me. Nobler would I have been had I made such a gesture days or weeks earlier in my stay in Mexico City. Instead I'd been anxious about my travel budget.

And just yesterday I sat with Ana in Lomas de San Isidro, a slum southeast of Mexico City. Built on an abandoned strip mine, the settlement lacks paved roads, piped water, and sewage systems. Squatter shanties cover several bare hillsides.

Just yesterday I sat on a homemade, wooden chair, which rested on a dirt floor, inside a home of plastic tarps, corrugated cardboard, and scrap wood, under the noonday sun, a one-room home for eleven of Ana's children and her husband. I'd breathed in dust. I'd wanted something more than the tortillas and peppers that Ana lovingly provided, the peppers dished up from a six-pound can that would, she said, along with the tortillas, be her family's only food for three days. She had little water, but Ana gladly poured me and my two companions glasses of lukewarm tea.

Ana was beautiful. She laughed and nervously nibbled on her pocketbook when I asked her about how she'd met Brijido, her husband, when I inquired about their first words to each other. She blushed and smiled and said that some things weren't to be spoken of, and everyone in the room laughed with her.

My ticket to Chicago likely cost the equivalent of two-months salary for Brijido. When I left Lomas de San Isidro yesterday, I had only fifty pesos to give to Ana.

This day of my departure from Mexico City summarizes my journey well, a vacillation between witnessing affluence and poverty, security and dispossession. It also encapsulates the disparity between life in urban slums in the global South and life as I know it in the United States.

A woman's voice from an overhead speaker tells me in English that it's time to board the airplane. As I stand in line and then lope through the gate, I wonder: Would Ana even know what to do with herself in an airport?

As I board the plane, I deeply desire to share Ana's story.

A Squatter Nation, One Billion Strong

For the first time in history, more people live in cities than in the countryside. Our world is no longer simply going through the experience of urbanization. Our world has become urbanized. And a massive number of urban residents live like Ana and her family, in insecure, impoverished conditions. *One billion people—or one in every three urban residents—now live in an urban slum, the vast majority of them in developing nations.*

Illegal slum communities, populated by millions of people, have enveloped major cities in the global South that are unable to respond adequately to the burgeoning demands of urban growth. Many residents migrate as refugees or from the countryside to escape rural poverty, to seek relative progress amidst the seeming optimism of cosmopolitan opportunities. They come to work, they come to be with family, they come seeking health care and education. Out of necessity, these impoverished residents create their own homes and neighborhoods spontaneously, sometimes overnight, because of a void in affordable housing.

Such unplanned development leaves these communities without electricity, clean water, sewerage, garbage-collection systems, or, among other things, community organization. Residents devise their own jobs as vendors, restaurateurs, cleaners, garbage scavengers, nannies, day workers, and prostitutes. Yet they are insecure, disconnected, without a sense of place. They have little power.

Meanwhile, landowners, both private and public, unwittingly lose control of property. Legally registered businesses compete against enterprising informal workers who generally don't pay taxes or licensing fees or adhere to other regulations. City transportation

systems lose prominence to informal drivers of vans, mopeds, and rickshaws.

Then, as disease, land disputes, political injustice, corruption, gender inequalities, inadequate legal codes, and war affect these urban settlements, urban poverty can seem hopeless and irrevocable, replete with risk and struggle. Yet for millions of people, such poverty is a daily reality.

My primary intention in this book is to introduce you, the reader, not just to cities or urban settlements, but to the people, the individuals living in them who struggle to raise their children, who enjoy friendships, seek employment, laugh, cry, and die in these settlements. For poverty and suffering are personal matters. Demographics, statistics, and myriad fields of research, as telling and important as they are, cannot fully capture the essence of life in urban slums. But by getting to know specific people while allowing related research to provide the context, we're able to personalize our understanding of urban poverty, put names and faces to issues that affect millions of residents.

Second, I intend to introduce you to some of the most pressing issues impacting these residents, including urbanization, land rights, the informal sector, colonial histories, and evictions and demolitions. While I highlight a few small development projects and agencies, this introduction to slums does not outline best practices for development, though some become evident through people's personal stories.

While I attempt to describe some fairly universal characteristics of urban settlements, I also omit information because of space limitations. I could have included more discussion on debt in the global South, the process of upgrading urban settlements, and some people's ability to organize and mobilize for social change in urban slums. Many settlements and cities are, of course, not represented in this book. About one-fifth of São Paulo, Brazil's 19.5 million people live in a slum, as do one-half of the 12 million people in Mumbai, India. Informal settlements exist in all regions of the world, in China, the Middle East, Latin America, Central Asia. The

very vastness and diversity of our world's urban settlements demand consideration beyond anything this or any other single text can provide. Slums are not some easily summarized monolith of misery.

What “They” Know, What “We” Don’t

I approached the writing of this book with an underlying conviction: Most of us in “developed” societies don’t have a clue.

We certainly know a lot. We know about popular culture, professional sports, movies, television, and computers. We know what’s cool; we know what’s not. We’re well versed in the ebb and flow of supply and demand, how to manage our money, and where to broker a good deal so we have change left over at the end of the day. We’re creating better automobiles, dishwashers, palm pilots, stoves, guns, missiles, malls, highways, airplanes, air conditioners, satellites, telephones, and homes. And on and on and on and on.

Yet we truly know so little about much of the rest of our world, in particular the experiences of people living in economic want who know a language, social structure, and environment so unlike our own, the half of the world that lives on less than US\$2.00 a day. Because we lack understanding of people in poverty, specifically people living in the global South, we lack real knowledge of our world. As one author puts it, “. . . the way the poor view the world is closer to the reality of the world than the way the rich view it. Their ‘epistemology,’ their way of knowing, is accurate to a degree that is impossible for those who see the world only from the vantage point of privileges they want to retain.”¹

Globalization demands that we seek common understanding in a world divided against itself. More and more we share common political, economic, and cultural interests with people thousands of miles from us. Every day our lifestyle choices influence others around the globe. Their choices affect us. Even beyond altruism and compassion, we must seek understanding because we have a common future with people in urban slums.

Still, I do write reluctantly.

Men, women, and children living in economic poverty don't need people gawking at them. They don't need photographs, videos, and television commercials showing us how atrophied their very thin famine-emaciated limbs have become. They don't need our pity. Besides, though some, in fact, do, most of "the poor" that get so globally lumped together do not match the overused images of abject need. Rather they labor hard at informal jobs or intermittently when work is available, barely making it but with clothes on their backs and, somehow amidst the struggle, smiles on their faces.

People living in economic poverty don't need another shadow of condescension cast upon them by a privileged Western writer who merely wishes to expose their wounds to cold scrutiny to summon that objectifying yet strangely consoling sense that "they" are simply "they," some "other" with whom we have no relationship. Such an exhibition exploits them and their stories merely for the sake of sentimentality, to tickle our nerves of analytical pleasure or to make us feel better that we're not in their situation. This is not my intention, though it is my ever-present dread. I write reluctantly for I fear falling into any of this. It's a frightening responsibility to take the stories of people's lives and convey them to others with authority and from a chosen angle. Storytelling is anything but exhaustive—accurate, I hope, but never the full story.

Nor is language exhaustive. The term "slum" generally refers to a once-attractive neighborhood that has deteriorated, but in the global South the word has come to describe illegal, spontaneous shantytowns lacking decent services and infrastructure. Yet slums around the world are complex and they change quickly. Local definitions of slums vary, though they generally include poor construction and illegality. Many definitions also include high population densities, a lack of basic services, low incomes, even the type of building materials residents use. People refer to them as *ciudades perdidas* (Spanish, "lost cities"), *barrios*, *favelas*, *aashwa'i* (Egyptian Arabic, "random"), informal settlements, squatter settlements, and peri-urban areas, among many other terms.

Meanwhile, “slum” can unnecessarily evoke stereotypes of dilapidation, crime, and foul living conditions that distance readers from individuals living in these neighborhoods. “Characterizing a community as a slum may identify it with chaos and squalor,” writes one researcher. “It may also mark the people who reside there as dirty and chaotic, inappropriately confusing their disadvantaged status with an unshakeable feature of their identity—a mark of stigma and a source of shame.”² Still, in some contexts the term lacks derogatory connotations and merely refers to low-income housing.

I generally prefer to use the term “informal settlements,” by which I refer to illegal neighborhoods comprised of inadequate structures and services, both to mitigate the negative associations of “slum” and because “informal settlements” emphasizes the unauthorized nature of these communities. But because “slum” remains completely appropriate in some circumstances, I have chosen to use these terms somewhat interchangeably. Similarly, I prefer “global South” over “developing nations,” a term that, even if unintentionally, could imply that some people are “underdeveloped.” I use “developed” and “developing” foremost in economic discussions.

Many other terms concerning this book’s subject matter are equally problematic. Even so, I recognize the irrationality of attempting to use completely neutral language, so I make these qualifications and then ask the reader for grace as I navigate the aesthetic and political complexities of language.

The People of Informal Settlements

Over a period of two years, I visited five cities to conduct research and interviews: Manila, Philippines; Nairobi, Kenya; Mexico City, Mexico; Bangkok, Thailand; and Cairo, Egypt. I chose these cities primarily because they are quickly urbanizing agglomerations in the global South and informal settlements comprise a large portion of their housing sectors. Second, I chose these cities because of personal contacts and convenient opportunities for

research. I could have chosen a great many other cities, places like Rio de Janeiro, Lagos, Port-au-Prince, Johannesburg, Mumbai, or Istanbul to visit informal settlements. As our world becomes more urbanized and industrialized, there is no shortage of spontaneous settlements cropping up in and around our cities.

My sojourns lasted from about two to four weeks each. When possible, I lived in close quarters with residents. Otherwise, I lived in hostels or at the homes of people working to improve the living conditions of these settlements, churches and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for the most part. In three cities—Nairobi, Bangkok, and Cairo—I benefited from the assistance of fellow researchers, who helped gather facts and stories. We conducted interviews in English or through local translators. In Manila, my wife accompanied me as a photographer.

Each of the next five chapters focuses on a particular issue affecting urban settlements. I first describe urbanization in the global South during the last half of the twentieth century before turning my attention to the effects of historical and current colonialism. Then I consider urban land rights, the informal sector, and living conditions. I conclude by providing readers with suggestions for further learning and action. Throughout the book, I interweave various issue-oriented discussions, historical accounts, and economic data with people's stories to provide context and depth.

I change most residents' names for the sake of privacy and, in some instances, security, though the most prominent people in the book have granted me permission to use their real names. Profiles and quotes without citations draw from personal interviews and primary research.

Because statistics on cities in the global South, and on urban settlements in particular, can vary wildly, I seek to use consistent, conservative estimates and sources. For example, in the second chapter, United Nations' estimates on city populations are lower than many other sources, yet the agency's great pool of census statistics and authority as a leading organization in development make it as reliable a source as any for this data. Regardless, on-the-ground reali-

ties are dire and most of these statistical variances don't alter implications for policy and economic development.

I wish to romanticize the nobility of these people and places no more than I wish to inflate their poverty and helplessness. Either extreme is offensive. Yet, any honest exploration of urban poverty is a daunting endeavor, and so I first reflect on the genuine goodwill of my encounters.

In Mexico City, I stayed with Aline, a mother of two boys, Denzel and Gustavo. Aline welcomed me, helped me hone my Spanish, prepared the best tacos, *jamaica* (a hibiscus drink), and *frijoles negros* (black beans) I've yet tasted. Though I eventually overcame her protests, Aline refused to accept compensation to cover the costs of my stay.

In Cairo, I met Osama, a Coptic Christian who taught me hymns in Arabic. He and Maher, a friend, laughed good naturedly when I stumbled over my gutturals, sounds so necessary in Arabic yet so foreign to my first language. When I later attended a church service for thousands of people, during which his choir performed, Osama welcomed me enthusiastically and escorted me to a seat near the officiating priest, gave me a tour of the church, introduced me to friends.

Sunee, a mother of one in Bangkok, lovingly laughed her welcome to me as we shared meals on the floor of her home. She worries for her teenage daughter and about the influences of their community—drugs, drug dealers, violence. Sunee also struggles to love an abusive husband. Yet she hosted me warmly, surely to fulfill cultural protocol, but also to live out the generous nature of her own heart. She cried when my traveling companions and I left.

I have also met some of the most gracious people I've ever known: Imbumi, a Kenyan who has worked in Nairobi's squatter communities for more than twenty years developing churches and organizing residents; Yung, an elderly Thai woman whose faith I find humbling as she describes her fear of eviction, even while praying and singing and laughing with others in delight.

I don't discount the likelihood that my own power and place as

an American influenced the welcome I received in these communities. Yet, I'm convinced that my hosts could not have mustered the kind of hospitality and warmth that I've enjoyed merely for self-serving purposes. I believe that, for the most part, this type of generosity seeks no reward, that it's simply characteristic of people living in economic poverty. This I've witnessed, time and again.

So while those of us in rich nations have much to offer Yung and Aline and the millions of other people living in urban settlements in the global South, they have much to offer us as well, their ideas and strategies, their charity and faith. I introduce these friends to you, the reader, and encourage you to listen closely to what they have to say, to embrace their troubles as your own, to let their stories change you.