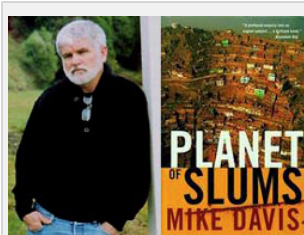




In-Depth: Tomorrow's Crises Today: The Humanitarian Impact of Urbanisation

GLOBAL: Interview with Mike Davis, author of hard-hitting Planet of Slums (2006)



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(September 2007) Mike Davis, author of hard-hitting Planet of Slums (2006) gave an interview to IRIN in late June 2007 and discusses the importance of address the issue of urban poor and the inequalities that come with rapid urbanisation.

QUESTION: Why is it important that this year marks the shift from a predominantly rural world to a predominantly urban one?

ANSWER: 2007 is just a convenient benchmark. I think most demographers probably feel the urban population shift occurred much earlier. The significance is not just this turning/tipping point in population, but the fact that future buildups will bring population in cities to demographic maximum sometime around 2060 -- and 95 percent of it in cities of the developing world. This is a massive shift in the problem of rural poverty and the transformation of world poverty into urban poverty.

It depends how you measure poverty. The World Bank has some wonderful researchers who have challenged the way the World Bank represents poverty. The World Bank is usually talking about people living in extreme poverty on less than a dollar a day. But if we take any reasonable measurement of poverty -- usually it's a proportion of either national median income or a measure of any kind of survivable minimum -- urban poverty is much bigger than the World Bank measures. If the majority of the future human race will live in cities, most of them will be poor by any standards given the current developmental trends.

Q: Are decision makers beginning to realise this importance? Was it discussed for example at the recent G8 or at the last World Economic Forum?

A: Obviously there are very different political cultures in Europe and the United States. In Europe, issues of development and global biological security have much greater say than in the United States. In [the US], what is so striking is the absence of any focus, of any deep analysis or understanding, on a level of traditional geopolitical policy-makers, on the level of the Bush administration but even the Democratic challengers.

This stands in contrast to the almost obsession with issues of slum proliferation and urban poverty amongst Pentagon war planners. These Pentagon war planners are very pragmatic. The absence of governmental control in the periphery of cities and definition of terrain as principle future terrain of combat of global insecurity, global instability.

So there's a very interesting contrast between the failure of the former foreign policy establishment to register these issues and the fact that Pentagon war planners have come to an appreciation of it. This is the result of American military for the last 20 years and the whole shift of insurgency from the countryside to the cities and the periphery of cities.

Q: What do you see as the best way to mainstream natural disaster risk reduction measures into efforts to address urban poverty?

A: The easiest way to combine them is that the public sectors need to be brought back in. The state needs to return and provide decent housing and decent employment and the conditions that take people out of natural hazards. Basically, this is still neglected in the world, and exposure to hazard in some cases is growing exponentially. Of course when you talk about natural hazard there's no real distinction between natural hazard and hazard generated by urbanisation itself. In my book I put a lot of attention on the problem of traffic in the developing world, which has become a very real nightmare and a hazard to the health and lives of millions of people.

Vulnerability and exposure to disaster are growing rapidly and are particularly driven by the displacement of poor populations in urban centres, by urban redevelopment programmes that drive the poor to the outskirts or push them into the interstices of the city. And perhaps overshadowing all of this is a return on a global scale to the Victorian conditions of public health and cities as potential incubators of new plagues and epidemic diseases.

Q: If marginalised urban populations inhabit dangerous land by necessity, how do we reduce their exposure to risk without driving them from the only form of shelter that they have?

A: Well you can't, not with existing policies. Urban poverty mitigation is a huge failure across the world, and I think there's increasing agreement that the UN MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] are not going to be met. To achieve a situation where we preserve the open areas and environment services, preserve the watershed that allows cities to have a sustainable relationship to a changing natural environment and at the same time provide shelter to people requires in my opinion far more radical and drastic programmes and above all fundamental shifts in social wealth spending and taxation than are currently offered by either the World Bank or UN.

The problem of increasing poverty and housing shortage is driving people to squatter-settle in areas where open space preservation is critical to the environmental metabolism of cities, the recycling of waste and the preservation of clean water. This is a problem that's out of control all across the world, most dramatically in Africa but also in South Asia and to a more limited extent in South America.

Q: Your book seems to imply that there are no good solutions. What do you think the least bad solution is?

A: My book doesn't imply that there are no good solutions; it implies that the solutions have to involve a return to far more radical vision [...] in the form of investment and urban

infrastructure, also in public health and above all the creation of far more employment.

The two major conclusions of my book are that the frontier of squattable land has more or less disappeared across the developing world, except in areas of extreme exposure to hazard. Squatting in the traditional sense has largely been privatised, and most of the poor people coming to cities and being born in cities have to purchase or rent their space. This frontier of free land envisioned as the safety valve for urbanisation largely no longer exists.

The second argument is that similarly in the informal sector you have so many people crowded into a small number of survival niches that increasingly informal employment, informal economic opportunity is being rationed by membership in ethnic religious or sectarian organisations. The informal sector is producing some of the sectarian tension that we see exploding around the world.

The two key safety bells that the World Bank and many NGOs counted on to allow this kind of miracle of bootstrap urbanisation to continue -- increased arable land [... and] economic opportunity -- have reached the point of diminishing return, which is why I import the term involution [from studies of agriculture] to talk about urban evolution: far too many people crammed into too few survival niches with diminishing, marginal returns.

Q: We at IRIN are trying to put the urban risks and urban reality for millions of poor on the humanitarian map. Is urban risk a humanitarian "blind spot"?

A: I think it's an immense blind spot. It's particularly concentrated at the highest policy levels of government in the United States. I tend to think that in more social-democratic countries in Europe, you tend to have a much greater appreciation of the relationship between urban stability, poverty, the main development trends, climate change.

In this country, we turn back to a narcissistic focus on ourselves, which makes it very difficult to put issues of general concern to humanity on the agenda of domestic politics. AIDS/HIV to some extent has been the exception to this. But most of the priorities and big issues of the discourse about development and of urban features are just simply missing.

This is partially a function of the fact that domestic American cities are still largely invisible in domestic political discourse. It's very difficult to find a declared American candidate like John Edwards or Dennis Kucinich talking about the decline of American inner-cities and the conditions of inner-city schools. The neglect of cities in internal, national American politics mirrors the absence of any debate about the issues the rest of the world thinks and agrees are absolute priorities.

Q: Considering what some see as the two sides of the urbanisation coin -- the city of light versus the city of darkness -- if you agree there are considerable potential positive aspects of urbanisation, please comment on some of these. What can nonstate actors/NGOs/civil society do to encourage these? If you do not agree, please say why.

A: I think cities are the only art we have to survive the coming problem of managing drastic changes in the climatic environment. Injurious to cities is the economy of scale in which cities don't create public luxury and public services that raise the living standards of urban populations. I may have a big swimming pool in Beverly Hills, but it will never be the equivalent of a great public swimming pool; a private library will never be the equivalent of a great public library.

Cities, if they function, are enormously efficient in raising standards of living and in creating lots of public space and infrastructures for cultural and human fulfilment. The problem is that in both rich and poor countries we are creating cities that lack essential hallmarks of classical urbanism.

At the same time, cities are the most efficient relationship we have with finite resources of our environment. We're creating cities that spoil environmental efficiency by destroying the open spaces upon which the urban metabolism depends. Cities are the problem, but ultimately, cities are the solution.

[ENDS]