

*Article for Small World Column, Brandon Sun, Sunday, June 18/06*

## **Urban Forum Tackles Global Challenges**

By Zack Gross

The World Urban Forum is taking place in Vancouver this week, from June 19<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>, just a year ahead of the predicted date when, finally, more than half the planet's population will have moved into cities. This is the third such United Nations conference and organizers warn that "the world's growing number of poor slum dwellers is a ticking time bomb that governments dare not ignore."

It is estimated that one-third of the three billion people now living in cities – one billion people – will be trapped in poverty with little prospect of economic improvement. Cities, both in rich nations and poor, attract those hoping to find good jobs. Whether it's Katmandu or Calgary, young people are attracted to bright lights and boom economies, but often find the cost of living high and chances of advancement low.

In developing countries, there aren't the training opportunities and social programs to support the rural influx to cities, so a large percentage have little access to housing, adequate food, water and sanitation, health services or education. It is a fallacy to think that urban dwellers are always better off than their "poor, rural cousins". Statistical rates of diarrhea, for instance, indicate that even the more affluent slum-dwellers suffer (and die) more than the rural poor. By 2030, four billion people – which will be 80% of the world's urban dwellers – will live in cities in developing countries.

Affecting cities increasingly overcrowded by this rural exodus are issues related to climate change, such as drier climates causing water shortages in some areas, and rising seas that will cause flooding in coastal cities in others. Increasing tensions in multi-racial, multi-faith communities, deteriorating air and water quality, and growing inequities in wealth and power will fuel dissatisfaction. Seven African countries recently surveyed showed that HIV/AIDS is more prevalent in urban, than in rural, populations.

"When a critical mass of people are in one place, if you don't empower them, they will empower themselves through revolution", says the head of UN-Habitat in presenting that agency's "State of the World's Cities 2006-2007" report. "If we want to avoid chaos, we have to empower the poor people".

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest percentage of urban slum dwellers at 72% of urban people. While Africa is one of the least populous parts of the globe, its urban contingent will soon outnumber the total population of Europe.

The answers to all of these challenges are easy to list but much harder to have implemented. While it is clear what must be done, the trends are often in the opposite direction. For instance, environmental quality is a huge urban issue everywhere on the planet but most especially in large Third World cities. Without the proper regulations

and the funds to take on environmentally damaging problems, with the growth of the car and garbage cultures, as cities around the planet “westernize”, urban air is “blue” with fumes, and roads and ditches are filled with refuse. Cities don’t have garbage collection and recycling programs, particularly in slum areas. Busses and cars don’t have emission controls and factories and homes burn coal, wood and dung. Programs are urgently required to deal with these concerns.

Land reform is needed to offer families homes and garden space. Governance reform is needed to give citizens a voice and allow them to participate in the decision-making mechanisms that affect them. Instead, multi-family groupings are often crowded into single family dwellings or forced to squat in open areas that could be taken back by municipalities or armies at any time. Whole poor communities are often bulldozed, such as recently happened in Zimbabwe, without provision being made for new places to live for those displaced. In Mexico, a similar community was uprooted to make way for the expansion of an airport.

Social and health programs also suffer when needed finances go to debt reduction, arms purchases or corruption. As well, structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, mean that fewer resources go to education, health and other programs, as governments are forced to reduce budgets to qualify for aid.

Optimistic, western development model thinkers, such as Jeffrey Sachs, author of “The End of Poverty”, describe what is happening in global cities as just a repeat of the Nineteenth Century industrialization experience in Europe and North America. They say that it ultimately benefited the population who endured poverty, but did find jobs and paved the way for their children’s prosperity. Less optimistic observers say that cities will become armed camps, with the poor on one side, the better-off on the other, and the whole system breaking down in environmental destruction.

Hopefully, the World Urban Forum will bring new perspectives and timely action to these urgent issues.

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