

HABITAT—FOR WHOM?

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This article was chosen from the publicity material issued by UNICEF FEATURE SERVICE as part of naming the year 1976 as Habitat Year. It has some relevance to the theme of this month: Environmental Sanitation. This article also provides a historical perspective of celebrating 1979 as the International Year of the Child.

THE numbers game that currently bedevils T gler's nightmare. Everything seems to be the development scene is becoming a juggling act of doubling and redoubling—except resources. In every overstuffed data bank figures are spilling out of their appointed pigeonholes and overlapping. The old development dictum that everything is interrelated has become frighteningly true: when problems begin to merge, how can the solutions be separated?

The latest examples of the coalescing crisis are the Third World cities. Twelve of them are the fastest-growing cities in the world—and seven of these potential monsters are in Asia. By the turn of the century the urban population of the Third World will have trippled—it is already 760 million today, and will be 411 million more in another 10 years time. How will the poorer nations cope with the task of caring for these burgeoning millions? As one more global conference ponders this giant imponderable, perhaps it is time to look more closely at the nameless hordes accused of challenging the development dream. Their most significant feature is their youth.

Migration from rural areas

If cities of the developing countries are outpacing national growth rates, their teeming slums are growing twice as fast as the cities themselves. Young men have for generations quit their rural homes to seek better times in the urban areas. Today, young families frustrated by rural neglect are uprooting themselves to follow the same trail. Migration from rural areas now accounts for 50 per cent of urban growth. The majority population in Third World cities already consists of migrants and their children. And the children are many.

Listed in every primer of resources as "dependent, non-contributing populations", these children—their nascent siblings are at once the hope and the despair of urban planning. There are so many of them; each one of them deserves so

much; there is so little to give them. They suffer the miseries engendered by growth because society offers them no choice. Yet an alternative has to be found soon. If the quality of their material world does not improve radically, there will be progressively more of them—stretching out small urgent hands for the fulfilment of rights that will have become mythical—and their environment will be less and less able to satisfy their yearning.

Today, the rate of urban growth in the developing countries is 2.5 times higher than in industrialized countries. Projections indicate that this will continue to be true at least till the turn of the century. But what are the projections about development of services and facilities in these Third World cities? Bleak.

The bleakest situation now is that of the slums and squatter settlements that comprise most of urban growth. These congested and squalid tracts have the worst housing and roads, the worst schools, the poorest medical care, the leanest parks and play areas, the least beauty, the least breathing space, the worst water supply, drainage and sewerage, the heaviest dependence on meagre and deficient resources—and the greatest need. Thugs and shanty-town landlords prosper in this congested, overstrained milieu, and sparks of co-operative effort are repeatedly eclipsed by sheer competitive struggling for more and more footholds in less and less space. This is the slum child's world, by whose currents he is shaped.

There are other, more economically quantifiable reasons why the United Nations has asked world leaders to declare war on the rot that has set into human settlements. But whether the Habitat conference stresses the problems or points to a solution, it cannot afford to leave the child out of its reckoning.

Unhappily, 'habitat' is a word familiar mainly to students of natural history; its relevance is lost

on many of us.. The United Nations aroused environmental consciousness in 1972 and focussed attention on population growth in 1974. Next, it exhorted the world to get serious about women's rights, for the sake of development if nothing else. It is hardly surprising that many unwitting references to 'the year of the child,' have cropped up this year (1976). Tentative markings on the U.N. calendar indicate that this theme will not officially dawn until 1979—but there is a profound truth hidden in remarks accidentally made about children's rights now. Why do we want to save human settlements from ruin anyway? The big question behind "Habitat Year" is after all, habitat for whom?

But knowing what the answer should be does not bring the solution any closer. Not unless many countries are prepared to move beyond lip-service to make major policy changes. If the Vancouver conference deliberations do not mark a radical departure from the bland pseudo-commitments that have trickled out of previous thematic years, posterity will remember this decade of global gatherings for bombast rather than action.

Facing the unpalatable

The danger facing any international conference is that of seeking to be palatable to all participants. The process of asking diplomatic compromises undermines the real motive force, and politically oriented polemics and lobbying often dominate the working hours. In expressly stating that it is "action oriented" the Habitat Conference is aiming at greater pragmatism. It can only achieve its object if participant nations concede the need to face the unpalatable.

This is unlikely to happen on a broad front unless a new kind of 'lobby' emerges. Like a children's lobby. In an intriguing assessment of the portents for human settlements policy-making, Philippines' Senator Helena Benitez—Coordinator of the Preparatory Planning Group for the Habitat Conference—has spoken of the "danger that when adults plan for human settlements, the viewpoints of children may not be truly reflected." Are children big enough to have viewpoint on national policy? By the sheer weight of their numbers, and the sheer force of their potential, yes. But, as Senator Benitez points out, "the danger is magnified because children have no means, no access to political decision-making." This does not mean she supports a Peter Pan army invading the Vancouver conference halls; it does mean that curative measures for today's urban ills as well as blueprints for tomorrow's urbanised habitat must recognise the totality of what the child deserves from his world. Today, in the crowded cities and the depleted hamlets alike, children exist in a graveyard setting.

In developing countries, planners face the awesome dilemma of knowing that the urban child's needs are multiplying rapidly while the rural child's equally pressing needs are still un-met. The rural scene is decaying in its own way, and the pace of its decline is accentuated by the scurrying ant-lines fleeing to the towns. The villages are without essential services; the towns and cities are without service for those who need them most. Both rural and urban children cry out for the minimum components of a 'livable' environment; both are denied them. There are research findings galore to point to the peril inherent in chronic deprivation—and each one underlines how much more serious the ill-effects are on the young. Yet deprivation is so many people's way of life.

In urban India, the housing shortage passed the 6.2 million unit mark two years ago. In the country's four largest cities, at least 67 per cent of the population lives in slums and shanty colonies; in Calcutta the proportion is 79 per cent—not counting the thousands of pavement dwellers. In Pakistan, the urban housing shortfall had reached 1.1 million units 12 years ago. Today, 59 per cent of urban Pakistanis and 61 per cent of rural Pakistanis live in cramped dwellings, with more than three people per room—and usually many more. In France, by contrast, only three per cent of the people—urban or rural have to live three to a room. In Iran, with less population pressure than the Indian subcontinent, 43 per cent of the urban people and 49 per cent of rural people have to live in such conditions. In Denmark, the proportion is just 0.4 per cent.

This does not mean the western countries are not urbanised, and urbanising further; it points to the lack of amenities and resources in the Third World, where as many as 98 per cent of urban people may be without any type of toilet, where at least 50 people will have to share one decrepit privy.

Poor living conditions take their toll every day—in poisoning from foul air, foul water, befouled earth; in overcrowded hovels, overcrowded, understaffed shanty schools, overburdened transportation systems, under-equipped medicare outlets. The toll is taken in the human resources of tomorrow. The cities—and the countryside—of the future deserves to be protected against this very real threat. The beginning must be made by acknowledging the rights of those who are most at risk. Habitat Year is not a time to speak of parks and stadiums. It is a year that should focus on the most tumbledown shack of the poorest family in the world's worst slum.

Courtesy: UNICEF