

READING REPORT
Dispossessed: Life in Our World's Urban Slums
by Mark Kramer
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006)

Thesis: The Western reader has no clue; no clue as to how one-sixth of the world lives every day; no clue as to how impoverished and desperate lives these people live. They are so hidden to our eyes. They are so far away. Their circumstances are so unimaginable to us as to seem unreal, even exaggerated and untrue. This author wants us to know. He wants us to know some of these people by name—to feel the rumble of the train as it passes two feet from their front door, to feel the distress of children unable to go to school, to feel the disgust of slipping and immersing one's foot in open sewage. Having felt these things, the author hopes we will be moved to do something about the quiet desperation of the world's urban poor living in the most unsustainable sector of the global south's unsustainable mega-cities.

Kramer is a professional journalist. With pen in hand, he traveled the world and immersed himself in the urban slums of five world-class cities: Manila, Nairobi, Mexico City, Bangkok, and Cairo. On the edges of these cities are the slums, the “informal settlements,” that house one billion of the world's inhabitants. Today, more people live in cities than in rural locations and the percentage will only continue to rise. People are flooding to the cities from the countryside seeking jobs and a better life. There, on the edges of the cities, they get stuck. They live lives of insecurity, disease, danger, and generally hopeless of ever escaping the cycle of poverty. They are pawns of politicians, landlords, moneylenders, global marketers, and the faceless urban sprawl that covets their once-worthless land on the outskirts.

The book features enough statistics to make the crisis palpable to the reader; the author has done his academic research well. More powerfully, however, the book features interviews and vignettes of the people who live there. One closes the book with new names inhabiting her memory—names of young girls self-sold or tricked into prostitution, names of women patting out tortillas to scrape out a meager existence, and names of Cairene's 50,000 *zabaleene* who daily collect, sort, and recycle the city's garbage.

The problem is huge and threatening; *one billion* people live in urban slums. Most of them lack the basic infrastructure services that the rest of us take for granted. Their governments don't help them; actually the governments typically threaten them and “dispossess” them of their hovels when their squatter land, once too peripheral to be of value, becomes very valuable to the expanding city that wants more contiguous land for upscale lodgings and businesses. Counter-intuitively, the author shows why cities *need* slums. The slums provide a labor pool of low-wage workers. Witness the garbage workers of Cairo who do a \$22 million (US) business volume annually. Outsourcing garbage to a French company costs the city \$50 million (US) plus valuable incentives and user fees. This conventional-wisdom decision costs the city more, devalues and impoverishes the garbage workers, and is an unsustainable system that cannot keep up

with the garbage volume. The city fathers have ignored their better-scenario dependence on the slum labor pool.

These huge global South cities are unsustainable. They are environmentally toxic and are getting worse every day. In just one day in Bangkok, up to one hundred tons of garbage goes into its waterways. Water is running out; both Mexico City and Bangkok are sinking as their underlying aquifers are depleted. Infant mortality is high (one in five slum babies die in Manila, compared to one in thirteen among the well-off). On the other hand, the author claims that with wise planning and good stewardship of resources, these mega cities do have hope of becoming sustainable.

The final chapter calls the reader to action. The author confronts the comparatively wealthy westerner with the observation that he is not as compassionate as he think he is. We suffer from donor fatigue. We suffer from the unreality of problems that seem so far away and concern people we have no apparent connection to. He calls us to work at developing a compassionate heart. He calls us to a simpler lifestyle that we might free more resources to help the poor. He calls us to learn, pray, give, go, equip, build relationships, and work locally. To that end he quotes Mother Teresa,

“I do not agree with the big way of doing things. To us what matters is the individual. To get to love the person we must come in close contact with him. If we wait until we get the numbers, then we will be lost in the numbers. And we will never be able to show that love and respect for the person. I believe in person to person; every person is Christ for me, and since there is only one Jesus, that person is only one person in the world for me at that moment.”

This problem is not going to go away. He predicts that within a decade there will be more than twenty cities with more than ten million populations, most in poor nations. He predicts that the number of informal settlement dwellers will double by the 2030s to two billion.

Interpretation: It would be hard to be suspicious of the author’s statistics. They are derived from reputable sources, such as the United Nations. But the numbers are numbing; fully one-third of all city dwellers live in a slum. In some cases it is even worse. In Nairobi, *60 percent* of the inhabitants live in an informal settlement, and occupy only 5 percent of the land. How does one emotionally handle information like that? How does one do anything meaningful against such immense, faceless problems? Despite the author’s call for personal involvement in the last chapter, doing something meaningful feels as hopeless as stopping a hurricane by shouting at it. Recently I read that Bruce Wilkerson (*The Prayer of Jabez*) tried to do something socially redemptive in an African county, and it broke him. The initiative collapsed and he resigned his leadership, slipping into relative obscurity. These are huge and complicated problems that are compounded by bureaucratic corruption and red tape. I suspect that the only good most of us westerners can do is to invest money and prayer in the work of Christian agency personnel “on the ground” in these settlements who know the landscape and show a hopeful track record of making durable impacts in solving problems.

One must celebrate the author's dedication in traveling to these five great cities and immersing himself among the urban poor. However, regarding his claim that global South cities have a hope of sustainability, one must be a bit suspicious of such an assessment from one who has spent only two weeks maximum in each of these cities. That is just not enough time to make such a broad assertion. Additionally, he offers no supporting evidence for his assertion, nor does he advance a plan. For instance, how can Mexico City solve its water crisis if its population doubles in the next twenty years? Sooner or later it would seem that a city must reach terminal growth and be unable to expand further. Infrastructure does not possess infinite resources.

Application: I have heard of the slum settlements of Manila for many years and look forward to getting closer to them and the people who minister to them during my November trip to Manila. In addition to the Overture II exposure to Manila ministries, I will have three days with a missionary acquaintance who is doing outreach and church-planting in Manila. I hope that this provides a new channel for my giving and service in coming years. Like most Boomers, I have an instinctive skepticism about solicitors for my money, whether it's a radio commercial or a missionary fund-raising letter. I want to see it for myself. I want to "kick the tires" and ensure that the claims are not exaggerated. I want reasonable assurance that the resources I invest are being used wisely and strategically. And I want to be personally involved. It is not enough for me to simply write a check every month. So much of what we westerners have done in trying to meet world-class problems has been well-intentioned, but ultimately counter-productive, if not damaging. I don't want to be part of that.

On the other hand, doing something, even if flawed, is usually better than doing nothing. In doing something, even if flawed, hopefully one will learn from one's mistakes and be better able to adjust to realities based on data feedback. Therefore, I must guard against donor insistence on exhaustive reassurances. One must be willing to take some risks. That is true in love and war, and I suspect it must be true in the discipline of stewardship as well.

I appreciate the author's inclusion of the exhortation to work locally. There are dispossessed people within our own communities. They exist within ten minutes of my home. They work in minimum-wage jobs if they work at all. Some of them are Hispanic illegal workers. Some of them speak no English and thus live in a "parallel universe" to my own. It will take my deliberate effort to find these people and build friendships and redemptive relationships with them. And, to sustain my efforts, I suspect this will need to be done in a community of friendship with some others who wish to cross invisible lines to the world of the dispossessed.

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