

URBAN PLANET

The global village is growing. A major conference on urbanization hosted by Canada has revealed that the “human tsunami” from rural to urban areas is making cities vibrant places of economic growth, while presenting myriad challenges with international implications.

Dhaka is a city in crisis. Ancient sewers in the Bangladeshi capital are leaking. Drinking water is dirty. The poorest of the poor live in spreading, squalid slums, their shacks lining waterways brimming with human waste, rotting garbage and a stew of chemicals. Cows and goats that drink from these waters die.

“Dhaka is falling apart at the seams,” says John Carter, a Canadian environmental consultant based in Halifax who has worked on a number of development projects in the city.

In the residential neighbourhood of Hazaribagh, dozens of leather tanneries dump toxic effluent into an already filthy river and lake. Carter, who has travelled to many slums, believes it may be the most polluted spot on earth. “You can’t really stand there for more than a minute because the air is so caustic it literally burns the inside of your nose.”

Yet Carter, who has worked in Dhaka on an environmental management project supported by Canada, is struck by how the local people go about normal activities like working, eating and washing clothes amidst the smell and extreme pollution. “It’s kind of like urban anarchy, but people have adapted, or accepted their fate.”

Indeed, people keep coming—and coming—making Dhaka the fastest-growing urban centre in the world. According to United Nations estimates, in less than a decade Dhaka will rank second among the planet’s 10 largest cities, with some 23 million inhabitants.

Cities across the developing world can tell similar tales of rapid growth, as people abandon rural areas for cities in search of a better life—and stay. Governments of every level are struggling to respond to the challenges as earth begins its first century as a mostly urban planet.

Rapid migration from rural to urban areas is changing how Canada is looking at development, says Tarik Khan, a director in the policy branch of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). “We have to find ways to ensure that place matters in addition to particular sectors for development.”



photo: courtesy of BEMP

◀ “People have adapted, or accepted their fate”: Canadian environmental consultant John Carter surveys the banks of the Buriganga River in Dhaka.

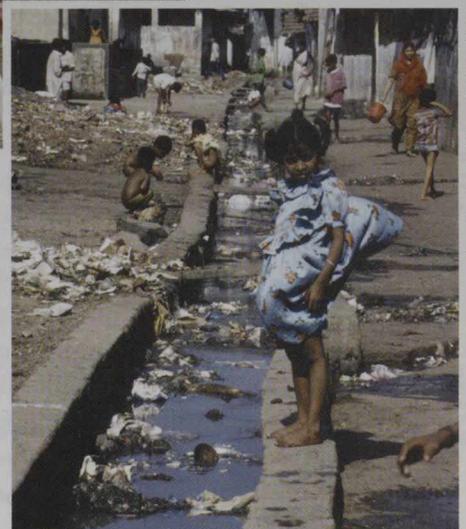
Canada has helped put this key emerging issue on the international agenda. In Vancouver in June the Government of Canada hosted the third World Urban Forum, a major conference on urbanization. Canadians have also developed numerous initiatives targeting big-city problems around the world.

“Managing the transition to an urban planet and sustaining the dynamic evolution of cities into the future will be one of this century’s fundamental challenges,” says Keith Christie, Director General of the Environment, Energy and Sustainable Development Bureau at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT). “Poor governance, the proliferation of slums, limited access to clean water and dignified sanitation contribute to poor environmental and social conditions with international implications. Canada’s hosting of the World Urban Forum represents an important contribution toward sharing solutions to these problems.”

The migration equation

The scale of the migration is staggering. Each day, some 180,000 people move into cities. By next year, more of the world’s people will live in urban areas than rural areas. In less than 25 years, it’s expected that two of every three people will be in cities.

Canada is already one of the most urban countries in the world, with 80 percent of the population living in cities. Other wealthy countries have also made the transition from a rural to a largely urban way of life.



▲ In the Dharavi slum in Mumbai, India, a girl stands by an open sewer.

photo: Stephanie Colvey/CIDA-ACDI