

# YOUTH IN AN URBAN AGE

**As the world's cities grow, the number of young people—and their problems—are exploding.**

Some 60 percent of the world's population will live in cities by 2030 and as many as 60 percent of these urban dwellers will be under the age of 18. Already, rapid urbanization is accompanied in developing countries by acute social problems, from homelessness and alienation to massive unemployment, overcrowding and the rise of violence and gang activity in growing slums.

such as urban agriculture and skills development. "Young people make up such a large percentage of cities...we have to try to get at this capacity young people have."

Jess Conn-Potegal, a member of the youth organizing committee for the recent World Urban Forum, agrees. "If we don't involve young people, then we're not creating solutions." The problems of urbanization, he says, include gang activity, violence and poverty in city slums, all of which have a disproportionate effect on young people. "The negative things that happen in the slums happen because of a sense of hopelessness."

Indeed, poorly policed slums are generating conditions for what are effectively "urban child soldiers." Young people growing up in crowded households spend more time on the streets, making them targets for recruitment into armed gangs or insurgent groups. Disenchanted youth find criminal activity to be a source of social mobility, self-esteem and economic opportunity.

"Slums are among the most dangerous places in the world to live, especially for kids," says Sarah Houghton of the Human Security Policy Division at DFAIT. Children as young as seven end up recruited by gangs, she says, becoming involved in arms and drug trafficking or the sex trade. It's an issue that Canada, as "a strong advocate of human security and a people-centred approach to foreign policy," sees as increasingly urgent, she adds.

In many developing countries, youth discontented with life in rural communities or forced out by civil conflict are joining the migration into cities, where they also face dismal prospects.

"Most of these young people feel they have no place in the world," says Eleanor Douglas of Save the Children Canada in Bogota, Colombia. She works with children affected by armed conflict in a program sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency. Douglas says that families have been "torn asunder" by decades of displacement, as well as by the "availability of arms and quick profits from the narcotics business, lack of meaningful work, and little access to relevant education."

Stan Williams of the Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association in Vancouver believes that dialogue on the issue can have an important impact. Williams, 29, an Aboriginal person from the Ketegaunseebee Garden River First Nation and Ohsweken First Nation reserves of Ontario, travelled with three colleagues to communities around Colombia last November setting up World Urban Cafés—open public forums on such urban problems as homelessness, crime and youth unemployment.

The Café program, which has staged more than 75 events in Africa, India, China, South America and Canada, includes discussion among young people, as well as music and performances. Williams says it has been an amazing experience to see participants bring their concerns forward. "One of our greatest results was having young people's voices heard." ♣

**Learn about the World Urban Forum and youth at [www.eya.ca/wuf](http://www.eya.ca/wuf).**



Youths in the shantytown of Jalousie in Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Growing up in crowded households means spending more time on the streets.

Youth advocates say that as children and youth are often caught at the centre of the urban chaos, they can also be involved in generating solutions.

"Improving life in the cities just can't happen without youth being engaged," says Doug Ragan, Senior Manager of the Environmental Youth Alliance in Vancouver, a non-profit group that involves youth in areas