

FIGHTING URBAN POVERTY WITH GREEN KNOW-HOW

In the Malika district of Dakar, Senegal, the local population ekes out an existence in the shadow of towering mountains known as Mbeubeuss. They tend vegetable patches, run small businesses and live like many people around the developing world.

But this place is different. The mountains here are made up entirely of garbage that stinks and smoulders and threatens to come sliding down with deadly force when it rains. Mbeubeuss is a working landfill site so polluted that a mayor of Dakar, Pape Diop, once called it a “danger for the whole country; a bomb about to explode.”

Yet hundreds of people have come here from the surrounding rural areas looking for a better way of life and found inventive ways to remain in the midst of this environmental menace.

“You marvel at their ingenuity and their social organization,” says Naser Faruqui, team leader of the new Urban Poverty and Environment Program at

site are grouped in the same way and have the same names as the villages in the countryside where these people came from.”

Faruqui, who oversees an urban initiative aimed at transforming the dump dwellers’ lives, was struck by a man who had amassed piles of plastic eyes, arms and legs and used them to repair scavenged dolls that, after his hard work, “looked quite good.” One resident collected hair to create wigs. Many others picked through the garbage for scrap metal to sell.

This way of life—such as it is—will end in two to three years when Mbeubeuss closes and a modern landfill opens some 80 kilometres away. The challenge for IDRC, under its new Focus Cities Research Initiative, is twofold: finding new livelihoods for the doll maker and others who live here and rehabilitating the dump site into a useful and safe place.

A team of researchers, local people and government officials will consider moving some residents to the new dump, where they can be trained for official jobs. Another option is to offer garbage-collecting tasks in neighbourhoods around the old dump. As for Mbeubeuss itself, the team will study whether it can be transformed into an area for small businesses to set up shop. “If they’re able to come up with ideas which make economic, social and environmental sense, then it may be a model for thousands of dump sites in Africa,” Faruqui says.

Focus Cities reinforces Canada’s commitment to fight poverty by reducing environmental impacts in urban areas. Faruqui says the urban

poor often get trapped because they settle on marginal land, where they face hazards such as a lack of water and sanitation and the threat of landslides and flooding.

“Because of their poverty, they’re subject to these environmental burdens, which in turn make their poverty worse,” Faruqui explains. “For example, if they have a lack of water supply and sanitation, then their kids might have diarrhea and they have to pay for medicines.”

Focus Cities is part of a shift at IDRC, prompted by rapid urbanization, to focus more on urban research projects. Work has begun in four cities—Dakar; Kampala, Uganda; Colombo, Sri Lanka; and Jakarta, Indonesia—with plans to designate another four.

The Jakarta team will look for ways to bring clean water, sanitation and garbage collection to a huge slum where local governments are cash-strapped. The trick is to convince residents that it’s worth paying part of the up-front cost of such services, says Faruqui, who notes that poor people typically end up paying 10 to 20 times more to bring in bottled water than rich people do for piped water.

In Kampala, the goal is to improve “urban agriculture,” in part by finding alternatives to the common practice of irrigating crops with untreated waste water. The research team there will study ways to isolate less contaminated household waste water used for things like washing and treat it with simple biological filters so it can be used to irrigate gardens. ♣



The doll maker of Mbeubeuss: In the giant Dakar landfill site, a man amasses piles of plastic eyes, arms and legs from discarded dolls and uses them to make new ones.

Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). “This is a community with moms, dads and kids... The settlements at the dump