

Insecure Lives for Marginalized Urbanites in Search of Human Security

Dr. Mary Racelis:

INTRODUCTION

When I think about human security in the context of urbanization, what readily come to mind are the enormous numbers of slum dwellers and informal settlers struggling to make a living in crowded cities and exert their claim to citizenship. Reading the Conference definitions of human security, my thoughts immediately jumped to threats to ordinary people launched by violent and nonviolent acts or, conversely, freedom from pervasive attacks on people's rights, their safety, or even their lives. Accompanying these reflections was a broader concern for the overall security of individuals – being protected from social and political violence, economic distress, and environmental degradation.

Urban poor people speak of the everyday violence afflicting them – a form of structural violence that simply accompanies “living.” Chronic insecurity fuels anxieties among informal settlers facing eviction because they lack legal titles or tenure security to their residential land, close to their places of work. Women worry where the next family meal is coming from, or how they are going to get proper treatment for their sick child at the health facility, or enroll their school-aged daughter in grade one despite her lack of a uniform, proper footwear, pad paper, notebooks, and pencils.

Human security as a concept also resonates with urban poor people because it includes empowering them to organize and seek their rights. If there is anything that has been impressive about urban poor groups all over Asia, it is that they are mobilizing to make their voices heard, resisting threats like demolition and eviction while pursuing access to basic services. Gender also should be factored in. All over the world, it is women in poor communities who are showing the greatest interest in figuring out how to address their issues and problems. Many are taking up community leadership positions, convinced they cannot remain passive in the face of threats to their family's wellbeing. Thus for urban poor communities, linking empowerment with human security makes sense. This outlook accords with the Conference statement that human security is people-centered, multidimensional, interconnected, and universal. Nowhere do you see better evidence of this than in Asia's urban informal settlements.

URBAN REALITIES IN ASIA

Let us turn our attention to the metropolitan cities of Asia, considered today the centers of rapid economic development. Forecasts indicate that by 2015, close to 50% of Asia's population will be living in urban areas, although there are still wide differences among countries. Impoverished rural environments that push people out, coupled with the lure of increased earnings and services in cities are creating ever larger urban centers. In the Philippines, a majority (55%) of the population is already classified as urban and the proportion is increasing rapidly, not only from in-migration but also natural population increase. In the period 1950-2000, Indonesia's urban population grew nearly nine times, from 10 million to 87 million, and in 2030 is expected to reach 180 million people.

Demographers predict 2.7 billion Asians living in urban areas by 2030 (Graeme 2003:3). About 150 of the world's 300 megacities with populations of 10 million or over will be found in Asia some 20 years from now. In 1950, 231 million Asians lived in urban areas and by 2000 they had increased five times to 1.22 billion while their proportions of the total population increased from 17.1 to 34.9 percent (United Nations 2001a). Moreover, in the next two decades Asia will pass the threshold of having more than half its population living in cities and towns (United Nations 2002).

Already underway are physical and administrative mergers transformed into massive metropolitan agglomerations. While the administrative boundaries of cities remain, urban expansion sees populations leapfrogging beyond them to occupy the increasingly dense corridors between farmland and forest. Eventually these once rural settings were overwhelmed by factories, shopping malls, golf courses, posh residential subdivisions, and resettlement communities for urban poor settlers evicted from the city core. In 1995, Jakarta DKI, which falls within the traditional legal boundaries of the city housed 9.1 million people. Incorporating the continuous built up areas beyond these boundaries brings the numbers up to 15.5 million. If one adds the three *kabupaten* on the edges of this continuous urban mass, known as Jabotabek, a megacity of 20.2 million inhabitants emerges.

Clearly, the phenomenon of urbanization is here to stay. The question is whether it is going to be favorable to those moving to the cities in search of improved human security. Or is it going to worsen or further degrade the lives of many as seems to be more and more the case today. Already the city of Mumbai has 16 million people and New Delhi has nearly reached that level. Observers say that Mumbai will jump to 27 million people by 2016. How does one govern an urban agglomeration of that size?

Metro Manila has 11 million today and several of its areas have some of the highest urban densities in the region – 89,000 per square kilometer. If you focus on the squatter or urban informal settlements, the degree of density is staggering. As one resident commented, “The difference between our place and other low income neighborhoods is that there they at least have streets. while here you have to squeeze your way along paths between the houses. You can't even walk straight but have to go sideways between the houses because they are so packed together and the spaces between them are so narrow.”

In Vietnam, 24% or 20 million people of the population were urban in 2000, with the figures expected to rise to 45% or 46 million by 2020. As everywhere else, that growth happens in cities, based on the services and production that occur there. Also evident is rapid growth in small and medium sized cities, but the irony here is that these cities are less financially endowed than the mega cities to handle the incoming populace. They thus have even less capacity to handle the increasing numbers of rural migrants coming into their centers or other city residents making a change.

Rapid urbanization is thus a major human security issue because of the conditions under which both migrants and low-income residents find themselves. The irony is that industry and sophisticated service organizations, local elites, the wealthy members of society and

their partner foreign investors reside in towering skyscrapers, modern business districts in Manila, Jakarta, and Thailand that could rival any in New York, Paris, or Tokyo. Meanwhile, on the ground in these Asian cities, right in the shadows of those tall, gleaming buildings sprawl degrading slums and informal settlements with hundreds of families living in them. The contrasts are night and day.

The Asian slum dwellers are packed into run down neighborhoods, often with one water tap and toilet for a 150 families, a health center that lacks medicine and trained personnel, and a school with 60 to 80 children per classroom where three children share one book and two brothers share a uniform. During the financial crisis, one child would come to school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday while his brother would come Tuesday and Thursday because they only had one uniform between them. At night the dark and unsafe environments populated by drunken men or unruly teenage gangs are dangerous for women, adolescents, and children. Gangsters and criminality within the urban slums likewise flourish, given the lack of employment. Yet, despite all this, urban informal settlements are notable for their ordinary residents struggling to survive and make a better life for themselves under sometimes extremely difficult and hazardous conditions. All too often they participate only minimally in the political processes that affect their well being.

Although almost 25% of Asia's urban population are poor, one should not focus solely on the negative aspects of slum-dwelling. The thriving informal economy brings survival and perhaps even economic progress. As one official pointed out to me, "There's really no unemployment here because almost everyone is working at something or other." Almost everybody is trying to find something – whether it is little girls peddling flower garlands on the street, women taking in laundry to do at the community faucet, or men disentangling car parts to turn them into spoons, forks and tools. All kinds of services and ventures get underway in urban slums. In that sense, slum communities offer some hope for people forced to fend for themselves, even as outsiders condemn them.

Governments all over are taking steps to address urban poverty through on-site slum upgrading and improved services, resettlement to the urban fringes, social security for informal sector workers, skills training, and alternative educational programs for out of school youth. One must likewise recognize the important roles that NGOs and faith-based groups in these places, but the scale of the problem is so enormous that even those efforts can only touch a small proportion of the needy. There are also much larger macro-political economy issues that apparently generate and sustain this type of poverty in the shadow of large scale economic growth, wealth and socio-economic disparities.

Where does human insecurity for Asia's urban poor lie? In the many informal settlements and slums that house people. Placed at the bottom rung of the income ladder, they cannot find affordable housing. They squat on any open territory they can find, preferably government land, where they are not likely to be thrown off or in the "danger zones" like river banks or railroad tracks, or underneath highways and so on. They have to be in the center of town featuring many potential customers to buy their services and products. Unemployment, low profit informal activities, limited health services, poor garbage collection, sporadic drainage, accumulating sewage, unsanitary environments, inadequate

schools, deplorable housing, poor communication (before cellphones came), tenure insecurity – these are the characteristics of urban slum dwelling. To the residents it means chronic insecurity as a regular feature of their neighborhoods.

Forced evictions constitute a recurring nightmare. Although the government says it does not force anyone out of their shanty homes, giving them the choice of leaving, urban poor people report they often have no real choice. “If you don’t tear down your own house voluntarily, you stand to lose compensation money or the prospective right to a resettlement plot.” The definitions of “forced” or “consultations” varies greatly depending on who the one who is being forced or doing the forcing.

In Metro Manila, 94,000 families are scheduled to be evicted in 2008 without adequate relocation, usually to very distant sites where there is virtually no employment. Many return to the city to be near their place of work. New resettlement sites on the fringes of the city have an impact on other marginalized people, like farmers and rural workers. Other residents of rural municipalities are likewise affected, since their communities were never meant to accommodate so huge an influx of new residents in so short a time. Local governments are hard put to deal effectively with another 5,000 to 10,000 families drawing on basic services and local transportation. Houses are the elements that middle and upper class officials emphasize as “the solution,” since in their view, the ramshackle domiciles are the problem. But for the communities, tenure insecurity hounds them and makes steady employment precarious. Viewed as persons who have no tenure rights and who can be moved on short notice, the urban poor remain in a suspended state of anxiety about possible forced evictions. On the other hand, experience shows that once informal settlers obtain security of tenure, they gradually improve their houses. The earlier tendency to invest any additional income in movable household items like television sets or cooking stoves is tempered by the zeal to make their dwelling a permanent home.

CONCLUSION

Human security then, must be accompanied by the concept of human rights. The poor have a right to food, employment, decent houses and basic services. A number of international United Nations conventions have been signed by our governments that need to be put into practice in defense of the poor. Urban informal settlers are a struggling, hard working group of citizenry, who must be involved in the process of solving their own problems, supported by government, civil society and the business sector. Their collective efforts also need to be cast in the light of globalization imperatives in a dominant neo-liberal market economy. These profoundly affect societal structures and economic policies. In the end, the kinds of changes sought by the urban poor will come about largely through their own efforts to change their situation through effective organizing. In doing so, they will hold government and society accountable to an inclusive citizenship that includes all marginalized people like themselves.

Reference Cited

Graeme, Hugo, 2003. *Urbanization in Asia: An Overview*. Paper prepared for Conference on African Migration in Comparative Perspective, Johannesburg, South Africa, 4-7, June, 2003.

[Panelists present their papers]

Unidentified speaker:

“This a more a question for Marita but the others can answer it as well. It appears to me that when you presented the main problems facing Muslim community dwellers it seems to be an amalgam sometimes – it’s not just housing clearly, it’s insecurity of the land where the houses are situated, and in your case it’s not really housing but employment because having no employment means they could not afford to rent an apartment or get decent housing. In your case, they were given housing but not enough mechanisms were provided to enable those who availed of government funded housing to maintain these facilities; it thus opens the door for gentrification so to speak or the entry of people who are not really the initial targets for the housing project. Now I see different sides of the same story but I wanted to ask in the case of [inaudible] did it make any difference? I’m surprised that going back there five years after that you still have a substantial number of people that are saying that their lives have not improved at all. This after the outpouring of AIDS, this after all the community organizations, this after government interests in truly helping them out. Why?”

Marita Concepcion Castro-Guevara:

“Thank you for your question. Basically what you’re asking is that in the case of Pajatas why, despite the infusion of so much aid from different sectors in society, is it still poor? Based on my survey 74% still remain poor. One answer is that the magnitude of the poverty problem is such that it’s very difficult to move the people up from poverty. But second, what I’d like to stress is that there are also macro-economic factors involved. There could be the infusion of aid from various sectors, the households can bend over backwards to work hard, but if there is some economic policies that are hostile towards the people, the whole [inaudible] policy prevents people from staying in their jobs for longer than five months. It gives leeway to companies who want to employ people only five months at a time. There is also the escalation of prices that do not commiserate the incomes of the people. Here it is difficult for people to move out of poverty. So there are macro-economic policies that are involved. Then there’s the whole rural development problem which paves the way for the entering of people from rural areas into congested communities like Pajatas. We also need to look at the macro factors, the roles of the governments, the policies of the government, in abetting a situation like urban poverty.”

Dr. Mary Racelis:

“Other comments?”

Jasmin Nario Galace:

“I am from the center for Peace Education. I was listening intently to all the presentations and I realized that in the Philippines and in Thailand civil society is taking an active part in lifting the lives of the poor. But I didn’t hear much from Indonesia and Japan. In the latter case, the solution the Japanese came up with wasn’t even addressed. The problem is that of people going to the third world because the labor cost is low. So I was really wondering to myself if Indonesia and Japan also have civil society efforts to help

uplift the lives of the poor. Is civil society there not as vibrant as they are in the Philippines and Thailand?”

Syaifudin Zakir:

“Okay, thank you, what’s different between Indonesia and the Philippines? Let’s go back to history again. Our civil society is really emerging after the defeat of the autocratic regime in 1997. It’s no wonder you can’t find it in that time. Everything is very centralized. What I get from Philippines – well they’re learning fast, that is the difference. In the Philippines, civil society prepared a long time before Marcos came down but it has been different in Indonesia. We have a ‘civil society’. It’s not a real civil society. Really only in the last ten years has a real civil society emerged. But again I told you that civil society isn’t the only problem – our policy for autonomy is also different. This autonomy is just coming in the year of 2000. That’s very different. In the Philippines, local autonomy started a long time ago. I know the Filipino system because I was there from 2004 to 2006. But here we are in Indonesia even though we already know about local autonomy from 2000; the mechanisms, law enforcement and policies are just coming two or three years this date. So it’s really new for us. That’s my comment. Thank you.

Boonlert Visetpricha:

“Thank you very much for your question because maybe I didn’t explain it clearly. In Japan, there is a civil society but maybe they have a different argument about how to deal with this problem. Some groups agree with the government and it uses this to justify their policy to evict the homeless. In certain examples of shelters, the government says that this idea is generated from the supporters of the homeless; some organizations ask the government to save the shelter but the government doesn’t support it. But some organizations [inaudible] the homeless problem from the unemployment problem. I studied with one organization in Japan, a particularly left-wing organization. They’re against the policies of the government [inaudible]. But some organization is searching two year for a good apartment. So this thing about the civil society is not homogenous. So it is different, they have different opinions and attitudes to deal with this problem. Thank you very much.

Unidentified speaker:

“Thanks for the presentation—I’m from Thailand but, at the moment, I’m studying for a Master degree in Japan at Waseda University in Japan. Since I’m from Japan my question is going to go to Ajahn Boonlert from Thammasat University. I just came from Tokyo last night so the pictures and stories that you just told are very fresh and reflect the reality in Tokyo. It really reminds me about the picture and the lifestyle of the homeless in Tokyo. I had a chance to look through your paper and you mention the work by professor Tom Gill who did research on homeless people in Yokohama. I had the opportunity to take his class on social research on homeless people. I’m personally interested in your topic as well. As you mentioned earlier, I also had the same shock in that before I went to Japan I had been to many countries in Southeast Asia, big cities like Bangkok and Manila where we share the same problem of homeless people. At that time, I thought it was because we weren’t as developed. So I concluded that this is a problem we share among developing countries in Southeast Asia. But when I went to Osaka, I was so surprised to find homeless people – because of different reasons or different problems. I don’t really know exactly

because I didn't do the research like you. To this point, I have a problem in my mind even though we're a developing country we still have this problem. But Japan, as you mentioned earlier, is considered one of the most financially and economically successful countries but they also have the same problem. To this point I'd like to ask – how can developed countries have the same problem? What should be the model of sustainable urbanization that brings people human security? I would like to ask this question – what is the model or what should we do? Because even developing countries face this same problem.”

Boonlert Visetpricha:

“I'm going to find the model right now. I'm thinking about your question. I was not kidding because there is no one model or solution. The context is different. In Philippines, there is great concern over the slum communities because more than 50% of the people in Manila live in slums or slum areas. So maybe this should be the first priority. But in Tokyo they don't have slums like in developing countries. The problem is homeless people. I don't think we have a model – only a strategy maybe. For me, I think that we cannot [inaudible]. I did research for the homeless in Tokyo and the slums in Manila. I don't think we can solve it with a program of neo-liberalism if we think that everything should be decided by market-mechanisms. So the price of land in urban areas is very high for people to afford and, in the same paradigm, if labor is decided by the markets then countries move to developing counterparts because it's cheaper. I think the main reason goes beyond the neo-liberal paradigm of marketing-mechanism. It is not enough to solve this problem.”

Syaifudin Zakir:

“One point that I want to underline is that when we talk about the urban poor, don't politicize them. When we start to do that the problem will never stop. Like in Indonesia, when the general election is coming they talk about the poor, the slums running everywhere but after they win the election they start to burn everything. That's my main point. Thank you.”

Marita Concepcion Castro-Guevara:

“What was stark about my study was that I was impressed by the fact that the entire effort to move a community out of poverty, to move households out of poverty, is really an integrated and multistage approach. It involves the government with regards to its policies, legislation; it involves the participation of civil society and the private sector. But what I also discovered – and this is not stretched in the literature – is the capacity of the people themselves, their own sense of agency. And when I was talking to the people from the community this was something they kept mentioning. Of course they rely on the government, on civil society to uplift them. But they themselves also realize the need to do something too. They should not fall prey to vices; they should limit the sizes of their families, and so on. Basically the entire approach towards moving out of poverty should recognize the interplay dynamic between social structures and human agency. Thank you.”

Boonlert Visetpricha:

“I say that, in the worlds of complex city, rich society and globalization there are many different kinds of people. They have differences in their ways of life, like the homeless, like the slum dwellers. I think we should start from understanding their ways of

life – understanding the factors that put them in those situations. This is the first step towards solving this problem, to understanding this problem. This is the first step.”

Dr. Mary Racelis:

“You have been a really wonderful audience. And I want to thank our panel for really giving us the basis for which we have spent a very interesting afternoon. For me I think perhaps, in the context of human security, what these papers have shown is that there also has to be a concept of rights. I think in the Thai case, it seems that the Thai government has said: ‘poor people have rights, and it’s not enough to think of freedom from want and freedom from fear but also that these people are in fact people, they have rights, we have obligations to them, and society as a whole plus the government that represents it, has an obligation in fact to make people livable for everybody and that some people shouldn’t prosper so much without recognizing that there is a huge proportion that is still being left out’. That’s the responsibility of the government, and the society as a whole, to find the mechanism which I think the Thai case shows well in order to make that shift. The poor have a right to be where they are – they are a struggling, hard working people and therefore need to be involved in the process of solving the problem as stakeholders. This will enable them, in fact, to solve the problem because institutions and policy situation support their cause. Perhaps the new element that has come in is the whole globalization context which hasn’t been looked at as much. But the connection between Japanese companies manufacturing out to our countries, new problems are being created because rural people are coming to look for the opportunities in cities; and yet there is a whole system in the global setting that one has to look at – the whole new liberal economy has to look at in addition to the human security aspect. Thank you again, I think it was a very productive afternoon.”