
Megaslumming.

A book launch and public debate on the future of urban shantytowns.

Press Release

'Megaslumming' book launch and panel discussion, London

Share The World's Resources convened a book launch and panel discussion on slum growth and urban poverty in the Global South, held on Wednesday 24 February at the Amnesty International UK headquarters in London.

The event followed the official launch of the book *Megaslumming: A journey through sub-Saharan Africa's largest shantytown*, which took place in Nairobi during January 2010.

At the talk and discussion in London, the book's author Adam Parsons was joined by two experts on the issue of informal settlements and urban poverty; Malavika Vartak, Campaign Coordinator for Poverty and Human Rights at Amnesty International UK, and David Satterthwaite, Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

The evening commenced with a short film about Djemba, the main subject in the book *Megaslumming*, that provided a sense of the colour, sounds and texture of sub-Saharan Africa's largest shantytown - Kibera. Adam Parsons then gave a talk on his experiences and thoughts about his time spent in Nairobi, and some of the wider international issues raised in the book's narrative.

Explaining why he wrote the book, he said; "Rather than just focusing on Kibera's social problems, which are already so well known, what I wanted to try and do is simply to represent the human struggles of its residents in an unbiased way that can allow us to be moved by their stories, and help us relate to their lives and see the connections between our different worlds."

Going on to explain how the post-election violence, global food crisis and economic downturn has led to a serious urban crisis in Kenya, Parsons argued that neoliberal economic policies are largely to blame for the colossal growth of slums in sub-Saharan Africa. He said: "Most governments and decision-makers have yet to renounce the free market economic assumptions of recent decades, in particular that the growing chasm between the super-rich and the disposable poor doesn't matter so long as economic growth and material affluence continues to increase at the top of the tree."

He added: "What I've tried to show in this book is that to understand the potential for a more humane form of economic development, we need only look towards the triumph of the human spirit in places like Kibera. ...If we are really to talk about changing the systems that keep poor people poor, it ultimately means that we have to re-embrace as a world community the basic ethics and values upon which all of our lives depend."

Malavika Vartak looked at the problem of slums and forced evictions from Amnesty International's human rights perspective, which she explained is part of their Demand Dignity campaign formally launched in May 2009. Drawing on the findings of Amnesty's recent report, entitled *The Unseen Majority: Nairobi's Two Million Slumdweller*s, Vartak outlined how the Kenyan government's response to the high proportion of informal

settlements in Nairobi has failed to ensure the State's obligations to realise the right to adequate housing.

She said that although Kenya is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and is therefore obliged under international law to protect and fulfil the right to adequate housing, "many if not all of these requirements remain unfulfilled, not only for the residents of Kibera, but those living in several other informal settlements."

She added: "Although there are many economic drivers of urban poverty, Amnesty's work focuses on the government, and calls on the government to first and foremost have a moratorium on forced evictions, and to develop legislation and policy that will protect people like the residents of Deep Sea or Kibera or Mathare [settlements in Kenya] from arbitrary evictions. And then work towards programmes like slum upgrading or land sharing where viable alternatives to forced evictions can be found, and the right to adequate housing can be realised."

David Satterthwaite noted that there are two ways to look at informal settlements; the first is to show how awful the conditions are and how deep the poverty is. The second approach, he said, "is to recognise that in informal communities there's vibrant communities, people with competence, people with capacity, who over time negotiate, improve conditions, change their relationship with local government. How slums become not slums."

He questioned: "Might our emphasis on making these places look ungovernable and impossible deter action, deter solutions to slums?"

Dr Satterthwaite argued that the most important issue is how slum-dweller organisations and women's saving groups are negotiating with governments to work their way out of living in slums. He explained how several million households across Asia, Africa and Latin America have secured better housing and basic amenities through their own efforts and organisations, often making good quality houses at half the price that contractors build.

In concluding that he is thrilled that places like Kibera are getting more attention, he added: "But I think we have a duty to try a little harder to highlight the needs, the priorities, the capacities of the slum-dwellers and their own organisations, because in the end it is our capacity to listen to them and support them that will reverse the tide, and not anything else."

In a lively question and answer session, contributors discussed a range of issues including corruption, security of tenure, problems in using the term 'slum', and responses to popular depictions of slum-dwellers from recent television documentaries and films such as *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Share The World's Resources will continue to promote the book *Megaslumming* throughout 2010 in order to raise awareness of issues related to informal settlements and urban poverty.

Notes

Megaslumming is published by Share The World's Resources. Written as an introduction to global justice issues, the book sets out to unravel how a 'megaslum' such as Kibera came to exist, what economic forces shape the reality of life for slum residents in Africa, and what it really means to live in extreme poverty. In a mix of travel writing, history and political narrative, the book vividly describes life in the slum through the eyes of its different residents – the AIDS orphans, the grandmother-headed households, the neglected schools, the Nubian elders, and most of all the street boys who become the author's guides and teachers inside the notorious shantytown.

Share The World's Resources (STWR) advocates for governments to secure basic human needs by sharing essential resources such as water, energy and staple food. www.stwr.org

Share The World's Resources

PO Box 52662
London N7 8UX
United Kingdom

Phone

+44 (0) 20 7609 3034

Email

info@stwr.org

Website

www.stwr.org

