

Interview with William Cobbett

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Heavily populated cities are a challenge for democracy

For this international expert, the Brazilian Constitution and City Statute provide a framework for land division throughout the world.

Sérgio Duran

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Laws such as those contained in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 and the City Statute of 2001 serve as important examples for the rest of the world of a legal framework for the just division of urban land, according the South African William Cobbett, Programme Manager of the Cities Alliance, a 21-member international organisation which aims to reduce poverty in urban areas.

Cobbett claims that economic development is not sufficient to improve housing conditions in cities and that a clear position needs to be taken by the public authorities in favor of poor people with regard to what he calls “the hostility of the middle classes and political elite.” Cobbett gave this interview on Friday (13 July 2007) with the *Estado de São Paulo* at the University of São Paulo Polytechnic School, which serves as an office for Cities Alliance.

What is your opinion about the result of the research that showed an increase in the slum population of São Paulo regardless of the fact that there has been no change in the size of the area occupied by slum housing?

Firstly, I would like to clarify that the local Prefecture is doing an excellent job. It has shown that the city of São Paulo is prepared to establish urban development programs based on real knowledge about the situation. There are countries where slums are not even marked on the map.

São Paulo's Popular Housing Superintendent, Elisabete França, reckons that the problem of the slums can be resolved within 16 to 20 years.

This is an intelligent comment. Our slogan (“*Cities Without Slums*”) follows the same line—that it is indeed possible to have cities without slums. It is not really a question of removing the slums but acknowledging the contribution made by the slum populations to economic, political and social formation.

Has any city managed to do that?

London, Paris...

Yes, but a long time ago....

In capitals of the developing world, the problem of irregular housing is a challenge for the next five decades. In Latin America, 75 percent of the population is already living in cities. In Brazil, a total of 85 percent. But this means that slums have in fact grown. In 1950, Ottawa in

Canada had the same population as Lagos in Nigeria: 500,000 inhabitants. Today Ottawa has 1.3 million inhabitants and Lagos 13 million.

But the basic difference between these countries is surely economic. Does economic growth not solve the problem?

In societies such as the Brazilian and South African—that are similar in various respects—this growth is not evenly divided. Therefore it is important to have the State intervene in order to ensure access by the poor population to resources. All over the world, the political elite and the middle class generally have a hostile attitude towards the urban poor.

Recently the Río de Janeiro local government announced an urban development project in the *Complexo do Alemão* in an effort to combat drug trafficking. What do you think of this model for fighting violent crime through urban development, inspired by Medellín in Colombia?

I'm not familiar with the Colombian model. Rio de Janeiro is an extreme case, but is not the only one in the world. It is clear that Rio presents a picture of a poor population that has been abandoned. When the State leaves a place to its own devices it is occupied by a parallel power. When I was Housing Secretary of Cape Town in South Africa between 1996 and 1998, I experienced this kind of problem. Urban development is an effective way for the State to regain control.

Did drug trafficking exist in South Africa's slums?

There were certainly gangs but not necessarily only drug trafficking gangs. Those who live in slums still need drinking water and electricity. Without the presence of the State, these services are supplied by others, generally at a much higher cost.

How does Brazil compare to other countries in that respect?

The 1988 Constitution and the City Statute (2001) are very important world models of juridical frameworks aimed at fair and just urban land division. In addition to upgrading slums, it is also necessary to establish overall preventive policies for increasingly densely populated cities. The urban development of the world's population is one of the greatest challenges faced by democracy. City planning often takes no account of the poor. Look at the case of Brasilia. This was a city that was planned for everything apart from the poor. A city like that needs poor people in order to function, just like any other city.

Who is William Cobbett?

William Cobbett is the Programme Manager of the Cities Alliance and an expert in combating urban poverty through housing projects. He is ex-Head of the Human Settlements Department of UN-Habitat in Nairobi. He was also Housing Secretary in Cape Town, South Africa between 1996 and 1998. He was Executive-Secretary of the South African Housing Ministry in the first government following the end of apartheid, in 1994.