

## **Star speaker was shack dweller: Jockin Arputham leads fight against urban poverty**

**Francis Bula**

Vancouver Sun

June 7, 2006

It's a sign of how much has changed in 30 years when it comes to United Nations conferences aimed at grappling with the problems of cities: Jockin Arputham is coming to the UN World Urban Forum that starts in two weeks.

Arputham might be an unknown name to 99 per cent of people in Vancouver. But to those who have been fighting what sometimes seems like a losing battle against urban poverty, Arputham is an inspiration.

Arputham, who in the 1960s was a homeless carpenter in Mumbai, has become a World-known leader in the movement of squatters and slum dwellers to come up with their own solutions to housing, sewage, water-supply and garbage problems.

In 1976, he was invited to the gathering of non-government organizations that took place at Jericho Beach. But he couldn't come because he was trying — unsuccessfully, as it turned out — to save the slum neighbourhood where he lived from being bulldozed by the Indian government.

Arputham was actually arrested for his activities, one of dozens of times, just before the conference. This time, Arputham is coming as a star speaker on a level with housing ministers from major nations. He's now president of Slum/Shack Dwellers International, a group that operates in almost a dozen countries to support community groups in their negotiations with local governments for the solutions they think will work for them.

"These new federations of shack dwellers are addressing new strategies and what they're doing in these countries is absolutely remarkable," says David Satterthwaite, who is with the International Institute for Economics and Development's human settlements program in London. "They have recognized that there's no point in asking the state to deliver things it can't deliver. Starting in the early 1980s, they said, 'We will work with you in partnership.' That was an amazing shift."

The IIED, founded by the legendary British economist and environmentalist Barbara Ward, has been pressing governments and international agencies for the past 30 years, through its human-settlements program, to work toward the goals of the 1976 UN Habitat Conference.

Satterthwaite has spent much of that time working with these emerging local groups, who have pioneered innovative new ways to improve the lives of the increasing number of people who live in slums and shantytowns or on the streets of hundreds of cities around the world.

In India, slum dweller groups took on the job of improving public toilets, which exist in every slum and are poor-quality disasters.

"They said, 'Let us design, build and manage our own public toilets,' " says Satterthwaite. "They have now built 500 of them in several cities."

This year's World Urban Forum focus on Arputham and other people like him is part of the big shift in how the world has chosen to tackle urban issues over the past 30 years.

In 1976, many thought if they just got all the UN countries to come together and agree to resolutions, problems of urban poverty and housing would be solved.

"The 1976 conference was a UN-wide conference specifically to get governments to make commitments," says Satterthwaite. "There was much more optimism that if governments formally endorsed something, that was all that was needed."

No one believes that any more and, in a way, this 2006 conference is less ambitious because no one expects governments to come up with massive amounts of money or comprehensive solutions.

"It's more of a conference to exchange ideas. It's not for brokering agreements." On the other hand, says Satterthwaite, there's a new feeling of optimism because of some of the changes that have happened over the past 30 years. One is the gradual rise in local democracy.

Most cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America did not have elected mayors in 1976. Now they do and many of those mayors will be coming to the forum.

The other source of optimism is the way local groups have come up with creative strategies to solve their own problems.

That's why the June 19–23 forum, expected to draw about 8,000 people, will be a different gathering.

"It will be the people that work on the ground in housing, sanitation and drainage," says Satterthwaite. "There will be lots of stuff where people just exchange ideas, like how to make a bus system work better in a city without more money."

Upon their arrival, forum participants will get a unique document that will bolster this kind of exchange. It's a booklet outlining ideas on how to change the world — ideas that have been put into action by grassroots community groups operating everywhere from Brazil to Kenya to Canada.

The booklet is a result of Habitat JAM, a 72-hour on-line international conversation about urban environmentalism held last December.

Tens of thousands of messages have been boiled down to about 70 main ideas, with descriptions of how different community groups have put them into practice.

In Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, the Philippines, India and Indonesia, for example, neighbourhood groups have formed recycling cooperatives to support the often-homeless waste scavengers who have learned to survive in urban slums by collecting and recycling different kinds of garbage.

In Sao Paulo, one cooperative has managed to buy its own land to process and store the cardboard that its paper-picker collectors salvage. In Indonesia, the government even supports scavenger co-ops and has put a duty on imported waste to help make economic conditions more favourable for scavengers.

Those kinds of ideas are more effective than many people realize, because, contrary to popular belief, most of the growth in urban populations isn't in megacities. Satterthwaite notes that a quarter of the world's population, half its urban population, lives in cities of under 500,000 people.

"Of the 1.5 billion people living in these 'small urban centres,' nearly three-quarters live in Africa, Asia and Latin America," he writes in one report. "Several hundred million more live in these same regions in 'large villages' that have urban characteristics and that could be classified as urban centres. These 'small urban centres' and 'large villages' are also likely to absorb a large part of the growth in the world's population up to 2025 and beyond."

Those kinds of smaller cities don't need massive renewal to make them work better. And small community groups that organize to provide solutions can have an impact.

"It isn't perfect," says Satterthwaite. "But it's so much better than the past."

fbula@png.canwest.com

### **Illustrations:**

Colour Photo: Indranil Mukher Jee, AFP/Getty Images / An Indian labourer works on a Construction at Kumbharwada next to Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, in Mumbai. An estimated 25,000 families living in makeshift huts along kilometres of sidewalks in Mumbai will be evicted within two years, officials say.

Colour Photo: Jockin Arputham, who in the 1960s was a homeless carpenter, and is now president of Slum/Shack Dwellers International, is heading to Vancouver to attend the World Urban Forum.