8 In the City Slums

The informal urban sector: it is one of those examples of economist's jargon which brings a grey glaze across the eyes of the layman. Yet this is one of the most colourful, exciting, bizarre, sometimes squalid, but often amusing aspects of Third World development. It is the bustees of Calcutta, with ten-storey blocks of flats squashed into the gardens of older houses; the favellas of Rio, tumbling down the city's many hills, under the shadow of the vast statue of Christ, yet an affront to the millionaires and bathing beauties of Copacabana and Ipinema; the slums of Nairobi, living permanently under threat of death by bulldozer; the incredibly crowded back streets of Hongkong.

This is the story of people who have left the countryside, usually driven out by poverty, the population explosion and the land famine. They have arrived in the city, but are not yet of the city, for it has offered them no job. So, singly or in families, they set out to make what kind of living they can. They are hard to define, and no one can ever be quite sure when a man is informally urban — or urbanely informal, perhaps? — and when he has crossed over into 'that undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns' — no, not in this case the Hereafter, just the modern economy.

However, acknowledging the difficulties, economists have made a stagger at defining the characteristics of the informal urban sector: ease of entry; reliance on indigenous resources; family ownership; small scale of operation, with no more than ten or fifteen workers; technology which is labour-intensive; skills that are acquired outside the schools; and unregulated and competitive markets. Add two negative
In the City Slums 97

qualifications — that governments offer it few favours, by way of import licences, equipment subsidies, credit, or low interest rates; and that they often harass it legally — and you have a fair idea of the informal urban sector.

The international planners have now set out to convince the authorities in Third World countries that this sector has great potential for growth, and that it has a much better chance of providing jobs for the ever-growing populations of the metropolises of Asia, Africa and Latin America than has modern manufacturing industry. The scale of the problems certainly demands some radical change in direction, for if urban poverty continues to grow at the rate of the past quarter-century, there is serious danger of violence and civil upheaval. The poor in the cities are more combustible material for revolution than are those in the countryside.

It is estimated that about 200 million poor people live in Third World cities. The number is growing all the time. In 1950 there were only sixteen cities in the developing world with populations above 1 million. Now there are over sixty, and by the end of the century the number will probably have risen above 200. Half of the urban growth is due to population increase and the other half to migration from the countryside.

In the past generation, there has been a move into the cities of the developing world on a scale the world has never witnessed before. The towns and cities of the rich world grew at a much more leisurely pace, and they were able to absorb their new citizens with greater ease. Probably 400 million people in this generation have moved into cities, and it has been estimated that by the end of the century three out of four people in Latin America will live urban lives. The growth of Rio and San Paulo appears unstoppable. One out of three Asians and Africans will also be in cities by the year 2000. The frightening fact is that the great conurbations of the Third World may have to absorb another 1000 million people. Yet already half the people in the cities of India are undernourished, and a quarter of the child deaths in the African cities are from malnutrition.

Already the modern sector of the Third World cities can only provide jobs for about two out of five of the people