LIVIN' FOR THE CITY

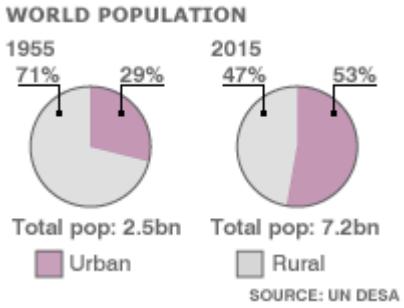
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Missionary photographs and stories need to concentrate more on cities than on the countryside. The problem is, of course, that cities generally are not as pretty as the rural areas and don't make such good publicity.
Category: Observations

Living in a small town, on the edge of an industrial estate, I often dream about moving to a house somewhere in the country. Ideally with a small stream in the garden and views of hills from the front room. A man can dream can't he?

This is strange, because there was a time when we lived way out in the country, in the village of Gouabafla, where we worked as Bible translators. In many ways, we were stereotypical missionaries, we lived in the bush and worked a people group with only a very small, first generation church. If you get hold of a mission magazine or browse a mission website, you will very quickly come across pictures of people like us; young men and women out in rural areas, sharing the Gospel. Typical missionaries.

However, there is a problem with this picture. The majority of the world's population don't live in the countryside, they live in cities and the urban population is growing rapidly. If we want to go where people are, we need to shift our focus to thinking about urban situations. Particularly, urban centres in Asia. The picture below shows why this is the case.



However, there are some challenges with shifting our mission focus to cities that we need to face up to. Here are a few, fairly random, thoughts.

- **Image:** as I mentioned above, the missionary stereotype is still focussed on the rural world. If we want to minister where people are, then we need to work to change that stereotype. Missionary photographs and stories need to concentrate more on cities than on the countryside. The problem is, of course, that cities generally are not as pretty as the rural areas and don't make such good publicity.
- **Money:** half way through our time in Ivory Coast, we had to move from our village location to the main city, Abidjan. That meant that we had to start paying rent. Living in cities can be expensive - ask anyone based in London! Mission to the world's cities can be an expensive business.
- **Complexity:Â** cities are desperately complex things with rich areas, poor areas, suburbs, commercial centres and all sorts of other subdivisions. Many different mission strategies are likely to be needed to reach a single city. We need missionaries who are prepared to live in slum areas; mixing with the urban poor and dealing with conditions that many of us would find very difficult. There is a need for others to minister to the middle classes; comparatively rich people living a somewhat Western lifestyle and with an increasingly Western attitude to religion and faith. It takes guts to live among the urban poor and it takes perseverance and patience (and perhaps a lot of money) to live among the urban middle-class.

- **Flux:Â** things change quickly in cities. Concepts such as people or language groups become increasingly hard to define.Â Imagine a young Kouya speaker moving into the city of Abidjan. He may well settle down with a woman who speaks, say, AttiÃ©. They don't speak each others' language, so they communicate in French, which is the language their kids grow up speaking. Which people group do the kids belong to? Which language should be used to reach them with the Gospel? Do we need to place a priority on translating the Bible into urban African French (which is not what they speak in Paris)?
- **Religion:** cities are the home of the world's great religions. Urban missionaries need to be equipped to deal with complex religious systems. Presenting the Gospel to Buddhists presents a whole different set of problems to evangelising Muslims. People need training and equipping and they need experience.

Of course, many agencies are already getting to grips with these things; they aren't new. However, I believe that mission publicity and the way in which we talk about mission in churches needs to catch up.

I'm also aware that whenever I post something like this, someone will make a comment saying that there is still a need for missionaries in rural Africa, or Europe. I know that and would never say otherwise. However, our deployment of mission resources needs to match (to some extent) the places where people live. Increasingly, people live in Asian mega-cities.Â

If you know where I got the title for this post from - you are showing your age!