

Excluded Citizenships: The Plight of Squatters in Jamaica

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Jimmy K. Tindigarukayo (Ph.D.)
Senior Lecturer, Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and
Economic Studies
University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Kingston 7

Introduction

The illegal occupation of land and/or building that characterize squatting in Jamaica can be traced back to emancipation period in 1833 when ex-slaves captured crown and marginal estate lands and land abandoned by planters, thus, making squatting institutionalized as a form of land tenure in Jamaica.



Currently, four main factors tend to aggravate the problem of squatting in Jamaica:

- High level of poverty in rural areas (60%), leading to rural/urban migration
- Rapid urban growth, from 34% in 1960 to 54% in 2011 (Jam census 2011)
- Housing shortage in urban centres, due to excessive demand vs supply
- High levels of unemployment among new migrants, creating the urban poor



As a survival strategy, most of the urban poor have invaded and illegally occupied urban land where they live in hurriedly constructed shanty shelters, commonly known as squatter settlements/slums.

Challenges/problems associated with Squatting

- (i) Social:** overcrowding, no basic utilities (clean water, sanitation, garbage disposal, access roads), high unemployment, high school dropouts
- (ii) Health:** air and water borne diseases (respiratory infections, typhoid) are common; uncollected garbage attracts rats that become a hard to kids
- (iii) Environmental:** deforestation, inadequate sewage disposal leading to pollution of water sources, crammed dwellings leading to fire hazards
- (iv) Economic:** use of lands suitable for agriculture, tourism, industrial dev.; squatters are rejected by employers because of where they live.



Initiatives to combat squatting in Jamaica have included:

- (i) slum clearance scheme, involving physical reconstruction of overcrowded units and provision of rental housing. However, these units are often too expensive for squatters to afford

(ii) Reduction of rural-urban migration

Immediately after Jamaica's political independence in 1962, an attempt was made to provide housing in rural areas to reduce rural-urban migration. Four main housing schemes were operational during that period:

- **Farm Housing Scheme**, administered by the Ministry of Agriculture;
- **Owner-Occupier scheme**, which provided soft housing loans to the rural poor to build houses on their own land;
- **Indigent Housing Scheme**, for people with special needs;
- **Rental and Sales Units**, both of which were Central Government Schemes, built for government employees

Despite the above housing schemes, rural-urban migration persisted especially among the youth who sought to run away from rural poverty.

(iii) Assisted Self-Help scheme,

This was done through the Programme for Resettlement and Integrated Development Enterprise (*PRIDE*). This programme, which was launched in 1994 by then Prime Minister P.J. Patterson, was based on five targets:

- (a) Selling government-owned land to the landless on subsidized price
- (b) Beneficiaries to implement the program through CBOs (Provident)
- (c) Community resource mobilization to pay for professional services
- (d) Financial subsidies from government for initial developments
- (e) Occupation of acquired plots within 2 years; beneficiaries were given a 30-year flexible payment mortgage scheme to ensure affordability.



However, Operation PRIDE was characterized by a number of problems that led to its demise in 2004, including: charges of corruption, nepotism, funding deficits, and engaging in the provision of upscale infrastructures, thereby driving up prices of lots that became too expensive for the poor that the programme was originally intended to serve.

(iv) Eviction

Despite its attempts to solve the squatter problems through land divestment and self-help housing programs, the Jamaican government has often utilized eviction to solve the squatter problem.

- In its *National Land Policy* of 1996, the government stated that it sought to “**reduce the incidence of squatting by eviction where necessary**”.
- Moreover, in its position paper on squatting of 1998, the Jamaican government stated that it would be tough on squatters because “**no one should have a free ride or be allowed to be a leach on the society**”.

(iv) Eviction (cont'd)

- Consequently, the Jamaican government has often evicted squatters by demolishing their dwellings, thereby imposing suffering on victims, including children and the elderly, in the most inhumane manner
- Whereas squatting is illegal, it is nonetheless a reflection of the fact that the state has failed to provide some of its citizens with legal shelter, thereby breaching one of the UN basic human rights.
- Moreover, eviction has been characterized by violence and intimidation, but as environmentalist Barry Wade (2012: 7) has correctly pointed out: **“people have to live somewhere and everyone, no matter how poor, needs shelter”**. This supports a Jamaican squatter who, when being evicted in October 2008, shouted: **“we can’t live in the air or on the sea, we have to live on land somewhere”**.

Conclusions

- (i) Despite the historical roots of landlessness for many Jamaicans since the emancipation period, the Jamaican government (both colonial and post-colonial) has never implemented a comprehensive settlement policy. This, in turn, has led to an increasing number of squatters; currently estimated at 25% of the country's total population of 2.8 million.
- (ii) Government policies to redress the squatter problem in Jamaica have not been successful to date, leading to the urgent need for a comprehensive squatter management policy.

Recommendations

1. A census and mapping of all squatters in Jamaica should be taken, on the basis of which regularisation of tenure for squatters can be implemented
2. Squatters should be integrated into the wider Jamaican society, by providing them with all basic services that are available to other citizens.
3. To instil a sense of shared belonging to a broader Jamaican community, children from squatter communities should be afforded safe, non-violent and inclusive learning environment where lifelong skills are provided.

Recommendations (Cont'd)

4. Global Citizenship Education (addressing such themes as peace and human rights, a culture of non-violence, respect for diversity, tolerance, and inclusiveness) should be introduced into the educational curriculum of Jamaica at all levels in order to promote harmony in a country that is currently consumed by high levels of crime and violence, arising mostly from high levels of inequalities within the Jamaican society.



The End