

### Urban living for TCKs

According to WHO estimates, over half of the world's population live in major urban areas, and this will rise to 60% by 2030 and to 70% by 2050, based on current population growth patterns. Of those urban residents, half live in small to medium-sized cities between 100,000 and 500,000, and 10% in cities over 10 million. Most of this growth is taking place in emerging economies, although even in richer countries the trend is for continuing urban growth. Given that mission agencies are increasingly placing families in major urban centres, there is now a high proportion of TCKs living in cities. The days of the missionary "jungle child" or "bush kid" are not completely gone, but increasingly in our agencies, the percentage of them is going down.

There are several reasons for this shift towards families living in major cities. They include among others:

- New work in previously closed countries inevitably starts in the main cities
- Major cities offer many more business and teaching opportunities, meaning that workers are much more likely to have jobs there than in small towns and villages
- Cities offer many more facilities such as access to health care, sanitation, better housing, and schools. This access to schools is one of the most important deciding factors in deciding where the family should live in the host country. Major cities have both the better national schools and most of the international ones in any country including the large majority of recently-founded MK schools.

There are plenty of positive aspects to this.

In Senegal where we worked, all of the tribes and migrant groups into the country are represented in Dakar. It was possible to find a people group that workers are committed to there, without having to go to their village homeland. Often those who have moved to the city for study and/or work are more open to consider new ideas - including the Gospel. It is therefore no surprise that most of the larger churches in Senegal are in Dakar and that the number of churches there has grown considerably over the past 20 years. With limited numbers of workers available it often makes sense to start in major cities.

Better facilities and education options make it possible for families to stay in the country longer. Also, the social milieu of a big city, together with the presence of a large national or international school, is closer to that of the passport country. This is very different to living and working in a rural area. The urban setting has the potential to make re-entry to the passport country for further study less of a shock to the system.

It is important to highlight two problem areas for mission agencies placing families and TCKs in cities.

The first is the "urban magnet" effect, whereby in some countries a disproportionate number of workers are living in one or two main cities. For families this inevitably means the cities where the international MK schools are located. It is common to find that well over half of all mission workers are based in a capital city which accounts for only 10-20% of the country's population.

This concentrated effect is intensified by the fact that many mega-cities easily take several hours to cross, especially when jammed with traffic at rush hours. As a consequence, families need to live close enough to the school to be able to travel in daily. This means that smaller cities and towns, and even other areas of the mega-city itself, get little or no gospel outreach. Many field and team leaders are extremely concerned by this as they see the needs of the rest of the country, yet also see the need for the children's education.

There have been various efforts made to counter the 'MK school magnet' effect. These include the development of smaller satellite schools from the 'parent' MK school; the provision of on-line lessons for children in the country or immediate area; home education support from peripatetic (travelling) teachers or by skype (using the same curriculum), and regular intensive short courses in specialist subjects. There has been some success, but eventually many children also want the social life that the MK school offers, as their national friends from younger childhood become more and more committed to their own education, or leave school in order to work.

Another feature of urbanisation is a lifestyle with low levels of physical activity. In one developed country, the annual distance travelled on foot or by cycle decreased by 25% through the 1980s and a further 40% during the 1990s. Over that time there was no increase in physical education or other exercise time at school. Therefore urban life has become more and more sedentary for many children in this and similar countries.

There are various reasons why physical activity in children has dropped:

- Increasing levels of car use, even for very short journeys
- Greater perceived risk of injury to pedestrians and cyclists from road traffic
- Loss, or perceived loss, of safe spaces to play outside, including a greater perceived risk of harm from other children or dangerous adults
- Huge growth of screen-based leisure which is easy to access and habit forming - this includes time spent on social media sites
- Difficulty of access to affordable exercise facilities. The bigger the city, the more options there are, but they may not be easy to access when located in other parts of the city requiring a lengthy journey to reach them and they may be too expensive to use regularly.

The same patterns are found in major urban centres all across the world, and these affect our TCKs. It is not unusual to find TCKs who travel to school by car (even when they live within a kilometre), go home by car, do their homework, relax with on-screen activity of some kind, and then go to bed - only to repeat the same pattern the next day and the day after etc The only regular physical activity for some is during PE lessons. It is not difficult to see why some PE teachers comment on how unfit many TCKs in their school are.

This lower activity level has implications for physical, mental and social development. The most obvious problem is childhood obesity: for example, figures from the USA show that it has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the last 30 years, with over a third of all children there now being classed as overweight or obese.\* Other developed countries may have slightly lower rates, but the increase is very marked there too. Major cities in emerging economies - where so many of our TCKs live - are also experiencing a major rise in childhood obesity levels. This worldwide problem has become so marked that some have called it a "globesity" epidemic.

\*<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/obesity/facts.htm>

The potential benefits of physical activity to health are huge. If a medication existed which had a similar effect, it would be regarded as a 'wonder drug' or 'miracle cure'.

Sir Liam Donaldson, Chief Medical Officer 1998-2010

[http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/library/Policy\\_briefings/walktoschoolpolicypaperfinal.pdf](http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/library/Policy_briefings/walktoschoolpolicypaperfinal.pdf)

The benefits of regular physical exercise are well documented in terms of lower stress levels, better lung and cardiovascular function. better disease resistance and long-term lower risks of problems such as strokes, heart attacks and type 2 diabetes. For many children, the daily average of moderate exercise (such as power walking, jogging or bike riding) is probably 10 minutes or less, whereas the recommended level is 60 minutes per day.

What can be done? I am a member of a local running club and have no problem at all finding quiet country roads to run on when at home in our small town. However I travel often with the job and visit many major urban centres, where I observe a real problem. Some have parkland areas where exercise is possible, in others stadiums are open free of charge or at low cost to the public for routine exercise. There are some cities though where land values are so high and where so many people are crowded into a small area that the opportunities for outdoor exercise are very limited. In such places international schools often do not have much space for PE because of high property costs. There are also some cities that are so heavily polluted that strenuous outdoor exercise means breathing in health-damaging fumes from vehicles and factories, or dust from building sites. Some places have very poor law and order enforcement, making it dangerous to exercise outside.

Given the need for regular exercise, alternatives have to be found in dangerous, cramped or polluted cities. Indoor exercise at home with an

aerobics routine or something similar is one possibility. However, it is usually better to be part of a club, even just an informal group of friends, as this helps to keep up motivation. Gym membership, regular swimming or indoor group sport and games are some of the many possibilities. All of this takes a deliberate effort on the part of children with parental support.

There are also a few minor lifestyle changes that would help. When it is possible to walk to school, don't drive the children there. UK figures show that the average distance driven to school is around 2km\* - in many cases it is considerably less. As well as saving large amounts of money on fuel and car wear and tear, walking that distance would go a long way to providing the daily exercise needs, and boosting the child's alertness once in school.

In almost all major cities, high buildings with lifts/elevators are standard. Try the staircase instead of the lift to get the heart pumping harder. It's common to see people using the lift to go up or down just one or two floors and to view anyone using the stairs as old-fashioned, quaint or even eccentric. Changing the habits from this mindset would provide easy-to-arrange exercise for children and parents alike.

Do you see either of these two problems in your area?

On the 'urban magnet' effect - do you have experience of effective alternatives to living close to the international MK school? Have you seen good examples of support measures put in place by schools and/or agencies, to help families working and living away from the major city?

What positive steps are children taking to keep fit? Examples of good practice from parents and schools? What help from adults is useful?

## References

**\*<http://www.sustrans.org.uk/change-your-travel/children-and-families/school-run>**

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## Joan Cooper - Teaching MKs in Pokhara

*Our missions and MK schools constantly need teachers, other school staff and family tutors. Joan is someone who responded to that need a bit later in life as a well-experienced teacher and administrator. She answered a number of questions for us in the interview below. She is now in semi-retirement, but still very active in various forms of volunteer work, including serving as a pastoral deacon in her local church.*

**Q Could you tell us the basic outline of what you went to do and when.**

I went to Nepal with INF(International Nepal Fellowship) on two different occasions. The first was in 1988 - 1989 when I was a teacher at the Primary Study Centre in Pokhara. The second time was from 2000 - 2001; that time I was the PA to the Director at the headquarters also in Pokhara.

**Q What were the living conditions like?**

For language and orientation I lived in a "flat" on a compound. The toilet was up a hill 100 yards away! It was very basic but it was only for the first six weeks. After that I stayed in a variety of places as I was house-sitting for missionaries on home leave. These were generally of a good standard, sometimes the toilet was out on the balcony (a favourite place for spiders), but there were also squat toilets out in the garden. There was no bath in any of the homes. There was no television and little furniture in most of the houses and flats so I often sat on beanbags on the floor. Often the set up meant living in an upstairs flat with the landlord living on the ground floor. Power cuts were very frequent.

**Q What were the joys and positives of the experience?**

It was fantastic to be in what must be one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Pokhara is surrounded by the foothills of the Annapurnas with views of 3 of the world's highest mountains to the north. We had the rosy glow of sunsets, wonderful flowers, huge banana trees in the garden and all sorts of animals - birds, butterflies, geckoes running up the walls and so much more. We could also enjoy finding semiprecious stones in the river.

I really enjoyed working with families from many parts of the world and making deep friendships with fellow missionaries with whom I am still in regular contact today. During our conference time I played musical instruments together with worship musicians from many countries. In a Christian MK school context, we started and ended working day with prayer with colleagues.

I made friendships with lots of Nepalese. In particular I was able to work with young musicians to create worship tapes that which were widely distributed and used. It was a privilege to perform a nativity play outdoors at the leprosy hospital - it didn't seem like Christmas in that temperature!

Working in a smaller MK school often requires skills outside of the classroom. I remember well cooking 150 pancakes at school on Shrove Tuesday, and Easter breakfast for the children and parents.

Above all the best thing was knowing with certainty that I was in the place where God wanted me to be at that time.

**Q What were the challenges?**

One of the biggest issues was being surrounded by abject poverty, disease and disability every day. There were so many beggars and children living on the streets. Knowing about this by reading or seeing it on television is one thing, living with it as a daily reality is very different. Political instability thrived alongside poverty leading to Maoist threats and student riots among other things. I had to escape tear gas being thrown when caught in one riot.

There were times when homesickness kicked in. There were few landline phones, and it was pre-widespread internet so we relied on air mail letters. It was disappointing and discouraging when there were no letters from home. I had to cope with sitting on the floor for up to three hours at church - only the old ladies were allowed to sit on the one row of chairs at the back! Learning the Nepali language to cope there and in other situations also wasn't easy!

I was less than enthusiastic about some of the animal life there. Snakes came in all shapes and sizes - little ones slithering across my open toed sandals, large fat ones the width of the road, and at times a bag full of snakes carried by a snake charmer! On top of this we had huge spiders, wild boar in the hedges at night, and leopards coming down into the town at night to steal dogs.

Lastly there was no cheese as we know it - only yak's cheese

**Q What do you feel that you have learned from your missions experience?**

I had to trust God for the demands of each day and for His provision.

**Q What kind of advice would you give to others who wish to go?**

If you go it will be in your weakness and in His strength.

*Educare is a free e-magazine for TCKs, parents of TCKs, and any organisations, family members or supporters concerned for TCK welfare. It is ministry of WEC International.*