

# What Makes A Third World Country?

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What does it mean to be a third world country? Our recent trip to South America gave us an answer.  
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The term "Third World" was invented by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952. Although it had political connotations at that time, it now simply refers to underdeveloped countries. It is typically thought to signify poverty more than anything else, but after our recent trip to South America, my wife and I have come to understand it differently.

{bot\_wrgoogle}My wife Ana was born and raised in Ecuador, and remembers using buckets of water to take a shower, because the city where she lived as a child didn't have running water in all parts. When we were in Ecuador in October of 2007, we were disappointed to learn that thirty years later, there still isn't running water in many towns. This is particularly sad given the economic boom that has taken place in the country in the last six years.

## Third World Equals A Lack Of Basic Services

We bought a small piece of property in San Vicente, Ecuador, a hundred yards from the ocean. Ana's grandmother is building a small house on it, and we were curious to see how it was going. We were surprised to see that it was almost complete. However, the appearance of faucets and a nice shower can be misleading. I turned on the shower and nothing happened.

Relatives that live nearby explained that the city had water only once every week or two for a few hours (Thursday mornings, we discovered). Fortunately, my wife's grandmother had installed a large cistern that held thousands of gallons of water. When the city water came on, this was filled, and easily lasted until the next time the water was on. But she was still using buckets to bring that water into the house for showers and dish washing.

We bought a pump and paid to have it installed. Now there was running water all the time, except for the occasional hour when the electricity went out. But pumps are stolen quickly we were told, even from walled communities, so we had to have a cement pump house built, with a locking gate. Problem solved.

This got us to thinking. I have never been a fan of higher taxes, but that is exactly what came to mind as a necessity. Our property taxes there are something like \$25 per year, which seemed nice at first, but consider the thousands of houses here, most with an expensive cistern, a pump (or a gravity-fed system with a tank), and a pump house. If the taxes were a little higher, could the city have a water system that worked, thus avoiding the necessity for all these things? Of course, this would also mean that the poorest residents, who don't have a cistern and pump, could have running water as well.

The roads were another thing that amazed us. Some politician had come through and build nice new roads almost ten years earlier, in both San Vicente and nearby Bahia. But since that time not one penny had been spent repairing them. The result? Traffic goes slow and cars drive all over both sides of the roads to avoid the worst holes. I'm sure there is expensive damage caused to cars as well. Apparently, no thought was given to the cost of maintenance - or any plan for it - when the roads were built.

I should point out that the water and power is always on in Guayaquil or in Quito, the capitol of Ecuador. In these cities, the streets are maintained, and people are buying cars and everything else with easy credit, just like in the United States. The shopping malls are actually nicer than anything I have seen in the U.S. In other words, there is money here. In fact, there are even new subdivisions popping up all over, with more people than ever buying new homes due to easy financing.

But this development is very uneven, to say the least. The smaller cities still have poor roads, problems with basic police service (don't leave clothes drying on the line overnight, we were told), and no regular running water. This lack of basic services, we decided, is what really sets third world countries apart from the rest.

Interestingly, everywhere where private companies are involved, things are going great. This means wonderful malls,

new ways to buy cars and homes, and even some nice private parks. Internet service is as fast in the big cities of Ecuador as anywhere in the world.

Anything that is done by the government, on the other hand, is done poorly. This includes roads, parks, water and sewage systems, and anything else they touch. Perhaps the first thing that a third world country like Ecuador needs to do is start contracting these things out to private companies. Even the poor of Ecuador who can't afford a thousand dollars to have a cistern and pump can afford to pay a bit more in taxes to have basic services.

Our experience in Ecuador, and what we have read about other such "poor" countries that are actually rich in many resources, has made us reconsider what it means to be a third world country, and what causes this state of affairs. It is a lack of basic services that more accurately defines such countries, it seems, and it is bad government above all that is the root cause of the problems.

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