



Slums and Slum Upgrading

What are Slums?

What is slum upgrading?

Policy Framework

Slum Upgrading

The word “slum” is often used to describe informal settlements within cities that have inadequate housing and squalid, miserable living conditions. They are often overcrowded, with many people crammed into very small living spaces.

These settlements lack basic municipal services such as water, sanitation, waste collection, storm drainage, street lighting, paved sidewalks and roads for emergency access. Most also do not have easy access to schools, hospitals or public places for the community to gather. Many slums have been unserviced and unrecognised for long periods, over 20 years in some cities.

Like all informal settlements, housing in slums is built on land that the occupant does not have a legal claim to and without any urban planning or adherence to zoning regulations. In addition, slums are often areas where many social indicators are on a downward slide; for example, crime and unemployment are on the rise.

All slums are not the same, and some provide better living conditions than others. Likewise, slum dwellers are not a homogeneous population, but a diverse group of people with different interests, means and backgrounds.

Slums are also a significant economic force. In many cities, as much as 60 percent of employment is in the informal sector of the urban population.

Today, more than one billion people in the world live in slums. In the developing world, one out of every three people living in cities lives in a slum.

UN-HABITAT defines a slum household as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following:

1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions.
2. Sufficient living space, which means not more than three people sharing the same room.
3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price.
4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people.
5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.

Why do slums develop?

Slums are not a new phenomenon. They have been part of the history of most cities, particularly in the early years of urbanisation and industrialisation as populations boomed. Slums are generally the only type of settlement affordable and accessible to the poor in cities, where competition for land and profits is intense.

There are two main reasons why slums develop: population growth and governance.

Population growth

Countries around the world are urbanising rapidly as more people migrate from rural areas to the cities and natural population growth continues to occur. Today, more than half the world's population resides in urban areas. More than 90 percent of this urban growth is taking place in the developing world.

Urban migration happens for a number of reasons:

The pushing and pulling forces of migration. Some people migrate because they are pushed out of their place of origin by factors such as natural disasters or sustained ecological changes. Others are pulled to a new destination by better job prospects, education, health facilities, or freedom from restrictive social or cultural realities.

Low incomes from agriculture. Most people in rural areas work in the agricultural sector, which is highly dependent on weather. Also, rural land is limited, its fertility sometimes low or declining, land holdings are small, farm debts are high, and many households have become landless. As a result, overall rural incomes are low.

Better job prospects. In comparison with rural areas, urban areas offer dramatically increased job opportunities. In addition, because urban cultures are often less constrained than those in villages, cities can also offer greater prospects of upward social mobility.

People know what cities can offer them. Most migrants make a deliberate choice to stay or leave in rural areas. Improved transport, communications and links with earlier migrants have all made rural populations much more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of urban life, especially regarding job opportunities and housing.

Urban migration is often a survival strategy for rural households. Sometimes, rural households split into several groups located in different places—rural areas, small towns, and big cities—in order to diversify their sources of income and be less vulnerable to economic downturns.

Governance

Another reason slums develop is bad governance. Governments often fail to recognise the rights of the urban poor and incorporate them into urban planning, thereby contributing to the growth of slums.

In addition, many countries simply cannot respond to rapid urbanisation quickly enough. People are coming to cities far faster than the planning process can incorporate them. Often, they find their own land and build a shack before the government has a chance to learn of their existence.

The attitude of a government towards urbanisation is also an important component. Some governments take a hostile approach to urbanisation. They believe that if they provide urban services to the poor, it will attract urbanisation and cause the slums to grow. The problem with this view is that very few people come to the city for water or services—they come looking for work.

In other cases, governments take more of a passive approach to urbanisation. They either do not have the planning tools to deal with the rapid urbanisation that is happening, or the tools in place are not sufficiently responsive to the reality on the ground.

What can be done to prevent the development of new slums?

There are basic things a government can do to prevent new slums from developing. One is to recognise that urbanisation is going to happen. Sometimes governments believe that adopting alternative policies, such as focusing on rural development, will stop urbanisation. This approach is rarely effective.

Once governments accept the reality of urban growth, the next step is to plan for it and determine where the new residents will live. Authorities should identify land and plan for its settlement even if money is not available for urban services. Once people settle on that land and feel that they have a right to live there, they will begin investing in it.

Over time, the area will upgrade incrementally.

What do we mean by land rights or secure tenure?

Land tenure is the right of an individual or group to occupy or use a piece of land. It can be via ownership or lease.

Land rights is about confidence in the future. People who are safe from eviction with a sense of long-term stability—whether they own the land or not—are much more likely to invest in their housing or community. Over time, these incremental improvements by residents can upgrade the entire community.

There must also be a clear legal framework behind land rights. Often, slum dwellers face significant obstacles to owning or obtaining the rights to land. Land markets are frequently dysfunctional, and inappropriate standards or regulations make it nearly impossible for local authorities to find enough well-located, serviceable and affordable land for the residents of overcrowded slum settlements.

In addition, control of land is often connected to political patronage and corruption, making it difficult to get clear information about land ownership, use and availability.

What do we mean by citizenship rights?

Slum dwellers are part of the urban populace, with the same democratic rights to environmental health and basic living conditions as all residents. These rights are often limited by a government's ability to realise them.

The process of realising the rights of slum dwellers hinges on their capacity to engage actively with the government. It is a question of creating a space where slum dwellers and the government can engage in a dialogue about slums and upgrading their communities.

Through dialogue, the parties can begin to lay out their rights and responsibilities and design programmes that communities are able to respond to. This is an important part of the process; if communities don't understand their responsibilities or a slum upgrading programme is beyond the reach of the slum dwellers, the programme has a much lower chance of success.



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Slums and Slum Upgrading
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