

THE CHALLENGE OF SLUMS

AN OVERVIEW OF PAST
APPROACHES TO TACKLE IT

Cities Alliance
Cities Without Slums

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Cover: People walking along an open sewer in a slum in Africa
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key Messages	4
1 Introduction	6
2 Setting the Stage	7
3 Understanding the Slum Challenge	14
4 History of Project-based Approaches to Slums	17
5 The Need for Systematic Approaches	20
6 Conclusion	21
Bibliography	13





KEY MESSAGES



This review is part of the Global Informality Paper Series and outlines the current state of the practitioner literature on slum upgrading programs. Given the scope of such undertaking, three different papers have been developed. This paper discusses important aspects required for the more detailed debate reproduced in the two other papers, one reviewing the international experience on slum upgrading programs, the other one the national and citywide approaches.



Slums are complex realities and differ greatly around the world. The lived realities of slums, informal settlements, and inadequate housing also differ as to slums between countries, within nations, and in cities.



This paper provides an overview of the definition, underlying reason of slums, and the scale of the problem. Slum upgrading is situated in a historical context by outlining different government approaches to informal settlements, including benign neglect, clearance, relocation sites and services, and the first generation of slum upgrading programs.



Past attempts have struggled to adequately address the challenge and diversity of slums both in terms of scale as well as depth. Nevertheless, a broader learning curve can be observed from an international vantage point. The earliest approaches consisted of neglect and destruction.



While a broader learning curve can be traced within past approaches to slums, it also became apparent that these manifestations are not a temporary phenomenon but a structural feature of urbanization that requires more structural approaches and policy reforms to address their underlying causes.



This paper is part of a larger review series on key topics of informality published in 2021. We encourage the readership to also engage with the review of slum upgrading programs, National approaches to slums, informal land markets, informal rental solutions, informal economy, the impact of COVID-19 on informal settlements, and informality concepts.

Cities Alliance - Global Programme on Informality

Two billion informal workers and one billion slum dwellers worldwide remain exposed to hostile policy environments and the sharpest impacts of poverty, social exclusion, climate change, and inadequate public health systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with already insufficient public service provision have exacerbated the vulnerability of low-income communities, elderly, children and women. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed long overdue structural problems derived from inequality and sets the momentum for a radical shift in the way cities are planned and managed. It is no longer acceptable that a major part of the world's population does not have access to minimum safe living conditions to deal with the pandemic. Thus, there is a strong need to address slums and informality on a permanent basis, with a fair and equitable allocation of resources, services, and land and public spaces.

Cities Alliance has been working to both highlight and improve the living conditions of slum dwellers for two decades, and can play a relevant role promoting this radical shift, legitimated by its institutional trajectory and robust membership.

The Global Programme on Informality seeks to build a coalition to globally overcome the political, knowledge and resource gaps for addressing informality of land, labour and citizenship at scale, on a permanent basis, with three specific objectives:

- 1) Mobilise Cities Alliance members, their constituencies and development partners to promote joint efforts and increased knowledge on addressing and harnessing informality and responding to COVID-19 in cities.
- 2) Identify key knowledge gaps and produce knowledge products that distil the results and learning from the dialogues and peer-learning and disseminate them to a global audience.
- 3) Facilitate a joint narrative and Cities Alliance coalition to deliver an advocacy and outreach campaign to a global audience to raise awareness on effective COVID-19 responses and demonstrate solutions to informality.





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1 INTRODUCTION

Informality is a complex topic with a long history.

Five decades ago, a study in Ghana resulted in the first comprehensive discussion on informality in a development context.¹ Hart coined the term informal economy that became an important concept to describe national economies in the developing world.² The idea of informality has been used in different knowledge domains and discourses. Several have made important contributions to improving our understanding of the Global South's urbanization processes: informal economy, informal housing, informal land markets, informal law, and informal institutions.

This paper is part of a larger review series on informality launched by Cities Alliance. Since its creation in 1999, this multi-institutional platform has been at the forefront of the debate on slums, slum upgrading, and the role of informality in cities of the Global South. Cities Alliance has recently launched the Global Program on Informality. The overall aim is to fundamentally alter how knowledge is created and shared on informal settlements and related topics. One of its objectives is to build a coalition to globally overcome the political and geographic as well as knowledge- and resource-related gaps for addressing the issue of informality in housing, land, economy, and citizenship at scale, on a permanent basis.

The “Practice Review of Informality” is embedded in the **Global Program on Informality** and proposes a new take on cross-sectoral knowledge sharing. Each paper addresses an important topic of informality by reviewing the literature produced by Cities Alliance, its members, and other important knowledge stakeholders whenever needed. Developed in close collaboration with the restructuring

of the knowledge library, several elements have been developed to enable better access and more targeted impact. The paper and its content have been tagged to unlock the potential of text-based online searches to make the content more accessible.

Our world is changing at an unprecedented pace.

This also imposes new demands on knowledge creation. The authors of this paper perceive the paper as a current snapshot of the practitioner's knowledge on the given topic. We encourage the readers to get in touch with us for further suggestions and comments. This feedback is very valuable to us and may include, among others, specific references to new projects and case studies, missing concerns, and proposals for future review topics. Interested parties can also sign up for the mailing list of the Global Programme on Informality. The papers shall be updated regularly (traceable in the version index) to keep pace with the evolving knowledge of the Global Community of Practice.

by Anthony Boanada-Fuchs, Vanessa Boanada Fuchs, Anaclaudia Rossbach and Susana Rojas Williams

1 – Hart, 1973.
2 – Chen, 2012.



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2 SETTING THE STAGE

Slums are complex realities and differ greatly around the world. While it is impossible to do justice to the range of living realities in a short review paper, it is important to stress the need to look behind concepts and definitions. In this section, we provide a more differentiated understanding of slums by highlighting that it is not confined to the Global South and by emphasizing the conceptual differences between informal settlements and inadequate housing.

Slums are a recurring feature of urbanization³ and “represent one of the most enduring faces of poverty, inequality, exclusion and deprivation.”⁴ While their manifestation is almost synonymous with the Global South, substandard housing is not entirely confined to this world region.⁵ Slums are also not the only form of inadequate housing which are the living reality of 1,6 billion residents or 20% of the global population.⁶

Important: For our discussion down below, it is important to emphasize the difference between slums, informal -, and inadequate housing.

Slums are not synonymous with informal housing. The common understanding of informal settlements is that they lack tenure security, access to basic infrastructure and services, required permits, and often conflict with current planning and building regulations.⁷ The concept of informal settlements stresses the process (see, for

example, the idea of self-help) and a lived reality outside and beyond the reach of formal structures. While we shall explore the complexity of the ideas attached to informality in a separate paper, it is important to highlight its differences to slums.

While there is a great overlap between the living realities in slums and informal settlements, they are not completely congruent. Some slums are not part of informal housing, and not all informal housing solutions have to be necessarily a slum. Chawls in India or Cortiços in Brazil are examples of squalid formal housing that are internationally classified as slums. Some informal settlements resemble formal neighbourhoods and owe their informal status due to conflicts with zoning laws and/or building regulations.

“**Informal settlements can be a form of real estate speculation for all income levels of urban residents, affluent and poor. Among them, slums are the poorest and most dilapidated form of informal settlements.**”⁸

3 – Cities Alliance, no date.

4 – UN-Habitat, 2020, p. 25.

5 – Estimates indicate that of the total one billion slum dwellers worldwide in 2018, 0,1% resided in the Global North, UN-Habitat Global Indicator Database 2020.

6 – UN-Habitat, 2020, p.xvii.

7 – UN-Habitat, 2018, p.12.

8 – UN-Habitat, 2019, p.12.

There is also informal urbanization of wealth, where elites use their influence to flout regulations and reap development benefits (higher densities, construction in protected areas, tax evasion). Such transgressions are often “whitened” by politics while the informality of poverty receives less favourable treatment in the form of repressive measures.⁹ The same dynamics can be observed for the informal economy, but in contrast, we miss comprehensive estimates on a global level on informal housing.

Slums also differ from inadequate housing as the latter is a larger category. The right to adequate housing is recognized as an international human right as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. This right has been recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and further characterized by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the general comments No. 4 (1991) on the right to adequate housing and No. 7 (1997) on forced evictions.

The right to housing contains freedoms (including the protection against forced evictions and the right to determine where to live), entitlements, and conditions to be met.¹⁰ The concept of inadequate housing is broader than the concept of slums and includes concerns for location, accessibility, cultural adequacy, and affordability. While several defining features of adequate housing are difficult to measure, a recent study of UN-Habitat, the New York University, and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy showed that informal housing was the only affordable option in the analyzed cities.¹¹



9 – blackened, see grey city concept Oren Yiftachel, 2009.

10 – see text box 1 and UN-Habitat, 2014, p.3.

11 – UN-Habitat, 2016; Shlomo Angel et al., 2012.

Text Box 1: Definition of Adequate Housing

"For housing to be adequate, it must, *at a minimum*, meet the following criteria:

- *Security of tenure*: housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats.
- *Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure*: housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating, lighting, food storage or refuse disposal.
- *Affordability*: housing is not adequate if its cost threatens or compromises the occupants' enjoyment of other human rights.

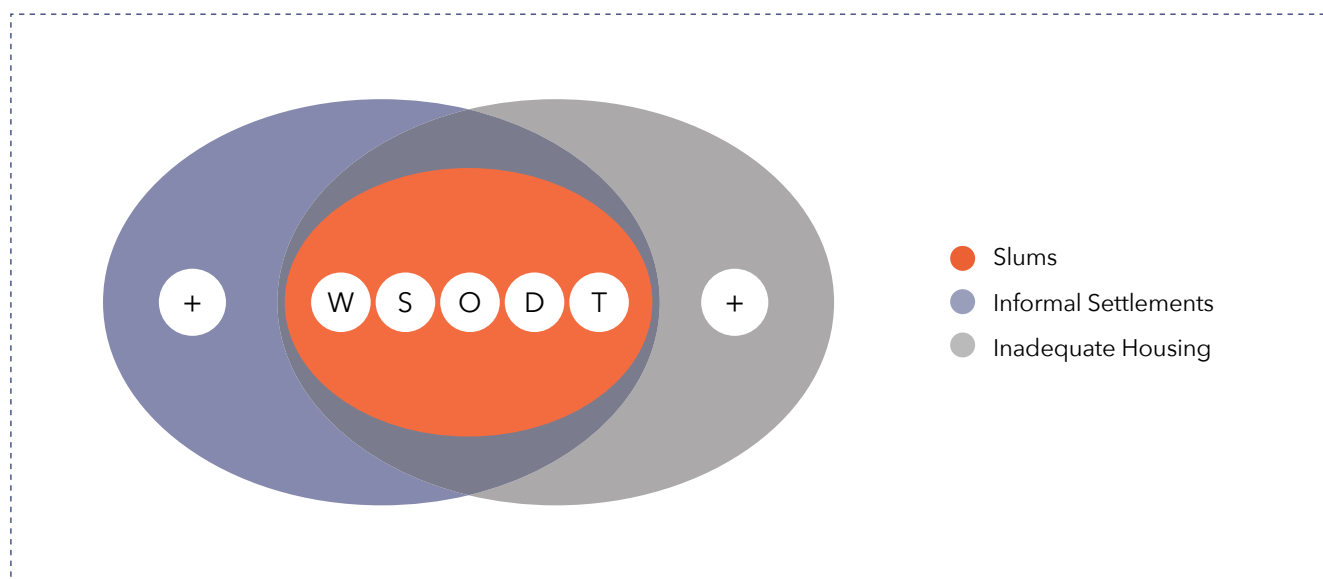
- *Habitability*: housing is not adequate if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space, as well as protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, other threats to health and structural hazards.

- *Accessibility*: housing is not adequate if the specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not taken into account.

- *Location*: housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas.

- *Cultural adequacy*: housing is not adequate if it does not respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity."¹²

Figure 1: Relation of Slums, Informal Settlements and Inadequate Housing¹³



Informal settlements and inadequate housing overlap imperfectly. The different intersections will be helpful in the discussion below to situate slum upgrading programs and point to their strengths and limitations. Another important insight deriving from a differentiated view on the three living realities is that there is no causal relation between informal settlements and slums or inadequate housing. Furthermore, the difference between the three can be very subtle, requiring detailed data and knowledge on legislation and local standards.

Informal settlements become and remain to be slums through the denial of accessing the benefits of urbanity, depriving neighbourhoods and their residents of access to the city and its public goods and services. Overcrowding in informal settlements is a direct sign of a lack of suitable alternatives. The concentration of poverty and the prevalence of non-durable materials result from exclusion to markets and opportunity structures.

National and local governments are the central agent of change as they have the power to draw divisions lines between informal settlements and slums -their action (and inaction) can cause informal settlements to turn into

12 – UN-Habitat, 2014, p.3.

13 – Figure from UN-Habitat, 2018, p.5.

dense pockets of poverty, producing a downward spiral of “slumification.” Even consolidated informal settlements are not beyond the reach of such forces.¹⁴ By contrast, political will and commitment paired with reducing formal hurdles, and right-sizing improvement packages can enable informal settlements to become fully-fledged city neighbourhoods.

Important: Before outlining the different approaches of national and local governments addressed at informal settlements, we shall situate the scale and breadth of the slum challenge.



Dominic Chavez © World Bank

2.1 Definition of Slums

“**A slum is a contiguous settlement where the inhabitants are characterized as having inadequate housing and basic services. A slum is often not recognised and addressed by the public authorities as an integral or equal part of the city.**”¹⁵

Ideas about slums are broad, there are many local understandings of slums, and there is no universally accepted definition. A common characteristic is that slums are housing units or neighbourhoods that are below a set standard.¹⁶ According to UN-Habitat, slum households are characterized as households that suffer from one or more of the following five ‘household deprivations’: insecure residential status, poor structural quality of housing, insufficient living area, inadequate access to safe water, and inadequate access to sanitation infrastructure.¹⁷ These dimensions are intimately connected as one often leads to the other.

Insecure Residential Status

Slum-dwellers commonly live on plots of land that do not legally belong to them. The urban poor are not only the lowest socio-economic layer of the city but also find themselves often marginalized in decision-making processes and need to content themselves with land parcels that do not have any competing interests. Such parcels are generally risky areas situated on slopes, close to waterways, or transportation infrastructures. Even on such land (and much more on other occupied lands), slum residents are not protected from eviction.¹⁸

14 – Azhar, Buttrely, and Ward, 2021.

15 – UN-Habitat, 2003, p.8.

16 – UN-Habitat, 2015, p.10.

17 – UN-Habitat, 2018, p.8.

18 – UN-Habitat, 2018, p.11.

Important: It is important to note, property titles are not a precondition to ensure tenure security. The risk of evictions can be eliminated or at least considerably reduced by providing and recognizing documents that confirm the residence of slum dwellers and their moral claim to a specific place.

Poor Quality of Housing

The quality of housing construction is important to fulfil its shelter function, as to say to protect occupants from rain, heat, cold and humidity, other threats to health and structural hazards.¹⁹ The structure of a house is considered durable if it fulfils certain location- and construction-based parameters, including being built on a non-hazardous plot (not near a toxic waste, dangerous right of way, on a flood plain or steep slopes) and uses permanent materials and is not in a dilapidated state.²⁰

There is evidence that investment into housing structures are strongly related to tenure security.²¹ Slums with low tenure security tend to be dominated by make-shift shelters with non-permanent materials. In contrast, slums with high tenure security can be subject to considerable consolidation and horizontal and vertical densification. "Over time, these incremental improvements by residents can upgrade the entire community."²²

Insufficient Living Area

Insufficient living areas is a serious problem in slums. Estimates indicated that 60% of all slum residents suffer from overcrowding.²³ Slum housing often exceeds an occupation of three people sharing one room, the standard for adequate living space.²⁴ No specific space standard for rooms has been set, but UN-Habitat states in a more recent publication 4 sqm as an absolute minimum.²⁵ This translates into less than 1,5 sqm per person and reflects the space required for sleeping on the floor. This number also stands in contrast to space standards of slum upgrading and affordable housing projects.²⁶

Inadequate Access to Safe Water as well as Sanitation

Access to adequate water and sanitation have important additional benefits in improving the lives (time-saving) and health (water-borne diseases) of slum residents. Access to WASH infrastructure remains a challenge. There are still 2,4 billion people who do not have access to improved sanitation, and another 2 billion are suffering from water stress.²⁷ The Asian continent is home to two-thirds of the global water-deprived population. Physical basic infrastructure is the backbone of many slum upgrading programs and might represent the only component of the intervention.

Improved drinking water includes access to piped water (to a dwelling, plot, or yard), a public tap, protected spring, rainwater collection, borehole, and bottled water if the sourced water is improved.²⁸ Improved sanitation includes flush or pour-flush toilets, latrines connected to a sewer, septic tanks, a pit, ventilated improved pit latrines, pit latrines with cover, and composting toilets/latrines.²⁹



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19 – UN-Habitat, 2014, p.4.

20 – UN-Habitat, 2003.

21 – see also P. Shah et al., 2015, p.9; Payne and Durand-Lasserve, 2012, p.45.

22 – Cities Alliance, no date, p.2.

23 – Mboup, 2004.

24 – UN-Habitat, 2018, p. 10.

25 – ACP and UN-Habitat, 2016, p.3.

26 – Based on a sample of 25 affordable housing programs around the world, an average unit size of 35 sqm was calculated.

27 – UN-Habitat, 2018, p. 3.

28 – UN-Habitat, 2018, p. 15.

29 – ACP and UN-Habitat, 2016, p.3



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Other Forms of Deprivation

While the above dimensions are used to define slums, the deprivation is not limited to insufficient space, non-permanent structures, and a lack of WASH infrastructure. The exclusion of slums from other parts of the city has many dimensions. Slum-dwellers often lack access to decent jobs, educational and skill training offers, as well as to social benefits and health facilities. Inaccessible or unaffordable transport options are suppressing access to economic opportunities³⁰ and represent an important root cause of slums. Other usually absent basic services are solid waste collection systems and electricity networks.³¹ Open public space and community facilities are also scarce in slum settlements, and such areas might be subject to strong air pollution and water and soil contamination.

Recent attempts to assess the multiple deprivations of slums propose to combine different ways of data collection (census, surveys, field-based mapping, human image interpretation, and machine image classification) in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of slum realities. Case study research revealed a wide gap between deprived areas and officially recognized slums.³²

30 – Shah et al., 2015, p. 7.

31 – UN-Habitat, 2003, p.85.

32 – Thomson et al., 2020, p. 80.

33 – Baskin, 2020.

34 – UN-Habitat, 2020, p.12.

35 – Gilbert, 2007.

36 – Huchzermeyer, 2011.

37 – Thomson et al., 2020.

Limitation of Current Definitions

“While the UN-Habitat definition has proven to be operational, it does not capture the lived reality fully and development trajectories of slums”³³

The current definition of UN-Habitat, albeit universally used in the international debate on slums, is not without shortcomings. The aim to establish an international standard to draw the line between slums and non-slum housing fails to recognize the large lived and physical diversity within the category.³⁴ Living standards differ greatly between regions, and what is seen as unacceptable might be considered a housing option in other parts of the world.³⁵ The flattening of the diversity in data aggregation eclipses the specific characteristics of settlement and their distinct possibilities for improvement.³⁶ Furthermore, the underlying data is incomplete and subject to ongoing criticism e.g., as slums are categorized as areas, they may also include formal housing structures but also deprivations are not confined within slum settlements.³⁷

Criticism of the Term and its Power

The term slum has a negative connotation in many parts of the world. The origin of the word slum can be traced to the 19th century and the societal changes of industrialization. While the meaning of slums changed over time, the ideas attached to the term are connected to the notion of marginality, sub-standardness, and even crime.³⁸ With the creation of Cities Alliance and the UN-Habitat Global report on slums, the term slum entered mainstream development discourses, a fact that has been criticized by academia.³⁹ Such views base their arguments on the origin of the term “cloaked in negativity”⁴⁰ and its association to squalor and dirt but also by examples of how governments have adopted the idea of “Cities without Slums.”

The governments of India, Kenya, and Zimbabwe⁴¹ and South Africa⁴² have misused the term to roll out large-scale slum demolitions. In the 2000s, it is estimated that five million people suffered from forced evictions every year.⁴³ The justification of such interventions has also shifted from health consideration to the need for (urban) development that might be hiding deeper investment interests in land and property (see literature on the financialization of urban development).

The term slum “is a very sticky word. It’s short, simple and difficult to replace. As a result, it is, more often than not, misused in the context of cities in developing countries”.⁴⁴ With the progress of the MDGs and the increasing advocacy of slum upgrading projects, the term can hardly be replaced. Nevertheless, it is important to keep the origin and limitations of the term in mind, also in the context of the more recent debate on shifting the focus to multiple-deprived urban areas.



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38 – UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 9.

39 – Gilbert, 2014.

40 – Gilbert, 2014, p.702.

41 – Gilbert, 2014, p.702.

42 – Huchzermeyer, 2011, p.94.

43 – UN-Habitat and GLTN, 2008, p.4.

44 – Mumtaz, 2001, p.2.



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3 UNDERSTANDING THE SLUM CHALLENGE

3.1 The Size of the Challenge

“COVID-19 has magnified the deficiencies of how we manage our cities, but has also given us a unique chance to rethink, replan and redesign.”⁴⁵

Considerable advancements have been achieved improving the lives of slum dwellers since the translation of the Cities Alliance Action Plan into the MDG Target 7D. The initial target of 100 million slum dwellers has been over-achieved and terms of time and scale. Unfortunately, urban growth outpaced the progress in slum improvements, and this success did not manage to reverse the global trend.

Worldwide, the total slum population increased from 723 million in 1990 to 817 million in 2000 to 928 in 2014. A similar worrisome development is the recent increase of both absolute (from 928 to 1.034 million) and relative slum occurrence (from 23% to 24%) between 2014 and 2018.⁴⁶ The impact of COVID-19 and its recovery still needs to unfold fully. Still, it is estimated that half a million people will fall into poverty⁴⁷ which should provide a considerable push for informal urbanization.

The manifestation of slums is also regionally very different. By far the largest concentration can be found in Sub-

Saharan Africa (56,2%) while the rest of the Global South ranges between 20,9 and 31,2%. Two out of three slum dwellers reside in Asia (ibid). There are more than 40 countries (of 122) where slums concentrate more than half of the urban residents, and six countries (all in Sub-Saharan Africa) have more than 80% slum dwellers. In South Sudan (96,5%), the Central African Republic (95,4%), and Sudan (92,6%), there is almost no alternative to substandard housing in the country (UNStats 2015 figures).

Important: Informal is the normal.⁴⁸ This is not only an important political statement but also puts into question current approaches to tackling informality (such as slum upgrading). Is it feasible for a country to improve or rebuild half or even 90% of its existing building stock?

3.2 The Breadth of the Challenge

Slums differ around the world and within countries and cities. From the section on definitions, we emphasized the difference between slums, informal housing, and inadequate housing. But slums as a category also hide a large heterogeneity in living realities. Every slum is different and housing realities even within a slum settlement can be very diverse, covering different tenure situations (rental housing, legalized owners, recognized owners, informal occupants, and homeless) state of consolidations and socio-economic realities.

Slums are seldom occupied by a homogeneous group of people, may consist of various cultural communities with different traditions, ethnicities, or religious beliefs. Interventions in slums need to acknowledge the diversity of needs, also by considering gender and age lines. A nuanced understanding of slums is important to provide targeted and effective interventions that are tailored to the demands of the community.

45 – Sethi and Creutzig, 2021, p.1.

46 – UN-Habitat Urban Indicators Database, 2020.

47 – Sethi and Creutzig, 2021, p.2.

48 – Cities Alliance, 2019, p.9.

Density contributing factor of slum formations. As a defining feature of slums is human density, many older and centrally located settlements are very densely built. In Dharavi and Kibera, slum upgrading faces great challenges due to the lack of space.⁴⁹

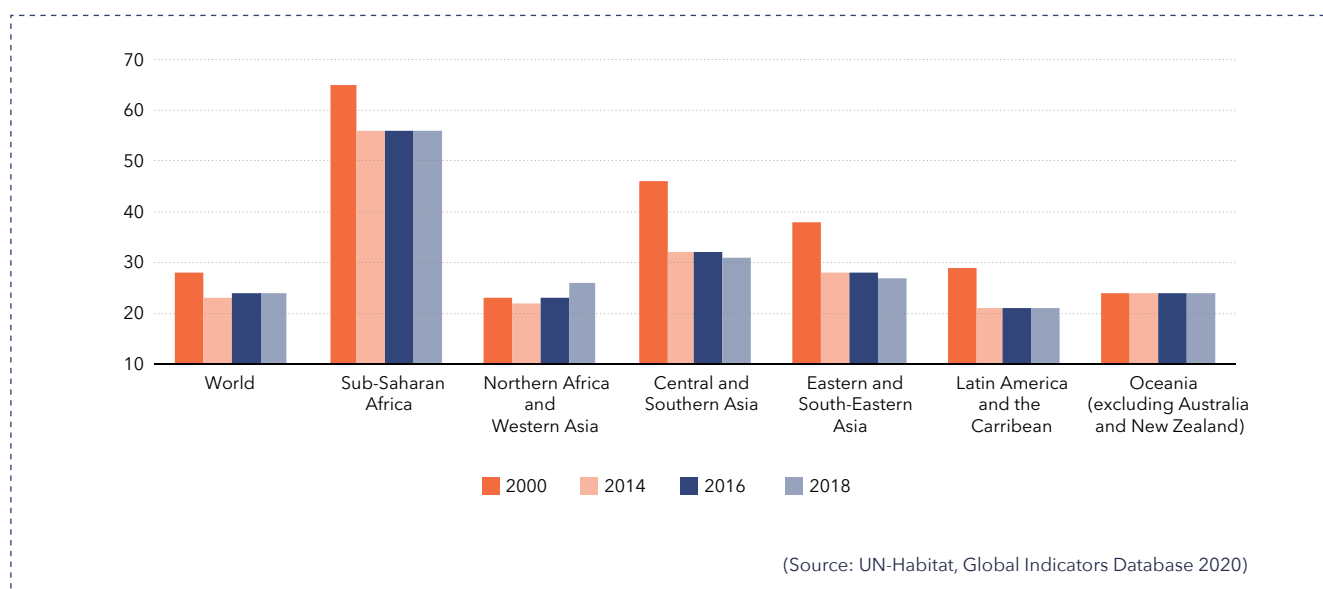
Slums have been also differentiated based on their socio-economic dynamics. A highly influential distinction was developed by Charles Stoke, who differentiated between “slums of hope” and “slums of despair”.⁵⁰ While the author used this distinction to highlight psychological differences among slum dwellers, the two types are nowadays more generally understood as internalized views of residents based on ongoing settlement dynamics.⁵¹ While the classification provokes strong images, no attempt

could be identified to translate such impressions into more concrete evaluation frameworks.

The Global Report on Human Settlements of 2003, which still represents the most comprehensive document on slums, uses such a basic framework to differentiate between declining areas and progressing settlements but at the same time enlarges it by co-considering the (i) origin and age (historical city-centre, slum estates, consolidating informal settlements), (ii) location (central, scattered slum islands, peripheral) and the (iii) size and scale (large, medium-sized, and small) as additional parameters.⁵²

Inner-city slums can look the longest occupation history, are often characterized by a diverse set of housing

Figure 2: Percentage of urban population living in slums



options, a vivid informal rental market, and may feature several government interventions. Inner-city slums are often very dense and characterized by old building stock.

Slums estates are worker housing units built by industrial companies and public estates built by the government that falls victim to unaddressed maintenance issues or restrictive legislation (rent controls) and become part of the substandard housing stock of a city.

Urban villages are historically grown rural settlements that were incorporation into urban areas through their spatial growth. Urban villages are often subject to the different regulatory mechanisms that can lead to considerable

densifications, as seen in China and India. In combination with lack of infrastructure, such areas are often part of the substandard housing stock.

Squatter settlements are the most important component of the slums⁵³ and have emerged at the periphery of most cities of the Global South. While the land may be occupied spontaneously more often, these invasions are highly coordinated and involve middlemen, public administration and political circles, and market actors. Initially, squatting was often a free option to settle down in an urban area, however, it increasingly ceased to be.⁵⁴ While we lack comprehensive data, it is safe to assume that nowadays, free informal options are a rare exception in the context of heightened urban pressures and greater market interests.

Illegal settlements and subdivisions are a sub-form from squatter settlements as the land is occupied with the original owner’s consent. The access to plots follows

49 – Satterthwaite, 2012, p.209.

50 – Stokes, 1962.

51 – see for example UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 11.

52 – UN-Habitat, 2003.

53 – UN-Habitat, 2003, p.82.

54 – Baross and Baken, 1990.



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market logic but misses, in contrast to their formal counterpart, registration, and often documentation. This form of informal land supply for housing is important in areas with customary land ownership, such as in many African countries and considerably outstrip the planning and service provision capacities of local governments.

These different slum types differ in physical, technical, legal, and geographic aspects and are subject to different socio-economic dynamics. These categories also illustrate the need for a differentiated approach to slum upgrading.

3.3 The Reasons for Slum Formation

“The forces driving the prevalence of slums in developing regions are rapid urbanization; ineffective planning; lack of affordable housing options for low-income households; dysfunctional urban, land and housing policies; a dearth of housing finance; and poverty and low incomes.”⁵⁵

The processes of slum formations are complex and deeply context-specific. The forces underlying the proliferation

of slums have been poorly understood for a long time.⁵⁶ A further complicating fact is that the literature conflates the reasons for slums and informal settlements formations, a more precise distinction between both helps to pin-point the underlying causes for creating sub-standard housing, which are exclusion and lack of government interventions (due to political attitudes but also lack of resources, poor governance), overcrowding (a result of lack of alternatives, dysfunctional housing, and land markets), tenure insecurity, and poverty.⁵⁷ These aspects are self-reinforcing and often can lead to downward spirals.⁵⁸

Important: International organizations stress two major mechanisms of slum formations, fast urbanization/population growth and bad governance.⁵⁹

Cities grow mostly by natural growth, and rural-urban migration can further aggravate the pressure on serviced land and housing. Migrations to cities are the combined effect of pull and push factors, such as changes in agricultural systems and better prospects in cities.⁶⁰ Many local governments in the world are struggling to accommodate new residents in their cities, which reflect in the growth of informal settlements – existing areas densify and peripheral land is squatted where possible.

The idea of bad governance acknowledges the lack of capacity and or will of the public sector to address the urban development and housing challenge. Slums emerge and grow due to the limited planning capacity and resources for service provision as well as inadequate market responses (catering to the demand of more affluent households). Inadequate regulations and laws can further push activities into informality, as formal compliance would be too costly or cumbersome.

55 – UN-Habitat, 2020, p. 25.

56 – UN-Habitat, 2003, p.195; Arimah, 2011, p.2.

57 – UN-Habitat, 2020, p.26.

58 – see Baskin, 2020.

59 – Cities Alliance, no date.

60 – Cities Alliance, no date.



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4 HISTORY OF PROJECT-BASED APPROACHES TO SLUMS

Governments have a long, yet not very successful, track record of slum interventions. While each country has its specific history of how its government reacted to slums or informality,⁶¹ they can be classified into different categories. From an international vantage point, it is possible to retrace a certain learning curve. However, on the country level, the evolutionary character might be less visible and linear, as seen in the reemerging popularity of slum clearances in the early 2000s.

4.1 Ignorance, Neglect, and Laissez-faire

Ignorance was the first way governments approached slums.⁶² Influenced by economic development thinking, slums, as the informal economy, were initially seen as an unavoidable but transient phenomenon⁶³ and a side product of national growth. The neglect also translated into “blanc spaces” in local planning documents that were often earmarked for public works.⁶⁴ There is also evidence that such government positions were beneficial to private landowners and property developers.⁶⁵

Neglect cannot be sustained for longer periods as the situation of slums escalates when completely left unaddressed (see for example the lost decade in Latin America). The first generation of this attitude also represents missed opportunities, as the challenge seemed rather manageable compared to today. In Buenos Aires, the squatter

population was merely 2% in 1956 and official numbers state the same share in Sao Paulo until the early 1970s. In time, the laissez-faire attitude⁶⁶ was abandoned when it became evident that slums were here to stay and symbolized dysfunctional urban (and government) processes.

4.2 Evictions

Clearing the problem was not solving it. In many countries, the first active government interventions in slums aimed at eradicating the substandard housing solutions by rebuilding the area and displacing the original residents.⁶⁷ In Delhi, Cairo and the cities of the Philippines, the local government practised slum clearances already in the 1950s. In many other countries, attempts to eradicate substandard housing was carried out in the following decades.

Such interventions used foremost health and safety arguments under the banner of urban renewal and only achieved “eyewash” and “wasted a lot of meagre resources.”⁶⁸ These attempts, as ill-informed of their underlying justification, were also never deployed at the scale they would be required, resulting in sporadic interventions that caused incredible hardship for some families. At the same time, other informal settlements continued to grow. Displaced slum dwellers would often reconstruct their destroyed homes in the same location or shift to nearby areas.⁶⁹

Eviction without providing alternatives is now considered a gross violation of a basic human right (see right to adequate housing). Governments, therefore, have the obligation “to refrain from carrying out forced evictions but the obligation to protect persons from forced evictions carried out by non-state actors such as corporations, international financial institutions and landlords.”⁷⁰ The UN recognized some justifiable causes for evictions, such as persistent

61 – Alsayyad, 1993, p. 40f.

62 – UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 14.

63 – UN-Habitat, 2003.

64 – Milbert, 2006, p. 302.

65 – Ward, 1990, p. 138.

66 – “benign neglect”, see Arimah, 2011, p. 4.

67 – UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 130.

68 – Koenigsberger, 1986, p. 31.

69 – Burra, 2005, p. 69.

70 – UN, 1997, p. 1.

non-payment and violent destruction of property. Still, states should assure that they are carried out warranted by law, forces minimized and adequate compensation for property losses made.

Important: The Centre for Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) estimates that almost 2 million people are forcibly evicted globally every year.⁷¹

4.3. Public Housing Programs With or Without Relocation

Providing alternatives was too splendid, costly, and slow. Public provision of housing programs was an early response to slums and recognizes that slums are an option not of choice but lack of alternatives. As nascent housing markets catered exclusively to the top income segments, the role of the government was to provide living arrangements for lower incomes and/or their public servants.

Several new governments of former colonies rolled out public housing programs. These initiatives were often informed by legislation and standards from the former home countries. As the upfront costs of supplying these housing options were “prohibitively expensive”⁷² and available resources limited, these programs were an inadequate answer to the scale of the problem (with a few exceptions in Southeast Asia, in particular, Singapore and Hongkong).

The few high-standard housing units often ended up in the hands of more affluent population groups.⁷³ Attempts to reduce cost resulted in public housing units far from the city and with low-quality materials and construction standards.⁷⁴ It was not uncommon that relocated slum dwellers moved back to the city and into another slum which provided a more central location and a lower housing cost burden.⁷⁵

Important: These problems are reoccurring issues, as observed in more recent large-scale housing programs such as the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) in South Africa or Minha Casa Minha Vida in Brazil.



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4.4 Slum Upgrading and Sites and Services

It was institutionalizing the Informal as a Game Changer. Slum Upgrading (SU) and Sites and Service (S&S) projects have been promoted by international organizations since the 1970s.⁷⁶ These projects incorporated informal construction logic into formal projects. Based on the idea of aided self-help (J.F.C. Turner, Mangin, Abrams), the urban poor were not seen as a problem but part of the solution for the housing crises. The advantage of informal construction processes is the inversion of the provisioning process, starting with the occupation and progressively building their housing unit based on need and capacities.⁷⁷

Institutionalized self-help encourages slum dwellers to build their own houses, while public interventions aim to improve existing or provide new basic infrastructure. During the 1970s such projects have been promoted and realized in around 280 projects and more than 90 countries with a total investment sum of US\$16 billion. S&S and upgrading schemes attempted to make use of informal production. They were both a ‘step into the right direction.’⁷⁸

In sites and services projects, new residents receive against payments a plot of land with essential infrastructure, such as water, sewerage, and electricity, and in some projects also a core housing unit.⁷⁹ A recurring feature is improved

71 – referenced in UN-Habitat, 2015, p.14.

72 – Shah et al., 2015, p. 8.

73 – Satterthwaite, 2012, p. 707.

74 – Shah et al., 2015, p.8.

75 – UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 14.

76 – World Bank, 1974; World Bank, 1980.

77 – Baross and Baken, 1990.

78 – Koenigsberger, 1986.

79 – Owens, Gulyani, and Rizvi, 2018, p.262.

access to credits to support incremental housing construction, road and community infrastructure, and income-generating activities.⁸⁰ Although sites and service projects are financially interesting interventions⁸¹ the vote by feet showed a clear sign of ill-informed practices.

In Karachi, 100.000 serviced plots that were provided at the beginning of the 1980s remained almost (700 plots) unoccupied a decade later. At the same time, informal neighbourhoods represented 33% of all growth between 1970 and 1987.⁸² The land for the subdivision was just too distant from the city and lacked infrastructure and services. By contrast, there is evidence that sites and service projects performed well when larger time frames are considered.⁸³ In time, urban development reduced the peripheral location of the projects.⁸⁴

Important: Even relatively successful projects such as the Million Houses Program of Sri Lanka (1984-1989) suffered from increasing prices of the serviced land, unattainable for the urban poor.⁸⁵



Slum upgrading remains the most financially and socially appropriate approach to addressing the challenge of existing slums”⁸⁶

Slum upgrading differs from the former approaches as such interventions attempt to provide adequate housing in situ, within the original places of residence, limiting the beneficiaries’ negative effects. The World Bank did not launch the first slum upgrading projects at scale but had an important role in legitimizing the approach.^{87 88} Already in 1969 (Jakarta and Surabaya), the Indonesian govern-

ment started to improve underserved villages. These slum-like settlements were upgraded with the Kampung Improvement Program that remained a global reference for three decades of operations. In 30 years, the program reached 15 million people.⁸⁹ Its success was owed to a constant improvement of its approach that expanded from a physical concern to community participation, a close collaboration between the local government and academia, and economic issues.⁹⁰

The largest slum upgrading of the World Bank was launched in Calcutta in the early 1970s. The Calcutta Urban Development Projects consisted of the foremost physical infrastructure provision to the bustee dwellers of the city. The slum upgrading project is representative of interventions of that time that suffered from too strong centralization, increased administration efforts, and unresponsiveness to local conditions.⁹¹ Slum upgrading projects of the 1970s-90s also had a strong physical infrastructure focus while the issue of maintenance remained largely undressed.⁹²

The institutionalization of the self-help idea into slum upgrading and sites and services projects of the World Bank failed to fundamentally alter urban development practices in the Global South. While the projects helped showcase the benefits of addressing the housing need of the urban poor with more cost-sensitive solutions, the approaches never left the pilot phase. It is estimated that the combined output amounted only to 10% of the total demand in the developing world.⁹³ Analysis of slum upgrading projects also showed that land regularization, albeit seen as essential, was rarely realized. The focus on infrastructure interventions can be explained by a quicker to implement, its capacity to generate employment, and ease in getting stakeholder commitment.⁹⁴

As a consequence of the limited reach but also the success of its housing projects, the World Bank and other influential international organizations shifted their concern towards broader issues that needed to be addressed to improve the housing situation of the urban poor: policies and market mechanisms.⁹⁵ The historical overview of more systematic approaches to informal settlements is provided in the paper on national frameworks.

80 – UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 16.

81 – According to a World Bank study US\$ 1-2.000 compared to US\$ 10.000 for a publicly provided full house UN-Habitat, 2015, p.17.

82 – Dowall, 1992, p. 416.

83 – Wakely and Riley, 2010.

84 – see Owens, Gulyani, and Rizvi, 2018.

85 – Shah et al., 2015, p.52.

86 – UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 16.

87 – Satterthwaite, 2012, p.206.

88 – For a different take on the first slum upgrading program in the world, see Harris, 2018.

89 – Cities Alliance, 1999, p.3.

90 – Hart and King, 2019; Satterthwaite, 2012, p. 207.

91 – Ljung and Zhang, 1989, p.10.

92 – UN-Habitat, 2015, p.17.

93 – Burgess, 2001, p.191.

94 – Werlin, 1999, p.1532.

95 – Mayo and Angel, 1993.



5 THE NEED FOR SYSTEMATIC APPROACHES

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Slums are a frequent manifestation of urban processes that systematic answers can only tackle. Past approaches and their often limited impact and/or negative externalities have underlined the need for comprehensive and strategic approaches. Program-based interventions remain testbeds and can lead to alleviating the symptoms but can not address underlying causes.

The proliferation of slums is connected to urban growth, bad governance, and inequality in accessing resources and opportunities. An effective slum upgrading intervention would tackle these broader challenges. As we shall see in other review papers, slum upgrading programs, particularly the more successful ones, are increasingly incorporating multiple dimensions beyond mere physical interventions.

The emergence of national approaches to slums (or at least city-wide strategies) represent an important step in the right direction. In order to be effective, these broader approaches to slums and informal settlements also need to develop a systematic understanding of the settlements they aim at improving. In this perspective, the section on the breadth of the challenge presented in this paper is of utmost importance. It reminds us that slums are very diverse and will require a toolkit of answers that can be adjusted to the local context selected by the concerned population.

The history of project-based programs also provides us with the first set of intervention options. Each

past approach can represent a powerful tool, if well understood in its strengths and limitations, even the approach of non-action.

Neglect could represent a strategic government position if applied to specific areas and embedded in a larger systematic intervention. Considering the scale of the problem in some countries, slum upgrading might take more than a generation to be fully achieved, even with a fully committed political leadership. If not finance, supply structure capacities might represent the actual bottleneck. Neglecting areas where the lack of infrastructure and services has not lead to unbearable states of deprivation, can ensure that central areas remain accessible to the urban poor.

Evictions are dangerous tools as they cause extreme hardship on the concerned population. Nevertheless, there are justified applications if this process is carried out in a transparent, accountable, and participatory manner. High-risk areas or essential land for providing infrastructure, services, or advancing important urban development projects represent justified cases for displacing slum households.

Public housing programs and, more generally, the enablement of other sectors to provide affordable housing is a fundamental strategy to prevent further slum growth but also create push factors to leave informal living realities for fully serviced apartments. Rental offers and direct and indirect incentives for supply actors play a vital role to ensure that housing is not only supplied but also remains affordable to the urban poor.⁹⁶

Sites and services can be highly effective tools to concentrate the informal growth of a city (particularly new arrivals) to well-serviced areas, albeit past practices have shown that public goods and services were often not supplied in the required quality. In the perspective of the peripheral

96 – In India, in situ upgrading projects have emerged where public-private partnerships construct housing units for slum dwellers. Given the economic calculations involved, this is not only a solution for very few slums (centrally and well-located in cities with high land values) but also very sensitive projects as it combines the need for displacement (moving from a slum to a housing unit within the same area) with large financial investments and high risk (therefore large profit margins). However, case studies indicate that slum dwellers are not always passive agents exposed to profit-seeking agents and may organize themselves to maximize their benefits (Baliga and Weinstein 2021).

location, transport solutions represent one of the essential services. Strategic and forward-looking strategies can also use public land reservations to provide overtime more centrally located land.

Slum upgrading options need to be tailored to local conditions and the specific need of the community. This not only underlines the importance of participatory processes but also the development of toolkits. The required interventions will differ based on the level of consolidation, the location within the city, and the nature of informality.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed the challenge of slums and provided an overview of past approaches to tackle it. The necessity of this paper emerged in the writing process of the review paper on slum upgrading practices a. A deeper review of slum upgrading interventions is only possible if acknowledging the diversity of slums in the world as well as the history of government interventions.

Slums are complex realities and differ greatly around the world. The lived realities of slums, informal settlements, and inadequate housing also differ as to slums between countries, within nations, and in cities. Past attempts have struggled to adequately address the challenge and diversity of slums both in terms of scale as well as depth. Nevertheless, a broader learning curve can be observed from an international vantage point. The earliest approaches consisted of neglect and destruction.

In retrospect, such interventions were ill-informed and based on a poor understanding of the underlying reasons for informal growth and substandard living arrangements.

Once ignoring the problem or trying to destroy it did not succeed, moving slums out of sight was the first acknowledgement of limited resources but still ignorant of the demands of the urban poor. A fundamental change represented the integration of self-help processes in housing provision systems. Advocated by international organizations, slum upgrading and sites and services represented a

step in the right direction. The programs were too centralized and featured typical problems of pilot initiatives.

It also became apparent that slums are not a temporary phenomenon but a structural feature of urbanization.

These manifestations can only be meaningfully and sustainably addressed when underlying causes are addressed, such as poverty, inequality, and other forms of persisting exclusion. The international development industry moved to promote policy reforms and more systematic approaches to slums (reviewed in a separate paper).

Still, much can be learned from the past approaches to slums. Each type of intervention represents the partial (and sometimes tiny) answer to the large and complex challenge of slums. Public housing programs and market enablement, slum upgrading and sites and services, even neglect and evictions can represent powerful tools for governments to intervene in specific slums, as long each intervention is well understood in its strength and limitations.

This paper is part of a larger review series on key topics of informality published in 2021. We encourage the readership to also engage with the review of slum upgrading programs, National approaches to slums, informal land markets, informal rental solutions, informal economy, the impact of COVID-19 on informal settlements, and informality concepts.



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