

# FOR SUSTAINED SOLUTIONS TO URBAN CHALLENGES, FOCUS ON STRENGTHENING GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP

## About this series

This brief is part of a series celebrating the innovative efforts of organised groups of slum dwellers to tackle, recover from and mitigate against the overlapping crises and multifaceted vulnerabilities of urban informality they face, and to improve their communities' living conditions.

The pandemic unearthed hidden vulnerabilities, exacerbated deep inequalities and eroded development gains, taking a heavy toll on the socioeconomic and mental wellbeing of urban poor communities. But it has also called attention to the vital role of grassroots agency in effectively responding to shocks and (re)building resilience. Cities can use these lessons learnt to improve the ways they tackle today and tomorrow's crises – both acute and chronic.

The series showcases community-led initiatives of SDI federations undertaken as part of a partnership between Cities Alliance and **Slum Dwellers International (SDI)**, with financial support from the **Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)**.

**The programme's** goal is to support sustainable and inclusive recovery efforts in and for informal settlement communities impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its current phase (2022–2024) is focused on rebuilding and locally-led climate adaptation initiatives identified and prioritised by slum dweller federations.

By locally leading, designing and implementing solutions themselves, SDI federations are redefining what sustainable, resilient urban development can look like.



@CODOHSA, Sierra Leone

In October 2023, 31 national, regional and youth leaders of the Tanzanian federation for the urban poor sat together in Chamazi, southwest Dar es Salaam to discuss their communities' priorities and vulnerabilities, share ideas and work together on decisions and solutions. They talked about the devastating impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on **savings groups** in the areas they represent and explored creative ways to respond and rebuild post-pandemic.

Similar discussions have been happening across the cities of the **Slum Dwellers International (SDI)** network. Savings groups and the community leaders who mobilise them are the building blocks and driving force behind organised federations of active citizens. They help federation members – who are mostly women – access loans for improving shelter and livelihoods, and mobilise for collective advocacy with local authorities to promote common priorities for those living with urban informality, like access to land or services. Saving schemes and other mutual support networks act as grassroots safety nets that cushion the urban poor during times of shocks like the pandemic, and have been a lifeline for many. They build up social capital in informal settlements, strengthening communities' capacities in their role as critical actors in climate adaptation and the resilient development of their cities.

In the wake of Covid-19, deepening poverty and lasting socioeconomic effects have eroded grassroots savings culture in many places. Pandemic lockdowns and public gathering restrictions undercut savings group norms rooted in regular face-to-face contact between members. Informal workers' businesses collapsed, leading to defaults on pre-pandemic loans and further fraying trust. People moved away because of lost jobs or homes. As a result, some savings groups broke up, lost members or exhausted their collective savings and are no longer active. Today, many can still no longer afford to make weekly savings: households' earnings remain badly hit and assets depleted, especially in the face of rising costs of living and other overlapping concerns like climate impacts.



From Tanzania to the Philippines, SDI federation leaders across 16 countries are seeking creative ways to rebuild these vital bottom-up processes and strengthen grassroots leadership, using multi-pronged approaches such as:



**Capacity strengthening** to promote women and youth leadership in decision-making and advocacy.



**Organising and mobilising** to revitalise dormant groups and support new groups.



**Addressing climate risks** to reinforce Covid-19 recovery efforts, recognising the multiple and interacting shocks and stresses communities face.



**Supporting workers to shift** to new kinds of livelihoods or launch collective ventures with their savings schemes – catalysing new livelihood strategies that build climate resilience and adaptation and improve living conditions.



**Training in savings** and loaning to empower existing savings groups and revive membership.



**Adapting group processes** to be more flexible, inclusive and appropriate in post-pandemic circumstances and to face current and future shocks.

## Wide-ranging impacts on livelihoods require wide-ranging social responses

In **Malawi** and the **Philippines**, efforts include federation building and improving savings activities, with a focus on savings systems and training in loan management and group investments in livelihoods. Federation leaders in Malawi are making processes of loan disbursement faster from their revolving Mchenga fund to cushion struggling savings groups. They are training groups on financial literacy, bookkeeping, loan management and group investments. And they are supporting groups and individuals with equipment and training in a wide range of enterprises and skills, from graphic design to tailoring and environmentally-friendly brickmaking. The Philippines federation's multi-faceted capacity development program includes training activities in community leadership as well as savings management and livelihood skills to support urban poor communities in their efforts to survive the aftershocks of the pandemic.



@PACSI, Philippines



@ACTogether, Uganda

## Youth contributions and needs

In **Uganda**, digitally literate youth leaders are helping drive wider federation discussions about the potential benefits of shifting from manual to digital banking. Many online technologies were adopted out of necessity during the pandemic; now the challenge is to understand how they can strengthen livelihoods and savings groups while keeping systems inclusive for those who can't use or afford smartphones and data bundles. And in Uganda, **Tanzania** and **Ghana**, among others, young women and men in particular are accessing vocational training and business start-up kits, and youth-led savings group enterprises, many at the nexus of livelihood building and climate adaptation, are being supported with non-cash boost grants in the form of start-up machinery and equipment.

## Leading recovery and resiliences

In **Sierra Leone**, federation rebuilding and recovery is being driven by women and youth wings of the federation, who meet regularly. They are driving processes that are designing mechanisms to enhance sustained resilience in communities in the cities of Freetown, Makeni and Bo. In São Paulo and Pernambuco, the **Brazilian** federation is training local women and youth leaders through climate change awareness workshops and adaptation projects such as climate resilient community gardening to tackle food insecurity. The focus is on strengthening experienced leaders and developing younger ones, both mainly women. For the Brazilian federation, climate action sits at the convergence of urban and environmental agendas, and is an opportunity to demonstrate to local governments the possibilities of reproducible climate resilience policies that integrate everyone. Their community strengthening projects are supporting poor urban communities to fight the knock-on effects of the pandemic and speak out about the impact of climate change in their neighbourhoods.



@INTERAÇÃO, Brazil

## THIS IS WHAT BUILDING ADAPTIVE CAPACITY LOOKS LIKE

Across the SDI network, strategic capacity building of leaders takes place continuously and in all federation activities. Grassroots leaders are key to understanding the particular vulnerabilities faced by different groups and what makes them more prone to harm from shocks and stresses. They work to recognise, integrate and amplify vulnerable communities' capacities to cope with and adapt to climate change. They drive effective and accountable implementation of federation activities in communities. And they are on the front line when federations advocate and engage with city and national governments.



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