

MAINSTREAMING THE MARGINALISED MAJORITY: A GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER AND YOUTH

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.



@PPHPZ, Zambia

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Go to an informal settlement in the middle of the day and you will mostly see women and youth.

They spend a lot of everyday life in the areas where they live, because of gendered responsibilities and overwhelming unemployment, among other reasons. Both groups have a lot at stake in improving living conditions linked to safety, security of tenure, economic opportunities and access to basic services, as well as adaptation to climate realities. Both groups are subject to the unequal impacts of climate change.

The SDI movement is founded on collaborative, women-led active citizenship.

Women in local saving groups make up the vast majority in all federations. Their priorities inform SDI's advocacy and action at all levels, seeking to improve lives and living conditions in low income urban areas and strengthen communities' resilience to acute and chronic shocks and stresses. For their part, young people are driving our shift to a predominantly urban future. Many are migrating to cities from rural areas in search of opportunities; all are active agents in the majority world's youth bulge. Young people's needs and priorities are often ignored in city systems and plans, and yet their energy and capacity to contribute creative solutions is huge. They are driving the implementation of many strategies to achieve the outcomes federations seek – across the network, youth are at the forefront of addressing climate change adaptation. And for SDI in general, the network's ongoing relevance relies on its ability to meaningfully engage young women and men in cities and impact their lives.



@CCODE, Malawi

In the focus on resilience, SDI affiliates are looking both internally and externally. They are critically reflecting on why and how to integrate gender equality goals further into structures and activities – to continue to challenge power dynamics so city development works for everyone. And they are listening to young people to understand their needs and ensure youth ownership of SDI activities. Employing approaches such as:



Capacity building and training for community members and professionals to appreciate gender equality concepts and gender mainstreaming methodologies.



Developing **analytical tools and monitoring mechanisms** that creatively adapt gender concepts to meet the realities of a grassroots network of the urban poor.



Experimenting with new ways of organising and integrating youth into federation activities to **nurture a new generation of leaders**.



Focusing on **livelihood and skills development activities** that understand and build on young people's priorities and survival strategies.



Promoting **local, youth-led climate action**.

GENDER EQUALITY BUILT IN

Starting with everyday experiences

The **Philippines** SDI Alliance is taking a decentralised and integrated approach to gender mainstreaming training, starting with federation leadership and then moving to its member base. Sessions are bottom up and community leaders are involved in designing them. The workshops begin with community experiences, so that the gender concepts being introduced can be rooted in federation members' reality. Tools include 'taking a walk' in someone else's shoes to see what it's like to be powerful or powerless based on gender or other differences. The Philippines' strategy for follow up activities is to meet people where they are in the process. This means strengthening understanding where the workshops revealed gaps, taking regional cultural and language differences into account, and tackling practical access difficulties of blended online/in-person learning so that members across the country can participate.



@FACCSU, Philippines



@PD Ghana

Structures and systems

In **Ghana**, SDI's mainstreaming efforts are refining gender sensitive frameworks and indicators that monitor and evaluate structures and programming. A few examples are: sex-disaggregated records of participation in meetings and activities; gender-balanced data collection teams; ensuring that being able to read is not a barrier to participating in advocacy and communications activities (more women than men are illiterate); considering gendered differences when assessing the potential negative impacts of federation activities (one recent instance was choice of location for waste collector groups' storage bins and equipment); and empowering women's involvement in budgeting and financial decision-making.

Finding the gaps, then addressing them

The **Zimbabwean** SDI Alliance is combining the two approaches above. Gender mainstreaming training for adult and youth federation leaders starts by understanding gender concepts. This informs a second workshop stage conducting gender audits of the federation's work to identify gender gaps. An illustrative need arising from the analysis has been to disseminate information about property rights and marriage: women are losing rights to land they have saved for because only their husbands' names are on the paperwork. Another area of analysis relates to unequal gender impacts of climate change and unequal gendered roles in climate action.



@Dialogue on Shelter, Zimbabwe



@CCODE, Malawi

Gendered pandemic impacts

The **Malawi** federation's gendered pandemic impacts has analysed differing needs, roles and expectations among women and men in waste management cooperatives and other small-scale environmental enterprises. Their city-level workshop was also attended by municipal officers. Malawi is also gathering gendered data about how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected people differently and discussing what their findings means for building back better. They have found an increase in suicides among men and boys living in informal settlements.

The pandemic also brought a wave of sexual and gender-based violence towards women and girls, which was experienced especially badly in overcrowded and underserved low income urban areas. The **Liberian** SDI Alliance has responded to this by focusing on community engagement and awareness raising to promote social behaviour change, training female and male community peer educators in areas where they work, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and local community health volunteers. The peer educators work to tackle myths and encourage community level reporting and at referral centres.



@MCA Liberia

YOUTH AT THE CENTRE



@SDI-Kenya

United efforts

Many federations' youth strategies start with conscious efforts to include younger members in all activities – workshops, meetings, projects, settlement profiling and community mobilisation. Being involved in federation activities helps build skills. Youth are driving data collection activities and are co-researchers. And young people are energetically driving many federations' content creation through Know Your City TV, learning (and teaching) media skills, communicating their own priorities and telling stories about their communities. Some SDI affiliates, like in **Kenya** and **Namibia**, are taking the approach to intergenerational continuity further, into federation leadership structures. In the **Kenyan** federation, a second tier of young upcoming leaders is undergoing ongoing leadership and governance training. They have been incorporated into the national leadership group where, through federation activities, older generations of leaders mentor and train them in advocacy, organising, savings, loans, investments and community engagement.

Recognising differences

A deliberate focus on young women and men's particular needs and priorities is also needed. In **Botswana**, young federation members are being encouraged to develop their own activities. They are also involved in health awareness projects, where they are working with people with disabilities to build more inclusive communities. **Zimbabwe's** youth federation have been involved in a youth skills assessment across all 12 regions of the country, collecting and analysing data to investigate what livelihood skills young women and men in the federation are interested in learning. Some popular ones are catering and baking, small animal rearing, making detergent and gardening.



@TFCl, Botswana



@PPHPZ, Zambia

Jobs, jobs, jobs

The need for livelihood-linked skills is huge in the context of the overwhelming challenge of youth unemployment in cities. Here, gendered considerations also apply. The priorities of young men and women living in informal settlements can look very different, as well as their ability to participate in programmes and other opportunities, for example if they have children of their own or family in rural areas to support. **Brazil, Malawi, Liberia, Zambia** and **Ghana** are just some of the federations running training projects for youth on income-generating activities ranging from brickmaking and plumbing to tailoring, waste collection and composting. Some is 'training of trainers', where participants are expected to share what they have learnt more widely among peers to improve the lives and livelihoods of those living in informality.

SOLUTIONS THAT ARE BUILT AROUND THE EXCLUDED

Cities are mainly planned and run by older men. And although most informal settlement residents are female, or young, or both, they are marginalised in political and public life, economic opportunities, wealth, assets, power and decisions. This is a problem: tackling urban inequality and delivering climate action requires prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable. Listening to and trusting the abilities of marginalised groups, such as women and youth, to define what it is that they need, leads to solutions that are built around the excluded¹ and to more inclusive and resilient cities that work better for everyone.



@PPHPZ, Zambia

References

¹ Patel, S (2021). "What women want – part two: to map vulnerability to climate change". IIED, 11 June. International Institute for Environment and Development. Available online (accessed 17 July 2024).