

NEGOTIATING WITH CITIES: TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RESILIENCE

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.



@SDI_Kenya

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In some of Kampala’s informal settlements during the Covid-19 pandemic, federation groups partnered closely with government officials to ensure health service responses were locally rooted. They helped form neighbourhood ‘health and hygiene teams’ who were then trained by the Ministry of Health to carry out door-to-door information dissemination. From this engagement, groups gained valuable networks and raised their profile with city authorities. Later, after lockdown ended, many federation health coordinators continued to be part of parish-level health service delivery systems, working once again with the city government to support crisis outreach during Uganda’s Ebola outbreak in September 2022.¹

Pandemic experiences influenced relationships between urban poor communities and local authorities in different ways. Where cities worked with organised groups in crisis response, as in Kampala, sometimes relationships came out stronger. Across the SDI network, federations collaborated with authorities – to identify vulnerable families in need of emergency assistance, locally deliver awareness campaigns, and advocate for temporary health and vaccination centres, among many other activities. In the process, community groups strengthened their links with local government departments; and officials in turn came to better understand the value of federations’ energy, agency and local knowledge.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has exposed inadequacies in urban governance, services and infrastructure and the fragility of city systems – bringing to the fore the nexus between health, on the one hand, and human security, shelter and economic empowerment on the other. In many cities, limited public trust was further eroded by unrealistic curfews imposed sometimes violently and without consideration of the poverty consequences. Or by pandemic ‘clean up’ operations that demolished informal stalls and dwellings. Post-pandemic, the earlier emergency measures that supported poor communities (like cash assistance, water provision and temporary health centres) were rolled back, leaving the same or worse deficiencies as before.

In marginalised urban contexts, absent or weak governance is always keenly felt in times of crisis. This is often exacerbated by the lack of data authorities hold on informal areas, further limiting their ability to respond. But better governance is essential if cities are to become more resilient to shocks like a pandemic, and to ongoing stressors such as the increasing risks of climate change. This must include recognition and collaborations that support community-led efforts to strengthen their own adaptive capacities.



@ACTogether, Uganda

In the wake of the pandemic, SDI networks in Africa, Asia and Latin America are approaching city governments, bringing their plans, showing their capacities and negotiating for recognition – using approaches such as:



Signing formal agreements with local authorities that recognise the comparative strengths of each partner.



Collaborating to address data gaps in our understanding of informal areas’ climate risks and adaptation capacities.



Providing practical support to municipal efforts to regularise informal settlements through improved tenure security and service provision.



Exploring new channels for advocacy, building on knowledge and experiences gained during the pandemic about health care and basic service needs.



Engaging city governments in participatory planning for slum upgrading.

Multipronged approaches

Organised groups of low-income informal citizens have a long history of pragmatically partnering with cities. This doesn't stop them contesting and challenging authorities where it is needed. In Lilongwe, the **Malawi** SDI Affiliate has been supporting informal settlement communities to contest unfair evictions linked to massive national government infrastructure projects. And at the same time is working with Lilongwe and Blantyre city councils in their efforts to regularise (different) settlements. The Alliance is helping households apply for title deeds to the plots they live on. Then, once regularised, settlements start contributing towards city rates and this translates to improved service delivery.

In **South Africa**, federation advocacy and data collection under the *Asivikelane* campaign (Zulu for 'let's protect one another') involves regularly surveying residents in eThekweni and Cape Town's informal settlements about water, sanitation and waste management service deficiencies in their areas. Detailed results are published monthly and shared with municipalities and national government departments to hold them accountable in a swift government response.



©CCODE, Malawi

Get it in writing

Working with city governments can be productive but short-lived. Political leaders' tenure is limited. Officials who understand and value federation work can be transferred at short notice. Sudden changes in administrative arrangements disrupt planned co-production projects. In Senegal, Uganda and Zambia, SDI affiliates are addressing these challenges by signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with municipal councils – formal plans for long term collaboration on development matters of common interest. In **Senegal**, the priority areas in six new municipal MOUs' including flooding, land irregularity, precarious housing, lack of municipal planning and infrastructure, and the need for better stakeholder consultation. In **Uganda**, the federation is in the process of signing MOUs with all city authorities where it is active. The recognition these bring makes it easier to link savings groups to concrete opportunities like government enterprise support schemes. The **Zambian** federation is also working its way through the lengthy, bureaucratic process of drafting MOUs with city councils. In Kitwe city, for instance, the scope covers activities to plug gaps in municipal data – such as settlement mapping, enumeration and compiling spatial registers – and federation involvement in participatory development of local and city level plans.

In Nairobi, in Mukuru's Special Planning Area (SPA), an ongoing large-scale upgrading process, the **Kenyan** federation is successfully wielding a different kind of document. The 'Mukuru People's Manifesto' forms the basis for ongoing and future collaboration between government institutions and local communities, binding incoming political leaders to their election commitments. Lessons learnt from successfully partnering with city authorities to plan Mukuru are also informing federation strategies as it advocates with the municipality to declare SPAs in other large Nairobi settlements.



@SDI, Kenya

Community-led data collection for climate risk assessment

Combined community and city government measures to upgrade slums can build resilience to climate change risks and assist vulnerable groups. In **Sierra Leone**, the federation is collaborating with local and national government partners in ways that both enhance community ownership of climate change solutions and integrate locally-led efforts to strengthen adaptation mechanisms. In Freetown, Makeni and Bo cities, this includes climate impact assessment and risk mapping, working with city authorities, civil society and academic institutions. The data collection is powered by federation 'climate ambassadors', mostly young women and men. Their findings on climate induced hazards will be used in city planning and disaster response, and inform the SDI Affiliate's own data-driven advocacy.



@CODOSAPA, Sierra Leone

Pivot to health

In their discussions and advocacy with city authorities, many federations are now doubling down on the pandemic's heightened focus on public health. Exploring ways to improve urban poor communities' access to public health services, and with awareness that many areas rely on informal private health services. The **Indian** SDI Affiliate is surveying public health services and needs in slums and slum relocation colonies in five cities across Maharashtra, Odisha and Gujarat states. Findings are used to support families in accessing government health programs and to push local authorities for service improvement. Local residents were supported to write letters to municipal authorities highlighting urgent locally-specific issues that need addressing before the monsoon arrived in June – such as public toilets, open or choked drains, unsafe drinking water, roads and street lights, garbage collection and waste bin provision.

The data informs a health-centred approach to resilience by improving the federation's knowledge about determinants of health for vulnerable urban populations. This is catalysing conversations and locally-driven strategies through a variety of actions. One such action is the establishment of 'health camps', supported by federation groups, that are based on infrastructure-linked health concerns communities have identified in their surrounding environments. They raise awareness about non-communicable diseases and health challenges, and build data to support community actions in demanding preventative public health interventions from the state.

Other SDI affiliates, including in **Kenya**, **Botswana** and **Zimbabwe**, are raising awareness about the post-pandemic mental health fallout in informal areas. And in **Ghana** and **Sierra Leone**, federations are collecting data on air pollution in settlements and linking this to climate risk assessments. Many also remain focused on tackling health concerns highlighted by the pandemic, with activities ranging from tackling vaccine misinformation to highlighting the importance of adequate water access, waste collection and improved nutrition.



@SPARC, India

BUILDING MUTUAL TRUST (TAKES TIME)

SDI affiliates' collaborations with city level stakeholders enable slum dwellers to build enduring relationships with local and national government, as well as with the private sector and civil society. These relationships alter decision-making processes so that they become more inclusive of the voices and priorities of the poor. As a result of strong partnerships with urban decision makers, organised communities are able to shape equitable and integrated urban policies that accelerate pro-poor city transformation – including in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring. Shared platforms like the examples above are used by federations to advocate for governance approaches that address existing vulnerabilities and exclusions in informal settlements, as well as to insist on the need for longer-term interventions that build and sustain communities' resilience to shocks and stresses.



@PPHPZ, Zambia

References

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