

THE CONFLICT SENSITIVE NATURE OF WORKING IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

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.



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As this programme was taking place, the large informal settlements of Mathare and Mukuru in Nairobi, Kenya, were seeing increased violence in the wake of a contested general election. Things were tense, complicating cooperation between the Kenyan SDI Alliance and county government. Sometimes there were weekly political demonstrations. Federation leaders and technical support staff revised project plans, applying core safeguarding principles: do no harm to project communities and reduce risks to staff. Activities were postponed in opposition strongholds where political temperatures were high.

Political instability can badly affect the carrying out of community-led development initiatives in urban areas. Where there is a history of political violence and conflict, politics of polarisation create a lack of trust and cooperation between different groups, making it harder to build consensus and inhibiting people's participation in project activities. It means there is an environment of fear in government institutions, too, leading to withheld approvals that are needed for fieldwork or restricting access to particular communities. An organised network can be seen as a threat.

Tensions can also be inflamed during other kinds of shocks and stresses, such as when state responses to a crises heighten conflict over resources or worsen distrust between governments and communities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, residents' grievances in low income urban areas already lacking infrastructure and essential services were compounded by harsh emergency measures imposed with little thought for the poverty consequences. Some local governments made the pandemic an excuse to 'clean up' informal areas – evicting and demolishing housing and markets, such as in Harare, Zimbabwe. This has also happened after climate-linked disasters, like the 2024 flooding in Nairobi, or in response to other health emergencies, like the recent Cholera outbreak in Lilongwe, Malawi. The resulting disruptions to lives and livelihoods render many destitute, and heightened economic hardship aggravates insecurity, especially for vulnerable populations, women and children. If there is no food in the house this can lead to domestic abuse. Pandemic-era unemployment and school disruptions are linked to increases in crime, child marriages, teenage pregnancies, and sexual and gender based violence.



@INTERAÇÃO, Brazil



Post-pandemic, urban poverty has risen, further compounded by overlapping crises like climate impacts, disease outbreaks and an increased cost of living. In urban Brazil, many are still going hungry and national political tensions have inflamed violence and discontent. In South Africa, xenophobic discrimination has increased against migrants and refugees, as well as social tensions between formal neighbourhoods and informal settlements; a common challenge the South Africa SDI Alliance faces during upgrading projects. In Harare and many other cities, emergency water kiosks installed in informal settlements at the peak of the pandemic to reduce long queues have long been removed, so residents still struggle to access water. In informal settlements in Zambia, this means women and girls wake up very early to queue at waterpoints, putting them at risk of violence and harassment, and contributing to the overall sense of insecurity communities experience on a daily basis.

Across the network, SDI affiliates are using tools and strategies to monitor and mitigate local tensions, reduce conflicts within the scope of their interventions, and build trust and social cohesion to reduce the potential for tensions to escalate to violence. Some of the approaches they use are:



Proactive strategies to mitigate the risks to communities from election or political violence.



Context-specific and community-led analysis of conflict risk in informal settlements, including with a gender lens.



Training on safeguarding practices for staff, federation leaders and community groups.



Youth capacity building to promote peaceful elections and counter the politics of polarisation.

In **Liberia**, the federation is promoting civic engagement among young people living in informal settlements. One of the aims of the training is to enhance their capacity to promote peaceful, nonviolent elections in their communities, advocating for clean speech and avoiding hate messages.

As in **Kenya** (above), many SDI affiliates regularly experience disruptions to projects, activities and community meetings linked to election periods.



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During this programme, the **Malawi** federation reported mass violent political demonstrations in Lilongwe. In **Brazil**, social and political turmoil from September 2022 culminated in an attempted coup in January 2023. Here, the lesson for the SDI affiliate is that when communities are involved in intense dynamics, such as tense electoral periods, it is no use wanting to stick to the project schedule.



@Dialogue on Shelter, Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe held harmonised presidential, parliamentary and local government elections during the project period, bringing risks to communities of political violence, intimidation and harassment by political parties, and restricting the federation’s access to communities towards and after the polling period. The project team of technical professionals and federation leaders monitored things closely, adjusting as needed. Gatherings required police clearance. Many planned activities were postponed or virtual arrangements made where possible. **Senegal’s** political calendar also led to conflicts in many of the municipalities where SDI works, requiring careful project planning around the electoral period.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The work of organised informal settlement groups across the SDI network – to reduce poverty, strengthen social cohesion, amplify the voice of urban poor people, improve services and upgrade physical infrastructure – is implicitly conflict sensitive, even when not actively confronted by election violence or other external factors that heighten tensions. This is because they understand that unplanned and informal settlements are always fragile contexts to a greater or lesser extent: characterised by exclusion, overcrowding, poor or inadequate essential services and infrastructure, lack of resources, weak governance and threats of eviction or land grabs; often located in climate vulnerable areas at risk from flooding, water shortages and forced relocation. Residents are frequently marginalised and without access to crucial support such as healthcare, education, employment opportunities and political representation. This creates vulnerable communities, whose fragility and grievances during shocks and crises can turn them into hotspots for social, economic and political tensions or struggles over resources.



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