

## Citizen driven action on urban poverty reduction

**SUMMARY:** Poverty reduction is generally seen as something designed and implemented by governments and professional organizations, supported by international agencies. Little attention has been given to actions taken by “the poor”, whether this is working autonomously (outside of government), organizing to make demands on government (claim making) or co-production, where they work with government. Yet there are a growing number of initiatives undertaken by urban poor organizations themselves – many of which now work at city level and some at national level; in 16 nations, these are undertaken by national federations of slum or shack dwellers. Many urban poor organizations have also shifted their engagement with government from making demands to offering partnerships in designing and implementing initiatives, both because there is not much point in making demands on government agencies incapable of fulfilling these demands and because these urban poor organizations and federations have demonstrated that they can design and implement cheaper and more effective responses. Many national governments and international agencies have not recognized the potential of these local government–urban poor organization partnerships in reducing poverty. And even where they do, many are inhibited by bureaucratic constraints or clientelist political structures.

### I. INTRODUCTION

MOST DISCUSSIONS OF poverty reduction focus on the role of national governments or aid agencies and development banks. Little consideration is given to the key local actors in urban areas – especially local governments and the poor’s own organizations. Indeed, it is rare for international agencies to have any dialogue with urban poor organizations, even as they support national poverty reduction strategies. But the conventional approaches to poverty reduction – state managed, professionally directed and sometimes funded by international donors – have not met the needs of large sections of the urban population in most low- and middle-income nations.<sup>(1)</sup> This can be seen in the high proportion of urban dwellers living in informal settlements or very overcrowded tenements and boarding houses lacking tenure, infrastructure and basic services. This is the case even in well-established democracies, where democratic pressures might have been expected to address these issues. It is also the case in cities and nations with successful and rapidly growing economies.<sup>(2)</sup> For instance, how is it that Mumbai, with all its economic success over the last few decades has around half its population living in “slums”? Clearly, within and around Mumbai there has not been much “trickle down” from its economic success. While the proportion of the urban population living in poverty and lacking basic services varies considerably from nation to nation, as does the extent of the deficit in services, even in most successful middle-income nations, urban poverty as manifested through inadequate living conditions and inadequate incomes is still a serious problem affecting large numbers of individuals and households.<sup>(3)</sup>

But there are many initiatives organized by the urban poor themselves to address their needs, through collective processes and activities, which get little recognition and support. There are also examples of urban governments that have sought to work with organized groups of the urban poor and support poverty reduction. As yet, very little international development finance goes to support these key local actors.

This Brief focuses on the efforts of the urban poor, while Brief 18 focuses on the role of urban governments (with a particular interest in the role of mayors).<sup>(4)</sup> In this Brief, there is interest in how low-income groups organize to take action and make demands, especially the means through which they have influence (which usually involves mass organization and collective political action) and can progress their interests. There is also interest in how they seek to be representative of and accountable to their members – and how they plan and act and build alliances with other stakeholders, including local governments.

1. See the paper by Richard Stren listed on the back page that notes the very low level of support within development assistance for urban development and notes also how peripheral urban development is to the Millennium Development Goals.

2. See, for instance, Solinger, Dorothy J (2006), “The creation of a new underclass in China and its implications”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 18, No 1, April, pages 177–194; also Bapat, Meera (2009), *Poverty Lines and Lives of the Poor; Underestimation of Urban Poverty, The Case of India*, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, Working Paper 20, IIED, London, 53 pages; available at <http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/10567IIED.pdf>.

3. Satterthwaite, David (2004), *The Underestimation of Urban Poverty in Low- and Middle-income Nations*, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, Working paper 14, IIED, London, 69 pages; available at <http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/9322IIED.pdf>.

4. See Brief 18 on “What role for mayors in good city governance?”

This Brief draws on papers in *Environment&Urbanization* Vol 20, No 2, October 2008 that were on the theme of City Governance and Citizen Action; these are listed on the back page, with details of how to obtain them electronically or in print. This summary, produced with the support of the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DANIDA) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), allows the journal’s main findings to reach a wider audience.

## II. FROM AUTONOMOUS ACTION OR PROTEST TO CO-PRODUCTION

DIRECT ACTION BY the organizations of the urban poor can be:

- **Autonomous action:** addressing their own needs, independent of the state.<sup>(5)</sup>
- **Making demands on the state to acquire something** (land for housing; support for upgrading existing housing with services; tenure of land they occupy) or to prevent something (typically eviction from their homes). Sometimes they also organize to reduce exploitation, typically in labour markets.
- **Co-production:** Urban poor organizations work with governments and aid agencies in decentralized flexible poverty reduction initiatives, and all parties make a major contribution; this may include joint planning, management and/or implementation.

The importance of autonomous action by the inhabitants of informal settlements is greatly underestimated, as so much of what is done collectively is invisible to outsiders – local savings groups, clubs, parent associations supporting local schools... But urban areas provide limits to what collective action can do independent of government. The inhabitants of an informal settlement often cannot improve their access to water because there is no local water source that can be tapped (or the local groundwater is contaminated). A settlement surrounded by other urban communities has nowhere to dispose of its solid and liquid wastes or channel storm and surface run-off. Although there are many examples of successful autonomous community actions, urban settlements need larger systems of trunk infrastructure for water, sanitation, garbage collection, and drainage and roads, which community organizations cannot construct. Community action can do the “internal pipes” but it needs support from government agencies to get these integrated into the “external pipes”.<sup>(6)</sup> There are also obvious limits to the capacity of low-income households to collectively set up and manage their own schools and health care centres (although there are good examples of these being set up within low-income settlements). In addition, in many locations and settlements it is difficult to get the necessary consensus for collective organizations because of the diversity among the urban poor in (among other things) political allegiances and ethnic ties.<sup>(7)</sup> It is not uncommon for there to be language or religious barriers to collective organization.

Making demands on state institutions (mostly local government agencies) by community-based organizations formed by the inhabitants of particular settlements (often termed claim making) is perhaps the best understood and most widely applied way of seeking to get needs addressed. The history of many informal settlements is one of residents’ slow and difficult negotiations with government agencies for basic services and for tenure and perhaps for some support for house upgrading.<sup>(8)</sup> This usually takes many years and has to be done piecemeal, as there is never support for comprehensive upgrading. These often form the basis of clientelist relations that are so ubiquitous in urban politics.<sup>(9)</sup>

Over the last 20 years, a growing number of urban poor organizations have shifted from claim making to co-production. This was developed by the National Slum Dwellers Federation in India during the 1980s.<sup>(10)</sup> This national federation formed by local and city-wide slum dweller organizations had focused on protest and on making demands on the state – especially to prevent evictions and to seek services. Their strength came from their numbers, their capacity to mobilize mass protests and, in some instances, their capacity to get support from the courts; but relatively little was achieved. There was recognition that demands on government organizations have limited value if these organizations are incapable of fulfilling these demands. Negotiating with the water agency to extend piped supplies to your settlement is of little value if the agency has no funds for this or is prevented by law from doing so. There was also recognition that even large coalitions of the urban poor have limited capacity to effect pro-poor change if both bureaucrats and politicians see them as the problem, as opponents, as trouble makers, as “illegals”.

So the National Slum Dwellers Federation and its partner federation Mahila Milan (savings collectives formed by women pavement and slum dwellers) began to offer government (especially local government agencies) the knowledge, strengths and capacities of their members in alternative programme designs. These are mass organizations, with hundreds of thousand of members. But instead of protesting, they demonstrated to government that they could build and manage better quality community toilets with washing facilities and better new housing than government agencies or the contractors they used. They could also prepare the detailed household data and maps needed to plan upgrading. When it was not possible to get support for upgrading their homes – for instance, for those living right by the railway tracks – the federations agreed to work with government agencies to manage the relocation (and minimize the number of people who had to be relocated<sup>(11)</sup>). This change in strategy led to many government-supported programmes being undertaken by these two federations, supported by the Mumbai-based NGO, SPARC. These illustrate a scale of action that is far beyond what civil society organizations usually engage in and far beyond what

5. See the paper by Saad Yahya listed on the back page.

6. This distinction was developed by the Pakistan NGO that has supported hundreds of community-managed initiatives for sanitation and water, the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute; see Hasan, Arif (2006), “Orangi Pilot Project; the expansion of work beyond Orangi and the mapping of informal settlements and infrastructure”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 18, No 2, October, pages 451–480.

7. See the paper by Charlotte Lemanski listed on the back page.

8. See Brief 19 on “Getting land for housing; what strategies work for low-income groups?”

9. Mitlin, Diana (2006), *The Role of Collective Action and Urban Social Movements in Reducing Chronic Urban Poverty*, Working Paper No 64, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Manchester University, Manchester, 69 pages.

10. See the paper by Jockin Arputham listed on the back page.

11. Patel, Sheela, Celine d’Cruz and Sundar Burra (2002), “Beyond evictions in a global city; people-managed resettlement in Mumbai”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 14, No 1, April, pages 159–172.

12. See three recent papers from *Environment and Urbanization*: Patel, Sheela and Jockin Arputham (2008), "Plans for Dharavi: negotiating a reconciliation between a state-driven market redevelopment and residents' aspirations", Vol 20, No 1, April, pages 243–254; also Patel, Sheela and Jockin Arputham (2007), "An offer of partnership or a promise of conflict in Dharavi, Mumbai?", Vol 19, No 2, October, pages 501–508; and Patel, Sheela (2009), "Getting the information base for Dharavi's redevelopment", Vol 21, No 1, April, pages 241–252.

13. See the paper by Diana Mitlin listed on the back page.

14. See <http://www.sdinet.co.za/>.

government agencies would normally support.

This did not mean that the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan lost their capacity for independent action, or that they were co-opted by the state – as can be seen in the current struggles over how Dharavi, the large informal township within Mumbai, will be developed. This struggle illustrates how the homes and livelihoods of the urban poor are threatened both by state power and market power. The state is prevented from simply bulldozing Dharavi and transferring the land to developers by democratic pressures and checks, even if there are developers, advisors and politicians for whom this is the preferred "solution". Without collective organization and alliances with other slum dwellers and other civil society groups, the residents of Dharavi would have little possibility of influencing the nature of Dharavi's redevelopment and protecting the interests of the poor.<sup>(12)</sup>

Citizen-led co-production<sup>(13)</sup> involves negotiating with the state so that local groups (in this case members of national federations of slum/shack dwellers) can be directly involved in the design, management and implementation of state programmes. Over the last 15 years, national and citywide federations of slum and shack dwellers have developed in many nations, in part drawing on and learning from the experiences and organizational models of the Indian federations, in part rooted in their own local traditions (especially savings groups). These federations have also set up a small umbrella organization, Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), to which they are all affiliated. There are national federations of slum/shack dwellers that are SDI affiliates in 16 nations, and savings groups that are developing federations in many more; Table 1 gives some examples. All these federations combine autonomous action (to demonstrate their capabilities) with offers of partnership to government agencies. These national federations have also formed a strong international alliance, so they learn from and support each other.<sup>(14)</sup> The federations that are members of SDI have a collective voice in their discussions with international agencies. They have also received financial support from some external funding agencies, where it is the member federations themselves who determine how this funding is used.

**Table 1: Examples of the savings and work programmes of the federations**

	Date <sup>(a)</sup>	Number of settlements	Active savers	Savings (estimated value in US\$)	Houses built	Tenure secured (number of families)
INDIA	1986	5,000	100,000	1.2 million	6,000 <sup>(b)</sup>	80,000
SOUTH AFRICA	1991	750	30,000	1.2 million	15,800	23,000
THAILAND	1992	42,700	5 million	206 million	40,000	45,000
NAMIBIA	1992	60	15,000	0.6 million	1,500	3,700
CAMBODIA	1993	288	11,300	145,000	2,798	5,000
PHILIPPINES	1994	148	42,727	631,830	547	26,166
ZIMBABWE	1995	62	45,000	n.a.	1,100	4,035
NEPAL	1998	396	3,147	173,402	50	85
SRI LANKA	1998	130	21,506	29,469	50	120
COLOMBIA	1999	1	60	10,000	–	60
KENYA	2000	50	20,000	50,000	110	5,600
ZAMBIA	2002	45	14,000	18,000	66	1,048
GHANA	2003	15	12,000	–	–	120
UGANDA	2003	4	500	2,000	–	300
MALAWI	2004	100	20,000	50,000	750	3,050
BRAZIL	2005	5	100	4,000	–	7,000
TANZANIA	2004	16	1,000	2,000	–	500

(a) The year in which significant savings schemes began; in some cases this precedes the year when the federation was established.

(b) A further 30,000 households in India have secured new housing not constructed by the federations but as a result of their activities.

The federations choose to have an active role in designing, implementing and managing responses to their needs. Their experience has been that even when the state responded positively to their demands, the responses rarely served their needs. Moreover, the experiences of the women-led savings schemes are that their engagement with programme implementation brings many further benefits: members begin to understand the possibilities and constraints within such partnerships and come forward with new, more complex and improved designs (both physical and programmatic); members grow in pride at what they accomplish and as a result of the respect they earn from the state officials that they partner; and secondary but important benefits can be secured, such as the employment of members either directly or as small sub-contractors.

Even where the state allocates considerable resources to urban poverty reduction – for instance, in housing subsidies or in building public toilets and washing facilities in informal settlements – if these are built and managed by government bodies or the contractors they hire, they are often inappropriate or of poor quality unless urban poor organizations can shape what is provided and how this is designed and managed. The government of South Africa has supported one of the world’s largest and most generous subsidy programmes to support low-income households get their own housing, but much of what has been built has been of poor quality and in inappropriate locations because low-income households had little influence on what was built and where it was located. In this instance, urban poor organizations, including the South African Federation of the Urban Poor, were able to change the way a proportion of the subsidies were allocated so that federation members within savings groups, not contractors, designed and built the homes. The quality and management of public toilets in “slum” areas in many Indian cities also improved greatly when Mahila Milan groups were able to influence their location and took over their design, construction and management.

### III. CONSTRAINTS ON SUPPORTIVE STATES

THE SLUM/SHACK dweller federations also chose co-production because of how little conventional democratic processes deliver for them, even if they do provide more scope for urban poor groups to organize, to make claims and to protest. Politicians with progressive social agendas often distrust the federations because they will not align with the politician’s party or mobilize votes for them. Co-production extends participatory democracy by enabling urban poor groups with both the right to influence decisions about priorities and the allocation of resources and the opportunity to design, implement and manage responses. Co-production also allows the development of solutions (house designs, building materials, plot layouts, infrastructure standards) that bridge the gap between what works for the poor and the formal rules and regulations governing land use and building and infrastructure.<sup>(15)</sup> The concept of co-production did not develop with reference to the global South (although its practice may have been in use) despite the fact that in the development literature co-production is viewed as a (necessary but temporary) solution to weak local governments. Rather, it was recognized as an important dimension to police work in the inner-city streets of the US in the 1970s; successful policing was not simply about the forcible control of neighbourhoods but also about negotiating social relations to achieve the ends desired by the majority of local citizens and the state. The new interest in high-income nations in co-production also reflects the recognition that the successful state requires citizen engagement rather than simply being recipients of state-delivered services.

In many cities, one limit of co-production is the very limited capacity of the state to act as an effective “co-producer”. In Dhaka, the Basteer Basheer Odhikar Surakha Committee (BOSC) was founded in 2000 to provide the means by which the urban poor could put pressure on city and ward governments and go beyond the conventional confrontational protests that had previously been the means by which the poor sought to influence government. BOSC has brought benefits to some informal settlements and has worked well with some ward commissioners. Women have also commented on how they appreciated the BOSC committees that have allowed them to participate; but BOSC’s impact is limited by the weakness of the ward and city government.<sup>(16)</sup>

Another limit of conventional democratic structures is the extent to which non-poor groups, including middle- and upper-income groups, know how to organize to get their demands met. In India, middle-class groups are increasingly active in developing forms of cooperation with local governments that exclude “unwanted people.”<sup>(17)</sup> In addition, the courts and public interest litigation in India that often served the interests of the urban poor in the late 1970s and early 1980s now serve middle- and upper-income groups and help to criminalize the homes and sources of livelihoods for large sections of the urban poor.<sup>(18)</sup>

As highlighted by the early research underlying the development of the Orangi Pilot Project, there may be four distinct types of constraints to citizen action: the expectations of citizens that the state will provide (or should provide) the infrastructure they need; the lack of local organizations able to support this work; the lack of technological options that favour local engagement and action; and the cost, especially if undertaken by the state or contractors.<sup>(19)</sup>

15. For examples of this, see Mitlin, Diana and Anna Muller (2004), “Windhoek, Namibia: towards progressive urban land policies in Southern Africa”, *International Development Planning Review* Vol 26, No 2, pages 167–186; also Manda, Mtafu A Zeleza (2007), “Mchenga – urban poor housing fund in Malawi”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 19, No 2, October, pages 337–359.

16. See the paper by Nicola Banks listed on the back page.

17. See the paper by Isa Baud and Navtej Nainan listed on the back page.

18. Bhan, Gautam (2009), “This is no longer the city I once knew; evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in Millennial Delhi”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 1, April, pages 127–142.

19. Orangi Pilot Project (1995), “NGO profile: Orangi Pilot Project”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 7, No 2, October, pages 227–236; also see reference 6, Hasan (2006).

20. See reference 9.

21. Fahmi, Wael Salah (2009), "Bloggers' street movement and the right to the city; (re)claiming Cairo's real and virtual spaces of freedom", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 1, April, pages 89–107.

22. Sabry, Sarah (2005), "The social aid and assistance programme of the government of Egypt: a critical review", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 17, No 2, October, pages 27–41.

23. See the paper by Hyan Bang Shin listed on the back page, which shows the difficulties faced by tenants in Seoul in getting alternative accommodation when their homes were "redeveloped"; see also Chitekwe-Biti, Beth (2009), "Struggles for urban land by the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 2, October, pages 347–366, which discusses the use of the housing queue.

24. Cabannes, Yves (2004), "Participatory budgeting: a significant contribution to participatory democracy", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 27–46.

25. See Brief 18; also the commitment of the former Housing Minister of South Africa, Lindiwe Sisulu, to work with the urban poor both in South Africa and internationally – see Sisulu, Lindiwe (2006), "Partnerships between government and slum/shack dwellers' federations", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 18, No 2, October, pages 401–406.

26. Campbell, Tim (2003), *The Quiet Revolution: Decentralization and the Rise of Political Participation in Latin American Cities*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 208 pages; also see Brief 18.

## IV. COPING WITH THE STATE

OF COURSE, THE strategies used by any urban poor organization or federation are shaped by the orientation of the state.<sup>(20)</sup> The state's response to citizen demands may be authoritarian, with strong repression of any protest or demonstration (especially where these are deemed to be illegal).<sup>(21)</sup> At its most extreme, the state organizes or supports murder, unlawful arrest and torture of individuals as a means of controlling such organizations. There are often authoritarian responses within democratic states – for instance, in responses to illegal land occupation or in the means by which city development plans are implemented, as large-scale evictions of urban poor settlements clear space for infrastructure or commercial developments.

But the constraints on urban poor groups' actions are often less obvious, as it is bureaucratic procedures that inhibit or delay them. Urban poor organizations are expected to go through (laborious, difficult, uncertain) conventional bureaucratic channels to make demands and access entitlements – or protest against unfair treatment. The informal nature of their homes, settlements and livelihoods often makes it difficult or impossible for them to use such measures – for instance, getting some entitlement may depend on living in a legal settlement or having a legal address or producing documents such as birth certificates, which they do not have. Such bureaucratic responses discriminate against those who do not fit with formal views of entitlements and proof of such entitlements, and the constraints they cause may be exacerbated by civil servants' hostility to the poor<sup>(22)</sup> – or by the state using bureaucratic procedures to limit who gets entitlements.<sup>(23)</sup>

Local governments often use clientelism to pre-empt the potential of community organizations or larger collective organizations or social movements to negotiate changes in public policies. Politicians develop relations with particular community leaders (often self-appointed) that allow these leaders to "deliver" something to their organization or movement (or simply co-opt community leaders by, for instance, bringing them onto the government payroll). One example of this is the *mastaans* in low-income settlements in Dhaka, who have a role that is somewhere between that of a local strongman and a leader, an intermediary between local government and the population, and a vote mobilizer.

In most cities, the state's position is a complex (and often changing) mix of these responses. Local government reforms such as those associated with participatory budgeting have sought to make the relations between the state and citizens (including the urban poor) more transparent and direct. If participatory budgeting allows each district within the city to influence public investments there, it also acts as an incentive for new neighbourhood-based associations to emerge and for older ones to broaden their membership base.<sup>(24)</sup> Also important is the space made by politicians or senior civil servants for urban poor groups and/or the efforts to work directly with them.<sup>(25)</sup> Certainly, decentralization and the return to democracy or strengthening of local democracy over the last 20 years has provided space for the election of many innovative mayors in South America, including those committed to working with urban poor groups.<sup>(26)</sup>

## V. ANY ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES?

THE LIMITATIONS IN state structures with regard to relations with urban poor citizens are also evident in most international agencies. Official development assistance agencies were not set up to support citizen groups. They were set up in an era when it was assumed that development assistance should be channelled through national "recipient" governments. If it is now accepted that representative organizations of the urban poor have importance in addressing urban poverty, the official development assistance agencies have structures that make it difficult to respond to this. And most "recipient governments" do not want international funding agencies working directly with urban poor organizations.

Even if development assistance is legitimated by how it will help reduce poverty, among official development assistance agencies and non-government international funding agencies there is usually a lack of accountability to the poor (indeed, most have no relations at all with urban poor organizations). Where they have programmes funding "urban poverty reduction", there is rarely any role for urban poor organizations in their design and implementation and little or no transparency to the urban poor in the allocation of resources. The urban poor face bureaucratic and often clientelist barriers in accessing resources from these agencies that are often similar to those they face when accessing government resources. Access to funding is also so often mediated by professionals who inhibit rather than support urban poor groups' decisions.

However, some international agencies have supported the organizations and federations of the urban poor directly – usually providing specific support for a particular federation in a country through their country office. More general support for the federations and SDI has been less common and mostly from international NGOs and private foundations, although some government aid programmes have supported them – for instance from Sweden, Norway and the UK. Many

27. See the development of Urban Poor Funds in many nations – Mitlin, Diana (2008), *Urban Poor Funds; Development by the People for the People*, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, Working Paper 18, IIED, London, 82 pages.

official development assistance agencies that have tried to support urban poor groups have struggled to reconcile the kinds of funding that best match the needs and priorities of the federations with conventional funding conditions and requirements. However, there is considerable progress in developing the means by which international funding can strengthen and support federations of the urban poor while also being accountable to the funders; most of the urban poor federations have set up their own Urban Poor Funds through which external donors can channel funding.<sup>(27)</sup> How would the effectiveness of development in reducing urban poverty be changed if just one per cent of official development assistance went to supporting representative organizations of the urban poor? This would also mean official agencies listening to and learning from these organizations – and helping them develop partnerships with local governments?

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## Human Settlements Group

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)

3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK

E-mail: [humans@iied.org](mailto:humans@iied.org) Website: <http://www.iied.org/human>

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