

Policy pointers

Urban social movements in low- and middle-income countries have developed cost-effective solutions to shelter problems and proposed ways to improve informal working conditions.

By coming together in wider networks and federations, local organisations have made a critical contribution to policy debates while helping to secure development for the most disadvantaged communities.

These movements and federations use many different strategies to develop and articulate their solutions and increase their visibility and voice to secure pro-poor political change. Policy makers need to support these efforts to be visible.

As the focus of global action shifts to recognising the importance of local government and civil society in the post-millennium development goal era, grassroots organisations and their networks provide the perfect opportunity for development assistance agencies to strengthen their portfolios and contribute to inclusive development.

Urban social movements, poverty reduction and social justice

Far too little attention is given to the ways in which organised urban poor communities can advance their needs and interests. Across Africa, Asia and Latin America, urban poor groups are forming federations and social movements that are active in shelter and livelihood struggles, challenging the ineffectiveness of top-down programmes and contributing their own solutions to reduce urban poverty and secure social justice. The work of these movements is relevant to development agencies and governments alike, whose current activities are failing to address the scale and depth of the challenge in urban areas. Policymakers in development assistance agencies can use aid more effectively by working with local grassroots organisations in low- and middle-income countries and their wider networks. In this way, they can help bring about change for the urban poor.

Over the last few years, street protesters pushing for political reform have drawn global attention in the Middle East and beyond. But at the same time, local organisations have been working in less visible ways to improve the living and working conditions of the world's lowest-income urban residents.

Globally, around one person in seven wakes up every morning to an unsafe home, little or no sanitation and/or inadequate water supplies. They live in informal settlements without secure tenure, and are generally ignored by local governments and formal service providers. Many earn a living in the low-paid formal and informal economies, often in dangerous conditions and without employment security or social protection. Their problems are compounded by exclusionary financial services, as banks refuse them loans and often deny them savings opportunities.

Residents take significant action

Yet, despite the scale of adversity they face, residents of these informal settlements have formed their own organisations to address their problems at local level. Given both the scale of these problems and their structural determinants, slum/shack dweller federations' and other community networks' efforts to test solutions, identify preferred alternatives and negotiate political inclusion are particularly significant.

Most low-income urban dwellers spend almost all their waking hours earning a living to take care of their family. The economies of urban centres depend on low-paid workers, who provide essential public services (water vendors, street cleaners, solid waste collectors), private services (hotel workers, hairdressers, childcare providers), retail services (vegetable vending, market trading), manufacturing (much of this in informal

workshops), personal services (domestic maids, gardeners, drivers) and security services (both public and private).

Although there has been limited public investment in the informal settlements where

most of these people live and work, the communities themselves have put considerable effort into upgrading their neighbourhoods. When this happens, new opportunities often emerge over time for

these regenerated settlements — particularly those in better locations — to become incorporated into more formal urban centres. However, the most vulnerable residents with the lowest income may then get displaced by higher-income groups moving into the area.

This briefing shares the lessons emerging from the work of the urban poor movements, bringing together experiences from both the shelter and livelihood movements. Together these represent millions of families across towns and cities in

low- and middle-income countries. But their significance extends beyond simple numbers; these movements support individuals to be agents for change, in the face of adversity and constraints on their time and resources. These strategies only happen at scale because they make sense to members and their families who invest their scarce time and resources into political struggles to improve their lives.

The work of these movements is relevant to development agencies and governments alike, whose current activities are failing to address the scale and depth of the challenge in urban areas. Development agencies contribute in valuable ways to meeting needs in some localities, but this is rarely on the scale needed, and urban poverty continues to grow. In the last decade alone, the populations of informal settlements in the towns and cities of low- and middle-income countries have increased by some 400 million.

What is the problem?

Sensationalist scenarios forecast a tidal wave of 'slum dwellers' who rise from dense shack settlements with open sewers to challenge

By joining together, local activists can plan and advocate for systemic change

Box 1. Urban poor support networks and representative organisations

- 1972:** SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) in India helps women in the informal economy to access work security, income security, food security and essential social security. Members gain individual and collective autonomy and self-reliance, both economically and in terms of their decision-making ability. SEWA's 1.3 million members across nine states are drawn from trade groups, particularly vendors and hawkers, home-based workers, labourers, service providers and rural producers.
- 1988:** ACHR (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights) is a coalition of Asian professionals, NGOs and community organisations that are committed to finding ways to secure inclusive urban development in the countries where their work is rooted. ACHR developed the Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA), which is now active in 165 urban centres across 19 nations. ACCA has supported over 1,000 community organisation initiatives in informal settlements since 2009, encouraging such organisations to come together to look at city-wide problems and work with local government to address them.
- 1993:** Red Lacre (*Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe*/Latin American and Caribbean Network) brings together 17 national and other emerging waste recycler movements, made up of self-managed participatory recyclers' associations. The network aims to achieve recognition and adequate remuneration for their members' work. This includes the legal right to be involved in the trade and its economic and social inclusion in the economy of each country, thus ensuring conditions of dignity. This in turn promotes improvements in quality of life, employment, growth of value chains and management systems by means of participative, democratic and inclusive processes.
- 1996:** SDI (Shack/Slum Dwellers International) was established by six national slum/shack dwellers' federations or networks to build the voice and agency of these communities, and women in particular. It aims to achieve inclusive cities that have the urban poor at the centre of strategies and decision making for equitable urban development. SDI now has active groups in 34 nations, including 15 national homeless and landless urban poor federations, formed by neighbourhood-based savings schemes.
- 1997:** WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), a global action-research-policy network, seeks to increase the voice of informal women workers by helping build and strengthen their organisations and alliances while also providing supportive policies and programmes and better statistical accounting and research. The network has 32 institutional members from informal worker membership-based organisations and 137 individual members who are researchers, statisticians, academics and professionals from international agencies and NGOs. WIEGO members come from 40 countries.

islands of privilege and so initiate an era of ghetto warfare and civil strife. Such representations are as problematic as the conditions they describe. They are used to marginalise the urban poor even more and strengthen an anti-poor rhetoric of criminality, subversion and functional exclusions. As significantly, these representations are more imaginary than real. Conditions are difficult, but in most urban centres, the residents of informal settlements spend much of their time improving their development options and in some cases negotiating for more effective state intervention. They invest in multiple efforts to improve their lives — and through their collective efforts have been able to secure more inclusive politics in many nations.

Faced with very poor living conditions and vulnerable livelihoods, the organised urban poor have been able to develop solutions that can work at scale and attract the interest and attention of local authorities, government agencies and other organisations to invest in inclusive cities. But these authorities, agencies and organisations have given far too little attention to the ways in which organised communities have been able to advance their needs and interests.

Coming together to challenge isolation and combat exclusion

Informal settlement dwellers and informal workers take many initiatives to address their disadvantage and exclusion. Most take place at the neighbourhood level or among small workers' associations. By joining together to form networks or federations, these local activists can plan and advocate for systemic change and enable broader-based coalitions to emerge.

The growth of networked associations and federations has allowed them to challenge the isolation experienced by individuals or very local-level initiatives. Networks prevent divisions among the urban poor and strengthen their vision, their capacity to act and their ability to press for political reform. Box 1 provides a summary of key global urban poor networks and associated professional support networks.

Strategies for success

The organised urban poor have secured success through many different strategies:

- In some Latin American cities, they have negotiated co-productive waste management and recycling service agreements with governments.
- In Colombia, the courts ruled that recyclers had to be included in solid waste management,

after finding that legislation was failing to take into account the 80,000 families working in the recycling industry.

- Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) have established urban poor or community development funds as a source of investment capital to initiate and expand community-led improvements in informal settlements. Such funds can blend different sources of capital (savings, government, donors) and ensure a central role for the organised urban poor.
- Over 125,000 homes have been constructed and serviced.
- The Philippine Homeless People's Federation has used disaster intervention to extend its scope and relevance, reaching thousands of households made homeless by floods and other disasters to organise groups, negotiate with authorities, upgrade homes and access basic services.
- The Self-Employed Women's Association and Red Lacre have worked with local groups to form cooperatives to advance the needs and interests of the urban poor to be more visible and negotiate with city authorities to have access to waste.

One of the key challenges the urban poor face is to be noticed and counted. As a result, many organisations and federations emphasise data gathering to combat invisibility (see Box 2, overleaf).

What are the implications for policymakers?

It is time to rethink our understanding of political change processes. There has been remarkably little development support for the representative organisations of slum/shack dwellers and low-income women workers, who are among the most disadvantaged groups. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of social movements to pro-poor policies in high-income countries, the financing of similar initiatives in low- and middle-income countries has been limited. However, the contribution of these federations and networks is critical. Not only do they identify positive strategies to support some of the lowest-income and most disadvantaged groups, they also negotiate tricky local politics and build a critical mass of political support by mobilising citizens.

Aid must be used effectively. Global and national representative networks provide a way for international development agencies to support grassroots initiatives. There are understandable

Box 2. Challenging invisibility through data collection

Gathering relevant information is a strategy shared by all urban poor federations and networks. They can use collected data to challenge the authorities' lack of attention to their members' homes and livelihoods, their refusal to acknowledge the urban poor's rights and entitlements, and the ways in which inappropriate laws and regulations penalise them. Becoming 'visible' enables the urban poor to demonstrate the contribution they make to their city.

SDI and ACHR groups map and enumerate their own neighbourhoods to improve access to services and housing improvements, producing valuable, tangible local knowledge with which they can engage local governments. Through this process, local groups organise and mobilise around a common goal, using specific tools that can help them develop relationships with local governments, leverage further funds and resources and develop platforms to engage in strategic policy change. SDI groups alone have gathered basic data in over 9,400 settlements, profiling all the informal settlements in 214 cities. They have also enumerated more than 4,000 settlements, collecting data from each household.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) worked closely with the International Labour Organisation to produce a Manual on surveys of informal employment and the informal sector for use by national statistical services in collecting labour force data. More recently they have been developing tools to monitor the state of the informal economy at the city scale, building on earlier work to analyse the impacts of global recession on informal workers.

difficulties for high-income country-based donors effectively financing small grassroots organisations and some experiences have not been positive. The global and national networks discussed in this briefing offer a real opportunity: they have the financial systems to manage development aid and the accountable processes to disburse funds with appropriately designed solidarity activities to maximise benefits.

There is a need for a shift to support local development. Post-millennium development goal discussions have recognised the vital roles of local governments and civil society in meeting

many key targets and the need to improve participation and representation and secure greater inclusion. Supporting the work of local grassroots organisations and their networking with peer groups is essential if the needs of the lowest-income and most disadvantaged groups are to be addressed.

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