

Policy pointers

Government data collection on informal settlements is often inadequate for planning and programming purposes. As a result, informal settlement dwellers are excluded from citywide plans and programmes, and governments use the lack of information to justify their failure to install basic services.

For decades, communities across Africa, Asia and Latin America have been collecting their own data on informal settlements, to help them and others understand and prioritise local needs. Standardising and aggregating this data will provide consistent and comparable analysis of living conditions.

Standardised data will help staff in local and central governments and international agencies who want to support urban poverty reduction in informal settlements to work with communities to plan interventions together.

By forging such a partnership of knowledge and expertise, policymakers and informal settlement dwellers can work together to create new urban development options that offering material improvements at the required scale.

Know Your City: community profiling of informal settlements

Urban poor communities across Africa, Asia and Latin America affiliated to Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) have begun a global campaign to standardise and aggregate the data they collect at settlement level. This data on their everyday lives and living conditions is a means to communicate the scale and extent of informality and deprivation in the spaces they occupy in their cities. Government planning departments often use inadequate data, which does not reflect the reality on the ground and is not fit for purpose. By standardising community data collection processes and management, SDI federations hope to scale up their leverage ability, and use this data to work with government staff to make real improvements to the areas where they live.

Evictions and exclusion are everyday realities for too many residents of informal settlements across the Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) network. In urban poor settlements, people may be forcibly transferred from their homes — both legally and illegally — and excluded from policy platforms that make decisions about the areas where they live.

Although planning for development is vital, and data is required, government departments with this responsibility have all too frequently avoided collecting information about informal settlements. Consequently available data is often inadequate for planning purposes.

Urban poor communities have been collecting data and producing knowledge about their everyday lives for more than three decades. SDI believes that standardising this data will help settlement dwellers establish partnerships with governments and allow them to collaborate with all agencies working on land, housing, infrastructure and other urban issues.

In a presentation at an SDI database workshop in Nairobi, SDI President Jockin Arputham outlined their vision:

“We need one SDI questionnaire, so we can use the information globally. We want to understand the magnitude of our power. We want to make different cases for different audiences. We want to collaborate with all the actors speaking about land, housing, infrastructure, all the people speaking about the urban. But we want to have a voice at these forums. We have asked how to use the data to establish partnerships with the government. What is the strength of your position when you speak to government? We can demonstrate that there are so many settlements in the city, that we need so much land to settle people in vulnerable areas, number of toilets in ratio to people, and so forth. Settlement profiles give us the big picture. For this reason we need to standardise the questions we ask.”¹

Standardised questions can provide citywide comparable settlement profiles, which in turn will

Governments can work with local communities to build up an understanding of local conditions

give the big picture, helping policymakers and settlement dwellers alike in their quest for better city planning.

How did it begin?

SDI groups began this work almost 30 years ago in India, with a community survey in Janata Colony in Mumbai in 1976. This was followed in

1987 with 'We, the invisible: a census of Indian pavement dwellers'.² The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) (an Indian NGO), the National Slum

Dwellers' Federation and Mahila Milan (a network of women's savings collectives) surveyed the populations who lived on the pavements of Mumbai to get accurate information on these families' backgrounds and living conditions.

Since then, SDI affiliates have collected information about thousands of informal settlements around the world. Residents no longer have to tolerate city maps that do not register their neighbourhoods. They can now be proactive in defining their own spaces and putting themselves on the map.

Why collect this information?

By collecting information and data about their everyday lives, these organised communities —

marginalised and often unrecognised by formal institutions — have catalysed incremental and large-scale upgrading of their living conditions. They have also built self-enumeration practices up to be one of the core strategies and pillars of practice for SDI affiliates.

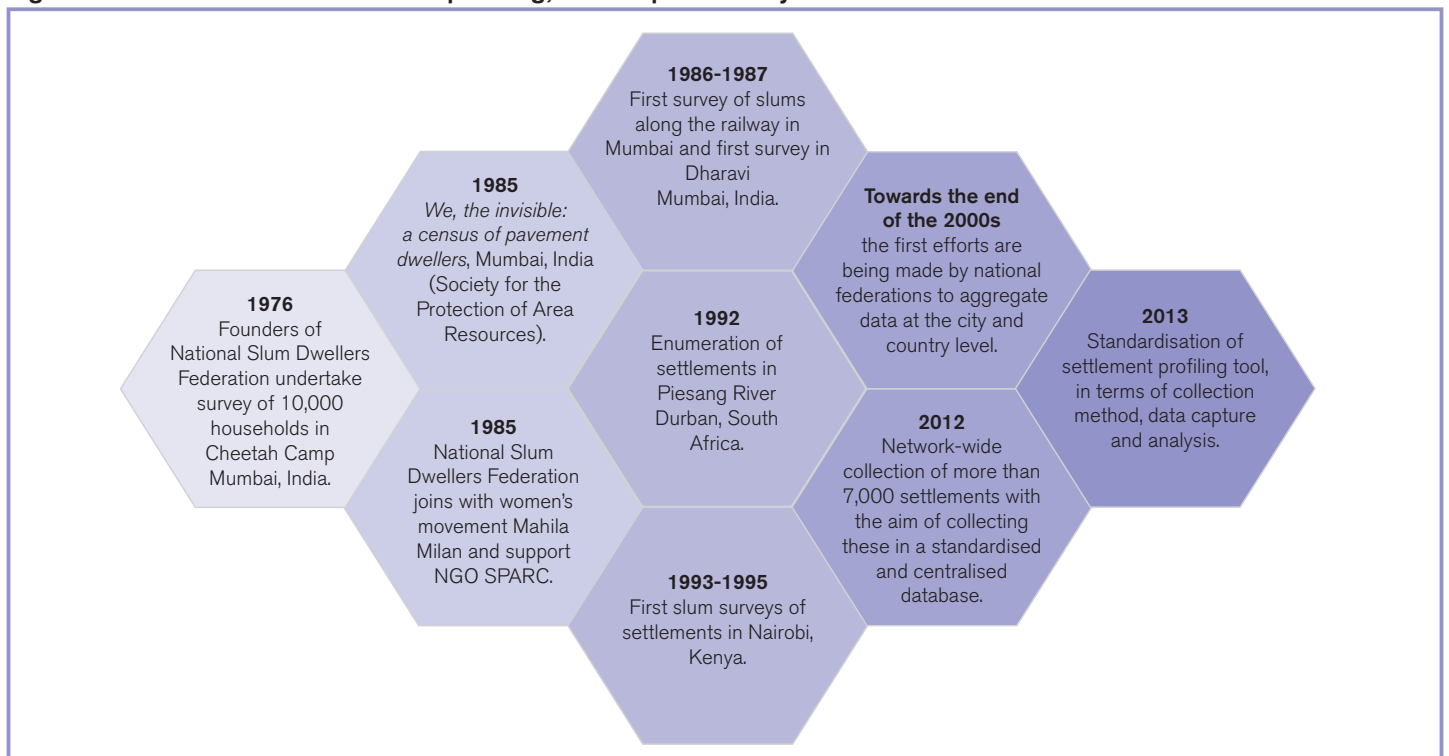
Collecting information is an effective tool for mobilisation at community and settlement level. It allows community members to open dialogues with city authorities and development partners around informal settlement upgrading, ensuring community participation in planning design and implementation.

Types of data collected

SDI affiliates collect three kinds of data:

Settlement profiles. Neighbourhood information across all informal settlements in their towns and cities to demonstrate the scale of problems to local authorities and other agencies. Profiling and mapping teams including federation leaders hold repeated consultations and discussions with residents. These profiles offer a snapshot of baseline information on the scale and nature of informality, assets and the conditions of poverty; they provide a detailed overview of a settlement, its inhabitants, brief history, land tenure, quality of housing, extent of provision of infrastructure and services, and the residents' main problems and priorities. This produces a rich set of data that captures the

Figure 1. The evolution of settlement profiling, 1976 to present day³



history, social, political and environmental conditions on the ground.

Household-level enumerations or censuses. Household questionnaires that commonly include questions about household size, income, assets and access to basic services and tenure security.

Mapping. Slum dwellers create and collate maps to complement settlement profiles and enumerations. These maps involve geographic information system plots of the settlement boundaries, structures and basic facilities such as toilets, schools and surface water.

Systematising and standardising

Data collection efforts were local in their focus until 2012, when the SDI network started to explore increased standardisation of its settlement profiles. By 2012, the changing scale of informality in cities of the global South and the challenge of increasingly globalised development agendas had reduced the visibility of the local context.⁵ SDI realised that consistency in data collection products across the network would allow its affiliates a stronger voice in national and international discussions.

Analysis⁶ of more than 7,000 settlement profiles collected by 15 SDI affiliates illustrates the challenges presented by existing data collection methods:

- Affiliates were collecting different kinds of data
- Definitions were inconsistent and imprecise
- Not all profiles had sufficient information for analysis, and some were incomplete
- Data was collected at various times, some profiles were undated
- There were possible duplicates
- The data often lacked location information and geo-spatial referencing
- Land area units and distances were imprecise
- Spatial definition was inconsistent and included neighbourhood identities, government delineations and historical boundaries.

The cause of these differences is understandable. Local communities actively participate in the design of their survey tools, so it is normal for questions to focus on a particular settlement and the concerns its community wishes to highlight. Yet, there are commonalities in informality and the conditions of poverty and deprivation. And although these were apparent to informal settlement dwellers and international policymakers, informal settlement residents

Table 1: A comparison of data collected by communities and others.

Data collected by SDI affiliated communities:	Data collected by others:
Remains 'alive' in the community.	Is analysed in complex ways and is rarely returned to the community.
Contributes to a realignment of power between the community and the authorities.	Reinforces the power of those outside the community and the gap between outside and inside knowledge.
Organises communities in a way that facilitates productive engagement with other urban development stakeholders (especially government).	Has no impact on community organisation.
Generates dialogue on planning at the community level.	Generates dialogue in professional and academic circles.
Comprehensively reaches across all residents in informal settlements and is a product of dialogue which reduces misinformation.	Often relies on samples and is prone to misinformation from communities (whether because of community strategy towards external agencies or simply suspicion).

Source: draws on Dobson et al. (2014).⁴

federated to SDI had not attempted to use their data to show such commonalities.

So SDI launched a global campaign across its network to develop a centralised and digitised slum/settlement profile database. Once the idea was floated, the federations were keen to participate. And while further engagement threw up more challenges, it also brought a recognition of the potential power of aggregation (that is, the bringing together of city profiles and settlement enumerations onto a common platform).

The power of aggregation

Given their marginal political and social standing, communities have engaged in data collection as much to strengthen a positive collective identity as to document their living conditions. Addressing this first objective has historically led them to seek the legitimisation of their data from external agencies. In the past, this was often in the form of a stamp or signature of approval from city officials, who would verify the data collection processes, and hence the resultant information.

The data world of the 21st century is vast and complex. For SDI even to stand still it has to upgrade its data collection systems. This awareness, combined the political understanding of the significance of aggregation, prompted the restructuring of approaches to data collection. Aggregation, the SDI affiliates realised, is also a strategy for legitimacy.

The quality and accuracy of SDI federations' data has been premised on the methodology and collection process that informal settlement dwellers use. Federations have refined this

methodology over the past three decades and shared it with each other across the global South through horizontal learning exchanges. A new shared profiling template is the first step to an advanced level of aggregation. SDI affiliates agreed the standardised profile in mid-2013 and 300 profiles have already been submitted to the central online database. They aim to have 1,000 by the end of 2014. The challenge now is to see how these findings can be brought together to provide insights across cities, countries and regions.

This new form of data use, underpinned by unified collection practices and agreed variables, is a considerable step forward for SDI. In addition to focusing on external validation and legitimisation (local authority officials will continue to be involved), SDI affiliates now draw on more rigorous scientific practice in terms of data collection, analysis and management. They aim to establish this core practice of community-led data collection as a replicable documented methodology.

SDI intends to challenge the practice of data collection by external agencies. Federation members have watched professionals come and extract information about living conditions in informal settlements, and then leave without being accountable to the residents who complete their questionnaires (see Table 1).

As federation members build up their skills and affiliates pool their data, aggregation is no longer a dream; it becomes a reality. Jean Pierre Elong-Mbassi, Secretary General of United Cities and Local Governments Africa (UCLG-A) supported SDI's call to action for the Know Your City campaign, requesting that local governments stop using second-hand data to understand reality. Instead, he called for "first-hand data from communities to be the mine of knowledge for the management of cities."⁷

What are the implications for policymakers?

Staff in local government, central government and international agencies who want to support urban poverty reduction in informal settlements can work with local communities to build up an understanding of local conditions, prior to planning interventions.

Communities using data collection modalities can use these to plan multi-scalar interventions. Mapping and enumeration enables local communities to determine their priorities and help city federations understand and support these needs, while profiling helps them understand the problems at city level and therefore interact more effectively with the authorities.

With standardised data, SDI federations can monitor the Millennium Development Goals more closely. For example, SDI has started developing its own sets of composite indicators that will draw on the standardised settlement profile and enumerations to monitor the sustainable development goals that are specific to urban and slum conditions.

As organised communities come to 'know their city',⁸ their sense of citizenship develops. They no longer have to listen to professionals and academics telling them about themselves. Instead, they can build a partnership of knowledge and expertise to create new urban development options that offer material improvements to the one billion people who need them.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

SDI is a network of community-based urban poor organisations in 33 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. It launched in 1996 when homeless and landless federations in six countries joined forces to find alternatives to evictions and influence the global urban development agenda.

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Notes

¹ Fieuw, W (2013) Internal report on SDI/SFI slum database project: East Africa workshop. Nairobi. / ² Society for the Protection of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) (1985) *We, the invisible: a census of pavement dwellers*. / ³ Timeline developed from various sources within SDI including: Bradlow, B (2013) Presentation at Global Land Tool Network meetings. The Hague; Makau, J (2014) *Knowing your city: The evolution of the urban discourse in Kenya and how grassroots data collection has influenced it*. Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual World Bank conference on land and poverty, Washington DC, April 2014; Community Organisations Resource Centre (CORC) (2009) *Profiles of the informal settlements within the Ekurhuleni metropolitan area; Informal Settlement Communities and The Shack Dwellers Federations of Namibia* (2009) *Community Land Information Program (CLIP): Profile of informal settlements in Namibia*. / ⁴ Dobson, S *et al.* (2014) *Negotiated planning: Breaking the implementation impasse in Kampala*. Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual World Bank conference on land and poverty, Washington DC, April 2014. / ⁵ Patel, S (2014) *Better measures for urban quality of life: The view from below*. See: www.sdi.net.org/blog/2014/02/3/better-measures-urban-quality-life-view-below / ⁶ The Santa Fe Institute (SFI), SDI's partner in the slum profile database project jointly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, reported these findings to SDI during a profiling workshop in Cape Town, South Africa in June 2013. Source: Author's field notes. / ⁷ MacPherson, A (2013) *Know your city: discussing community-collected data at World Urban Forum 7*. See: www.sdi.net.org/blog/2014/04/10/know-your-city-discussing-community-collected-data / ⁸ The Know Your City campaign is a global campaign for grassroots data collection and inclusive partnerships with local government for citywide community networks of urban poor (slum/informal settlement dwellers) communities to effect the upgrading and inclusion of informal settlements in cities. See: www.sdi.net.org/videos/110 and www.sdi.net.org/blog/2014/03/27/sdi-world-urban-forum-7