

What are slums and why do they exist?

If you do not have the misfortune of living in a slum, then chances are you don't often think about them. When driving by a slum, you will most probably be repulsed, but perhaps subconsciously, you are tempted to blame what you see on those who actually live there. Everyone, especially those who live there, wishes slums would just go away. But before change can come to the slums, change must come to our misconceptions about why slums exist in the first place.

Here is a formidable reality: In Nairobi, Kenya, 60 per cent of the population subsists in slums and squatter settlements. That 60 per cent is crowded onto only 5 per cent of the land – without adequate shelter, clean water or decent sanitation.

UN-HABITAT's *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* asserts that much can and must be done to improve the lives of the nearly one billion slum dwellers alive today. But in order to do so, governments, international aid agencies, and NGOs involved in facing the slum challenge must first come to grips with what slums really are, why they exist, and in fact, why the number of people living in such places is projected to double by 2030.

What is a slum?

Since it first appeared in the 1820s, the word slum has been used to identify the poorest quality housing, and the most unsanitary conditions; a refuge for marginal activities including crime, 'vice' and drug abuse; a likely source for many epidemics that ravaged urban areas; a place apart from all that was decent and wholesome. Today, the catchall term "slum" is loose and deprecatory. It has many connotations and meanings and is seldom used by the more sensitive, politically correct, and academically rigorous. But in developing countries, the word lacks the pejorative and divisive original connotation, and simply refers to lower quality or informal housing.

The term "slum" is used in the Report to describe a wide range of low-income settlements and poor human living conditions. A simple definition of a slum would be "a heavily populated urban area characterised by substandard housing and squalor". This straightforward description reflects the essential physical and social features of slums, but more meat needs to be put on these bones.

Slums in the traditional sense are housing areas that were once respectable – even desirable – but which deteriorated after the original dwellers moved on to new and better parts of the city. The condition of the old homes declined as they were progressively subdivided and rented out to lower income people.

Today, slums have come to include the vast informal settlements that are quickly becoming the most visible manifestation of urban poverty in developing world cities. Such settlements are known by many different names and are characterized by a variety of tenure arrangements. In all cases, however, the buildings found there vary from the simplest shack to permanent and sometimes surprisingly well-maintained structures, but what most slums share in common is a lack of clean water, electricity, sanitation and other basic services.

Slums can be divided into two broad types: "slums of hope" and "slums of despair". The first are settlements on an upward trend, largely made up of newer, usually self-built structures, and that are in or have recently been through a process of development, consolidation and improvement. The second group comprise "declining" neighbourhoods in which environmental conditions and services are in a process of seemingly inevitable decay. Unfortunately, the

history of slums in Europe, North America and Australia has demonstrated that, without appropriate interventions, slums of hope can all too easily yield to despair, a self-reinforcing condition that can continue for a very long time.

A UN Expert Group recently recommended to policy makers and international bodies what they consider to be a more “operational definition” of a slum, one that is intended to enable better targeting of improvement programmes aimed primarily at resolving the physical and legal problems faced by slum dwellers. According to these experts, a slum is an area that combines to various extents the following characteristics:

- Inadequate access to safe water;
- Inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure;
- Poor structural quality of housing;
- Overcrowding; and
- Insecure residential status.

These characteristics are being proposed because they are largely quantifiable and can be used to measure progress toward the Millennium Development Goal to significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

Why do slums exist?

However slums are defined, the question remains “why do they exist?” Slums come about because of, and are perpetuated by, a number of forces. Among these are rapid rural-to-urban migration, increasing urban poverty and inequality, insecure tenure, and globalisation – all contribute to the creation and continuation of slums.

Rapid rural-urban migration – Since 1950, the proportion of people working in developing country agriculture has declined by 20 to 30 per cent. The immigrant urban poor have largely moved from the countryside to the cities voluntarily, in order to exploit actual or perceived economic opportunities. Opportunities manifest in part, due to the growing urban informal sector, which is most spectacularly visible in the many growing and large-sale informal and squatter settlements in urban centres. In many cities the informal sector accounts for as much as 60 per cent of employment of the urban population and may well serve the needs of an equally high proportion of citizens through the provision of goods and services.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, 78 per cent of non-agricultural employment is in the informal sector making up 42 per cent of GDP. More than 90 per cent of the additional jobs in urban areas that will be created in the next decade will be in small-scale enterprises in the informal sector. All this is taking place during a period when the formal urban labour market is barely rising or even shrinking in most developing countries. The resulting explosive growth in the informal sector has been accompanied by poverty and the rapid growth of slums.

Political conflict also drives urban migration, not only within countries, but across borders as well. In Angola and Mozambique, urbanization has been driven largely by civil conflict which forced many rural residents to flee to relatively safe urban areas. About 4.5 million Mozambicans were displaced to urban areas during the 1980s.

UN-HABITAT’s projections show that by 2030, Africa will cease to be a rural continent, as more than half of its population will be in cities in towns – this in a matter of one generation.

But spiralling rural to urban migration is not limited to Africa alone. Over the last 40 years, Latin America has experienced such a rapid rate of urbanisation that today, 75 per cent of the population lives in urban areas. Asia, which is home to 80 per cent of humanity, is also urbanising and currently 36 per cent of Asians live in cities. Some of the world’s largest cities, such as Mumbai, Calcutta and Bangkok, have over 10 million people and between one-third and one-half of them live in slums.

The rapidity and enormous volume of this rural-to-urban migration intensifies slum formation. City planning and management systems are unable to adequately cope with the massive population influx.

While there are no reliable global estimates of urban poverty, it is generally presumed that there is currently less poverty in urban areas than in rural areas. However, the rate of growth of the world’s urban population living in

poverty is now considerably higher than that in rural areas. Urban poverty has been increasing in most developing countries subjected to structural adjustment programmes – programmes that often have had a negative impact on urban economic growth and formal employment opportunities. The absolute number of poor and undernourished in urban areas is increasing, as is the share of urban areas in overall poverty and malnutrition. In general, the locus of poverty is moving to cities, a process now recognised as the “urbanization of poverty”.

Insecure tenure – The lack of secure tenure is a primary reason why slums persist. Without secure tenure, slum-dwellers have few ways and little incentive to improve their surroundings. Secure tenure is often a precondition for access to other economic and social opportunities, including credit, public services, and livelihood opportunities. Study after study confirms that, in slums where residents enjoy secure tenure to land and housing – whether formal or informal – community-led slum improvement initiatives are much more likely to be undertaken and, in fact, succeed.

Globalisation – Slum formation is closely linked to economic cycles, trends in national income distribution, and in more recent years, to national economic development policies. The Report finds that the cyclical nature of capitalism, increased demand for skilled versus unskilled labour, and the negative effects of globalisation – in particular, global economic booms and busts that ratchet up inequality and distribute new wealth unevenly – contribute to the enormous growth of slums.

The Report notes that, in the past, the global economic cycles were responsible for creating the famous slum areas of major cities in today’s developed world and they are very likely to do the same again in the developing world.

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