

Slum Dwellers to double by 2030: Millennium Development Goal Could Fall Short

***UN-HABITAT report finds many Governments ill-equipped to face Slum Challenge
New approaches to urban planning and improved management policies urgently needed***

Nearly one billion people alive today – one in every six human beings – are slum dwellers, and that number is likely to double in the next thirty years, according to UN-HABITAT's new publication **The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003**.

Unprecedented urban growth in the face of increasing poverty and social inequality, and a predicted increase in the number of people living in slums (to about 2 billion by 2030), mean that the United Nations Millennium Development goal to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 should be considered the absolute bare minimum that the international community should aim for, according to the report to be released in October 2003.

The locus of poverty is moving from the countryside to cities, in a process now recognized as the "urbanization of poverty." The absolute number of poor and undernourished in urban areas is increasing, as are the numbers of urban poor who suffer from malnutrition, say the report's authors.

This movement towards "full urbanisation", which has already been completed in Europe and in North and most of South America, means that most new population growth will be absorbed by the cities of the developing world, which will double in size by 2030. Three quarters of this growth will be in cities with populations of 1 to 5 million people, and in smaller cities of under 500 000 people. The report finds that, alarmingly, there is currently little or no planning to accommodate these people or provide them with services.

Yet the United Nations' goal of "Cities without Slums" is not unattainable, according to the report, which calls for the vigorous implementation of urban planning and management policies designed to prevent the emergence of slums, along with slum-upgrading and a commitment on the part of governments to reduce poverty.

Economic Trends at the Heart of Slum Growth

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, 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 system was responsible for creating the famous slum areas of major cities in today's developed world and it is very likely to do the same again in the developing world.

Slum development is fuelled by a combination of rapid rural-to-urban migration, spiralling urban poverty, the inability of the urban poor to access affordable land for housing and insecure land tenure.

More than half of the twenty nine case study cities covered in the UN-HABITAT report indicate that slum formation will continue throughout Africa, and in many parts of the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia.



Focus should be on poverty

While traditional approaches to the slum problem have tended to concentrate on improvement of housing, infrastructure and physical environmental conditions, the report's authors advocate a more comprehensive approach to addressing the issue of employment for slum dwellers and the urban poor in general.

Slums are largely a physical manifestation of urban poverty, a fact that has not always been recognized by past policies aimed either at the physical eradication or the upgrading of slums. For this reason, future policies must go beyond the physical dimension of slums by addressing the problems that underlie urban poverty.

Slum policies should be integrated with broader, people-focused urban poverty reduction policies that deal with the varied aspects of poverty, including employment and incomes, shelter, food, health, education and access to basic urban infrastructure and services.

Improving incomes and jobs for slum dwellers, however, requires robust national economic growth, which is itself dependent upon effective and equitable national and international economic policies, including trade. Current evidence suggests that globalisation in its present form has not always worked in favour of the urban poor and has, in fact, exacerbated their social and economic exclusion in some countries.

"Improving the effectiveness of slum policies can be achieved by fully involving the urban poor and those traditionally responsible for providing slum housing," says Mrs. Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT. "But this will require more inclusive urban policies on the part of the public sector which must be made more accountable for the supply of urban public goods and services to all."

There is abundant evidence of innovative solutions developed by the poor to improve their own living environments, leading to the gradual consolidation of informal settlements. Where appropriate upgrading policies have been put in place, slums have become increasingly socially cohesive, offering opportunities for security of tenure, local economic development and improvement of incomes among the urban poor. UN-HABITAT's Global Campaign on Secure Tenure is closely linked with policy intervention in slums. The campaign is designed to promote the commitment of Governments to providing "Adequate Shelter for All", one of the two main goals of the Habitat agenda. Providing secure tenure is seen as essential for a sustainable shelter strategy, and is a vital element in the promotion of housing rights.

In addition, the quality of urban governance plays a central role in the eradication of poverty and slums, and the creation of prosperous, more liveable cities. UN-HABITAT's Global Campaign on Urban Governance, launched in 1999, envisions and promotes "inclusive cities", cities in which everyone, regardless of their economic status, gender, race, ethnicity or religion, is enabled and empowered to fully participate in the economic and political opportunities that cities have to offer.

"For slum policies to be successful, the kind of apathy and lack of political will that has characterized both national and local levels of government in many countries in recent decades needs to be reversed," says Tibaijuka. "Much more political will is needed at all levels of government to confront the huge scale of slum problems that many cities face today, and will no doubt face in the foreseeable future."

Investment in Infrastructure Key

At the core of efforts to improve the environmental habitability of slums and enhance economically productive activities is the need to invest in infrastructure – to provide water and sanitation, electricity, access roads, footpaths and waste management. Low-income housing and slum-upgrading policies need to pay attention to the financing of citywide infrastructure development. Having said that, however, the main focus of policy makers must be on poverty reduction and the up-grading of slum communities.

The report finds that upgrading existing slums is more effective than resettling slum dwellers and should become the normal practice in future slum initiatives. It goes on to state that the eradication of slums and resettlement of slum dwellers can create more problems than are solved. Eradication and relocation unnecessarily destroy a

large stock of housing affordable to the urban poor and the new housing provided has frequently turned out to be unaffordable, with the result that relocated households move back into slum accommodation.

Slums of Hope Rather than Despair

UN HABITAT's The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003 finds that there is, despite the current crisis, abundant evidence of innovative solutions developed by the poor to improve their own living environments, becoming more socially cohesive when appropriate upgrading policies are put in place. Such policies offer opportunities for more secure tenure, local economic development and improvement of livelihoods and incomes for the urban poor. They can transform the settlements in which the urban poor struggle to survive from filthy ramshackle housing developments characterised by disease and insecurity to upgraded, well-maintained homes, where families and communities can thrive. This transformation - from slums of despair to slums of hope – is, according to the Report, not only conceivable given the right policies, but highly achievable.

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