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Today's Slums: Myths versus Reality

If the apathy that has pervaded and impeded slum policy to date is to be overcome, many of the misconceptions and myths about slums and slum dwellers must also be shattered. Some common misperceptions about slums and the people who live in them are explored in the new UN-HABITAT publication ***The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements***, which presents a cogent and comprehensive view of the realities of slum dwelling in the 21st century.

Myth #1: Slums serve no purpose.

- Slums provide accommodation for urban workers of all kinds and are the sites of industries that have customers throughout the city. Slums provide low-cost housing and low-cost services for rapidly expanding low-income urban populations, and also serve as networks of social support for new migrants to the cities.

Myth #2: All Slums are the same, and all slum-dwellers are poor.

- Slums are places where it is easier to see poor people in high concentrations and under the worst conditions, but even the most exclusive and expensive areas will have some low-income people. Slums are a physical and spatial manifestation of increasing urban poverty and intra-city inequality; however, slums do not hold all of the urban poor, nor are all slum dwellers poor.
- Slums and poverty are indeed related and in fact mutually reinforcing, but the relationship is not always direct or simple. Slum dwellers are not a homogeneous population. While the majority of slum dwellers are among the most economically disadvantaged, some people with reasonable incomes actually choose to live within or on the edges of slum communities. There can be any number of reasons for making this choice, but it is usually because they are involved in or own businesses located near or in the slum area.
- The general occupational profiles of urban slum dwellers have not been systematically studied for most of the cities in the world. There are often fallacies held – by urban residents and policy makers alike – that slums are home to domestic servants, rag pickers, sex workers, manual labourers and criminals – people with very low or almost no education – people with dysfunctional households or no households at all. Such fallacies have given rise to the idea that these settlements are “urban sores”, with almost no positive contribution towards the normal functioning of the city.
- A recent survey conducted by a non-governmental organisation, Shelter Associates, in partnership with a community based federation of slum-dwellers, Baandhani and the local municipal corporation in Pune, India, tells a different story. The survey conducted across 211 slums revealed that the occupations vary from government employees, ammunition factory employees, painters, drivers, small entrepreneurs or even office-goers. A majority of the women in slums work as housemaids, sweepers, vendors and even government employees. The survey also revealed the presence of a small number of computer professionals, teachers, nurses and doctors in some of the slums.

Myth #3: There never used to be slums.

- Today, the vast majority of slums are found in the developing world, but it is important to remember that in the early years of urbanisation and industrialisation in the Western world, urban conditions were at least as bad as those found anywhere today and slums were just as widespread. In the 19th century, industrialization in Europe and America led to rapid urbanisation. The population of London went from about 800,000 in 1800 to over 6.5 million in 1900; during the same period, Paris grew from one-half to over 3 million; and by 1900 New York's population had swelled to 4.2 million. This explosion meant that

World Population in Billions

the poor lived in dark, airless and unsanitary tenements, often without windows, where they were regularly exploited by rapacious landlords and politicians.

Myth #4: Slums are the fault of slum dwellers who do not want to help themselves.

- An important message of the UN-HABITAT Report is that slums and urban poverty are not just a manifestation of a population explosion and demographic change, or even the vast impersonal forces of globalisation. Slums must be seen as the result of a failure of housing policies, laws and delivery systems, as well as of national and urban policies. Although urban centres throughout the world now hold more of the 'poorest of the poor' than ever before, the urban poor are usually able to help themselves and to access official assistance more than their rural counterparts. Indeed, the immigrant poor have largely moved to city slums voluntarily in order to find jobs.

Myth #5: Slum dwellers are a burden on the economy.

- In many cities, as much as 60 per cent of employment is in the "informal" sector of the urban population. This sector often serves the needs of an equally high proportion of citizens through the provision of goods and services. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector accounts for 78 per cent of non-agricultural employment and 42 per cent of GDP. More than 90 per cent of additional jobs in urban areas in the next decade will be created in micro- and small-scale enterprises in the formal sector.
- While many developing countries have regarded the informal sector as something illegal to be eliminated because it "undercuts" the formal sector, which is required to comply with labour and safety laws and pay taxes, another school of thought is that reducing onerous regulations and dissolving large under-productive enterprises can unlock the creative power of micro-entrepreneurs and provide goods and services at lower costs. With assistance from international agencies that have sought to encourage poverty reduction and micro-enterprises, a few countries have tried to support and empower the sector as a start-up of the economy in which innovation can flourish.
- Numerous studies in both developed and developing countries have documented the potential significance of slums as incubators for upward social and economic mobility. Upward mobility does not necessarily mean that people will move out of slums. On site physical transformations in slum communities is in many cases, evidence of socio-economic upgrading. In this regard, support networks appear to be strongly conditioned by spatial proximity and cultural background.

Myth #6: Crime emanates from the slums.

- Slums are often associated with crime, but in some places this is more a fabrication of the media than a reality. In cities with high crime rates, poor people suffer more from violence and petty theft than rich people. In fact, violence and security issues are regarded by poor people in many cities as considerably more important than housing or income issues. The fear of crime has changed the nature of cities with high levels of violence (especially in America and Africa); altering the open, interactive nature of the community. There are also added dangers of crime for slum-dwellers not necessarily because there are more criminals in slums than elsewhere, but because their homes are less secure and there are likely to be fewer police on patrol than in wealthier areas. However, studies show that inclusive, participatory strategies such as neighbourhood policing can minimise crime and violence, even in slums.

Myth #7: Squatters are just people who don't want to pay rent.

- In fact, one quarter of the world's squatters do pay rent. Squatting actually refers to the legality of land ownership, not to the issue of rent payment at all. Squatters are people who occupy land or buildings without the permission of the owner. Squatting means that an occupant has no claim to the land that he or she occupies that can be upheld in law. In some countries, squatting has been a legitimate way of occupying unused lands. In many countries, squatters have eventually gained some form of informal title that is recognised by the community. In some countries, such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Kenya and parts of India, squatter housing is, in fact, rented from informal sector landlords, and ironically, given the low level of services available and the poor quality of the housing, these people actually pay more per square foot than the rich.

Myth #8: The poor contribute nothing to society and nothing good ever came out of the slums

- The poor are currently the largest producers of shelter and builders of cities in the world. It is generally acknowledged that most slums are not the social wastelands of the popular imagination at all, but provide livelihoods, social networks and a tolerable standard of living for the residents. Slum dwellers constitute a complex political mosaic and have an embedded sense of community participation.
- It is, in fact, hard to overestimate the contribution that slum dwellers have made to cultural life in the twentieth century, which has included the main musical and dance movements of the twentieth century: jazz, blues, rock and roll, reggae, funk and hip-hop music. In France, the ballads of Edith Piaf were spawned in the slums and moved a generation of listeners. Break dancing in New York, fado in Portugal, flamenco in Spain and rebetika in Athens – all were born in slums – as were township music and soukuss in Africa, as well as various Latin American dances in Brazil and Argentina. Contemporary Africa has been the inspiration for Meja Mwangi's novels of slum life in Nairobi, Ghanaian Kwei Armah's novels including *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; and the legacy of legendary Afro-Funk pioneer, Nigerian, Fela Kuti. Most recently, the list extends to include the award winning Brazilian film, by Fernando Meirelles, *City of God*.

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