



Briefing Note

Global Slum Dwellers

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1. Introduction

At a minimum, there are 881 million slum dwellers in the world according to UN-Habitat.¹ This is an increase from the 689 million slum dwellers worldwide in 2000.² Whilst in real terms the number of slum dwellers has increased since the millennium, the *proportion* of people living in slums has declined. In 2000, 39% of the developing world's urban population lived in slums, down to 30% by 2014.³ In all regions except Western Asia and Oceania, the proportion of slum dwellers has declined over this period (see Figure 1). The most dramatic reductions were across South and East Asia. There is, then, cause for optimism. We know it is possible to improve the lives of slum dwellers, because it has been done.

But there is much to do. Slums exist in all regions of the Global South: they are not specific to one continent or area. Sub-Saharan Africa has the greatest proportion of slum dwellings, with over half its urban population live in slums. In other regions, the figure ranges from a fifth to a third. Slum conditions are therefore prominent across all regions and warrant urgent action.

Adopting only a regional focus fails to tell the whole story. Certain countries have a particularly high rate of slum dwellers. Haiti, for example, has triple the average proportion of slum dwellers to the Caribbean and Latin America.⁴ This is linked to its high rate of urbanisation and the effects of natural disasters and climate change. Bangladesh has the highest number of slum dwellers in South Asia. Dhaka, its capital, alone has over 5000 separate slums.⁵

2. Definition(s)

Broadly, a 'slum' is a form of *urban* poverty in a *developing* region. A 'slum', for the purpose of analysis, is not rural and is not in the developed world; however both contain households which exhibit 'slum-like' characteristics.

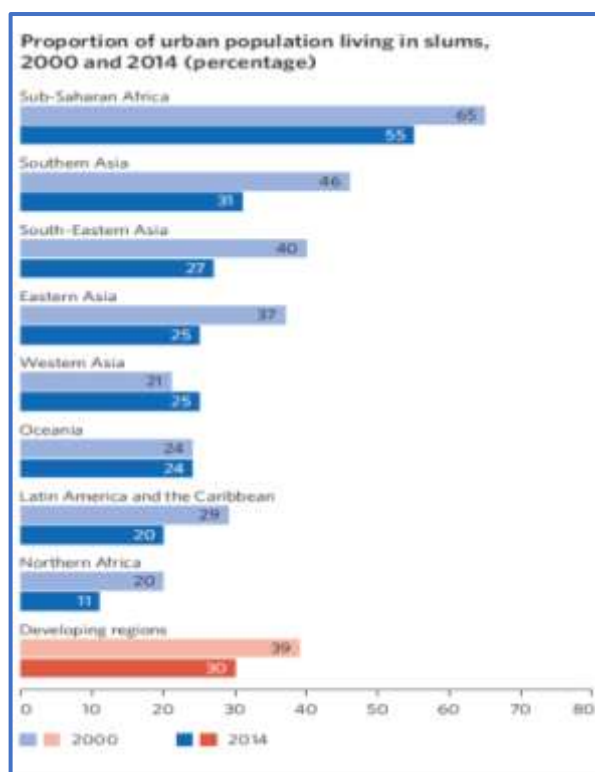


Figure 1: United Nations, 'The Millennium Development Goals Report', 2015, p. 60

¹ World Urban Campaign, 'Slum Almanac 2015/2016: Tracking Improvement in the Lives of Slum Dwellers', 2016, p. 2.

² Ibid., p. 8.

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵ Kamruzzaman, M., and Hakim, M.A., 'Socio-economic Status of Slum Dwellers: An Empirical Study on the Capital City of Bangladesh', *American Journal of Business and Society* 1:2 (2016), pp. 14-15.

Within this frame, UN-Habitat defines a ‘slum’ as when a household possesses *at least one* of the following ‘deprivations’⁶:

- Lack of access to **improved water source** – meaning a source protected from outside contamination, e.g. faecal matter
- Lack of access to **improved sanitation facilities** – meaning a facility that ‘hygienically separates human waste from human contact’, e.g. a flush toilet, or a latrine connected to a closed sewer or septic tank
- Lack of **sufficient living area** – meaning no more than three people to a room that is at least four square metres, or six people to eight square metres etc.
- Lack of **housing durability** – meaning being built on a non-hazardous location and a structure able to withstand various climactic conditions
- Lack of **secure tenure** – meaning right to effective protection against unlawful eviction

The statistics cited in the Introduction are calculated by UN-Habitat using this definition, though not all five criteria could be assessed in all locations. The final part of the definition (secure tenure) was not assessed at all as criteria were not established. Thus, the above statistics are a global *minimum*, and the scale of slum dwellings is in fact higher, likely much higher.

The UN-Habitat definition is seen as too restrictive by some. In reality, ‘the local context matters and different countries adopt their own definitions’.⁷ The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, for example, categorises an area as a ‘slum’ simply if it is ‘unplanned’.⁸ Further, what a slum dwelling looks like is highly variable. Within Dhaka alone, slum homes vary from thatched huts, to sturdier kacha houses (mixture of wood, mud and straw), through to pukka houses (conferring solid construction material such as stone or cement).⁹ In this way, while UN-Habitat’s precise definition is helpful in gathering data, it is important to be cognisant of local understanding. The five-part criteria are best used as a reference of common characteristics, rather than a rigid formula.

3. Slum Dwellers and Homelessness

There is debate over whether to define slum dwellers as ‘homeless’. Slum dwellers *are* included in the Framework established by the Institute of Global Homelessness.¹⁰ Bush-Geertsema, Culhane and Fitzpatrick, who composed the Framework, at a base level consider an individual to be ‘homeless’ if they are ‘living in severely inadequate housing...’¹¹ Their understanding of ‘inadequate housing’ shares many of the ‘household deprivations’ identified in the above definition of a slum by the UN: this includes insecure tenure, lack of protection from adverse weather, poor provision of services and more.

Despite this, the authors urge a distinction within this broad definition between the literal ‘homeless’ and the ‘inadequately housed’: slum dwellers are the latter. This draws a

⁶ World Urban Campaign, ‘Slum Almanac’, pp.2-3.

⁷ Bird, J., Montebruno, P., and Regan, T., ‘Life in a slum: understanding living conditions in Nairobi’s slums across time and space’, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 33:3 (2017), p. 497.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

⁹ Kamruzzaman, M., and Hakim, M.A., ‘Socio-economic Status of Slum Dwellers: An Empirical Study on the Capital City of Bangladesh’.

¹⁰ This is in Category 3H: ‘People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, *including those living in slums/informal settlements*’ (my emphasis).

¹¹ Bush-Geertsema, V., Culhane, D., and Fitzpatrick, S., ‘Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness’, *Habitat International* 55 (2016), p. 125.

meaningful distinction between people living **without accommodation** (or in temporary accommodation as a result), and people living in **inadequate accommodation**. While this distinction is contentious, the literal ‘homeless’ suffer from the UN’s ‘household deprivations’ because they lack accommodation entirely, rather than because the accommodation they do have is bad. There are similarities between the needs of those without any accommodation and those in inadequate accommodation, but there are also differences which need to be acknowledged at this definitional level.

This distinction is also useful as ‘homeless’ people lack organisations and networks which advocate for them. In contrast, slum dwellers have been comparatively well-represented at governmental and supranational level for several decades (see ‘The International Response’, below). Any organisation seeking to end homelessness therefore needs to consider how not to subsume the unique and specific needs of those **without accommodation** into the better-represented discussion concerning **inadequate accommodation**, whilst still tying both into the wider theme of affordable housing.

4. Causes

The reasons behind the prevalence of slum dwellings are many but three are primary: population growth; rapid urbanisation; and poor planning.

Populations are growing across the developing world, and urban housing is not keeping up with demand. This is why the number of individuals living in slums has increased, even as the proportion of urban residents living in slums has fallen significantly since 2000.

Rapid rural-urban migration in the Global South has and continues to put intense stress on housing stock and the capacity of water, sanitation and hygiene. Ninety per cent of urban growth worldwide is happening in developing countries. Already, half of people in Asia live in urban areas, and the urban populations of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are expected to double in the next 20 years.¹² However, urbanisation does hold opportunity for the poor. Employment opportunities are greater in cities: urban employment in Africa grew at twice the general rate over the past decade.¹³ Cities also allow for greater mobility and productivity, as well as proximity to services.

The continued expansion of slums is a result of a failure to plan for this urbanisation – a failure of government and the private sector. For example, house building has often focused on provision for the middle classes rather than the poor. Mass-housing projects, usually undertaken on greenfield sites on the peripheries of cities, have proven unaffordable to most of the urban population. The affluent have tended to ‘downgrade’ their property value by moving away from the city centre but into this new, better quality housing, leaving poorer residents in slums. The minister of Human Settlements in South Africa has pledged to build 1.5 million such homes by 2019, and similar initiatives have been completed or are underway in Ethiopia, Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe and elsewhere.¹⁴ Mass-housing is preferred to upgrading slums (e.g. by improving sanitation) as it is cheaper and quicker to carry out. But in the meantime, those in slums continue to live in substandard accommodation. More comprehensive planning that accounts for the needs of the poor is required.

¹² World Urban Campaign, ‘World Cities Report 2016: Abridged Edition’, 2016, p. 1.; UN-Habitat, ‘Slum Almanac’, p. 8.

¹³ UN-Habitat, ‘World Cities Report 2016’, p. 8.

¹⁴ Croese, S., Cirolia, L.R., and Graham, N., ‘Towards Habitat III: Confronting the disjuncture between global policy and local practice on Africa’s “challenge of slums”’, *Habitat International* 53 (2016), p. 240.

There are other factors causing slum dwellings. The cost of land in many urban areas is prohibitive, often exceeding 40% of total property prices.¹⁵

The prevalence of idle land, hoarded by investors speculating on rising value, inhibits an increase in housing stock. In both China and the Philippines, levies were issued on such investors with success.¹⁶ Conflict also causes an increase in slum dwelling. As a result of war, Iraq experienced a 60% increase in the slum population between 2000 and 2014.¹⁷

5. Consequences

The human cost of living in slums is considerable. Disease and ill-health are linked to slum-living, primarily due to two factors common to slums: poor sanitation infrastructure and unclean water. Diarrhoea in particular is prominent: 88% of all diarrhoea infections worldwide are attributed to these two factors.¹⁸ In a survey of slum dwellers in Dhaka, 78% of respondents had suffered from disease in the previous two months, the most frequent being diarrhoea, then fever.¹⁹ Despite the fact two-thirds of these respondents used improved sanitation facilities, the pits and open latrines used by a minority of the population impacted on the health of the entire community.²⁰ In Nairobi, just two thirds of slum dwellers have access to piped water, and only 25% to hygienic sewage disposal.²¹ While unclean water and inadequate sanitation are hardly exclusive to slums, the densely populated environment of cities facilitates the diffusion of pathogens which spread disease. Thus, 'The urban poor have a lower life expectancy at birth, and a higher infant mortality rate than both the rural poor and the urban nonpoor.'²²

Slum dwellers are also prone to suffer from non-communicable disease. The contraction of this type of disease is not dependent on contact with others, and so points to an overall lower level of health among slum dwellers than the general population. A study of the Pau da Lima favela in Salvador, Brazil, found that slum residents are twice as likely to suffer from diabetes and are also more likely to be obese or overweight. A greater proportion of slum residents also tend to smoke.²³

Slum dwellers are more likely to experience tenure insecurity and face eviction or the threat of eviction. Crime and violence also tends to be higher in slums.²⁴ Further, children and young people are more susceptible to the higher rate of disease. Those with disabilities also suffer due to the unaccommodating infrastructure of slums.

Slum dwellers tend to have fewer educational and employment opportunities than those in formal accommodation. However, slum dwellers often have greater opportunity than the rural poor. The higher population density and greater mobility of cities improves access to

¹⁵ McKinsey Global Institute, 'A blueprint for addressing the global affordable housing challenge – Executive Summary', p. 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹⁷ United Nations, 'The Millennium Development Goals Report', 2015, p. 60.

¹⁸ Duflo, E., Galiani, S., and Mobarak, M., 'Improving Access to Urban Services for the Poor: Open Issues and a Framework for a Future Research Agenda', *J-PAL*, October 2012, p. 14.

¹⁹ Kamruzzaman, M., and Hakim, M.A., 'Socio-economic Status of Slum Dwellers: An Empirical Study on the Capital City of Bangladesh', p. 15.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

²¹ Bird, Monteburano and Regan, 'Life in a slum: understanding living conditions in Nairobi's slums across time and space', p. 515.

²² Duflo, E., Galiani, S., and Mobarak, M., 'Improving Access to Urban Services for the Poor: Open Issues and a Framework for a Future Research Agenda', p. 14.

²³ Snyder, R.E. et al, 'Differences in the Prevalence of Non-Communicable Disease between Slum Dwellers and the General Population in a Large Urban Area in Brazil', *Tropical Medicine and Infectious Disease* 2:3 (2017).

²⁴ World Urban Campaign, 'Slum Almanac', p. 4.

schools. In Nairobi, 94% of children attend primary school in slum areas, the same level as attend in the city's formal housing population. This is 10% higher than those in rural areas.²⁵ Similarly, employment opportunities are often greater in slum areas than rural parts, which accounts for the increase in rural-urban migration in recent decades. Due to the greater connectivity of cities, slum dwellers are also more likely to have access to electricity, which improves quality of life. Some 85% of respondents to the survey of slum dwellers in Dhaka owned a television.²⁶

Of course, not all cities offer such opportunities or to the same degree, and employment especially is often precarious. Slum dwellers are usually at the sharp end of urban poverty, and do not share significantly in the wealth-creation of developing cities. Countries with large slum populations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, are among the most unequal in the world. Yet it is important to recognise that slums 'are not static areas of poor living conditions'.²⁷ Some slums have relatively prosperous residents: in Nairobi, half of slum dwellers have a secondary education.²⁸ This underlines the striking variety in slums and slum dwellers, and the importance of local context. There is great disparity even within one city. In Nairobi, the Mukuru area contains slum houses which overwhelmingly lack solid roofs or walls, usually owned by the very poorest. In contrast, in Kayole the construction is mostly of a higher quality and properties are larger than average, raising living standards.²⁹ To understand the consequences of slum-living therefore requires nuance and localised investigation.

6. The International Response

The international community has responded to the prevalence of slums primarily by setting targets through the United Nations. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) included Target 7.D: 'By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.'³⁰ This was achieved, with over 320 million people experiencing improvement in at least one of the four measurable criteria which define a slum: improved water, improved sanitation, more durable housing or less crowded conditions.³¹

In 2015, the UN radically extended this ambition through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Target 11.1 is most relevant: 'By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums.'³² In addition, SDG 1 (on ending poverty) and SDG 6 (on improved sanitation) apply to slums. Moreover, the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in October 2016 promoted a 'housing at the centre' approach to ending global poverty which entails the improvement or eradication of slums.

²⁵ Bird, Montebruno and Regan, 'Life in a slum: understanding living conditions in Nairobi's slums across time and space', p. 515.

²⁶ Kamruzzaman and Hakim, p. 15.

²⁷ Bird, Montebruno and Regan, 'Life in a slum: understanding living conditions in Nairobi's slums across time and space', p. 498.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.514.

³⁰ United Nations, 'The Millennium Development Goals Report', p. 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³² World Urban Campaign, 'Slum Almanac', p. 2.

7. Strategies for Achieving SDG 11.1

While significant improvements were made in achieving MDG Target 7.D, the world faces a huge challenge to achieve SDG Target 11.1. McKinsey estimates that to replace all substandard housing (of which slums form a major part) by 2025 as well as to keep up with growing demand, around \$16 trillion is required, including up to \$3 trillion of public funding.³³

The main strategy advocated by the UN to improve the lives of slum dwellers is Slum Upgrading – this is explicitly referenced in Target 11.1 ('...upgrade slums'). Slum Upgrading means an in-situ improvement in housing and surrounding infrastructure; greater access to social provision; and ensuring secure tenure. For example, an upgrade might include the introduction of a tile or concrete roof or hygienic sanitation.

One widely-championed implementation mechanism is a Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme (PSUP). This has been advocated by the UN since the Habitat II Conference in 1996, and was again enshrined in the SDGs through Target 11.3 which agreed an 'inclusive' approach to urbanisation and 'capacity for participatory... planning and management in all countries.'³⁴ This approach is distinct in incorporating all stakeholders in the planning process, facilitating collective interest. Improved water and sewage systems cannot usually be implemented unilaterally, so requires coordination among neighbours. Direct community involvement also manifests in a state-financed Community Managed Fund controlled by residents for improvements in their area; this can comprise up to 10% of the PSUP funds. Across the African, Caribbean and Pacific region, 35 states are implementing a PSUP.

However, as discussed above many governments and private firms are pursuing mass-housing projects on the peripheries of cities as a quicker and cheaper way of meeting demand. Even though current strategies are failing to offer housing for the poor, some argue that such direct supply may be a more effective approach than Slum Upgrading. First, the scale of the housing challenge demands more than just incremental change; slum upgrading is slow. Second, improving informal settlements such as slums is disproportionately expensive compared to improving formal housing developments. As slums are usually unplanned, extending infrastructure such as sanitation and water through upgrading programmes costs around three times more than in planned developments.³⁵ Third, slums are an inefficient use of prime urban land. As the building quality is poor, they are predominantly one or two stories high.³⁶ In theory, high density urban living in structures with a large capacity (e.g. high-rise blocks) holds opportunities for the poor. They can provide low-cost housing right next to employment and educational opportunity. In contrast, slums (whether upgraded or not) are an inefficient use of urban land, housing one family on a plot which could house ten to twenty times more. Trying to make them habitable, or slightly less inhabitable, may be a bad way of improving the lives of slum dwellers and future slum dwellers.

Part of Slum Upgrading, and central to SDG Target 11.1, is guaranteeing secure tenure. Insecure tenure means facing the threat of forced and/or arbitrary eviction, often leading to homelessness. The UN estimates 70% of the world's people-to-land relationships are not documented. Women face particular discrimination – in some countries, if a husband dies,

³³ McKinsey Global Institute, 'A blueprint for addressing the global affordable housing challenge – Executive Summary', October 2014, p. ii.

³⁴ World Urban Campaign, 'Slum Almanac', p. 86.

³⁵ Croese, S., Cirolia, L.R., and Graham, N., 'Towards Habitat III: Confronting the disjuncture between global policy and local practice on Africa's "challenge of slums"', p. 240.

³⁶ Bird, Montebruno and Regan, 'Life in a slum: understanding living conditions in Nairobi's slums across time and space', p. 497.

by custom the house is the property of his family rather than his wife. Insecure tenure also entrenches slum conditions, as residents are reticent to invest in their property (e.g. by installing improved sanitation, water or electricity) if they face possible eviction at any moment. The Global Land Tool Network (part of UN-Habitat) is working across the world to improve security of tenure through a culturally-sensitive formula termed the 'Continuum of Land Rights'.³⁷ This incorporates the various forms of tenure – including documented and undocumented, formal and informal, individual and group – to establish an application which holds legitimacy locally, and then push for policy or administrative reform.

8. Conclusion: Reasons for Optimism

Slums form just one part of the wider issue of affordable housing identified by SDG Target 11.1, which spans both the developed and developing world. New technology and approaches provide cause for optimism. Industrial construction methods, in which most components of a house can be built off-site through a more rationalised method, have made good-quality housing cheaper and quicker to build than ever before.³⁸ Indeed, it is important that improving the lives of slum households is considered within the entire spectrum of the housing market: by building stock for upper- and middle-income brackets, housing is freed up for those on lower incomes. Further, the local context must be considered: uniform standards which are too rigorous or ambitious can result in pricing out poorer households from good quality housing.³⁹ In some situations, this may also mean placing safety above comfort, e.g. clean water and hygienic sanitation over living space or communal areas. This will mean contravening the rigid UN definition of a 'slum' in some cases, but is preferable to leaving others homeless.

Whilst SDG 11 is undeniably ambitious, there is reason to believe it can be achieved. We know improvements in the lives of slum dwellers can occur, because it has occurred for some 320 million since 2000. We also have the technology and knowledge at our disposal to quickly build high-quality housing. Above all, for the first time the international community is committed to ending slum dwellings and to the universal provision of safe and sustainable housing.

³⁷ Global Land Tool Network, 'The Continuum of Land Rights – A brief', 2015.

³⁸ McKinsey Global Institute, 'A blueprint for addressing the global affordable housing challenge', p. 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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