

Briefing

Urban; Communication

Key messages to support youth engagement for more just cities and housing systems



youth
civic media



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Key points

Young people living in informal settlements are an invisible majority in cities in the global South, with limited ability to influence the governance of housing and urban development.

Youth groups and organisations are using a series of digital tools and strategies to strengthen their agency to influence urban decision making.

Young people are calling on key stakeholders — including governments, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and donors — to make changes, from funding capacity building to inclusive spaces for participation, to ensure their voices are meaningfully heard.

Together, these actions can create a more supportive environment for diverse youth to advance more just cities and housing systems.

Engaging young people from informal settlements in housing and urban governance

Young people living in informal settlements are mobilising to influence urban governance, working together to overcome insecure housing, poor services and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Youth groups are employing a range of strategies to become local leaders, challenge stigma and influence decision making — often enabled by digital technologies. They are producing data, documenting community realities and sharing their knowledge through collective learning. Young people from informal settlements are key urban stakeholders who are already laying the foundations for more inclusive and equitable cities; it is essential to recognise and engage them as partners in addressing current and future urban challenges.

Young people living in informal settlements across cities in the global South are an invisible majority in housing and urban governance. Yet they are actively organising, exchanging knowledge, producing media, mobilising collectively, challenging narratives and driving change from the ground up, often enabled by digital technologies.¹ Through these practices, young people are renewing leadership in housing and urban movements and shaping more just urban futures.²

As cities in Africa and Asia grow, young people hustle to find pathways for a flourishing life. More than 50% of the world's young people (aged 15–24) live in the Asia Pacific region,³ while in sub-Saharan Africa 70% of people are under the age of 30.⁴ Both these regions also have the highest numbers of people living in informal settlements, where youth face not only poor

quality and insecure housing, inadequate infrastructure and exacerbated exposure to risks, but also continual criminalisation by authorities and exclusion from decision-making spaces.⁵ Young mothers, LGBTQI+ groups, people with disabilities and those belonging to specific castes, occupations, religions or ethnicities are particularly marginalised.

Based on insights from online exchange sessions between 13 youth groups from informal settlements in ten countries across Africa and Asia (see Box 1, page 3), this briefing outlines the key strategies being used by these young people to influence housing and urban governance and proposes recommendations for creating a more supportive environment to develop their engagement. The exchanges were organised as part of 'Neighbourhoods Fit for Diverse Young People: Civic Media Practices and Urban Claims

Young people living in informal settlements are becoming active agents in urban governance

Making in Nepal and India' (YCIV), an action-research project led by University of Sheffield in partnership with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), IIED and local partners in Nepal and India. Participants included members of the ACHR network and organisations that were invited to join through the Hub for Housing Justice and its partners.⁶ The YCIV project, which is supported by Fondation

Botnar, aims to explore how diverse young people are embracing 'civic media' and using this to influence urban governance.

Support young people's capacity building efforts

Young people in informal settlements are creating spaces in which to exchange knowledge, learn collectively and build skills to engage with their urban contexts. They are involved in training and becoming trainers, expanding both personal and collective capacities, and challenging inequalities across gender, age, caste and ability.

These learning processes often draw on popular and critical pedagogies, using the everyday experiences of young people as a learning realm. Young people use media and digital technologies, as well as peer-to-peer learning and creative formats, to raise awareness about housing rights, urban services and environmental risks.

Despite the importance of the topics, support for learning about urban and housing rights remains limited, fragmented and often short term. Many

youth groups lack sustained opportunities to develop skills, share knowledge and build collective leadership. To address this gap, **NGOs and donors** should invest in long-term youth capacity building, including support for training of trainers to scale up learning within communities. Funding needs to recognise learning as an iterative and emancipatory process rather than a one-off intervention, and greater investment is needed in digital and media-based learning to align with young people's interests.

Partner with youth groups in producing data and knowledge about informal settlements

Young people are increasingly collecting data and producing knowledge about their communities, housing conditions, access to services, environmental risks, gender disparities, and residents' needs and aspirations. These efforts, such as the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) initiative Know Your City TV, challenge the persistent lack of recognition of informal settlements in urban knowledge systems.⁷

Using tools such as digital mapping, mobile surveys, participatory geographic information systems, photography and drones, young people are generating evidence that strengthens community claims. Data collection is also a mobilising tool, helping young people organise.

Yet these contributions are rarely treated as legitimate forms of knowledge. **Research institutions, observatories and local authorities** need to partner with youth groups as genuine knowledge producers, supporting their capacity for data management and the strategic use of evidence for advocacy. Public institutions



Workshop with youth representatives at Hunnarshala Foundation, Bhuj, India. Credit: AABHAT Collective

must recognise youth-produced data as valid and reliable, and integrate it into urban planning, policy formulation and decision-making processes.

Support youth leadership to mobilise and renew urban movements

Building on the legacy of older community organisers, young people are emerging as active leaders within informal settlements. They are mobilising neighbours, increasing awareness, forming solidarity bonds and enabling diverse forms of leadership steered by women and minority groups.

Young people are innovating through digital media and social platforms, using online spaces to coordinate action, amplify campaigns and connect across neighbourhoods and cities. These hybrid forms of mobilisation, which combine face-to-face organising with digital engagement, are expanding the reach and visibility of urban struggles.

Despite the growing leadership of young people in informal settlements, traditional movements often struggle to strengthen intergenerational dialogue and fully support youth-led forms of mobilisation, which are frequently framed as auxiliary rather than being central to movement strategy. To create a more supportive environment, **housing and urban social movements** need to actively engage youth leadership that can bridge new forms of collective action, including the use of digital tools.

Showcase youth media and storytelling to change narratives

Young people from informal settlements are reclaiming their right to representation by producing their own media and narratives. Through videos, social media content, documentaries, feature films and creative storytelling, young people are using their voices to challenge stigma.

These counter-narratives highlight the diversity, creativity and leadership within informal settlements, shedding light on groups that are marginalised, such as young women, religious minorities and young mothers. By targeting diverse audiences, youth media production reshapes how informal settlements are understood in public debates.

However, their work often struggles to reach wider audiences and is overshadowed by stigmatising portrayals in traditional media. To address this, **mainstream media outlets** should actively showcase youth-produced

Box 1. YCIV online exchange participants

In 2025, as part of the YCIV project, IIED organised a series of online exchanges to learn about the challenges and strategies used by youth organisations to strengthen the engagement of diverse young people in urban and housing processes. The participants were:

- **Lumanti Support Group for Shelter** (Nepal), part of the YCIV project working with youth in Dharan (<https://lumanti.org.np>)
- **Hunnarshala Foundation** (India), part of the YCIV project working with youth in Bhuj (www.hunnarshala.org)
- **HaZoBiT** (Benin), a youth-led slum dwellers federation that works for dignity, social inclusion and sustainable development at the grassroots (www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61552476783297)
- **SDI-Kenya** (Kenya), a non-profit organisation that is part of SDI, supports the urban poor; organised the Muungano wa Wanavijiji youth initiative (www.muungano.net)
- **Community Mappers** (Kenya), a community-based organisation based in Kibera, Nairobi, empowering young women through research and entrepreneurship (www.communitymappers.com)
- **Know Your City TV** (KYC-TV) (Zambia), a youth-led media initiative under SDI (see below) and the Zambia Homeless and Poor People's Federation (www.facebook.com/people/Know-Your-City-TV-Zambia/100064091521392)
- **ACTogether** (Uganda), an NGO providing technical support to the National Slum Dwellers Federation, a movement of the urban poor communities that promotes community savings groups and works with youth through the KYC-TV initiative (www.actogetherug.org)
- **Agbajowo Collective — Media4Change** (Nigeria), a group of young storytellers from different informal communities in Lagos, using media to show resilience, injustice and discrimination (www.justempower.org/media4change)
- **SDI Secretariat** (South Africa), a global network of community-based organisations in informal settlements in over 30 countries, promoting data collection, media activism and peer learning (<https://sdinet.org>)
- **Indore activists cohort from the Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS)** (India), which actively engages youth from marginalised communities in Indian urban centres to amplify their voices through social media (www.instagram.com/mpnavnirmanmanch)
- **Alumni of the IIHS Inclusive Housing Programme, Delhi cohort, 2023–24**, a group of community-based activists and former IIHS fellows working on the issues of housing and rights in Delhi (<https://khorigaon.in/author/khorigaon>)
- **Arkorn** (Indonesia), which organises urban poor communities in cities such as Yogyakarta, Palu, Surabaya, Surakarta and Lombok through community architecture practices (www.arkomindonesia.id)
- **Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives Inc. and Technical Assistance Movement for People and Environment Inc.** (Philippines), two organisations that collaborate and work closely with the Homeless People's Federation Philippines, supporting community-led housing, land tenure and settlement upgrading initiatives nationwide (www.pacsii.org and www.tampeii.org)

content, recognising these narratives as legitimate and vital contributions to public debate. **Influencers, opinion shapers and digital platforms** can also amplify youth narratives, countering harmful stereotypes about informal settlements. Likewise, **cultural and arts sectors**, including philanthropic and public funding bodies, should establish dedicated support for young people from informal settlements, to sustain the production and distribution of content.

Recognise young people from informal settlements as expert activists in governance spaces

Young people from informal settlements are increasingly engaging in advocacy within informal and self-organised spaces, as well as in more formal and official processes of urban governance and planning. When included in official spaces, they bring locally grounded, collective demands into decision-making processes, often combining technical knowledge with lived experience.

However, participation in formal governance frequently remains tokenistic or inaccessible. Many processes are primarily consultative, offering limited opportunities for young people to meaningfully shape decisions, while bureaucratic processes and excessively technical language create further barriers to engagement.

Meaningful spaces for young people's participation in housing and urban governance need to be inclusive, diverse and creative, acknowledging multiple forms of expertise.

Government and planning actors need to recognise youth representatives and develop accessible online and offline spaces for continued participation. These mechanisms should acknowledge young people's realities, incorporating digital technology where appropriate. This includes sharing information in accessible formats, via relevant and effective channels, and ensuring diverse voices are heard and continue to influence policy and planning, creating genuine opportunities for decision making.

Conclusion

Young people living in informal settlements are mobilising to influence housing systems and urban governance, aiming to shape more inclusive, just and resilient cities. Through collective organising, knowledge production, digital innovations, political contestation and creativity, they are already addressing critical gaps in housing and urban governance, while addressing intersectional inequalities experienced by women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, among others. However, their contributions remain undervalued, unheard, stigmatised, under-resourced and frequently excluded from formal decision-making processes.

To unlock the full potential of youth-led action, policymakers, donors, media outlets, civil society and urban practitioners must move beyond tokenistic engagement towards sustained, meaningful partnerships. This necessitates long-term investment in youth capacity building, formal recognition of youth-generated data and knowledge, and stronger support for youth leadership within urban movements. It also demands amplifying youth narratives to challenge stigma about, and criminalisation of, informal settlements. This in turn requires accessible, diverse and inclusive governance spaces where young people can genuinely influence outcomes.

Recognising young people from informal settlements as expert stakeholders is not only a matter of equity, but a strategic necessity for addressing the complex and rapidly evolving challenges facing cities in the global South. By embedding youth perspectives, skills and leadership into urban policy and practice, governments and institutions can foster more responsive, accountable and transformative approaches to urban development that leave no one behind.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

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FIND OUT MORE

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Notes

¹ Cociña, C and Frediani, A (2024) Media trajectories: a brief introduction to the communication practices of housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22521iied / ² Frediani, A and Cociña, C (2024) Communication practices and the struggles for housing justice: early reflections from São Paulo and Lagos. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22587iied / ³ United Nations (2026) World Population Highlights 2026: Youth. UN DESA/POP/2026/TR/No. 13. New York. / ⁴ United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (2021) Young People's Potential, the Key to Africa's Sustainable Development, 23 February. / ⁵ UN-Habitat (2023) Rescuing SDG 11 for a Resilient Urban Planet. SDG 11 Synthesis Report, High Level Political Forum 2023. Executive Summary. / ⁶ The Hub for Housing Justice is a collaborative initiative led by a group of civil society networks and research organisations that aim to collectively advance more just and sustainable housing. For more information, visit www.hubforhousingjustice.org / ⁷ Slum Dwellers International, Know Your City TV, <https://knowyourcity.tv>

