Briefing

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Policy pointers

Community savings schemes and enumeration projects, developed with strategic aims, form an invaluable platform that can galvanise urban poor groups to engage with local government.

Innovative pilot projects that develop lower-cost solutions for improving housing and services legitimise the role of urban poor groups within a progressive planning agenda and can drive policy change.

Demonstrating practical capacity is an important way for urban poor groups to build their status and long-term involvement in urban planning and governance processes.

Active alliances and networks among slum dwellers can share learning and amplify voices, leading to pro-poor poverty reduction strategies.

Partnerships for progressive pro-poor city planning

City and municipal governments in the global South often lack the resources and political will to engage with urban poor groups to tackle poverty. However, organised urban poor groups in over 30 nations have developed a range of strategies to build partnerships with local governments in developing progressive, pro-poor, urban planning. This briefing summarises experience gathered from several countries including South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe and gives examples of how partnerships between local government and urban poor groups can be effective and lead to progressive pro-poor policy reform for urban development.

One in seven people worldwide live in informal urban settlements that offer insecure tenure, inadequate shelter and poor access to basic services such as water and sanitation. Local governments have the scope to address many of these dimensions of urban poverty because they are responsible for urban planning and for providing or overseeing the delivery of most basic services. But many local governments continue to pursue policies that marginalise or actively exclude the urban poor and overlook their basic needs. Paradoxically, the urban poor are invisible and discriminated against in part because the settlements they live in are unplanned and therefore considered illegal.

The urban poor are often seen as a problem, rather than as individuals who contribute much to city economies and communities. This leads to unjust and ineffective policies. Clearances of informal settlements simply displace low-income households within and outside of the city. A better approach is to include the urban poor in strategies that address poverty practically and strategically.

Organising and mobilising brings recognition

Urban poor groups have been organising and mobilising so they can forge partnerships with local governments that create spaces for participation in urban planning. A first step in community-led development is to engage with local governments, but poor communities often have limited or no relationship with city government. City officials rarely venture outside their offices, while low-income citizens can find it difficult to reach officials, and can find them intimidating to engage with.

The now-successful National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda's early experience in Jinja typifies this. One local organiser commented that "Before the federation, technocrats did not want to hear the word slum. Officials would think, 'What about the slum? Who are those people? Why can't they find another place?'"[1] Yet progress is possible. One Federation member has commented, "Don't think you have to break the existing structures; mostly you can make them work better for you."[1]

Sharing successes

Involving communities in urban planning can become part of governance institutions' normal approach

While self-help groups often form in low-income settlements to support each other at times of severe hardship, there are increasing and diverse incidences of communities mobilising more strategically — around housing and basic service provision. Over recent decades, an approach has developed in which informal settlement dwellers document and share learning within and between communities, cities and countries through a global network: Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI). Learning is adopted, adapted and diffused through SDI's network of 33 national federations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These encompass over 16,000 women-led savings groups and over a million savers.

Box 1. The Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation and the Gungano fund

The Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation emerged from urban poor communities that were mobilising on the edges of Zimbabwe's cities and towns. These communities had been overlooked by local government and were working to demonstrate their capacity to be proactive stakeholders in urban development planning, not groups dependent on government help.[2]

The Gungango (gathering) urban poor fund has been instrumental in this process. It was established in 1999 to pool community savings and provide an accessible form of finance for urban poor groups that are excluded from more formal finance. It has played a strategic role in enabling the urban poor to engage with local governments, leverage more secure land tenure, reform city planning policies, address eviction practices and catalyse upgrades for housing and basic services.

However, it has taken time to build up influence — attempts to engage with local governments were not initially successful. The federation had to develop the fund independently at first (with support from Misereor and Homeless International). It began by developing detailed enumerations of its communities so that in 2002, when the city of Harare was planning an eviction of backyard shack dwellers in the Mbare settlement, the federation was able to successfully halt the eviction by presenting extensive Gungano savings records alongside detailed community enumerations. The community's willingness to save for housing and the federation's understanding of Mbare convinced the city government to negotiate, to grant land and to create a platform for engagement with the urban poor for upgrading projects, planning and even policy reforms. This continued engagement has built a partnership in which the federation's enumerations of informal settlements act as a catalyst for action through the Harare Slum Upgrading Programme. This cooperation has driven a significant shift away from evictions.

Saving, enumerating and mapping brings legitimacy

Two practices usually form the foundations in this process: establishing savings groups, and enumerating and mapping (that is, recording informal settlements, their residents and their needs). By saving, communities show they are willing to invest in housing and basic services and that they can manage funds with transparency and accountability. By mapping and enumerating their communities, the urban poor record valuable, tangible local knowledge that will both help them engage local governments and contribute to replanning (see Box 1).

These processes also strengthen community organisations as residents organise and mobilise around a common goal. They develop specific tools that they can use to build relationships with local governments, leverage further funds and resources and develop platforms for engaging in strategic policy change.

Precedent-setting pilot projects

Communities can use savings and enumerations to initiate small pilot projects — often with some development assistance. Mapping and enumerating reveals a community's housing and basic service needs, and community savings can be an impetus to develop community-led solutions. Pilot projects are crucial in demonstrating to city governments that the urban poor have the practical capacity to develop and manage local projects. A successful community-led project can demonstrate how the urban poor can develop innovative, cost-effective housing and basic service solutions. Demonstrating this practical capacity is one of the most significant ways urban poor groups legitimise themselves as stakeholders in urban planning and governance (see Box 2).

Driving policy change

Changes in practice have the potential to drive policy reforms at both local and national levels. At present, official policy and regulatory frameworks too frequently stop the urban poor developing solutions to their housing and basic service needs. Adhering to standard building regulations is generally too expensive, and prevents more innovative low-cost solutions. The South African Federation's urban poor fund, uTshani, encountered this problem in the early 2000s. Its ability to develop housing projects was undermined both by regulatory frameworks and poor relations between the federation and local government.

Box 2. Pilot projects to engage municipalities in Uganda

The National Slum Dweller's Federation in Uganda has developed savings schemes in different cities and towns and has enumerated many informal settlements. The federation recognises the value of using pilot projects to engage with municipalities and demonstrate communities' capacity to develop a working relationship with local government.

As elsewhere, savings and enumerations establish the foundations for such relationships. For example, in 2011 an enumeration by the federation demonstrated that over 80 per cent of slum dwellers in Jinja had inadequate sanitation. Local community members decided to build and manage toilets. Once they had initiated the process by assessing needs, developing the design and proposing management, the local government agreed to provide the land and some technical oversight.

The impetus for the project was the community's poor sanitation, but it brought significant strategic advances for the federation. One Jinja city council member commented, "Building the relationship requires patience and communication and that's where the federation comes in – it promotes confidence-building and helps manage expectations".

The project convinced the local government that the federation had the capacity to project manage upgrading initiatives using cost-effective construction methods and contractors. This success led to a discussion between the World Bank, Cities Alliance and the Jinja municipal council, which resulted in a regulation change that means municipal contracts can now be awarded to communities.[1]

But as federations of the urban poor establish themselves as legitimate urban stakeholders they develop the scope and opportunity to address some of these constraints and to open up spaces to innovate and advocate low-cost approaches to informal settlement upgrading. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation and Dialogue on Shelter Zimbabwe have been able to advocate an incremental approach to settlement upgrading, which has been incorporated into the National Housing Policy. Letting communities incrementally upgrade housing, and basic services is more affordable because it can be funded through a series of small loans. This approach prioritises basic services such as water and sanitation, followed by roads. Families can develop their houses one room at a time. It also allows communities to experiment with unconventional infrastructure that reflects local need, such as 'sky loos', which are raised and need no water.

Success is not guaranteed

But developing partnerships between the urban poor and local government faces many challenges and does not always easily succeed. Communities have organised and mobilised to shape urban planning, seeking partnerships in diverse social, political and economic circumstances. In the past, the state has often actively marginalised these communities, and still some situations are less responsive than others. For example, affiliates of the South African Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor have had chequered experiences with local governments. Collective action has not always led to partnerships, and evictions have continued in informal settlements.

Marlboro South is an informal settlement of over 5,000 people living in 53 factories on the outskirts of Johannesburg. The community has been threatened with evictions since 2005. The community mobilised and enumerated in 2011 and in partnership with the University of Johannesburg's faculty of Design and Architecture, developed a proposal for incremental upgrading. The plans were disregarded by the city government. Protests have prevented evictions, but there is currently no scope to upgrade this settlement, which continues to be afflicted by poor housing and inadequate basic services.[3]

Maturing partnerships build pro-poor urban governance

Development agencies frequently advocate community development and participation, but these ambitions are often not realised at local government level. Yet despite difficulties, involving communities in urban planning and governance can become part of governance institutions' normal approach over time. The processes discussed here are undoubtedly protracted and iterative, but they allow community development and participation to become

embedded in local governance structures in a way that is truly accountable to the urban poor. They demonstrate how partnerships between communities and city governments can address urban poverty, and how the urban poor can demonstrate their value and become recognised as legitimate stakeholders in urban planning and development processes.

The practical and strategic potential that these emerging partnerships have to address poverty has immediate implications at the city level. The partnerships demonstrate how some of the political and resource challenges that undermine local governments in the global south can be overcome, and how broader more inclusive structures of urban governance can be established. The examples given here demonstrate how these processes have the potential to shape national policies to address urban poverty.

But to achieve that potential, learning must be shared. Slum/Shack Dwellers International provides an international network for that sharing, and recently other organisations have become interested in supporting this work. United Cities and Local Governments, UN-Habitat, and Cities Alliance are all working with Slum/Shack Dwellers International in their endeavours to promote good city governance build structures to address urban poverty and development needs.

Anna Walnycki, Hellen Nyamweru, Skye Dobson, Beth Chitekwe-Biti, George Masimba-Nyama and Walter Fieuw

Anna Walnycki is a researcher in IIED's human settlements group. Hellen Nyamweru is a documentation officer and Skye Dobson is executive director of ACTogether, Uganda. Beth Chitekwe-Biti is executive director and George Masimba-Nyama is the national programmes director at Dialogue on Shelter, Zimbabwe. Walter Fieuw is a research and documentation officer at the Community Organisation Resource Centre, South Africa.

Notes

[1] Nyamweru, H., Dobson, S. Forthcoming. *Triggers of a strong working relationship between communities of the urban poor and local government: an examination of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda's (NSDFU) experience in Jinja, Uganda*. IIED Working Paper. / [2] Chitekwe-Biti, B., Masimba-Nyama, G. Forthcoming. *Citizen Engagement with the State at the Local Level.* IIED Working Paper. / [3] Fieuw, W. Forthcoming. *A politics of resolve: people-centred development in South Africa.* IIED working paper.

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