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Inclusive Cities Remain Elusive

UN-HABITAT Report cites failed policies, bad governance, corruption, and a fundamental lack of political will for persistent urban poverty and burgeoning developing country slums - urgent need for political and economic action based on human right to decent shelter and a better life.

The challenges of urban poverty and appalling living conditions in the cities of the world's developing countries do not persist because of a failure to devise workable solutions. They persist because of narrow political and economic priorities that are not based on meeting the needs of people in an equitable or sustainable manner. It is now clear that effective approaches to urban development are those that integrate basic human rights into proposed solutions. UN-HABITAT'S recently released publication *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* argues for an inclusive, "rights-based approach" to development – one predicated on the promotion of freedom, the well-being and dignity of individuals, and the "centrality of the person."

Projects that are meant to address urban poverty and the challenge of the slums must now aim for much more than increasing the availability of affordable housing and physical services. To succeed today, urban improvement projects must be strategic, inclusive and holistic, with success measured in terms of improved social equity, sustainable overall development of cities, and the involvement of all stakeholders, especially the marginalized and more vulnerable members of society.

While there are any number of ways to go about urban improvement, according to the Report "participatory slum upgrading" is now regarded as the best way to deal with the problems of existing slums, by providing upgraded infrastructure, and loans for home improvement without clearing off large populations of urban poor, who have nowhere else to go. But to succeed – and to be sustainable – slum upgrading projects must be carried out as part of a city's overall political, social and economic development strategy. The Report's authors argue that slum upgrading initiatives must be inclusive and focused on local conditions, capitalizing on the considerable untapped energy of slum dwellers and their representative organizations. And they need to be a legitimate part of formal, on-going development efforts aimed at continuing improvements in the quality of life of all citizens. Only then can cities move from having improved slums, to becoming cities without slums.

The Cities Without Slums Action Plan

In September 2000, world leaders came together at the United Nations Millennium Summit to identify a number of general goals and specific, measurable targets for improving the human condition in the 21st century. One of the targets established then was to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. To achieve that target, the "Cities without Slums Action Plan" was conceived. This Action Plan is supported by UN-HABITAT and the World Bank, through the Cities Alliance Initiative, and calls on the international development community to adopt a new unity of purpose focused on improving the living conditions and livelihoods of the urban poor.

According to the UN-HABITAT Report, the Cities Without Slums Action Plan focuses on upgrading the most squalid, unhealthy and vulnerable urban slums and squatter settlements found in the developing world. It builds on successful community-based slum upgrading programmes, but, by promoting the idea of city development strategies, it also addresses the broader policy and institutional issues that limit their sustainability. By supporting national and local authorities seeking to develop city- and nation-wide slum upgrading programmes, the Action Plan aims to set in motion a global movement that will transform the lives of large numbers of the most vulnerable and marginalized urban residents.

(World Population in Billions)

The Report's authors argue that the Millennium target can be achieved, if governments and development agencies make the necessary long-term commitments of political will and financial resources. They also note that, while the Millennium target pales in comparison to the global scale of current and projected urban poverty and the related slum challenge, it is a critical first step in what must become a sustained effort to create truly inclusive cities and improve the lives of the most disadvantaged.

The Action Plan entails six key activities. The capacity of developing country governments to develop and implement appropriate policies must be strengthened, policies that overcome institutional bottlenecks to urban improvement and that encourage local commitment, resolve and buy-in. National- and city-level upgrading programmes need to be developed. Regional and global knowledge and learning systems need to be constructed and maintained, systems that pay heed to the lessons learned by those already closely involved in slum upgrading programmes. Governments and development agencies must invest in slums, providing basic infrastructure and municipal services to be operated and maintained by the community. They must also invest in strengthening the capacity of many civil society partners that can, in turn, help governments and communities do the job well and at scale. And slum upgrading must be a beneficiary of strong leadership and political buy-in at all levels and by all partners involved in implementing the Cities Without Slums Action Plan. Underpinning all these activities is the notion of inclusiveness, and that moving towards inclusive cities requires a human rights-based approach to development.

Achieving inclusiveness will require significant reforms in governance, both at the national and local level. Beyond that, say the authors of the UN-HABITAT Report, a strategic vision is required of what a city really is – or could become. Strategic visioning is a prerequisite to the realization of truly inclusive and livable cities. The effectiveness of the vision will depend on the extent to which it is embraced by all urban citizens, especially the poor and disadvantaged. And this in turn will depend on the extent to which decision making is transformed in developing country cities and good governance is encouraged by the development community.

Towards Inclusive Cities

Some of the recommended good practices for improving urban management include:

- Slum upgrading conducted through concerted strategies and involving self-help and local ownership, as the recommended response to poor conditions and services in existing slums;
- Improving tenure security as a means of bettering the lives of slum dwellers and improving their access to urban services, finance and income generating opportunities;
- Attention to the interaction of land use, transport and infrastructure provision, taking particular care that new construction benefits the poor as well as the affluent and that adverse impacts and displacement are minimized for poor communities;
- Increasing employment opportunities through support for the small enterprises and poverty alleviation measures, including the use of appropriate technologies for infrastructure and housing provision that are affordable and provide work opportunities;
- Mobilizing urban finance for enterprises and housing, through microfinance institutions and by facilitating the involvement of banks and other investment bodies in housing and infrastructure investment;
- An “inclusive city” approach by local authorities who are increasingly responsive and accountable to their citizens; seeking to benefit all constituents and embracing principles of good governance;
- Forming partnerships between different levels of government, NGOs and the private sector, and citizens represented through community-based organizations;
- Establishing meaningful forms of intersectoral and cross-government coordination that permit the integration of top-down planning to meet national goals with bottom-up participatory planning that brings local and grass-roots needs to the forefront of the policy debate.

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