

Squatter Settlements as ‘Building Sites Not Slums’

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By 2050 most of the urban population of the world will be concentrated in the Global South i.e. Asia (52%) and Africa (21%) (UN Habitat, 2014; Satterthwaite & Mitlin, 2014). UN Sustainable Agenda 2030 appreciates the increasing challenges posed by rapid urbanisation including issues of urban sustainability, increase in informal settlements (slums, squatters, shanty towns) and resilience to future urban environmental stresses (Bradnock & Williams, 2014). In the past 25 years, slum dwellers have increased from 689 million to 828 million in population, representing 30% of developing countries’ population (UN, 2015; Rockefeller Foundation, 2016). Global South is projected to house almost all this increase between now and 2030 (Satterthwaite & Mitlin, 2014; UN, 2015).

Squatter settlements were first defined by the ‘regimen of congestion’ that characterised the new mercantile cities of the 16th century as too many people began competing for too few dwellings and resources (UN Habitat, 2003; Ooi & Phua, 2007). Today, they are ‘defined as illegal residential areas that lack adequate access to water and sanitation, security of tenure, poor structural quality of housing and insufficient living area’ (UN Habitat, 2007; Brown, 2006; GDRC, 2015). These are considered to be ‘products of failed policies, inappropriate regulation, dysfunctional land markets, unresponsive financial systems and a fundamental lack of political will’ (World Bank & UNCHS, N.A; UN Habitat, 2003).

These settlements are a physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and intra-city inequality (Space Syntax, 2010). However, not all urban poor live in slums, and conversely, not all those who live in slums are poor (UN Habitat, 2008; UN Habitat, 2014). The poor quality of housing and lack of basic amenities represent a clear dimension of urban poverty. They may appear as ‘crowded and disorganised groups of dirty shacks’ but upon closer inspection, all sorts of complex and human-life support systems are seen as functioning highlighting ‘resourcefulness not hopelessness’ (UN Habitat, 2008; Potter, et al., 2012). Lewis (1966) points out how urban poverty gives structure to these settlements and plays a positive role: “... It has a structure, a rationale and defence mechanism without which the poor could hardly carry on.... way of life, remarkably stable and persistent... The culture of poverty ... is a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and become a sub-culture of its own” (Lewis, 1966; Singh, 1992).

There is no implicit intention to glamorise the life of squatters. It is evident they lack most of the basic facilities and ‘draw upon internal wells of resilience just to cope each day’ (UN Habitat, 2003; Beall, 2002). However, out of these unattractive environments can emerge ‘cultural movements and levels of solidarity unknown in leafy suburbs’ (UN Habitat, 2003). The so-called ‘second wave urbanism’ is

perceived as a better alternative to rural poverty (Thieme & Kovacs, 2015). Robert Neuwirth emphasises their importance by stating that “anything that involves 1/3rd of the urban population of the world is beyond a trend. It’s reality. These are part of every city’s fabric –and they should be treated that way...they are the cities of the future” (Future Urbanism, 2015). Squatter settlements provide a gateway to ‘explore rich variety, great achievement and typical 21st century urban life’ (WHO, 2008; UN, 2006).

Abrams (1964) illustrates the process of squatting as a ‘conquest’ of city areas for the purpose of shelter, defined both by the law of force and the force of law (Abrams, 1964; GDRC, 2015). Turner (1969) takes a positive outlook and portrays squatter settlements as highly successful solutions to housing problems in urban areas of developing countries (GDRC, 2015; Turner, 1969). He stated that ‘Like the people themselves, we saw their settlements not as slums, but as building sites. We shared their hopes and found the pity and despair... quite comic and absurd’ (Turner, 1982). He argued that if security of tenure were provided, and if real incomes were rising, then self-help housing will improve the settlement conditions (Potter, et al., 2008; Stepick & Murphy, 1979). Turner reinterpreted the ‘simple shacks in the squatter settlements as the first stage in an incremental process of construction’ (Kellet, 1993). Far from being passive victims of circumstance or being trapped in a culture of poverty, he wrote that the poor in such settlements demonstrated great energy and intelligence in the use of resources and in evaluating priorities (Kellet & Napier, 1995). In his seminal paper ‘Squatter Settlements: An Architecture that works’ Turner pointed out that the existential value of a squatter settlement is the product of three freedoms unknown elsewhere: ‘the freedom of community self-selection, the freedom to budget one’s own resources and the freedom to shape one’s own environment’ (Turner, 1968). Mangin (1967), Payne (1977), Eyre (1972), De Soto (1989) and, Dwyer (1975) similarly put the development of squatter settlements in the overall perspective of urban growth in the third world and its inevitability (Mangin, 1967; Payne, 1977; Eyre, 1972; DeSoto, 1989; Dwyer, 1975).

Until pre-mid 1970s, urban issues in Global South received little attention (Parnell, 2016) and poor were conveniently blamed by the wealthy for the urban poverty (Gilbert & Gugler, 1992). These settlements were seen as ‘slums of despair’ (Stokes, 1962) not ‘slums of opportunities’ (Parsons, 2010; Agnihotri, 1994). However, the ‘attitudes of urban analysts have shifted over recent decades, from essentially negative interpretations to a more positive view that sees squatter communities as making a major contribution to the city by adding to its labour resources, contributing individual enterprise, including that engaged in ‘recuperative production’, and consuming some of the city’s production while housing themselves at little direct cost to the government’ (Potter, et al., 2012; Gilbert, 2008). Perlman (1972) notes that ‘squatters are not economically marginal but exploited, not socially marginal but rejected, not culturally marginal but stigmatised, and not politically marginal but manipulated and

repressed” (Perlman, 1972; Pacione, 2009). According to UN Habitat (2008), ‘squatter settlements are not characterised by laziness or delinquency but by energy, creativity, resourcefulness and entrepreneurial skills’ (UN Habitat, 2008). Jones et al. (2015) noted that Dharavi is the largest slum in Asia houses more than half of the 12 million residents of the mega city, Mumbai, India and despite its precarious existence, enterprises and industries flourish in the settlement (Jones & Sanyal, 2015). Similarly, in a study by Eyre (1970), it is noted that in Montego Bay, Jamaica between 1960 and 1970 more than three thousand families who moved into the ten shanty towns during the decade invested at least two million hard-earned dollars in materials and labour (Eyre, 1970) .

From an economic perspective, squatter settlements are a source of (real or imagined) economic opportunity for a nation’s poor, and of low-cost labour supply for the public and private production of goods and services (UN Habitat, 2008). They are also ‘a source of profit and capital accumulation for both internal and external property owners’ (UN Habitat, 2003). A revised view of resources for urban settlement makes it impossible to focus clearly with the ‘public/private sector’ or ‘dual economy’ concept in mind (Bhargava, 1981). It is necessary to add a third ‘informal’ sector consisting mainly of initiative, effort, skills and very small savings (Brown, 2006; UN, 2015).

The informal sector is also called the ‘tertiary refuge sector’; it is made of jobs such as street hawking, shoe shining, snow cone vending, car washing, taxi driving and many others (McGee 1979, Potter, et al., 2012, Kleniewski, 2005). Such activities subscribe to the notion that ‘even to eat crumbs you have to be sitting at the table’ (Pacione, 2009). They are adept at producing the services and commercial activities that the formal sector fails to provide through the mobilisation of local enterprise and industry (UN Habitat, 2003) as De Soto (1989) notes that ‘they invent jobs, learning in the process as they were never taught’. From a social perspective, slums provide low-cost services and housing for rapidly increasing low-income urban populations. They serve as ‘networks of social support for new migrants to the city’ (UN Habitat, 2014). On a political front, they are seen as important sources of votes and other forms of ‘mutual support for or opposition to local and national governments’ (UN Habitat, 2008).

When examining approaches to informal settlements, it is vital to recognize the diversity of opinion from a range of actors. The main groups involved are the informal settlement residents themselves, other urban residents, and government. International agencies, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, also have changed their policies toward low-income housing provision over time. Governmental action at national level for squatter settlements has ‘generally shifted from negative policies such as forced eviction, benign neglect and involuntary resettlement, to more positive policies such as self-help and in situ upgrading, enabling and rights-based policies’. World Bank since the early 1970s has been a keen supporter of ‘aided self-help schemes (ASH)’, employing mainly two approaches; provision of services and rationalisation of house and street layouts, and provision of serviced sties

with unit designs (World Bank & UNCHS, N.A). UN Habitat II placed increased attention on the livelihoods and environmental problems faced by the urban poor with increased focus on gender and children issues which were previously highly neglected (UN, 2015).

'There is abundant evidence of innovative solutions developed by the poor making squatter settlements socially more cohesive, offering opportunities for security of tenure, local economic development and improvement of incomes among the urban poor' (Potter, et al., 2008). Examples include people-driven upgrading in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, people-financed upgrading in Hue, Vietnam, participatory resettlement in Surabaya, Indonesia, city-wide slum upgrading in Thailand, community led sanitation scheme in Orangi Pilot Project, Karachi, etc. (UN Habitat, 2014). However, these success stories have been rather few, in comparison to the magnitude of the slum challenge, and have yet to be systematically documented' (Potter, et al., 2012). Huge criticism has also been faced in regard to aided self-help policies. Potter (2004) quotes Pinches (1994), who claims 'that aided self-help schemes 'served the narrow economic interest of states, elites and international agencies' by offering cheap solutions to demands for housing' (Potter, 2004).

For slum policies to be successful, the 'kind of apathy and lack of political will that has characterized both national and local levels of government in many developing countries in recent decades needs to be reversed' (UN Habitat , 2003). There is a need to obtain 'a confluence of top-down and bottom-up approaches, effective coordination of decision-making and policies' (UN Habitat, 2007) and participatory governance strategies including community-based self-finance, simplification of the formal sector, channelling loans through community savings groups, Usage of intermediate institutions to bridge formal and informal finance and, development of cost-reduction strategies for upgrading and densification (World Bank & UNCHS, N.A).

In a nutshell, the essay points out ways in which a squatter settlement is no more a slum but a building or development under construction growing in the economic, social and political realms. Participatory governance models need to be designed at all levels for effective upgradation or aided self-help of squatter settlements in the developing countries.

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