

DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

Better measures for urban quality of life: the view from below

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Almost 1 billion people currently live in slums, and this number is expected to grow by nearly 500 million by 2020 - if we're to ensure that no one is left behind in the future development agenda, we need to determine whether progress is really reaching these marginalised groups. And for that, we need appropriate indicators and data. In [this blog series](#), experts put forward their key recommendations to improve the way we define and measure progress in the quality of life of the urban poor.



The current debates around the post-Millennium Development Goal development agenda include a vital focus on measuring change and — hopefully — progress. But there is an unspoken tension: the **reality of local contexts is becoming less and less visible to increasingly globalised development agendas.**

Social movements of the urban poor find themselves caught in the cross-fire of such debates. I have dedicated the past three decades of my professional life to working with the leaders of many such movements around the world, and this has been my experience. Real people, real families and real lives are subsumed into aggregated figures that mask local variations.

Almost all countries in the Global South, especially in Africa and Asia, are undergoing historic urban transformations. Yet many have national leaders elected from rural areas, and political parties whose leaderships persist in 19th- and 20th-century perspectives principally addressing rural development. We need measurements to assess whether politicians and administrations' development policies are pro poor in urban areas.

International-development investments are focused on rural development, based on theories rooted primarily in rural experiences. Cities are seen by many as locations of economic growth, not locations for aspiration, opportunity, equity and inclusion. We need measurements that can inform indices for desired ends such as equity and inclusion.

I am not advocating that we throw out all existing poverty indices. Rather, I am absolutely convinced that these indices need to be adapted to meet the challenge of linking traditional measurements of poverty with new

approaches to measuring urban quality of life. The prevalent informality of habitat and livelihoods in developing-world cities mean it is crucial to develop both measurement benchmarks and practical policy initiatives that make cities work for all who live in them. We cannot benchmark what is not comprehensively measured.

Another flawed global measurement concerns the universal dollar-based poverty line. This measurement has **barely any relevance to the experience of people who contend with the twin challenges of poverty and inequality**. Measurements of urban subsistence must be linked with macro-economic and financial trends such as inflation. Just one example is food inflation. In my country, India, the sudden quadrupling of potato and onion prices, due to an increase of fuel prices and speculative practices, has had a significant impact on what and how much the poor eat. The increasing number of malnourished children in urban areas makes this clear. However, universal poverty lines do not capture this very real effect.

Informal shelter strategies in cities are also invisible to such universal measurements. Those who live in homes with insecure tenure, under the ever-present risk of demolition and eviction, often use soft, impermanent material for house construction. These may have to be rebuilt after a monsoon, or on a seasonal basis, depending on the local climate. [Shack/Slum Dwellers International](#) (SDI), the global network of grassroots urban poor federations, estimates that over 25 years, a family could build one good-quality home with those labour and material costs. This indicates there is an **urgent need to measure the impact of evictions and of the destruction of habitat and livelihoods**, often brought about by government agencies.

The global economic order is based on upfront capital investments that sit uncomfortably with urban-poor strategies to upgrade their lives incrementally from survival to stability. Households consolidate their home structures and upgrade them, especially those who have de facto security of tenure. In the absence of state support, this is how almost all informal households create shelter to meet their needs. But almost all government standards for habitat and all capital-investment strategies of accessing subsidies and finance for households needs, require capital to be 'collected' upfront and then repaid over 10 to 20 years. This is only possible if lending institutions feel secure in the applicant's financial situation; and they are never satisfied if the applicant is employed in informal livelihoods.

Basic amenities such as water, electricity, sewerage and sanitation remain a major problem for most urban households. **As long as informality renders urban populations invisible, data will be skewed and investment delayed**. In some cities, the poor only began to receive water and electricity once state and private-sector companies realised that [the poor were 'purchasing' these amenities from informal cartels](#) at higher rates. The Department for International Development and the World Bank have begun to incentivise electricity providers to reach the poorer consumers .

Measurements of sanitation access for the poor are incomplete. Further, aid agencies and foundations have worryingly chosen to focus on technical solutions to deficits in access to adequate sanitation. In so doing they ignore the primary drivers of the financial and political relationships that determine the extension of services.

More and more urban workers are employed in the informal sector. Where are the measurements of their impact on GDP, or to demonstrate that most poor people end up working from their homes? Furthermore these informal entrepreneurs are often vulnerable to a city's punitive anti-hawking rules and can lose their capital investments when their goods are confiscated.

Governments are almost completely unaccountable to their poorest citizens. This is because they are disenfranchised in an underground system and the logic of cities is not easily accepted and measured. Corruption in high places is measured and quantified quite well. But the extent to which the poor pay for this in order to survive is rarely calculated in measures of governance.

Thankfully, I see practical seeds of hope every day amongst the communities in which I work. The poor survive often through collective processes, while governments and external investments in development overwhelmingly target individuals. Social movements of the urban poor are emerging mainly because urban changes are not impacting their lives. All over Asia, Africa, and Latin America, those fed up with systems are exploring different ways to seek change. Many have been patient for too long waiting for their national governments to wake up. Others, especially young people, are getting impatient. **The poor may increasingly turn to violence as the only**

way to get the attention of their governments.

What the world needs now — and urgently — are new ways to track these processes, and to develop new paradigms of development that work for the poor, their communities and their cities.

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