Affordable public spaces in Informal settlements
Urban poor federations strategize around spatial, social, political and economic inclusion

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With a growing number of people living in an increasing number of cities and urban centres in Africa, Asia and Latin America, it becomes critical to understand how the benefits of urbanization can be shared more equitably between the well off and the marginalised populations of the city. While cities offer better quality of life, one in three urban residents still lives in under-serviced areas. When the supply of serviced land and housing stock cannot keep up with the growing numbers, the low-income population resort to living in slums. More than 70% of the population in most African cities live in slums. Slum dwellers and informal settlers live in dire conditions, for example; there is one toilet for every 500 people in the slums of Nairobi in Kenya and 1 toilet for every 800 families in Dharavi, which is one of Mumbai’s largest slums. If you are living in an informal area there are more chances that you will be employed in the informal economy and if you are an informal sector worker there are more chances that you will end up in an informal settlement. While exclusion of the marginalised groups can be broadly defined as spatial, social, political and economic, one of the defining factors of exclusion is the unaffordability of the poor to access land in cities. High prices of land and housing in the urban areas have made land into a lucrative business and this is visible in the disparity between slum and non-slum areas. Some areas have significantly better infrastructure and public amenities as compared to the deprived areas with inadequate housing, poor facilities and lack of basic services like water and sanitation. Existing high densities and exclusionary building regulations further set limits on house sizes, building height restrictions, open space allocation often compromising on the public/community spaces which are as important for the general well being of the community and the city.
Public spaces in informal settlements are to a large extent the product of local self-help and self-managed processes often since their inception; however, there is little understanding about these spaces as they are invisible to the rest of the city. These spaces are designed informally long before any professional or local government intervention and develop in the absence of any basic infrastructure, unlike other public spaces in the city. Public spaces in informal settlements are public in terms of ownership and accessibility, but are communal in terms of use and attachment. They play an important role in the physical and social dynamics of the settlement, however, the improvement and consolidation of such spaces may not be realised for many years. (Jaime Hernandez Garcia, 2013)

This paper makes the assumption that urban poor communities like everyone else have a right to aspire and bring value-added to their living spaces both private and public. Cities provide opportunities for people to assimilate, however, often times the very marginalised groups do not have a voice and identity. This has implications for the quality of their life and livelihoods and also for the city at large.

In most cities in the developing world public spaces are not well kept and in many cases insecure especially for women, young girls and children living in informal communities who tend to be most vulnerable. Research over the years has repeatedly illustrated that discovering how to negotiate the social and physical space of a neighborhood is important for developing safe and secure public spaces within these informal settlements. In poorer neighborhoods children can often still be seen playing on the streets. While this means they have more opportunity for spatial mobility and freedom, the consequences and risks to their health and safety because of the dangers of traffic, hazardous waste and physical abuse are of great concern. The message is clear: when neighborhoods are not supportive of children’s needs then children are limited in their use or are forced to take risks. Alongside environmental destruction is the increasing impoverishment of the world’s poor. It is now thought that six out of 10 of our future children will grow up in cities, in poverty, at risk (Satterthwaite et al, 1996). It is the poor who live in the shadows of the factories and
rubbish dumps where degraded land is cheapest and it is the children playing in the streets who are most exposed to these environmental hazards. Around 300 million children in cities worldwide are living in absolute poverty (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 1996) they are at daily risk of physical harm. Spaces that are safe for women and children are also safe for the rest of the members of the community. (Malone K, Editorial, 2001)

There is a growing realisation that spatial exclusion of the marginalized cannot be entirely separated from economic and social dimension. It is usually the economically marginalized groups that inhabit physically deprived spaces. The lack of information and data on informal settlements, the land they occupy and the informal economy in cities makes it difficult for cities to include them in the planning. From the side of government there are challenges around lack of resources and low levels of capacity at local government level compounded with fickle and popular government programs associated with one party that changes when the next one.

There is a universal failure to engage low-income groups and their organizations sufficiently- both in prioritizing interventions and partnering with them on implementation. This lack of capacity to have participatory processes, which are inclusive, is reflected in both civil society and government. The lowest income and most disadvantaged often do not participate. Experience shows that decentralized level of decision-making and planning activities does not necessarily lead to inclusion if not always acted upon.

More recently, social movements of the urban poor have been able to organize and come together to fulfill some of their needs around habitat and livelihoods. There are growing examples in Asia, Africa and Latin America that organized groups of informal communities have shown a growing capacity to engage with their cities on viable public works and slum upgrading projects.

Slum Dwellers International (SDI) is one such network and federates over 33 national
urban poor federations. The goal of this urban poor movement is to find affordable solutions to secure land, housing and basic services. By creating a voice and identity for slum dwellers, federations of the urban poor have been able to influence their agenda for land and housing locally, nationally and globally. By planning public and community spaces like community toilets, community centres, small and big upgrading works these communities have set the tone for learning, building capacity, managing and implementing such projects. This experience of working on their collective spaces and amenities has built the capacity of organisations of the urban poor to engage with their cities on the less controversial issues like access to toilets and common amenities as compared to the more difficult negotiations around land and housing. By seeking collective solutions to their individual needs of sanitation and other basic amenities, these communities have redefined their relationships inside their communities, with their neighbouring communities and their local authorities. In doing so they have been able to gradually open up the social and political space needed for this dialogue to happen. They have succeeded to stop evictions and have built the momentum, the drive and the motivation to sustain their long-term objective of finding land and housing in their city. Negotiations around the lack of basic sanitation and services have built the capacity of these communities to tackle some of the underlying governance issues around managing communal/public spaces within their localities.

This paper seeks to understand some of the strategies used by organised groups of these informal communities towards spatial, social and economic inclusion. It will examine several examples of community initiatives towards planning and designing their common spaces. The solution may not always be the ideal one but it is the first step in learning to understand the politics of creating such spaces and looking after them. By doing their homework through community savings and collecting information about informal settlements in their cities, preparing alternative plans and engaging their local governments, organised communities have built the trust and relationship much needed with their city. Through implementing slum upgrading projects organised groups of the urban poor have been able to create alternative spaces that are useful to their members, women, children, youth and elders. Community planning around re-blocking in the
settlements of Cape Town in South Africa is an example of how lost spaces within communities were consolidated to create more useful physical spaces that work for the community, the neighbourhood and the city. By realigning their internal spaces and pathways these communities were able to create open spaces within their settlements for women, children and young people to have safe spaces to socialise.

Making the distinction between community and public spaces:
This realisation came first when the federation in Mumbai was given the job of designing common toilet blocks. There is a marked distinction in the design, type of users, usage pattern and maintenance required for toilets constructed in public spaces, outside the boundaries of the community as compared to those constructed inside the community. In Harare, truckers, the market venders and buyers use the toilet block constructed in the central market place by the federation in early 2000. This insight also made the federations more discerning of the kinds of projects they could take on. Similarly, the federations also defined their livelihood spaces, making a distinction between large city markets from the informal markets inside the informal settlements. They have the capacity to influence the spaces within their community more than the spaces outside of their community. By engaging with such projects they have been able to prove to themselves and city authorities that they have the capacity to take on projects of a certain scale. Most of the examples that appear in this paper will refer to examples that are community spaces designed for the needs of the community or close to the physical boundaries of the community.

Slums are unplanned settlements and have to learn to make the most of the spaces they occupy. Since serviced land in the city is unaffordable the poor often inhabit land that is not serviced. City federations are often confronted with two types of scenarios for settlement upgrading. In the first scenario, which is often the preferred option, they upgrade, realign and improvise on the existing land they live on. If this is not possible then the second scenario includes redevelopment or resettlement. However, the later examples are far and few and more expensive to take to scale given the scarcity of land within the city and the sheer numbers of people who need to be re-housed. This is one of
the main reasons why federations of the urban poor promote onsite slum upgrading and incremental construction. Kisenyi, holds one of the biggest slum settlements in the centre of Kampala and also one of the largest and busiest markets in Kampala. With the government's and developers' growing interest in this land, the residents and petty traders in Kisenyi face the constant threat of evictions. In Kisenyi, it is a common site to see groups gather around porches, courtyard verandas and other open spaces to cook dinner, chat, wash clothes and play. The residential and commercial spaces have been intertwined to making room for such activities. While such spaces have been adhoc and planned for informally in the existing settlement, the community hopes they have the opportunity to plan these spaces in case of a new redevelopment (Kisenyi 11&111 executive summaries, (2011), student report of the international master course in urban ecological planning, NTNU, Trondheim.

Community Toilet Blocks:
While the ideal solution would be for every family to have individual toilets, the land they occupy and their densities does not always allow informal communities to do so. By constructing community toilets, its members have been able to prove to the city that it can find solutions that are affordable, that work for the common good of the community, their localities and the city. Since common toilet blocks attract large numbers of people who queue in front of them, they become a good point for transmitting information or communicating with the community. Slum dwellers federations in many cities have designed community toilets to play the added function of acting as communication centres and some of them also double up as community centres.

In the past five years, the alliance of the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) a Mumbai based NGO, The National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and Mahila Milan (MM in India has renovated and built over 800 community toilet blocks, with a total of over 16,000 toilet seats. These toilet blocks constructed have special features, which make them different from the toilet blocks constructed, by the municipality: There is community participation at every level – in the design,
construction and maintenance. The toilet block is connected to the main sewer line with access to adequate water and electricity with a overhead and underground water tank. The design includes separate entrances and areas for men and women, and a separate squatting area for children, which makes it safer for children and easier for mothers.

Communities have designed monthly family passes which cost Rs.20-25 per household, irrespective of the number of family members or the number of times they use it. In the past everyone had to pay per use. Income is also generated from passers-by who pay Rs.1 per use. Because of the multiple use of this facility it becomes even more important to ensure that they stay clean. In some cases the community has appointed a caretaker and included a caretakers room.

Demonstration toilet blocks are designed, constructed and maintained with community involvement, with experienced federations providing skill training and support to newer groups. These toilets showcase good design standards and innovations, include proper light and ventilation, separate children’s toilets. Many also double as a community meeting space.

Community-built toilets work because they are affordable; stay well maintained because families have a stake in the process. Families pool resources to pay for a caretaker. These community-led sanitation projects provide desperately needed, clean and safe sanitation facilities, improving health, productivity, safety and quality of life especially to young girls and women. They also give the community skills and confidence to take up further construction projects, generate income, explore solutions for other basic needs and sustain negotiations with authorities.
The Kinawataka community toilet in Nakawa municipality in Kampala city serves both the community members and the people who come the Kinawataka community market. The ground floor of the unit has been completed and is being rented out to recover funds. A community hall has been designed for community meetings. The council has been willing to provide land and technical assistance to the project and the construction is implemented and managed by the community. The Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) has become interested in the project, which is reflected in its engagement with the community. The project has also opened new ground for the redevelopment of the Kinawataka market (more about the market in the informal market section below). The ministry of land, housing and urban development has extended technical support in this regard and formed a steering committee for re-development, involving the city federation and Nakawa municipality. The federation has established project management committees in each region and structured their learning through exchanges between the regions. Challenges to the project include that the community in the market has been unable to raise the 20% contribution, halting the progress of the project. Tracking of toilet usage has also not been done properly making it difficult for the federation to effectively track income generated as well as the number of users. A new caretaker has been hired and a new tracking system is being developed in response to this.

Besides large amounts of loans that have gone out for individual sanitation, 921 community toilets blocks with 20,902 seats have been designed and constructed by the community with the engagement of the local authority and the slum dweller federations.
Community resource centres:
Having a physical space to convene, as a community is an important asset towards creating the mental, emotional and physical space supports community mobilising. These spaces allow communities especially women to talk about their individual and collective problems and find solutions to these problems. These spaces allow women to collectively-actualise and build their skills and capacities to take on projects beyond their individual needs. In Bolivia, Zambia, Malawi and Kenya, community centres were designed and constructed by local communities with the support of their NGO partners. Today there are over 772 such centres that have been designed, constructed and supported within SDI.

The Chinsapo community hall, in Lilongwe, Malawi has made space for the federation to congregate and hold meetings. The federation in Lilongwe manages this space and hires the space out when not in use. The hall is strategically located in the largest market in the largest settlement in Lilongwe.

The George compound settlement in Lusaka is over 70 years old with a population of over 70,000. The community hall in Lusaka, Zambia is a two storied building located at a convenient location on the main road. This structure was designed and constructed by the community members with resources from their local urban poor fund, other donor agencies and the urban poor international fund supported by SDI (more about UPFI to come). It is used for various community activities training programs including community savings. It allows the members of the community to come to a common place where they can problem solve and interact with other stakeholders. When not in use the
space is rented out for wedding functions and parties and generates some income. This community center has invigorated the leaders of the community especially the women, given them a sense of identity and purpose and become a model resource center that attracts non-federation members to come and participate.

Similar community centers have been designed and constructed by local communities in Villa Vista, a mining city in Oruro, Bolivia, in Vukuzenzele in South Africa and Nairobi in Kenya.

Informal settlement markets: Federations in Uganda, Kenya and Ghana are exploring ways and means to redevelop and redesign these informal markets. These markets are located within the settlement and benefit both the buyers and sellers who are mostly from the same community. More recently, discussions around planning and designing for these informal community markets, among the different country affiliates is opening the space for a more nuanced understanding of how to mobilise other categories of the urban poor like street vendors, home-based workers and waste pickers linking the habitat and livelihood agenda.

Proposed development for Kinawataka market place; Kinawataka, is an informal settlement in the Nakawa Division in Kampala, Uganda. The settlement is approximately 150 acres and is located close to the main railway line. Inadequate housing, rampant crime, and high unemployment plague the settlement. Most residents eek out a living in the informal market. For more than 20 years, the market (located off the Kampala- Jinja highway) has served the local and surrounding communities of Kinawataka. The market was known for being the arrival point of fresh produce from Eastern Uganda. The market contains over 120
small business premises, ranging from 32 permanent lock ups (made of brick and iron sheets), to 71 temporary stalls made of wood and iron sheets or tarpaulin. Vendors selling vegetables, fish, and charcoal operate the market stalls. Vendors dealing in general merchandise, groceries, operate the lockups and services like electronic repair. In addition there are butcheries and restaurants whose structures are more permanent in nature. The structures are either owned or rented. The monthly rent ranges from 15,000 - 50,000UGX (6-$20) depending on the location and structure. The proposed project seeks to upgrade the informal settlement market in situ and improve the livelihoods of the present vendors. It seeks to develop an alternative to eviction, through organizing the urban poor by partnering with local and national government to plan and upgrade. The project will create the spatial, social and economic space for existing settlement and their businesses. The project also seeks to demonstrate that organised community organizations can overcome many of the challenges that have impeded market development in Uganda to date: namely, politics, land wrangles and over-priced solutions. The beneficiaries of this project will be the market vendors in Kinawataka market and the residents of Kinawataka settlements and surrounding areas.

From Community savings to Urban Poor Fund International (UPFI):
An important tool for mobilising within SDI is through community savings. Federations of the urban poor have created local urban poor funds to begin to engage around such community projects with their city governments. However, their own resources are not always sufficient. UPFI is global pot of money that is designed to make cheap finance available to national urban poor federations when their own savings or local urban poor funds are not sufficient. It strengthens the hands of the federation when negotiating with city authorities that already have so many other priorities, making it difficult for them to address the needs of the informal

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communities. Organised communities go equipped with alternative financial and technical solutions and by undertaking precedent projects show government that they have the organisational capacity to do so. This marks a huge leap in their dialogue with their governments who are encouraged to listen and accommodate their demands. Such funds are growing and are able to open the political and financial space needed for negotiating projects of scale. Though these funds are small they are strategic in that they bring all these different components together and allow organised communities to change practice and policy by engaging government. UPFI/SDI, 2013 [http://www.sdinet.org/upfi](http://www.sdinet.org/upfi)

Conclusion:
Organized communities of the urban poor have explored various strategies for spatial, social, political and economic inclusion in cities. Evictions and negotiations around land and housing can be long drawn with many roadblocks. By building their capacity around community savings and by collecting citywide data on informal settlements city federations have been able to develop concrete proposals that are for the common good of the community. Its members learn to negotiate, articulate and create clear plans for implementing projects that build their skills and their capacity to work on the more difficult issues of housing.

By working on their collective spaces, they learn collective behaviour; move beyond their individual needs and build the collective voice, identity and skills much needed to sustain their long-term negotiations on land and shelter in the city. Designing, planning and constructing such spaces helps the community buy time with local officials. Often these projects are a force of good and have the ability to stop drastic responses from the government like evictions.

By mobilising through community savings and collecting citywide information of their settlements, the women have been able to prioritise their needs and create slum-upgrading proposals. Safe, clean, secure open common spaces have a direct influence on the quality of living conditions of informal settlements especially for women, young girls
and children. With more women participating in the implementation of these projects it redefines the gender relationships within these communities.

By negotiating for better common spaces, the community learns to articulate their collective needs and negotiate with local authorities. They also learn to manage their already very dense spaces more creatively as it teaches them to maximise their minimum resources of available land and finance. Building and constructing community versus individual facilities brings down costs and makes such facilities more affordable.

By working on precedent setting pilot projects, they prove to the city that they have the capacity to take on such projects. By learning to work on small projects like community toilets, they build the skills and confidence to work on bigger and more complex projects like that of community markets. Planning spaces for living and livelihood builds their capacity to look at the needs of the settlement more holistically. By engaging with local government around these projects also helps the engineers and other officials in government understand better how to work with poor communities.

By engaging with external technical support these community organisations redefine their relationship with professionals. Overtime they have been able to develop a cadre of professionals who have become more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of poor communities and who develop the capacity to translate the aspirations of these communities into blue prints.

Designing, and managing community projects at scale also builds confidence in these communities to bid for larger contracts from the city, which also become a source of income generation. By proving that they can plan, design and manage such projects, organised groups of the urban poor are able to prove to government and other actors that they have the capacity to take on such projects small and big at scale. With experience the community and the city understand better what projects the community can take on and what they cannot.
Shared facilities are not always attractive to the middle class. It is not uncommon to find the middle classes who often compete for the same spaces in the city, as they are cheaper to buy. Community toilets are a deterrent to the middle class and it stops them from buying spaces meant for low cost housing.

Informal Settlements and their physical space they occupy contribute to viewing them as an opportunity to understand different ways of seeing and thinking about the city. In their quest of finding security of tenure in cities, which are normally hostile and alien to the urban poor, organised urban poor communities and slum dweller federations have been able to prove that they can participate in the cities development. Through relevant and affordable design options and collective planning, implementation and management of these spaces they have taken responsibility for their community spaces and amenities within their settlements thus making them safe and secure for their women and children.

Informal communities in different parts of the world have used their inherent entrepreneurial skills to contribute to the informal economy of cities. The collective assets that they produce are a force of good to the city. Organised groups informal communities in the last two decades have built their capacities and continue to proactively engage their city authorities on slum upgrading projects that have improved their living and livelihood spaces. Marginalised communities all over the world aspire to coexist in peace and harmony with other classes of people in their cities.

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