Know Your City: community profiling of informal settlements

Urban poor communities across Africa, Asia and Latin America affiliated to Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) have begun a global campaign to standardise and aggregate the data they collect at settlement level. This data on their everyday lives and living conditions is a means to communicate the scale and extent of informality and deprivation in the spaces they occupy in their cities. Government planning departments often use inadequate data, which does not reflect the reality on the ground and is not fit for purpose. By standardising community data collection processes and management, SDI federations hope to scale up their leverage ability, and use this data to work with government staff to make real improvements to the areas where they live.

Evictions and exclusion are everyday realities for too many residents of informal settlements across the Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) network. In urban poor settlements, people may be forcibly transferred from their homes — both legally and illegally — and excluded from policy platforms that make decisions about the areas where they live.

Although planning for development is vital, and data is required, government departments with this responsibility have all too frequently avoided collecting information about informal settlements. Consequently available data is often inadequate for planning purposes.

Urban poor communities have been collecting data and producing knowledge about their everyday lives for more than three decades. SDI believes that standardising this data will help settlement dwellers establish partnerships with governments and allow them to collaborate with all agencies working on land, housing, infrastructure and other urban issues.

In a presentation at an SDI database workshop in Nairobi, SDI President Jockin Arputham outlined their vision:

“We need one SDI questionnaire, so we can use the information globally. We want to understand the magnitude of our power. We want to make different cases for different audiences. We want to collaborate with all the actors speaking about land, housing, infrastructure, all the people speaking about the urban. But we want to have a voice at these forums. We have asked how to use the data to establish partnerships with the government. What is the strength of your position when you speak to government? We can demonstrate that there are so many settlements in the city, that we need so much land to settle people in vulnerable areas, number of toilets in ratio to people, and so forth. Settlement profiles give us the big picture. For this reason we need to standardise the questions we ask.”

Standardised questions can provide citywide comparable settlement profiles, which in turn will...
governments, helping policymakers and settlement dwellers alike in their quest for better city planning.

**How did it begin?**

SDI groups began this work almost 30 years ago in India, with a community survey in Janata Colony in Mumbai in 1976. This was followed in 1987 with ‘We, the invisible: a census of Indian pavement dwellers’.2 The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) (an Indian NGO), the National Slum Dwellers’ Federation and Mahila Milan (a network of women’s savings collectives) surveyed the populations who lived on the pavements of Mumbai to get accurate information on these families’ backgrounds and living conditions.

Since then, SDI affiliates have collected information about thousands of informal settlements around the world. Residents no longer have to tolerate city maps that do not register their neighbourhoods. They can now be proactive in defining their own spaces and putting themselves on the map.

**Why collect this information?**

By collecting information and data about their everyday lives, these organised communities — marginalised and often unrecognised by formal institutions — have catalysed incremental and large-scale upgrading of their living conditions. They have also built self-enumeration practices up to be one of the core strategies and pillars of practice for SDI affiliates.

Collecting information is an effective tool for mobilisation at community and settlement level. It allows community members to open dialogues with city authorities and development partners around informal settlement upgrading, ensuring community participation in planning design and implementation.

**Types of data collected**

SDI affiliates collect three kinds of data:

**Settlement profiles.** Neighbourhood information across all informal settlements in their towns and cities to demonstrate the scale of problems to local authorities and other agencies. Profiling and mapping teams including federation leaders hold repeated consultations and discussions with residents. These profiles offer a snapshot of baseline information on the scale and nature of informality, assets and the conditions of poverty; they provide a detailed overview of a settlement, its inhabitants, brief history, land tenure, quality of housing, extent of provision of infrastructure and services, and the residents’ main problems and priorities. This produces a rich set of data that captures the

![Figure 1. The evolution of settlement profiling, 1976 to present day](image-url)
history, social, political and environmental conditions on the ground.

**Household-level enumerations or censuses.** Household questionnaires that commonly include questions about household size, income, assets and access to basic services and tenure security.

**Mapping.** Slum dwellers create and collate maps to complement settlement profiles and enumerations. These maps involve geographic information system plots of the settlement boundaries, structures and basic facilities such as toilets, schools and surface water.

**Systematising and standardising**

Data collection efforts were local in their focus until 2012, when the SDI network started to explore increased standardisation of its settlement profiles. By 2012, the changing scale of informality in cities of the global South and the challenge of increasingly globalised development agendas had reduced the visibility of the local context. SDI realised that consistency in data collection products across the network would allow its affiliates a stronger voice in national and international discussions.

Analysis of more than 7,000 settlement profiles collected by 15 SDI affiliates illustrates the challenges presented by existing data collection methods:

- Affiliates were collecting different kinds of data
- Definitions were inconsistent and imprecise
- Not all profiles had sufficient information for analysis, and some were incomplete
- Data was collected at various times, some profiles were undated
- There were possible duplicates
- The data often lacked location information and geo-spatial referencing
- Land area units and distances were imprecise
- Spatial definition was inconsistent and included neighbourhood identities, government delineations and historical boundaries.

The cause of these differences is understandable. Local communities actively participate in the design of their survey tools, so it is normal for questions to focus on a particular settlement and the concerns its community wishes to highlight. Yet, there are commonalities in informality and the conditions of poverty and deprivation. And although these were apparent to informal settlement dwellers and international policymakers, informal settlement residents federated to SDI had not attempted to use their data to show such commonalities.

So SDI launched a global campaign across its network to develop a centralised and digitised slum/settlement profile database. Once the idea was floated, the federations were keen to participate. And while further engagement threw up more challenges, it also brought a recognition of the potential power of aggregation (that is, the bringing together of city profiles and settlement enumerations onto a common platform).

**The power of aggregation**

Given their marginal political and social standing, communities have engaged in data collection as much to strengthen a positive collective identity as to document their living conditions. Addressing this first objective has historically led them to seek the legitimisation of their data from external agencies. In the past, this was often in the form of a stamp or signature of approval from city officials, who would verify the data collection processes, and hence the resultant information.

The data world of the 21st century is vast and complex. For SDI even to stand still it has to upgrade its data collection systems. This awareness, combined the political understanding of the significance of aggregation, prompted the restructuring of approaches to data collection. Aggregation, the SDI affiliates realised, is also a strategy for legitimacy.

The quality and accuracy of SDI federations’ data has been premised on the methodology and collection process that informal settlement dwellers use. Federations have refined this

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<th>Table 1: A comparison of data collected by communities and others.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Data collected by SDI affiliated communities:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Remains ‘alive’ in the community.</td>
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<td>Contributes to a realignment of power between the community and the authorities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organises communities in a way that facilitates productive engagement with other urban development stakeholders (especially government).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generates dialogue on planning at the community level.</td>
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<td>Comprehensively reaches across all residents in informal settlements and is a product of dialogue which reduces misinformation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Data collected by others:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is analysed in complex ways and is rarely returned to the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reinforces the power of those outside the community and the gap between outside and inside knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has no impact on community organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generates dialogue in professional and academic circles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Often relies on samples and is prone to misinformation from communities (whether because of community strategy towards external agencies or simply suspicion).</td>
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Source: draws on Dobson et al. (2014). ¹
methodology over the past three decades and shared it with each other across the global South through horizontal learning exchanges. A new shared profiling template is the first step to an advanced level of aggregation. SDI affiliates agreed the standardised profile in mid-2013 and 300 profiles have already been submitted to the central online database. They aim to have 1,000 by the end of 2014. The challenge now is to see how these findings can be brought together to provide insights across cities, countries and regions.

This new form of data use, underpinned by unified collection practices and agreed variables, is a considerable step forward for SDI. In addition to focusing on external validation and legitimisation (local authority officials will continue to be involved), SDI affiliates now draw on more rigorous scientific practice in terms of data collection, analysis and management. They aim to establish this core practice of community-led data collection as a replicable documented methodology.

SDI intends to challenge the practice of data collection by external agencies. Federation members have watched professionals come and extract information about living conditions in informal settlements, and then leave without being accountable to the residents who complete their questionnaires (see Table 1).

As federation members build up their skills and affiliates pool their data, aggregation is no longer a dream; it becomes a reality. Jean Pierre Elong-Mbassi, Secretary General of United Cities and Local Governments Africa (UCLG-A) supported SDI's call to action for the Know Your City campaign, requesting that local governments stop using second-hand data to understand realty. Instead, he called for “first-hand data from communities to be the mine of knowledge for the management of cities.”

What are the implications for policymakers?

Staff in local government, central government and international agencies who want to support urban poverty reduction in informal settlements can work with local communities to build up an understanding of local conditions, prior to planning interventions.

Communities using data collection modalities can use these to plan multi-scalar interventions. Mapping and enumeration enables local communities to determine their priorities and help city federations understand and support these needs, while profiling helps them understand the problems at city level and therefore interact more effectively with the authorities.

With standardised data, SDI federations can monitor the Millennium Development Goals more closely. For example, SDI has started developing its own sets of composite indicators that will draw on the standardised settlement profile and enumerations to monitor the sustainable development goals that are specific to urban and slum conditions.

As organised communities come to ‘know their city’, their sense of citizenship develops. They no longer have to listen to professionals and academics telling them about themselves. Instead, they can build a partnership of knowledge and expertise to create new urban development options that offer material improvements to the one billion people who need them.

Anni Beukes

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Notes


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