

The Informal City and the Phenomenon of Slums: understanding the informal model is key to shift planning responses.

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Abstract

In today's world, one in three urban residents lives in slum conditions. According to the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT), in 2006 nearly 1 billion people in cities in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and even Europe and North America could find housing only in slums and informal settlements. The scale and complexity of the problem of informal settlements are unprecedented, and demonstrate clearly that most cities face difficulties in accommodating their residents within the formal, official and enacted plans governing the use of land and urban areas. Data collected by UN-HABITAT show that the percentage of urban population living in slums has been decreasing since 1990 to 2010, from 46.1% to 32.7% respectively. However, in absolute numbers the population has been continuously increasing and will continue to increase for the years to come. This means that a large part of the population can only find housing in informally planned settlements outside of the official planning framework of cities. In Africa, for example, urban growth is synonymous of slum formation which in practice means that African cities are urbanizing on the basis of informal land development processes rather than through urban plans. In Latin America, informal settlements represent the fastest-growing segment of metropolitan populations, and informally supplied land has provided large parts of the population with access to land for housing. Despite the existence of housing programs, settlement upgrading, and land regularization policies, informal settlements persist and multiply. Informal land development, in the form of illegally and informally developed housing and human settlements, typically accounts for between 20 and 70% of urban growth in cities in the developing world.

The keynote presentation draws on UN-HABITAT's data on slums and on the author's experience with citywide slum upgrading programmes in different countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa. At first, the author provides a brief overview of the problems associated with slums and informal settlements and provides unequivocal evidence of the scale and scope of the phenomenon of informal urbanization. It argues that a poorly functioning housing sector and a lack of housing

options affordable to the various social and economic groups are among the deep-rooted causes of the flourishing informal land and housing markets in cities throughout the developing world. It highlights regional differences in Africa, Asia and Latin America and shows how bottlenecks in land supply and land delivery systems hinder access to serviced land and adversely affect the supply of affordable housing for large swathes of the population, which appears to be the root cause of informal and illegal land development and slum formation. The presentation highlights the peculiarities and vitality of the informal development process with a wealth of illustrations from different cities, countries and regions in the developing world that helps us to understand the underlying causes but also strategies individuals and groups follow to access land and housing outside the formal systems of planning. The second part of the presentation focuses on possible responses and elaborates on the kinds of policies that help cities to take better control of their growth and offer viable alternatives to formalize and guide urban growth.

The final and conclusive part of the presentation elaborates on the challenges facing cities within the context of climate change mitigation and adaptation and the need to foster sustainable urbanization and promote a paradigm shift in our practice of planning and managing cities.