

Blurring the Formal-Informal Dichotomy: Is Self-Help the Answer?

Sadia Amin

University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

While over 70% of the world population is expected to live in urban areas by 2030, most of this would be absorbed by the informal settlements in the Global South. This policy brief looks critically at the issue of informal settlements with respect to land tenure and focuses on global grass-root organizations in their efforts to negotiate equality through self-help. In doing so, this brief recognizes the need for problematizing the formal-informal binary that rests on arbitrary legal structures, at a policy level to fully integrate informal settlements in the urbanizing logic of the Global South.

Background

With 70% of the world population expected to live in urban areas by 2030, the future of cities is said to be in the Global

South. However, these future cities of the South are not imagined as the glistening ordered cities of the West, but rather as “largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood” (Davis, 2006), absorbing the population sprawl in the slums. The modern urban slum, as an itinerant of recognition (Roy, 2011) for the cities of the Global South and as a manifestation of urban poverty, was seen as a hindrance for the modern city to reach its full potential. Within such a challenging context, it was no surprise that informality was an important theme at the ninth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF9), that opened with an aspiration to help people in informal settlements live with dignity. Bearing in mind the derogatory connotation of the word “slum”, and the complexities of blanketing a variety of

settlements under the category, this brief will use the more objective term of informal settlements instead.

Where previously informal settlements have been a cause of anxiety to urbanists, they are now increasingly seen as places for alternative entrepreneurship, surplus labor, and a focal point for street politics. The narrative about seeing informal settlements as a menace has changed to a more accepted view where economists like Charles Kenny and Hernando de Soto praise the heroism of the dwellers. Looking to integrate informal settlements into the formal city because of their economic virtues and untapped opportunities was also a theme at WUF9. However, the problem with the existing narrative is its undertone of binary between formal and informal, which also affects how city governance and planning policies are shaped. It not only romanticises informality, but looks at these settlements from an ethnocentric gaze, as something separate from the “formal” urban fabric that must be dealt with in order to create an ideal city.

There is a need for changing this ethnocentric gaze around informal settlements, from a patronizing economic view that only takes informality into account for its economic benefits, to one which looks at it as an integral part of the urbanizing Global South; with its people having equal rights to urban services. To understand this from the vantage point of the Global South, this policy brief will look at two global organizations with arguably the most dominant voice at the WUF9 on mobilizing grass-root efforts for policy impact on securing land tenure. It will look at the initiatives taken by the SDI and GLTN to integrate informal settlements in the socio-economic fabric of the city, through self-help efforts of the local communities. It will then provide a critical reflection on this dominant discourse of self-help at WUF9.

Implementing the New Urban Agenda – Organizations making a difference

The UN Habitat document Challenge of the Slums published in 2003 defines informal settlements in terms of land, as residential areas where dwellers do not have a legal

claim to the land they are living on. As a guidance document towards inclusive, sustainable urbanization, the New Urban Agenda, produced in 2016 pledges to maintain equality in providing services to informal settlements in urbanizing cities. The premise of inclusive urbanization hence, rests on security of land tenure, following from Sustainable Development Goal 1.4.2 which places secure land tenure as an indicator of eradication of poverty. In order to increase the visibility of the informal settlements through data collection and establishing stakeholder partnership, organizations have been working for secure land tenure for the urban poor, to in turn implement the New Urban Agenda.

1. Slum Dwellers International (SDI)

Slum Dwellers International (SDI) works in 32 countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America to form federations of urban poor, to enable them to collect data by self-help and negotiate secure land tenure with the governments. As a network of community based organizations, SDI aims to bring change from below through its “Practices

for Change” policy which includes six practices, involved in empowering the most vulnerable. From its Savings Scheme that allows women to collectively access short term loans (which are almost impossible to access for the urban poor) and develop their financial skills and leadership capacity for increased participation, to Enumeration and Mapping for mobilizing communities for future planning, SDI’s goal to create inclusive cities reflects well on the New Urban Agenda. A result of community driven data collection has been its Know Your City campaign, which has produced the largest database of informal settlements around the world, for policy makers and researchers to work on. This campaign reflects on not only urban services available to the settlements, but also on the relationship between governmental authorities and communities.

In its attempt for “co-producing access to land, servicing and housing”, SDI is involved in building global and local partnerships, engaging with governments and international organizations to deal

with localized issues. As a material goal, the Slum Upgrading practice of the SDI is recognized as a policy intervention for transformation of institutional practices, and for deepening democracy through improving the living conditions of informal settlers.

A unique feature of SDI is its recognition that not all informal settlements are the same, and slum upgrading is context-specific however, generalizations are important for creating global impact. The database made by Know Your City campaign debunks the narrative that informal settlements are socio-politically disordered, by revealing not only the relationality between authorities and communities, but also the socio-economic fabric of each settlement in various cities. For policy makers, SDI provides a vantage point in the Global South to listen to the settlers on what works for them, instead of a top-down approach in city planning. In all its efforts, SDI attempts to reduce forced evictions through increasing the visibility of informal settlers, and taking a rights-based approach towards them.

2. Global Land Tool Network

GLTN, or the Global Land Tool Network works specifically on establishing the security of land tenure for the urban poor, through stakeholder partnerships. It works for the realization of Sustainable Development Goals by developing land tools for attainment of land reforms for good governance and “inclusive land administration”. These land tools which focus specifically on providing equitable rights to the most vulnerable, including women, are: The Continuum of Land Rights; The Participatory Enumeration for Tenure Security; Land Records System for the Poor; and Customary Land Tenure. It recognizes that individual land titling of private property is not the solution for security of land tenure, but rather, land rights work on a spectrum and tenure type is context driven. Through research on legal pluralism regarding land tenure, GLTN has pioneered training and policy implementation via global forums, the result of which has been the Flexible Land Tenure Act in Namibia.

Like SDI, GLTN has also been involved in participatory data collection for slum upgradation, as an important step in empowering informal settlements to represent themselves rather than having external representations of them. By establishing land records to assist local and national governments, and taking region-specific initiatives (e.g. incorporating Islamic land law for women in Muslim countries), GLTN aims to establish best practices to follow, bringing in bilateral and multilateral organizations, national and municipal governments on a single platform to establish the right for adequate housing and standard of living for the urban poor.

What's next? Is Self-Help the Answer?

While organizations like SDI and GLTN amongst many others (e.g. Asian Coalition for Housing, Cities Alliance, Mahila Milan etc) are commendable in their efforts to establish informal settlements as an integral part of the urban fabric of the Global South, they are extremely reliant on self-help, which becomes problematic as this would shift the responsibility of local

governments to the third sector. Self-help, while sending a strong message about empowerment, adds to the responsibilities of the informal settlers who have to prove themselves worthy of rights, through these international organizations. There is also the question of whether settlements which do not agree with the political agendas of global organization are left behind in this aim to be inclusive, as context-specific politics is not always aligned with those of the organization. Furthermore, representing the settlements on international platforms like the UN Habitat or World Urban Forum, reflects a hierarchical relationship between global organizations whereby local people are given minimal space to speak for themselves.

Self-help is embedded in the idea that governments are completely ignorant of the socio-economic conditions, livelihoods, and political associations of people living in informal settlements. This claim does not stand when local vote-bank politics are analysed (for instance in India, these politics are integral to state-citizen relations vis-à-vis informality), which

reveal complexities of nature of governance when it comes to informal settlements. These complexities render the self-help efforts useless when forced evictions are still carried out to make space for large-scale urban projects or when data collected for secure land tenure and urban services are instead used for displacements.

It would be incorrect to say that grass-root organizations do not make any impact at all; they do in fact empower the local communities to access the city and its resources. However, this is done in a more passive way by staying away from active politics and in their limited impact on how governmentality functions in informal settlements, more needs to be done. The work of grass-root organizations is set in opposition to official narratives, which in turn feeds the formal-informal binary, limiting the integration of the settlements into the urban fabric of the cities. This was specifically reflected in the functionality and organization of WUF9, where organizations such as SDI and GLTN presented about their work, but no representation from governments and/or

policy making bodies was to be seen, rendering their impact questionable.

Hence, what is needed is a more reflexive approach to informal settlements, and the blurring of the formal-informal dichotomy on a planning policy level. Informal settlements should not be seen for the economic or political opportunities they offer for development, but as having an organizing logic (Roy and AlSayed, 2004), with its people as equal citizens with rights to urban services, fully integrated in the city.

References

Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of slums*. London, Verso.

Llosa, M V (1989) Forward to 'The Other Path: the invisible revolution in the Third World' by Hernando de Soto, in S Corbridge (ed.) (1995) *Development Studies: a reader*. London: Edward Arnold

Roy, A. and Alsayyad, N. (2004). *Urban informality*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

Roy, A. (2011), *Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism*. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35: 223–



World Urban Forum, February 2018



238. doi:10.1111/j.1468-
2427.2011.01051.x

Report on Human Settlements 2003),
London: Earthscan/UN-Habitat.

UN Human Settlements Programme
(2003) The Challenge of Slums (Global