
The Seven Myths of 'Slums'

Challenging popular prejudices about the world's urban poor



Contents

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Introduction

For anyone who takes an interest in the problem of slums, a few basic facts will soon become clear. Firstly, the locus of global poverty is moving from rural areas to the cities, and more than half the world population now lives in urban areas for the first time in human history. Secondly, most of the world's urban population, most of its largest cities and most of its urban poverty is now located in Africa, Asia and Latin America – the so-called developing world. Thirdly, the growth in slums since the 1980s is both formidable and unprecedented (even though urban slums have existed in Europe since the Industrial Revolution), and the future prospects for the growing number of slum-dwellers is currently less than optimistic.

Beyond these facts, there seems to be little awareness about the reality of slums in the popular imagination. Thanks to the tireless work of many activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) over many decades, the issue of global poverty is now high on the international policy radar – but the issue of slums, which forms a major component of poverty in urbanising cities, still fails to register in most people's concerns. Part of the reason is the low priority given to slums compared to other development concerns, which often have high-profile celebrities and international charities backing their cause. It is more difficult to generate widespread interest in the gritty problem of inadequate housing than in such issues as gender equality, primary healthcare and education, or human rights violations like child labour and human trafficking. There is also a lack of general agreement about the seriousness of slum formation; for some writers, the ingenuity and resourcefulness witnessed in many slums is even viewed as a model for social organisation in wealthy nations. At the same time, governments and policymakers appear at a loss to understand how to respond to the problem at a global level, as reflected by the Millennium Development Goal on slums that aims merely to “improve the lives” of 100 million slum-dwellers by 2020 (one in 10 of the total number when the target was drawn), which effectively accepts that the burgeoning slums of the developing world are here with us to stay.

For these reasons, this report is an attempt to help promote a wider interest in the challenge of slums and urban poverty. Much may be written about informal settlements in academic books and journals, but the depiction of slums in popular movies and literature often serves to reinforce a number of long-held prejudices against the urban poor. The complacent indifference expressed by many governments and middle-class citizens to the struggles faced by the millions of people living in slums can also lead to other forms of discrimination, as explored throughout the following chapters. It is on this basis that the material is structured around seven different ‘myths’. As popularised through the brilliant book “Hunger: Twelve Myths” published by Food First in 1986, conventional thinking on development issues in the West is often characterised by many assumptions, clichés and rationalisations about the very poor who live in distant countries. In challenging some of these core myths, we are able to move beyond a response to poverty motivated by guilt or fear, and instead focus on the structural causes

of powerlessness that result in insecurity and deprivation.¹ Any number of different myths about slums could have been chosen, but the ones selected aimed to give a general perspective on a range of key issues related to human settlements – including the impact of economic globalisation, the role of national governments, the significance of the informal sector of employment, the question of international aid, and the (little mentioned) controversy surrounding global slum data and development targets.

This report is also meant as a counterpart to the book *Megaslumming* about life in Kibera, the famous low-income settlement based in Nairobi, Kenya. The purpose of this other STWR publication on slums was to help raise awareness about the reality of extreme urban poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, presenting a first-person narrative about the author's personal encounters with the communities' different residents. Although the short book gives an overview of the political and economic forces that have shaped the conditions of poverty in Kenya, its account was necessarily focused on the human stories within one particular low-income community, and was less focused on the global picture and solution to slums. A key element that was missing from this account was the inspiring work of urban poor groups and community networks in many cities of the South – a cause that is championed by innumerable grassroots movements and many NGOs around the world. As outlined in several of the chapters that follow, the first step toward realising a ‘world without slums’ lies in supporting the resourcefulness, capacity and organisational ability of the people who actually live inside these settlements – a fact that is long recognised by development practitioners, but still ignored by many governments who continue to displace the urban poor from their places of living and livelihood.

A few words of clarification may be needed on the use of terminology, especially for anyone who objects to the word ‘slum’. Many writers prefer to use alternative, less emotive phrases to describe these differing forms of inadequate or illegal housing, such as low-income communities, informal settlements, squatter colonies, shantytowns, or else the country-specific names that often reflect either their rural character or material status, such as *bustee*, *bidonville*, *favella*, *katchi abadi*, *barrio* or *kampung*. While the word ‘slum’ is purposefully used throughout these seven myths (along with other synonyms for the sake of variety), it is by no means intended to carry any derogatory associations. On the contrary, the main reason for using this colloquial term is to draw people's attention to the many injustices that afflict the world's urban poor – hundreds of millions of whom live in conditions that would cause public outrage and moral indignation if replicated in the ‘developed’ world.² During another visit to East Africa in early 2010, it was a surprise to learn that most well-heeled citizens in globalising cities like Nairobi are equally as uninformed about the slums beyond their doorstep as their affluent counterparts in the West. This is not to deny that the word ‘slum’ may tell us something of the living conditions in unplanned shelters, but nothing about the qualities of the people who live there, or the many differences in informal settlements

throughout the developing world. In Myths 3 and 7, further attention is paid to the many conceptual problems and dangers of using the word 'slum', particularly in relation to the campaign slogan adopted by UN-HABITAT and other urban assistance agencies: "Cities Without Slums".

Another term used throughout these chapters that may need clarification is 'neoliberalism', or the policy of non-intervention by the state in the economy (often called 'market fundamentalism'), which some people may consider obsolete in light of the failures of deregulatory policies that led to the world stock market crash of 2008. It is true that many governments have been forced to contradict the dominant ideology of recent decades by intervening in and regulating the economy, and even by nationalising many financial institutions. Various world leaders have declared that we are witnessing the end of *laissez-faire* economics and the so-called Washington Consensus, while the Financial Times opined during the run-up to the crisis that "the dream of global free-market capitalism has died".³ But over two years later, it is clear that the priorities of most governments have not fundamentally altered. The incredible bank bailouts of late 2008 were used to help sustain rich financiers in city capitals, and conservative governments – newly elected in many countries – are now relentlessly cutting back on social welfare, public services and worker privileges. The same 'failed' banks continue to operate in global financial markets, while most governments continue to push all the major hallmarks of neoliberalism since the 1980s: more privatisation of industries and services, reduced barriers to trade and increased capital flows between states, a sustained reliance on export-led growth and supply-side economic policies. In other words, state interventions to shore up ailing financial sectors may have temporarily saved the free market global economy, but it far from constituted any structural change in economic relations. In fact, the underlying dynamic of international competition that characterises the world-market orientation of most governments is more entrenched than ever before.

This forms the main subject of critique throughout this report: the straight-jacket of economic globalisation that forces governments to turn their cities into an attractive home base for financial capital, at the expense of redistributive strategies that would directly benefit the excluded poor. So long as policymakers prioritise economic growth ahead of the basic human needs (and entitlements) of the weakest members of society, the prevalence of slums will inevitably worsen across the Global South, as the following chapters set out to explain. This is perhaps the most interesting, if mystifying, aspect of the slums challenge. Just as climate change is leading countless people to question the limits of a growth-led, consumption-based globalised economy, the rapid growth of slums is a direct confrontation to the logic of competitive free markets. The current model of development is unsustainable not only because the planet cannot endure the environmental costs of unending pollution and resource depletion, but also because the continuing divide between rich and poor – expressed most visibly in the form of urban slums – is leading to social tensions and segregations that no society

can ultimately contain. Yet few people decry the rapid growth of slums and urban poverty, or forewarn the lack of planning by governments for how to accommodate this "surplus humanity" in the developing world. In its final conclusion, this report suggests that the hope for an urgent transformation of economic priorities rests with the goodwill and solidarity of a united global public voice, as much as with the organisational ability and political influence of the poor in developing countries.

A summary of the seven myths

Myth 1: There are too many people

It is easy to believe that urban slums are a consequence of too many people living in cities, or too many poor people migrating from rural to urban areas for governments to contend with the strain on housing. But the real problem is rooted in outdated institutional structures, inappropriate legal systems, incompetent national and local governance, and short-sighted urban development policies. From a wider perspective, the resurgence of a non-interventionist ideology in recent decades has weakened the role of national governments, and de-prioritised the importance of the state in planning for an equitable distribution of resources in cities. Crippled by debt, forced to prioritise loan repayments over basic services such as healthcare, and held in thrall to the so-called Washington Consensus policies that demanded a withdrawal of government from almost every sphere of public life, it has been impossible for initiatives by the state or international agencies to keep pace with the rate of urban slum formation since the 1980s. In the simplest terms, the existence of slums is not an inevitable consequence of overpopulation, but a result of the failure of policy at all levels – global, national and local – and the adoption of an international development paradigm that fails to prioritise the basic needs of the poor.

Myth 2: The poor are to blame

Many people continue to blame the poor for their conditions of poverty. According to this deep-seated myth, the people who live in slums are antisocial, uneducated and unwilling to work, or else they would not be living in such conditions of squalor. In contrast to such popular prejudices, however, anthropologists and development practitioners have long observed that the poor are not a burden upon the urbanising city, but are often its most dynamic resource. While achieving considerable feats of inventiveness in self-help housing on an individual basis, the collective power of urban poor groups has produced exceptional results in building new homes and upgrading existing slum housing – as reflected in official development literature which recommends “participatory slum improvement” as the best practice for housing interventions in developing countries. Yet for every example of a successful community-led upgrading scheme, there are as many examples of slum clearance operations and forced evictions. This constitutes one of the most crucial questions in the fight against urban poverty: will governments together recognise and support the ability of the poor to organise and help develop an inclusive city, or will they continue to view slum-dwellers as being ‘anti-progress’ and a threat to established institutions?

Myth 3: Slums are places of crime, violence & social degradation

A long-standing prejudice against the urban poor is the widespread view of slums as places of social degradation and despair, and of slum-dwellers as perpetrators of violence and crime. Although high levels of crime may occur in many informal settlements in developing countries, the popular depiction of life in slums often fails to acknowledge the

deeper causes of insecurity and violence – including the links between levels of crime and incidences of poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and youth unemployment. These causal factors (and most importantly, the responsibilities and failures of state institutions) often go unacknowledged in films and media reports about slums. Many squatter settlements in the South also exhibit a communal solidarity that contradicts these negative stereotypes, along with innumerable examples of self-sacrifice, altruism and community service that serve as a laudable example for mainstream society. This is not to glorify or sentimentalise the urban poor and their self-help housing, as many slums can be equally characterised by the opposite qualities of ruthless individualism and petty-exploitation. But too often the stereotypical view of squatters as something ‘other’ – whether it be criminals, idlers, parasites, usurpers, prostitutes, the diseased, drunks or drug addicts – is the most common response to the urban poor.

Myth 4: Slums are an inevitable stage of development

There is an underlying assumption to much of the debate surrounding slums and urban poverty: that the poor will get to our standard of living eventually, just so long as they follow our prescribed free market approach to development. Yet the policies for industrial growth followed by developed countries were not based on a *laissez-faire* ideology of free trade and state non-intervention, but instead used protectionist strategies for key industries in the earlier phases of development – which calls into question the neoliberal policy recommendations made to developing countries since the 1970s. The mainstream ‘science’ of economics is also based on the assumption that perpetual growth is the foundation of progress, even if common experience raises doubts about the environmental and social side-effects of unfettered capitalism. Furthermore, we can ask if it is acceptable to consider the appalling conditions and human abuses that defined cities all over Europe during the nineteenth century as an inevitable, even if disagreeable, part of progress in a modern industrialising city like Dhaka or Chang Hai. If not, our only choice is to consider alternative goals and more holistic models for development that prioritise social objectives ahead of the profit imperative and GDP, with a more equitable distribution of resources on the national and global level.

Myth 5: The free market can end slums

Many proponents of economic globalisation maintain a rigid faith in the power of market forces to end slums. Get the inefficient government out of the way, remains the assumption, and the beneficent power of the market mechanism and private capital will act as the levers of economic growth and widespread affluence. But after several decades of relying on the market as a cure-all for the ills of the twenty-first century, the increasing number of urban dwellers living in slums is sufficient evidence that the ‘growth-first’ strategy for development isn’t working. Employing market forces as the arbiter of resource distribution is socially exclusive, and it does not function when there is a need to produce certain types of goods or services such as housing for the poor or welfare services

for low-income groups. The deregulation and privatisation of public services serves to directly undermine social welfare provision, and further compromises the ability of public agencies to meet the needs of those who cannot afford the market price for housing, healthcare, education and sanitation. In short, the efficiency-oriented, growth-led and internationally competitive strategies of the 'city-enterprise' have failed to combat the problem of slums, and are more likely to exacerbate urban poverty than act as a solution in the future.

Myth 6: International aid is the answer

There may be more aid projects for improving the living conditions of the urban poor than ever before, but the current system of donor assistance has clearly failed to stem the tide of growing slum formation. The first problem is simply one of scale; urban poverty reduction is one of the lowest priorities for aid donations from most multilateral agencies and wealthy countries. A greater problem is the difference between the kind of assistance that is needed to ameliorate slums and the forms of action that are currently provided by international aid institutions. In particular, most official development assistance agencies have failed to develop relationships with slum residents and their representative organisations, and rarely assign any role to urban poor groups in the design and implementation of aid programmes. The priorities of aid agencies and development banks are also unlikely to favour the kind of redistributive policies that are central for giving the poor local control over the housing process. Although additional financial resources are imperative for upgrading slums in developing countries, it is doubtful that aid can successfully address the crisis in urban housing unless there is a transformation of goals and priorities by the major powers and the institutions that govern the global economy.

Myth 7: There will always be slums

Few writers on urban development issues imagine a 'world without slums' in the future. In the polarised debates on urban poverty, both the 'slums of hope' and 'slums of despair' viewpoints tacitly accept the continued existence of slums. Part of the problem is one of semantics, as it is difficult to conceive of an end to 'slums' when the language used to describe them is limited and generalised. The UN's Millennium Development Goal on slums – to "significantly improve the lives of 100 million slum-dwellers by 2020" – also implicitly accepts the existence of slums as an enduring reality, as achieving this (unacceptably low) target would hardly result in cities without slums. If urbanisation trends and cities are to become socially inclusive and sustainable, the economic model that sustains them must be wholly reformed and reimagined. A first step lies in recognising the possibility of achieving a new vision of human progress based upon a fundamental reordering of global priorities – beginning with the immediate securing of universal basic needs. Only then can the twin goals enshrined in the Habitat Agenda of 1996 be translated into a concrete programme of action: "adequate shelter for all" and "sustainable human settlements development in an urbanising world".

Myth 1

There are too many people

“Poor peasants and artisans have existed from time immemorial; but miserable and destitute villagers in their thousands and urban pavement dwellers in their hundreds of thousands – not in wartime or as an aftermath of war, but in the midst of peace and as a seemingly permanent feature – that is a monstrous and scandalous thing which is altogether abnormal in the history of mankind. We cannot be satisfied with the snap answer that this is due to population pressure.”¹

Since Thomas Malthus first warned of an impending population explosion in 1798, the idea that there are too many people in the world for everyone to share in the earth’s bounty is one of the most persistent and widespread myths in popular thinking on development. When applied to the problem of informal housing and slums in developing countries, the implications are clear: that there are too many people sharing the land, and too many people migrating from rural to urban areas for governments to contend with the strain on housing, infrastructure and job provision. It is easy to agree with such a viewpoint when contemplating the foreboding statistics from the United Nations. At the beginning of the century it was estimated that 170,000 people were moving to cities on a daily basis, and they required about 30,000 new housing units per day.² As the latest figures from the UN’s *State of the World’s Cities* report suggest, the world slum population will probably grow by six million people each year unless drastic action is taken (equivalent to more than 115,000 people moving into a slum somewhere in Africa, Asia or Latin America each week, or more than 11 people each minute).³

In the face of such dramatic figures, it is perhaps understandable if politicians and more privileged citizens perceive that city authorities across the developing world simply lack the resources to provide such vast numbers of the immigrant poor with adequate housing; that governments lack the needed financial resources and capacity to provide basic infrastructure and services to the immigrant poor on such a scale; and that the existence of slums is an inevitable consequence of a mushrooming and increasingly mobile human population. But is it really true that governments are unable to provide adequate housing and public services for all residents in rapidly growing cities, or that population growth and overcrowding is the source of the problem of slums? Chelsea in London (UK), after all, is one of the highest-density urban concentrations in the world, yet it is a much sought after and exclusive district – at the density of Chelsea, you could fit the entire world into the area covered by Senegal.⁴ There are also many examples of Western cities that grew at comparable rates to the developing world’s fast-growing cities, but without comparable rates of poverty, malnutrition and disease (such as Los Angeles in contrast to Calcutta since 1900, or Tokyo in contrast to Mexico City).⁵

The basic reason why shacks or houses are built on illegally occupied land in many low- and middle-income nations is straight forward; there is a gap between the cost of the cheapest ‘legal’ accommodation and what

large sections of the population can afford. Formal urban land markets are too expensive for most of the immigrant poor, while government regulations that influence the provision of land and its cost largely fail to account for the needs of newcomers to the city. The inevitable result is a high proportion of the population living in overcrowded tenements and informal settlements, most of which provide very poor quality housing on land sites that are occupied or built on illegally.⁶ It may be tempting to view the sheer volume of poor urban migrants as ‘the problem’, but the real problem is the failure of urban governments to ensure there is sufficient land for new housing with infrastructure and services to support low-income residents. In other words, the manifest and pervasive urban squalor in many cities of the South is by no means an inevitable consequence of having too many people, but the outcome of outdated institutional structures, inappropriate legal systems, incompetent national and local governance, and short-sighted urban development policies.⁷ The existence of slums is essentially the manifestation of a greater and fundamentally political problem of unequal land supply, discriminatory resource allocation and usage, and the age-old questions of social equity and distributive justice.

Policy choices, not population growth

To understand the deeper causes of rapid rural-urban migration and slum growth in cities of the South, it is necessary to examine the economic policies that have driven the process of development in recent decades. Although changes in the development policy paradigm are not uniform for all countries in the developing world, the impact of neoliberal economic reforms have contributed in large measure to increases in poverty and inequality since the late 1970s. Much has been said and written about the now-discredited Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that were led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank from the mid-1980s throughout the developing world. Most of the countries who committed to restructuring their economies were heavily indebted and reeling under the impact of soaring oil prices, and thereby susceptible to receiving further loans on condition of implementing adjustment reforms. These policy lending ‘conditionalities’ – summarised by state withdrawal, free market expansion and privatisation of public services – had a devastating impact on the poorest members of society in both the rural and urban sectors of recipient countries.

In rural areas, the agrarian welfare state that functioned in many poorer countries in the post-war period until the mid-1970s was effectively dismantled under adjustment policies that necessitated the deregulating of land markets, the drastic cutting of farm subsidies and price supports, and a shift to export-oriented agriculture. As a result, subsistence-level small farmers were forced to compete with (heavily subsidised) transnational food corporations from the industrialised Northern countries. In the formerly protected home markets, millions of small producers were rendered redundant and either dispossessed or displaced, leading to a structural shift of people from rural to urban places of residence through migration, and a “reserve army of migrant

labour”.⁸ The phrase often used to describe this process of upheaval in rural areas of the South throughout the 1980s and 1990s is ‘de-peasantisation’. SAPs and economic liberalisation policies represented the convergence of the worldwide forces of de-agrarianisation and national policies promoting the consolidation of small holdings into larger industrial-scale agribusiness.⁹

In urban centres, most notoriously in many African and Latin American countries, the consequences of economic restructuring was similarly catastrophic for millions of people in the urban lower- and middle-classes. Structural adjustment enforced such measures as reduced government expenditure through substantial public-sector redundancies and freezing salaries; the privatisation of state-run industries leading to massive lay-offs without social security; removal of price controls leading to sudden price rises for basic goods and services; the introduction of ‘user fees’ for public services such as health and education; and raised interest rates to tackle inflation which hastened the closure of many small local businesses.¹⁰ Many cities became trapped in a vicious cycle of increasing rural-urban migration, the collapse of formal urban employment and falling wages, and an undeveloped manufacturing sector that was unable to provide sufficient jobs for those displaced from the traditional agriculture sector. At the same time as structural adjustment forced millions of people out of the countryside, infrastructure spending and public sector jobs were significantly eliminated in the cities. In effect, the cities became a dumping ground for a surplus rural population with limited skills, scant education, and little hope of attaining employment in the formal sector. This was the basic recipe for a dramatic rise in inequality and urban poverty, a burgeoning informal sector of employment, and the dramatic growth of urban slums throughout the developing world from the 1980s onwards.¹¹

It is only in this context of the neoliberal agenda that the problem of governance can be fully appreciated. In 2003, the United Nations’ *Challenge of Slums* report – the first truly global audit of urban poverty – gave an almost damning indictment of the role that neoliberal policies played on the expansion of urban slums in the developing world. In a pivotal chapter entitled *Cities and Slums Within Globalizing Economies*, the Report states: “The main single cause of increases in poverty and inequality during the 1980s and 1990s was the retreat of the state. The redirection of income through progressive taxation and social safety nets came to be severely threatened by the ascendancy of neoliberal economic doctrines that explicitly ‘demanded’ an increase in inequality.”¹² Despite its diplomatic and erudite phrasing, the essential message of the *Challenge of Slums* was explicitly clear: that appropriate government intervention on a national and international level is fundamental to the management of sustainable and equitable cities. The root of the problem of social exclusion and urban poverty, says the Report, was the “abandonment of the redistributive agenda” following almost 50 years of government intervention and wealth distribution in the Keynesian period. According to neoliberal ideology, markets were somehow regarded as

being capable of delivering prosperity for all, and “the major problem was regarded as governments who were sapping the ability of the people to generate wealth.”¹³

While the World Bank continues to identify the remedy to urban social problems as ‘good governance’ – demanding the transparency of public sector institutions, political decentralisation, legal reform and anti-corruption measures – the neoliberal agenda has placed intolerable constraints on national governments to deal effectively with urban poverty. Crippled by debt, forced to prioritise loan repayments over basic services such as healthcare, and held in thrall to the ‘Washington Consensus’ diktats that demanded a withdrawal of government from almost every sphere of public life, it has been impossible for initiatives by the state, international agencies, donors or NGOs to keep pace with the rate of urban slum formation since the 1980s. The promotion of decentralisation by the World Bank and IMF has led to greater responsibilities for local administrations, but without the power or resources to carry out these duties successfully.¹⁴ Under these constraints, national governments cannot control the land market for housing, or afford the infrastructural investment and services required in rapidly expanding cities. As the *Challenge of Slums* testified, there is no effective alternative to intervention by the instruments of local, national or international governance.

The failure of governments

Although it cannot be said that neoliberal globalisation is the main cause of slum growth *everywhere* throughout the developing world,¹⁵ the development policy paradigm promoted by the IMF, World Bank and most major powers since the late 1970s is a foremost reason for the ongoing deluge in urban poverty and the ‘big bang’ in slum formation. The resurgence of a non-interventionist ideology has weakened the role of national governments, and de-prioritised the importance of an activist state in planning for the equitable distribution of resources in cities. This prevailing model of development has also spawned projects and policies that have destroyed the livelihoods of millions of small farmers in rural areas, diverted resources to export production that might otherwise be used by the poor to produce for their own needs, and created the structural conditions for mass migration into many cities of the South.

It is not simply the occurrence of rural-urban migration that is the source of the problem, nor is it simply the manifestation of a population explosion within cities or demographic change, but rather the failure of governments to implement the necessary redistributive policies to provide low-income residents with sufficient land, infrastructure, services and support for new housing. For the many countries that committed to structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, reduced government expenditure and massive public sector redundancies further limited the possibility of low-income residents securing adequate employment in the formal sector. Today, this same ideology continues to legitimise policies that deprive persons in need of essential public

services. If the governments of developing countries wish to access loans and grants with which to sustain their economies, they are given little option but to agree to pro-market policy prescriptions (such as reducing agricultural trade barriers, privatising housing and the supply of essential services, and spending less on social support).¹⁶ In its simplest form, the existence of slums and urban poverty is a result of the failure of policy at all levels – global, national and local – and the adoption of an international development paradigm that fails to prioritise the basic needs of the urban and rural poor.

The challenge of slums is ultimately determined by the recognition of a mass injustice. We are led to wonder at the morality of a world that denies people employment in a homeplace that may have sustained their ancestors for millennia, and then denies them a home or a life of dignity in areas where they go in search of a new livelihood. The excluded poor are constantly left to fend for themselves in the interstices of the urban fabric, without any planned locations to populate, or economic resources to buy or rent their way into the formal housing market. Forced to construct primitive settlements upon marginal lands at the urban periphery, or on steep hillsides, along railways and riversides, or on other dangerous areas not suitable for development, the residents of 'slums' are often caught in a limbo existence that is neither strictly urban nor rural. With no security of employment for the unskilled rural migrant, and with no access to adequate housing or security of tenure in illegal settlements, the residents of slums are easy targets for exploitation in the economic and social order of the city system.

Myth 2

The poor are to blame

“... ‘ordinary people’ – that is, all of us as citizens – have to slough off the vestiges of cap-touching filialism and demand that those in power help us to do what we can do locally for ourselves – by guaranteeing our access to fair shares of available resources – and where essential, by providing complementary infrastructure that cannot be installed locally and that can be provided for all.”¹

The deep-seated myth that the poor are to blame for their conditions of poverty echoes back to the earliest days of industrialisation in Western Europe. With a perverse inversion of cause and effect, the prevalence of extreme urban poverty and slum settlements is blamed not on the vagaries of industrial growth, failures in urban planning or the inequitable distribution of land and resources, but on poor people themselves. Today, many people continue to reason that the residents of slums are antisocial, uneducated and unwilling to work, or else they would not be living in such conditions of deficiency and squalor. Once denied a place in civic life and urban culture, slum residents are subsequently viewed as an impediment to the progress and betterment of society.² A sinister consequence of such prejudiced attitudes to the poor is seen in the summary evictions of illegal settlements. Although the underlying reasons for slum clearance operations is likely to differ from official justifications, an intolerance of slum residents – and an unwillingness among governments to acknowledge their role in the causes of slum formation – is an attitude that motivates and psychologically permits the forced relocation of the poor.

In the early twentieth century, the transfer of rural poverty to cities was prevented by the enforced controlling of urban entry from large parts of the agrarian population. In its most extreme form, the British colonial cities of eastern and southern Africa prevented urban migration through the enactment of pass laws, alongside vagrancy ordinances in the cities. While such policies led to the formation of neglected shantytowns on the fringes of cordoned cities, the European settlers brooked no responsibility for the underprivileged or indentured native poor.³ In the 1950s and early 1960s, when national independence and the overthrow of dictatorships led to a deluge of poor migrants into Third World cities, indigenous government attitudes to the rapid growth of slums was generally no more enlightened than their colonial predecessors. Often described as a “cancer” and thus in need of eradication, a common reaction to squatter settlements was large-scale bulldozing programmes – at times encouraged by Western-trained ‘experts’ and professionals.⁴ An important change in the housing policies of most governments in the South took place by the mid-1970s, in part stemming from the recognition that squatter settlements or other forms of illegal housing are a permanent part of a city’s growth. Governments gradually realised that eradication policies were not part of the solution but, in terms of displacing families into worse conditions and damaging their networks of social cohesion, rather exacerbate the problem.⁵

This shift in attitude was given an intellectual validation in the work of the English architect John F. C. Turner, whose publication *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* was printed in the same year as the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements was held in 1976. The new wisdom that Turner promoted, after being influenced by the creative ingenuity he witnessed in the squatter settlements of Peru, sought to nurture the self-help housing of the urban poor through an *in situ* approach to slum upgrading (meaning ‘in the same place’, referring to the improvement of an existing habitat without forced relocation to another site). Turner argued that housing is best provided and managed by those who are to live in it, rather than being centrally administered by the state through a ‘top-down’ approach to the reform of urban poverty. His pithily-written book is one of the most widely-read critiques of public housing programmes, which had largely failed to allocate sufficient and appropriate units to low-income groups in Third World countries during the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ As Turner famously pointed out in one of his early essays: “Housing is a verb”, and as such the industrialised countries had much to learn from the communal housing constructions of rapidly developing cities in the Global South.⁷ The role of the state, as well as private professionals and international donors, was reconceptualised in Turner’s writings as an ‘enabler’ of the urban poor in their incrementally-built squatter housing, and the existence of slums was considered less the problem than the solution. Such was the impact of Turner’s ideas on housing policies worldwide that even the World Bank was influenced by his concepts and methods, officially changing its position from the mid-1970s to endorse slum upgrading instead of new site development for squatters.⁸

The collective power of the urban poor

Since Turner first observed that poor people living in slums were building for their own needs much more effectively than governments or public agencies, a compelling amount of evidence backs up his view that the urban poor are not a burden upon the developing city, but are often its most dynamic resource. The immense ingenuity and resilience of those who occupy illegal settlements on private or public land, frequently in the most dangerous or uninhabitable areas of the city, is witnessed in the remarkable diversity of their habitations – such as the self-made houses built on thick bamboo stilts on the edge of marshes, as in Bahia’s *alagadosi* or on the ponds outside Dhaka; or on steep hillsides unfit for conventional construction, as in the *favelas* of Rio; or inside floodplains, as in many of Jakarta’s *kampung*s or the lagoon community of Makoko in Lagos; or even in cemeteries, as in Cairo’s infamous *el-arafa*. Not only do the residents of squatter communities receive little or no expenditure from the government on infrastructure and services, they also tread more lightly on the planet, using far fewer resources (water, electricity and other services) and generating lower levels of waste than their wealthier neighbours.⁹ The slum, when considering its high density, minimal land occupation, low-cost of production and large population size, is the most ‘sustainable’ form of housing construction by any yardstick.¹⁰ And yet

low-income groups rarely receive official acknowledgement or support for their role in the construction and management of urban housing across Africa, most of Asia and Latin America.

While achieving considerable feats of inventiveness in self-help housing on an individual basis, the organised and collective power of the urban poor can also produce exceptional results. In many developing countries, the lowest income urban residents have formed into national federations of 'slum' and 'shack' dwellers that are actively engaged in addressing their own needs, both in building new homes and upgrading existing settlements. In 1996, several of these federations and community-based organisations joined forces to found an umbrella organisation, Slum/Shack Dwellers International (S.D.I.), that represents urban poor groups from 28 countries of the Global South.¹¹ At the local level, three main techniques are employed in the self-help development of poor communities; conducting neighbourhood surveys to create census data, setting up community-controlled pools of capital for savings and loan collaboratives, and negotiating with government officials to build housing and secure basic services and infrastructure. In this way, slum residents are placed in charge of improving their own circumstances, leading to greater self-reliance and community empowerment.¹²

Over the last 20 years, a growing number of urban poor organisations have shifted from making demands on the state – such as to acquire land for housing or security of tenure, or to prevent being summarily evicted from their homes – to a collaborative approach with governments and aid agencies. The reasons for this shift are broadly two-fold; firstly, there are limitations to what the inhabitants of informal settlements can achieve through their own autonomous actions, however well organised these may be. The importance of community-managed savings groups, local schools and clubs may be greatly underestimated and often invisible, but government support remains essential in the provision of larger systems of trunk infrastructure for water, sanitation, drainage, garbage collection and roads. Collective organisation in many low-income settlements may also be limited by the diversity of political allegiances and ethnic ties among the urban poor. Secondly, demands made on state institutions by community-based organisations are characterised by slow and difficult negotiations that usually take many years to be achieved in a piecemeal fashion, and without support for comprehensive upgrading of existing settlements.¹³ Even when the state has allocated considerable resources to urban poverty reduction, the projects built by government bodies or the contractors they hire is often inappropriately designed, of poor quality, and in unsuitable locations unless urban poor organisations have an influence over how it is designed and managed.¹⁴

Pro-poor change through cooperation

The shift from “protest to co-production” was first developed by the National Slum Dwellers Federation in India during the 1980s, principally by its founder Jockin Arputhum (popularly known as Jockin, who later became president of the S.D.I. network). After working tirelessly to

build federations of slum-dwellers across India, his initial focus was on protesting against injustices felt by the urban poor, especially with regard to evictions, and on making demands upon the state for basic services. Although the federations achieved many successes, mainly through their strength in numbers and occasionally through support from the courts, Jockin recognised that demands on state organisations had limited value if these organisations were incapable of fulfilling them. He also saw that pro-poor change would always be limited, no matter how large the coalition or social movement of the urban poor, so long as bureaucrats and politicians saw them as trouble-makers and the ‘opposition’, and therefore as the ‘problem’.¹⁵ As Jockin notes in a biographical essay, he was arrested some 67 times in the 1960s alone and frequently jailed, which sometimes attracted as many as 10,000 people to demonstrate outside the police station for his release. Recalling the realisation that led to his eventual change of tactic in the 1980s, he writes: “It was during these years that I saw a need to change the approach. I was doing all the agitation, breaking this and that, being completely militant, but the material benefit to the people was zero. I couldn’t even build one toilet. I had not even asked the government if it could build the toilet.”¹⁶

As national and city-wide federations of slum and shack dwellers have developed in many nations since the late 1980s, the success of the new approach has helped to trigger acceptance of low-income communities as legitimate parts of the city – helping to break down the myth that poorer groups are ‘other’ or less equal to richer citizens. In part drawing on and learning from the example laid down by the Indian federations, the citizen-led model of co-production – combining autonomous action, which demonstrates the abilities and capacity of the urban poor groups, with offers of partnership to government agencies – has been promoted by the S.D.I. network across 28 countries of the Global South; first in South Africa (where security of tenure has been negotiated for 23,000 families since 1991, and over 15,800 houses have been constructed by federations in collaboration with the state); and then across countries in Latin America, Africa and most of Asia.¹⁷ Thailand, the third country to adopt the federation model of action in low-income settlements, has achieved by far the highest number of active community savers of all – at over 5 million people, with an estimated collected sum of \$206 million – and built the largest number of citizen-led, co-produced houses at 40,000 units.¹⁸

In contrast to common stereotypes about the incompetence and laziness of the poor, or about the inability of community groups to collaborate with governments and international agencies, many remarkable case studies can be cited on how the community-led model of upgrading is able to successfully formalise squatter settlements and ameliorate slums [see Box 1]. In the case of Baan Mankong in Thailand, a total of 14,642 families were included in a myriad of diverse upgrading, reconstruction and land-sharing projects, alongside negotiations for land tenure security (on a cooperative, individual or leasehold basis).¹⁹ In the case of Pakistan, where 24 million people live in informal urban settlements or

peripheral urban land, projects in 248 locations across the country have demonstrated that communities can finance, manage and build internal sewerage development in cooperation with the local government.²⁰ In the district of Orangi, for example, local people financed and built sewers for the benefit of 98,527 houses.²¹ And in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a popular social organisation called the Madres de Plaza de Mayo Association signed a joint agreement with the city government and neighbourhood housing cooperatives in 2007 to rehabilitate a factory in an old industrial warehouse. Adopting construction methods based on experiences from Cuba, the factory is now able to build at least 5,000 new housing units each year – with the first pilot project successfully constructing 105 housing units, at considerably lower costs compared to traditional techniques, as well as community facilities including a school, a child day care centre, parks, lighting and shops (with a new local authority office built for the community by the government).²²

Box 1.

Case studies in aided self-help: Thailand and Argentina

A nation-wide slum upgrading programme initiated by the Thai government in January 2003 under the name Baan Mankong (“Secure Housing”) demonstrated the potential of collaborations between low-income residents and local governments, development professionals, universities and non-governmental organisations to achieve the large-scale upgrading and improvement of existing settlements. With the immensely ambitious target of improving housing conditions and security of tenure for 300,000 households in 2,000 poor communities across 200 Thai cities within a five-year time-frame – providing for at least half the urban poor communities in Thailand, the Baan Mankong project illustrated the positive repercussions of enabling urban poor groups to lead the process and generate local partnerships.²³ In sharp contradistinction to conventional approaches to slum upgrading or slum redevelopment, the project imposed as few conditions as possible on the urban poor communities. With the freedom to design their own programme, the community groups were able to work as the key actors in control of funding, management, and also most of the building work (instead of using contractors). A basic principle in the programme is to upgrade existing settlements *in situ* wherever possible, as this avoids disrupting a households’ employment or income-earning activities and their social networks, and where relocation is necessary a site to develop new homes is sought close by to minimise the economic and social costs to households. Government agencies were no longer the sole planners, implementers and construction managers delivering to beneficiaries, and the role of the urban poor was transformed from being passive recipients of state hand-outs into becoming the most active change agents in a city-wide programme of development.²⁴

If the urban poor and their income-earning activities and settlements are often viewed as the ‘problem’ in a city, the housing projects led by community groups demonstrate their inspiring capacity to improve their own conditions and negotiate with municipal authorities. Popular housing production in Buenos Aires, Argentina, also shows the scale of what

can be achieved when politically organised social movements shift from making demands and protests to conducting dialogue with the state. Following neoliberal economic adjustment policies during the 1990s (summarised by deregulation, privatisation of public services and state reform), high rates of unemployment, along with an enormous increase in the amount of people living in very low-income informal settlements across the city, led to widespread popular protests by the marginalised urban poor.²⁵ The *piquete* (picket line) tactics of these new social movements and organisations, mainly in the form of interrupting traffic on main roads or mobilising masses of people around strategic sites, took on such a wide visibility that they began to seriously threaten the survival of the existing political structure.²⁶

Despite securing many successes in terms of welfare programmes and political representation, some of these movements began to adopt self-managing processes as a way of maintaining their political independence from the state. For example, the picket movement MTL (Movimiento Territorial de Liberacion) decided to become involved in housing production, setting up a construction cooperative that employed only grassroots movement members – most of whom possessed no formal labour experience. Although the local government housing institute in Buenos Aires deemed their initial project “insane”, the self-managed scheme on Monteagudo Street successfully covered 18,000 square metres, constructed 326 apartments in two- and three-storey buildings, and included a complex of 10 business premises for commercial and service micro-enterprises. The new layout and architecture of the street, that would befit a middle-class suburb of any city in Western Europe or North America, was carefully not shut off from the wider community or consigned into becoming a “concentration of the poor”; rather, sidewalks were repaired, an old industrial buildings area was restored, and community facilities were opened to the neighbourhood at large, including child day care and medical assistance centres. From its outset, the social housing project was planned out by the urban poor themselves to achieve several wider community aims; to act as a training ground for cooperative members to incorporate themselves into the ‘working class’ culture, to reduce the disaffiliation of the underprivileged sectors, to create more jobs, and to end social exclusion by stimulating the heterogenous integration of the project’s residents with the existing neighbourhood.²⁷

With such evidence of the resourcefulness, capacity and organisation ability of the urban poor, the real question is not whether they are to ‘blame’ for their poverty, but why their valiant efforts at improving their conditions continue to be thwarted or ignored by so many governments. On one hand, the rhetoric of urban development agencies gives many reasons for being optimistic about the discarding of negative stereotypes about the poor living in slums and shantytowns. Over the past three decades, the United Nations has developed several comprehensive frameworks that outline the importance of involving slum residents in the decision-making and design processes of slum improvement, as well as in the construction of new housing and infrastructure services. In 1996,

the Habitat Agenda adopted by 171 countries mapped out the principles and actions that can lead to sustainable human settlements, emphasising an “enabling approach” that governments should support in the community-based production of housing.²⁸ In a 2005 landmark report by the UN Task Force on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers, an entire chapter was dedicated to ‘Recognizing the urban poor as active agents in development’, with a further section on the need for greater financial and institutional support of slum-dwellers and their organisations.²⁹ As reflected in the scores of publications by UN-HABITAT since the late 1970s, “participatory slum improvement” is today the accepted best practice for housing interventions in developing countries.³⁰ On paper at least, it would seem that John Turner’s influence in the formation of slum-upgrading policies has held a long-lasting legacy in official development circles.

On the other hand, there are many reasons to be less optimistic about the empowerment and reconceptualisation of the urban poor. So far, participatory slum improvement initiatives have mostly been adopted on a limited scale or consist of demonstration projects in developing countries.³¹ As squatter settlements continue to swell in most rapidly-urbanising cities, the work undertaken by informal community or neighbourhood organisations in improving slums and providing basic services – whether on their own or with appropriate support from official agencies – has had little impact on the living conditions of the poor in overall terms. And for every example of a successful community-led upgrading scheme, there are as many examples of slum clearance operations and forced evictions. Although “aided self-help” is the hailed policy approach of most governments today, a series of global surveys of forced evictions by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) paints a very different picture. In the most recent survey of the period 2003-2006, over 2 million people in Africa and almost 3.5 million people in Asia and the Pacific were forcibly evicted from their homes. Furthermore, nearly 175,000 people in the Americas and over 16,000 people in Europe suffered from forced eviction in the same period. These operations are normally carried out by government police forces and frequently involve large-scale demolition programmes. Usually directed at the poor living in informal settlements or slums, entire communities of tens (or even hundreds) of thousands of people are forcibly removed, leaving the victims homeless and subject to deeper poverty, discrimination and social exclusion.³²

Clearing out the poor

As the global assessments by COHRE make clear, a dramatic paradigm shift is still required in the areas of urban governance and development, but powerful economic forces make it difficult to challenge the mindset of those leaderships which overlook or sanction slum clearance operations.³³ Although there are many different causes of forced evictions, the perpetrators generally justify their actions in the name of ‘development’ – with the implication that removing the poor from informal or illegal housing is on behalf of the public good.³⁴ The fate of Mumbai in India is a notable example. In January 2005, government officials pushed forward with a

scheme to demolish all squatter communities throughout the city. Some 300,000 people were made homeless in the first round of slum clearance, described as “the most brutal demolition drive in recent times” by the UN’s special rapporteur on adequate housing. If all shanties built after 1995 continue to be demolished as announced, up to three million people will be made homeless. The aim, according to the state Chief Minister, was to “turn Mumbai into another Shanghai” by replacing the chaos of slum settlements with a new city open for ‘development’. In the public discussions about the demolition plans, a section of the middle-class argued that slum-dwellers are a social burden who deprive tax-paying citizens of public services; some eminent artists and writers even argued that those settled on land illegally should be disenfranchised.³⁵ More disturbingly, the courts in India abruptly retreated from defending the right to life, livelihood and adequate housing for the urban poor. In the case of *Almitra Patel vs. the Union of India* (2000), the court said that slums were “...large areas of public land, usurped for private use free of cost”. The slum-dweller was named an “encroacher”, and the resettlement following eviction that was hitherto mandatory suddenly became a matter of injustice; “...rewarding an encroacher on public land with an alternative free site is like giving a reward to a pickpocket for stealing”.³⁶

As a result of these attitudes, the slum is effectively reduced to a “flat image” of all that is undesirable in a modernising city, and becomes something without history or structure, and devoid of the politics behind its creation. The failure of the state to build low-income housing, and the productivity and community relations that also characterise the slum, are all eclipsed. As the author Gautam Bhan writes: “Thus reduced, evictions and resettlement become not tales of the destruction of individual people’s lives and livelihoods, but simply the erasure of the image of a slum, emptied of the people who live within it.”³⁷ This was the context in which 75,000 shanties were demolished in Mumbai early in January 2005, with cleared areas fenced off by barbed wire and guards stationed to prevent reoccupation, even as the homeless lingered outside with nowhere else to go.³⁸ It is also the context in which Jockin Arputham, the aforementioned leader of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India, is leading a battle to prevent Dharavi in Mumbai – the largest informal settlement in India – from being simply bulldozed and transformed into new commercial and residential developments (even though Dharavi was originally constructed by the work of the poor by using mud, sand and stones to raise the marshland above flood level, and without any government support).³⁹ Although Mumbai may be an extreme case study of anti-poor discrimination, similar examples can be cited from other cities across the Global South [see Myths 3 and 7]. Despite the collective organisation and growing influence of the slum-dweller federations, the homes and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of low-income groups continue to be threatened by formidable state power, market power and global economic pressures. And for all the official rhetoric from governments and development agencies on the human rights of slum residents and ‘participatory slum improvement’, the urban poor continue to be blamed for being anti-progress.

At their root, these deeply ingrained attitudes against the poor represent a lack of compassion and humanitarian concern that shamefully contrasts with the noble words of many United Nations declarations. Slums characteristically grow on land that is virtually worthless at the time of settlement, often on waste grounds or low-lying areas or beside canals, which is then reclaimed and made habitable without any government assistance. As the world's cities rapidly expand and the middle-classes – with greater purchasing power and political support – want more space for better housing, business centres, recreational areas and tourist attractions, so the poor are threatened with eviction from their self-made homes. The more prosperous the city becomes, the more unwanted and expendable become the urban poor, and the more liable they are to be cleared away. While the city space is transformed by the 'globalisation' of the world economy, governments fail to prioritise the basic needs of the poorest citizens who are left behind. Notwithstanding the moral negligence of this approach, governments also fail to capitalise on the most powerful resource in the rapidly urbanising city – the urban poor themselves, who have a proven capacity for upgrading slums when given the right kind of support from state authorities. This represents one of the most crucial questions in both the fight against urban poverty, as well as the formulation of policies that account for the social and environmental costs which are part of urban change: will the leaders of municipalities, national governments and international agencies together recognise and support the ability of the poor to organise and help develop an inclusive city? Or will the hundreds of millions of slum residents continue to be resisted as a threat to established institutions, and therefore become further marginalised, dispossessed, and bulldozed out of existence?

Myth 3

Slums are places of crime, violence & social degradation

“Slums can be places of cruelty and violence, but equally of solidarity, tenderness and hope; we do not always distinguish between the conditions of people’s lives and the response to those conditions.”¹

A corollary of the myth that the poor are to blame for their poverty is the widespread prejudice against slums as places of social degradation and despair, and against slum residents as perpetrators of violence and crime. In many instances, this is more a fabrication of the media than a reality. Although popular films such as *City of Gods* or *Slumdog Millionaire* may raise awareness of the problems in slums, they offer only a reductive account of the lives of poor people, playing upon the clichés and hackneyisms about urban poverty that reinforce popular prejudices, but without recognising the human decency and community ties that also exist in the slums (often with equal or greater measure than all the examples of misery and exploitation). The reality is that poor people living in informal settlements are the foremost victims of crime and violence, as opposed to the middle-classes living in wealthier neighbourhoods with higher levels of protection. Contrary to popular perceptions, many poor areas in cities of the South may even be considered relatively safe when compared to the daily robberies, burglaries and attacks experienced in many Western capital cities. Unfortunately, emphasising the crime and squalor in slums can lead to worse consequences than simply a biased misrepresentation of informal settlements, including the victimisation, disempowerment and disenfranchisement of the urban poor; further justification for slum-clearance programmes; and the wrong policy solutions to deal with rapid urbanisation and poverty.

After spending two years in four different squatter communities around the world, from Rio de Janeiro to Nairobi, Mumbai and Istanbul, the journalist Robert Neuwirth writes of his personal encounter with popular prejudice against squatters. When interviewed by Indian newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations during his stay in various low-income communities across Mumbai, his positive descriptions of generosity and communal spirit were twisted by reporters who stressed only the ‘high crime in slums’ angle that they thought their editors and readers wanted. Neuwirth writes: “...it seems that many in the elite, newspaper-reading and -writing population in Mumbai have had it drilled into their heads for years that squatters are neglectful and criminal and intransigent, and attempts to tell a different story don’t get heard – or, at least, don’t get printed.”² In contrast, his stay in one of Rio de Janeiro’s most notorious *favelas* was not an experience of non-stop crime and violence, as usually portrayed in films and the media, but of relative safety and community protection. The squatter community may have been controlled by drug gangs, but the risk of running a business or getting robbed in the *favela* was dramatically less than in the ‘legal’ city centre.³ In Nairobi, Neuwirth also found that the ‘legal’ neighbourhood of Eastleigh was the centre of gun dealing, and more dangerous than many squatter areas. “Squatter communities may be illegal,” he writes, “but that doesn’t make them criminal.”⁴

Although high levels of crime may occur in many informal settlements, the popular representation of life in slums often fails to acknowledge the deeper causes of insecurity and violence. In a recent study on urban safety and security by UN-HABITAT, data revealed that violence and crime are at present widespread in all countries of the world. Over the period 1980–2000, total recorded crime rates increased globally by around 30 percent; while between 2001 to 2006, 60 percent of all urban residents were victims of crime, compared to 70 percent in Latin America and Africa.⁵ In all the studies cited, a correlation exists between levels of crime and incidences of poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and youth unemployment. The quality of municipal government and the effectiveness of urban planning and urban management is also a key factor in the victimisation rates of the poor and vulnerable population segments.⁶ Yet these causal factors – and most importantly, the responsibilities and failures of state institutions – often go unacknowledged in media representations of violence and crime in informal settlements.

A prime example was seen in the major violence that erupted across the slums of Nairobi in early 2008. While many journalists portrayed the street warfare as resulting from “tribal barbarism” and “irrational hatreds” of the poor, fewer commentaries acknowledged the underlying reasons for the carnage that led to 1,200 deaths and the displacement of more than 300,000 innocent people – one of the most horrifying instances of a ‘slum clash’ in modern times. The history of Kenya’s poor resource allocation was easily overlooked, with its skewed patterns of land distribution among the most unequal in the world since its independence in 1963. In many newspapers, reportage of the ethnically-motivated killings was also stripped of context, including the fact that around 60 percent of the city population live in slum conditions on 5 percent of the land and receive almost no government protection, public welfare or basic service provision. At the same time as police officers were witnessed shooting protesters during the period of violence, the privileged minority in Nairobi were given a heavy police protection along all the major roads, and were largely unharmed by the social upheaval – another fact that drew little comment in the mainstream press.⁷ The effect is to reinforce popular prejudices and fears against slums and slum residents, thereby criminalising the urban poor without acknowledging the extreme inequality, poverty and disenfranchisement that sows the seeds of violence and social disorder.

The popular view of slums as centres of crime and havens for criminals is also a commonplace excuse for governments to deal with the consequences of urban poverty whilst ignoring its causes. Despite the realisation of most governments since the 1970s that eradication policies exacerbate the problem of slums [see Myth 2], slum-clearance operations are still justified on the basis of fighting crime. Although scores of examples could be cited over recent decades from Zambia to Kuala Lumpur, the Philippines to Beijing, perhaps the most notorious incident occurred in the aftermath of the 2005 Zimbabwe elections. In a

police assault that was callously titled Operation Murambasvina (“Drive Out Trash”), over 700,000 Zimbabweans lost their homes or source of livelihood or both, with street vendors branded as criminals to excuse tearing down their soapbox stalls. An estimated 2.4 million people were directly affected in a campaign to ‘restore order’ to the city, using the same arguments about criminality and urban squalor that were adopted in the colonial past.⁸ Similar strategies are used to deal with street children who tend to turn to crime as a survival mechanism. Rather than combating the causes of child delinquency and their criminal behaviour, youth gangs are an easy victim of paramilitary and para-police forces who partake in ‘cleansing’ practices, a phenomenon that is consistently reported in Brazil, Guatemala, India and Kenya among other low-income countries.⁹ In all these cases it is the poor who are the real victims of urban violence, while the actual perpetrator is an uncaring state apparatus that fails to represent their concerns.¹⁰ Urban violence also leads to the erosion of grassroots civil organisations and urban political institutions, and therefore undermines the real solution to poverty in cities – the empowerment of the urban poor themselves.¹¹

The language of ‘slums’

Part of the reason for prejudiced gut reactions to urban squalor is the current use of language, particularly in relation to the word ‘slum’. The origins of the term in nineteenth-century England had distinctly negative connotations, with slums usually stigmatised as centres of crime and infectious disease – an association that still resonates in many people’s minds today.¹² Although usage of the word ‘slum’ was largely discredited by academics for many decades in the twentieth century, the United Nations is largely responsible for resurrecting the term following its ‘Cities Without Slums’ initiative in 1999 (later translated into the Millennium Development Goal to “achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers by 2020” – see Myth 7). The UN’s use of the slogan may have the noble intention of increasing official and public interest in the problem of inadequate housing, but its historical and emotional connotations also carry the danger of reinforcing negative stereotypes about the urban poor. Just as the popular literature of Victorian London assumed that all people living in slum areas were of a degenerate character, the word slum can confuse the physical problem of poor quality housing with the characteristics of the people living there.¹³ In recent years, it is common practice for the media to pick up on the words ‘slum’ and ‘slum-dwellers’ and emphasise the crime, disease and squalor associated with life in low-income settlements.¹⁴ The plethora of such reports can have the effect of kindling fear and foreboding from the middle-classes, and of portraying slum residents as an “anomic mass of human derelicts” without agency or uniqueness.¹⁵ This tendency to generalise about the qualities of slums across the world serves to reduce the lives of all their occupants to the lowest common denominator, and can prevent us from perceiving the awkward contradictions and differences among slums worldwide.¹⁶ At worst, the negative associations with the word ‘slum’ can be used by demagogic mayors and government

ministers to justify slum demolition programmes as a way of ‘improving’ life in the city [see box 2 below].¹⁷

Box 2.

Using ‘slum’ rhetoric to discriminate against the urban poor

In South Africa, the passing of the Slum Elimination Act in 2007 is a key example of how language in relation to ‘slums’ can be used to criminalise the urban poor, to justify slum-clearance operations, and to allow governments to deal with the consequences of urban poverty whilst ignoring its causes. In a press statement issued before the bill was passed in 2007, the South African shack-dwellers’ movement called Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) explained why the new legislation would support “the rich against the poor”, as evidenced in the bill’s language. AbM claimed that the word “eliminate” was being used to introduce draconian measures to simply remove shack-dwellers from informally-occupied land, instead of giving them appropriate support for slum improvement and security of tenure. Many of the fears expressed by AbM were sadly validated in the ensuing years. Since the passing of the Act, tens of thousands of shack-dwellers across South Africa (mainly in Cape Town and Johannesburg, as well as Durban) have been evicted to transit camps – reminiscent of the sites used in the apartheid era during the Fifties for the screening, segregation and repatriation of unwanted black urbanites. Although the government maintains that the camps are temporary, ‘formal’ and an acceptable stop-gap in the process of delivering permanent houses, the conditions in the camps are often far worse than in the informal shantytowns. Most transit camps consist of one-room shacks with tin roofs and paper-thin walls, are often without electricity, and are typically encircled around the perimeter with fencing, barbed wire and police security at lockable gates.¹⁸ In the run up to the 2010 football World Cup held in South Africa, many further thousands of people were evicted from their homes in nearby sites, and thousands of traders were banned from their places of work – as foretold several years before by Abahlali baseMjondolo and other human rights activists.¹⁹ As the statement below explains, the justification for the forced relocation and eviction of the urban poor is marked by the use of such words as “slum”, “eradication” and “informal”.

*Abahlali baseMjondolo Press Statement Thursday, 21 June 2007: Operation Murambatsvina comes to KZN – The Notorious Elimination & Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums Bill.*²⁰

“...The Bill uses the word ‘slum’ in a way that makes it sound like the places where poor people live are a problem that must be cleared away because there is something wrong with poor people. But it does not admit that the poor have been made poor [by] the same history of theft and exploitation that made the rich to be rich [sic] and it does not admit that places where poor people live often lack infrastructure and toilets because of the failure of landlords or the government to provide these things. The solution to the fact that we often don’t have toilets in our

communities is to provide toilets where we live and not to destroy our communities and move us out of the city. In this Bill the word 'slum' is used to make it sound like the poor and the places where they live are the problem rather than the rich and the way in which they have made the poor to be poor and to be kept poor by a lack of development.

"In America black community organizations have opposed the use of the word 'slum' to describe their communities because they say it makes it sound like there is something wrong with them and their places rather than the system that makes them poor and fails to develop their places. They also say that once a place is called a 'slum' it is easy for the rich and governments to say that it must be 'cleared' or 'eliminated' but if a place is called a community then it is easier to say that it must be supported and developed.

"There is also a problem with calling *imijondolo* [shack settlements] 'informal settlements' because once a place is called 'informal' it is easy for people to say that it shouldn't get any of the 'formal' services that people need for a proper life like electricity, toilets, refuse collection and so on. But many of us have lived our whole lives in 'informal settlements'. We can't wait until we live in 'formal' houses to get electricity to stop the fires, water, toilets, drainage, refuse collection and so on. We are living our lives now. We can't wait to start living only when and if the government puts us in a 'formal' one roomed 'house' far out of town.

"And we don't like the word 'eliminate'. This is a word that is violent and threatening, not respectful and caring. Our communities should be nurtured, not eliminated.

"The people who live in the *imijondolo* must decide for themselves what they want their communities to be called. We must be allowed to define ourselves and to speak for ourselves.

"...This Bill makes anyone who tries to stop an eviction a criminal who can be fined R20,000 or sent to prison for 5 years. Any normal person would try to stop an eviction. Which mother would stand by while her home and community is destroyed? If this law is passed it will make us all criminals. But this law says nothing about stopping the illegal and unconstitutional evictions that are perpetrated against shackdwellers all the time by the eThekweni Municipality. The Municipality breaks the law every time that it evicts us without a court order and every time it leaves people homeless but Municipal officials are never arrested. If the laws that exist now are not used fairly we have no guarantee that this [new] law will be used fairly.

"...A World Class city is not a city where the poor are pushed out of the city. A World Class city is a city where the poor are treated with dignity and respect and money is spent on real needs like houses and toilets and clean water and electricity and schools and libraries rather than fancy things for the rich like stadiums and casinos that our cities can just not afford.

"We will fight this Bill in the courts. We will fight this Bill in the streets. We will fight this Bill in the way we live our ordinary lives everyday. We will not be driven out of our cities as if we were rubbish."

The author Jeremy Seabrook has described many of the squatter communities that contradict the negative stereotypes about 'slums' in the cities of South Asia. One informal settlement called Mirpur Six in Dhaka, Bangladesh, recreates the pattern of village construction and still utilises the materials of the natural world. Built with bamboo frames on platforms of compacted red soil, such 'slums' would decay naturally if suddenly returned to the earth. The community also retains other sensibilities of rural life; the seasonal offerings of jackfruit and mango trees is shared among the residents, the families are united against intruders and invasion from outsiders, and a community solidarity is evinced in their caring for the sick and dying.²¹ Despite the conditions of extreme deprivation, there exists many such small oases of mutual help and protection where the poor, at least to some extent, try to re-create the social relationships of the village.²² In Bangkok, Seabrook discovered that newcomers to the city cannot understand why money is not given to those who do not have any; in the villages, where rice represented wealth, people were always ready to share any surplus with their neighbours.²³ In Dharavi, Mumbai, he was told by residents that neighbourhood is their survival, and the crowded places of the slums are a form of safeguard against abuse and violence. If anything happens to someone, news will quickly spread and "a hundred people will come running". Social cohesion also means that neglected or abused children are taken in by other families, while the poor offer food to the hungry. For such reasons, residents are opposed to government plans to reconstruct Dharavi into apartment blocks where "people close their doors and no-one knows what happens behind them," and instead want the community to be reconstructed on the *chawl* system (single- or two-storey houses).²⁴ Life in the slums is also characterised by innumerable examples of self-sacrifice, altruism and community service, such as the private doctor in Dharavi who provides a free medical service to those who cannot pay,²⁵ or the unrecorded generosity of the poor in Klong Toey, Bangkok, who get into debt with private moneylenders for the sake of their children.²⁶ In cities of the Philippines, Seabrook writes that most slums are perceived as a threat to order; "...this is no longer because they are going to overthrow society, or are prey to destabilizing leftist beliefs, but because their capacity for autonomy, self-reliance and independence suggests that they hold the key to a different way of doing things, that they represent the embryo of an alternative social order that is more egalitarian and solidaristic – the reverse of that ideology of extreme individualism preached by the powerful".²⁷

This sentiment that squatter settlements can be equally an example of community and kinship than crime and social despair is given some evidence in the citizen-led, co-operative approach to slum upgrading and social housing construction. Somsook Boonyabanha, founder of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) in Thailand, has observed how truly participative upgrading strategies can unleash a "communal creativity" that leads to other collective solutions to meeting peoples' various needs. In several of the Baan Mankong projects [see Myth 2], this is expressed in the construction of special shelters on collectively-

purchased land for needy community members, such as destitute widows, AIDS orphans, the disabled or the elderly – a form of welfare system provided by the local community themselves known as a *baan klang* or ‘central house’.²⁸ Boonyabancha calls this, at base, the rebuilding of “human culture” and a “sharing spirit” that has been eroded in recent decades.²⁹ Instead of saying ‘I’, everyone uses ‘We’, and the concept of “poverty alleviation” is reconceived from being “something like dirt that we have to sweep out of the city so everyone will be rich and happy”. Instead, poverty is no longer seen as a problem, but as a resource – in the sense that people who face poverty possess considerable strength and capacity.³⁰ Furthermore, city mayors and civil servants are led to alter their perceptions of the urban poor through their experience of collaborating with social organisations in the city-wide, horizontal approach to upgrading. Slum communities are no longer seen as a hotbed of crime that inhibits a city’s development, but as a normal part of existing urban structures – not something outside the city system. The artificial attitudes of ‘them versus us’, or ‘illegal versus legal’, are naturally broken down, and city authorities and politicians are more likely to view ‘slum-dwellers’ as normal and highly capable human beings. As a consequence, they are more inclined to engage in discussions on how they can help fix the housing problems of the very poor, and are less likely to view slums as a blight to be ‘cleared away’.³¹

The danger of over-emphasising ‘community’

Highlighting the agency of slum residents or the positive aspects of life in ‘slums’ is, of course, not to glorify or sentimentalise the urban poor and their self-help housing. It is also true that for all the squatter settlements that exhibit a strong sense of community, as many others are characterised by the opposite qualities of ruthless individualism and petty-exploitation in which the poor, frequently suffering from extreme deprivation and oppression, turn their backs on the misfortunes of their neighbours. As one resident of the Kibera settlement in Nairobi put it (a widowed grandmother suffering from HIV, hunger and absolute poverty, and forced to look after 12 dependent children and grandchildren inside a small corrugated-roofed rented shanty); “Eh! The neighbours can’t help us because they have their own problems.”³² There can also be little community in a slum that suffers repeated evictions, forced removals, or constant uprootedness through violence and police coercion. A greater danger exists if the positive profiles of slums help to justify a withdrawal of state and local government investment and support, in keeping with the World Bank and IMF ideology that pushed for the abandonment of state-interventionist policies [see Myth 1]. In stressing the ability, courage and capacity for self-help of the urban poor, it may enable governments and development agencies to deflect attention from the poverty crisis faced by developing cities. Even worse, it may help governments to rationalise or excuse cuts made on social spending through liberalisation and privatisation programmes, and thereby absolve themselves of the responsibility to secure access to basic needs as a universal human right. By stressing the ability of the poor to help themselves, to become

proactive in providing essential services and generating their own employment, the way is prepared for the state to disengage and leave them to the mercy of market forces.³³

While the self-help achievements of slum-dwellers have been celebrated in a number of stories and television documentaries over recent years, too often the stereotypical view of squatters as something ‘other’ – whether it be criminals, idlers, parasites, usurpers, prostitutes, the diseased, drunks or drug addicts – is the most common response to the urban poor. Evidence for such views may be easily corroborated in the ghetto neighbourhoods of low-income cities, but the criminal sub-cultures and degenerates of many urban slums are only a part of the complex global reality that is more contradictory, and far more uncomfortable, than the sensationalised portrayals in newspapers and cinemas may have us believe. These prejudiced opinions persist even though many cities and industries would come to a halt without the labour provided by slum-dwellers, not only in driving the middle-classes to work or hauling the materials for new homes and offices, but also in providing domestic labour. The supposed ‘criminals’ and ‘layabouts’ that live in urban slums may also be catering for more privileged families, washing their clothes, and taking care of their children.³⁴ The complacency evinced in these attitudes may go some way to explaining the general apathy and lack of political will among many governments to implement policies aimed at improving the living conditions of slum residents. In this regard, the first step towards addressing the problems of slum residents may start with the limited conception of informal settlements in the popular imagination, and in ceasing to treat these settlements as ‘slums’ at all – that is, as blighted areas of squalor, disease and crime – but rather as vibrant communities that display great reservoirs of resourcefulness, dignity and compassion despite the persistence of extreme inequality and public neglect.

Myth 4

Slums are an inevitable stage of development

“The emphasis on hope and achievement is convenient too for the upper classes, for it suggests a lower class which is willing to integrate itself into the dominant culture, and furthermore to raise itself by its own bootstraps, thus necessitating no major redistribution of income.”¹

There is an underlying assumption to much of the debate surrounding slums and urban poverty: that the urban poor will get to our standard of living eventually, and countries of the South will rise to the same level of material affluence as the industrialised North, just so long as they follow our prescribed free market approach to development. The view that slums were a temporary and unavoidable phenomenon was prevalent in most developing countries until the early 1970s, based on the assumption that slums would be overcome by economic development in both urban and rural areas. It was on this basis that slums and the rights of slum residents were largely ignored by newly-independent Third World governments in the 1950s and 1960s, as reflected in land-use maps that showed informal settlements as blank spots denoting undeveloped land.²

Although an official policy of neglect is no longer justifiable for governments [see Myth 2], the assumption that slums are a ‘natural’ part of progress still persists in various forms. In the West, the landscapes of today’s urbanising world bear such resemblances to nineteenth-century Britain that it may bring the reassurance that we have been there before: if only governments continue to follow the same industrial pattern of development, then slums will automatically disappear.³ Since the neoliberal ascendance in development policy from the late 1970s, the advocated approach for governments was firstly to get the ‘market signals’ right, and then deal with any remaining pockets of the poor and excluded. Urban inequalities, from the latter-day policy perspective, were viewed as a residual and temporary outcome of necessary market-led growth.⁴ The orthodox mindset which still prevails could be read as follows: economic growth is good (inevitable/necessary/mandatory), and since such growth depends on populations organising themselves in cities, urbanisation is also good (inevitable/necessary/mandatory).⁵

A number of important correctives are needed to highlight the myths that lie behind these beliefs and rationalisations. To begin with, the policies for industrial development followed by the now-developed countries (NDCs) – Britain, the USA, Germany, France, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Korea and Taiwan – were not based on a *laissez-faire* ideology of free trade and state non-intervention, but instead used protectionist strategies for key industries in the earlier phases of development. This well argued fact goes against the orthodox view of capitalism’s history, and calls into question the neoliberal policy recommendations made to developing countries based on privatisation, deregulation and the liberalisation of international trade and investment. It is upon the assumption that NDCs attained their economic status based on these same non-interventionist policies that the Washington Consensus agenda maintained much of its legitimacy, as well as the international rule-

making of the World Trade Organisation since its inception in 1995.⁶

The unofficial history of ‘development’

The reality is more the opposite of the official history. Most notably in the case of Britain, a country widely regarded as having developed without significant state intervention, import protection was widely applied throughout the industrial revolution, and even the short-lived liberalisation of the British economy during the mid-nineteenth century was a highly controlled affair overseen by the state.⁷ On the national level, government non-intervention was more to blame for producing the scenes of degradation and squalor recorded by Engels, Dickens, Mayhew and Booth in Victorian England. It was only the tireless work of reformers, improvers and trade unions that created pressure for governments to intervene against the worst abuses of early industrialism, resulting in legislation to limit the hours of work, prevent child labour, make education compulsory, and regulate against unsanitary living conditions and sub-standard housing.⁸ The comprehensive welfare state in Britain achieved after the Second World War is still a dream for most of the developing world. Yet the opposite of the policies that eventually raised living and working conditions for the urban poor in Britain are now being advocated to governments in the Global South.

Structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s therefore had the effect of “kicking away the ladder” of protectionist tariffs and subsidies that the NDCs employed in their progression from economies based on agriculture to those based on high-value goods and services produced in cities.⁹ Following the exploitation of foreign lands in the colonial era and a history of infant industry protectionism, rich countries have achieved a position of strength from which they now command less-developed nations to adopt free market economic policies, in spite of their fragile industrial development and dependency on smallholder agriculture. Moreover, the major industrialised nations fail to practice the same economic prescriptions that they preach. As long pointed out by campaigners, the current free trade regime is extremely biased against developing countries, with the US and EU in particular maintaining strong protectionist policies in key industries along with huge subsidies in agriculture and food manufacture.¹⁰ In other words, those policies that rich countries are not prepared to implement at home are being recommended as a panacea to less-advantaged nations with greater levels of poverty and inequality. International financial institutions dominated by the West, in particular the World Bank, IMF and WTO, have effectively institutionalised a biased and unequal world economic system for the benefit of the already advantaged. In this light, it is difficult to account for the belief that the current development policy paradigm is going to lead to the eradication of slums in the future, when the evidence suggests that urban poverty and wealth inequality is *exacerbated* by a non-interventionist path of industrial growth. The only certainty is that developed countries are recommending policies that they find beneficial for themselves (not least for Western commercial interests), rather than those that are beneficial for the inclusive development of poorer nations.

The complacency that lies behind these attitudes is further highlighted when we question the human costs of industrial development: the exploitation of unskilled newcomers to the rapidly-urbanising city, the former peasants who are forced to adjust to industrial work in factories, the child labourers paid a fraction of the minimum wage, the young women paid \$5 a day without benefits in *maquiladoras* and special economic zones set up by multinational corporations – the human raw material of economic growth, working in conditions that no person from the richest nations could withstand. Just because the megacities of today seem to replicate the ‘transitional’ scenes of human degradation experienced during the early industrial era in Europe and North America, does this exonerate the rich world from failing to prevent – or benefitting from – the exploitation of the poor in developing countries? Is the only answer to create even more wealth, on top of the wealth that has already been created over the past 200 years of industrialisation? If ‘trickle-down’ economics is the solution for the world’s problems, persistent poverty and growing social exclusion in the twenty-first century must surely call this approach into question. Even in those South Asian countries that achieved rapid economic growth over the period of neoliberal globalisation, extreme poverty remains widespread while income inequality is continuing to soar almost everywhere.¹¹

Reconceptualising the informal economy

Following the continued failure of ‘trickle-down’ growth strategies to benefit all sectors of society, many development thinkers have turned to the informal economy as an answer or solution to poverty in the developing world. The informal sector of employment – more commonly understood as the huge invisible economy of home-based producers, garbage collectors, garment and domestic workers, and the millions of street traders that characterise the developing world – has become the primary source of livelihood in a majority of low-income countries since the 1980s debt crisis.¹² In some ways reminiscent of the tens of thousands of impoverished entrepreneurs that peddled their wares between the grimy alleyways of nineteenth century European cities, the new urban labouring poor are of a scale unprecedented in human history – by some accounts comprising up to three-quarters of non-agriculture employment in developing countries, or about two-fifths of the working population of the developing world.¹³ In sub-Saharan Africa and across Southern Asia, this figure could be higher than 80 percent of all working men and women if reliable data was available, especially if women’s invisible paid work was counted in official statistics.¹⁴

During the 1980s and 1990s, urban development studies moved beyond the assumption that urban poverty and economic informality is a transitory phenomenon – a ‘temporary’ stage as an economy matures and becomes more developed. By this time, the rate of rural-urban migration had far exceeded the expectations of Arthur Lewis’s classic model of economic development,¹⁵ while the assumptions of the “Todaro Model” – that the informal sector acts as a school for learning basic skills from which most rural migrants can eventually graduate to formal-sector

employment – were shown to be increasingly idealistic.¹⁶ In the urban research and debate that followed, neoliberal thinkers – most notably the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto with support from the intellectual technocracy of the World Bank – reconceptualised the informal sector as an untapped source of micro-entrepreneurship that could overcome the clientelist state, act as a motor of economic growth and bring urban poverty to an end.¹⁷ Although there may be many reasons to praise the “uncelebrated social capital of the slums”, and to perceive the remarkable dependability of poor women in repaying micro-credit loans as a sign of hope that slum-dwellers can pick themselves up by their bootstraps and eventually join the ranks of the middle-classes, there are more reasons to question this business-minded optimism of upward mobility in the informal economy.¹⁸

The author Mike Davis debunks what he calls the “myths of informality” by partly drawing on the understanding of Jan Breman, a veteran researcher who has spent 40 years studying poverty in India and Indonesia. Informal employment by its very definition, writes Davis, is the absence of formal contracts, rights, regulations and bargaining power – an immeasurable and neglected mass of people who are not registered, let alone taxed. Its essence is not defined by unlimited elasticity and sustainability, but by an endlessly franchised “petty exploitation”.¹⁹ It is usually the weakest and smallest who bear the heaviest burdens of informalisation, in particular women, and competition for work has become so intense that jobs are not generated by “elaborating new divisions of labour, but by fragmenting existing work, and thus subdividing incomes” – as defined by the street scenes in developing cities of shoe-shiners squatting on the sidewalk all day to serve a handful of customers, or young boys hawking tissues to passing rows of smoky traffic, or construction workers waiting each morning in the vain hope of a days work.²⁰ Worst of all, increasing competition within the informal sector “depletes social capital and dissolves self-help networks and solidarities essential to the survival of the poor – again, especially women and children”.²¹

The safety net of last resort

In effect, the risks of the international financial system are downloaded to the informal sector, which operates as a kind of safety net of last resort for those who lose their jobs in formal employment (especially in the aftermath of financial crises). It is inevitable that earnings in informal employment are likely to fall as work opportunities become crowded out, until the safety net ultimately breaks. Earnings may become so low that individuals cannot meet their basic needs no matter how long the hours they work, or how many family members seek to earn a living on the streets. To therefore believe that private enterprise should be encouraged to operate in low-income settlements by making labour even more flexible, predicated on the belief that the state already intervenes too much and market forces are more efficient, is to casually invite even worse scenes of misery and destitution in urbanising cities (in Davis’s solemn words, a “living museum of human exploitation”).²² The reform

or even removal of regulations cannot automatically ‘formalise the informal’, not when the problem of urban poverty begins with the lack of appropriate regulations and state interventions. The reality is less susceptible to any quick-fix panacea: a global economy that has proven unable to absorb a vast displaced and impoverished humanity, a process of globalisation that has strengthened the rights of the most powerful and weakened the rights of the most excluded, and labour markets sustained by policies that lack any sufficient degree of compassion, imagination or long-sighted vision.

This is not to overlook the crucial role that the informal sector plays in cities of the South, providing work and livelihoods for a large proportion of the urban population in the absence of formal or secure employment opportunities – particularly for those living in slum settlements. On the contrary, it is imperative that governments uphold the rights of informal workers through more effective forms of public intervention. As long recognised by most governments in developing countries, much of the informal sector in which many poor individuals earn an income may be considered illegal, but provide goods and services that are essential to the functioning of the ‘legal’ city (even if the police still subject many informal workers to harassment, fines or arrest).²³ The point of contention is the assumption held by many people in government and the business community that the streetwise operators of the “underground circuits of the economy” are always able to get by without expensive social provisions or welfare support, unencumbered as they are from the tax and benefit systems of the ‘formal’ economy. This complacent view has been resurrected during the ongoing global economic crisis: that the informal sector is a critical safety net that can infinitely absorb more people and offer them a source of income, or in the words of former IMF Chief Economist Simon Johnson, “a last safe haven in a darkening financial climate”.²⁴ As Jan Breman contests, the “massive army of reserve labour at the bottom of the informal economy is entrapped in a permanent state of crisis which will not be lifted when the Dow Jones Index goes up again.”²⁵

The bigger questions

Even if the business potential of the millions of slum-dwellers living in abject poverty could be unleashed and transformed into a widespread material affluence, we can ask if the path of never-ending industrial growth and consumption is the answer to the world’s problems. The very word ‘development’ has a deterministic ring – meaning the path pursued by the West, originally imposed upon the rest of the world through colonial conquest, and now justified on the basis of economic necessity.²⁶ The mainstream ‘science’ of economics – also originating from and propagated by the West – does not question its assumption that perpetual growth is the foundation of progress, even if common experience raises doubts about the perilous side-effects of unfettered capitalism and industrialisation: the depletion of rainforests and fish-stocks, the threat to ecology and biodiversity, anthropogenic climate change and pollution, and the hundredfold increase in inequality over

200 years. The policy papers of orthodox economists give no insight into what might happen if the remaining four-fifths of humanity successfully follow the same development patterns.²⁷

Business-as-usual for politicians in the developing world also spells a very uncertain long-term future, for the real costs of slums are hidden from balance sheets and economics text books – the drain on resources from ‘containing’ slums, the costs of dealing with humanitarian crises caused by outbreaks of contagious diseases, of water pollution from untreated sewerage, or the costs of keeping order when unrest or mass violence occasionally breaks out inside the more volatile shantytowns. And more indirectly, the social costs of maintaining a large population of uneducated men and women who live unfulfilled, underdeveloped and uncreative lives; the quiet psychological burden felt by the middle-classes who have to live with slums beyond their doorstep; and the intangible moral costs felt by those in the privileged world who remain unmoved by this affront to personal dignity and social justice.

As a final question, we might ask if it is acceptable in today’s culture of human rights norms to condemn millions of people to a life in subsistence-wage sweat shops as a point of entry into the game of capitalism, a type of forced labour that gives many slum residents the choice between economic exploitation or continued abjection. Is it likewise acceptable to consider the appalling conditions and human abuses that defined cities all over Europe during the nineteenth century as an inevitable, even if disagreeable, part of progress in a modern industrialising city like Kolkata, Jakarta, Mexico City or Chang Hai? If not, our only choice is to consider alternative goals and more holistic models for development, no longer predicated on endless capital accumulation and economic growth, that prioritise social objectives (such as the right to health and the right to a clean environment, along with the right to adequate shelter and the eradication of poverty) ahead of the profit imperative and GDP, with a more equitable distribution of resources on the national and global level.

Myth 5

The free market can end slums

“The creation of a new urban commons, a public sphere of active democratic participation, requires that we roll back that huge wave of privatisation that has been the mantra of a destructive neo-liberalism in the last few years.”¹

According to the international institutions and powerful states that drive globalisation (along with most of the business community, conservative political parties, libertarian ideologues and the corporate-controlled media that gives voice to their concerns), we are told that social injustice can only be addressed by the proper application of some version of free market capitalism. As the appalling poverty that haunts the world is the foremost expression of social injustice, and as the incidence of slums concentrated in cities is the most visible manifestation of poverty, this rigid faith in the magic of market forces to end slums demands special consideration. Since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan began their attack on social housing in the 1980s – a symbolic hallmark of the ideology that has permeated almost every aspect of political, economic and social life in the intervening years – we are still led to believe that ‘There Is No Alternative’ to the tenets of economic liberalism: free markets, free trade, small governments and privatisation. Get the inefficient government out of the way, remains the assumption, and the beneficent power of the market mechanism and private capital will act as the levers of economic growth and widespread affluence.

Before we can assess the implications of this prevailing ideology, it is first necessary to understand how free market policies have transformed the nature of civic life and the role of citizens within cities. The urban policy agenda of recent decades is still referred to in academic discourse as neoliberalism or neoliberal urbanism/governmentality – a term that can be attributed to a distinct phase in the struggle between market- and state-led capitalism since the 17th century. Dedicated to the extension of market forms of governance into almost all spheres of social life, proponents of this political-economic philosophy reached an intellectual prominence – if not hegemony – with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. The significantly more limited role for the state that neoliberalism envisioned was unprecedented in the history of capitalism; prior to the 1970s, even conservative movements countenanced a broader vision for state-led governance than is now the case.²

As a result, the role of urban governance has fundamentally changed over recent decades, with the word ‘governance’ becoming a general term to denote the changing balance between government and the private sector [see Myth 1]. The rationale for this shift lies in the apparently growing gap between available resources and welfare demand – according to the perspective of most economists, governments alone can no longer afford to meet the needs of all residents in cities. In reality, the responsibility for securing wealth and welfare has been devolved from governments to the individual under what some academics have called the initial “roll-back” phase of neoliberalism, in reference to the rolling back of the

gains in state-provided welfare achieved during the Keynesian period.³ This process involved the retreat from previous government control of resources and state regulations, including public services, nationalised industries, and labour and social rights. Advocates of neoliberalism claim that the way to improve social welfare is through less dependency on governments and a greater reliance on private agencies, hence the motivation behind the privatisation of formerly state-run services and industries. The role of the state is reconfigured into being, first and foremost, the ‘enabler of growth’ and business prosperity.⁴

Academics have similarly referred to the 1990s onwards as the “roll-out” phase of neoliberalism.⁵ As wealth and opportunities became even more unevenly distributed during the Thatcher/Reagan years, the dogmatic devotion to deregulation and marketisation was necessarily replaced by new attitudes to development that voiced a greater concern for social welfare. The World Bank took up the discourse on ‘social capital’, for example, in stressing the importance of “the community’s capacity to work together to address their common needs”, while public-private partnerships (PPPs) were promoted as a solution to poverty and urban regeneration.⁶ An “entirely new paradigm for development” was adopted, in the words of former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, that fostered partnerships between a broad coalition of actors such as international institutions, bilateral agencies, voluntary organisations, the police, schools, neighbourhood residents and (most importantly) investors and the private sector.⁷ Beneath the rhetoric, however, the objective was fundamentally unchanged – to mobilise community and other social networks and assets toward the goal of “a competitive and revitalized urban growth machine”.⁸ This was the ‘growth-first’ approach to urban development that has come to define the modern era; a kind of zero-sum competition among cities and states that prioritises social investment ahead of social equity or redistribution. The name of the game is to transform urban spaces to be as attractive as possible to financial investors, hence the expansion of downtown areas into attractive up-scale service centres, the implementation of large-scale projects (such as train station renovations and waterfront redevelopment schemes) to attract big expositions, conventions, and ‘mega-events’ like the Olympics, and the makeover of central cities to benefit them as ‘world class’ conference and hospitality destinations.⁹

The world class city

The world class, globalising city is managed much like a large corporation and forced to compete for the capital investment required to build new offices and plants and provide jobs. As such, cost-benefit calculations determine the allocation of resources within a city rather than missions of service, equity and social welfare.¹⁰ In what has been called the “city-state”, “city-corporation”, “entrepreneurial-city” or “city of the spectacle”, a manufactured place *image* of the city is used to represent its value and to attract tourism, convention industries and capital investment from overseas. In effect, the city is turned into a marketed image on the global stage, a packaged commodity called a “world class city”. All players

must compete in the new globalising process, including individuals and enterprises as well as entire cities.¹¹ It is only under these extreme conditions of competition that the ‘There Is No Alternative’ school of thinking becomes persuasive; even modest efforts for redistribution, which in themselves may be far cries from trying to realise social or economic justice, are understood to be doomed to fail because the capital needed to fund them will simply relocate elsewhere.¹² With great skill in exploiting these new opportunities, large domestic or transnational corporations are able to benefit from a ‘bidding war’ between the mayors of different cities, who often mortgage away their future through tax forgiveness, debt burdens, and the foregoing of spending on other public needs. As the globalisation champion Thomas Friedman famously argues, you either run with the Global Herd or you will face less access to capital, less access to technology, and ultimately a lower standard of living (at least for those privileged citizens not altogether excluded from the new social order).¹³ The future of urbanisation is regarded as already determined by the power of globalisation and of market competition, and urban possibilities are limited to “mere competitive jockeying of individual cities for position within the global urban system”.¹⁴

For the individual, the shift in discourse during the roll-out phase of neoliberalism has been accompanied by a redefinition of rights and citizenship. Formerly progressive goals and mottos such as ‘self-reliance’ and ‘autonomy’ are redefined in an individualised and competitive direction; individual freedom, for example, is redefined as “freedom from bureaucracy rather than freedom from want, with human behaviour reconceptualised along economic lines”.¹⁵ In the process, the notion that the state is obliged to secure a person’s rights and obligations is replaced by a growing conception of individual responsibility. Citizens are increasingly ‘freed’ of the state and led to provide for themselves through market participation. Employees are redefined as entrepreneurs with an obligation to work, not a right to work. No longer relying on the state, they are responsible for their own education and retraining, and must now negotiate access to work and services without state patrimony.

The “self-responsibilisation” for one’s own well-being may be welcomed by wealthier citizens for a number of reasons; in being freed to increase their wealth and consumption without interference from a ‘bureaucratic’ and ‘inefficient’ state, inequality no longer needs to be justified, apologised for or hidden. According to the logic of a market-driven society, inequality is not a problem of what the poor lack, but rather of what they have been unable to achieve. For the ‘global citizens’ that inhabit gated residences of material comforts and privatised services, it is also no longer necessary to identify themselves with the same imagined city as the poor. Furthermore, the responsibility of ensuring access to housing and basic services is not held by the state or the elite, but by the ‘self-governing’ individual through participation in the market. For the poor, however, this means placing a new responsibility upon their shoulders for which they are no more equipped to bear, and with less obligation on the state to ensure access to basic needs.¹⁶ The very notion of the ‘right to the city’ – which has laid

the basis of a claim to urban residency and citizenship for the urban poor since the 1960s – has been steadily eroded through the dominance of neoliberal ideology and discourses on the competitive city.¹⁷ Attention is effectively redirected away from traditional issues of social justice, and the right to the city is reinterpreted in terms of a new ideal citizen-subject: an “aspirational middle-class consumer citizen, ideally primed to live in a ‘world class city’”.¹⁸

Urban management by market forces

This is the background from which we can assess the implications of market liberalisation policies for the urban poor. After several decades of relying on the free market mechanism as a cure-all for the ills of the twenty-first century, the increasing proportion of urban dwellers living in slums is sufficient evidence that the ‘growth-first’ strategy for development isn’t working. Clearly, economic growth alone does not in any way guarantee redistribution and equity. The fallacy of ‘trickle-down’ theory is dramatically expressed in the case of Mumbai, a city in which half the population still lives in slums despite its resounding economic ‘success’ in recent years. India is a foremost example for other reasons: following several decades of nationalism and state-planned growth and welfare-provision after Independence, the adoption of liberalisation and economic reforms since 1991 has been coupled with more discriminatory attitudes to the urban poor [see Myth 2]. The most effective answer to the city’s problems, at least for the cheerful proponents of corporate-led projects who speak of turning Mumbai into another Singapore, is to give market forces free reign over the city. They initially portrayed the market mechanism as a kind of impersonal bailliff who will “painlessly” evict Mumbai’s five or six million poor, and clear the city of all the “undesirables” who don’t fit into India’s rapidly growing service and consumption-centric economy – regardless of the fact that Mumbai continues to attract thousands of rural migrants to the city each year who simply have nowhere else to go.¹⁹

Maintaining the city’s image on a global stage then becomes dependent on efforts to keep downtown areas and event spaces free of undesirable groups (such as the homeless, beggars, prostitutes and the very poor). As cities seek to attract tourism and convention industries while catering for a more business-oriented and middle-class clientele, the inevitable side-effects are seen in gentrification and the displacement of poorer communities, along with the abandonment of neighbourhoods that don’t fit into the new design. Even in most successful middle-income nations, urban poverty as manifested through inadequate living conditions and inadequate incomes is still a serious problem that affects a large proportion of the population.²⁰ Although globalisation may have acted as the true engine of economic growth in recent decades, the progressive increase in levels of marginality, poverty and inequality highlights the failure of the free market to redistribute its benefits and opportunities.

Employing market forces as the arbiter of resource distribution is socially exclusive, not inclusive, and does not function when there is a need to

produce certain types of goods or services such as housing for the poor or welfare services for low-income groups.²¹ This calls into question the continued trend for privatisation in the provision of basic needs and services. In industrialised countries, an average of 80 percent of the population has access to private housing markets, while 20 percent is dependent on public subsidies. In developing countries the opposite occurs, where private markets have little reach and are highly speculative. In Latin America as a whole, for example, only 20 to 40 percent of the population have access to housing through the real estate market. As public policies do not meet the needs of the remaining 60 to 80 percent, the excluded population are left to meet their own housing needs – which often includes blue-collar workers, public servants and bankers within the illegal squatter settlements and *favelas*.²² A similar dynamic takes place in the privatisation of urban infrastructures and basic services, a trend that began in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s with Margaret Thatcher's free market economic reforms and then spread to almost every corner of the globe. During the 1990s, private sector participation was vigorously promoted by international organisations such as the World Bank, IMF and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, as well as bilateral development agencies and the governments of fully industrialised countries. The arguments in favour of privatisation were based on the general agreement that public utilities have been too slow in extending access to services, that they can be inefficient and corrupt, and that developing countries reeling from debt were unable to pay for new infrastructures. In particular, the World Bank's "Cities Without Slums" action plan (in coalition with UN-HABITAT) sought to solve the problem of urban poverty in part through public-private partnerships – a strategy to harness the power of transnational corporations in the delivery of basic social and economic infrastructure to urban slums.²³ Under the free market development paradigm, basic needs like clean water, sanitation, healthcare and education are not considered a birthright, but a privilege of the fee-paying user even in the poorest low-income settlements. The role of the state is not to be directly responsible for addressing society's needs and problems, but to facilitate and regulate the business sector in undertaking social functions and economic development. In the process of privatisation, public goods are effectively transferred into private hands, and the government acts on behalf of corporations in operating (or building new and large-scale) infrastructures and realising their profit potential.

Privatisation for the poor

While this strategy may have a certain rationale for providing services to high-end consumers in industrialised countries, it has serious flaws when applied to the urban poor in developing countries. The incentive for private provision to low-income areas has little to do with the securing of basic human rights or with development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals, and everything to do with commercial opportunities and potential profit. A key consideration for private companies and their financial investors is scale, as larger projects with a sizeable client base provide the highest rates of return. Private operators are also more

likely to cherry pick the most attractive locations with acceptable levels of financial and political risk, ideally in regions with large or growing economies, in cities with denser and wealthier populations, and in more affluent neighbourhoods that are preferably already connected to utilities. None of these criteria apply to low-income populations and slum settlements, where residents are too poor to be profitable and represent too great a financial risk. This reality is reflected in the provision of water and sanitation, in which the least profitable locations are often excluded from the service area in private contracts.²⁴ Still only around 5 percent of the world's population is currently served by the formal private sector in water and sanitation, despite the keen support of many development agencies for 'pro-poor' private sector participation since the 1990s. An estimated 1.1 billion poor people still lack access to improved drinking water, while 2.4 billion people lack reasonable access to improved sanitation – and most of the unserved urban dwellers in this number live in the low-income neighbourhoods that large water companies have shown little interest in serving.²⁵

In sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest region of the world which came under substantial donor pressure to privatise in order to access loans or debt relief, few private sector operatives have been willing to negotiate contracts. Most multinational companies regard the region as too risky for investment, two of which (Saur and Biwater) stated that African countries do not represent attractive investments due to the very poor state of public utilities, and because most consumers cannot afford tariffs that are high enough to generate adequate returns.²⁶ The case of water privatisation in Bolivia is also famous. When the American company Bechtel took over water services in 1999, rates immediately increased by 35 to 50 percent. In the capital city Cochabamba where families earn on average \$100 a month, the prospect of paying \$20 a month in water bills led to widespread protests and clashes until the government finally annulled the private contract. This story has had a big impact on the polemic debate surrounding water privatisation and was an inspiration for popular resistance against other privatisation contracts around the world, such as Suez's attempts to privatise the Ganges river in India.²⁷ As the 'Cochabamba Water Wars' poignantly illustrated, privatisation of essential services can dispossess the poor of their right to basic social amenities, whilst servicing the economic interests of multinational corporations (usually based in the wealthiest countries).

The modern-day privatisation debate also tends to overlook the lessons of history during the nineteenth century. Although the free market viewpoint was prevalent in many countries undergoing sanitary reform over this period, private sector provision only benefitted the wealthiest social groups who were able and willing to pay. Governments eventually became convinced that clean water and sanitation was important for both public health and national economic development, and that the only way to achieve this was through the government provision of piped water and water-borne sewerage systems. By the twentieth century these efforts were institutionalised in most industrialised countries and cities, guided

by the goal of universal public provision. It was only with the ascendancy of neoliberal policies from the late 1970s that water, like other essential goods and services, became widely regarded as an “economic good” as opposed to a publicly-held, common resource.²⁸ In other words, those policies that didn’t work in the heyday of Western industrialisation are now advocated as a new solution for deficiencies in basic service provision throughout the developing world.

It is also noteworthy that private sector provision has achieved neither the scale nor the benefits anticipated in Africa, Latin America and South Asia. Although energy and telecommunications has seen increased private sector participation, the water and sanitation sector – of fundamental importance to poverty and health development targets – has experienced comparatively little privatisation, especially in the poorest countries.²⁹ Recent trends also suggest that the rate of privatisation has been slowing since the late 1990s, and the substantial amounts of private money needed to provide basic infrastructure to low-income areas has simply not materialised.³⁰ This is notwithstanding the unpopularity of privatisation among the poor, nor even the ethical considerations of allowing corporations to extract profits from the poorest people who are trying to secure their basic needs.³¹ As the law professor Michael Likosky questions; “If globalization has underdeveloped urban infrastructures for the poor, should the poor then be asked to fuel globalization in their attempt to escape from urban poverty?” The working poor should not need to pay their way out of poverty, says Likosky, in order to profit members of the very corporate class that is in part responsible for their poverty in the first place. Rather than charge the poor for using infrastructures, the state (or if necessary, foreign aid) should pay for the infrastructures of the urban poor – just as governments provided basic services as a public good during the twentieth century.³²

The right role for governments

One of the tragic paradoxes of globalisation is that privatisation and free market policies hinder the kind of government action that is needed to tackle urban poverty and slum growth. It is indisputable that the private market is unable to provide an answer to the deficiency in housing and urban service provision for the poor, yet the Washington Consensus policies still enforced harsh reductions in government spending on social needs during the 1980s and 1990s. The deregulation and privatisation of public services serves to directly undermine the welfare state and further compromises the ability of public agencies to meet the needs of those who cannot afford the market price for housing, healthcare, education and sanitation. While the greatest need in developing cities is for a stronger and more accountable role for government, privatisation policies and ideas of market efficiency and state-downsizing have severely constrained the capacity of municipal governance. But the role of the state is not actually reduced, nor is the power of the nation-state declining in an era of increasing globalisation. Although international competition and market-driven policies are limiting the options of local governance, both the national and local state is increasingly required

for the global economy to function smoothly (such as by enforcing international agreements, formulating binding trade policies, and ensuring the security of global financial transactions).³³

The real difference is that the actions of governments are adapted to meet the needs of market growth and the efficient conduct of the business community. It requires infinitely more government planning and intervention to build a skyscraper, for example, than to assist the poor in constructing low-income secure housing. If anything, the formal power of governments to affect the development of cities is greater than ever before, even if this power is generally exercised to facilitate the trends of increasing corporatisation and economic competition. The reason that low-income settlements are given so little priority in national budgets is not simply an indication of severe fiscal constraints or a decreasing role of the state, but more the result of deliberate policy choices in favour of wealthier citizens and the business sector. These attitudes may be shaped by an international policy framework that favours an increased reliance on market forces as the best allocator of resources, but even this doesn’t automatically remove the responsibility of governments to secure the basic rights of all citizens. In this light, the free market approach to urban development can be read as a collusion between governments and corporations to push a common agenda, regardless of the increased partitioning of cities and the exclusion of the urban poor.³⁴

The efficiency-oriented, growth-led and internationally competitive strategies of the ‘city-enterprise’ have failed to combat the problem of slums, and are more likely to exacerbate urban poverty than act as a solution in the future. This dominant approach may well have turned cities into ‘engines of growth’, but the balance sheet of costs and benefits is difficult to justify; technical transformation, prosperity and affluence for the chosen few, but deepening poverty, inequality and increasing marginalisation for the many. The liberalisation of national economies, their global integration, structural adjustment and the privatisation of former public utilities is clearly a marvellous investment strategy for transnational corporations, unless we question its implications for social cohesion or environmental sustainability. This would include, *inter alia*, the promotion of wasteful consumerism, the undermining of national sovereignty, the weakening of state authority and the depletion of natural resources – and ultimately, a “dehumanizing implosion of deepening alienation, anger, and social breakdown that manifests itself in urban violence, a loss of compassion for the weak, and a disregard of the environmental and human consequences of economic activity”.³⁵ This is another of the great paradoxes of globalisation: while the push for democratisation is promoted by the flows of information associated with global integration, these same processes have centralised power and control into unaccountable corporate institutions. The result is a system in which a few make decisions on behalf of a whole, returning great rewards to themselves while passing the costs onto others. To formulate new public policies that prioritise the person and community in place of the market and enterprise is therefore the greatest – and most urgent – humanitarian challenge of our time.

Myth 6

International aid is the answer

“Development has become a big business, preoccupied more with its own growth and imperatives than with the people it was originally created to serve. Dominated by professional financiers and technocrats, the development industry seeks to maintain an apolitical and value-free stance in dealing with what are, more than anything else, problems of power and values.”¹

Never in the history of cities have there been so many projects for improving slums and the living conditions of the urban poor by international aid agencies, development banks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). But just as state policies have failed to meet the needs of the urban poor in most low- and middle-income countries, the current system of donor assistance from wealthier countries – whether from government-to-government or mobilised directly on the ground by NGOs and other agencies – has failed to stem the tide of growing slum formation. As this Myth sets out to explain, international aid not only fails to benefit a major proportion of the poor living in slums, but it often works against their best interests.

The first problem with development assistance for cities is simply one of scale. At no time in the past 30 years has international aid as a whole exceeded US \$60bn a year, a sum that is equivalent to 20 percent of the annual budget of the US department of defense over the same annual period, and hardly enough to have a major impact on the lives of 2 billion poor people in low- and middle-income countries.² Even the total aid commitments made by 15 countries at the Gleneagles ‘G8’ meeting in 2005 to great fanfare, comprising a mere 0.51 percent of their national income, have been left unmet. In 2010, the continent of Africa is expected to receive just \$12bn of the \$25bn pledged.³ As a general trend, overseas development assistance is receiving declining support in most Western countries (with only a few exceptions, notably the Nordic countries), particularly in respect to what is traditionally known as ‘urban development’.⁴ Urban poverty reduction is among the lowest priority for aid donations from most multilateral agencies. The proportion of World Bank funding going to improve housing conditions in urban areas aimed at lower-income groups, for example, was 2.3 percent between 1981 and 1998. The figure for the Asian Development Bank was a mere 1.7 percent over the same time-frame.⁵ At the same time, the budgetary spending of most national governments in developing countries also fails to sufficiently recognise the urbanisation of poverty, whilst priority is given to the politically articulate and influential sectors of their urban populations.⁶

These facts dispel an assumption that guided the work of most international aid agencies for many years: that investments in development in poor countries suffer from an ‘urban bias’. According to this rationale, project expenditures have tended to privilege urban areas at the expense of investments in rural areas. Because economic growth and modernisation naturally occurs in the cities where wealth is most concentrated, the policies of leading development agencies were

said to be biased against the countryside – a notion that continues to receive support, especially from those who advocate neoliberal economic policies in favour of export-oriented agriculture.⁷ This assumption that city-dwellers benefit more from development than their rural counterparts persists even despite the growing incidence of slums and extreme urban poverty – what amounts to an ‘anti-urban bias’ for the poorest residents in developing cities. Another reason that urban development does not muster enough interest within most aid agencies to attract sufficient funding is the sheer competition from other issues. Climate change, HIV/AIDS, post-conflict reconstruction, child labour, violence against women, and natural disasters like floods or droughts or hurricanes are all issues that may involve life or death for millions of vulnerable people, and therefore hold a high moral imperative in the clamour for assistance budgets. These campaign demands, often backed by high profile celebrities and international NGOs, are more likely to gain popular support than demands for long-term urban development needs such as slum upgrading, capacity building for newly democratised municipal governments, or support for participatory planning initiatives.⁸

The bottom line is that insufficient financial resources are one of the main impediments to dealing effectively with the problems faced by urban slum-dwellers. This reality is partly attributable to increased public sector austerity resulting from global economic inequalities, structural adjustment policies and liberalisation programmes since the 1980s [see Myth 1]. Other factors include the incapacity (or unwillingness) of governments to provide appropriate support to low-income settlements; the lack or misuse of financial resources by municipal authorities; a growing pressure on municipal budgets from new jurisdictions on their periphery; and the misuse or poor targeting of subsidies for the urban poor.⁹ In short, there is a large gap between what is needed within low- and middle-income countries to reduce urban poverty and what governments, aid agencies or development banks are currently providing in terms of financial and technical assistance. As argued below, there is an even wider gap between the *kind* of assistance that is needed to ameliorate slums and the forms of action that are currently provided by international agencies and multilateral institutions.

Aiding or hindering the urban poor?

It wasn’t until the 1970s that development agencies began to set the agenda for urban housing policy in low-income countries. By this time, the large public housing programmes that were launched by many Third World governments during the 1950s and 1960s had made little impact on the problem of urban slum formation. Many of these government-financed housing projects proved too expensive for their supposed target group, and too few units were built relative to needs. Most of the limited allocation of funds also ended up benefitting the middle class, while designs and locations were often ill-matched to the needs of poorer groups.¹⁰ This was the political climate in which John F.C. Turner published his influential critique of public housing policies in 1976, *Housing by People* [see Myth 2]. From this time, the World Bank initiated

a large number of urban development assistance programmes and helped to establish slum upgrading as an officially recognised strategy. Although Turner was a key intellectual influence in the Bank's new philosophy, there were arguably other ideological reasons for supporting his ideas. The concept of self-help and incremental construction was exactly the kind of cost-effective solution that fitted into the Bank's neoliberal concept of an austere state; the role of government, in the slum upgrading approach, is to be facilitating rather than fundamental. According to the urban development specialist Cedric Pugh, the intention of the World Bank was to make housing affordable to low-income households without the payment of subsidies, in contrast to the heavily-subsidised public-housing approach. Not only did this downgrade expectations of the state commitment to provide adequate shelter for all, but the new goal in housing policy became 'improving' slums rather than redeveloping them.¹¹ This required the state to form partnerships with international donors and NGOs to become an 'enabler' of the poor – an approach that was consummated by the Cities Alliance initiative in 1999 (led by the World Bank and UN-HABITAT, and comprising a broad coalition of 10 of the major donor countries, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Environment Programme, the European Union, local governments, urban poor federations, as well as a number of low-income countries since 2007).¹²

Although "self-help" and "participation" became the buzzwords of the low-cost housing debate from the mid-1970s, aid assistance has largely failed to adhere to the true tenets of this approach. According to the new consensus that emerged around slum upgrading and 'sites and services',¹³ the urban poor should be empowered to formulate their own solutions to the problems of housing and human settlement, backed up with a redistribution of power and resources in their favour. Government action should therefore focus on facilitating poorer groups in their "freedom to build" their own housing, such as by providing cheap building materials and credit, well-located sites, knowledge and technical advice, as well as infrastructure and services.¹⁴ However, giving dwellers control over the design, construction and management of their housing did not imply that all the poor of the world should become do-it-yourself housebuilders, even though they are very often forced to do so. The key principle, as emphasised by John Turner, is to give the poor *local control* over the housing process, which depends on personal and local access to resources which only governments can guarantee.¹⁵ The enabling approach to low-cost housing therefore requires governments to prioritise an increase in poor people's access to resources, rather than grandiose housing projects. Effective community participation also depends upon a decentralisation of power and resources to city/municipal level, and a democratisation of the political system. This is to ensure that citizens can influence government policies and priorities, and local governments can respond to the diverse needs of poorer groups.¹⁶

In practice, the functioning of aid agencies often works against these core principles of participation, decentralisation and redistribution.

Especially since the mid-1990s, innumerable NGOs have taken a central role in the provision of aid to thousands of slums and poor urban communities. Under a tiered system of coordination and funding, an international donor agency like the World Bank, the Ford Foundation or the UK Department for International Development will work through a major development NGO which, in turn, often works with local NGOs. Discussions about "good governance" and "capacity-building" have become central to development discourse since this period, but despite the commitment of international agencies to strengthen or build local capacity, local government officials are often bypassed or ignored by aid agencies and foreign consultants. In many cities, a large number of international agencies (both official agencies and NGOs) are often busy funding separate projects with no coordination between them, and with little attempt to work together and help improve the capacity of local institutions.¹⁷ In this way, NGOs can serve to pre-empt community level capacity-building by taking over decision-making and negotiating roles.¹⁸

Most official development assistance agencies have also generally failed to develop relationships with urban poor citizens and their representative organisations. Much of the literature on aid assistance concludes that planning and urban management is much more effective if responsibilities are delegated directly to the urban poor, with the decision-making process transferred to the lowest possible levels. But rather than support the work of local communities in slum-upgrading programmes or infrastructure provision, international agencies rarely assign any role to urban poor groups in the design and implementation of aid programmes. Part of the reason is the structure of aid institutions, which were set up on the assumption that development is best delivered by making large capital sums available to recipient national governments, accompanied by the best technical advice. Although the limitations of this fixed relationship between donor agencies and national governments are long recognised, there is still little scope for aid institutions to respond directly to the needs and priorities of local communities. This structure also creates a great distance between the aid agency and the intended beneficiaries of urban development programmes; decisions about funding are made far from the urban poor in government ministries or at the headquarters of large agencies in Europe or North America, and aid projects are shaped by commercial and political influences that filter through many intermediaries before reaching the people on the ground.¹⁹

The result is a lack of accountability to the urban poor, as well as a lack of transparency to the poor in the allocation of resources – and yet it is the poor whose needs justify the entire development industry. With so little ability to influence development programmes, apart from the extremely limited power to vote for politicians who oversee the international aid institutions, the urban poor are unable to hold a development bank or a bilateral agency to account if a project fails – or even worse, if a development project threatens their home or livelihoods.²⁰ Furthermore, most of the literature on development assistance is written by the staff of international agencies, most of them based in Western countries,

with little attention paid to the perspectives of those who live and work in poor communities (such as the staff of local NGOs, schools and health centres, and members of community-based organisations).²¹ The residents of squatter settlements are normally given little or no say in internationally-funded projects, have no involvement with agency staff during the projects implementation, and are usually abandoned as soon as the project is completed. Such projects may bring considerable improvements in the provision of water, sanitation and some services but fail to alleviate the wider problems of unemployment, violence and generalised poverty.²²

Box 3.

Kibera: a case study in aid ineffectiveness

A notable recent example of the constraints on international aid effectiveness is a pilot slum upgrading programme in Nairobi, a city in which at least half of the population lives in over 100 slums and squatter settlements. First initiated in 2002 as a partnership between the Kenyan government and the Cities Alliance initiative (a coalition of urban assistance agencies led by UN-HABITAT and the World Bank), the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP) aims to “improve the overall livelihoods of people living and working in slums” across Kenya by 2020.²³ In 2008, the Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga said the government would complete 30,000 housing units for slum-dwellers in Nairobi in just under three years.²⁴ According to national newspapers, the project aimed to “do away with shanties” in Kenya within the space of 10 years.²⁵ It took until September 2009 – a preparation period of more than seven years – until the first pilot project was rolled out in Kibera, known as the largest informal settlement in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁶ The aim, according to P.M. Odinga, was to prepare the ground for a “modern, low-income residential estate with modern schools, markets, playgrounds and other facilities”.²⁷

But for all the UN’s rhetoric on community involvement and participatory slum improvement, the relocation of the first 1,300 people into new blocks of concrete flats provided little hope for the remaining hundreds of thousands of residents. As the director of one local NGO commented, “unbearable squalor and grinding poverty” is likely to plague many of those left behind in the midst of increasing unemployment and high food prices – a situation that continues to worsen in Nairobi.²⁸ Further concerns were raised that the poorest residents, many surviving on less than \$1-a-day, would not be able to afford the increased monthly rent and higher cost of electricity and water in the new apartments. Others claimed that by encouraging residents to rent out the remaining two rooms in their unit, the upgrading project would not solve the problem of overcrowding.²⁹

Despite a long period of professed consultation between officials and community groups during the planning process, the blocks of flats were built very close to each other, making it difficult for the highly entrepreneurial tenants to use the remaining space to make a living. Some of the relocated residents even claimed to have been moved

against their wishes, and said the Kibera slum settlement had provided more living space and freedom than the new flats.³⁰ Regardless of all these issues, the total budgetary costs of rolling out the nation-wide government slum-upgrading plan had already been considered a “pipe dream” as early as 2006.³¹ In August 2009, the Housing minister said the total cost of “eradicating” Kenya’s slums was Sh885 billion – an amount the government simply does not have.³² Besides which, at the rate the Kibera project was being implemented in 2009 the upgrading of all existing residents will take another 1,170 years to complete.³³

The priorities of the World Bank and other bilateral aid institutions are also unlikely to favour the kind of redistributive policies that are central to the enabling approach. A longstanding critique of the Bank and other big multilateral lending agencies involves the use of aid to ensure that recipient governments adopt policies that favour the interests of private corporations and financial institutions based in Northern countries. The World Bank may in theory exist to promote long-term and pro-poor development through funding projects, but it also serves to influence the economic policies of governments in an orthodox and monetarist direction – a practice that became public in the 1980s as a result of structural adjustment lending. In seeking to maintain the current structure of the international economy, biased in favour of the rich industrialised nations and particularly the United States, the priorities of the World Bank are often at odds with a truly pro-poor development strategy that benefits the majority of developing countries. The political analyst Walden Bello attributes part of the reason for this bias in priorities to the ideology and academic background of most economists who work within the institution. In the neo-Keynesian worldview that dominates the thinking of World Bank technocrats, development is viewed as a technical question that omits the relations of conflict and exploitation that govern economic life. Poverty is therefore abstracted from the context of the unequal relationships of power that create and perpetuate it. The problem of poverty is transformed principally into a problem of scarcity; the solution to scarcity is posited as economic growth; and the key to economic growth is viewed as ‘efficient production’. Under this paradigm, redistribution of wealth is a secondary issue. At best, redistribution is conceptualised in a superficial way as the sharing of increased national income – the ‘benefits of growth’ – rather than the deeper problem of access to and control of resources.³⁴ This may go some way to explaining why very few of the ‘slum upgrading’ and ‘sites-and-services’ schemes of the 1970s and 1980s, many sponsored by the World Bank, took the land issue into consideration. The inequitable distribution of land is an eminently political issue that clearly goes to the heart of the problem of slums, and yet plays a minor role in the formation of many aid assistance programmes.³⁵

Beyond slum upgrading?

Notwithstanding the limited achievements among international donor agencies since the 1970s, it is not to say that aid assistance is not needed or is incapable of improving the living conditions of the urban poor. Many examples could be cited of the positive results that follow

from aid projects: the provision of housing and basic services that reduce health burdens for low-income individuals, the real benefits that communities receive from water supply and sanitation systems, neighbourhood health care clinics or even from improved forms of local governance. If anything, international assistance needs to be massively scaled up if the crisis in urban housing is to be adequately recognised and addressed, especially when many bilateral assistance programmes and even the World Bank have reduced their support to this sector. The more fundamental question is whether the processes used to achieve any such development targets will utilise the real actors in housing projects – not only governments or NGOs, but the people and organisations who actually live and work in slums.

Even citywide slum upgrading/housing development projects that support decentralised actions and community groups are only a part of the solution to slums. Upgrading projects and interventions, when targeted at informal settlements with an extremely high density of people, can be tantamount to endorsing the inequity of a quarter of the city's population living on just five percent of the city's land (as in the case of Delhi, India).³⁶ Overseas aid agencies may support many slum improvement schemes in low-income cities (often coordinated by Western consultants and advisors with foreign funding who facilitate urban development from the most expensive hotels, restaurants, cars, trains and planes) whilst at the same time supporting a development path that privileges wealth, large-scale development and international business. Aside from urban development assistance, other policies and programmes that bilateral agencies and multilateral lending institutions implement can further marginalise the very large segments of the population who act as the recipients of aid. This was notoriously the case with structural adjustment lending, which the World Bank and IMF imposed on more than 70 countries during the 1980s and 1990s with devastating outcomes for the poor across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Advocating the need for more overseas development assistance in the short-term is also not to countenance an international economic order that offers the palliative of aid as a form of charity, often provided with conditions for macro-economic reforms that benefit multinational corporations and Western financial institutions. In the huge volume of literature informing the aid debate, there is no shortage of voices that proclaim against 'aid dependency' in the South; it is incontestable that a truly sustainable form of development has to come from within a country, and cannot be the result of external help.³⁷ Focusing solely on development aid can also divert attention from other related global justice issues, such as debt, tax havens, corporate power, trade justice and the need for policy freedom. Without a transformation of goals and priorities by the major powers and the institutions that govern the global economy, it is doubtful that aid can ever work as intended (i.e. as a means of "providing sufficient impetus to overcome the strong forces that keep people poor").³⁸ The unequal access to resources and services that lies at the heart of urban poverty cannot ultimately be redressed by a

development paradigm that gives priority to the market over government, to wealth accumulation over redistributive strategies, and treats the poor as an afterthought to be partially relieved with international aid.

Myth 7

There will always be slums

“So distribution should undo excess, And each man have enough.”¹

Is it realistic to talk about an end to slums at any point in the future? Or does the same view hold for ‘slums’ as for those who proclaim against global poverty: “the poor have always been with us, and always will be!” For some modern writers, the evidence suggests that the future of cities is a foregone and forbidding conclusion, a “planet of slums” made up of a permanently redundant – and potentially revolutionary – mass of disenfranchised informal workers. As the urban sociologist Mike Davis argues, the self-help squatters on the edge of cities inhabit a “zone of exile”, a “new Babylon”, and the only hope is the “militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism”.² For other writers, the view of cities as engines of breakdown and apocalypse is far from justified. In 1962, Charles Stokes differentiated between ‘slums of hope’ and ‘slums of despair’, the former category becoming popularised by the anthropologist Peter Lloyd in 1979.³ As Lloyd argued, much of the scholarly literature on squatter settlements reflects the prejudices of Western observers to squalor and neglect, as well as fears of the urban poor becoming a socially destabilising force – a view that gained popular prominence, long before Mike Davis, following the anthropological studies by Oscar Lewis in the late 1950s.⁴

Furthering these dystopian vs utopian viewpoints in more recent times, some writers are tempted to romanticise the “magic of squatter cities” for their ecologically and socially sustainable practices, or for the self-help praxis of the urban poor and their values of mutuality, community and solidarity.⁵ Both reactions to urban poverty are an extreme of the reality, often serving the ideological purposes of different interest groups who occupy a higher social strata: the political far right who effectively view slum-dwellers as an unwanted burden on market society, or the political far left who imbue slum-dwellers with their hopes of revolutionary social transformation. As a consequence, all of these interpretations tacitly accept the existence, and persistence, of slums.⁶

Part of the problem is one of semantics. The word ‘slum’ can lump together a wide variety of different tenements and types of residents, and was only given an operational definition in 2003 by the United Nations in terms of a loose set of criteria – restricted to physical and legal characteristics, and excluding the more difficult social dimensions.⁷ This can apply the term ‘slum’ with broad strokes to different cities and countries across the world, although in practice most slums are anything but homogenous. As the studies of architects and planners since the 1960s discovered, slums contain both a mixture of housing conditions and a wide diversity of people. Anthropological writers such as William Mangin and John Turner, for example, perceived a marked difference between squatter settlements and inner-city slums, and found it was usually difficult to describe squatter settlements as ‘slums’ at all. Peter Lloyd also argued that what might seem a forsaken ‘slum’ to the Western eye may be viewed quite differently, in more positive terms,

by the shantytown residents themselves. In this light, it is difficult to conceive of an ‘end to slums’ when the language used to describe them is so generalised and problematic. Even in many developed countries today, the existence of slums still persists despite growing affluence and constant policy shifts. As general housing standards rise, areas that fail to reach the acceptable standard can be newly categorised as ‘slums’.⁸ If countries like the UK or USA have still not managed to end the problem of slums, it is reasonable to argue that countries like Ethiopia or Afghanistan – which according to the UN’s debatable statistics had respectively 99.4% and 98.5% of the urban population living in slum conditions in 2001 – have little hope of ameliorating, let alone solving, the problem of slums in the future.⁹

Misunderstanding the targets

The problem of language in realising an ‘end to slums’ is further complicated by the campaign initiatives of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT). In 1999, UN-HABITAT and the World Bank led a wide coalition of urban assistance agencies under an initiative called the Cities Alliance. The two key issues that the new partnership focused on – the growth of slums, and the management of cities where slum growth is taking place – led to the ‘Cities Without Slums Action Plan’, which was subsequently incorporated into the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000. Since that time, ‘Cities Without Slums’ is the main campaign slogan adopted by UN-HABITAT in its promotional material. The branding, however, promises much more than the content. The stated intention of the programme is not to literally ‘end slums’ within a specific timeframe, but rather to strengthen institutions and partnerships for slum-upgrading initiatives at the citywide level.¹⁰ As a slogan, Cities Without Slums is therefore a normative idea, namely a broad conception of what the world should look like, rather than a causal idea that is more operational and usually takes the form of a target.¹¹ None of the UN’s publications even vaguely suggest that it has a target for achieving cities without slums.¹²

A major problem with the slogan lies in its openness to misinterpretation; some governments, most notably in Africa, appear to have confused the normative idea – that cities should not have slums – as being an actual target, namely to eradicate slums. As further explained in Myth 3, this objective can be used by governments to validate large-scale slum demolition projects, as evidenced by illegal mass evictions in Zimbabwe in 2005 and in Abuja, Nigeria in 2006, and through slum ‘elimination’ legislation in South Africa in 2007. For example, former President Thabo Mbeki keenly referred to the UN’s campaign on slums when formulating the aim to eradicate all informal settlements in South Africa by 2014, based on the simplistic policy solution of replacing them with formal housing and stamping out any new erection of shacks.¹³ This is not to apportion blame with urban assistance agencies for the continuance of slum clearance operations, as the Cities Alliance initiative is wholly against this approach and UN-HABITAT strongly campaigns against such policies. However, so long as governments focus on the vision

of a globally competitive city free of visible squalor, thereby making them prone to slum removal projects, the use of language in calling for an 'end to slums' can help justify anti-poor policies and lead to tragic consequences. The housing policy expert Marie Huchzermeyer argues that a more appropriate objective than the eradication of slums is therefore an official policy of recognition, one that seeks to manage and understand today's and future informal settlements instead of clearing them away and trying to prevent them from re-emerging. In this respect, the Cities Without Slums campaign would be more appropriately named "Cities Recognising Slums".¹⁴

The Cities Without Slums slogan is also sharply contradicted by its operational target, as embodied in the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on slums. This goal, tucked away as "Target 11" of the seventh MDG on ensuring environmental sustainability, aims merely to "significantly improve the lives of 100 million slum-dwellers by 2020".¹⁵ Not only does this reflect the unacceptably low priority that the problem of inadequate housing receives in comparison to other development concerns, but it also tacitly accepts the existence of slums as an enduring reality – as achieving the target would hardly result in 'cities without slums'. One hundred million slum-dwellers comprised only about one in 10 of the total number of people who lived in slums in 2000 (according to the statistics in *The Challenge of Slums* report). The goal effectively ignores the needs of the remaining 1.3 billion people who, according to previous estimates, will be living in slums by 2020.¹⁶ Also, the target date of 2020 is five years later than the end point of all the other MDGs. And unlike most of the MDGs, it doesn't set out to halve or substantially reduce the slum population. As UN-HABITAT recognises, this makes it difficult, if not outright impossible, to set country-specific targets so that governments can know the numbers of slum-dwellers whose conditions they must improve as part of the global MDG.¹⁷ Moreover, the target was poorly defined and failed to specify what a "significant improvement" in the lives of slum-dwellers would entail.¹⁸ The fact remains that many upgrading and new house development programmes have "significantly improved" the lives of slum-dwellers, but almost never on a scale that significantly reduces the problem.¹⁹

Questioning the global statistics

If the only way of measuring progress towards achieving the "slums target" is the number of slum-dwellers worldwide, the efficacy of UN-HABITAT's statistics – as the only provider of global slum data – also gives cause for great concern. When the Millennium Development Goal on slums was set in 2000, it was not actually known how many slum-dwellers existed in the world.²⁰ It wasn't until *The Challenge of Slums* was published in 2003 that the first-ever estimate of slum-dwellers was given as a global figure, reported as 924 million in 2001, or 31.6 percent of the world's urban population.²¹ This was a historic UN statistic, and its grim predictions made headlines across the media: that the "number of people living out their days in the squalor of a slum is almost one billion", a number that could double in 30 years "without radical changes".²² In a subsequent

State of the World's Cities report published in 2006, the number of slum-dwellers worldwide was estimated at 998 million – expected to cross the one billion mark some time in 2007. The Report's authors predicted that if nothing is done to improve the lives of slum-dwellers or prevent slum formation, the global slum population could grow to 1.4 billion by 2020 (when the MDG on slums is scheduled to be met).²³ Since that time, the former Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, Anna Tibaijuka, has declared the number of slum-dwellers worldwide to have broken the one billion mark.²⁴ It was therefore a surprise when the latest biennial *State of the World's Cities* report for 2010/11 stated that the number of slum-dwellers in the developing world stood at 828 million – and that governments have collectively exceeded the MDG on slums by at least 2.2 times already!²⁵

Although this might be considered good news, there were reasons to question the validity of these claims. In contradicting earlier statistics, the baseline total of slum-dwellers was downward revised to 767 million people in 2000 (not 912 million as estimated in the 2006 report), but *without any qualification* (such as an explanation for a change in measurement, as the World Bank has repeatedly done with global poverty data – resulting in massive revisions to its statistics each time).²⁶ This gave the misleading impression that the number of slum-dwellers in the developing world was reduced from over a billion people in 2007/8 (as previously reported) to 828 million people in 2010 – a remarkable achievement, considering that the numbers were expected to dramatically increase.²⁷ Even if an explanation for the downward revision in baseline figures had been provided, such an enormous fluctuation would be unacceptable for most economic statistics and make them unfit for use.²⁸ Indeed, a meticulous study by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) suggests that the scale of urban poverty could be *under-stated* in official statistics used by governments and international agencies in most low- and middle-income nations, which could lead the UN to report inaccurate data on the extent of poverty in many cities.²⁹ The number of people living without adequate shelter could, in this regard, be far beyond 828 million people. At the very least, the lack of clarity and reliability over the measurement of slum-dwellers worldwide highlights the difficulty in realising an 'end to slums'. If we cannot be sure how many slum residents there are in the world, or how to measure our progress in improving their lives, then it is unlikely that the UN's "Cities Without Slums" campaign can turn its slogan into a reality.

Where the world is headed

Setting aside all of these analytical and conceptual problems, some straightforward observations can be made about where the world stands in relation to the slums challenge. Firstly, no statistics are required to reveal what every urbanite in the developing world must realise: that the problem of slums is a growing reality. Although the UN's data on slums is contestable and probably underestimated on many counts, the latest figures revealed that "the urban divide still exists" and is expected to increase in coming years. Even according to UN-HABITAT's significantly downward-revised figures, the global slum population will probably grow

by six million people each year unless drastic action is taken. Put bluntly, the absolute number of slum-dwellers across the world is expected to increase, and keep on increasing.³⁰ The number of town and city-dwellers is expected to rise to two-thirds of humanity by 2030, and in the case of sub-Saharan Africa it is likely “that nearly half of the growth in sub-Saharan Africa’s urban population will take place against a background of poverty and deprivation between now and 2020.”³¹ If present trends continue over the coming decades, we can expect the same things as forewarned in the 1989 classic *Squatter Citizen*: “...tens of millions more households living in squatter settlements or in very poor quality and overcrowded rented accommodation owned by highly exploitative landlords. Tens of millions more households will be forcibly evicted from their homes... The quality of many basic services (water, sanitation, garbage disposal, health care) will deteriorate still further, and there will be a rise in the number of diseases related to poor and contaminated living environments.”³²

In the second decade of the new millennium, as the world economy reels from the impact of a global financial crisis, the outlook is increasingly pessimistic. As in previous economic recessions since the 1980s, many governments in Latin America, Asia and Africa face large deficits in their balance of payments and insuperable problems with national debt. Application for loans from the International Monetary Fund still leads to pressure to reduce public spending, especially in social programmes. As a result, government subsidies for basic goods and services (such as staple foods and transport) are more likely to be cut, while the provision of basic services and new investments in city infrastructure are more likely to be postponed. And as always, it is the urban poor who are among the hardest hit, with little or no safety margin to allow them to absorb or survive the impacts of the crisis. As millions more people migrate from rural areas to the cities, where the lack of employment and declining real incomes is affecting the middle-class as well as the lower-income groups, increasing numbers of urban-dwellers will be forced to organise the construction of their own shelters.³³ This depressing outlook is reinforced by The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010, which states that the recent crisis in housing markets may offset the progress made in lifting people out of slums since 1990: “Although the crisis did not originate in developing regions, it has hit their populations and cities, where millions continue to live in precarious conditions... In many cases, public authorities have exacerbated the housing crisis through failures on four major counts: lack of land titles and other forms of secure tenure; cutbacks in funds for subsidized housing for the poor; lack of land reserves earmarked for low-income housing; and an inability to intervene in the market to control land and property speculation. Low incomes in the face of rising land prices virtually rule out the possibility that the working poor can ever own land, contributing to the problem of urban slums.”³⁴

Another observation is that few, if any, governments have development plans that sufficiently address the housing demands of urban growth and development in developing countries. As urbanisation continues

apace, few of these governments are even attempting to put in place the infrastructure and services that are needed to make cities liveable for all low-income residents. Even when investments are made, they tend to be in high-end infrastructure projects to attract foreign capital rather than to provide services to the poor, or to make cities more attractive to domestic investors.³⁵ As mentioned in Myths 2, 3 and 5, city ‘beautification’ programmes continue to result in the mass dislocation of squatters and slum-dwellers – an ongoing phenomenon that is making news headlines, at the time of writing, in Durban (South Africa) and Delhi (India) for the 2010 World Cup and Commonwealth Games respectively.³⁶ There is also little evidence to suggest that a framework has evolved to adequately address the problems of slums at the global level, let alone shape a clear vision of a future without any incidence of urban poverty and inadequate housing. For many fast-expanding mega-cities, the pressing concern is not the longer-term sustainability of rapid urbanisation and its social and environmental consequences for generations to come, but the short-term viability of the continued divide between rich and poor – especially in the context of an economic crisis and food price volatility that led to riots across the developing world in 2007 and 2008.³⁷ The impasse in urban policy is exacerbated by the ideological belief that states as well as cities have no alternative but to accelerate headlong in the same direction, relentlessly driven by the pressure to compete for high-class tourism, foreign investment, large-scale development projects and all other hallmarks of the ‘world class city’. As urban leaders seek their own bit of competitive advantage over the others, the very poor living in illegal squatter communities represent the unwelcome shadow side of globalisation.

Although faith in deregulated markets has been jolted by the world stock market crash in 2008, there are few world leaders who question the trajectory of the privatised and globalised market economy, based on the assumption that further and higher growth is the speediest and most effective route to alleviate poverty, despite all evidence to the contrary.³⁸ In the corridors of power, turning back on the export-oriented, growth-led model is seen as neither practical nor viable. Yet there is nothing inevitable about the current processes that result in an uncontrolled form of urbanisation that is resource depleting, polluting and exploitative of the urban poor. The choice rests with governments and decision-makers to either accept the social instability and rising slum growth that accompanies current trends, or forge a new path with different policies to achieve more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. If urbanisation trends and cities are to change, the economic model that sustains them must be wholly reformed and reimagined. A first step lies in recognising the impossibility of continuing in the same direction of urban development, and the possibility of achieving a new vision of human progress based upon a fundamental reordering of global priorities – beginning with the immediate securing of universal basic needs. Only then can the twin goals enshrined in the Habitat Agenda of 1996 be translated into a concrete programme of action: “adequate shelter for all” and “sustainable human settlements development in an urbanising world”.³⁹

Conclusion

A new vision for cities clearly begins with a change in mindset by the business and political community and all those involved in the governance and construction of cities. This requires a rethinking of the entrepreneurial and 'marketing' approach to urban development in which the city is regarded as a product for exchange with the rest of the world, as if the city is a saleable commodity that can be made available to the best buyer on the global market. Since the 1990s, the main question that concerns decision-makers in almost all developing cities is how to apply the economic rationality of business to urban management in order to improve its efficiency and functionality. In the competitive race to attract resources and investments, public institutions continue to be opened to the private sector. Citizens are valued for their role as customers and consumers; the focus of policymakers is to minimise costs and maximise the quality of private enterprise; and the primary goal of urban development is to increase the city's prospects for unending GDP growth and material prosperity. The last concern is the living standards of the weaker social classes, or the social disintegration that accompanies rising affluence and growing levels of inequality. As the provision of urban housing and services is shifted from the public sphere to the market sector, those with insufficient purchasing power are further excluded. There is little or no incentive for business to produce assets for the urban poor who inhabit informal settlements, yet market-based solutions are still promoted as the only real solution to the global housing crisis [see Myth 5]. The withdrawal of the state from its social redistribution role, mirrored by the shirking of much of its regulatory functions, is a key factor in the growth of slums in most of the developing world [see Myth 1]. In relying upon the market to provide access to resources, few governments have made a concerted effort to build or subsidise the building of adequate supplies of low-income housing.

A reversal of current trends undoubtedly depends upon strong state involvement and a different role for governments. It may be a truism to assert that efforts to redistribute land are needed, but such state intervention in the land market – always opposed by powerful vested interests – is no longer a viable policy option since the advent of economic liberalisation. Considering the inability of the market alone to correct distortions in the distribution of land, it is inevitably up to city public authorities to establish subsidies and loan programs for the purchase of urban land or houses, to regularise land ownership, and to guarantee the right of immediate provision of an adequate, sufficient and independent living space to vulnerable and homeless groups.¹ It is also up to governments to give correct support to low-income groups in their direct attempts to upgrade informal housing and provide services, or to construct new buildings, or to negotiate land tenure agreements for informal settlements [see Myth 2]. The same holds true for international development assistance agencies, which often have no relationships at all with urban poor groups. In turn, the participation of community groups in government programmes requires a strengthened role for local governments, with the decentralisation of control and revenues from national governments based in the capital [see Myth 6].² The 'enabling

approach' to slum improvement cannot therefore be reduced to simply restraining governments from intervening in housing and land markets, and allowing markets to function more efficiently – based on the orthodox policy prescriptions of privatisation, decentralisation and deregulation (as promoted by the World Bank and other bilateral and multilateral donors, Western governments and NGOs since the late 1980s).³ In contrast, the truly bottom-up and demand-driven process entails a more humanised model of development that empowers grassroots movements, promotes social transformation, and curbs growing inequalities through redistribution and integration.⁴ Overall, the approach of governments cannot focus exclusively on housing, which reduces the problems of squatters to merely the lack of adequate shelter and services, but must integrate actions in other sectors (such as food security, healthcare, education and employment).

In broader terms, the envisioning of a world without slums begins with questioning many of the assumptions that drive international development: that migration to cities is an inevitable and unstoppable process, that small-scale and peasant agriculture in rural areas is inefficient and a thing of the past, that the Western model of industrial development and free-market capitalism is the only possible route to progress. While newspaper articles in recent years have repeatedly quoted the UN's statistics about half of the world becoming urban, this doesn't negate the hardships endured by the remaining population who are still rural-based – particularly in Africa and Asia where rural inhabitants are a majority.⁵ There are still around 500 million small farms in developing countries, supporting almost 2 billion people – one third of humanity, most of whom are struggling to live and feed their families on less than US\$2 a day.⁶ For these people, the push-factors for rural-urban migration are driven by a number of formidable forces that lead to poverty and unemployment, including the deteriorating productivity of the land, the cost of industrial inputs, declining prices for commodities produced for sale on the market, and the enclosure of agricultural land for airports, highways, resorts, or for development projects such as big dams.⁷ The crisis in the agricultural sector continues to cause the disappearance and massive displacement of peasants and indigenous people.⁸ As organisations and social movements from Asia and Africa stated in discussions for 'The World Charter on the Right to the City' in 2004/5, the "absence of policies of agrarian reform and support for family agriculture, and the lack of access to essential natural resources such as water and technology, has been a contributory reason for the constant migration to the cities".⁹ To deal with the causes and not the effects of poverty in the South, and to reverse the trend of increasing slum growth in cities, inevitably requires new strategies to be envisioned that focus on rural development for smallholder farmers based on agro-ecological farming methods.¹⁰ If policymakers are to take sustainable development and poverty eradication seriously in the future, a basic question will concern – as Mohandas Gandhi famously campaigned for 80 years ago in the context of India – the renaissance of farming and village life and the re-peasantisation of rural areas. This is not to de-emphasise

the importance for governments and international agencies to prioritise securing the basic needs of informal communities and the poor in towns and cities, but to question more widely the exported-oriented model of industrial agriculture that has led to the destruction of local food systems and livelihoods across the developing world.¹¹

Transforming the global economy

The more fundamental reasons for why poor groups in low-income countries lack access to adequate housing and basic services is about the explicitly political questions of a governments' orientation on broader social and economic issues, and the unequal distribution of resources between the richest and poorest nations. In the widest sense, a world without slums and poverty cannot be imagined without a transformation of our existing political, economic and social structures. This is to recognise that development is not synonymous with economic growth, and a higher standard of living in material terms is not the only yardstick of human progress. A new development paradigm must be based on a more moderate use of the world's resources, and the recognition that the earth's products must be shared more equitably between nations. For rich countries this requires accepting the need for simpler lifestyles and a reduction in overall consumption at the national level, which logically follows from a more holistic vision of man's relationship to the environment and a growing rejection of the work/consume treadmill. All this depends on evolving development strategies that incorporate moral, ethical and spiritual values, and that promote cooperative and non-economic relationships between public, private and social players – as opposed to the market-driven culture of today that places material acquisition and maximum profit at the centre of development.

Meanwhile, the daily struggle for survival continues for a major proportion of the world's population. So long as current trends continue, summed up by intense international competitiveness and the increasing centralisation of power and wealth through a globalised marketplace, the organised resistance of the urban poor remains critical. The response of many academics and development practitioners is to rightly advocate for more community empowerment, participation, autonomy and devolution of control, but immense forces of state and market power are still arrayed against slum-dweller and civil society groups – forces that perpetuate an unjust global system which is rooted in the *disempowerment* of the urban poor, the *dispossession* of rural livelihoods, and *growing* extremes of inequality. The hope is not for the poor to rise up in revolution and reclaim their right to the city through violent social protest, a prospect that has long been deemed unlikely in light of the political conservatism that defines most of urban life, and the simple fact that squatters and the urban poor – despite their potential to outnumber police and paralyse such cities as Mumbai where they make up half the population – are largely characterised by a law-abiding quiescence that has yet to organise into a viable social movement or alternative political force.¹²

Yet signs of hope are found in the myriad experiments and new movements of recent years based on collective forms of democratic governance and communal decision-making, including participatory budgeting in Brazil,¹³ the Agenda 21 ideals of sustainable cities undertaken by many municipalities, the formation of neighbourhood committees and voluntary associations, and not least the urban poor federations that have emerged from grassroots savings groups since the 1990s. Many of these inspiring examples highlight the social solidarities that already exist and underpin urban life, and the potential for rapid improvements when poor communities are included in development processes. Whether these movements and innovations can be scaled up to form a viable alternative to the current development paradigm, accompanied by reformed economic and political structures that can rapidly secure basic human needs in all nations, is a question that will determine the social stability and international security of the coming century. The hope not only rests with the mobilisation of sufficient power through political organisation in the South, but also with the willingness of those in affluent societies to join voices with the poor, to sense the urgency for justice and participation, and to strengthen the global movement for a fairer distribution of the world's resources.

Notes

Introduction

1. Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, *World hunger: Twelve Myths*, Grove Press, 1986. See introduction.
2. The imperative need to raise awareness about slums is also stressed in the work of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT). As stated by its Executive Director, Anna Tibaijuka: "Awareness of the magnitude of slums in the world is key. As awareness increases so openness to discuss this issue increases as well, and new ideas will inevitably expand." See UN-HABITAT, *Slums of the World: The face of urban poverty in the new millennium*, Nairobi, 2003, foreword by Anna Tibaijuka.
3. Martin Wolf, 'The rescue of Bear Stearns marks liberalisation's limit', *Financial Times*, 26th March 2008.

Myth 1

1. E.F. Schumacher, 'Roots of Economic Growth', Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi, India, p. 38.
2. cf. Luigi Fusco Girard, 'Introduction', in Luigi Fusco Girard et al (eds), *The human sustainable city: challenges and perspectives from the habitat agenda*, Ashgate Publishing, 2003, p. 4.
3. UN-HABITAT states that 22 million people in developing countries moved out of slum conditions each year between 2000 and 2010, but 55 million new slum-dwellers were added to the global urban population since 2000. Short of drastic action, the world slum population is expected to grow by six million people each year. These statistics are significantly downward-revised from previous estimates, as discussed in Myth 7. See UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011: Bridging The Urban Divide*, Earthscan, Nairobi, March 2010.
4. Personal communication from David Satterthwaite to Jeremy Seabrook, in J. Seabrook, *In the Cities of the South: Scenes from a Developing World*, Verso, 1996, p. 10.
5. Jorge E. Hardoy and David Satterthwaite, *Squatter Citizen: Life in the Urban Third World*, Earthscan, 1989, p. 53.
6. 'Getting land for housing; what strategies work for low-income groups?', *Environment and Urbanization – Brief 19*, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), October 2009.
7. See *Squatter Citizen*, chapter one. See also Cecilia Tacoli et al, 'Urbanization, Poverty and Inequity: Is Rural-Urban Migration a Poverty Problem, or Part of the Solution?', in George Martine et al (eds), *The New Global Frontier: Urbanization, Poverty and Environment in the 21st Century*, IIED, UNFPA and Earthscan Publishing, 2008.
8. Farshad Araghi, 'Peasants and the Agrarian Question', in Fred Magdoff et al (eds), *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2000.
9. Deborah Bryceson, 'Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour Redundancy in the Neoliberal Era and Beyond', in Deborah Bryceson et al, *Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour in Latin America, Asia and Africa*, Practical Action, 2000, pp. 304-5.
10. Frances Stewart, *Adjustment and Poverty: Options and Choices*, Routledge, New York, 1995.
11. Walden Bello et al, *Dark Victory: The United States, Structural Adjustment and Global Poverty*, Pluto Press, 1998; see also www.whirledbank.org
12. UN-HABITAT, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2003: The Challenge of Slums*, Earthscan, London, chapter 3, p. 45.
13. Ibid, p. 43.
14. For example, see Richard Peet, *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO*, Zed Books, 2009, chapter 4.
15. Myanmar is a notable exception in the case of neoliberalism, while Venezuela is a noted exception in the case of structural adjustment programmes across Latin America. See Alan Gilbert, 'Extreme Thinking About Slums and Slum Dweller: A Critique', *SAIS Review* vol. XXIX no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2009), pp. 37-38.

16. According to the European Network on Debt and Development, both the World Bank and the IMF are still making heavy use of economic policy conditionality, especially in sensitive areas such as privatisation and liberalisation. For example, see EURODAD, *Untying the Knots: How the World Bank is Failing to Deliver Real Changes on Conditionality, 2007*; and Nuria Molina and Javier Pereira, *Critical Conditions: The IMF Maintains its Grip on Low-Income Governments*, April 2008, www.eurodad.org

Myth 2

1. John F.C. Turner, *Housing by People*, Marion Boyers, 1976, pp. 23-26.
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3. Sue Jones and Nici Nelson, *Urban Poverty in Africa: From understanding to alleviation*, Immediate Technology Publications, London, 1999.
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7. John Turner, 'Housing is a Verb', in John Turner and Robert Fichter (eds), *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process*, New York, 1972.
8. Rod Burgess, 'Petty commodity housing or dweller control? A critique of John Turner's views on housing policy', *World Development*, Vol 6., 1978, pp. 1105-1133.
9. Janice E. Perlman and Molly O'Meara Sheehan, *State of the World 2007: Our Urban Future*, Worldwatch Institute, November 2006, see chapter 9.
10. Kirtee Shah, 'Agenda 21 for Sustainable Construction in Developing Cities', in Luigi Fusco Girard et al (eds), *The human sustainable city: challenges and perspectives from the habitat agenda*, Ashgate Publishing, 2003, p. 291.
11. As of September 2008. See Shack/Slum Dwellers International, About Us, www.sdinet.org/about-us/ (accessed May 2010).
12. Robert Neuwirth, 'Bricks, Mortar and Mobilization', in *Ford Foundation Report*, vol.36, issue 2/3, Spring-Summer 2005, pp. 13-18.
13. 'Citizen Driven Action on Urban Poverty Reduction', *Environment & Urbanisation Brief 17*, International Institute for Environment and Development, October 2008, p2; see also David Satterthwaite, 'Editorial: The Social and Political Basis for Citizen Action on Urban Poverty Reduction', in *Environment & Urbanisation: City Governance and Citizen Action*, Vol 20 no. 2, October 2008, pp 311-313.
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16. Jockin Arputham, 'Developing new approaches for people-centred development', in *Environment & Urbanisation: City Governance and Citizen Action*, Vol 20 no. 2, October 2008, p. 336.
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18. See table 1: Examples of the savings and work programmes of the federations, in *Environment & Urbanisation Brief 17*, op cit, p. 3.
19. Somsook Boonyabancha, 'Baan Mankong: Going to Scale with "Slum" and Squatter Upgrading in Thailand', in *Environment & Urbanization*, Vol. 17 no. 1, April 2005, p. 34.
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22. Mariano Scheinsohn and Cecilia Cabrera, 'Social Movements and the Production of Housing in Buenos Aires; When Polices Are Effective', in *Environment & Urbanisation: City Governance and Citizen Action II*, Vol 21, No. 1, April 2009, pp. 119-123.

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32. Deanna Fowler et al, *Global Survey on Forced Evictions: Violations of Human Rights 2003-2006*, Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), Geneva, December 2006.

33. Ibid, pp. 5-6.

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35. Sandhya Srinivasan, 'Tsunami-Like Devastation Hits Mumbai Slum Dwellers', Inter Press Service, January 30, 2005, <http://ipsnews.net>

36. Gautam Bhan, "'This is no longer the city I once knew". Evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in millennial Delhi', in *Environment & Urbanisation: City Governance and Citizen Action II*, Vol 21, No. 1, April 2009, p. 135.

37. Ibid, p 140.

38. Sandhya Srinivasan, op cit.

39. See Sheela Patel and Jockin Arputham, 'Plans for Dharavi: negotiating a reconciliation between state-driven market redevelopment and residents' aspirations', in *Environment & Urbanisation*, Vol 20 no 1., April 2008, pp. 243-254.

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2. Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 252.
3. Ibid, pp. 258-9.
4. Ibid, p. 280.
5. UN-HABITAT, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2007: Enhancing Urban Safety and Security*, Earthscan, London, pp. 54-55.

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7. Adam Parsons, *Megaslumming: A Journey Through sub-Saharan Africa's Largest Shantytown*, Share The World's Resources, pp. 10-14.

8. Andrew Meldrum, 'A Tsunami of Demolitions', *New Internationalist*, Issue 386, January 2006.

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11. See Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, op cit, p. 25.

12. Anthony S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London*, Edward Arnold, New Jersey, 1977.

13. Alan Gilbert, 'The Return of the Slum: Does Language Matter?', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Volume 31.4, December 2007, pp. 702-703, 710.

14. For example, see Daniel Howden, 'Planet of the slums: UN warns urban populations set to double', *The Independent*, 27th June 2007; Jennifer Rowell, 'The slums in the world's teeming cities need an urgent solution', *The Guardian*, 28 March 2006.

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16. Alan Gilbert, op cit, p. 38.

17. Ibid, pp. 608-9.

18. Kerry Chance, Marie Huchzermeyer and Mark Hunter, 'Listen to the shack-dwellers: Tens of thousands of shack-dwellers in South Africa are doomed to be evicted to transit camps', *Mail and Guardian*, South Africa, 24th June 2009.

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22. Ibid, p. 41.

23. Ibid, pp. 3, 30.

24. Ibid, p. 66.

25. Ibid, pp. 61-62.

26. Ibid, p. 189.

27. Ibid, pp. 200-201.

28. See Box 1, in Somsook Boonyabancha, 'Baan Mankong: Going to Scale with "Slum" and Squatter Upgrading in Thailand', in *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 17, No. 1, April 2005, p. 41.

29. See Box 1, *ibid*, pp. 41-42.

30. Ibid, pp. 42-43.

31. Ibid, pp 38-39.

32. Adam Parsons, op cit, p. 70.

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5. cf. Rahul Goswami, 'Missing the slums for the cities', Energy Bulletin, Post Carbon Institute, 21st May 2010.
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11. For example, see Branko Milanovic, *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality*, Princeton University Press, 2005; United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2005*, New York, 2005; Robert Hunter Wade, 'Is Globalisation Reducing Poverty and Inequality?', *World Development*, vol. 32 no. 4, 2004; Ravi Kanbur, 'Economic Policy, Distribution, and Poverty: The Nature of Disagreements', *World Development*, vol. 29 no. 6, 2001.

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15. Arthur Lewis's article entitled 'Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour', published in The Manchester School in May 1954, is widely regarded as the single most influential contribution to the establishment of development economics as an academic discipline. According to the Lewis Model, there is a large 'reserve army' of labour in unlimited supply in the rural areas (i.e. the non-capitalist and 'backward' subsistence sector), which means that the industrial capitalist sector can expand in urban areas without the need to raise wages.

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18. See also Democracy Now!, 'Microcredit: Solution to Poverty or False 'Compassionate Capitalism?'. Interview with Vandana Shiva and Susan Davis of the Grameen Foundation, 13th December 2006.

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24. Patrick Barta, 'The Rise of the Underground', *Wall Street Journal*, 14th March 2009, quoted in Jan Breman, 'Myth of the Global Safety Net', *New Left Review*, No 59., September-October 2009.

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11. Cedric Pugh, 'The Role of the World Bank in Housing', in Brian Aldrich and Ranvinder Sandhu, *Housing the Urban Poor: Policy and Practice in Developing Countries*, Zed Books, 1995, p. 64.

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13. 'Sites-and-Services' schemes are the provision of plots of land (ie. sites), either on ownership or land lease tenure, along with a bare minimum of essential infrastructure needed for habitation (ie. services such as roads, water supply, drainage and electricity). In most projects, the beneficiaries were left to construct and develop the actual houses using their own and the community's resources. Although many serviced-site projects have faced considerable opposition and failure, this concept received widespread support by the World Bank and was taken up by many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A key departure from earlier housing schemes was the recognition that low-income groups are able to build their own houses, as long as appropriate support is provided by government agencies. See, for example, World Bank, *Sites and Services Projects*, Washington DC, 1974; World Bank, *Shelter*, Washington DC, 1980.

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36. Gita Verma, *Slumming India: A Chronicle of Slums and their Saviours*, Penguin, 2003, pp. 72-72.

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3. Charles J. Stokes, 'A Theory of Slums', *Land Economics*, Vol 38 no. 5, August 1962; Peter Lloyd, *Slums of Hope? Shanty towns of the Third World*, Manchester University Press, 1979.

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14. Marie Huchzermeyer, 'How to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020', op cit. Professor Alan Gilbert at University College London also notes: "If the key problem to be addressed is to improve the quality of people's housing, then a campaign entitled 'In search of better shelter' would be much more accurate and honest. Most importantly, it would represent a reasonable goal and would not convey the negative images evoked by the use of the word 'slum'. 'Better shelter' suggests a progression: that housing problems are so complicated and deep seated that they cannot easily be resolved, let alone eliminated. Improving shelter does not demand the end of 'slums', which is unachievable, but to produce better housing conditions, which is. The danger with the term 'cities without slums' is that it is just a slogan; rhetoric that carries with it an empty promise." See Alan Gilbert, op cit, p. 709.

15. See UN-HABITAT's *Strategy for the Implementation of the MDG 7, Target 11*, Nairobi, 25th November 2005.

16. Amnesty International, '*Slums: Human Rights Live Here*', Briefing Paper, May 2009; see also Irene Khan, *The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights*, Amnesty International, 2009, p. 161. Note: the forecast of 1.4 billion slum-dwellers by 2020 was made in the UN-HABITAT report *State of the World's Cities 2006/7*.

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18. *Ibid*.

19. Somsook Boonyabanha, 'Baan Mankong: Going to Scale with "Slum" and Squatter Upgrading in Thailand', op cit.

20. UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011: Bridging The Urban Divide*, Earthscan, March 2010, p. 40.

21. *The Challenge of Slums*.

22. For example, see Alex Kirby, 'Slum growth 'shames the world'', *BBC News*, 6th October 2003; John Vidal, 'Every third person will be a slum dweller within 30 years, UN agency warns: Biggest study of world's cities finds 940 million already living in squalor', *The Guardian*, 4th October 2003.

23. UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2006/7: The Millennium Development Goals and Urban Sustainability – 30 Years of Shaping the Habitat Agenda*, Earthscan, London, 2006, p. vi.

24. For example, in a statement given by Mrs Anna Tibajuka on World Habitat Day 2008, she said: "[One] historic turning point is that the number of urban slum-dwellers worldwide has broken the 1 billion mark, making it clear that the urbanization of poverty is arguably one of the biggest challenges facing development today." See UN-HABITAT, 'Statement of the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT, Mrs. Anna Tibajuka on the occasion of World Habitat Day 2008', 9th October 2008, www.unhabitat.org

25. *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011*, op cit.

26. For a short critique of the World Bank's global poverty statistics, see Adam Parsons, 'World Bank Poverty Figures: What Do They Mean?', Share The World's Resources, 15th September 2008, www.stwr.org

27. Rasna Warah, 'UN-HABITAT's Slum Estimates: Fact or Fiction?', unpublished article, 23rd April 2010.

28. In a personal communication with the Press & Media Relations Unit at UN-HABITAT in April 2010, clarification was sought on why the total number of slum-dwellers in the developing world had changed so markedly in comparison to previous statistics. A reply was promised from the chief

statistician of the Global Urban Observatory Section (GUO) under the City Monitoring Branch, but despite several further requests it was never forthcoming.

29. David Satterthwaite, *The under-estimation of urban poverty in low- and middle-income nations*, International Institute for Environment and Development, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series: Working Paper 14, April 2004.

30. According to The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010: "...in absolute terms, the number of slum dwellers in the developing world is actually growing, and will continue to rise in the near future. The progress made on the slum target has not been sufficient to offset the growth of informal settlements in the developing world... Redoubled efforts will be needed to improve the lives of the growing numbers of urban poor in cities and metropolises across the developing world." See pp. 62-3.

31. *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011: Bridging The Urban Divide*, op cit, p. 42.

32. *Squatter Citizen*, p. 301.

33. cf. *Squatter Citizen*, p. 60.

34. United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*, New York, pp. 62-3.

35. cf. UN-HABITAT, *State of the World's Cities 2006/7: The Millennium Development Goals and Urban Sustainability – 30 Years of Shaping the Habitat Agenda*, Earthscan, London, 2006.

36. Richard Lapper, 'Poor cry foul over World Cup in Durban', *Financial Times*, 7th June 2010; Jason Burke, 'Shining India' makes its poor pay price of hosting Commonwealth Games', *The Guardian*, 11th July 2010. In a report on the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, it was estimated that 100,000 families had already been evicted due to Games-related projects by June 2010, and a further 30,000-40,000 families were estimated to be displaced before the Games commenced in October. It stated: "The goal of portraying Delhi as a 'world class' city and an international sports destination, has led the Indian government – both at the state and central level – to lose sight of its priorities and legal and moral commitments to its people." See Shalini Mishra, Shivani Chaudhry and Miloon Kothari, *The 2010 Commonwealth Games: Whose Wealth? Whose Commons?*, Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), 13th June 2010.

37. cf. Eric Holt-Giménez, *The World Food Crisis: What's behind it and What we can do about it*, Food First, Policy Brief No. 16, October 2008.

38. For example, see David Woodward and Andrew Simms, *Growth Isn't Working: The Unbalanced Distribution of Benefits and Costs from Economic Growth*, New Economics Foundation, January 2006.

39. The Habitat Agenda is the main political document that came out of the Habitat II conference in Istanbul, Turkey, 3rd to 14th June 1996. Adopted by 171 countries, it contains over 100 commitments and 600 recommendations on human settlements issues. See also Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements: General Assembly resolutions 51/177 of 16 December 1996 and 53/242 of 28 July 1999.

Conclusion

1. See 'World Charter on the Right to the City', elaborated at the Social Forum of the Americas (Quito, Ecuador – July 2004) and at the World Urban Forum (Barcelona, Spain – September 2004).

2. See *Squatter Citizen*, pp. 270-274.

3. For example, see World Bank, *Housing: Enabling Markets to Work*, A World Bank Policy Paper, Washington DC, 1993; see also Vinit Mukhija, 'Enabling Slum Redevelopment in Mumbai: Policy Paradox in Practice', *Housing Studies*, 18(4): 213-222, 2001.

4. See G. Gran, *Development by People: Citizen Construction of a Just World*, Praeger, New York, 1983; David Korten, *Getting to the 21st Century*, op cit; Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990.

5. UN-HABITAT, 'Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium', General Assembly: Special Session for an Overall Review & Appraisal of the Implementation of the Habitat Agenda, New York, 6-8 June 2001.

6. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 'Food prices: smallholder farmers can be part of the solution', undated, www.ifad.org/operations/food/farmer.htm

7. Jeremy Seabrook, *Cities*, Oxfam GB publication, Pluto Press, 2007.

8. La Via Campesina, 'Declaration of Rights of Peasants – Women and Men', June 2008, <http://viacampesina.org/en/>

9. Leticia Marques Osorio, *The World Charter on the Right to the City*, Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, Paris, 2005.

10. See *Agriculture at a Crossroads – Global Report*, International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), April 2008.

11. For example, see GRAIN, 'Global agribusiness: Two Decades of Plunder', *Seedling Magazine*, July 2010, www.grain.org/seedling

12. Most researchers have found that urban protests in the developing world were against specific actions or policies, such as the IMF riots that broke out during the 1980s, and have not constituted a 'social movement' that posed a significant political challenge or sought any radical forms of change. See Alan Gilbert, *The Latin American City*, Latin American Bureau, London, 1990; also T. Evers, 'Identity: The Hidden Side of New Social Movements in Latin America', in D. Slater (ed.), *New Social Movements and the State in Latin America*, Foris Publications, Amsterdam, pp. 43-71; also Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*, Edward Arnold, London, 1983.

13. See Hilary Wainwright, *Reclaim the State: Experiments in Popular Democracy*, Seagull, 2009.

Further resources

Abahlali baseMjondolo (Shack Dwellers Movement, South Africa):
www.abahlali.org

Amnesty International 'Demand Dignity' campaign:
www.amnesty.org/en/campaigns/demand-dignity/issues/slums

Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Thailand (ACHR):
www.achr.net

Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE):
www.cohre.org

Community Organisation Resource Centre, South Africa (CORC):
www.corc.co.za

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED):
www.iied.org/human-settlements

Landless Workers Movement, Brazil: www.mstbrazil.org

La Via Campesina (International Peasant Movement):
www.viacampesina.org/en/

Megaslumming microsite, Share The World's Resources:
www.stwr.org/megaslumming

People-Centred Development Forum:
www.pcdf.org

Practical Action:
www.practicalaction.org/shelter

The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers, India (SPARC):
www.sparcindia.org

UN-HABITAT (United Nations Human Settlements Programme):
www.unhabitat.org

The seven myths of slums

Researched and written by Adam Parsons
December 2010

About Share The World's Resources

STWR advocates for governments to secure basic human needs by sharing essential resources such as water, energy and staple food.

As an NGO with Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, we work to influence policy in areas such as international trade, finance and agriculture.

Our publications provide analysis on key global justice issues, and explain how and why economic sharing can end poverty and promote international peace and security.

The website presents a selection of the latest international news, articles and videos on a wide range of critical issues including globalisation, climate change, corporate power, alternative economics and people's movements.

You can find us on Facebook and Twitter, or sign up to our newsletters.

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The Seven Myths of 'Slums'

Much may be written about informal settlements in academic books and journals, but the depiction of slums in popular movies and literature often serves to reinforce a number of long-held prejudices against the urban poor. This report sets out to unravel some of these core 'myths', and aims to give a general perspective on a range of key issues related to slums – including the impact of economic globalisation, the role of national governments, the significance of the informal sector of employment, the question of international aid, and the (little mentioned) controversy surrounding global slum data and development targets.

Although the gritty issue of slums may not register high on many people's concerns in the richest countries, it has critical implications for the future direction of world development. After several decades of relying on the market as a cure-all for the ills of the twenty-first century, the increasing number of urban residents living in slums is sufficient evidence that the 'growth-first' strategy for development isn't sustainable. In its overall message, this report argues that our only choice is to consider alternative goals and more holistic models for development that prioritise social objectives ahead of economic growth and corporate profit, with a fairer sharing of resources on the national and global level.

