Making Slums Livable

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There is growing concern with the problem of slums in the cities of the global south. Slums not only mark zones of exclusion but also compound the problems of inequality by concentrating the effects of deprivation. A vast amount of research has conclusively shown that when housing and services are of poor quality, levels of health, education and economic opportunity all decline. For decades, official policy has been to remove or prevent slums, but slums have continued to grow and in many cities of the global south are home to a majority of the city's population. An emerging consensus is that a more practical approach for policy makers is to focus on so-called *in-situ* upgrading of slums, that is, instead of removing slums, making them more livable by improving the housing quality, basic infrastructure, and delivery of basic services like water and sanitation.

Based on the record of slum rehabilitation in South Africa, Brazil and India, four big lessons can be drawn.[1] First, in our research we have found that the most immediate challenge slumdwellers face is not so much the lack of infrastructure or services but rather that they have to continuously battle to get access to anything. In New Delhi for example, services are not so much provided or withheld, as much as constantly and unpredictably negotiated for. This not only makes the urban poor highly dependent on powerful actors (political patrons, brokers) who can mediate with local service agencies but also comes with perverse opportunity costs. For example, in most of the slums of Delhi, women (and most often girls who are being kept out of school) must wait long hours for tanker trucks to come deliver water at random hours. An obvious solution here is building a piped water system, but if political or fiscal conditions don't permit this, some simple organizational solutions can make a huge difference. In this instance, a basic coordination of delivery schedules would make a huge difference to people's lives.

Second, if coordination is the key to improving service delivery in slums, then having officials permanently present in the slum can make a big difference. Delivery of various services is almost universally driven by vertically organized "line" departments. These departments are usually highly centralized with offices far from the communities they serve and limited information about conditions on the ground, including the "capture" of the services they deliver. In Delhi, slum residents can go months without seeing a government official, and tanker trucks and other services are often under the control of local brokers more interested in collecting rents than delivering public goods. In contrast, in Durban South Africa one of the most studied cases of successful slum redevelopment was based on a model known as "area-based management" which

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1 For Brazil and South Africa see Patrick Heller, "Democracy, Participatory Politics and Development: Some Comparative Lessons from Brazil, India and South Africa," *Polity*, 44, 643-665. For India see "Cities of Delhi" at http://citiesofdelhi.cprindia.org/

called for having a local office co-ordinate line-department services in the community. Not only was the local office much better at making sure that, for example, when a local school (the education department) was built it actually had a water connection (the water department), it also made it much easier for officials to work with the community in solving co-ordination problems.

Third, intervening in densely packed slums requires working closely with communities. Of course, community participation has now become the basic mantra of the development community and is baked into government policy documents. But more often than not (Brazil being an important exception), officials treat participation as an inconvenience and reduce it to little more than a once-off meeting with the community. Time and again we have heard officials refer to participation as "noise" or as something that is "beyond our bandwidth." But if communities don't have a part in designing projects, especially in-situ upgrades, they rarely succeed. In Delhi, community toilets installed by various government agencies invariably fall into disrepair because communities or local state actors are never authorized or resourced to maintain the facilities. Service delivery projects in South African townships have been wracked by often violent conflict largely because communities resent the heavy handed manner in which politicians and officials have imposed projects from above. When projects are not painstakingly negotiated with communities, the implementation almost always triggers resistance. To ensure that policy commitments to involving the community actually work it is critical to get the right personnel. In Delhi, in situ upgrades are managed by engineers. But engineers, by their own admission, do not have the basic skills to work with communities. Here, the key to success is front-line workers who have the right skill set (such as a background in the social sciences or social work) and are actually commited to working closely with communities. This in turn requires having sufficient on-the-ground authority to co-produce solutions with communities.

And this leads to a final lesson: there are no blueprints. The city of Delhi has launched repeated drives to upgrade slums, has conducted countless surveys of eligible households, budgeted enormous sums and produced reams of reports and evaluations, but virtually all slum upgrade projects have failed because they never invest in the processes that are required to get the job done.   Yes, it's important to have basic goals—in this case a certain technically feasible level of upgrading in a crowded slum—but how that goal is achieved will have to be precisely tailored to local conditions. The solution, in other words will have to be to a large degree bootstrapped, worked out through iterated cylces of learning and feedback. And if slum upgradation is by definition complex and requires working closely and continuously with communities, then the measure of success in the short and medium turn should be processes, not "hard" outputs.

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