The Seven Myths of 'Slums'

by Adam Parsons

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Conventional thinking on development issues is often characterised by many assumptions, clichés and rationalisations about the residents of slums. In challenging some of these core myths, we can focus on the structural causes of urban poverty that result in the rapid growth of informal settlements, writes Adam Parsons.

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 number of slum-dwellers worldwide is expected to continually increase in the decades ahead.

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 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. Much may be written about informal settlements in academic books and journals, but the depiction of slums in popular movies and literature also 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 or 'myths' about the solutions to inadequate housing.

As popularised by many publications in recent decades that highlight the common misconceptions about global poverty, 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. The following 'myths' about slums aim 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.

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 a more 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 and 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 and misguided response to those who live in poor urban communities.

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 rapidly industrialising city like Mumbai or Chang Hai. If not, our only choice is to consider alternative goals and more holistic models of 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 residents living in slums is sufficient evidence that the 'growth-first' strategy for development isn't sustainable. Employing market forces as the arbiter of resource distribution is socially exclusive, not inclusive, 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 also 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 'world class city' 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 the goals and priorities of the major donor countries 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 development model that sustains them must be wholly reformed and reimagined. In the widest sense, a world without slums and urban poverty cannot be realised without a transformation of our existing political, economic and social structures. 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". 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.

Adam Parsons is the editor at Share The World's Resources. He can be contacted at adam@stwr.org.

This article is drawn from the report: The Seven Myths of 'Slums' - Challenging Popular Prejudices About the World's Urban Poor