

**Forum:** UN Habitat

**Issue:** Improving living conditions in urban slums

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## Introduction

Hidden within thriving metropolises, urban slums provide shelter to impoverished individuals who are unable to afford lives inside urban areas. These slum dwellers typically tap on the cities' water pipelines, electrical wires, and many more to survive. Yet, as diseases like malnutrition, measles, malaria, and dengue continue to encroach upon the health of these people, their lives are completely unsustainable.

So far, this global housing crisis has rendered 12.5% of the worldwide population in slums with the majority being in urban regions of developing nations. Even though these poorly built residents do serve as basic shelters, they are still highly vulnerable to natural disasters and are typically overcrowded. Furthermore, slum dwellers are often stripped of their land tenure, or their rights to control their land, which further demonstrates the conspicuous risks of living in slums.

Right now, the UN Habitat Program is the leading advocate for increasing the quality of life within urban slums. It has declared slum upgrading as one of its first priorities given that slums all over the world are still expanding. Thus, it is up to the delegates within this powerful driving force to eradicate poor living conditions in urban slums.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Slums

According to the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN Habitat), slums are any sort of household that guarantee minimum requisites to survival but are not capable of providing any of the following:

- Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions
- Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room
- Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price

- Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people
- Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions

## **Slum dwellers**

Residents (permanent and temporary) of slums

## **United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN Habitat)**

Founded in 1978 via General Assembly Resolution 3327 (XXIX), the UN Habitat program serves to more effectively manage human migration and settlement as well as grant people sustainable, adequate shelter. It mainly tackles the 11th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which aims for the development and consolidation of sustainable cities and communities.

## **Background Information**

### **Causes of urban slums**

There is no clear answer to the origin of urban slums. It is only safe to assume that their emergence was gradual as the world became more industrialized and life began to revolve around urban areas more than rural areas. Even so, many theorists and UN researchers have come up with many demographic, political, environmental, economic, and social factors that might have contributed to the development of urban slums.

### **Rapid urbanization**

Many theorize that the leading cause is the rapid urbanization in developing nations that were unprepared for such dramatic social changes during the 20th century, when a surge of rural people flooded into newly founded cities, seeking job opportunities and more prosperous lives. However, these governments simply could not meet the demand for more sustainable housing in urban cities and failed to incorporate these migrants into urban planning. This inability became a handicap for the governments and spiraled way beyond their control as the migrants without places to live began to construct their own shacks around the peripheries of major cities, leading to an immense boom of urban slums. It should also be noted that governments are not always at fault when facing rapid urbanization because worldwide population is still growing exponentially and interminably while there is only a finite amount of space available for migrants to occupy.

### **Poor governance**

Some governments are unwilling to provide financial and humanitarian aid to urban slums since they believe such actions will actually serve as a benefit that may attract more poorer rural citizens to reside in urban slums. As long as this mindset is still intact within the thought process of governmental officials and intergovernmental organizations, living conditions in urban slums can barely be improved. Governments also consider slum dwellers as individuals who live off of the nations' resources without contributing back to the society. In other words, since it has already been firmly established and internationally recognized that people need to consume and produce simultaneously in order for an economy to function effectively while slum dwellers are simply incompatible with this formula, governments worldwide have found such an excuse to not upgrade urban slums. They believe that slum dwellers are, in essence, the parasites of society. Thus, many efforts dedicated towards solving this issue have been halted.

Governments have also failed to implement functional, adequate infrastructure in rural areas, which leads to a massive disparity of the living qualities between urban and rural regions and then encouraging a greater influx of rural citizens into such urban regions. As already mentioned above, governments are unable to accommodate basic housing for all the migrants, thus the formation of urban slums.

To make matters even worse, institutional corruption within governments have further hindered the international community's efforts to solve this issue. For instance, it has been reported that officials in India forced slum dwellers to pay for the documents they lacked. The Indian government has attempted to order housing provisions, but officials have repeatedly delayed such actions, rendering any efforts obsolete. Most importantly, the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals that Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) are a lot more susceptible to corruption, and it is within such LEDCs that urban slums tend to be more ubiquitous, thus further lowering the chances for these slum dwellers to receive better living conditions. Even in an ideal circumstance where a government is not corrupted, lack of sufficient financial resources is still a problem that cannot be omitted because governments are unable to allocate funds for the construction of newer, more sustainable housing to cope with the influx of people into urban areas. Combined with the absence of intergovernmental coordination, slum dwellers remain desperate for better lives.

### **The current state of urban slums**

Slums can be found in almost any city, and the slum population continues to swell. On average, during the last decade, people living in urban slums increased by roughly six million every year. The UN Habitat also estimated that from 2010 to 2020, this number will increase by 500 million or even more. The growth of slums tends to be more palpable in developing countries or regions, most especially in

Southeast Asia, Africa, South America, and Mesoamerica. Here are some of the world's largest and most extensive urban slums:

### **Kibera Slum (Nairobi, Kenya)**

This slum currently houses roughly 200,000 dwellers within shelters that are typically assembled by mud walls and recycled tin ceilings. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) devoted for the cause have already installed electricity in 20% of the houses there, but water shortages remain a troublesome issue due to the fact that wealthier Nairobians have imposed huge sums of unofficial "taxes" on drinkable water for the slum dwellers while the Kenyan government largely ignored this. Yet, starting from 2015, the Kenyan government began to erect permanent houses in the slum and installed new, functional pipelines that granted the residents clean sanitation. The government also offered jobs that involved cheap unskilled labor within Nairobi, allowing the residents to gradually become more self-sufficient. Since then, unemployment rates have plummeted.

### **Rocinha Favela (Rio De Janeiro, Brazil)**

Home to about 70,000 impoverished individuals, the Rocinha Favela stands as the largest urban slum in Brazil. The unfortunate topographic location of Rocinha Favela renders it prone to landslides and floods. Unlike most urban slums, this one grants proper sanitation to most households and electricity to some. Yet, drug trafficking, human trafficking, slum violence, and other forms of serious crime still pose a threat to the general welfare of the residents in Rocinha Favela.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

### **UN Habitat**

The UN Habitat is one of the most prominent organizations seeking to significantly upgrade housing in urban slums. It provides advice to governments on how legislation regarding housing and other pertaining infrastructure can be reformed. In the last ten years, a myriad of countries have already accepted various solutions offered by the UN Habitat and have chosen to implement them, such as the Housing Profile Tool, which helps the governments analyze and better understand factors that inhibit access to adequate housing. Moreover, the UN Habitat has launched a framework called the Global Housing Strategy (GHS), which is a collaborative goal to help the governments realize the significance of granting all citizens the rights of basic housing, including basic necessities and durable shelters. The strategy puts emphasis on establishing national housing strategies for all nations that direct policies

about the management of housing, slum upgrading, and the removal of slums. According to the UN Habitat, the strategy, if carried out successfully, can facilitate:

- a paradigm shift in thinking and practice in housing policy
- a contribution to the post-2015 sustainable development goals
- the promotion of systemic reforms to enable wider access to adequate housing with variety of housing solutions matching effective demands
- strengthened linkages between housing and other parts of the economy
- the decentralization of housing production
- the increased use of sustainable building and neighborhood designs and technologies towards more cost-effective, flexible and energy-efficient solutions

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1812	Author James Hardy Vaux coined the term “slums” in his <i>A New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of the Flash Language</i>
1889	English sociologist Charles Booth provided the modern definition of slums, which described areas encompassing overpopulation, the spread of diseases, the shortage of food, and so on
1910-1920	The Kibera Slum was founded in Nairobi, Kenya
1978	Formation of the UN Habitat Committee
2003	The UN Habitat published its <i>The Challenge of Slums</i> report, which is one of the first systematic analyses on various data regarding slums
May 23rd, 2007	The estimated date for the “Urban Millenium”, which was when the urban population finally exceeded than the rural population worldwide

2011-2012	The GHS was launched by UN Habitat
2012	About a third of the world's urban population lived in slums

## Relevant UN Resolutions and Treaties

The United Nations founded a body known as the UN Habitat to streamline human migration into urban areas and ensure noticeable betterment of the migrants' livelihood in the cities. Via the research and studies conducted by the UN Habitat, the UN paved the way for a path of slum upgrading.

- Resolution 66/207, 14 March 2012 (**A/RES/66/207**)
- State of the World's Cities (published by the UN Habitat in annually)
- New Urban Agenda, 23 December 2016 (**A/RES/71/256**)
- Slum Almanac (published by the UN Habitat in 2016)
- The Challenge of Slums (published by the UN Habitat in 2003)

## Possible Solutions

**Collaborate and promote models for adequate houses that can survive different kinds of natural disasters in their respective countries.** When attempting to solve this issue, implementing more durable, concrete structures that are more resilient towards natural disasters is an important factor to consider. This can systemize and streamline the mass-construction of sustainable shelter and greatly enhance the general welfare of slum dwellers.

**Governments can encourage investment in small and/or medium scale industries that offer more jobs to impoverished urban individuals.** Another solution to this issue is to create more opportunities for slum dwellers to generate sufficient income as an effective way to better integrate these dwellers into the urban economy. Yet, this can only occur if the middle and upper classes in urban areas accept the slum dwellers and are willing to provide jobs, which comes with great difficulty because they tend to believe that slum dwellers are claiming jobs from them.

**Last but not least, the international community can call for the establishment of a framework under the UN that promotes the installation of adequate infrastructure around urban slums that guarantee steady supplies of water, food, and medical aid when needed.**

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