ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES
The Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Future We Want for All
Global Thematic Consultation

Urban Inequalities
Sheridan Bartlett, Diana Mitlin, David Satterthwaite

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Introduction
Urban dwellers in low- and middle-income nations are on average better off than those in rural areas – healthier, better educated, better housed, with more livelihood opportunities. This rural-urban distinction has encouraged a focus on rural poverty as the most compelling development concern. But it can be a misleading dichotomy. Not only does it ignore the vital links between rural and urban and the complex continuum that they occupy; it also hides considerable inequalities within these categories. This is especially the case where urban averages are concerned. Cities are home to the wealthiest people and to some of the most excluded and deprived. There can be stark disparities in urban incomes, assets, levels of provision, political influence and social status that often exceed any gap between rural and urban averages. The reassessment of objectives within post-2015 debates is a chance to recognize these disparities and the associated injustices as integral to addressing our commitment to a better world.

Urban inequalities are also masked by standards and definitions that fail to take account of urban realities. National poverty lines often disregard the higher cost of living in most cities and what it means to be tied to a cash economy. These inequalities really matter where every basic need has to be paid for or otherwise negotiated. Applying global standards for the provision of sanitation and water can also be misleading in densely populated settlements, communicating a level of adequacy that is not warranted. Understanding the causes, nature and extent of urban inequalities is critical, not only because it calls attention to severe and increasing deprivation in many urban areas, but also because of the ramifications of these disparities for economic growth, for peace and security, for the health and well being of all citizens, rich and poor, urban and rural.

A detailed, comprehensive understanding of urban inequalities is impossible at present because of serious data limitations. Census data, where it exists, is generally published at a high level of aggregation, and in many countries, does not even include informal settlements, whose residents remain unrecognized and uncounted. Other externally supported surveys and assessments (for example DHS, MICS, PRSPs) use representative samples that are too small to allow a detailed look at inequalities within cities; in addition to under-sampling those living in informal settlements, they may also ignore the street homeless. Only large categories can be derived – like urban versus rural – and many equally important inequalities are not captured.

The connections between poverty, economic growth and inequality
Cities are drivers of economic growth. Concentrations of people and investment, high levels of exchange, economies of scale and proximity, can all contribute to vitality and development. But the benefits are seldom equally shared. As economies grow, societies generally become more stratified and hierarchical. The more stratified they are, the easier it is for those with higher incomes and more power to make self-interested decisions that pass on any costs associated with their advantages, penalizing those at the bottom of the ladder. As the gap grows, it becomes easier for the rich to distance themselves from the poor. In the absence of pro-poor policies, economic growth, inequality and continued levels of absolute poverty can easily co-exist.

Inequalities are not exclusive to urban areas. Landless labourers within systems of plantation agriculture, for example, can be at the adverse end of large income inequalities. Nor are all
urban areas the same in this regard – inequalities in living conditions within a provincial town are very different from those in a megacity. But generally speaking, the evidence indicates that inequalities are more extreme within cities than elsewhere.5

These inequalities are reflected in the mortality and stunting rates of young children, unambiguous indicators that manifest deprivation on multiple fronts. Young children’s survival and nutritional status are related to the income needed to purchase food and access healthcare, but they are also tied to the provision of water and sanitation, to the quality of housing, to maternal education, to entitlements like ration cards and to the political inequities that can underlie all of these things. A 2002 Kenyan study revealed the scale of the urban disparities in survival for under-five children, demonstrating that inequalities within Nairobi far exceeded the difference between average rural and urban rates (Figure 1).6 Mortality rates were about 20 times higher in the worst performing individual settlements than in the best.

Figure 1: Child mortality rates, Kenya (Deaths per 1000 births)


Other studies looking at stunting rates for young children also find large disparities in urban areas. Menon et al., analyzing DHS data from 11 countries, found intra-urban differentials far higher than those in rural areas, with the lowest-income quintile of urban children on a par with lowest-income rural children. Some analyses show that the high rate of child malnutrition is increasingly an urban problem in many countries in both relative and absolute terms.8

In most high- and middle-income nations over the last 100 to 150 years, life-threatening deprivations for the urban poor, expressed in simple terms through these child indicators, have been reduced or removed even as inequalities in income and wealth have increased. In much of Latin America and in parts of Asia, there has been progress in reducing inequalities in the provision of basic services, as a growing proportion of the urban population has gained access to water, sanitation, schools and health care. But in most of the world’s urban centres, large inequalities in income and wealth remain and are matched by serious deprivation on other fronts.

These inequalities do not always occur symmetrically across different dimensions.9 Some cities with greater equity in the provision of basic services remain among the most unequal in terms of income – Cape Town, Johannesburg, Sao Paulo, Curitiba as well as major US cities are
examples. Other cities with less income disparity, like Dar es Salaam or Addis Ababa, still have significant gaps in such provision. But in general, inequalities in different domains are strongly correlated and mutually reinforcing.

**Economic inequalities**
The vast majority of urban incomes depend on wages or on the trade of goods and services. The structure of the labour market and the distribution of well and poorly paid jobs is critical here. As the demand for skilled workers grows, these more highly trained urban residents find more opportunity and higher returns, and very often inequality grows. In the absence of strong redistributive policies, labour markets reward those at the top and even in the context of economic growth the incomes of the “unskilled” or exploited remain inadequate and may even become worse.  

The informal sector plays a significant role. Indeed, rather than a “sector”, Roy argues that it can be seen as a mode of urbanization, a set of transactions linking economies and spaces that drives urban expansion.  

Agarwala noted in 2006 that the informal economy accounted for 82 percent of India’s urban labour force, half of it self-employed, half the employees of informal entrepreneurs. Bolivia, Honduras, India, Madagascar, Mali, Paraguay, Peru, Zambia are all examples of countries where more than 70 per cent of non-agricultural employment is in the informal sector.

Although the informal economy can be seen as a set of vital, resourceful responses to exclusion from the formal realm, it is seldom the means for upward mobility. In fact, although it may enable survival, it generally maintains and increases inequalities. Informal sector work is most often badly paid, irregular and unpredictable. Events like the global recession can have significant impacts: a 2009 study interviewing vendors, waste pickers and home based workers from 10 countries found they were working longer hours, earning less, and making serious cuts in their spending for food and healthcare. For those running their own enterprises, potential for expansion is limited by low capital investment and modest returns. Informal work offers no systematic protections or benefits and there is a lot of room for exploitation. The insecurity can mean that workers employed in the informal sector are reluctant to make demands. Informal workers are subject to harassment and extortion by police and authorities. Conticini describes the considerable bribes paid by some children, girls especially, living on the streets in Dhaka, in order to be allowed to do their work – 50 to 60 percent of earnings for girls, 30 to 50 percent for boys. Some informal work poses health risks which jeopardize longer term security. A study of Dhaka rickshaw pullers found that, far from promoting upward mobility, this initially rewarding occupation left pullers with serious health problems, a diminishing capacity to work and declining household fortunes. The children of these first-generation migrants from rural areas tended to have less education than the children of families who remained behind in villages.

The lack of reliable income underpins other inequalities, making it difficult to invest in assets that could enhance survival and increase opportunity, like children’s education. In a cash economy, choices about housing and its location are limited. Transport costs may limit livelihood options. Healthcare may be out of reach. Households dependent on informal and badly-paid formal work can become trapped in downward spirals. Child malnutrition, again, is an informative indicator, and rates rise when fluctuating incomes cause households to cut corners on food expenditures. In 2007 and 2008, the rapid increase in food prices was found to have particularly significant impacts for low-income urban households, driving them deeper into
chronic poverty. These income inequalities spawn more extensive social problems too. Fajnzylber and colleagues note, for instance, that an increase in income inequalities (rather than urbanization per se) tends to have a robust effect on the rate of violent crime.

**Spatial inequalities**

Urban inequalities are also expressed through highly stratified spatial realities, structured both by the market and by government. There can be stark contrasts in urban housing quality, density and levels of provision, with significant implications for health and the quality of life. Pavement dwellers in Mumbai, for instance, have less than a square metre of space per person, with no proper access to water and sanitation, while their wealthier neighbours enjoy all the amenities in sometimes lavish apartments. Even highly successful cities like Mumbai fail to provide adequate housing options for the low-income citizens who are essential to their functioning.

In most cities, informal or illegal settlements house a large proportion of the population, often on a small fraction of the available land. These settlements range from congested central slum neighbourhoods to more peripheral land sites, often in inhospitable and dangerous areas such as flood plains or industrial waste zones. In most cities in the South, between 20 and 70 percent of the population lives in housing that fails to meet basic building standards. The quality of shelter for the poorest can be truly wretched, often little more than plastic sheeting or cardboard. Even undesirable locations do not protect illegal squatters from possibility of eviction, sometimes repeated evictions – a risk that discourages investment in housing and neighbourhood, adds considerably to stress levels, and deepens poverty and inequality.

Official UN statistics show that the great majority of urban dwellers in low and middle income countries have access to “improved” provision for water and sanitation. This category covers enormous inequalities in access however. “Improved” does not necessarily mean convenient or adequate for health. It can mean regular, piped water supplies direct to a home; but it can also mean a long walk to a waterpoint that functions only some of the time, and that always has long lines. Inequalities in provision exacerbate income problems. Many people who purchase water from vendors because of a lack of provision may be paying many times more per unit than middle class residents pay for their piped supplies.

Especially where density is high, the sanitation situation can be dire. Residents may be served at best by filthy rundown public toilet blocks at a distance. The use of plastic bags or “flying toilets” is the default solution in many settlements, especially for women and girls. Concentrations of people mean concentrations of waste, and in the absence of provision for waste collection, accumulations of uncollected garbage of all kinds can fill any vacant space, fouling the surroundings, blocking drains where they exist, contributing to flooding and disease. Urban slums can be demoralizing and even life-threatening environments – under-five mortality rates for urban children are more highly correlated to their access to water and sewerage connections than they are to either poverty lines or the availability of health services. Inequalities in urban health are extreme, not only for young children but across the board, and urban slum dwellers can face health risks well in excess of those experienced even by low-income households in rural areas.

In growing numbers of cities, wealthier residents choose to separate themselves from these environments of poverty and to live in gated communities and enclosed neighbourhoods,
surrounded by private security systems. These hard spatial boundaries concentrate privilege and reinforce inequalities, fragmenting the city and undermining any sense of solidarity among urban dwellers. Rodgers describes the network of high speed roads in Managua, Nicaragua, that connect the comfortable residential, commercial and leisure worlds of the rich, while the remainder of the city crumbles into neglected, unpolicing slums. Similar situations have been described in cities around the world. Researchers have long hypothesized that these kinds of spatial divisions fuel frustration and contribute to high levels of violence and insecurity, as illegal activities and markets become more concentrated in low-income areas. The situation there is exacerbated by the lower levels of police protection that tend to go hand in hand with an absence of provision on every other front. The trend towards the beautification of city centres, along with necessary infrastructure improvements, also pushes low-income households and traders out of city centres to the periphery, contributing to the creation of increasingly segregated urban space.

A further aspect of spatial inequality is the risk posed by climate change, which especially penalizes those living in such hazardous locations as flood plains, steep hillsides, low-lying coastal areas and settlements without proper roads, drainage, waste removal or flood protection. Hundreds of millions of low-income residents are driven further into poverty by their incapacity to cope effectively with the weather-related disasters and hardships that are increasingly common in many urban areas around the world.

**Social status**

Inequalities in social status can be driven by gender, age, ethnic identity, disability and other factors. But in urban areas, residency in low-income settlements can itself be a potent instrument of social exclusion. Regardless of how visibly deprived they are, residents of illegal settlements are often for all practical purposes invisible people, the ultimate in low social status. Their settlements appear on no maps, and they have no formal identity. The white SUVs of international agencies drive by them on their way to meetings about rural poverty. The lack of a legal address may mean no access to public entitlements like schools and health clinics, no emergency services, no police protection, little or no provision for basic infrastructure.

This social exclusion has implications beyond the lack of provision. In Rio de Janeiro, even with the same educational background, favela residents can be paid wages 40 percent less than those from other parts of the city, and many people are afraid of giving their addresses during job interviews. From Rio to Shanghai and beyond, assumptions are freely made about connections between poverty, dirt and moral delinquency, and this can justify everything from eviction and spatial segregation to the exclusion of people from work and children from school. These associations can be internalized as well, with far reaching consequences. Dealing with defecation in the absence of provision, for instance, can be stressful, time consuming and even dangerous, but especially for girls and women it is also a source of humiliation. Older children living in informal settlements are often inclined to see the deficiencies of their settlements as personally degrading and a reflection of their own questionable social worth. Swart Kruger describes the reluctance of young residents of a squatter camp in Johannesburg to use local parks and other amenities because of the disgust that they felt was directed towards them. Their very identity as residents of this stigmatized plot of land, to which they were relegated by the actions of others, became an effective mechanism of exclusion.
Social exclusion is increasingly viewed as a catalyst of violence. In most urban areas, as noted, the gradient of violence and insecurity disproportionately affects low-income neighbourhoods. It is generally recognized, however, that it is not just poverty per se but the inherently stressful nature of exclusion and low social status that contributes to this phenomenon. Unequal exposure to fear and victimization, and the unequal means to cope, contribute further to stress levels and to the mutually reinforcing layers of disparity that characterize so many urban areas. In Nairobi’s informal settlements, for instance, where most people walk several minutes to reach public latrines, women and girls say it is unthinkable to use latrines at night because of the danger of rape. In low-income settlements in Guatemala City, other than going out for school or work, young people say they spend almost no time away from home. In the context of pervasive gang activity, their only options are “avoidance, compliance or engagement.” For those who opt to join gangs, Winton’s analysis suggests that this is a “manifestation of young people’s need to feel part of a group in situations of multiple exclusion and the absence of alternatives.”

Political exclusion and inequalities

Living in a settlement with no legal address can mean exclusion from voting registers, and the lowest-income households typically have little or no political voice or formal representation. But political inequality means more than exclusion from formal participation in the political process. Even when people do have the vote, it can be controlled through vertical relationships that trade access to benefits from those in power in return for electoral mobilization. Political dependence is central to patterns of urban inequality, and differentials in power, influence and access help to reinforce disparities on many fronts.

The scarce supply of shelter and basic services in many urban areas can result in clientelist relationships through which more powerful, well-connected players control access to many of the basic necessities. Political influence can pay off handsomely. In Nairobi, where most residents in informal settlements are tenants, 41 percent of landlords were found to be government officials and 16 percent were politicians. Most were absentee landlords with little interest in improving conditions for their tenants; many ran lucrative businesses on the side selling water and access to toilet blocks. In Karachi too, municipal officials provide private water tankers with access to public water supplies which are then sold at much higher prices, to their mutual benefit. Infrastructure investments and land policies are generally political decisions which hinge less on the needs of residents than the interests of the political elite. The inequities experienced by the urban poor are reflected in the private gains of the wealthy, and gaps are perpetuated.

There are distinct hierarchies of influence and control even within low-income settlements. Hossain describes how this plays out within an informal bosti in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where a handful of politically well-connected residents maintains total control over rents and informal access to utilities, and even manages local conflict resolution. A separate group corners the benefits of poverty reduction programmes. NGOs implementing development projects operate through local committees, in keeping with donor requirements; but most bosti residents, struggling to survive and earn a living, have no time for this involvement. A few relatively well-off residents are always the “community representatives” for these projects; they help define needs in terms of their own priorities and end up being the primary beneficiaries or controlling access to benefits. As long as the bosti remains illegal, argues Hossain, there will be little scope for most residents to have any control over the closed and discriminatory systems that run the
settlement. Banks also describes how these local *bosti* leaders demand free goods and services from those with informal enterprises in Dhaka, reducing scarce income and jeopardizing the viability of the business.

**Strategies for responding**
The reasons for urban inequalities are clear but they aren’t inevitable. Where there is political will, there is considerable scope for countering the trend towards a destructive divide. Offsetting rising inequalities is most commonly discussed in terms of fiscal redistribution through various government strategies and investments, be they taxes, subsidies or transfers. Hurtado argues, for instance, that redistribution on the part of the state can help mitigate the effects of the labour market. Cash transfers are also recognized for their capacity to support virtuous cycles that can lift families out of chronic poverty.

Still under-explored is the potential of community cash transfers, which arguably can expand the capacity of urban residents to invest in critical shared goods, building social capital as part of the process.

Successful as fiscal redistribution of various kinds can be in certain situations, an important reason for considering strategies that reduce other dimensions of inequality is the relatively limited scope that governments have for influencing labour markets to benefit those at the bottom. There is certainly the potential to limit the costs of informal employment through less repressive regulation, acknowledging the dependence of the formal on the informal in many cities, and enhancing savings and borrowing opportunities. But simply formalizing the informal is not the same as creating work or restructuring an inherently discriminatory system, and such measures often exclude the most disadvantaged. In general, experience has shown the difficulties of fiscal redistribution at scale: the rich can avoid paying taxes, and the poorest may not benefit from bureaucratized safety nets. Governments, along with international agencies and civil society organizations, generally have greater potential to come at inequality from other directions—for instance, by addressing issues around secure tenure, the quality of housing and access to basic services, reducing discrimination and stigmatization along the way.

These kinds of initiatives have been effectively undertaken by national governments in many cases. Thailand’s significant slum upgrading programme, Baan Mankong, supported by a national agency, is an especially good example. Working with and through local communities, the programme has done a great deal to reduce inequalities in housing conditions, infrastructure and services for tens of thousands of urban households. But national schemes are not uniformly successful. South Africa’s housing policy is a case in point. The scale of funding has been considerable, but has resulted in many poorly planned housing schemes that do little to address the needs of the target population—the housing backlog is now larger than in 1994.

Local government is most often the official level through which inequities in services and provision are addressed. In Rosario, Argentina, for example, past and present mayors have reduced inequalities in the city through much improved health care and other service provision and accountability, despite belonging to a party that was not in power nationally. Progress in many cities has demonstrated the extent to which political will can improve conditions, even in the absence of copious resources. Upgrading alone, however, is seldom sufficient in the absence of social inclusion and political clout. One of the more crucial roles for local governments is their capacity to allow more space and influence for those suffering from these inequalities, working in partnership with the urban poor. An important example is participatory budgeting, instituted by hundreds of local governments, especially in Latin America, as a way to
allow local neighbourhood residents the chance to influence the city’s budget and investment priorities.45

Citizens in the Global North struggled for many decades for democratization with effective and accountable states.46 Central to progress were strong urban social movements able to mobilize and pressure the state for change. In Brazil, it was federations of residents’ associations in Porto Alegre, pushing for innovations in municipal practices, that enabled their interests to be advanced, whatever the interests of politicians.47 And across towns and cities in the Global South networks and federations of the urban poor – slum dwellers, waste pickers, vendors and others – have been articulating a new more inclusive vision of urban development.

Some of the best documented work of collective practice has been that of organizations and federations belonging to Slum/Shack Dwellers International, now active in countries across Asia, Africa and more recently Latin America.48 These federations, working now in almost 400 cities, are made up of locally-based women-led savings schemes that come together to negotiate with their governments. Together they have upgraded homes and settlements and negotiated for improved water and sanitation provision, often using models they have developed and tested first as precedents. Many have completed city-wide surveys of informal settlements and their residents, creating the basis for dialogue with local governments over planning for upgrading and resettlement where necessary. One of their most meaningful accomplishments has been the extent to which they have been able to negotiate secure tenure, the bedrock on which so much else depends. When households and communities have tenure, they are in a better position to negotiate around other basic dimensions of inequality like water and sanitation, education for their children and police protection. The benefits can be cumulative and mutually reinforcing. Perhaps the most critical benefit is the political voice that is gained in the process. Learning how to join together to negotiate with those in power can have profound implications. Arjun Appadurai refers to “the politics of shit”, explaining that when the poor themselves discuss their sanitation needs and solutions with World Bank officials, they become political actors rather than victims – in this case crossing the divide between the local and the transnational.49

The kinds of changes made by these federations, by the Baan Mankong programme, by committed mayors, can have fundamental and far-reaching implications for urban society as a whole. When slums are upgraded and become integrated into the urban fabric, when basic service provision becomes universal and foul smells and piles of waste are no longer markers for the otherness of poverty, when rich and poor residential areas are side by side, sharing public space and schools, sidewalks and transport systems, it sets other processes in motion as well. In Medellin, Colombia, an assertive effort under mayor Sergio Fajardo to integrate marginalized communities into the city involved pathways, bridges, stairs, cable cars, effective transport, parks and plazas, soccer fields and a network of ambitious library parks, as well as investments in neighbourhood infrastructure. The murder rate is reportedly 15 percent of what it was during the heyday of the city’s violence.50 Research indicates that the decline in homicides was 66 percent greater in intervention neighbourhoods than elsewhere.51

**Conclusion**

Urban inequalities are laid out on continuum of formality and informality, legality and illegality. Within the unequal urban playing field, informal solutions to life’s needs are fundamental to the survival of the urban poor. But at the same time these solutions can perpetuate and even
deepen the degree of inequality in a number of domains. The forms and extent of informality, whether in housing, land or livelihoods, are constrained and controlled by powerful interests which allow some things and disallow others to further the kind of urban development that concentrates benefits at the top. There are many proven alternatives that help to distribute the benefits of urban potential more equitably. But the most effective of these for addressing the spectrum of inequalities are the approaches that allow space for marginalized urban dwellers to play a primary role in crafting the solutions that work for them, in ways that do not exclude the most disadvantaged.

As global institutions and official development assistance agencies reflect on what should follow the Millennium Development Goals, this is an opportunity to ground an urban vision in some basic principles that could significantly alter the expanding landscape of urban inequality.

1. **Inclusive goals:** Targets that set out to reach some percentage of those in sore need – be it half of those in hunger, or ten percent of slum residents – are based on pragmatic considerations. But they also reveal an astonishing acceptance of the need to decide who will be left out. Partial targets often end up entrenching inequalities. Nations understandably go for the low-hanging fruit in the effort to demonstrate success. Those who are left out are generally those most in need, hardest to reach. As the significance of inequality is documented and discussed among governments and donors, surely a critical first step is an acceptance of the moral imperative to include everyone in the goods and services that address basic needs - safe and sufficient water, sanitation and drainage, education, health care and emergency services. Goals may not be reached everywhere – but surely they should reflect a global aspiration for inclusive, universal access.

2. **Inclusive strategies for inclusive cities:** MDG targets have been about ends not means. There has been considerable discussion about whether the “how” is important here, or whether it should be left to the discretion of those who implement. But within the context of a global agenda that primarily acknowledges national partners, it is only practical to recognize the centrality of collective action by grassroots organizations and of the local governments who have statutory responsibility for meeting most of their basic needs. The task, simply put, is not only to install a water pipe. It is to ensure that people can afford the water, that the pipe is maintained, that it serves everyone and does not end up being controlled by a powerful elite. Those who shoulder the burden and live with the consequences should be included in developing the priorities and the strategies for inclusive implementation. Our global agenda needs to acknowledge our interdependencies, to nurture our collective capacity to address multiple needs.

3. **Inclusive assessment:** Progress towards global goals and targets, or the local translation of these targets, is generally represented by the use of averages. Especially where there are large disparities, as in urban areas, these averages can be a significant misrepresentation of the situation of those most in need. In a world committed to addressing inequalities, assessments of progress must also reflect the range of realities. The size of the gap should matter as much as the mean, and differences in progress, whether by location, by quintile, by group, should be an ever-present sub-text to the average.

The MDGs were conceived as a way to generate support for aid agencies and development banks to achieve their vision of development. Now we have a chance to craft a new MDG vision – one that includes progress for everyone and that accepts that every citizen is integral
to successful development, urban or otherwise. Universal provision matters, inclusive decision making matters, more probing assessments matter; but underlying all of these is a vision of the city as a place for all of its citizens.

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