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Revisiting complex conundrums of slum definition in urban policy: A case of India



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Abstract

Slums, often termed informal settlements, become the primary housing solution for low-income urban dwellers due to fierce competition for land and profits, leaving them with limited choices owing to their meagre incomes and lack of alternative housing opportunities. The paper delves into the global prevalence of slums, emphasising the significance of accommodating the urban poor, particularly in India. It explores the challenges faced by marginalised populations in planned cities and the critical need for precisely defining slums. The origin of the term 'slum' is traced, highlighting its evolving interpretation. The impact of rapid urbanisation on slum growth is analysed, emphasising the complex interplay of economic, social, and policy factors. The definition of slums is critically examined, along with the disparities and limitations in current categorisations. The paper highlights the evolution of slum policies in India, focusing on the role of definitions in shaping these policies, spanning from initial eradication strategies to current in-situ redevelopment initiatives, while examining the impact of evolving theories, the engagement of NGOs, and the persistent challenges in implementation. It scrutinises recent policies like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, featuring issues hindering effective slum improvement. Overall, the paper stresses the crucial link between clear slum definitions and successful urban poverty alleviation strategies.

Keywords: Slum growth, urbanisation, slum definitions, slum policies, marginalised communities

Background

Globally, more than half of the world's population resides in urban areas, i.e., about 55 per cent, and it is projected that by 2050, it will rise to 70 per cent³. In 2001, approximately 924 million people worldwide resided in slums, constituting around 32% of the global urban population. According to UN statistics, there has been a decline in the population living in slums from 25.4 to 24.2 per cent between 2014 to 2020, and by the end of 2020, it is estimated that 1.1 billion urban residents live in slum or slum-like conditions. In India, the population of slums increased from 52.4 million in 2001 to 65.5 million in 2011 (Census of India), and as of 2020, 49 per cent of the urban population lives in slums⁴. In urban areas and cities, due to increased urbanisation, the marginalised populations often face inadequate living conditions, limited access to basic services, and remain excluded from their rights. Informal settlements, commonly known as slums, emerge as a predominant solution for accommodating low-income individuals in urban areas. These settlements represent the only viable housing option for the impoverished, given the intense competition for land and profits in cities, leaving them with limited choices due to their

³ SDG Indicators. (n.d.). Unstats.un.org. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/goal-11/#:~:text=While%20the%20proportion%20of%20the>

⁴ World Bank Open Data. (n.d.). World Bank Open Data. Retrieved January 3, 2024, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.SLUM.UR.ZS?end=2020&locations=IN&start=2020&view=bar>

meagre incomes or lack of alternative housing opportunities (UN-Habitat, 2003). Lefebvre (1968), in his work on 'Right to City', argues for a shift from market-centric control to a more citizen-oriented approach involving the people in shaping and governing urban spaces (King, 2019). His study suggests that individuals, particularly those marginalised, should not only have the right to own a city but also the ability to shape, transform, and alter it according to their needs and perspectives⁵. This framework would only be possible if slums are defined with precision and addressed appropriately; they are crucial for sustainable urban planning in India, as their inclusion and identification based on current conditions are essential components of city development strategies (Shekhar, 2021).

Although slums have been recognised since 1956, their definition seems ambiguous and inadequate. Effective management of slums requires comprehensive mapping, incorporating both spatial and non-spatial information, and to do so, it is important to identify and define slums considering the relevant characteristics. It is essential because an adequate definition may hinder efforts to address the complex issues within slum areas effectively. By incorporating a holistic perspective that considers not only the physical layout but also the socio-economic dynamics, authorities can develop more nuanced and targeted strategies. Recognising the diverse characteristics of slums enables a more accurate assessment of the needs and challenges faced by slum dwellers, leading to more effective interventions. Therefore, the critical emphasis on a comprehensive definition highlights the importance of addressing slums in a manner that includes the complexities inherent in their social, economic, and spatial dimensions for meaningful urban development.

Moreover, a widely shared perspective within the field of urban studies emphasises that planned cities typically exhibit a tendency to marginalise the economically disadvantaged, as predominant urban planning policies prioritise the elimination of informal settlements in the interest of efficient city planning (Watson, 2009). Slums are often stigmatised as breeding grounds for criminal activities, prompting authorities to view their eviction as imperative for creating liveable and secure urban environments. Consequently, initiatives aimed at reducing vulnerability in urban spaces frequently result in the relocation or complete eradication of these slums. The critical implication here is that while the intention may be to enhance urban living conditions, such initiatives often overlook the intricate socio-economic dynamics within these marginalised communities. By focusing solely on eviction or elimination, there is a risk of neglecting the root causes of informal settlements and the complex challenges faced by their residents. A nuanced approach is critical to address the underlying issues, promote inclusivity, and ensure that urban development initiatives uplift the lives of all citizens, including those residing in slums.

Historical trajectory of the word 'slum'

The word 'slum' originated as part of the London cant and was first defined in convict writer James Hardy Vaux's work on "Vocabulary of the Flash Language" in 1812. In this context, the word 'slum' was used interchangeably with words such as racket, criminal trade or room. However, by the 1830s and 1840s, during the second cholera pandemic years, the term began to be associated with impoverished living conditions rather than criminal activities. Cardinal Wiseman, known for his writings on urban reform, is sometimes credited with popularising the term 'slum' among more refined writers, transforming it from street slang. By the mid-19th

⁵ Slum-dwellers and their right to the city. (2022, August 9). The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/slum-dwellers-and-their-right-to-the-city-8080946/#:~:text=The%20Term%20>

century, slums were recognised as a global phenomenon, identified in many countries such as England, France, America, and India.

Over the years, the word 'slum' has experienced several iterations in its interpretation and usage. In October 2002, based on the physical and legal aspects of a settlement, the UN officially accepted the definition of slum as "characterised by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure" (Davis, 2006, p. 23). According to UNESCO, a slum is "a building, group of buildings or an area characterised by overcrowding, deterioration, insanitary conditions, an absence of facilities or amenities which, because of these conditions or any of them, endanger the health, safety or morals of its inhabitants or the community" (Seabrook & Siddiqui, 2011, p. 117). Afterwards, UN-Habitat (2006) defined a slum household by identifying five essential amenities. A household lacking any of these would be considered a slum: first, access to a reliable and affordable water supply that does not require excessive effort to obtain; second, improved sanitation, including waste disposal and a shared toilet for a reasonable number of people; third, security of tenure, meaning residents have documented rights to live in their homes and are protected from eviction; fourth, durable housing with a permanent and adequate structure; and finally, sufficient living space, ensuring that no more than two people occupy a single room.

Growth of slums and urbanisation

The genesis of slum growth can be traced back to the 20th century, emerging in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Following World War II, global economies experienced a gradual increase in trade, although constrained by the ominous forces of the Cold War. It wasn't until 1990, with the dissolution of the Iron Curtain in Europe, that global trade witnessed an unprecedented surge, propelling the world into the era of globalisation. At the same time, the transformative decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of new communication technologies, significantly enhancing global connectivity⁶. This remarkable progress facilitated developing nations in identifying economic opportunities, streamlining access to new markets, and making the utilisation of cost-effective skilled labour from the developing world commonplace. However, despite the advantages brought about by globalisation, it simultaneously ushered in a universal phenomenon of increased inequality and poverty. As developing nations embraced globalisation by opening their economies, established principles such as progressive taxation, social safety nets, and labour regulations gradually felt the impact. Consequently, the rate of economic and social growth, especially in developing countries, surpassed initial projections, giving rise to unforeseen challenges.

The expanding urban population is primarily driven by the significant phenomenon of rural-urban migration, influenced by various pull and push factors. Pull factors, such as enhanced public amenities, social services, and economic opportunities, attract individuals to urban centers, while push factors include limited employment, low productivity, meagre income from agriculture and other primary industries, and unfavourable working conditions, compel people to leave rural areas (Woo & Jun, 2020; Mahabir et al., 2016). This migration poses a considerable challenge for urban centers across various countries, as they struggle to accommodate the influx of people without the necessary infrastructure. Additionally, the growth of Indian economy on

⁶ Habitat For Humanity. (2018, September 4). Urbanisation and the Rise of Slum Housing. Habitat for Humanity GB. <https://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk/blog/2018/09/urbanisation-slum-housing/>

the global stage and the implementation of economic liberalisation policies accelerated the urbanisation process in the country. These factors prompted a substantial migration of individuals from smaller towns and rural regions to major urban centers, and this influx is a consequence of economic opportunities coupled with policies that opened up avenues for trade and commerce. Therefore, cities have become engines of growth for aspirations and employment, drawing in a diverse population seeking better prospects and livelihoods. Consequently, cities have also evolved into hubs where a substantial population competes for basic necessities, including affordable housing, access to vacant land for shelter without the threat of eviction, quality education, healthcare services, clean drinking water, and improved mobility (Ooi & Phua, 2007). This further escalated the demand for urban housing and intensified the pressure on land and housing prices. As cities became more urbanised, they underwent expansion accompanied by surge in population. This process in turn, leads to increase in the cost of housing and infrastructure, resulting in a shortage of affordable housing. Faced with limited options, the economically disadvantaged people resort to developing their own informal infrastructure, giving rise to the formation of slums as an inevitable consequence.

The proliferation of slums in urban and peri-urban areas is largely attributed to the factors mentioned above. Their emergence is also a direct consequence of the failure of city governments to plan systematically and provide affordable housing for the low-income segments of the urban population. Due to the rapid growth of urban populations, the capacity of city authorities falls behind to adequately address housing, environmental, and health infrastructure needs. As a result, slum housing has become the de facto solution for meeting the housing needs of the low-income urban population. A major challenge stems from the lack of coordination among different authorities responsible for economic development, urban planning, and land allocation. This coordination gap aggravates the difficulties in managing the consequences of rapid urbanisation.

Simultaneously, the rapid urbanisation unfolding in developing countries presents an enormous challenge for most municipal governments, which find themselves inadequately equipped on physical, fiscal, political, and administrative fronts (Ooi & Phua, 2007). It becomes a complex task to cope with the demands of providing essential infrastructure services to their burgeoning populations. As a consequence of constrained resource allocation, the urban poor face a disadvantaged position in the competition for basic services. Adding to the complexity of this situation are inherent disparities embedded in investment standards, pricing policies, and administrative procedures. Frequently, these disparities tip the balance in favour of the affluent, resulting in limited access to fundamental necessities for the poor, including shelter, safe water, acceptable sanitation, minimal nutrition, and basic education. The intense competition for urban land increases the challenges faced by the urban poor, relegating them to the peripheries of society. These structural imbalances in investment and policy often perpetuate unequal access to resources and services, contributing to a widening gap between socio-economic classes. The disparities not only hinder the equitable distribution of essential amenities but also reinforce social marginalisation. Therefore, the urban poor find themselves grappling with an intricate set of challenges, with limited opportunities for upward mobility and an increased vulnerability to the adverse effects of urbanisation.

The swift expansion of larger cities and mega urban regions in developing countries is starkly evident in their surroundings, characterised by densely populated and generally impoverished shantytowns. Mumbai serves as an explanatory example of such large cities in India. Various forms of informal and irregular housing have proliferated as a consequence of this rapid growth.

In the peri-urban zones or areas at the rural-urban interface, administrative responsibilities are often far from clear-cut. Ambiguities persist between urban and rural governments, as well as at provincial and national levels of governance. This lack of clarity adds an additional layer of complexity to the effective management of urbanisation challenges in these regions.

Do slums drive economic development in regions?

It is a widely acknowledged concept in literature - that economic development is a crucial factor in the eradication of poverty. As economies grow and prosper, the standard of living tends to improve, leading to a reduction in poverty levels. Slums/informal settlements contribute significantly to the growth of urban economies in developing countries. Despite their informal nature, slums involve a substantial portion of the labour force, implying that these informal sectors are not isolated from the broader urban economic landscape. These opportunities are the primary source of livelihood and means of survival for the slum dwellers. Therefore, they have a broader impact on urban life by contributing to the provision of urban services, such as waste collection, etc. Beyond services, slum dwellers are identified as active participants in the production of goods, including everyday products for local markets and exports (Elrayies, 2016).

As per a study by Marx et al., (2013), a significant trend has emerged where countries undergoing rapid economic growth have also seen significant improvements in the living conditions of urban households, particularly in terms of reduced proportions of people living in slums. This correlation suggests that economic prosperity is linked with positive changes in urban areas. Using a cross-country regression framework, Arimah (2010) delved into the relationship between economic indicators and the prevalence of slums, revealing meaningful associations between them. Specifically, a negative correlation was observed with GDP per capita, indicating that as a country's income per person increases, the incidence of slums tends to decrease. On the other hand, positive correlations were identified with indicators such as the national debt stock and debt service, as well as with inequality measured by the Gini coefficient. These correlations imply that higher levels of debt and greater income inequality are associated with a higher prevalence of slums.

However, the study also highlights a critical limitation of relying solely on cross-country correlations, which emphasises that such analyses may oversimplify the complex relationship between economic growth and urban development. This arises from the fact that rapid urbanisation rates in developing countries do not consistently align with fast economic growth. In other words, while there is a general expectation that economic growth and urban development go hand in hand, this isn't universally true. There are certain developing countries which despite experiencing rapid urbanisation, have not witnessed parallel economic advancement. In contrast, some of the least developed countries have encountered rapid growth in their urban population without experiencing significant economic growth. This highlights a decoupling between urbanisation and economic progress in these cases. Essentially, even though urban areas in these countries are expanding quickly, the overall economic conditions are not improving proportionately.

For instance, some nations, such as Indonesia and Brazil, have witnessed rapid urban development without a significant expansion of slums, while others, like Nigeria, have seen a substantial portion of their urban growth attributed to the proliferation of slums (Marx et al., 2013), highlights the nuanced role of slums in the economic development context. In countries where slums are not the dominant aspect of urbanisation, effective urban planning strategies, governance, and socioeconomic factors may play a crucial role in achieving economic

development without a significant increase in informal settlements. In contrast, in countries where slum expansion accounts for a substantial part of urban growth, it indicates challenges in controlling slum proliferation, which may have implications for overall economic progress. Therefore, managing slum growth becomes an important factor in encouraging sustainable and inclusive economic development in urban areas.

Exploring the slum definition

According to Section 3 (Chapter II) of the Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1956 of India, a slum area or slum is defined as: *“Where the competent authority upon report from any of its officers or other information in its possession is satisfied as respects any area that the buildings in that area—*

(a) are in any respect unfit for human habitation; or

(b) are by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to safety, health or morals, it may, by notification in the Official Gazette, declare such area to be a slum area.”

(2) In determining whether a building is unfit for human habitation for the purposes of this Act, regard shall be had to its condition in respect of the following matters, that is to say— (a) repair; (b) stability; (c) freedom from damp; (d) natural light and air; (e) water supply; (f) drainage and sanitary conveniences; (g) facilities for storage, preparation and cooking of food and for the disposal of waste water; and the building shall be deemed to be unfit as aforesaid if and only if it is so far defective in one or more of the said matters that it is not reasonably suitable for occupation in that condition.”

Most state governments across the country adopted the definition of ‘slum’ or ‘slum area’ from the aforementioned Act and formulated their respective Slum Acts based on legal regulations specific to each state. While the definitions may vary from state to state due to differences in socioeconomic conditions, the physical characteristics of slum areas tend to be similar across regions. Upon a thorough analysis of state-specific slum acts, two distinct characteristics have emerged, representing the criteria by which a settlement is classified into a slum.

1. Unfit for human habitation

If an area is determined to be detrimental to safety, health, or morals due to factors such as dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty building design, the presence of hazardous and unwholesome trades, inadequate street layout, insufficient ventilation, light, or sanitation facilities, or a combination of these issues, it can be officially designated as a slum area through a notification. This declaration is made based on the understanding that these conditions collectively contribute to an environment that is harmful to the well-being and living standards of the residents in that particular area. A building is considered to be unsuitable for human habitation if it is significantly deficient in one or more of these aspects, including repair, stability, no dampness, natural light and air, natural water supply, lack of proper drainage and sanitary facilities, and poor facilities for storage, preparation, and cooking of food, as well as the disposal of wastewater.

This feature can further be categorised into sub-themes:

- **Lack of basic services**

One commonly cited characteristic in slum definitions globally and nationally is the absence of essential and basic services such as inadequate access to improved sanitation facilities and reliable sources of clean water, absence of waste collection systems, electricity supply, paved roads and walkways, street lighting, and no proper rainwater drainage. These collective deficiencies contribute to the overall portrayal of a slum, highlighting the challenging living conditions in such areas.

- **Overcrowding and congestion**

Limited space per person, the cohabitation of multiple families, and a significant prevalence of single-room units characterise overcrowding in slum areas. As per UN-Habitat, overcrowding is identified as having more than three individuals occupying a habitable room⁷. However, the majority of Slum Acts in various states and UTs lack specific guidelines on parameters for overcrowding and congestion. Usually, in most slum dwelling units across the country, overcrowded conditions are evident, where a single room is shared by five or more individuals, serving as a multipurpose space for cooking, sleeping, and living.

- **Lack of basic health conditions**

Inadequate access to basic services leads to unfavourable living conditions, evident in the presence of exposed and open sewers, absence of proper roads/streets, unregulated waste dumping, and contaminated surroundings. Dwellings are often constructed in unsafe locations, such as floodplains, in close proximity to industrial facilities emitting toxic substances, near waste disposal sites, and on land prone to landslides. The overall arrangement of the settlement may pose hazards due to the lack of access routes and the high concentration of deteriorating structures. This combination of factors contributes to the overall unsuitability and risk associated with the living environment in these areas.

2. Settlement size

Most states in their Slum Acts have not specified a minimum size for a settlement that qualifies as a slum. Only, certain states, such as Odisha, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, have set specific criteria. For instance, Odisha mandates a minimum of twenty households, Punjab requires at least twenty-five households, Jammu and Kashmir requires at least 10 to 15 households, and Himachal Pradesh with a minimum of fifteen households. This requirement ensures that a slum is characterised as a distinct and identifiable area rather than just a single dwelling.

Disparities in the slum definition

Most of these definitions only focused on their physical characteristics rather than considering the more challenging-to-measure 'social dimensions,' even though, in most cases, the definitions align with economic and social marginalisation (Davis, 2006). This approach includes both shantytowns on the outskirts of cities and typical old-style inner-city tenements. As a result, despite being comprehensive, the definition might not include all situations that could be

⁷ World Health Organization. (2018). *WHO housing and health guidelines*. World Health Organization. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/276001>

considered slums. In India, for an area to be officially recognised as a slum by the government, it needs to go through a process of notification or legal designation. This recognition is crucial because it's supposed to grant residents certain rights, like access to clean water and sanitation services. However, there's a problem – many areas that clearly resemble slums, with poor living conditions, are never officially recognised as such (Subbaraman et al, 2012; Nolan, 2015). For example, in Delhi, no new areas have been officially designated as slums since 1994 and most areas designated as slums in Delhi are located in the old city, specifically in the walled city of Shahjahanabad. (Bhan, 2013). In the Master Plan of Delhi (MPD) 1962, the area was designated as a slum; however, it underwent subsequent reclassifications. First, it was recognised as a heritage zone, and later, in the MPD of 2001, it was categorised as a "special area" (Bhan, 2013, p. 64). Despite these changes, certain parts of the old city still carry the slum designation alongside their status as both a heritage zone and a "special area." Importantly, 97 per cent of the small neighbourhoods in the old city that are marked as slums are privately owned and have been so since before Independence and the MPD of 1962.

Defining slums solely based on physical characteristics may pose limitations in accurately identifying them. This approach might overlook settlements residing in structures resembling slums but not meeting the specific criteria of being categorised as such. This means that even if people are living in conditions that would typically be considered a slum, they may not get the official recognition and the associated rights and benefits that come with it. This situation raises concerns about the accuracy of slum data and the potential exclusion of certain communities from government support and services.

Discourse of slum policies

Based on these definitions, slum policies have been formulated at the national and sub-national levels, and they are executed in various phases. The implementation of these policies began with clearing or demolishing the slums, followed by redeveloping, rehabilitating, and upgrading the slums, along with providing land rights to the slum dwellers. According to Bardhan et al. (2015), since independence, policies addressing slums and affordable housing have undergone significant transformations at different times in the process of urban planning. In addition, the Constitution of India mandates that matters related to land, accommodation/housing, city development, and civic infrastructure fall within the jurisdiction of the State Government (Bardhan et al., 2015). Every Indian state has the authority to establish its own regulations, strategies, and initiatives for improving conditions in slum areas, except when it comes to land owned by central government agencies (Burra, 2005). During the colonial period, these agencies (defence establishment, port trusts, railways, etc.) acquired extensive landholdings and even after independence, the distribution of land ownership remained unchanged making central government the largest owner of urban land in the country.

The main objective of implementing these policies is to enhance access to sanitation and safe water, ensure secure tenure status, provide durable housing, and allocate sufficient living space for all (UN-Habitat, 2006). Banerjee and Chattopadhyay (2020) in their study assess that the living conditions in slums vary based on their legal status, influencing the provision of amenities. Using the slum classification defined by the Census of India – for example, Notified slums, officially recognised under specific Acts, tend to receive more extensive amenities such as water, sanitation, etc., compared to recognised slums, which lack formal designation, or identified slums, characterised by dense living conditions, poorly constructed crowded tenements, and inadequate hygiene and sanitation, yet are not officially recognised or notified as slums by any

Act. This disparity in amenities highlights the significance of legal recognition in determining the level of infrastructure and services available in different types of slums.

From eradication to improvement

Initially, theories like the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1959) and the theory of marginality (Park, 1928) characterised slums as sources of societal problems synonymous with crime and violence. These theories believed that those who moved from rural areas to cities were not able to adapt well to city life and were responsible for their own poverty. Theoretically, the proposed solution was the demolition of these slums and the relocation of residents to public housing projects. These ideas were used to justify government policies of removing informal settlements. The initiatives to address urban slum issues in India began in the 1950s. During this period, large-scale 'eradication approaches' were implemented involving mass demolitions and evictions rather than approaches to improve the slums. The first initiative, named 'Slum Clearance,' was introduced during the Second Five Year Plan of the Government of India (GOI), and all the states were mandated to proceed with the implementation (Sawhney, 2013). However, this strategy proved ineffective as the slums tended to reappear in the same locations or relocate to different areas. Later, between 1972 and 1973, in the fourth Five Year Plan of GOI, the government implemented a program aimed at enhancing the environment of urban slums, providing essential services such as water supply, sewage, drainage, and street pavements across 11 cities, and gradually expanded to 9 more cities in the country (Sawhney, 2013). In 1976, a census of slums was conducted, and identity cards were issued as part of efforts to understand and address the challenges faced by slum dwellers (Chattopadhyay & Biswas, 2010). This approach reflected a recognition that addressing the root causes and improving living conditions are more sustainable strategies than mass demolition.

Favelas of Brazil: A case study on slum clearance to public housing

In the year 1970, the Catacumba favela in Rio de Janeiro underwent demolition, leading to the relocation of its residents to high-rise apartments situated on the outskirts of the city. This transition resulted in a substantial decline in household income for the inhabitants due to increased travel expenses and altered job availability, particularly for women. The move imposed additional financial burdens, including mortgage payments and utility bills, culminating in an overall net loss of income for the affected households. In addition, the residents were relocated based on their income levels rather than preserving social and familial ties, leading to the disintegration of the supportive community structure that existed in the original favela.

Moreover, the relocation physically isolated the residents from urban amenities such as movies, beaches, markets, and spectator sports. This not only disrupted their established way of life but also contributed to rising suspicion, distrust, and crime rates in some of the newly developed areas, as observed by Perlman (1976). Despite the positive impact on basic living conditions, especially for children who gained access to improved water and sanitation facilities, the relocation faced challenges associated with the poor quality of construction. Constant leaks and the emergence of cracks in the walls within a few years after construction raised concerns among residents, making them hesitant to commit to long-term mortgages for their new housing units. The complex aftermath of the relocation included both positive and negative aspects, reflecting the multifaceted consequences of such urban transformation efforts.

Later, various scholars such as Gans, Jacobs, Castells, and Perlman, among others, dedicated themselves to understanding the complexities within slums, and their research brought about a paradigm shift, challenging the initial negative perceptions (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013). Through their work, they shed new light on slums, offering a more nuanced understanding of the socio-economic dynamics and the lived experiences of the slum dwellers. The slum redevelopment policies further focused on the importance of self-help and tenure security, inspired by John Turner's study (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013), wherein slum residents are granted tenure security, a sense of ownership and stability to enhance their dwellings, demonstrating tangible improvements in their living conditions over time. According to his theory, when the living conditions in a slum improve, residents are likely to enhance their homes gradually, particularly if they have secure tenure and access to credit. The theory doesn't consider land tenure as a crucial prerequisite for successful slum upgrading projects, although it acknowledges its importance. Turner asserts that the government's role in this context should be minimal, primarily focused on expanding human aspirations (Werlin, 1999). This approach integrated the agency and empowerment of slum dwellers, marking a significant departure from previous top-down approaches, indicating a more inclusive and participatory model.

Nakamura's (2017) study on slum declaration in Pune indicates that providing slum dwellers with the guarantee of occupancy rights, even in the absence of complete property rights, can motivate them to enhance the quality of their housing in slums. Hence, formalised land tenure plays a crucial role in enhancing tenure security and facilitating housing improvements in the long run. Another study by Werlin (1999) suggests that the slum upgrading approach is not fundamentally flawed; rather, its successful implementation demands a robust and compassionate bureaucratic system. His evaluation of the Bustee Improvement Programme (BIP) of Calcutta showed that the outcome of the programme was initially positive until the early 1970s, but it progressively deteriorated over time as it could not adequately address the housing issues; the government appeared either incapable or unwilling to confront the challenges posed by the growing squatter settlements. The programme was designed to enhance slum conditions by providing service latrines, installing water taps, improving surface drainage, constructing and widening roads and pathways, and providing street lighting and waste disposal facilities.

Eventually, the slum redevelopment policies evolved and led to the integration of NGOs/supranational agencies, such as the UN-Habitat and the World Bank, in the implementation process. Their involvement reflected a broader trend towards incorporating diverse perspectives and resources in the redevelopment process, acknowledging the value of community engagement and external support in addressing the complex challenges associated with slum redevelopment. However, numerous studies and evaluations have argued that these enabling approaches are not as effective as they seem, and their impact might be more favourable to big NGOs than the local communities they aim to help (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013). According to a study conducted by Mukhija (2003) on the Markandeya slum, a part of Dharavi in Mumbai, which was chosen for reconstruction as part of India's Prime Minister Grant Project (PMGP) in 1988, highlights institutional, physical, and financial challenges over the ten-year construction period (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013). The project was implemented in collaboration with the local NGO SPARC. The initial plan involved constructing a low-rise building with 94 units, shared toilets, and a community terrace. However, as the developer changed and land regulations permitted higher density, the project evolved, and the number of units increased to 180. Throughout the implementation, the project encountered various changes. SPARC, the NGO supporting the initiative, struggled with financing. Although the

project qualified for a low-income housing loan from the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO), which is mandated to assist low-income residents, there was a demand for collateral to secure the loan. This requirement posed a challenge despite the project's goal of providing housing for those with limited financial means. Mukhija (2013) argues that these enabling approaches seem to be more about trying the opposite of what didn't work before, without clear proof that it will be successful or is the best and only solution. Delhi's Kathputli colony's in-situ rehabilitation through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model is yet another example which shows these alternatives are inefficient as they do not accommodate resident needs and concerns. The project involved temporary relocation of the slum dwellers to transit camps until vertical structures were built for them to reside. In 2022, after 13 years of construction, the flats were open for the first batch of slum dwellers from the Kathputli colony⁸. The entire process, from constructing the buildings to temporarily shifting the dwellers to the transit camps, was contested, highlighting inadequate planning and poor implementation.

Over time, initiatives aimed at upgrading slums in various cities have indeed played a crucial role in enhancing the living conditions of residents, promoting better health, and ensuring increased security without resorting to displacements. Despite these positive outcomes, it is evident that these efforts have struggled to address the extensive and escalating nature of the issue (UN-Habitat, 2012). Recognising the pressing need for more comprehensive strategies, especially in rapidly urbanising nations, there is a growing acknowledgement that slum upgrading should evolve beyond isolated projects and embrace citywide approaches. This shift is imperative to effectively tackle the magnitude of the problem and create sustainable improvements on a larger scale. Generally, slum upgrading involves the implementation of policies and initiatives for slum accommodation, relocation, and redevelopment, as well as addressing expenditure and financing for upgrading, and incorporating the private sector (Sharma et al., 2020).

Slum upgradation projects: Case studies from Southeast Asia

Indonesia's Kampung Improvement Program (KIP), implemented at the national level, stands out as a successful case of effective implementation of a slum upgrading initiative. According to Das (2008), the program played a significant role in decreasing urban poverty and enhancing the living standards of Indonesia's urban poor population. The main objective of the KIP was to enhance the quality of life in urban kampungs, which, although translating to "village," is commonly used to refer to urban slums (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013, p. 187). The program aimed to achieve this by implementing fundamental physical infrastructure improvements, including paved footpaths and roads, well-maintained drains, designated garbage bins with organised collection services, and the installation of public water taps and toilets. Upgrading the physical environment within the kampung would serve as a catalyst for individual households to improve their dwellings. Overall, KIP aimed not only to address immediate infrastructure needs but also to stimulate broader positive changes within the urban kampungs, promoting a comprehensive improvement in the resident's living conditions and economic prospects.

While the KIP has achieved success in integrating certain kampungs into a more accessible urban environment, it is not without its limitations. The underlying concept of KIP is to incentivise property owners to enhance the physical structure of their houses and upgrade their

⁸ Kathputli Colony: Slum dwellers to get flats soon. (2023, October 15). The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/kathputli-colony-slum-dwellers-to-get-flats-soon/articleshow/104436171.cms>

landownership status by improving the quality of the kampung (Supriatna & Molen, 2014). However, as highlighted by Agrawal (1999), the strategy faced constraints, primarily stemming from the limited availability of urban land. The scarcity of urban land emerged as a significant obstacle, hindering the impact of kampung upgrading. Furthermore, another limitation is that the KIP initially focused on upgrading physical infrastructure and did not address crucial land tenure issues. This omission was a substantial drawback, as secure land tenure is a critical aspect of sustainable urban development. Additionally, the program's failure to generate tax revenue for the government, as noted by Winayanti and Lang (2004), posed another challenge. Without a sustainable source of funding, the government faces difficulties in financing and expanding the program to its full potential, limiting the overall effectiveness of the KIP in achieving comprehensive and lasting improvements in the upgraded kampungs.

The government of Thailand in 2003 introduced two initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of the urban poor: Baan Mankong (Secure Housing) and Baan Ua Arthorn (We Care). The Baan Mankong Program operates through the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) and focuses on directly providing infrastructure subsidies and housing loans to impoverished communities (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013). This financial support is intended to empower these communities to enhance their housing conditions and access basic services. The program embodies a bottom-up approach, involving the active participation of the communities in the improvement process. The Baan Ua Arthorn initiative, managed by the National Housing Authority, takes a different approach by designing, constructing, and selling ready-to-occupy flats and houses at subsidised rates. These residences are made available to lower-income households, who, in turn, can opt for a rent-to-own arrangement (Boonyabancha, 2005). This means that eligible households can make affordable monthly payments, facilitating their gradual transition from renting to eventual ownership.

A study by Archer (2012) revealed that the Baan Mankong initiative significantly enhanced the living conditions of the people. Residents were willing to bear the increased financial responsibilities, considering it a necessary trade-off to preserve their community, as landowners aim for well-maintained properties. A substantial majority believed that the upgrading process has also improved tenure security. However, their responses highlight that this security is not solely reliant on the legal documentation but also hinges on their trust in community leadership, personal financial stability, and the long-term plans of landowners and city infrastructure development. The program's participatory and decentralised approach empowered low-income households and their community organisations to contribute to the upgrading process. This model not only facilitated the physical improvement of residences but also emphasised the importance of community involvement in securing and sustaining enhanced living conditions.

The Integrated Low-Cost Sanitation Scheme, initiated in 1980-81, aimed to improve sanitation facilities in slum areas and was administered through the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO), utilising subsidies from the central government and loans facilitated by HUDCO (Sawhney, 2013). After the economic liberalisation in the 1990s, the emphasis moved from physically providing housing to addressing the financial aspects of housing (Mitra, 2021). During the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992–1997), the Urban Basic Services for the Poor (UBSP) was launched to alleviate urban poverty. Subsequently, in 2005, the Basic Services for Urban Poor (BSUP) was initiated under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) with the aim of developing urban infrastructure. The objective of BSUP was to offer security of tenure at affordable rates, along with improved housing, water supply, sanitation,

education, health, and social security⁹. During this period, neoliberal strategies, such as public-private partnerships and market interventions, were employed to formalise slums and provide subsidised, beneficiary-driven individual housing and essential amenities to low-income families. (Sarkar & Bardhan, 2020). Currently, policies lean towards in-situ slum redevelopment, involving the demolition of existing slums and the subsequent construction of new housing units, often in the form of vertical buildings.

One of the recent initiatives for in-situ slum redevelopment, Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY), grants cities the authority to identify unsafe and objectionable slums (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013). The former are the ones which pose environmental and health risks, while the latter violate legal or master plan norms. However, the absence of precise criteria for identifying these slums, especially in the definitions mentioned by the Slum Acts, may lead to ambiguity in classifying the slums during the implementation of the initiatives. An assessment by Patel (2013), highlighted deficiencies in the construction of units within the RAY Program (2013), suggesting potential challenges in long-term maintenance. The substandard construction of these units represents a significant drawback in the program, necessitating actions to uphold construction quality. This is crucial to reduce the maintenance burden on residents, which could compel them to abandon their homes. She further observes that despite the program encouraging community participation, there is a problem at the municipal level. The lack of ability to have meaningful discussions leads to the creation of government-funded projects that are built by contractors. These projects resemble poor-quality public housing. Past experiences with such public housing projects have shown that there are hidden, long-term social costs that become apparent several years after people start living in these homes. Steps need to be taken to enhance the quality of construction in these projects to avoid long-term problems and ensure better living conditions for the residents. Therefore, the absence of clear distinctions between various types of slums within slum definitions can hinder the formulation of effective policies.

Although policies have evolved through adaptive strategies in response to changing socio-economic and urban development needs, they have remained inadequate and ineffective in improving the living conditions of the slum either because of lack of funds or poor planning and implementation. For instance, RAY evolved into Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, which mandates affordable housing for all living in urban areas. Initially, the scheme was set to conclude in 2021-22, but the duration has been extended to December 31, 2024. An assessment by the Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs, focusing on the in-situ Slum Rehabilitation (ISSR) vertical of the scheme, highlights various concerns. Despite its significance in providing housing for landless individuals or slum dwellers, the committee observed a low number of sanctioned houses. Out of the 14.35 lakh houses demanded, only 4.33 lakh received approval. Moreover, as of December 2022, a mere 99,000 houses were delivered, and 1.08 lakh were non-starters, facing delays in construction initiation. Challenges contributing to this suboptimal performance include issues related to land availability, delays in obtaining statutory clearances, and the complexity of clearing existing slums (Kumar, 2023). At the same time, there are states like Odisha which has put commendable efforts into improving the lives of slum dwellers by providing land rights. In 2012, a preliminary version of a bill designed to confer land rights and discourage the emergence of new slums was introduced for discussion (Mohapatra, 2022). Subsequently, in 2017, the bill

⁹ BSUP | Department of Urban Development (UD). (n.d.). Udd.delhi.gov.in. Retrieved January 3, 2024, from <https://udd.delhi.gov.in/ud/sjsry>

successfully transitioned into law. Such initiatives should be implemented and practiced by other state governments in the country.

Decoding the problem: Is it the definition or the policies?

The discussions indicate that formulation of slum policies is significantly influenced by the definition of slums. The efficacy of these policies is intrinsically tied to the clarity and accuracy of the definitions used to characterise slum areas. A city that is genuinely committed to successful strategies for alleviating urban poverty and improving slum living conditions should begin by clearly defining what qualifies as a slum in its specific socio-economic context and in accordance with local municipal or national legislative systems (UN-Habitat, 2003). This initial step is crucial for identifying the target areas and beneficiaries effectively.

During the early 1950s, the concept of slums lacked a precise definition, prompting the government to undertake the task of demarcating them by establishing a clear definition (Narayanan, 2023). The aim was to provide clarity and guidelines for identifying and addressing slum areas. Gradually, it was acknowledged that demolishing all slums wasn't practical, leading to a shift in policy towards providing amenities rather than focusing on delineating slums. With the increased urbanisation post-1990s, slums also proliferated with distinct characteristics, and simultaneously, the definition of slums seems limited and lacks precision. Instead of rethinking the definition of slums, the discourse turned to quantifying the lack of amenities in slums and other neighbourhoods, reflecting an evolving understanding of the relationship between slums and urbanisation. Over the years, the discourse transformed, viewing cities and slums as investment opportunities for economic growth, resulting in funding schemes and demand-driven policies (Narayanan, 2023).

Even after decades of the legislation of the Slum Areas Act and various slum upgradation programmes, the slum dwellers living in major Indian metropolis face forced evictions and displacement for the execution of urban initiatives, particularly projects focused on expanding infrastructure, urban renewal, and beautification without any measures to relocate them. This restructuring of urban spaces reflects the prioritisation of development and aesthetic enhancements, often at the expense of marginalised or vulnerable communities. For instance, the Maharashtra government, in an aggressive move, initiated a demolition campaign aimed at slums that had appeared after January 1, 1995. This ruthless drive unfolded between December 2004 and February 2005, resulting in the demolition of approximately 50,000 to 70,000 hutments in 44 localities (Burra, 2005; Dupont, 2011). Similarly, in Kolkata and Delhi, mass demolition drives of slums took place between 2004 - 2006. The need for a more inclusive approach to urban planning becomes evident in light of these cases, emphasising the importance of balancing development goals along with the protection of the rights and livelihoods of marginalised communities.

Way Forward

Defining slums with precision is the most important as they serve as the foundation for effective policy frameworks and addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with urbanisation. A clear understanding of what constitutes a slum ensures that interventions are formulated to the specific needs of these communities. Timely data collection plays a crucial role in this process, providing accurate insights into the nature of slums, their evolution, and the changing socio-economic conditions within. For instance, the Census has not been conducted for 2021 yet, which makes it difficult to get an estimate of whether the slum population has increased or

decreased. In addition, utilising up-to-date information enables policymakers to design targeted interventions, allocate resources efficiently, and implement sustainable solutions. Incorporating the latest technological tools for data collection, such as satellite imagery, geographic information systems (GIS), and on-the-ground surveys, ensures that policymakers have real-time information about slum areas. This data-driven approach aids in identifying not only the physical characteristics of slums but also the social and economic dynamics at play.

Timely data collection further facilitates evidence-based decision-making, allowing policymakers to adapt strategies as slum conditions evolve. It helps in identifying trends, assessing the success or shortcomings of ongoing initiatives, and formulating responsive policies that address the root causes of slum formation and persistence. Moreover, data enables the prioritisation of resources based on the severity and urgency of slum conditions. Whether it involves upgrading existing slums, providing secure land tenure, or developing alternative housing solutions, having accurate and timely information is essential for the effective allocation of funds and resources. The nexus between defining slums with exactness and timely data collection is crucial for formulating and implementing policies that will certainly improve the lives of slum dwellers. Implementing strategies to address the challenges of slums must involve refraining from extensive demolitions and increasing the income level of the slum dwellers¹⁰. While this approach may not be universally applicable, it holds potential for most cities. These strategies can lead to creating opportunities, promoting flexible labour markets, expanding local enterprises, etc., which can contribute to the overall economic development of slum areas. The key premise is to abstain from demolishing slums for a considerable period, ideally spanning 10 to 20 years. This prolonged period without demolitions can encourage significant positive developments within these communities, leading to substantial growth. The detrimental impact of demolitions lies in the fact that they force residents backward, eroding their wealth and disrupting their lives. By avoiding extensive demolitions and focusing on income generation, policies can promote sustainable development, creating a positive impact on the economic and social fabric of slum communities.

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¹⁰ 'Slum demolitions limit growth'. (2019, July 8). *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/slum-demolitions-limit-growth/article28314930.ece>

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