

RIO+20: Slum-dweller power

RIO DE JANEIRO, 19 June 2012 (IRIN) - Seven years after the Zimbabwean government tried to wipe out informal urban settlements in a campaign known as [Operation Murambatsvina](#) ("getting rid of the filth"), the scales have tipped in favour of the homeless, who are helping the capital city, Harare, develop a protocol to upgrade their living spaces.

"The government is broke, so they have no choice but to listen to us," said Patience Mudimu, of the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation.

More than luck has changed the fortunes of the slum dwellers not only in Zimbabwe but also in many other developing countries, where informal settlements do not often feature in the government's growth plans.

The Federation and other members of Shack Dwellers International, a [network](#) of urban poor associations in 33 countries, have come up with a winning formula of using micro-finance or savings schemes to develop their own plans to upgrade or purchase land for housing projects, which they then present to their local authorities.

"The first issue is to secure community-led land tenure," Mudimu said. The Zimbabwean federation comprises 635 saving schemes.

Their rationale is simple. Informal settlements are seen as a development nightmare and an eyesore. "The instant response of any local authority is to find ways to bulldoze them," said Ruby Papeleras of the Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines, a network of 161 urban poor associations. "So when we come in with alternatives and money to develop us, then they are willing to listen to us."

But getting there has been neither quick nor easy. In the Philippines it took 10 years of constant engagement and rising to a position of some influence to get the local authorities to listen to them. "Many of us tried the rights-based approach - protests for our right to housing - but it did not get us anywhere," said Sonia Cadornigara of the Federation in the Philippines.

The proactive or participatory approach, as it is known in development circles, has helped place the Federation on local housing boards and in government structures. "We are now in a position that we know a lot more about government's housing policy than often the officials themselves, and are called in to advise them," said Cadornigara.

"The world is undergoing the largest wave of urban growth in history," according to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). It expects the number of people living in urban areas to swell to almost 5 billion by 2030, with urban growth concentrated in Africa and Asia.

UN [Habitat](#) estimates that one in every six human beings is a slum dweller, and by 2030 the number could grow to two billion. The growth of slums has been prompted by rural-to-urban migration, a rapid increase in urban poverty, and the lack of access to affordable housing and secure land tenure.

Focus on future

[Questions](#) have been raised about these projections, and UNFPA does go on to say that "most of the new growth will occur in smaller towns and cities, which have fewer resources to respond to the magnitude of the change."

Evidence of this is emerging in countries affected by frequent droughts, for instance, in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. Diana Mitlin, a UK government economist and acting head of the human settlements group at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), agrees that smaller urban centres are expanding.

Participatory approaches, where people assume a self-help and developmental role, designing their own projects and negotiating the support they require directly from the state and donors, become all the more relevant, Mitlin noted.

"These [new] institutions have also attracted interest for their role as political agents that can also help make the state more accountable, especially when groups of these institutions form coalitions or federations, as in the National Federation of Slum Dwellers in India, or the South African Homeless People's Federation," she wrote in a [paper](#) co-authored with John Thompson, who is also at the IIED.

Thinking climate change

Mitlin said the IIED has been working with the associations of slum dwellers in developing countries to help them realize their potential to negotiate. The researchers have also uncovered the ability of the groups to think strategically, taking into account disaster risk reduction and other long-term necessities.

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In July 2000 a trash-slide at a dump-site in Payatas, a local government ward in Manila, killed more than 200 people. Volunteers from a savings-based community paramedics programme were one of the first groups [to respond](#) to the crisis, Mitlin pointed out in a paper she co-authored.

Money from the scheme was used to provide for the people who had been affected. "It was feared that the tragedy would have a negative impact on the savings programme but instead, savings rose to record levels," she said. "This showed the Federation leaders that they had something of value to offer. Since 2006 the Federation has expanded its capacity to organize and mobilize disaster-affected communities to post-disaster reconstruction of temporary and permanent housing and relocation."

The Federation was forced to shift its focus from short-term relief to long-term projects such as relocation to safer areas, which was in line with their work on achieving community-led secure tenure.

With erratic weather and the often related pressure on water and other resources, Mitlin said the Shack Dwellers International model is an example of how an empowered process could help ensure "pro-poor outcomes to climate change adaptation, integrating protection from adverse climate change with other community development needs."