

# Urban poverty - from understanding to action

**WHAT LESSONS CAN** we learn from the papers in this issue - and from those in the April 1995 issue, also on urban poverty - about how poverty can be reduced? And why is there so much literature about urban poverty and so little about poverty reduction?

On the second of these questions, there is a large literature and a long experience of poverty reduction in urban areas but most of it is not referred to as such. In many of the most successful poverty reduction interventions, the word "poverty" may not even appear. What the papers in this and the previous issue of *Environment and Urbanization* make clear is how misleading it is to think that urban poverty is only "a lack of income" from which it follows that poverty reduction is only achieved by increasing the income of the poor. There are many aspects of poverty - not only a lack of income but a lack of assets, a lack of power, a lack of legal rights (or their upholding), a lack of the resources or contacts necessary to secure political advantage, a lack of access to education, and a very poor quality of housing in which most low-income groups have to live and the tremendous health burden this brings with it, especially where health care provision is also inadequate. But because urban poverty has been equated only with a lack of income, as Northern concepts of "poverty lines" were transferred to the South with little or no modification, the interventions that successfully addressed the other aspects of poverty were not considered as poverty reduction.<sup>(1)</sup>

Perhaps the most important lessons of the papers in this issue are:

- the many forms of deprivation that those

with low-incomes face in urban areas and the need for poverty reduction measures to recognize this; and

- the right of those with low-incomes to be able to call on governments for resources and services and to be able to set priorities both in what is done and how it is done.

## Reducing urban poverty

**CERTAIN PAPERS IN** this issue relate directly to poverty reduction. The paper by Graham Alder describes not only the very poor conditions in which more than half of Nairobi's population lives but also the new mechanisms that are being developed to ensure better coordination between the many different groups working to reduce poverty. More could be achieved if all such groups coordinated their activities and worked closely together, especially if the city authorities and the national government added their support. The paper by Emiel Wegelin and Karin Borgman is about the role of city and municipal authorities in poverty reduction - with their role not only being what they can fund but also what they can encourage and support among the community based organizations and other voluntary sector groups, NGOs and the private sector. The paper also outlines the great range of areas through which municipal authorities can help reduce poverty - including reducing crime, improving water, sanitation, drainage and roads and reducing the vulnerability of low-income settlements to floods and other environmental hazards, and points out that these improvements can be linked with employment creation for low-income groups. Their paper is

**Several of the papers in this issue, like those of the April 1995 issue, were first presented at a workshop on "Urban Poverty" organized by the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP) and IIED's Human Settlements Programme. The April 1996 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* will include a description of the work of CROP.**

## Introduction

also a reminder of how inappropriate government rules and regulations can help create poverty, as they criminalize the only available ways through which most low-income households find employment, develop livelihoods and build their own houses.

The paper by Eduardo Rojas and Margarita Greene describes the ways in which the government of Chile seeks to reach low-income groups with improved housing. While the paper makes clear some of the weaknesses - for instance, the "standard" contractor-built basic housing and core housing for low-income households that is often poorly constructed and ill-matches the needs and priorities of many low-income households - it also shows a strong government commitment to improving housing for low-income groups and describes a programme that has brought improved housing to a significant proportion of low-income households. It is notable that the text of this paper does not mention the word "poverty" although clearly it is about a government programme that is seeking to reduce poverty.

The NGO Profile on the Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan is an interesting contrast. This NGO's work has been on improving housing and living conditions for large numbers of urban poor in Karachi (and increasingly in other cities in Pakistan) because of the ineffectiveness of national and municipal authorities. However, this is not to say that government responsibilities have been ignored and, in recent years, Orangi Pilot Project has begun to work more with governments, as these agencies have shown a growing interest in their success in improving sanitation facilities for almost one million people. The paper by Charles C. Mueller considers why governments have not given sufficient priority to improving water supplies and sanitation and examines why environmental economics has failed to highlight the environmental and health costs of inadequate sanitation, the benefits of improved sanitation and the options available for addressing this problem.

## Understanding urban poverty

**OTHER PAPERS IN** this issue build on those of the previous issue in expanding our un-

derstanding of urban poverty. The paper by Alphonse Yapi-Diahou gives a wonderful insight into who lives in the precarious settlements that house around one-fifth of Abidjan's population and why they choose to live there. The developments in Abidjan's land market it describes are similar to those in most cities of the South - the fact that even illegal land markets have become highly commercialized so that most of those labelled as "squatters" have paid the owner, or an intermediary acting for the owner, for the right to settle there. This paper is also a reminder of the constantly changing nature of a city's housing market and how diverse the priorities are among "low-income groups" as each individual or household has their own preferred trade-off between the price they pay for accommodation, tenure, and location close to employment and family.

The fact that low-income groups seek accommodation that meets a variety of possibly conflictual needs is also a theme in Frans Beijgaard's paper, which explores how lower and middle-income households find accommodation in the more central areas of La Paz in Bolivia. As this paper describes, low-income households generally have three preferences with regard to housing: ownership (both for security and also to obtain an asset); a location close to the centre of town so that access to jobs is easier and cheaper; and an independent house instead of an apartment or room with shared services. But houses that match all three preferences are too expensive so one or more of these preferences has to be foregone. For instance, a central location is often only possible if a whole household rents one small room with baths, toilets and kitchens shared with other households. Ownership may be possible but only by purchasing land (usually illegally) on the urban periphery and building a house - but this means a location distant from main centres of employment. The paper also describes how in La Paz, more than one-quarter of all households live rent-free in a room, apartment or house with the permission of the owner. This form of tenure is called *cedida* and this clearly benefits many younger households by providing them with an opportunity to live in or near the city centre which would be beyond their means as renters or owners. This paper is also a re-

minder of how interventions by governments or international agencies must be rooted in a real understanding of local circumstances, otherwise what they promote might benefit few if any low-income groups. The paper by Ik Ki Kim is also a reminder of the diverse needs and priorities among those with "low incomes" as it explores the differences in the circumstances and the strategies of the inhabitants of Nanjido which, up to 1992, was the garbage dumping area in Seoul, South Korea.

The paper by Shahnaz Huq-Hussain contributes to the growing number of studies that show how migrants' decisions to come to cities are not illogical. It also describes how female migrants arriving in Dhaka find work, what they do, and the importance of their monetary contribution to household income, as well as their domestic and child-rearing tasks. The paper also reinforces the points made by Nazneen Kanji in her paper in the previous issue of *Environment and Urbanization* about the inequality within households as women may have responsibility for maintaining the household but have little control over household income and may even have no control over the use of income that they themselves earn.

## Underestimating the scale of urban poverty

**SEVERAL PAPERS IN** this issue not only help widen our understanding of urban poverty but also show how its scale has been considerably underestimated. The paper by Jenny Bryant-Tokalau describes the scale of urban poverty in the Pacific and how this region has more urban poverty than most people have recognized to date. The paper also points to the many dimensions of urban poverty - in health, housing and living conditions and school attendance as well as in incomes. The paper by Charles C. Mueller considers the enormous scale of urban poverty in Brazil, despite the fact that Brazil is one of the world's largest economies and, for much of the last 45 years, also one of its more successful. The paper describes the large proportion of Brazil's urban population that still lacks provision for sanitation and, to a lesser extent, access to piped water, and considers

how this is rooted in a society with a high degree of inequality and a growing number of urban poor. It highlights the very high health costs of living in homes lacking adequate provision for water supply, sanitation and health care. It also includes some of the most shocking evidence of inequality within a nation - life expectancy at birth in the city of Fortaleza in 1988 was 22 years less than in Porto Alegre. Graham Alder's paper emphasizes the scale of urban poverty in Nairobi - and also describes another aspect of inequality, how some 55 per cent of Nairobi's population live in illegal or informal settlements on land that takes up less than 6 per cent of the city's total area.

## The "new poor"

**THE PAPERS BY** Alberto Minujin on Latin America and by Adil Ahmad and Ata El-Hassan El-Batthani on Khartoum make clear the processes that underlie impoverishment and how, in two very different contexts, the last 10-15 years has not only increased the poverty faced by those who were already poor in the early 1980s but also pushed many middle-class people into "poverty".

The "squeezing" of the middle-class in Latin America is described in detail in Alberto Minujin's paper. He was one of the first people to document the rise of the "new poor" and this paper describes not only the scale but also the mechanisms by which they became poor and how they differ from the people who were already poor prior to the 1980s crisis. This paper also draws attention to the mismatch between conventional definitions of the "poor" and those who live in very poor quality housing. As poverty lines are generally based on income levels and these income levels are determined without making sufficient allowance for the cost of what might be termed "minimum adequate quality" housing, a large part of the population living in very poor quality housing in cities in the South are not considered poor. But with many of the "new poor", the problem is the reverse. Their incomes may decline to the point where they cannot afford to meet their daily needs but they often live in housing of adequate quality. Of course, many have to move out of their adequate quality housing

## Different Aspects of Poverty Alleviation

INCREASING INCOME AND/OR ASSETS	
A job through employment creation	Where successful, these bring new jobs and/or enhanced incomes, although external support must understand local constraints. <sup>(2)</sup> There may be considerable potential for linking employment creation for low-income groups with public works to improve water supply, provision for sanitation and drainage, improved roads etc. <sup>(3)</sup> Examples of credit and support for informal enterprises include the work of the Carvajal Foundation <sup>(4)</sup> and of Praja Sahayaka Sewaya in Sri Lanka. <sup>(5)</sup> See also the important links between livelihoods and better collection and management of garbage in Asian cities, <sup>(6)</sup> Bangalore, <sup>(7)</sup> Jakarta, <sup>(8)</sup> and Bogota. <sup>(9)</sup> Credit for small-scale enterprises must respond to women's needs and priorities, as well as men's.
Credit for small- scale or informal enterprise*	
Education, literacy and vocational training	In general, these should increase income-earning capacity as well as providing other advantages. Vocational training must teach useful skills. In many countries, biases against women in education and vocational training must be addressed. New approaches include environmental education by and with children in East Africa <sup>(10)</sup> and schools for street children that understand their priorities and constraints. <sup>(11)</sup> The barriers to education for low-income households caused by the introduction of school fees or their increase or the increase in other education costs (for instance of school uniforms or examination fees) have to be addressed. <sup>(12)</sup>
Providing squatters with legal tenure	Increased security of tenure for "owner-occupiers" in illegal settlements reduces the risk of eviction, increases the value of the asset and increases the possibility of obtaining credit - see case studies of Barrio San Jorge <sup>(13)</sup> and FUPROVI <sup>(14)</sup> and land invasions in Lima <sup>(15)</sup> and Buenos Aires. <sup>(16)</sup>
Emergency credit*	The ready availability of emergency credit can greatly reduce the vulnerability of low-income groups to economic shocks - see as one example the Mahila Milan crisis credit scheme. <sup>(17)</sup>
UPHOLDING HUMAN RIGHTS	
Access to justice within the judicial system	This includes legal systems that protect citizens from forced eviction - see the issue of Environment and Urbanization on "Evictions" <sup>(18)</sup> and the work of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. <sup>(19)</sup> This also includes public programmes to reduce crime and violence within low-income settlements and community programmes to halt the abuse of women and children within families - see the case study of Lihok-Pilipina Foundation in the Philippines <sup>(20)</sup> and the paper on building coalitions for violence prevention in the USA. <sup>(21)</sup> It is also important to establish the right of low-income urban dwellers to land for cultivation <sup>(22)</sup> and the need to halt the harassment of women hawkers. <sup>(23)</sup>
IMPROVING HOUSING AND BASIC SERVICES	
Tenure of housing*	As well as the advantage noted above in terms of value of asset, secure tenure generally promotes household investment in improving the house and more capacity to negotiate with local authorities for improved services - see the paper on Ouagadougou <sup>(24)</sup> and on Barrio San Jorge. <sup>(25)</sup>
Improved water, sanitation, drainage and garbage collection*	If adequately provided, this removes a tremendous health burden and also considerably reduces the time needed for domestic tasks. This brings particular advantages to the person in the household responsible for collecting water and managing household wastes - usually women. <sup>(26)</sup> It is also important to reduce the vulnerability of many low-income settlements to floods - see the example from Lusaka. <sup>(27)</sup> The profile of Orangi Pilot Project in this issue is an example of a programme which reached large numbers of low-income households with

	improvements. See also papers on Guatemala City <sup>(28)</sup> and the Carvajal Foundation. <sup>(29)</sup>
Basic health care	If readily available, this greatly reduces the economic and health costs of illness and injury. <sup>(30)</sup> There are particular advantages for the person in the household who takes care of those who are sick or injured (usually women). See for instance the initiatives in Guatemala City <sup>(31)</sup> and in the paper on "Setting a new agenda; sexual and reproductive health and rights". <sup>(32)</sup> See also the paper by community based epidemiologists through which the inhabitants of low-income settlements become involved in identifying and monitoring health problems. <sup>(33)</sup>
Day-care	This increases the time for other tasks for those who look after young children and also means young children are not left in the care of older siblings. <sup>(34)</sup> Day-care centres can also provide regular health checks for infants and young children and monitor their nutritional status; they can also provide stimulus and support for children's physical and mental development. Day-care centres are often particularly valuable in increasing women's income-earning capacities and especially valuable to single parent (usually women headed) households - see as examples Barrio San Jorge <sup>(35)</sup> and the initiatives in Guatemala City. <sup>(36)</sup>
Housing finance*	Housing credit available to low-income households who want to build, extend or buy their own home could afford them better quality housing - see for instance the papers in the issue on "Funding community initiatives". <sup>(37)</sup>
Transport	Cheap and efficient public transport can greatly reduce the disadvantages for low-income households of living in peripheral locations and, if city-wide, could also help reduce the price of housing - see the case study of Curitiba. <sup>(38)</sup>
* : The items marked with an asterisk can be used to strengthen community organization among low-income groups and directly or indirectly help strengthen political representation.	

as they can no longer afford the rent or the mortgage payments. But others can stay - for instance owner-occupiers who have little or no mortgage. As the paper states, "...unlike the old poor, the 'new poor' do not live in easily recognizable neighbourhoods or enclaves. They can be found in just about any middle-class neighbourhood or apartment block. This is private poverty, hidden behind closed doors." The paper by Adil Ahmad and Ata El-Hassan El-Batthani also points to the large number of "new poor" in Khartoum who have joined those who were already poor, and the extent to which inadequate and ill-directed government policies have contributed to this.

## From understanding to action

**IF URBAN POVERTY** is understood to be much more than just a lack of income - and includes all the aspects of deprivation that

go with an inadequate income - then a great range of initiatives to improve housing, health, transport and basic services become part of poverty reduction, as illustrated in the table below. It does not pretend to be comprehensive but rather seeks to widen the concept of what helps reduce poverty or at least alleviate some of its worst effects. The table also includes examples of papers in this and previous issues of *Environment and Urbanization* that describe an initiative to address this aspect of poverty reduction. The items marked with an asterisk can be used to strengthen community organization among low-income groups and directly or indirectly help strengthen political representation. However, any initiative to reduce poverty that works with low-income groups and the organizations they form in participatory ways can strengthen community organization and cohesion which, in turn, can strengthen low-income groups' capacity to negotiate with local authorities and other external agencies.

### Participatory approaches

**IN THE APRIL** 1995 issue of *Environment and Urbanization*, a new section on participatory approaches was launched. Two papers are included in this issue, describing the use of participatory tools and methods. In the context of poverty reduction, such tools and methods seek to ensure that the perspectives, knowledge and skills of the poor are better integrated into the strategies of professionals working to assist low-income communities.

Each of the two papers in this issue draws on a different tradition within the current interest in participatory approaches. In Kaneez Hasna's paper, a set of tools from participatory rural approaches has been identified and modified for use in Chittagong, Bangladesh. This enabled researchers to better understand the perceptions and motivations of residents in one settlement with respect to water and sanitation issues. In the second paper, Sergio Mazzucchelli discusses the use of workshops and the involvement of a range of "stakeholders" in two participatory environmental assessments in Argentina. The workshops identified common concerns and collective strategies in an extension of more traditional tools for environmental assessment.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See in particular the papers by Robert Chambers and by Ellen Wratten in the April 1995 issue of *Environment and Urbanization*.

2. See the paper by Nazneen Kanji in the April 1995 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* for an example of the constraints on increasing informal sector employment.

3. See the paper by Emiel Wegelin and Karin Borgman in this issue.

4. Cruz, Luis Fernando (1994), "Fundación Carvajal; the Carvajal Foundation", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.2, October, pages 175-182.

5. Gamage, Nandasiri (1993), "Praja

Sahayaka Sewaya (Community Assistance Service)", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.2, October, pages 166-172.

6. Furedy, Christine (1992), "Garbage: exploring non-conventional options in Asian cities", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.4, No.2, October, pages 42-61.

7. Huysman, Marijk (1994), "Waste-picking as a survival strategy for women in Indian cities", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.2, October, pages 155-174.

8. Puerbo, Hasan (1991), "Urban solid waste management in Bandung: towards an integrated resource recovery system", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.3, No.1, April, pages 60-69.

9. Pacheco, Margarita (1992), "Recycling in Bogota; developing a culture for urban sustainability", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.4, No.2, October, pages 74-79.

10. Lee-Smith, Diana and Taranum Chaudhry (1990), "Environmental information for and from children", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.2, No.2, October, pages 27-32.

11. Costa Leite, Ligia and Martha de Abreu Esteves (1991), "Street children in Brazil: an alternative View", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.3, No.1, April, pages 130-139.

12. See Kanji, Nazneen (1995), "Gender, poverty and structural adjustment in Harare, Zimbabwe", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.7, No.1, April, pages 37-55.

13. Hardoy, Ana, Jorge E. Hardoy and Ricardo Schusterman (1991), "Building community organization: the history of a squatter settlement and its own organizations in Buenos Aires", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.3, No.2, October, pages 104-120.

14. Sevilla, Manuel (1993), "New approaches for aid agencies; FUPROVI's community based shelter programme", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.1, April, pages 111-121.

15. Peattie, Lisa (1990), "Participation: a case study of how invaders organize, negotiate and interact with government in Lima, Peru", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.2, No.1, April, pages 19-30.

16. Cuenya, Beatriz, Diego Armus, Maria Di Loreto and Susana Penalva (1990), "Land invasions and grassroots organization: the Quilmes settlement in Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.2, No.1, April, pages 61-73.

17. Patel, Sheela and Celine D'Cruz (1993), "The Mahila Milan crisis credit scheme; from a seed to a tree", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.1, April, pages 9-17.

18. See the papers in *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.1, April 1994.

19. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, NGO Profile in *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.2, October 1993, pages 153-165.

20. Banaynal-Fernandez, Tessie (1994), "Fighting violence against women: the Cebu experience", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.2, October, pages 31-56.

21. Cohen, Larry and Susan Swift (1993), "A public health approach to the violence epidemic in the United States", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.2, October, pages 50-66.

22. See for instance Smit, Jac and Joe Nasr (1992), "Urban agriculture for sustainable cities: using wastes and idle land and water bodies as resources", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.4, No.2, October, pages 141-152; The Ecologist (1994), "Whose common future? Reclaiming the commons", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.1, April, pages 106-130.

23. Mitullah, Winnie (1991), "Hawking as a survival strategy for the urban poor in Nairobi: the case of women", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.3, No.2, October, pages 13-22.

24. Jaglin, Sylvie (1994), "Why mobilize town dwellers; joint management in

Ouagadougou, 1983-1990", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.2, October, pages 111-132.

25. See reference 13.

26. Lee-Smith, Diana and Richard Stren (1991), "New perspectives on African urban management", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.3, No.1, April, pages 23-36; also Jordan, Sara and Fritz Wagner (1993), "Meeting women's needs and priorities for water and sanitation in cities", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.2, October, pages 135-145.

27. Mulwanda, Mpanjilwa (1993), "The need for new approaches to disaster management; the 1989 floods in Lusaka, Zambia", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.2, October, pages 67-77.

28. Espinosa, Lair and Oscar A. López Rivera (1994), "UNICEF's urban basic services programme in illegal settlements in Guatemala City", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.2, October, pages 9-29.

29. See reference 4.

30. For a case study of the health costs faced by low-income households lacking adequate provision for health care, see Pryer, Jane (1993), "The impact of adult ill-health on household income and nutrition in Khulna, Bangladesh", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.2, October, pages 35-49.

31. See reference 28.

32. Germain, Adrienne, Sia Nowrojee and Hnin Hnin Pyne (1994), "Setting a new agenda: sexual and reproductive health and rights", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.6, No.2, October, pages 133-154.

33. Yacoob, May and Linda M. Whiteford (1995), "An untapped resource: community based epidemiologists for environmental health", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.7, No.1, pages 219-230.

34. See reference 33.

35. See reference 13.

36. See reference 28.

37. See *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.5, No.1, April 1993 on "Funding Community Initiatives".

38. Rabinovitch, Jonas (1992), "Curitiba: towards sustainable urban development", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.4, No.2, October, pages 62-77.

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# **Notes**