

Community-driven data collection in informal settlements

**Better
Evidence
in Action**

In brief

Around a billion urban dwellers in the global South live in informal settlements. Most of these lack basic infrastructure (including water piped to homes, good provision for sanitation, paved roads, paths and drains) and services (including schools, health care and household waste collection). In many cities in Africa and Asia, more than half of the population live in informal settlements. But there is little or no data on these settlements. Most have no street names and their residents have no addresses. Many national governments rely on national sample surveys for data on health and living conditions, and these have sample sizes too small to provide needed data for the residents of informal settlements.

With community-driven data collection, grassroots organisations collect relevant data to help address their needs. This can be done in various ways, for instance through surveys, participatory mapping or enumerations.

National federations of 'slum'/shack dwellers that are active in over 30 nations have pioneered community-driven surveys of informal settlements. Surveys gather data on each informal settlement in a city from questions asked and answered in group discussions and interviews with key informants. These surveys are able to deal with what are often controversial issues (for instance, landlords worried that tenants may make a claim on the plot they live on) and sensitive issues (for instance, health problems) because the questions are being asked by residents or by community leaders (for instance, savings group managers) that the residents know and trust. Those asking the questions are also taken by community leaders to walk around the settlement — and while doing this to record the settlement's boundary using GPS.

The surveys undertaken by national slum/shack dweller federations cover:

- Details of all informal settlements, the year they were founded, current population and whether they are currently facing an eviction threat
- Housing and site conditions including density, land ownership, eviction threats in the past, quality of housing, tenant:landlord balance, extreme weather events in last 12 months and whether the site is at risk (eg from floods)
- Very detailed assessments of the quality of provision for water (accessibility, cost, quality, time needed to access), sanitation (usually a mixture of individual,

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shared and public toilets), electricity, garbage collection and drainage, street lights, schools, health care facilities, transport services, policing and fire stations

- Nature of community organisations and leadership, regularity of community meetings and interactions with local government, and community priorities for upgrading.

Community-driven surveys do not collect data on each household, shelter and plot. Community-driven enumerations do. These are more time consuming and are used when agreement has been reached on upgrading initiatives or other initiatives to provide infrastructure and services. For instance, if some re-blocking is required when bringing in paved roads, paths and sewers, enumerations provide details of each plot and shelter to support this. Enumerations also provide each house with a number and each household with a card with the data they reported recorded on it and usually a photo of the household. This gives them a document specifying an identifiable address, which is very important for inclusion in government programmes and services.

When can we use it?

Informal settlements are often not included in health, demographic and socioeconomic surveys, and large data gaps exist concerning the lives, livelihoods and living conditions of hundreds of millions of people. Community-driven data collection in informal settlements can fill the gaps left by sample surveys and can address a variety of topics.

The value of community-driven data collection lies on the one hand in the information base it provides to residents and community organisations, allowing them to discuss their priorities based on evidence, and on the other hand in the relationships they help to build with local government. This can be seen in the growth in its use in cities across many nations. Surveys and mapping of informal settlements have been undertaken by slum/shack dweller federations in over 700 cities — sometimes done to fight eviction threats, sometimes to support informal settlement upgrading, sometimes to provide the information base needed for community-managed relocation (for instance, from sites that are too dangerous for upgrading).



Gathering data for an upgrading programme in Pune

Credit: SPARC

Strengths for gathering better evidence

One of the key strengths of community-driven data collection is its ability to simultaneously address local issues and influence discourse, policy and/or practice at higher scales. By bringing out evidence about living conditions and livelihoods in areas not normally covered by conventional data collection efforts, community-driven data collection can serve to challenge negative or poorly informed discourses about informal settlements, and provide transparent and accurate data for the assessment of poverty, health and living conditions, costs, public services and so on.

At the same time, by working directly with the residents in informal settlements, these methods empower people both to frame and collect their own data, at once raising awareness among themselves as a collective and strengthening the voice of their organisations in negotiation or advocacy vis-a-vis local and national authorities.

As such, community-driven data collection is used as a tool for influencing policy and stimulating positive change at different levels. The analysis framing by the poor for the poor leads to more accurate data on which to make decisions around resource allocation, policy design and urban development activities.

Aspects to keep in mind

The results of community-driven data collection efforts provide a perspective that is often otherwise unheeded and, as such, serves to complement or challenge existing knowledge. Depending on the power dynamics of the given context and the interests vested in it, data collected by informal communities themselves may be more or less willingly accepted and listened to by authorities. To resolve situations where the validity of community-driven data collection is challenged by authorities, the local organisations who manage the data collection can take care to adequately check the data and display the results in public so residents can see them and raise objections where relevant. Hundreds of city or municipal governments have accepted the validity of these types of surveys and enumerations, and have used them in planning interventions.

Considering power, inequality and gender

The community organisations that design and carry out the data collection have been explicitly set up in order to give more power and voice to low-income urban dwellers. The tools and methods they use are designed to reinforce this and ensure that they do serve the needs of the lowest income groups.

The documentation of the work of community organisations and their federations to collect their own data includes many personal testimonies by women on the importance of the community groups they belong to. These are usually savings groups that draw women into a collective process that raises their aspirations, and nurtures the confidence and skills they need to achieve them. These involve new public identities for women centred on their leadership in acquiring essential services and strong mutual support through the operation of the savings groups. It is the immediate engagement in local development activities, running meetings, managing finance, constructing or improving homes and community toilets, surveying their neighbourhoods and so on that enables women to discover their capabilities. Women-led savings groups have also organised to address other pressing issues including domestic violence.

Community-driven data collection in action

In IIED's work to support poverty reduction in urban areas over the last 25 years, the most powerful and relevant learning has been through working with, listening to and helping document the work of national federations of slum/shack dwellers and Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) that supports them. Federation surveys have documented conditions in 16,000 informal settlements. Their sanitation programmes, upgrading programmes and new

Community-driven data collection can serve to challenge negative or poorly informed discourses about informal settlements



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Toolkit

Contributors to the toolkit

Simon Anderson	Celie Manuel
Sam Barrett	Essam
Annabelle	Mohammed
Bladon	David
Francesca	Satterthwaite
Booker	Krystyna
Stefano D'Errico	Swiderska
Phil Franks	Janna Tenzing
Sam Greene	Xiaoxue Weng
Ced Hesse	

Contact

David Satterthwaite
david.satterthwaite@iied.org

Sam Barrett
sam.barrett@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road, London,
WC1X 8NH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

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and www.facebook.com/theiied

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housing programmes have reached hundreds of thousands of low-income households. Most of the federations have many working partnerships with local governments. Many have set up local funds that support collective initiatives and provide downward as well as upward accountability.

Community-driven data collection and use will remain one of the key underpinnings of what has become a powerful, global social movement. Surveys, mapping and enumerations are part of a range of methods used by the federations. Through practise, reflection and adaptation, their members have refined a toolkit that has proven highly adaptable and relevant to different settings.

Community-led surveys to challenge official poverty lines

National governments and international agencies set poverty lines to allow them to measure the scale and depth of poverty. These poverty lines are meant to represent the income a person or household needs to meet daily nutrition requirements and pay for other basic needs. Many official poverty lines are contested — perhaps especially the US\$1 per person per day poverty line used by the World Bank (currently adjusted to US\$1.90). This greatly under-estimates the scale of urban poverty, because in most urban contexts it is far too low to cover the cost of non-food needs (including rent, payments for water and sanitation, healthcare, keeping children at school, transport, and so on). Set a poverty line low enough and no one is poor.

IIED has been presenting evidence on the inappropriateness and inaccuracy of poverty lines and other poverty measures for 25 years. But discussions with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights led to another approach. Grassroots leaders from six Asian nations were invited to consider how they would define and measure poverty, and after an initial meeting in 2014 they returned to their cities and collected data that they considered relevant for measuring and monitoring poverty. This included over a thousand detailed household expenditure surveys from different settlements in a range of cities in each of the six nations. They highlighted how the US\$1/day poverty line was far below the cost of basic needs and identified ways to reach the poorest groups.

This document is part of the 'Better Evidence in Action' toolkit.

Further reading

For the work of the federations and SDI, see www.sdinet.org

For a short overview of the federations, see Satterthwaite, D and Mitlin, D (2013) *Reducing Urban Poverty in the Global South*. Routledge, London.

60 papers on the work of different federations have been published in *Environment and Urbanization*. See <http://eau.sagepub.com>. Most are open access. See Vol 24, No 1 — whole issue on community-driven enumerations and mapping.

For the community-driven data for poverty lines in Asia, see Boonyabancha, S and Kerr, T (2015) How urban poor community leaders define and measure poverty. *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pages 637–656.

Figure 1. The tools and methods used by SDI federations

