Search

Our work   About   News and comment   Publications

Why enumeration counts: documenting by the undocumented

Around one in seven people around the world live in informal settlements in urban areas. These settlements – sometimes referred to as slums or shantytowns – lack not only good provisions for water, sanitation and basic services, they are also often deliberately left out of official surveys and maps. As a result, their inhabitants rarely have official identity documents, or other official papers confirming their address and therefore their right to live there.

Guest blog by Sheela Patel

10 May 2012

For residents, having no official documents often means being denied connections to piped water supplies and sewers, and not having access to services such as household waste collections, local policing, and even schooling and/or health care. It often means no possibility of opening a bank account, obtaining insurance or getting on the voters' register.

If someone has an address and has been counted in a city survey, with documents to prove it, this suggests they (and their neighbourhood) are considered part of the legal city. A legal address can also provide some protection against their house being bulldozed or, should it be destroyed, of getting some compensation.

Truly participatory documentation?

Clearly documentation is important, but what is collected and how it is collected is also crucial. While many development interventions and the surveys associated with them are often said to be

participatory, many are not. Assessing participation in documentation should include an assessment of whether inhabitants:

- are involved in setting the questions being asked to them
- have ownership of the information generated from the survey and
- can use the knowledge that the research, surveys and data collection produces for their own discussions of priorities and in their negotiations with local governments

Based on these three assessment criteria, many documentation processes calling themselves participatory would come up short.

Community-led documentation

Women and men from Pupo community, southern Thailand arrange squares, representing house plots, on paper to visualise how they could group dwellings together. Credit: Chawanad Luansang.

People living in informal settlements are well aware of the benefits of documentation and are now carrying out enumerations and mapping their own settlements as a result. This truly participatory work is described in case studies from Ghana, Kenya, India, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda and Zimbabwe in the new issue of the journal *Environment and Urbanization*.

In Zimbabwe, community-driven settlement mapping and enumeration in Magada, a large informal settlement in Epworth, just outside the country's capital, Harare, has brought about plans for major changes. The process facilitated an agreement between the residents and their community organizations, and local and national government to work together to improve the conditions, for example, of the settlement's road layout and water and sanitation systems. The process also provided the maps and data needed to implement this work.

It's the first time that a local government has agreed to support 'upgrading' or improvement works, and it's the first settlement plan in the country to include meaningful participation by residents in

articulating their priorities and in influencing the design. The work to map and number each plot was undertaken by teams that included residents, supported by members of the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation. For more details, see the paper by Beth Chitekwe-Biti, Patience Mudimu, George Masimba Nyama and Takudzwa Jera.

The National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda enumerated informal settlements in five cities where 200,000 people are living. This work developed the skills and capacity of Federation members carrying out the enumerations and mapping, which in turn supported the planning and implementation of upgrading work by federation, local and national government agencies. Read the full paper by Jack Makau, Skye Dobson and Edith Samia for further information.

In Ghana, community-driven enumerations were undertaken in Old Fadama, the largest informal settlement in Accra, whose residents have long been threatened with eviction. Three enumerations have been done to show politicians and civil servants the scale of economic activities carried out in the settlement, and its importance for the city's economy as a whole. The enumerations changed the city government's perspective on informal settlements and helped shape policy away from forced evictions towards participatory relocations or rehabilitating the settlement. The enumerations also increased the residents' confidence to engage with city government. For more details, see the paper by Braimah R Farouk and Mensah Owusu.

In South Africa, the survey and enumeration held in Joe Slovo, an informal settlement of about 8,000 inhabitants in Cape Town, showed the likely negative impacts of a proposed resettlement on the residents. Many residents worked nearby and, if moved further out of the city, would have faced difficulties paying for transportation. The enumeration – which revealed that the population of Joe Slovo was much smaller than expected – helped open up the possibility of redeveloping the existing settlement. The data collected is now being used to facilitate this work, including improving the settlements' sanitation systems. For more details, see the paper by Carrie Baptist and Joel Bolnick.

The Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia has carried out enumerations and mapping in all the country's informal settlements. The scale of the work sets a precedent – more than 500,000 people live in the settlements without secure land tenure. The residents were supported to carry out detailed enumerations and mapping to identify development priorities and to provide the information needed for development initiatives. For more details, see the paper by Anna Muller and Edith Mbanga.

A federation of women's savings groups from the city of Cuttack, Orissa state, India has surveyed and mapped all 331 of the cities' informal settlements. Meetings with residents were held to create a profile of each of the settlements, and Global Positioning System devices were used to map out settlement boundaries. This information has helped provided the local government with accurate digital maps of the settlements, and has influenced plans to upgrade the slums. For more details, see the paper by Avery Livengood and Keya Kunte.

Sharing learning

Similar tools and methods as those outlined above are being used in many other cities around the world by different federations of slum/shack dwellers. These federations, and the local NGOs that work with them, are members of Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). These community-led documentation processes have become a core practice of the federations – along with supporting community-managed savings groups, and federation exchanges to see and learn from each other's work. Many of the peer exchanges have involved community leaders experienced in community-led documentation visiting groups in other cities or nations to share their experiences on how this can be done. So, the groundwork is being laid for further community-led documentation of urban informal settlements in the future.

This was written by guest blogger Sheela Patel. She is the founder and Director of the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) India, which is based in Mumbai, and works in partnership with the National Slum Dweller Federation and Mahila Milan. She is also Chair of Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI).

Tags: Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), Enumeration, Participatory documentation, Environment and Urbanization, Urban Matters.

Share:

All blogs | About the IIED blog
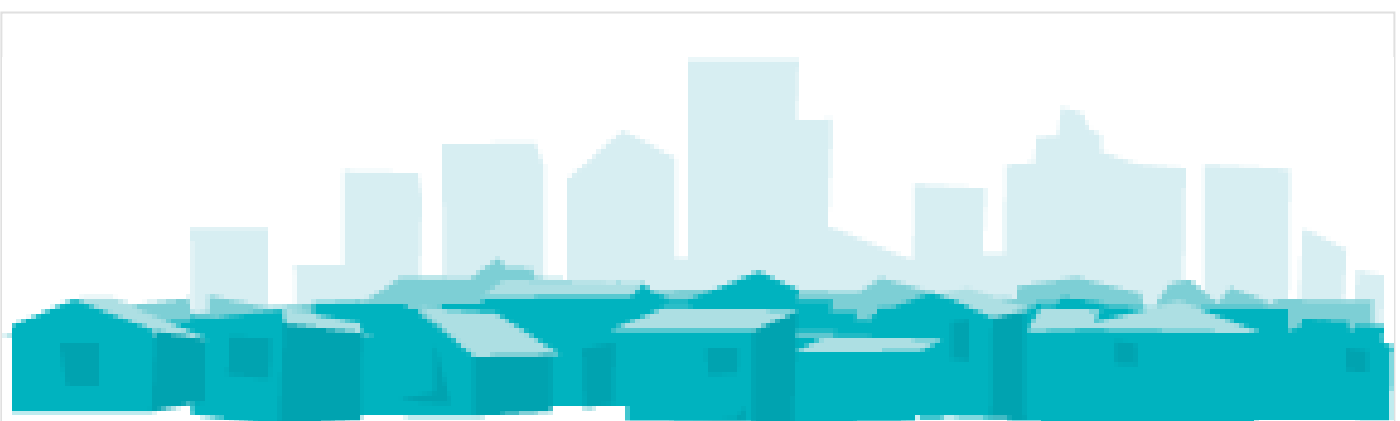
URBAN MATTERS

Blogs integrating research and action for more inclusive and sustainable cities

Blog series