

Community-generated data crucial for implementing New Urban Agenda

Good urban planning can't happen without a better understanding of informal settlements, advocates say.

Brendon Bosworth October 20, 2016

QUITO, Ecuador — Earlier this year, when the Liberian government wanted to demolish informal housing in the West Point section of Monrovia, local community members had a strong argument to dissuade them.

Thanks to a slum profiling initiative done the previous year through Shack/Slum Dwellers International, the community knew that many of West Point's rudimentary, wooden toilets — so-called “hanging toilets” because of how they are built over the water — were located where the demolitions would take place. The toilets likely would get destroyed too.

Destroying the toilets, they argued, would pose a public health threat.

“That was where we came with our data and said ‘no’,” recalls Bill Jlateh Harris, of Shack/Slum Dwellers International, who lives in West Point. “If you take away [toilets] you expose us to open defecation and disease outbreaks. We appealed to them, using our documents, to stop the demolition exercise. It worked. Those structures are still there, in fact. They were not touched.”

The data community members collected in West Point includes information about the number of taps and toilets in the area, as well as population figures. It is available online through the “Know Your City” campaign, a data initiative from Shack/Slum Dwellers international that provides community-generated data from more than 7,700 communities in 224 cities.

In upcoming forums between the municipality, civil society groups, and community members, the data will be useful for assessing the progress of local development projects, says Harris.

“The information we have collected is basically used to engage national government,” he says.

“The truth is, there is not much new [data] at the national level about the slums.”

Filling a void

Community-generated data that gives insight into the state of informal settlements is valuable to community members who, like Harris, can use it to influence government decisions. But it's also crucial to urban researchers looking to get a clear picture of the dynamics in informal settlements, especially due to the paucity of urban data available on the Global South.

“It's important to hear from multiple scales — from residents, to neighborhood level, and city- and regional-level information,” says Timon McPhearson, director of the urban ecology lab at the

New School in New York. We need “to hear about how they’re being affected by the many challenges, as well as how they’re responding.”

“In many cases, local communities have already innovated in incredible, and in many cases low-tech, solutions for dealing with their everyday challenges as a way to improve their livelihoods,” says McPhearson. “That information isn’t easily transferred to other locales, just because the data isn’t being gathered.”

[Read: [Habitat III prompts hope for more inclusive view toward informal settlements](#)]

The New Urban Agenda, the 20-year strategy for sustainable urbanization adopted here this week at the U.N.’s Habitat III conference on cities, speaks to the use of community-generated data. It’s folded into a broader appeal to governments to brush up on their data collection, synthesis, and sharing capacities.

The document asks signatories to support “institutionalized mechanisms for sharing and exchanging information, knowledge and expertise,” which includes the collection, analysis, and sharing of reliable community-collected data. It directs governments to support data collection, analysis and sharing initiatives across spheres of government, which includes data from community-based monitoring processes. And it pushes governments to promote the creation of “open, user-friendly, and participatory data platforms.”

This is a good start, but as with other issues in the New Urban Agenda, it doesn’t go far enough to make concrete the way this should be done, experts say.

“The New Urban Agenda does emphasize the importance of knowledge holders at multiple levels,” McPhearson says. “But it doesn’t address how to gather that knowledge, how to spread that knowledge, how to analyze it and read it back to communities in the forms of solution making.”

Researchers can play a role in working with the data gathered by communities, he says. “There is a critical role for [researchers], in particular, to be involved in knowledge gathering, synthesis, and analysis, and finding the opportunity space for new solutions to address the urban challenges.”

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