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# Slum Renaissance

Rethinking Human Habitats

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# Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the way in which we have addressed and how we currently address slum issues in order to generate a broader and deeper understanding of how slum strategies could be better organized in the future. Slums are becoming an increasingly, and ominously, prevailing form of human settlement and traditional strategies of addressing the problem have often failed. Therefore, from a normative viewpoint within the context of sustainable development, it is my belief that new, more equitable and sustainable strategies are needed. In this thesis, I attempt to break down a number of myths regarding slum communities and their inhabitants. It is my belief that such myths and pre-understandings can generate negative and pejorative attitudes towards slum communities and, ultimately, lead to failed policies and strategies. In the concluding chapter, I propose a “Renaissance” of the way we understand and relate to slum communities and the vital urban functions they represent in order to generate ideas for more sustainable future strategies.

Keywords: *Slums, Informal Settlements, Community Participation, Urbanization, Poverty, Sustainable Development, Urban Planning*

# Summary

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|----------------------------|--|
| <b>Title:</b>              | Slum Renaissance – Rethinking Human Habitats   |
| <b>Level:</b>              | Master thesis, spring semester 2009 (30 ECTS)  |
| <b>University:</b>         | Uppsala University & Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences   |
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| <b>Problem:</b>            | Slums are becoming an increasingly prevalent form of human settlement. A third of the global urban population now resides in slum communities. This figure is predicted to double in the coming thirty years if no concrete and comprehensive action is taken. However, traditional means of dealing with slums have proved largely inefficient and, to some extent, counter-productive. |
| <b>Research questions:</b> | What has characterized traditional strategies for addressing slum problems? Which are the elements of failure and success in these strategies? How does our perception of slums affect the way we relate to them and deal with them? How can future strategies be enhanced?  |
| <b>Purpose:</b>            | The purpose of this essay is to analyze the way in which we have addressed and how we currently address slum issues in order to generate a broader and deeper understanding of how slum strategies could be better organized in the future.  |
| <b>Keywords:</b>           | Slums, Informal Settlements, Community Participation, Urbanization, Poverty, Sustainable Development, Urban Planning   |

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# 1. Introduction

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*This introductory chapter is comprised of a brief prologue, a description of the purpose of this thesis, problem definition, methodology, disposition and a discussion regarding the academic relevance of the essay.*

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## PROLOGUE

*“You can close the city gates but not the mouths of men.”*

- Iranian proverb

Slums are becoming an increasingly, and ominously, prevalent form of human settlement. Their appearance and constitution may vary extensively in the global context, but they have at least one thing in common: they manifest a severe and acute failure in the planning and organization of our human habitats, a failure essentially characterized by the dreary livelihoods of hundreds of millions of urban residents around the world. Historically, slums have existed in various forms since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, although poor urban areas have existed ever since the very advent of cities. Still today, an ever-increasing number of people seek refuge and opportunities in the cities, especially in the Global South. Cities and urbanities have, however, often shown to be organizationally incapable of dealing with these new residents. Forced evictions and removal of slum residents have been two ways of dealing with the problem whereas nowadays, slum upgrading is the prevailing strategy. But slum upgrading is, as we shall see, not an entirely sufficient solution to the problem

since it is still a reactive rather than proactive strategy. There have for a long time been discussions regarding the urbanization of poverty. Perhaps we should also begin to discuss the 'impoverishment of urbanity' – the lack of urban organizational capacity and political will to deal with issues such as slums and poverty.

The United Nations declare that, despite the lack of a universal and holistic definition of slums, around one billion – or one third of the global urban population – resided in slum areas in 2003. In the absence of radical measures to tackle the problem, this discouraging figure is predicted to double in the coming 30 years.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this will be a severe obstacle in the global endeavor towards sustainable development, but most fundamentally, it will be an acute predicament for the millions of people who desperately continue to search for renewed hope and opportunities in our overcrowding cities. As physical manifestations of socio-economic, political and organizational failures, the global slums will continue to incarnate the dismal backsides of urbanization in the coming decades. The World Bank, for example, has warned that urban poverty will become the “most significant, and politically explosive, problem of the next century”.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally falling outside of regional and urban planning, slum areas are often considered as marginalities, informal enclaves on the perilous margins of burgeoning city centers – outside of the closed city gates. I intend to show that this is largely an artificial presumption; that slum communities are not marginalized enclaves, but rather well-incorporated and productive socio-economic parts of the urban fabric. My assertion is that if we continue to look upon these communities as marginalized, they will continue to be marginalized. As such, they will remain chimerical obstacles for development rather than potential catalysts for entrepreneurial energy and human capacity. My other assertion is consequently that slum communities must be embedded in all aspects of urban planning and that they must be seen as inherent parts of the urban

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<sup>1</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: foreword

<sup>2</sup> Anqing, Shi, 2000: p.14

fabric. Conceivably, there are a number of myths regarding slum communities which, according to my viewpoint, can lead to misconceptions, prejudices and, ultimately, failed policies. It is my intention to break down a number of these myths and to try to look at the problem area with a “new set of eyes”.

What is proposed in this essay is therefore a ‘slum renaissance’. The meaning of the term ‘renaissance’ is a ‘rebirth’ or a ‘new start’<sup>3</sup>. In the context of this project, it represents both a rebirth of the slum communities *per se* (in for example their physical, infrastructural, socio-economic and environmental manifestations) but perhaps most importantly a rebirth of the way we understand these communities and integrate them in planning and organizational processes. It is my profound belief that infrastructural, socio-economic and environmental development must be deeply rooted in holistic, interdisciplinary planning and organization if any tangible and sustainable results are to be achieved. This is exactly what has been lacking when it comes to slum communities.

## **1.1 Problem definition**

A third of the global urban population now resides in slum communities. This figure is predicted to double in the coming thirty years if no concrete and comprehensive action is taken. However, traditional means of dealing with slums have proved largely inefficient and, to some extent, counter-productive. The current paradigm of ‘slum upgrading’ holds many promises but is apparently not sufficient for tackling the problem of ever-increasing urban poverty. Therefore, innovative and more comprehensive strategies for dealing with slum communities must be adopted. I argue that slum communities should be embedded in all aspects of urban planning and organization, something that requires a new perspective of the issues at hand – a renaissance of the way we

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<sup>3</sup> Renaissance: meaning "rebirth" or "revival"; from Italian: Rinascimento, from re- "again" and nascere "be born". The term refers to the historical period in Europe between 1400 and 1600, a period characterized by a radical development in arts, medicine, politics, sciences and humanism following the dark ages. The term can also represent a major social transformation.

understand slum communities in the context of sustainable development. Furthermore, it is my belief that there are a number of misconceptions and prejudices (among the broader public as well as among for example planners, politicians and scientists) regarding slum communities which must be dealt with in order to address slum issues in a more efficient, equitable and sustainable manner.

## **1.2 Purpose and research questions**

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the way in which we have addressed and how we currently address slum issues in order to generate a broader and deeper understanding of how slum strategies could be better organized in the future. The departure point of this essay is normative in the sense that I believe that such strategies should be enhanced and improved if our societies are to achieve real change in the endeavor towards a more equitable and sustainable development in the decades to come. Moreover, the purpose is also to break down a number of “myths” regarding slums which I believe affect the way we understand and relate to slum issues.

Key research questions:

- *What has characterized traditional strategies for addressing slum problems?*
- *Which are the elements of failure and success in these strategies?*
- *How does our perception of slums affect the way we relate to them and deal with them?*
- *From an organizational/planning viewpoint, how can future strategies be enhanced?*

### **1.3 Methodology**

To put it simply, the methodology is the path leading from the problem definition and research questions to the potential answers conclusions in the end. It is the technique and process by which the problem is addressed in all stages of the research:

- gathering of information
- analysis and explanation of information
- interpretation of the analytical results
- evaluation of the interpretation<sup>4</sup>

This essay embraces a broad problem area and it is general in its character. The methodology used will be based on thorough literature studies within the area in order to gather the information necessary for analysis, interpretation and evaluation. The thesis will have a qualitative character although quantitative data will be used for illustrating and addressing the problem at hand. Part of the thesis, namely the chapter where I will try to break down a number of myths surrounding slums, will also have a discourse analytical character. An abductive re-contextualization of the “slum problem” will provide the methodological basis of my research. An abductive approach commences in empirical data without discarding theoretical inspiration, allowing for a re-contextualization of the phenomena at hand during the process of research.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, this will be an exploratory study where I will try to deepen my understanding of the issues constituting my research by using information gathered from case studies and other writings and by relating these to a framework for analysis. These kinds of frameworks are often said to be most important in deductive, theory-testing studies but their importance in exploratory studies should not be reduced. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are in a sense always guided by a

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<sup>4</sup> Rienecker & Jörgensen, 2000: pp.166-167

<sup>5</sup> Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994: p.42

theoretical framework – our “pre-understanding” of the world around us. By making this implicit framework explicit it may be possible to avoid preconceived ideas of certain phenomena and try to see the processes through a different set of eyes.

## **1.4 Delimitations**

As previously mentioned, this thesis is of a general character and not a case study. Accordingly, the thesis has no explicit geographical case limitation, although the main focus is on cities and slum communities in the developing world. The lack of a universal definition of slums makes generalizing quite an intricate task, but as described later, I will identify aspects of slum communities which are more or less common in a global perspective. Whatever definition used, there is generally a common understanding of what a slum is, and this is also an issue which will be addressed in the thesis. As for the temporal limitations, I have mainly concentrated on the time period from the 1950’s and onwards. The reason for choosing this stretch of time is the rapid growth in urbanization and slum formation that has occurred during the last half-century.

## **1.5 Academic relevance and previous research**

My intention is that this thesis shall have both societal and academic relevance. Within the current paradigm of sustainable development, it is my belief that understanding and dealing with slum issues will become increasingly important components of development strategies in the future. However, slums are still often not recognized and addressed by authorities as integral parts of cities and urban planning<sup>6</sup> and therefore, spontaneous urbanization processes will continuously put pressure on the sustainability of our human habitats. Thus, part of the academic relevance of this thesis lies in identifying obstacles to a more

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<sup>6</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2003: Guide to monitoring target 11: Improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers

sustainable approach for dealing with slums. While realizing the difficulties in such an endeavor, I believe that it is an important and interesting task to at least try to look at the problem with “a new set of eyes”, hopefully generating ideas and perspectives which can be used for further reflection and research.

There is a lot of previous research within the problem area. The field of urbanization processes and slum formation is well-advanced and organizations such as UN-HABITAT and the World Bank continuously publish new findings regarding slum issues both as case studies and more general writings. Such previous research is certainly valuable for this thesis and I intend to use it methodically with a critical angle. One of the most important sources for my study will be the groundbreaking UN-HABITAT publication “The Challenge of Slums – Global Report on Human Settlements 2003”. The book “Planet of Slums” by Mike Davis will also provide interesting contributions and ideas. Furthermore, I have read a large number of articles on the subject which I intend to connect to my writing effort.

## **1.6 Disposition**

The introductory chapter of this thesis includes a brief prologue, problem definition, purpose and central study questions, description of the methodology used, delimitations and a discussion regarding the academic relevance of the essay. The second chapter deals with the theoretical framework which is intended to guide my writing as well as brief definitions of the concepts which are central to this framework. These concepts will also be examined and elaborated more thoroughly in later parts of the thesis. This part also deals with the complicated matter of trying to define what a slum is. In chapter three there is a historical background description of urbanization in the developing world and the formation of slums. It is my belief that such a background description is necessary for the context of the thesis. Later on, in chapter four I intend to break down a number of “myths” regarding slums with the purpose of developing an enhanced

understanding of the problem area, not obscured by misconceptions and prejudices. With this in mind, in chapter five I will look at how the “slum problem” has been addressed historically and today, trying to understand why slum policies often fail. The sixth concluding chapter comprises a discussion, analysis and interpretation of my findings.

## 2. Theoretical framework and central concepts

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*In the following chapter I will initially introduce the central concepts of this essay in relation to the theoretical framework which I intend to use in order to answer the specified research questions.*

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**T**he word ‘theory’ here implies a system of suppositions and premises within a field of study which can be used in order to interpret, describe and explain a phenomenon, creating a framework for the understanding of the subject. As such, the word ‘theory’ is not equivalent to hypothesis or thesis.<sup>7</sup> The theoretical framework of this essay will, in combination with the specified methodology, be used as a tool for organizing and structuring the research in a manner that makes the essay intelligible and comprehensible with regard to the problem area and definition. ‘Concepts’ are the central keywords connected to the theoretical framework which are used in order to analyze and organize the information at hand. The concepts are systematically necessary for a comprehensible framework, especially if there are doubts, discussions or alternatives regarding their definitions and meanings. They are either collected from existing theories or defined according to the research matter.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 Central concepts

In this part, I intend to briefly define some of the concepts which are central to this thesis, accordingly constituting the backbone of the theoretical/conceptual

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<sup>7</sup> Rienecker & Jörgensen, 2000: p.158

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

framework which will guide the research process. These concepts will be elaborated more thoroughly in the coming chapters of the essay.

### 2.1.1 Sustainable Development and Sustainable Urban Development

The most quoted definition of sustainable development is the one coined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>9</sup> Sustainable development is often conceptually broken into three parts: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability as seen in the figure below. During the last decades, the concept of sustainable

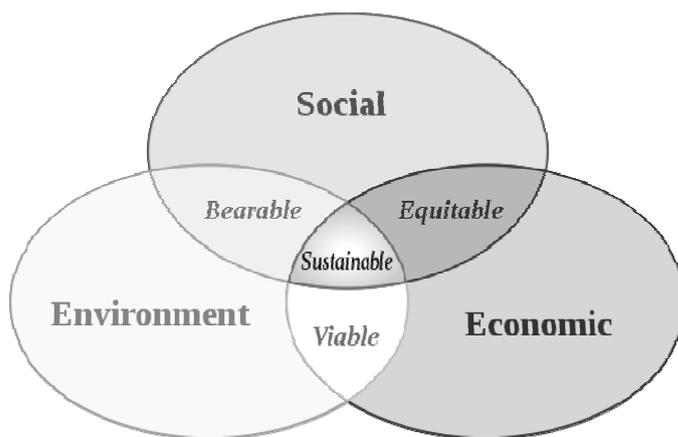


Fig.1: The three pillars of sustainable development

development has been part of a dominating development paradigm although it has also been highly contested from many directions. It is said to be too ambiguous with no “true meaning”, signifying “everything and nothing” and weak as a policy goal.<sup>10</sup>

Influential writer Wolfgang

Sachs further claims that “since ‘development’ is conceptually an empty shell that may cover anything from the rate of capital accumulation to the number of latrines, it becomes eternally unclear and contestable just what exactly should be kept sustainable”.<sup>11</sup> However, the idea of sustainable development as a normatively holistic development strategy suits the context of this thesis. I will mostly be referring to sustainable *urban* development since urban areas,

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. 1987: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development

<sup>10</sup> Connelly, 2007: p.260

<sup>11</sup> Sachs, 2000: p.81

primarily in the developing world, are the focal points of my research. So then, what signifies sustainable *urban* development in this context? It is clear that due to the rapid global urbanization during the last decades, our cities will be central components of future development strategies. As mentioned in a UN report, a number of indicators for sustainable urban development have been proposed in connection to urban life quality; job opportunities, food, water, energy, education, poverty, transportation, recreation, health, environment, crime and housing.<sup>12</sup> Hence, further breaking down the “three pillars” of sustainability as mentioned above, sustainable urban development in this context spans over a wide array of issues often connected to the governance, planning and organization of our urban societies. The difference between “regular” sustainable development and sustainable *urban* development is perhaps a semantic one, but in any case, cities are generally complex and dynamic systems which need unique attention, strategies and policies.

### **2.1.2 Defining slums**

The term ‘slum’ is an ambiguous concept that needs to be examined further. It generally relates to an area/community/district with a large amount of poor people and an extensive lack of public services. The negative and pejorative connotations (such as for example high criminality and unsanitary conditions) of the term have prevailed through history. According to some, the word ‘slum’ itself dates back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where it was used for labeling “racketing” and “criminal trade”. It later transformed from a practice into actual living conditions, taking a physical form in poor, overcrowded inner-city areas in for example, London, Paris, America and India.<sup>13</sup> Today, slums have many different names; *Favelas* in Brazil, *Kampungs* in Indonesia, *Bidonvilles* in North Africa, *Barrios* in Venezuela, *Shantytowns* in South Africa, *Tugurios* in Latin

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations, 2001: Sustainable Urban Development: A Regional Perspective on Good Urban Governance, p.8

<sup>13</sup> Davis, 2006: p.21-22

America and *Gecekondus* in Turkey to mention a few<sup>14</sup>. Although diverse in character and context, they often share certain elements. Nevertheless, there are many difficulties in defining the term 'slum'.

The Cities Alliance<sup>15</sup> has attempted to define what they mean with the term as:

A community that does not have

- Basic municipal services such as water, sanitation, waste collection, storm drainage, street lighting, paved footpaths, roads for emergency access;
- Schools and clinics within easy reach, safe places for kids to play
- Places for the community to meet and socialize

Further, the Cities Alliance claim that slum populations are marginalized, exposed to disease, crime and natural disasters. Among other things, they are the result of failed policies, corruption, dysfunctional land markets and lack of political will.<sup>16</sup> However, since our understanding of slums changes over time and place, it is hard (or perhaps even impossible) to make a universal definition of what a slum is. Due to different social, economic, cultural, political and physical factors, countries, and even cities, all over the world define slums differently. The table below illustrates a survey of 29 cities regarding their definitions of a slum, conducted by the UN for their Global Report on Human Settlements 2003.

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<sup>14</sup> See for example TEAR Australia, "Slum Facts" (<http://www.tear.org.au/education/slum-survivor/slum-facts/>)

<sup>15</sup> The Cities Alliance is a global coalition of cities and their development partners committed to scaling up successful approaches to poverty reduction.

<sup>16</sup> Cities Alliance, 1999: p.1

|                | No definition | Construction materials | Temporary nature | Construction legality | Land legality | Health and hygiene | Basic services | Infrastructure | Crowding | Poverty | Low income | Environment | Compactness | Crime and violence |
|----------------|---------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|----------|---------|------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Abidjan        | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Ahmedabad      |               | X                      | X                |                       |               | X                  | X              |                | X        |         |            |             | X           |                    |
| Bangkok        |               |                        |                  |                       |               | X                  |                |                | X        |         |            | X           |             | X                  |
| Barcelona      | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Beirut         | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Bogotá         |               |                        |                  | X                     | X             |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Cairo          |               | X                      |                  | X                     | X             |                    | X              |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Chengdu        |               |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            | X           |             |                    |
| Colombo        |               | X                      | X                | X                     | X             | X                  | X              |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Durban         |               | X                      | X                |                       |               |                    | X              |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Havana         |               | X                      |                  |                       |               | X                  | X              | X              |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Ibadan         |               | X                      |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          | X       | X          |             |             |                    |
| Jakarta        |               |                        |                  |                       | X             |                    |                |                |          |         | X          |             |             |                    |
| Karachi        |               |                        |                  |                       | X             |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Kolkata        |               | X                      | X                |                       |               |                    | X              |                | X        |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Los Angeles    |               | X                      |                  |                       | X             |                    |                |                | X        |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Lusaka         |               |                        |                  |                       | X             |                    | X              | X              |          |         | X          |             |             |                    |
| Manila         |               | X                      |                  |                       |               | X                  |                |                | X        | X       |            |             |             |                    |
| Mexico City    | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Moscow         | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Nairobi        |               |                        |                  |                       |               |                    | X              | X              |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Naples         | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Newark         | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Phnom Penh     |               |                        |                  |                       | X             |                    |                |                |          |         |            | X           |             |                    |
| Quito          |               |                        |                  | X                     | X             |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Rabat-Salé     |               | X                      |                  |                       | X             |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Rio de Janeiro |               | X                      |                  | X                     | X             |                    | X              | X              | X        |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Sao Paulo      |               | X                      |                  |                       |               | X                  | X              | X              | X        |         |            |             |             |                    |
| Sydney         | X             |                        |                  |                       |               |                    |                |                |          |         |            |             |             |                    |

Table 1: Local slum definitions (source: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003, p.197)

Out of these 29 cities, eight lacked a formal slum definition. The most commonly referred to issues are the use of poor construction materials, the issue of legality and the lack of basic services. Interestingly, the aspect of poverty only appears in two definitions. Naturally, not all slum inhabitants are poor. Likewise, not all the urban poor are slum residents.

Due to the lack of a general slum definition, a United Nations Expert Group developed an operational definition of slums in 2002. This definition is to a great extent based on the Millennium Development Goals. The table below illustrates this operational definition. It embraces inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding and insecure residential status. Note however that this definition does not account for the more difficult social dimensions of slum communities.

| Characteristic                       | Indicator                                 | Definition   |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Access to water</b>               | Inadequate drinking water supply          | A settlement has an inadequate drinking water supply if less than 50 % of households have an improved water supply: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Household connection;</li> <li>• Access to public stand pipe;</li> <li>• Rainwater collection;</li> </ul> with at least 20 liters/person/day available within an acceptable collection distance   |
| <b>Access to sanitation</b>          | Inadequate sanitation                     | A settlement has inadequate sanitation if less than 50 % of households have improved sanitation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public sewer;</li> <li>• Septic tank;</li> <li>• Pour-flush latrine;</li> <li>• Ventilated improvement pit latrine;</li> </ul> The excreta disposal system is considered adequate if it is private or shared by a maximum of two households  |
| <b>Structural quality of housing</b> | a. Location<br>b. Permanency of structure | a. Proportion of households residing on or near a hazardous site. The following locations should be considered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing in geologically hazardous zones (landslide/earthquake and flood areas);</li> <li>• Housing on or under garbage mountains;</li> <li>• Housing around high-industrial pollution areas;</li> <li>• Housing around other unprotected high-risk zones (e.g. airports, railroads, energy transmission lines).</li> </ul> b. Proportion of households living in temporary and/or dilapidated structures. The following factors should be considered when placing a housing unit in these categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of construction (e.g. materials used for wall, floor and roof);</li> <li>• Compliance with local building codes, standards and bylaws</li> </ul> |
| <b>Overcrowding</b>                  | Overcrowding                              | Proportion of households with more than two persons per  |

|                           |                    |   |
|---------------------------|--------------------|---|
|                           |                    | room. The alternative is to set a minimum standard for floor area per person (e.g. 5 m <sup>2</sup> )   |
| <b>Security of tenure</b> | Security of tenure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proportion of households with formal title deeds to both land and residence.</li> <li>• Proportion of households with formal title deeds to either one of land or residence.</li> <li>• Proportion of households with enforceable agreements or any documents as a proof of tenure arrangement.</li> </ul> |

*Table 2. Operational definition of slums (Source: Adapted from UN Habitat, 2002a, 2002b, The Challenge of Slums, p.12)*

This operational definition includes the top referred-to aspects of the case study survey mentioned above; construction materials, legality and provision of basic services. Conceivably, the use of these indicators also relates to their measurability at household and community level. A social (and perhaps socio-economic and socio-cultural) dimension is of course more difficult to assess and measure in an operational definition like this, at least in a quantitative manner. Likewise, within the context of sustainable development, it is often the case that the social dimensions of sustainability are indistinct and difficult to assess. While the social dimension is generally recognized as an integral pillar of sustainable development, it also lacks an operational character since it is simply so complex to define what aspects should be embraced and developed.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, slums are complex, they constitute a relative concept, there is an abundance of local variations and they are often in constant change. Still, the UN asserts, it would be better for several purposes to have a more universal and objective slum definition, but this is an effort that has just recently started.<sup>18</sup> Despite what definition used and what aspects are covered in such a definition, it is my belief that there are also other factors affecting the way we understand and relate to

<sup>17</sup> Martin, (OECD), 2001: pp.3-4

<sup>18</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: pp.10-11

slums, as a concept and as a reality. In chapter four, I will go through a number of myths and pre-understandings of slums which I believe affect our understanding of the slum phenomenon.

### 3. Background – Urbanization and the Formation of Slums

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*In this background chapter I will describe the historical development of urbanization and the growth of slum areas in the developing world. I will relate this to the literature and theoretical viewpoints on which this thesis resides.*

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*“Urban poverty is one of the biggest stories happening on the planet. But it gets ignored because it happens slowly, inexorably.”<sup>19</sup>*

**A**s our world is becoming increasingly urbanized, global population patterns more and more resemble a dotted canvas of ever-growing cities and abandoned hinterlands. In a process often generated by rural impoverishment and underdevelopment, people are guided towards the cities – busy centers of commerce, jobs, culture, opportunities and future prospects. A seemingly universal urban appeal has indeed created new opportunities as cities have become motors for development and drivers for change. It has, nonetheless, also generated enormous socio-economic and environmental problems which increasingly impede the prospects of a positive future development. This dilemma – the developmental potential of urbanization versus its demising capability to utilize this potential – is often characterized and aggravated by the extensive lack of efficient and integrated planning which is needed for urbanization to be socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

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<sup>19</sup> McLean, 2006

### 3.1 Urbanization in the developing world

During the last century, rapid urbanization has been one of the most crucial socio-economic changes of our societies. Societies in the developing world are no exceptions. They have been primarily rural, but are rapidly becoming urbanized as more and more people move into the cities from the countryside in order to find jobs and new opportunities in life. In 1950, the proportion of people living in cities in the developing world was only 18 per cent. By 2030, this proportion is predicted to have risen to 56 per cent.<sup>20</sup> According to some, we have reached 'maximum urbanization' in many parts of the western world. Global population growth will therefore to a large extent be concentrated to cities in the developing countries. In the coming 30 years, the urban population in the developing world is predicted to double to around 4 billion at a growth rate of around 70 million people annually. There is, however, an extensive lack of planning regarding the possibilities of accommodating these new urban residents or providing them with necessary services.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, this rapid urban growth has generated a wide array of socio-economic and environmental problems of which slum areas in many senses have become physical manifestations.

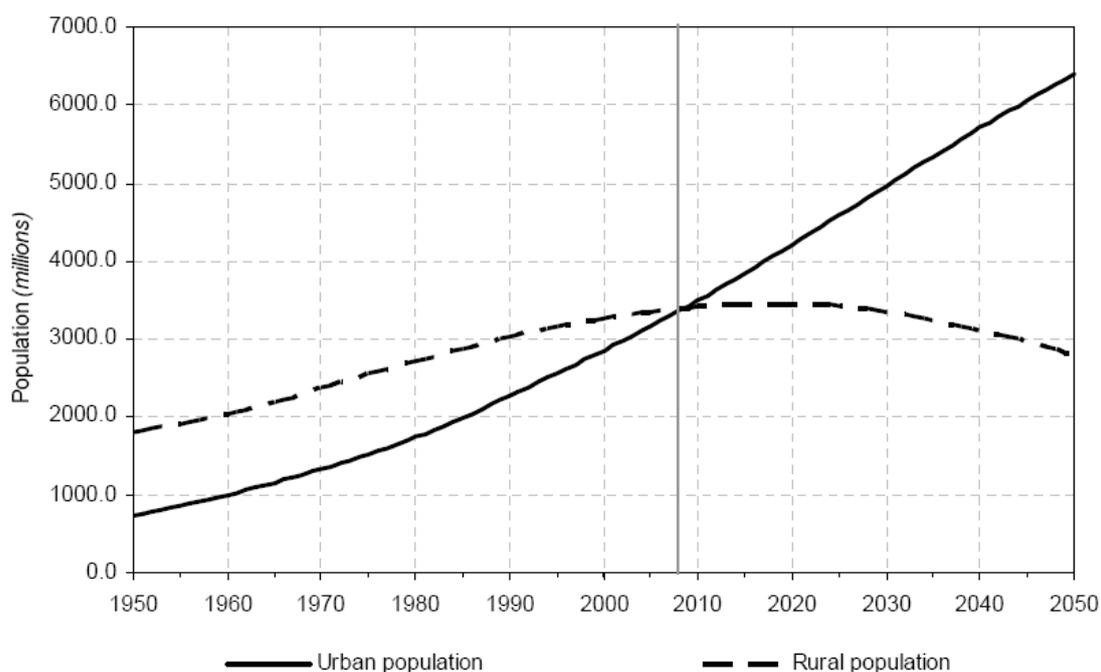
The two figures below illustrate the actual and predicted share of urban and rural population between 1950 and 2050. Fig.2 also shows an interesting tipping point: during the end of this decade, the world became more urban than rural for the first time in history.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.xxxi

<sup>21</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: pp.2-4

<sup>22</sup> According to the United Nations' predictions, this event occurred in 2008. Scientists from North Carolina State University and the University of Georgia claim that this historic event took place on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007 when, according to their predictions, the global urban population of 3,303,992,253 people exceeded the global rural population of 3,303,866,404 people. (Science Daily, Online Edition, 2007-05-25)



*Fig.2: Urban and rural populations of the world, 1950-2050 (source: World Urbanization Prospects, The 2007 Revision, p.2)*

Fig.3 below illustrates the share of global urban and rural populations by development group (More developed regions and less developed regions) between 1950 and 2050. It shows an exponential growth of the urban population of less developed regions, while the urban population of more developed regions has remained more balanced. Moreover, the tipping point of urban-rural population in less developed countries is predicted to occur in the beginning of the 2020's.

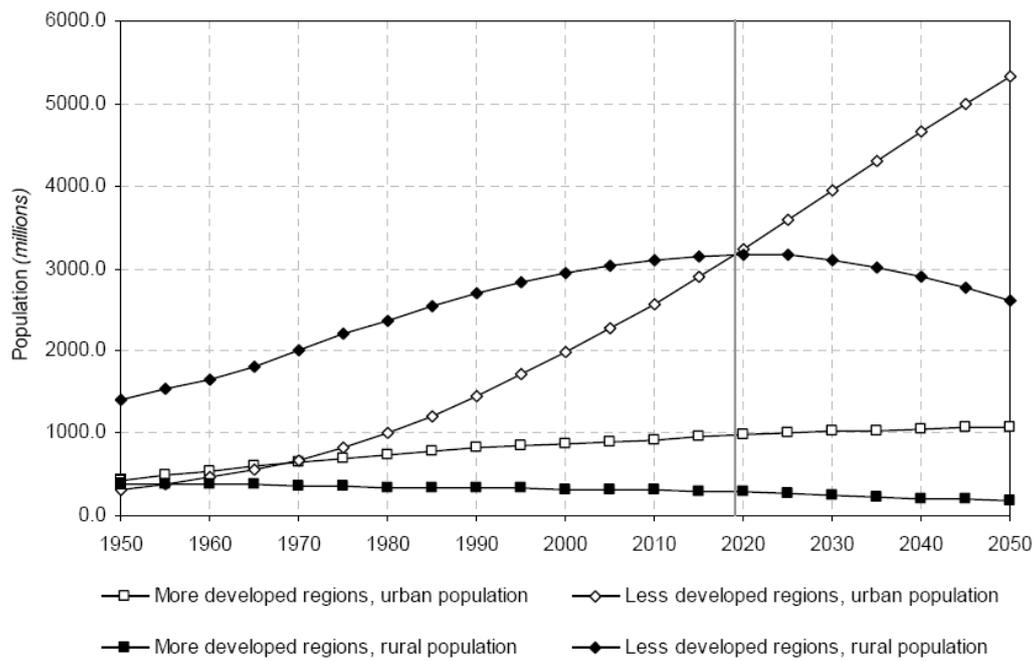


Fig.3: Urban and rural populations of the world by development group, 1950-2050 (source: *World Urbanization Prospects, The 2007 Revision, p.3*)

The two main explanations for urban population expansion are migration and natural growth. The importance of these components vary over space and time in the urbanization process, but seemingly, population movement rather than natural growth is the main dictating factor of urban population change, especially in the developing countries.<sup>23</sup> It is also clear that there was an explosion in urban population growth during the second half of the twentieth century. The reasons for rural-urban migration are of course diverse and varied in a global perspective. However, they can generally be divided into “push and pull” factors. To a certain extent, the push and pull factors can also be described as *involuntary* (push) and *voluntary* (pull) causes of rural-urban migration. Notwithstanding, a combination of the two is certainly often the case when migrants decide to head towards the city.

<sup>23</sup> Drakakis-Smith, 2000: pp.57-58

### 3.2 Push and pull factors of rural-urban migration

The *pull factors* of urban growth generally signify the prospects of jobs and higher incomes in the city. Moreover, through improved communicational abilities (such as radio and television) and means of transportation, “urban values” have spread to the remotest places on earth, further increasing the “pull effect” of cities.<sup>24</sup> But some claim that the *push factors* have played a more important role in the never-ending streams of people seeking a refuge or safer haven in the cities. Such push factors can be for example war, famine, lack of land, declining agricultural productivity and so on.

**Table 3. Examples of rural-urban push and pull factors**

| Push  | Pull   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Famine, draught natural disasters</li><li>• War, insurgency, conflicts</li><li>• Poor living conditions regarding for example health care, education and housing</li><li>• Unemployment</li><li>• Agricultural change</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prospects of higher employment</li><li>• Prospects of higher income and wealth</li><li>• Prospects for better health care and education</li><li>• Urban facilities and way of life</li><li>• Protection from conflict, safety issues</li></ul> |

On the Indian subcontinent for example, millions of people were driven into cities (and slums) due to the partition of India and Pakistan, its ethnical and religious aftermath and the consequent conflict after the 1950s. Likewise, the war in Algeria in the 1950s displaced half of the rural population which then fled to the cities after independence.<sup>25</sup> The massive American bombing campaigns over Vietnam forced massive amounts of people to move from the countryside to the cities as an essential military strategy aiming at demolishing the revolutionary

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: p.64

<sup>25</sup> Davis, 2006: pp.55-57

forces and their often rural constituencies. As Samuel Huntington describes it: “The Maoist-inspired rural revolution is undercut by the American-sponsored urban revolution”.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the urban population share of South Vietnam also grew from 15 percent to 65 percent. Additionally, modern investments in large-scale commercial agriculture has resulted in increased landlessness, further pushing people into urban areas.<sup>27</sup>

Seemingly, the reasons for migrating to the cities are extremely diverse in their character, and these were only a couple of examples. Nevertheless, a general result of this migration is an ever-growing demand for the cities to provide shelter, health care, education and other services. The organizational capability, and perhaps political will, of cities to do so have however not increased and developed in the same pace as rural-urban migration. As a result, urbanization in the developing world has almost become synonymous with slum formation.

The table below illustrates the urban population growth in major world regions between 1950 and 2025.

**Table 4. Urban population in major world regions, 1950 – 2025 (millions)**

| Region                        | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1995 | 2000 | 2025 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>World</b>                  | 724  | 1012 | 1352 | 1807 | 2584 | 3208 | 5605 |
| <b>More developed regions</b> | 449  | 573  | 698  | 834  | 875  | 965  | 1040 |
| <b>Less developed regions</b> | 275  | 439  | 654  | 972  | 1709 | 2101 | 4025 |
| <b>Africa</b>                 | 32   | 50   | 83   | 133  | 250  | 331  | 804  |
| <b>Latin America</b>          | 68   | 107  | 162  | 241  | 358  | 431  | 601  |
| <b>Asia</b>                   | 218  | 342  | 407  | 596  | 1101 | 1291 | 2615 |

*Source: Todaro & Smith, 2003: Urbanization and Rural-Urban Migration: Theory and policy, p.6*

<sup>26</sup> Huntington, 1968: pp.650-653

<sup>27</sup> Drakakis-Smith, 2000: p.61

Table 5: Estimated slum population by major region, 2001

| Estimated slum population       |           |                             |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| Region                          | Thousands | Percent of urban population |
| World                           | 923 986   | 31.6                        |
| Developed regions               | 54 068    | 6.0                         |
| Europe                          | 33 062    | 6.2                         |
| Other                           | 21 006    | 5.7                         |
| Developing regions              | 869 918   | 43.0                        |
| Northern Africa                 | 21 355    | 28.2                        |
| Sub-Saharan Africa              | 166 208   | 71.9                        |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 127 567   | 31.9                        |
| Eastern Asia                    | 193 824   | 36.4                        |
| South-central Asia              | 262 354   | 58.8                        |
| South-Eastern Asia              | 56 781    | 28.0                        |
| Western Asia                    | 41 331    | 33.1                        |
| Oceania                         | 499       | 24.1                        |
| Least developed countries       | 140 114   | 78.2                        |

*Source: The Challenge of Slums, 2003, p.14*

It is clear that the largest part of the urban population growth takes place in the less developed regions of the world. Not surprisingly, this is also, as shown in the table to the left, the regions where the estimated urban slum population is the largest. For example, the share of the urban population living in slum conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa is a staggering 71.9 percent. As for the world in general, almost a third of the urban population were living in slum conditions in 2001.<sup>28</sup> On a country basis, according to UN-HABITAT, the largest share of urban slum dwellers are found in Ethiopia and Chad (both 98.4 percent) and Afghanistan (98.5 percent).<sup>29</sup> The figures presented

here are however quite ambiguous since there is a lack of accurate and reliable data within the area. Another big problem is, as previously mentioned, the lack of an actual definition of what a slum is.

### 3.3 Slum formation and persistence

So then, how and why are slums formed? Understandably, cities are often seen as nodes of development and opportunities, but the people who go there and reside there must often compete for the most basic elements of life; an affordable living

<sup>28</sup> These figures are derived from the operational definition of slums, recommended by a UN Expert Group Meeting in 2002. This operational definition will be further described in the next part of this chapter; "Defining slums"

<sup>29</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2003: "Slums of the World: The Face of Urban Poverty in the New Millennium?"

space close to employment opportunities, a piece of land on which a house or shelter can be erected, access to education and health care, access to clean drinking water and public transportation, possibilities to make a living by selling commodities in street corners and so on. In many cases, governments do have the power and resources to supply many of these services and possibilities and to reduce the costs of many of them.<sup>30</sup> But seemingly, this is often not the case. The following part will elaborate on a number of aspects which are commonly mentioned as underlying factors of slum formation.

Firstly, it is important to mention that explosive population growth and demographic change are not the only factors of slum formation. According to the UN, the growth of slums must be considered a result of failed national and urban policies and most importantly, a genuine lack of political will.<sup>31</sup> Relating to urban-rural migration, it is of course more difficult for people to grow their own food in cities than in rural areas and consequently they must rely on the urban cash economy for survival. Moreover, a job in the city generally requires higher education which is often not easily accessible for poor people. Notwithstanding, rural inhabitants tend to have less access to cash and jobs, but seemingly, the deficits generate more severe problems in an urban setting. On a global development basis, poverty reduction strategies are generally considered in rural terms, but as economist Jeffrey Sachs points out, we need better urban-based strategies as well.<sup>32</sup> Mal-adapted national and urban policies (both regarding aspects such as poverty reduction, housing issues, laws and distributive systems) and a lack of political will clearly stand in the way for a more sustainable urban development.

Thus, slum communities will continue to grow and new ones will appear on city edges – unplanned, uncontrolled and, in many peoples’ eyes, unwanted. National and urban policies, therefore, must be proactive as well as reactive in terms of slum formation and urbanized poverty. Political will is consequently a crucial

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<sup>30</sup> Satterthwaite, 1995: p.301.

<sup>31</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.5

<sup>32</sup> O’Meara Sheehan, 2003: p.134

element when it comes to sustainable development and sustainable urban development, but still, such much-needed political determination and spirit is lacking in many places today.

Secondly, the problem of slum formation and persistence today also has its roots on a global scale. During the latest decades, the forces of globalization have clearly affected the development of urban settlements. Accordingly, the issue of slum formation integrates factors from all levels; global, national, local and neighborhood. Some compare today's neoliberal globalizations trends with the international regime of mercantilism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when slums were at their worst in Western cities. An economic paradigm, manifested in Structural Adjustment Programmes<sup>33</sup> (SAPs) in the 1970s and 1980s has seemingly weakened the role of cities in the developing world by focusing primarily on agricultural exports. When looking back at the previous part of this chapter regarding extensive rural-urban migration during the same time period, it becomes clear that such strategies have worked against the primary demographic direction (rural inhabitants moving to the cities). Such policies, therefore, have generated a rapid expansion of the urban informal sector, pushing even more people into insecure living conditions and unemployment.<sup>34</sup> As such, claims influential writer Mike Davis, the Structural Adjustment Programmes were deliberately anti-urban in nature, intended to overturn the urban bias previously seen in welfare strategies and government investments.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he says, the SAPs minimized the role of the state by reducing government programs intended to, for example, address slums and "redress urban marginality".<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the United Nations Humans Settlements Programme claims that "*The main single cause for increases in poverty and inequality during the 1980s and 1990s was the retreat of the state*". The previously mentioned focus on agricultural export and improved agricultural productivity has created a "surplus rural population" heading towards the cities in search for jobs and other opportunities, often (if at

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<sup>33</sup> Development programmes characterized by deregulation, privatization and export orientation

<sup>34</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.6

<sup>35</sup> Davis, 2006: p.153

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.: p.62

all) ending up in the low-wage informal sector and forced to reside in slum conditions.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, failed policies also have global and international roots and can therefore not be accredited only to national and local governments and authorities. However, these global challenges – the growth of poverty and urbanization – are increasingly being managed at a local level. And clearly, at many local levels there is an extensive lack of resources and political possibilities to manage these issues in an efficient, sustainable and equitable manner.

### **3.4 Summary and reflections**

As our world is becoming increasingly urbanized, the problems and issues we face gain an increasingly urban character. The urbanization of poverty, for example, is by many considered one of the key issues which needs to be tackled for a more sustainable development in the coming decades. According to some, we have reached “maximum urbanization” in the Western world and consequently, much focus must be directed to urbanization trends in the developing world which will hold the majority of new urban residents in the times ahead.

In the light of the enormous problems which many people face there today, it is imperative to identify sustainable strategies and solutions which can incorporate slum communities in the broader urban context, but as we have seen, a lack of good governance, political will and efficient urban policies often impede development in that direction. As a result, we will increasingly need to deal with problems such as inadequate infrastructure, sharp social divisions and urban poverty through reactive strategies rather than proactive ones. It is my belief that such remedies are shortsighted solutions, to some extent perhaps even counter-productive.

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<sup>37</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: pp.43-46

There are of course several reasons as to why slum issues are rarely prioritized. As a central part of this thesis, I believe that the negative connotations connected to slums and their inhabitants have affected and continue to affect the way we relate to and address slum issues. Such connotations are often shaped by a set of misunderstandings, prejudices and myths regarding slums and their inhabitants, affecting both public opinion, political will and policy making in a negative way. The next chapter will deal with what I call “Slum Mythology” where these aspects will be elaborated more thoroughly.

## 4. Breaking down Slum Mythology

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*The intention of this chapter is to analyze and break down a number of myths, misconceptions and prejudices regarding slum communities and their place in the broader urban fabric.*

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Regardless of time and place, there have always been a number of myths, fallacies and prejudices surrounding slum communities and their inhabitants. Often being part of a common discourse, these myths commonly lead to misconceptions, mistrust and failed urban policies. The way we look upon, reflect upon and talk about slum communities will undoubtedly affect the way we try to address the problems and potentials there. “We” in this sense not only represents academics, researchers and planners. It is clear that the same myths are often shared by the slum dwellers themselves, further anchoring the misconceptions and fallacies which obscure a more comprehensive perception of slum communities and impede the rethinking of our urban futures.

This chapter is intended to describe, analyze and break down parts of this “slum mythology”. It is important to mention that the “myths” laid down in this chapter are not necessarily false *per se*, but that they altogether, and on their own, can generate misleading conceptions regarding the nature of slums. Since this thesis is of a general nature, it is also hard to make any assertions claiming a certain “truth”, if there is such a thing. Although slum areas share many characteristics, they are also very diverse in a global and historical context and therefore such assertions would be ambiguous as well. A “myth” in the context of this thesis therefore relates to a widespread narrative or belief that to a certain extent is erroneous or misleading. The academic classicist Richard Buxton defines a myth

as a “socially powerful traditional story”.<sup>38</sup> Such stories can, intentionally or unintentionally, reinforce social values, practices and beliefs which are, or are not, “true”. The following part will briefly illustrate a number of “myths” or narratives which are commonly connected to our understanding or pre-understanding of slum communities and their dwellers. Again, it is difficult, and perhaps somewhat undesirable, to generalize. However, in the context of this thesis, the myths below represent aspects which I believe, to a certain extent, to be part of a common mindset and attitude regarding our understanding of slums. That is, when hearing the word “slum” (or whatever connotations related to it), I believe we commonly get a picture which is extremely negative and often artificial in character. The idea is not to “romanticize” slum life, but rather to illustrate and highlight aspects of it which are often obscured by our pre-understanding of the phenomenon.

## **4.1 Myths and narratives**

The following part will briefly illustrate a number of “myths” regarding slum communities. They are collected from a number of different sources and put into the context of this thesis. Although they are divided into four sets, they are often interrelated and connected in character.

### **4.1.1 The Myth of marginality**

Marginalization has often been used as a concept to describe individuals, groups and communities outside the official social, economic, cultural and political spheres of society. It is however an ambiguous and contested concept, not least among anthropologists.<sup>39</sup> From the late 1960’s and onwards, anthropologist Janice Perlman has studied the life of slum residents in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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<sup>38</sup> Buxton, 2004

<sup>39</sup> Anthropologists, in particular, have tended to study marginal groups. This stems in part from the idea that, by looking at what happens on the margins of a society, one can see how that society defines itself and is defined in terms of other societies, and what constitute its key cultural values. (www.encyclopedia.com)

When synthesizing the collective body of literature regarding the concept of marginalization (including its social, cultural, economic and political dimensions) – both as a discourse and as something that could be empirically tested – she came to the conclusion that the principal understanding of marginalization was false. Originally, the myths of marginality had blamed slum residents for maladaptive attitudes and behaviors, making them unfit for a place in the urban fabric. According to the modernization literature at that time, the poor generally had themselves to blame for their own poverty and they were responsible for their own failure of entering formal markets of jobs and housing. This created a “we and them” view among urban residents, where slum inhabitants were blamed for crime, violence and social collapse. Moreover, this view was generally legitimized by social scientists at the time and the concept of marginality was used to blame the victim in public-policy and academic discourse.<sup>40</sup> This, in turn, created invalid, but nonetheless common, stereotypes surrounding the urban poor and the concept of marginalization, as seen in the examples below:

- The slums lack internal social organization and its residents are lonely and isolated
- The slum dweller is not integrated into the city and does not make use of the urban context
- The slum is an enclave of rural parochialism<sup>41</sup> in the city
- As a reaction and adaption to deprivation, the slum dweller develops a culture of poverty
- Slum dwellers are a drain on the urban economy, gaining more than they give
- The culture of traditionality and the culture of poverty contribute to an economic parochialism in the slum dweller
- The slum dweller is not integrated into city and national political life

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<sup>40</sup> Hanley et al, 2005: pp.15-16

<sup>41</sup> The term *parochial* can be applied in both culture and economics if a local culture or geographic area's government makes decisions based on solely local interests that do not take into account the effect of the decision on the wider community (Wikipedia). Here, it would imply that the slum residents only care about their own situation, disregarding other interests.

- Because of their frustration and social disorganization, slum residents are prone to leftist radicalism<sup>42</sup>

These propositions – or stereotypes if you wish – were, according to Perlman, accepted at every level of society, but they were empirically false and misleading. The misconceptions regarding marginalization have contributed largely to ineffective public policies, such as the forced clearance of slum areas. The narrative of marginalization cleaned the self-image of the rest of society by considering “marginal” populations as deviant, as scapegoats for broader societal problems. Perlman, however, showed that slum residents<sup>43</sup> were well organized socially and that they certainly made use of the larger urban environment and its institutions. Economically, they had the worst jobs for the lowest pay and they built their own houses and infrastructure for the community. Politically, they were devotedly involved in political issues that affected their lives, both within the slum areas and in the wider context. Perlman concluded that the slum residents were not marginalized but intrinsically integrated into society although in a way that was unfavorable for their own interests.<sup>44</sup> She describes this detrimental integration of slum residents as asymmetric:

*“They contribute their hard work, their high hopes, and their loyalties, but do not benefit from the goods and services of the system. They are not economically and politically marginal, but are exploited, manipulated, and repressed; they are not socially and culturally marginal, but stigmatized and excluded from a closed class system. This continues to be the case today.”<sup>45</sup>*

Slum communities are, in this view, socially, economically, culturally and politically integrated into urban society but are still often treated as problematic enclaves dislodged from these spheres and from the “formal” urban environment.

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<sup>42</sup> Hanley et al, 2005: pp.16-17 (Adapted from Perlman, 1976: p.131)

<sup>43</sup> In this case in Rio de Janeiro

<sup>44</sup> Hanley et al, 2005: pp.17-19

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.: p. 18

Accordingly, if we continue to perceive these communities as marginalized, they will continue to be marginalized. From an organizational and managerial point of view, this should be recognized as a major obstacle for a sustainable and equitable urban development.

#### **4.1.2 The myth of conformity**

Furthermore, a widespread understanding is that all slums are the same and that all slum residents are poor. Slum dwellers have often been, and are still, often portrayed as illiterate, jobless, poor, polluting people of low social status. The term 'slum' is often applied in broad strokes, implying any place that is problematic or bad, directly including the people who reside there. Such conformity stereotypes create an image of slums and slum dwellers that is extremely negative and pejorative, shaping popular imagination in ways that are detrimental for a positive and integrative societal development. There is of course extensive poverty in slum areas and often very high concentrations of poor people reside there under extremely bad conditions. However, not all the urban poor live in slums, nor are all slum dwellers poor.<sup>46</sup> In reality, of course, there exists a wide range of people among the slum dwellers. For example, the NGO "Shelter Associates" conducted a large survey among 211 slums in Pune, India. It revealed that among the occupations held by slum dwellers, there were as diverse occupations as government employees, painters, drivers, office workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, computer professionals and small entrepreneurs.<sup>47</sup> The socio-economic and socio-cultural auras of slum communities are obviously very diverse in character.

Clearly, such information defies generalized notions and misleading stereotypes regarding the nature of slums. Accordingly, slum communities are not heterogeneous spaces of despair and misery. Notwithstanding, slums are

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<sup>46</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2007: Today's Slums: Myths versus Reality

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

generally extremely poor areas, but for transparency reasons it is important to point out that there is a great diversity both among and within slums. The point here is not to “romanticize” slum communities, but to illustrate their diverse character. In a global perspective, slums are also very diverse regarding for example tenure, gender composition, literacy rates, poverty and length of residence. Such diversity is apparent on national and even city levels.<sup>48</sup> As Molly O’Meara Sheehan asserts in “State of the World 2003”:

*“Although ‘slums’ are generally understood to be urban areas with miserable living conditions, they vary dramatically from place to place and are described by a universe of overlapping terms – some of them are colorful; many of them, like ‘slum’ are frankly negative; and few are synonymous.”<sup>49</sup>*

Moreover, she claims, related terms such as “squatter settlements” and “informal or illegal settlements” give us a false impression of community character. As every city has its own history and culture, every slum has its own character; many rent-paying tenants live in squatter settlements, law-abiding people often reside in illegal housing and communities settled by squatters a long time ago may not be slum communities today.<sup>50</sup>

So clearly, all slums are not the same, nor are their dwellers. This might seem obvious, but it is my belief that the word “slum” (or whatever connotation related to it) commonly generates an extremely negative image (i.e. criminality, poverty, drugs, etc.) which in many cases leads to prejudice and narrow-mindedness. As part of a common discourse and popular belief, I further believe that such narrow-mindedness might affect the way we relate to and address slum problems in a negative way as vast numbers of people are labeled as “undesirable” and “unwelcome” in the broader urban context. Seeing only poverty, violence and

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<sup>48</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.66

<sup>49</sup> O’Meara Sheehan, 2003: pp.132-133

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.: p.133

misery as key features of slums and slum residents is simply wrong and such a view obscures more constructive aspects such as community spirit, entrepreneurship and a dedicated struggle for self-development and, often, survival.

#### **4.1.3 The myth of history**

Another common idea is that slums as a form of human settlement is a relatively “new” phenomenon, restricted to countries and cities in the developing world. However, during the phases of urbanization and industrialization in the Western world, urban living conditions were at least as bad as they are in many places now.<sup>51</sup> Poor urban areas have existed ever since the advent of cities and the notion of “slums” started to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the Victorian era (1837-1901) in Great Britain, there were slum areas in all of the country’s larger cities; London, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and so on.<sup>52</sup> Industrialization in Europe and America led to rapid, unbridled urbanization. London grew from 800 000 inhabitants in 1800 to over 6.5 million in 1900 and the population of Paris six-folded during the same time period. This population explosion forced thousands of people to live in slum conditions.<sup>53</sup>

Neither are slum areas or slum conditions restricted to less developed countries today. As shown in chapter 3 for example, 6.2 per cent of the urban population in Europe resides in slum conditions. The general figure for the more developed regions of the world is 6 per cent. Moreover, a city like Los Angeles has 100 000 homeless people living in slum-like conditions on streets and in parks.<sup>54</sup> Moscow, having more billionaires than New York City today, is also the home of more than a million squatters residing in extremely primitive conditions.<sup>55</sup> These were only a few examples, but obviously, slums have existed in various forms for a long time

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<sup>51</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2007: Today’s Slums: Myths versus Reality

<sup>52</sup> Canadian Content - History, 2008

<sup>53</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2007: Today’s Slums: Myths versus Reality

<sup>54</sup> Davis, 2006: p.36

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.: p.166

and that they are not restricted to less developed regions of the world today although the vast majority of slum areas are found there now. However, taking history into consideration, it would be fair to say that some lessons should have been learned regarding urban poverty, slum formation and ways of addressing the problem.

#### **4.1.4 The myth of futility**

Furthermore, it is common to regard slums as purposeless, as needless unproductive white spots on the urban map. To a large extent, this is also an artificial understanding, blurring the importance that slum communities play in the broader perspective. As an integral part of many cities in the developing world, slum communities play a key role in socioeconomic development, not least when it comes to the vital issue of housing the enormous (and growing) urban poor population.<sup>56</sup> As such, they provide essential possibilities of accommodation for thousands of workers in the urban area with customers throughout the cities. The importance of their provision of social support networks for new urban migrants can neither be overstated.<sup>57</sup> Slum communities are often the primary locations for informal sector enterprises, consequently generating considerable contributions when it comes to local employment, the urban economy and national growth.<sup>58</sup> Slums provide both perceived economic opportunities for the urban poor as well as an extensive low-cost labour supply (which, however, is not necessarily positive). As such, slums provide critical socio-economic functions for new migrants and for the urban poor. Another important contribution is culture. According to UN-HABITAT, it is hard to overvalue the contributions to cultural life that slums have provided, including arts, music, dance and other aspects. Some

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<sup>56</sup> Majale, 2008: p.271

<sup>57</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2007: Today's Slums: Myths versus Reality

<sup>58</sup> Majale, 2008: p.271

examples of slum related culture are the musical movements of jazz, blues, rock and roll, reggae and hip-hop.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly then, they are not purposeless or unproductive, but rather extremely consequential when it comes to a number of urban functions. In the light of the enormous problem that needs to be addressed, it would be fair to say that realizing the vital purposes and functions of slum communities should constitute an integral part of planning and policy making efforts – something to build on.

## **4.2 Summary and reflections**

Breaking down slum mythology is clearly a complex effort. While realizing the difficulties in doing such a thing in this brief manner, I believe it is important to illustrate that there are a number of misconceptions and fallacies regarding slum communities. Being part of common discourse, such misconceptions become incorporated in a mindset which shapes our understanding of these communities, probably also affecting the way in which planners, politicians, policy makers and the broader public alike relate to them. It is also important to point out that this chapter is not intended to illustrate slums as something good or positive – it is intended to illustrate the problems connected to a widespread negative stereotype image of slums. If these communities continue to be perceived as undesirable, purposeless, unproductive, marginalized, criminal and dirty, they will, needless to say, constitute a thorn in the flesh for urban development. Stereotyping slum residents and their habitats in such a manner, not taking into consideration the vital urban functions they represent, might then lead to counter-productive strategies and an increasingly gloomy picture regarding sustainable urban development in the coming decades. If mindsets and narratives as the ones described above affect our attitude towards slum communities, they might certainly also affect the way we deal with the issues at hand. Fairly surprisingly then, traditional approaches to dealing with slums have often been

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<sup>59</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2007: Today's Slums: Myths versus Reality

focused on simply “getting rid of the problem” through forced clearances, evictions and so on.

Reflecting upon these issues and realizing the danger of generalizing too much, it is my belief that before we build or “rebuild” our human habitats in a more sustainable way, we also have to “rethink” them. This implies getting rid of stereotypes and prejudices, realizing and embracing the functions and opportunities that already exist and implementing strategies which incorporate slum communities in the broader urban context. It also implies identifying sustainable strategies that are socially and culturally conscious, aspects of sustainability which are, as mentioned earlier commonly not prioritized today.

Taking it even further, perhaps the word “slum”, as an extremely negative and pejorative term, should be erased from our dictionaries, making space for more constructive notions?

## 5. Dealing with slums and the urban poor

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*The intention of this chapter is to briefly go through the history of dealing with slums, from the traditional means of forced evictions and clearances to in situ slum upgrading and today's best practices. In connection to the previous chapters, I will try to identify aspects and circumstances which have influenced these slum strategies and possibly to identify why they have so often failed.*

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**T**raditional measures of dealing with “the slum problem” have historically proven to be extremely inefficient, short-sighted and often counter-productive. Human values have often been de-prioritized in the name of urban renewal and conflicts over valuable urban space. In connection to the previous chapter, it is my belief that the pre-understandings of and attitudes towards slum communities and their inhabitants have affected the way in which the problems at hand have been addressed. I will therefore try to reflect this idea by elaborating more thoroughly on how slum strategies have been characterized in a historical perspective. The strategies described below are not temporally static; elements of them have been employed and combined throughout the last decades.

### **5.1 Neglecting slums**

Until the 1970's, a negligence approach dominated the attitude towards slums in the developing countries. Firstly, slums were considered illegal and secondly, they

were considered to be a temporary and inevitable problem which would somehow “solve itself” through national economic development. Most commonly, slums weren’t even placed on maps but were rather illustrated as undeveloped pieces of land.<sup>60</sup> Simply ignoring the existence of slums might seem odd, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, having a general picture of slum areas as something illegal (and therefore not prioritized as a subject to upgrading and investments) and as an unavoidable phenomenon which would soon be automatically resolved clearly affected the strategies (or lack thereof) at the time. Regarding slums as blank spots on maps then also means regarding them as blank spots in reality – undesired and purposeless. Rather than focusing on upgrading strategies and integration of the new urban poor, massive public housing efforts were instead allocated to the urban middle classes<sup>61</sup>, further neglecting the needs of an ever-growing informal and “invisible” population. As such, the urban poor were deprived of a place in urban culture, increasingly stigmatized as unproductive and unneeded.

Apparently even today, negligence, inattention and indifference continue to be visible elements in approaches toward slum issues all over the world. This is evident in for example the lack of provision of public transports, infrastructure and service of social institutions in slum communities. While perhaps not being blank spots on the map anymore, reality keeps lurking on.

## **5.2 Criminalizing slums**

Another stereotype previously discussed is the criminalization of slum residents. Clearly, slums are often linked to criminal activities, but according to many observers, this is more a media fabrication than reality.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, slum dwellers and the urban poor themselves are more vulnerable to crime and violence because their homes are less secure and their communities are less

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<sup>60</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: pp.129-130

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2007: Today’s Slums: Myths versus Reality

frequently patrolled by the police than wealthier areas are. Ever since the 1970s, in creating a stereotype image of slum dwellers as criminals, it also became commonplace for governments all over the world to justify slum clearance as a method of fighting crime. Consequently, during the latest decades, thousands of homes have been destroyed and tens of thousands of people have been forcibly evicted in the name of fighting crime.<sup>63</sup> Onwards, it has also been done in the name of “development” and “progress”.

### 5.3 Evicting slums

So, from the 1970’s and onward, forced eviction of slum residents and clearance of their habitats became the general response to addressing slum issues. Continuously today, hundreds of thousands of the urban poor are forcibly evicted from their neighborhoods every year.<sup>64</sup> When it became all too clear that national economic development simply wouldn’t resolve slum problems automatically, governments instead decided on repressive strategies often characterized by mass evictions of slum residents.<sup>65</sup> The table below illustrates a number of famous slum evictions, still only representing a small part of the total number of people forcibly evicted during the latest decades. An interesting recent example is the preparations for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, where as many as 1.5 million people were displaced, many of them forcibly evicted against their will.<sup>66</sup>

**Table 6. Famous Slum Evictions**

| <b>Year(s)</b> | <b>City</b>    | <b>Number evicted</b> |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| <b>1950</b>    | Hong Kong      | 107 000               |
| <b>1965-74</b> | Rio de Janeiro | 139 000               |
| <b>1972-76</b> | Dakar          | 90 000                |
| <b>1976</b>    | Mumbai         | 70 000                |

<sup>63</sup> Davis, 2006: pp.108-111

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.: p.98

<sup>65</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.130

<sup>66</sup> Beck, 2007

|                |               |           |
|----------------|---------------|-----------|
| <b>1986-92</b> | Santo Domingo | 180 000   |
| <b>1988</b>    | Seoul         | 800 000   |
| <b>1990</b>    | Lagos         | 300 000   |
| <b>1990</b>    | Nairobi       | 40 000    |
| <b>1995-96</b> | Rangoon       | 1 000 000 |
| <b>1995</b>    | Beijing       | 100 000   |
| <b>2001-03</b> | Jakarta       | 500 000   |
| <b>2005</b>    | Harare        | 750 000+  |

*(Source: Mike Davis, 2006: Planet of Slums, p.102)*

These eviction policies have generally been directed toward slums in inner-city areas where urban renewal and rebuilding of city centers has taken place. Consequently, the urban poor were evicted and relocated to the outskirts of the cities. However, this was a short-sighted solution as the spatial growth of cities continued and the newly created slum areas now again became objects for land development and planning. In a vicious circle, new evictions and clearances forced the urban poor to continuously relocate to the new urban outskirts.<sup>67</sup> As planner Tunde Agbola portrays it: “The urban poor, as a result, are nomads, transients in a perpetual state of relocation”.<sup>68</sup> Once again then, the stigmatization of purposelessness is reflected in slum strategies – it is easier to just “relocate the problem” than to actually try to resolve it or plan for times ahead. According to UN officials, clearance and evictions were so extensive in the 1970s so that governments actually destroyed more housing than they were building each year. At the same time, the number of urban poor grew steadily throughout the decade and governments increasingly failed in meeting the needs of their impoverished residents. Thus, new strategies were needed, and the most cost-effective one appeared to be upgrading efforts.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.130

<sup>68</sup> Agbola, 1997: p.51

<sup>69</sup> Werlin, 1999, p.1524

## 5.4 Upgrading slums

So, from the late 1970's and onward, within the context of an emerging civil society, democratization processes and decentralization, slums were to a greater extent recognized as a durable phenomenon which needed more appropriate responses. The approach of self-help and *in situ* upgrading basically had three focal points; the provision of basic urban services, security of tenure for slum dwellers and innovative access to credits adapted to the needs and requirements of slum communities.<sup>70</sup> In theory, it was believed that as the living environment of slum communities was improved, slum residents (who often showed great organizational skill) would progressively improve their own homes and living conditions, not least because of provided access to credit and security of tenure.<sup>71</sup>

For the authorities, this was a very cheap solution (according to a report from 1980, such upgrading strategies, financed by the World Bank, cost only US\$38 per household as opposed to US\$10 000 for a low cost public housing initiative) and they often had very poor results.<sup>72</sup> The intention was to “help the poor help themselves” by making housing more affordable to low-income households without the payment of subsidies. State and local government intervention and support was accordingly very limited and the improvement effort (and burden) was put on the poor themselves.<sup>73</sup> This time period largely corresponds to the era of Structural Adjustment Programs and the “retreat of the state” mentioned in chapter three of this essay. To put it simply, weakened governments, through aid projects, supplied some basic infrastructure and then counted on the slum residents themselves to organize and develop their settlements and livelihoods. But these upgrading strategies were to a large extent characterized by extensive miscalculations and exaggerated optimism.

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<sup>70</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.130

<sup>71</sup> Werlin, 1999: p.1524

<sup>72</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.130

<sup>73</sup> Davis, 2006: pp.71-72

Slums are often situated in hazardous areas like ravines and hills, making them extremely expensive to upgrade in the first phase. Providing security of tenure also proved to be particularly complex, governments abandoned their provision of services and the communities could not maintain their facilities. In order to keep slum upgrading costs at their lowest, the infrastructure provided was often of low, rapidly deteriorating standards. Getting the communities involved also proved harder than originally thought, often because of a lack of education, economic hardships and political unrest.<sup>74</sup> Also importantly, poverty alleviation and slum upgrading were not often prioritized on actual government agendas during the time.<sup>75</sup>

Surely, this paradigm of upgrading did also have many positive and promising aspects, but for it to be efficient and sustainable, it would require very powerful support from a number of stakeholders. Not least, the retreat of the state meant that such support became increasingly difficult to uphold. It is also clear that upgrading slum communities was still not a priority issue for many governments (and their international beneficiaries), furthermore illustrating an indifference and unresponsiveness towards the needs of the growing urban poor population. Although not entirely a “blaming the victim” approach, a much too heavy burden was put on the poor themselves and the little institutional support provided was, as mentioned, of rapidly deteriorating standard. Certainly, this also reflects an attitude towards slum communities and their residents which is characterized by inattention and negligence for livelihoods which must be sustainable in the long run.

## **5.5 Enabling slums**

Building on these upgrading efforts, many lessons were however learned. Perhaps most importantly, they increased the awareness of the importance of including slum residents themselves in planning and decision making processes,

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<sup>74</sup> Werlin, 1999: pp.1528-1529

<sup>75</sup> The Challenge of Slums, p.131

not only in construction processes (strategies which, as mentioned, often failed because of a lack of actual institutional support and long-term planning). Community organization and participation became increasingly important aspects of slum upgrading efforts from the mid 1980's and onward, culminating in the UN Habitat Agenda in 1996.<sup>76</sup> The objective of this agenda is to "achieve adequate shelter for all, especially the deprived urban and rural poor, through an enabling approach to the development and improvement of shelter that is environmentally sound".<sup>77</sup>

The new "enabling approach" paradigm focused particularly on the mobilization of "the full potential and resources of all the actors in the shelter production and improvement process" so that "the people concerned will be given the opportunity to improve their housing conditions according to the needs and priorities that they themselves will define".<sup>78</sup> Still closely connected to slum upgrading, these enabling policies were intended to support local determination and action with the state still to a large extent withdrawn. Decisions concerning socio-economic and physical investments were to be made at the lowest effective level - the community or the neighborhood. Higher authorities were supposed to provide the institutional support, training, organizational assistance, managerial advice and financial help needed.<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, local communities were put in focus and governments were given a facilitator role. Community participation has continuously and increasingly been adopted by many organizations and authorities as a key factor for slum upgrading efforts. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, for example, participatory strategies are vital for sustainable development. Since, (in theory), all stakeholders are part of the decision making process at all stages of the project, development problems will be easier to understand in their entirety. Therefore, solutions are more likely to be effective through participation.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> The Habitat Agenda, 1996: chapter 1, Preamble

<sup>78</sup> Tebbal & Ray: p.2

<sup>79</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.131

<sup>80</sup> Inter-American Development Bank, 1997: "Why is participation Important?"

Conceivably, slum upgrading efforts through enabling and participation are also more proactive, in contrast to other strategies which to a large extent have been characterized by reactive elements. Community participation as a proactive measure can for example include the development of local capacity, the use of local resources and information and assurance of stakeholder ownership. As such, it has a broader policy focus than reactive strategies in order to enhance impact and sustainability.<sup>81</sup> Traditionally, as mentioned, slum upgrading efforts and other strategies have mainly concentrated on reactive measures to the physical manifestations of slums, for example access to water and sanitation and housing improvements. Such measures are of course imperative, but they are not designed to tackle the root causes of the problems at hand, such as poverty and social exclusion. Within the context of sustainable urban development, proactive strategies are seemingly more constructive than reactive ones since they incorporate the important social dimensions of sustainability to a larger extent. In this sense, proactive strategies are ostensibly also more long-term in character, taking into account both the underlying causes of urban poverty and slum formation as well as a more extensive planning for the future.

This new paradigm of slum upgrading and community participation certainly holds many promises and there are several success stories from around the world. However, community participation strategies in slum upgrading have mostly been developed on a very limited scale, or as pure demonstration projects.<sup>82</sup> Not surprisingly, elements of neglect, forced evictions, clearances and other approaches previously mentioned are still highly observable all over the world.

## **5.5 Summary and reflections**

Reflecting upon these strategies, it is easier to identify the elements of failure than those of success. Bulldozing the livelihoods of hundreds thousands of poor urban

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<sup>81</sup> Imparato & Ruster, 2003: p.35-36

<sup>82</sup> The Challenge of Slums, 2003: p.132

residents and repeatedly forcing them to relocate to new urban margins is clearly not a sustainable alternative. This also reflects a piercing ignorance regarding the important socio-economic and cultural networks and functions which often already exist in slum communities. Neglecting or criminalizing them, making them scapegoats for broader urban and societal problems, seeing them as unproductive, purposeless parts of society will evidently not solve the problems in the long run, at least not in a sustainable or equitable manner. The retreat of the state, lack of political will, stigmatization of purposelessness and illusions of the self-fulfillment of economic growth are only some of the underlying factors of failure. These factors also reflect an attitude towards slum communities and their dwellers which is often counter-productive and destructive in its policy implications.

The aim of the United Nations, through the means of its Millennium Declaration, is to improve the dreary livelihoods of 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020. This is of course an admirable goal in itself and such policy targets are clearly needed. Nonetheless, 100 million slum dwellers only represent about one tenth of the global slum population today. Given the predicted increase in slums in the coming decades, this ratio will further decrease. The prospects of upgrading through participatory measures are promising, but it will not be sufficient, especially since the progress so far is slow. What is proposed in this essay is therefore a 'slum renaissance'. The meaning of the term 'renaissance' is a 'rebirth' or a 'new start'<sup>83</sup>. In the context of this project, it represents both a rebirth of the slum communities *per se* (in for example their physical, infrastructural, socio-economic and environmental manifestations) but perhaps most importantly a rebirth of the way we understand these communities and integrate them in planning and organizational processes. Simply acknowledging their existence (and not neglecting them as white spots on the map) must certainly be the first step. Slum communities will continue to exist, and grow, for a long time and

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<sup>83</sup> Renaissance: meaning "rebirth" or "revival"; from Italian: Rinascimento, from re- "again" and nascere "be born". The term refers to the historical period in Europe between 1400 and 1600, a period characterized by a radical development in arts, medicine, politics, sciences and humanism following the dark ages. The term can also represent a major social transformation.

therefore it is of outmost importance to adopt proactive strategies which are also designed to take care of the thousands of migrants which will head towards cities in the future. Realizing the functions and values of slum communities and building on the vital networks that already exist there is also imperative. Bulldozing urban poverty will, as authorities now should have realized, not work.

## 6. Renaissance

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*While reconnecting to the previous sections, the aim of this concluding chapter is to generate ideas for more sustainable ways of dealing with slum communities in the future.*

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**W**ithout a doubt, dealing with slum communities will be a central part of urban strategies in the decades to come. Slums are becoming a worryingly prevalent form of human settlement and future prospects are indeed quite depressing although much effort is being put into upgrading these communities. Improving the livelihoods of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 is certainly a noble and much-needed ambition, but when looking at the sheer number of people residing in slum conditions today (and the predicted increase in the number of urban poor), such figures become disturbingly small. Furthermore, the international community is falling short in even reaching this target, much due to the continuously inefficient slum strategies in many countries:

*“Acts such as forced evictions, pose one of the main barriers to the achievement of this [the Millennium] target. Unfortunately this practice continues in a number of countries where the rights of citizens continue to be ignored – more particularly the rights of those who often do not have the capacity or voice to speak for themselves”<sup>84</sup>*

In this thesis, I have tried to understand why slum strategies have so often failed in the past, with the aim of generating new ideas for more sustainable strategies of dealing with slums. As my research has proceeded, it has become clear for me that prevailingly negative and pejorative attitudes towards slum communities

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<sup>84</sup> UN-HABITAT, 2005: Sounding the alarm on forced evictions

and their inhabitants might surely have affected the nature and achievements of slum strategies. In connection to other factors such as the retreat of the state, organizational incapability, lack of political will and economic incentives, these attitudes and pre-understandings have become parts of a paradigm where slum communities are often considered to be purposeless and unproductive parts of the urban fabric. Moreover, it is my belief that such attitudes often have their roots in false and misleading understandings of slum communities and their dwellers, as described in chapter four. Dealing with people's attitudes and pre-understandings is of course a difficult and time-consuming effort, but I believe that it is necessary for us (as researchers, politicians, planners and the general public) to rethink our human societies in more sustainable and equitable ways. Such rethinking certainly applies to sustainable development in the broader context, where changes of lifestyles and attitudes are, on the face of it, imperative for change. Then, it would come as no surprise that it should also apply for slum communities and the way we understand them and relate to them.

### **6.1 The impoverishment of urbanity?**

As physical manifestations of socio-economic, political and organizational failures, global slums will continue to incarnate the dismal backsides of urbanization in the coming decades. Traditional means of dealing with slums have, as we have seen, often proved to be extremely inefficient and, to some extent, even counter-productive. They have also been characterized by a severe lack of humanism, equity and holistic planning, aspects which are central in the struggle for a more sustainable development. There has for a long time been ongoing discussions regarding the subject "urbanization of poverty". However, as many cities are seemingly incapable of dealing with the problems at hand, perhaps we should also discuss the "impoverishment of urbanity"?

Impoverishment, in this sense, relates to the lack of political will, organizational resources and economic and infrastructural incentives which are needed for

urbanities to provide for, and support, basic needs and sustainable livelihoods for their inhabitants. Cities have for a long time been praised as nodes of development and progress. Now, as we stand at a point where the world has become more urban than rural for the first time in history, it is necessary to rethink and rebuild our urbanities in order to make such development and progress real – and sustainable.

## **6.2 Recognizing and realizing slums**

Slums represent a major failure in this sense, historically and contemporarily. Perhaps it is time to try to understand slums not as problems, but as possibilities? They will, without a doubt, be around for a long time to come, and they are already inherent parts of the urban fabric even if they are not always recognized as such. We then have to ask ourselves: what do slums represent? On the one hand, they represent a major failure in the planning and organization of our urban habitats, essentially characterized by the appalling livelihoods of millions of slum inhabitants all over the world. On the other hand, they represent a number of functions and opportunities which are essential to, first and foremost, slum dwellers themselves and future migrants, but also to the larger urban contexts and urban-rural connections. Slums can, in this sense, instead represent processes and relationships which will be increasingly vital not only for actual slum dwellers, but also for the cities on which margins they reside.

According to predictions, as many as two billion people will reside in slum conditions within the coming 30 years and the developing world slum will constitute the primary habitat of mankind.<sup>85</sup> Surely, the time for neglect must be long gone, as must the distressing strategy of “bulldozing” urban poverty. Upgrading and enabling slum areas by the means of community participation will therefore be vital in the future, although such incentives are needed on a much larger scale. However, I believe we must also adapt our understanding of slum

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<sup>85</sup> McLean, 2006

communities. Realizing the values and functions that slums can represent is the first step of recognizing them as actual urban components. Examples of such functions can, as previously mentioned, be the essential provision of socio-economic support networks for new urban migrants, affordable housing and services for poor urban residents, a low-cost labor supply in the city, places of self-improvement and development, real or imagined economic opportunities for a nation's poor and, perhaps most importantly, they serve the function of being a home. Again, it is not my point to "romanticize" slum life in any way. But the functions these communities serve clearly defy notions and understandings of slums as unproductive and purposeless; they are socially, economically, politically and culturally bound to the larger urban contexts and functions and must be recognized accordingly. Then, again, instead of conceiving slums *per se* as problems, conventional attitudes and strategies towards slums should be regarded as the real problems. What is proposed here is therefore a renaissance, a restart, of the way we understand and relate to slum communities.

### **6.3 Renaissance**

"Renaissance" is a term meaning "rebirth" or "revival". Historically, it refers to the time period in Europe between 1400 and 1600 – a period characterized by a radical development in for example arts, medicine, politics, sciences and humanism following the dark ages. Moreover, the term can also represent a major social transformation. In the context of this essay, renaissance signifies a shift in the way we understand and recognize slum communities as functional parts of the broader urban fabric. The times of neglect and forced evictions of slums are dark ages indeed, furthermore being a time of prevailing and steadily increasing urban poverty.

According to what I have found during this brief research process, false pre-understandings and myths have generated negative and pejorative attitudes towards slum societies. Such attitudes and prejudices have become part of a

public discourse, affecting the way we perceive and relate to slums, ultimately leading to failed policies and strategies. Such strategies and policies have certainly failed because of a number of reasons, but it is further my belief that many of the roots of failure stem from negative pre-understandings of the slum phenomenon. Reversing such pre-understandings and attitudes around is therefore, according to my belief, an essential and fundamental first step for sustainable and equitable future strategies. Then we can understand slum communities as places of aspiration and build on the enormous potentials which reside there instead of merely regarding slums as places of despair, criminality, violence and disease.

The Norwegian photojournalist Henrik Bendiksen puts it eloquently, talking about the Kibera slum in Nairobi:

*“You might imagine it [the slum] as some monolith of desperation and poverty, but that isn’t the case. Of course people know they are poor, but that’s not their focus – and they don’t want to be seen by the outside world as desperate, sad people. In fact, most have incredible energy. You find very few people sitting around doing nothing: people either work in Nairobi or have a small business in the slum itself. There are vibrant communities there, such diversity of experiences.”<sup>86</sup>*

Certainly, many slum residents are poor. But in every slum, there are experiences, aspirations, engagements and great entrepreneurial energies which cannot be regarded as purposeless or unproductive. Building on such community resources would be a central part of the “renaissance” I propose. Therefore, slums must be recognized as inherent parts of the broader urban context. It also has to be recognized that slums will be around for a long time to come, whatever incentives are put forward. Consequently, planners, politicians, researchers and the general public must realize the vital functions that slums can represent. Slum communities will however remain marginalized as long as they are regarded as

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<sup>86</sup> McLean, 2006

such. This has historically – and will in the future – lead to strategies which are not efficient, sustainable or equitable in the long run.

It is my belief that by overcoming prejudices and pejorative attitudes, the developmental potential of slum communities can be realized and improved. Rethinking informal habitats, building on their existing socioeconomic and cultural patterns through community participation will hold many promises, both for the urban poor themselves and for the greater urbanities in which they reside. Moreover, if slums are going to constitute the primary habitat of mankind in a couple of decades, it should be regarded as a moral imperative to resolve these issues with regard to future generations within the context of sustainable development.

If our cities are to remain engines of development and progress, the “impoverishment of urbanity” must be addressed in a manner which makes such development sustainable and equitable for everyone. The “renaissance” I propose presupposes continuous slum upgrading efforts through community participation and enabling strategies. Accordingly, in the context of this project, it represents both a rebirth of the slum communities *per se* (in for example their physical, infrastructural, socio-economic and environmental manifestations) but perhaps most importantly a rebirth of the way we understand these communities and integrate them in planning and organizational processes. It is further my belief that the primary asset of a city is its residents. The question of informality is then a secondary one. It should be regarded as a moral responsibility for governments and authorities to provide for, and support, basic needs and sustainable livelihoods for their inhabitants, whether they are formal or informal urban residents.

## 6.4 Conclusions and reflections

For the first time in history, we now live in a world that is more urban than rural. Needless to say, many of the challenges we must face in the future will be of urban character. Urbanization trends have historically generated both opportunities and problems, and this is also the case today. Slums, as physical manifestations of rapid, uncontrolled, unplanned – and often undesired – urbanization, have existed in various forms throughout urban history. Today, however, one third of the global urban population resides in slum conditions and this figure will increase steadily in the coming decades.

Reconnecting to the research questions of this thesis: what has characterized traditional strategies of addressing slum problems and which are the elements of failure and success in these strategies? Although there are certainly positive examples of slum policies and strategies from around the world, traditional ways of addressing slums must generally be seen as failures; failures of planning, failures of implementation, failures of understanding and failures of humanism. According to me, there is much hope in the current paradigm of slum upgrading through participation, but I believe that slums are still too often considered as blank spots on the map by many authorities and are as such not worth prioritizing. Considering the possibility that urban poverty might represent the “most significant, and politically explosive, problem of the next century”<sup>87</sup> such prioritizing appears truly counter-productive and thoughtless.

One of the main points of this thesis has been to try to understand how our perception of slums might affect the way we relate to them and address the problems they represent. Although such research efforts should probably be based on a wide array of qualitative case studies, I believe it is fair to say that the prejudices, myths, fallacies and pre-understandings that surround slum communities to a certain extent have affected both the way we relate to them and address them by different strategies.

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<sup>87</sup> Anqing, Shi, 2000: p.14

If slum communities are broadly considered as purposeless, unproductive parts of the urban fabric, then slum strategies will not embrace the vital social, economic and cultural functions that exist there. If they are considered as illegal communities and “temporary problems”, they will not be objects for priority and investments in long-term planning efforts. If slum areas are understood as criminal, dirty, disease-infested drains on the broader urban context, they might simply be demolished in order to make place for “better” neighborhoods and the slum residents will be forced to move to the new, often hazardous, outskirts of the cities. So yes, I believe that we must change our understanding of slum communities in order to achieve real and sustainable change. Accordingly, I stress that slum communities should be recognized as inherent parts of the urban fabric which will remain there for a long time, regardless of the strategies used. Therefore, long-term, proactive slum upgrading efforts which can safeguard and develop existing socio-economic and cultural patterns are essential. Slum communities should moreover be realized as productive and functional elements both for the urban poor themselves but also for the broader urban context. So, from the Favelas of Brazil to the Gecekondus of Turkey, the Kampung in Indonesia and the Barrios in Venezuela, we need to recognize and realize the vital functions that slums constitute and embrace the developmental potential that they represent. As such, future strategies can take advantage of the experiences, aspirations, engagements and great entrepreneurial energies which already reside there.

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