



The Sanitation Deficit Reflects a Deficit in Governance for the Poor

By [Sheela Patel](#); published on Mon, 29 Aug 2011

This year, as part of the opening plenary at World Water Week 2011, I was invited to represent the challenges, issues and concerns about the urban poor that are part of the Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) of which I am the Chair. Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) was created in 1996, several years after some of the NGOs and CBOS working at city and national level in 8 countries, prominently those from India and South Africa, considered the need for a transnational organization that assisted and facilitated community leaders to learn from the experiences of each other in a globalizing world where others had opportunities to network communicate and learn from one another, but such possibilities were not for the urban poor.

Over the last several years, we have moved from just exchanging strategies and building the knowledge and capacity of the community leadership and their support professionals, to advocating the challenge for all development actors to engage with slum networks as partners in a real sense rather than consumers or beneficiaries of development assistance.

It has also meant that the Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) leadership demonstrate what they are capable of doing, demonstrate their capacity to solve problems that their cities and their membership face, and to develop confidence to become the VOICE of the urban poor in a world that is just beginning to acknowledge that urbanization is here to stay; that there are increasing inequities between those who live in the formal city and those who are pushed into informality and live to serve the formal city but never get real citizenship in those cities. This requires changing values and attitudes of both the slum dwellers and their organizations as well as of the cities' national and global development agencies dealing with policy and financial elements of projects.

A secure place to live, and access to basic amenities, followed very closely by the right to undertake livelihoods are the crucial safety networks for the urban poor. Yet these have remained outside the purview of the increasing informal habitation seen in cities, and this exclusion has impacts and implications for an average of 25%, but often up to 60%, of the city residents. Accountability must be sought in national and local policies that continue to ignore the urgent need to address the terrible conditions in which the poor live in informal settlements.

Water and sanitation represent the most clear and obvious amenities that link cities citizens, their local government and national state. Cities must provide water and sanitation to all their citizens and this is part of their most fundamental requirement and the cities' responsibilities. My message at the World Water Week 2011 is that the existing deficit in

sanitation is very obvious and clearly one of the unachieved MGD goals. It reflects the real deficit in governance, since for the poorest in the city, inclusion and concern about them gets reflected in whether they get access to these amenities. Obsession with technology, sustainability and financial viability are often some of the lame excuses given as to why amenities can't be provided.

Change has to come now, so that deficits can be addressed and growth in urbanization in the next decade does not have to see such terrible inequities in cities in the future. And this cannot happen unless the poor and their organizations and settlements are seen as partners addressing this challenge. Events like World Water Week have to have community leadership to bring their voices to such debates and it was telling that I, as a professional, was their lone representative among over 2500 people who registered.

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