Geo Factsheet

Shanty Towns

Over 250 million people live in squatter settlements or shanty towns which have rapidly grown on the outskirts of cities in many developing countries. This Factsheet looks at the causes and consequences of such settlements and ways in which the problem is being addressed.

The simplest explanation for the development of shanty towns is that poor migrants have little alternative. There are more people flocking to 'Third World' cities than can be housed by overstretched governments. To take the example of Latin America, rapid urban growth has seen the rise of several 'giant cities':

Table 1. Growth rates and 1990 population for selected Latin American cities

City	% Growth rate			Population in 1990 (millions)
	1960s	1970s	1980s	
Mexico City	5.6	3.7	3.0	20.19
Sao Paulo	5.5	4.1	3.7	17.40
Buenos Airies	2.1	1.8	1.5	11.51
Rio de Janeiro	3.7	2.2	2.2	10.71
Lima	7.3	5.1	4.1	6.25
Bogota	6.2	4.1	3.2	4.85
Santiago	4.2	2.9	2.4	4.73
Caracas	5.0	1.7	1.2	4.10

Unable to afford to live among the existing housing stock, people are forced to live in shanty towns or 'squatter settlements', (known as *Favelas* in **Rio de Janeiro**, *Bustees* in **Calcutta**, *Pueblos jovenes* in **Lima** and *Ranchos* in **Caracas, Venezuela**). These can be broadly defined as having the following characteristics:

- Most of the dwelling is built by the occupants or fellow 'self-help' builders.

- The housing is at least initially illegal, either because the land does not belong to the builder or because planning permission has not been given.

- They are built using cheap or waste materials such as mud, thatch, corrugated iron, wood and rags.

- Most services - water, sewerage, electricity - are lacking.

- Housing density is very high.

- They are often sited on land liable to natural hazards - flooding and landslides, eg. **El Alto, La Paz, Bolivia.**

However, not all shanty towns share these characteristics. In parts of cities such as **Delhi, Bogota** and **Mexico City**, extensive areas of self-help housing exist on land which the squatters purchased after the initial settlement. However, although the squatters can claim ownership, they are not given legal title to the land which usually lacks planning permission from the urban authorities because of its unplanned physical layout and its lack of authorised access to services (although many shanty towns make illegal access to electricity and water supplies).

As a result of these conditions, people in shanty towns are exposed to numerous 'diseases of poverty'. A survey in the Indian city of **Allahabad** found several factors likely to cause ill-health:

- The main shanty area is located near to factories which release pollutants into a river used by residents for washing and bathing.

- The inadequate drainage system often becomes clogged with waste.

- Homes are very crowded, accelerating the spread of disease and accidents are common as children play near cooking stoves.

Health tests on local residents found high levels of diseases related to a contaminated water supply, particularly dysentery and diarrhoea. With many children receiving less than 500 calories per day, levels of infant mortality were very high.

Such conditions are tolerated because conditions are usually worse in their rural homelands. In the countryside infant mortality is higher, so too is malnutrition, either because the poor may be forced to sell the food they produce to pay off debts, or else, being landless labourers, they have no food of their own and little money to buy enough. These conditions are being made even worse by rapid population growth.

That there is not a perfect correlation between those who are the poorest and those who are making the move to the city suggests that there is an element of choice in moving to the city. Those who move are best adapted to city life: the young, the better educated and skilled. It is also this sort of person who is most likely to be lured by the 'bright lights' and promise of new opportunity in a large city.

For many years shanty towns were seen as an eyesore, 'social cancers' damaging a country's international reputation. The perceived problems of shanty towns include:-

- They are politically embarrassing to the government; their appearance draws attention to the level of poverty, lack of urban planning etc., eg. **Mahim Creek** comprises 3 highly visible shanty towns around **Bombay airport**.

- Their presence depresses the property prices in the city.

- They are a major fire hazard.

- They harbour disease - carrying (pathogenic) organisms, a problem compounded by high population densities.

- As an eyesore or perceived dangerous area, they may harm tourism.

- Many are located in environmentally high risk sites, vulnerable to landslides and floods.

Across much of the 'Third World', in the 1950s and 1960s, shanty towns were bulldozed as municipal governments attempted to re-house the urban poor in better grade public housing. In doing so, governments overestimated their own financial resources in thinking it affordable to house soaring urban populations in government housing.

Governments that bulldozed shanty towns invariably found that they still could not overcome the basic problem that led to those shanty towns being developed in the first place: that there are simply too many people and too few houses. Many government housing blocks were poorly constructed with no open space between the towerblocks, often they were too expensive for the poor to afford. Being made to live in these flats often broke up the large families that had been the basic social unit in the countryside. Gradually, it became apparent that for the urban poor, living in a shanty town made better sense than living in government housing with rents they could not afford. Shanty housing came to be seen as starting point, to be built up and improved upon by the occupiers and the government working together (see Case Study: Nova Iguaco).

The governments of many developing countries now view such developments more positively and recognise their advantages in:-

- Providing a starting point for urban planning.

- Providing a base and information point for migrants eg. in **Bombay** most migrants now head for shanty towns rather than **Chawls** (innercity tenements).

- Re-using waste materials.

- Providing a pool of cheap labour for urban industry.

Governments began to provide **'site-and-service'** support; existing shanty town residents would be granted land title, removing the threat of bulldozing that previously held back any efforts by the occupiers themselves to upgrade their housing. Governments would also begin to establish better quality roads, pavements, water and sewerage systems. The actual task of building and improving homes was left to a strategy of self-help, the idea being that people would upgrade their homes as and when they felt it possible to allocate some of their hard-earned money to that purpose. Some of the conditions that assist the improvement of shanty towns are outlined below:

- The availability of land - this may depend on governments releasing public land or chiefs releasing communal land.

- Security of tenure - i.e. some certainty that homes will not be bulldozed. This may be acheived by allowing the land to be purchased or put on a long lease. However, the purchase of land in cities such as **Calcutta** (India) and **Caracas** (Venezuela) has resulted in very rapid land price increases.

- Some 'spare' money to be able to afford building materials and hire labour

- The pool of self-help 'know-how' from neighbours and kin

Shanty towns may therefore slowly develop through gradual improvement or **consolidation** into an accepted suburb of the city. The process of consolidation may be very slow but both the urban authorities and the self-help builders benefit from the process. The poor can gradually improve their home, maintain health and often establish some income by renting out a room or establishing the front room as a shop. The size of the house is flexible and can be rapidly expanded if circumstances allow.

Case study: Jakarta, Indonesia
*Indonesia's GDP increased by 5% every year between 1980 and 1992 and per capita income in Jakarta is now 80% higher than the national average. However, of the total city population of 12 million, almost 2 million people continue to live in **Kampung** villages between the skyscrapers which have sprouted up over the last decade. With the urban population growing at 3% per year, access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities were identified as priorities. The Kampung Improvement Project provided standpipes for every 30 families along with waste collection points and street level drains, funded 70:30 by the government and local communities.*

Case Study: Nova Iguaco, Rio de Janeiro

Advantages	*Disadvantages*
Long established - continuous development since late 19th century	*Marshlands and steep slopes - Danger of landslides inhibits service provision*
Electricity supplied to 50% of homes	*Intermittent supply*
Has partially developed water and sewage services	*Intermittent nature of service creates disease risk in distribution pipes*
Has main road and bus services	*No access for refuse services*
Active women's movement initiating community training and township association	
50% of residents in formal sector employment	*An estimated 20% of the population involved in drug selling*

There are now many examples of shanty housing being improved by 'self-help' approaches: wooden houses gain more solid walled structures, more rooms are added and connections made with expanding sewerage networks and electricity supplies. Many schemes rely on communities working together to pool their resources and labour. In **Lusaka,** (Zambia), local community and Government agencies have worked together to provide a 'site and service' infrastructure to produce cheap but good quality housing. Groups of twenty to thirty people are encouraged to dig drainage ditches and build the foundations and shells of houses. The government, on its own lacking the resources to adequately house everyone, then provides building materials for the people to complete their homes and lay water and drainage pipes. Communities have then gone on to build a local school or clinic as successful schemes foster a stronger community spirit.

Self-help housing often results in better quality houses than those provided by the government. Housing must closely match the needs and income of its inhabitants and this is precisely what self-help housing offers. However, there are serious obstacles which may slow down or stop consolidation: rising land prices, the rapidly increasing cost of even basic construction materials and increasing unemployment as recession hits heavily-indebted developing countries mean that, for many self-help builders, consolidation is impossible. Furthermore many urban poor have increasing difficulty even getting to work as new shanty towns are long distances from the centre (eg. in **Mexico City**). Land taxes and severe government intervention would be required to prevent this.

For many residents of 'Third World' cities the opportunities to improve their homes are still scarce. Governments may still be unsympathetic or the costs - in terms of money and time - of upgrading a home may still be too great. Consequently, many millions of urban people will continue to live in conditions of dire, life-threatening poverty. Yet there are success stories where governments have provided the right support for individuals and communities to improve their environments.