DIE ERDE

Journal of the
Geographical Society
of Berlin

Slums: perspectives on the definition, the appraisal and the management of an urban phenomenon

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Abstract

The contribution provides a basic introduction to the topic. It outlines the term 'slum', details the challenges associated with this form of settlement in the literature and the public opinion, and profiles the development approaches and solutions to overcome the problems associated with the slum phenomenon. The principal aim of the article is to illustrate that there are different approaches to define, assess and solve the problems of informal settlements and their inhabitants. The paper emphasises the complexity and variety of slums worldwide as well as the controversial perspectives adopted towards them. It shows how the normative framing of different actors associated with the 'slums of hope' and the 'slums of despair' and shaped strategies and action to resolve and overcome the material, social and institutional challenges of the slums.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag bietet eine grundlegende Einführung in das Thema. Er umreißt den Begriff „Slum", beschreibt die mit dieser Siedlungsform verknüpften Herausforderungen, wie sie in der Literatur und der öffentlichen Meinung bestehen, und arbeitet die Ansätze und Lösungen der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit heraus, die die mit dem Phänomen „Slum" verbundenen Probleme überwinden helfen sollen. Das Hauptziel dieses Artikels ist es darzustellen, dass es verschiedene Ansätze gibt, um die Probleme der informellen Siedlungen und ihrer Bewohner zu benennen, zu bestimmen und zu lösen. Der Beitrag betont die Komplexität und Vielfalt von Slums weltweit – wie auch die sehr unterschiedlichen Perspektiven, die ihnen gegenüber eingenommen werden. Er stellt dar, wie sich die normative Ausrichtung unterschiedlicher Akteure mit den „Slums of Hope" und den „Slums of Despair" verbindet sowie mit den Strategien und Maßnahmen, die materiellen, sozialen und institutionellen Herausforderungen der Slums anzugehen und zu überwinden.

1. Introduction

Today more than half of the world population lives in urban areas, a billion of whom dwell in informal settlements, often referred to as slums, in the countries of the South. Slums and their precarious living conditions have long been a topic of academic and public debates. Of principal interest here was the desire to eradicate the slums – along with the urban development imbalances and lifestyles incidental to them. Only recently has it become widely acknowledged that the global number of slums and slum dwellers is so big that at present there is virtually no chance to overcome the slum phenomenon. The debate on the world's

slums has thus begun to contemplate systematic consolidation and upgrading of informal settlements with the objective of signing them over to the 'normal', 'official' city, and how this can be achieved. In addition to this broader urban development and quasi interventionist approach to the slum phenomenon, slums have likewise been observed with respect to other aspects – as places of informal economies with their own market logic, as places that largely escape government control, and, if nothing else, as places whose otherness has always been a source of fascination to bourgeois society (cf. contribution by *Malte Steinbrink* in this journal). Hence slums are discussed in various ways and from different perspectives. There are diverse and often contradictory understandings of what characterises a slum, why – or why not – it is a problem and how it – and its inhabitants – should be treated by urban policies in general and urban planning in particular. To illustrate this point, while *Hernan de Soto* and his colleagues (1986) emphasise the productive potential of slums, *Mike Davis* (2006a) draws a thoroughly pessimistic, almost apocalyptic picture of the world's poorest districts. *Alan Gilbert* (2007), in turn, questions whether the use of the term is productive at all. These few examples illustrate how contested both the slum phenomenon and its academic conceptualisation are.

This contribution provides an overview of the main points of controversy regarding the debate about slums – i.e., the definition of the slum phenomenon, the problems and challenges associated with it and the policies and interventions to alleviate these problems. It is structured in four more sections: Section 2 outlines the attempts to define the term 'slum'. This is followed by a discussion of the various challenges which are identified as associated with the slum phenomenon from different points of view (Section 3). The subsequent section outlines the approaches of different actors to handle, manage and develop the slums and discusses the way in which the distinct approaches are echoed in practical urban planning and political strategies (Section 4). The contribution ends with a brief conclusion (Section 5).

2. Perspectives on the definition of slums
2.1 The meaning of the term 'slum'

The English word 'slum' is a term that immediately conjures up strong images of poverty and misery, danger and decay. Since its first appearance in English writings at the beginning of the nineteenth century,

the term 'slum' has had a distinctly negative connotation. However, it originally had no unified meaning. Various sources describe it as a "back room" for sinister business deals, a "back alley, street of poor people" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2013) or – in what was probably the world's first gangster language dictionary published by the Australian renegade *James Hardy Vaux* in 1812 – generally a crime, a "racket" (*Prunty* 1998: 2). Likewise, the term's etymology is not quite clear, although it has been traced back to the German word *'Schlamm'* (mud) (*Prunty* 1998: 2). The meaning of the term as it is now used worldwide became common usage in the English language by the 1840s: "The term 'slum' was used to identify the poorest quality housing and the most unsanitary conditions; a refuge for marginal activities including crime, 'vice' and drug abuse (…) – a place apart from all that was decent and wholesome" (UN Habitat 2003a: 9). As early as the 1880s, the housing reform movement in Great Britain made initial attempts at an 'operational' definition of the word slum, applied the term to houses that did not serve the basic needs of its inhabitants and thereby provided the basis for the segregation of 'slum areas' (characterised by the dominance of this type of dwelling) (UN Habitat 2003a: 9). Thus, by the end of the 19th century a twofold understanding of the term slum had been established which has hardly changed since then: According to the New Oxford Dictionary of English a slum is either "a squalid and overcrowded urban street or district inhabited by very poor people" and/or "a house or building unfit for human habitation" (*Pearsell* 1999: 1756). Cities Alliance, jointly founded by the World Bank, UN Habitat, UNEP and the Asian Development Bank in 1999 in the course of the 'Cities without Slums' initiative, provides a similar definition: "Slums are neglected parts of cities where housing and living conditions are appallingly poor" (Cities Alliance 1999: 1).

While this basic meaning of the term 'slum' has been established for more than hundred years now, more recent attempts – particularly in the English language – at a more precise definition of the phenomenon vary considerably. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Geography, for instance, defines a slum as an "area of poor housing, often characterised by multi-occupancy, overcrowding, and poverty. Schools are poor, items sold in local shops are more expensive than those sold in a supermarket, and sanitation inadequate. Slum populations often exhibit high concentrations of drug abusers, alcoholics, criminals, and vandals" (*Mayhew* and *Penny* 1992: 210). This

definition focuses on social aspects, i.e., the inhabitants of the slums and the very negative set of social characteristics unduly assigned to them. The online edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica uses similar language, defining a slum as "a densely populated area of substandard housing, usually in a city, characterised by unsanitary conditions and social disorganisation" (Encyclopedia Britannica Online 2013). A report on terminology carried out by UN Habitat several years ago, however, revealed the term's blurry definition. It examined how slums are defined in twenty-nine cities of the world, twenty-one of which use their own specific slum definition, whereby all of these definitions differ from one another. Apart from the diversity of existing terms, the report shows that the majority of local definitions applies to structural and urban development aspects, with poverty referred to in very few cases. None of these definitions adopts the pejorative tone regarding the people living in the slums which is apparent in the quoted definitions (UN Habitat 2003a: 197).

2.2 The indefinableness of slums as a spatial entity

The great difficulty of finding a universal slum definition mirrors the heterogeneity of marginalised neighbourhoods and informal settlements and the diversity of their design. The outward appearance of the slums is as varied as human dwellings and settlements generally are: "Slums range from high-density, squalid central city tenements to spontaneous squatter settlements without legal recognition or rights, sprawling at the edge of cities" (Cities Alliance 1999: 1). They can, for instance, be distinguished according to their location in 'central slums', 'scattered slum islands' and 'outer city slums' (UN Habitat 2003a: 88ff.). Even in everyday language, two very different settlement forms – not least as a result of their spatial location – are associated with the term slum: shabby inner-city areas of ill repute on the one hand, and shacks or self-built settlements located in the peripheries of numerous cities in developing countries on the other. Media reports about shacks and shelters on footpaths or landfill sites are largely responsible for the association of slums with images of impoverishment. On the other hand, the development of informal settlements frequently leads to bizarre urban architectural situations whereby the 'normal' or formal city and the slums are tightly knit and have little similarity with the outward appearance of the slums mentioned above. The flat roof settlement of multi-

storey residential buildings in cities like Phnom Penh and Cairo and the informal development of the green buffer zone between social housing high-rise blocks built in the industrial modern style in Caracas are two examples. From the outside, numerous slums are indistinguishable from conventional forms of settlement or housing (in other contexts commonly a tourist attraction) – their classification as a slum is first and foremost an indication of their social and/or spatial position. The latter applies, for example, to mud huts in the poor districts of Karachi, yurt settlements on the periphery of the Mongolian capital Ulan-Bator and the lake dwellings along the canals of Manila or Bangkok (see, e.g., UN Habitat 2006: Chapter 2.1; UN Habitat 2008: Chapter 2.4).

Given the variety of physical phenomena associated with the term 'slum' it seems almost impossible to unambiguously define the slums of the world as a particular type of spatial entity, i.e. as a form of settlement that combines particular characteristics. Any attempt to define the term 'slum' can ultimately be contested on the grounds that it belies the complexity of the phenomenon and its blurred boundaries (quite apart from the fact that definitions are always social constructs, not reflections of reality). In other words (cf. also UN Habitat 2003a: 11):

– Slums are too complex to be defined by a single parameter.

– Slums are too multifaceted for a slum definition based on a set of criteria that can be universally applied.

– Slums are too changeable for a permanent slum definition.

– Slums frequently have blurred boundaries; their limits, for example, depend on the shape of the administrative units.

It can therefore be established that 'slum', on the one hand, is a relational term; what is considered a slum and what not is determined by the respective spatial and temporal context. On the other hand, the use of the term in practice is almost always tantamount to the spatial reification of a social phenomenon, because it is not primarily the (dilapidated) houses or the (deficient) physical infrastructure that causes the interest in the slums but the social living conditions and the environment of its inhabitants.

2.3 The UN Habitat approach to defining and monitoring the slum phenomenon

UN Habitat, the United Nations' programme and think tank on human settlements, plays a key role in the provision of information on the slum phenomenon worldwide. It does so on the basis of its own relatively simple definition, which applies to the physical, infrastructural and ownership realities on site, and operationalises the question of whether a neighbourhood should be categorised as a slum or not according to the status of the households living on the ground: "UN-HABITAT defines any specific place, whether a whole city or a neighbourhood, as a slum area if half or more of all households lack [i] improved water, [ii] improved sanitation, [iii] sufficient living area, [iv] durable housing, [v] secure tenure, or combinations thereof. An area or neighbourhood deprived of improved sanitation alone may experience a lesser degree of deprivation than an area that lacks any adequate services at all, but both are considered slums in this definition" (UN Habitat 2008: 106; numbering ['i' … 'v'] added by the authors). This definition has a number of specific features:

(1) The definition is based on the distinction between the slum as a spatial object and the slum households, according to which slums are defined, i.e. identified. Hence urban development conditions are only included indirectly in the definition via the living conditions of the majority of the households. At the same time, it takes into account that, on the one hand, not every slum dweller lives in appalling conditions and that, on the other hand, large sections of the population outside the slums could face slum-like conditions.

(2) Although the definition refers to household conditions, poverty, and the social exclusion of slum households are not an integral part of it (despite their frequent listing as a sixth criterion in UN Habitat documents). The definition is based exclusively on prevailing urban development and infrastructural conditions.

(3) Although security of tenure, the final criterion in this definition, plays a major role in the slum debate (see below), it is difficult to ascertain with empirical data. There is little evidence of tenure in the official statistics of most countries or in UN Habitat records for that matter. As a rule, therefore, the UN Habitat slum definition is operationalised solely on the first four criteria cited above.

The UN Habitat slum definition is probably the most feasible starting point for the discussion of the slum phenomenon in an international perspective. It provides a set of sufficiently clear criteria of what constitutes this phenomenon and therefore allows a calibration of different perspectives on the slums. It is indeed a common point of reference in many international studies on global urban development and the most widely used basis to get an understanding on the quantitative magnitude of the slum phenomenon. It has been used to collect some impressive facts on this topic (see *Tab. 1*). Nonetheless, the figures should be taken with care because official statistics in many countries are hardly reliable enough to provide a fully consistent basis to determine the exact number of households living in slum conditions (and thus to delineate slum areas according to the UN Habitat definition). Also, data across world regions are often hardly comparable because of the specificity of the slum phenomenon in different regions of the world – but this is a problem that is virtually impossible to resolve.

Tab. 1   Slum population by world region (2010). Source: UN Habitat 2010: 32

	Maghreb	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America & the Caribbean	East Asia	South Asia	Southeast Asia	West Asia	Oceania	Developing countries (total)
Slum population (mill.)	11.84	199.54	110.76	189.62	190.74	88.91	35.71	0.56	827.69
Slum population as percentage of urban population (%)	13.3	61.7	23.5	28.2	35.0	31.0	24.6	24.1	32.7

As can be seen in *Table 1* the slum population – i.e., those who live in slum households but not necessarily in slums in the physical sense – is estimated at more than eight hundred million people in developing countries worldwide, most of whom live in Asia, and amounts to approximately a third of the total urban population. In sub-Saharan Africa, the latter figure is substantially higher. Several Asian countries – notably China and India – have recently been very successful in reducing their slum populations. In China it dropped by 65.31 million in absolute terms from 2000-2010, in India by 59.73 million and in Indonesia by 21.23 million people (UN Habitat 2010: 32, 39f.). The '7d' objective laid down in the Millenium Development Goals of 2000 to extricate at least 100 million slum dwellers from the slums by 2020 had already been exceeded by more than twice the amount by 2010, not least as a result of the substantial prosperity in Asia. With the exception of the Middle East (i.e., West Asia), the slum population as a percentage of the total urban population has in fact fallen everywhere in recent years. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that in absolute terms the slum population is increasing – the number of new slum residents is annually six million, which is roughly equivalent to fifty per cent of annual urban growth worldwide (UN Habitat 2010: 42). It is furthermore remarkable that it is not the largest cities and agglomerations of the developing countries that show such dynamic growth in the slum population but rather small and medium-sized cities, where the share of slum residents is highest anyway (UN Habitat 2008: 108ff.).

3. Perspectives on the appraisal of slums and the slum-related problems

Whenever slums become the target of public, political or academic attention, they almost always fall into the 'problem' category – as a place where numerous grievances accumulate which call for intervention. And indeed, there is hardly any doubt that slums determine the living standards and opportunities of their dwellers. At the same time they shape the development perspectives of entire cities or even societies. On the other hand however, it is important to note that the appraisal of the slum phenomenon largely depends on the perspective from which it is viewed. In other words: The actual problems relating to the slum phenomenon (perceived by the people living in the slums) may be quite different from those that prevail in public, political or even academic debates.

There are at least three dimensions to which the problems associated with the slums can be related. The material dimension refers to the physical urban structure and infrastructural layout of slum areas; the social dimension takes up the hardships that life in the slums entails and the life world of slum dwellers; the institutional dimension refers to the multitude of formal and informal rules that regulate the life of slum residents.

3.1 The material dimension: urban structure and infrastructural problems

The most visible – and probably most undisputed – problems of the slums are usually the poor quality and overuse (i.e., overcrowding) of buildings and tenements, the overly high population density in the area, and the inadequate or non-existent basic technical infrastructure such as paved paths or sanitary installations. Despite the vast differences in the world's slums – according to the aforementioned definition by UN Habitat, they all share severe urban and infrastructural deficits that immediately distinguish them from the 'regular' city. It should be noted, however, that there are no universal criteria with which to identify the type of urban structure or infrastructural facility that could be seen as normal or appropriate. Although now internationally accepted, western ideas of normality in the urban context are of little relevance when it comes to understanding the cities of the global South – the major urban agglomerations of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the urban settlement surfaces of which are often classified as 80-100 per cent slum (in line with the UN Habitat definition). Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that urban development and infrastructural deficits in these 'slum cities' are accompanied by poor living standards and often precarious hygienic conditions. UN Habitat's endeavour to document living conditions worldwide has provided comparable albeit rough quantitative data on these deficits (cf., among others, UN Habitat 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2008, 2010). In the year 2000, for example, only about 37 per cent of all households in the slums of the so-called developing countries were connected to drinking water supply, and less than 20 per cent to a waste water disposal system. (In addition, many households outside areas officially designated as slums are not connected to water supply or waste water disposal systems either.) These figures vary considerably from one world region to another. In sub-Saharan Africa even less than 20 per cent of all households living in a slum area were connected to

drinking water supply and just over 7 per cent to the waste water disposal system, while corresponding values in Latin America reached almost 58 per cent and over 30 per cent respectively (UN Habitat 2003a: 114). In addition, slum dwellings often provide less than adequate protection from the rain and were often constructed in flood or landslide areas. Lack of access to public transport also leads to the exclusion of slum dwellers from regular jobs in the formal sector, since work places cannot be reached.

3.2 The social dimension: deprivation and stigmatisation

It is common knowledge that urban development and infrastructural deficits in the slums go hand in hand with serious social problems. In most cases these deficits are first and foremost a manifestation of extreme social inequality, since they are in sharp contrast to the often excellent structure and infrastructural facilities of more prosperous urban districts. Accordingly, they are also a sign of poverty, i.e. an indication that those who live in slums do not have the financial resources to afford minimum housing standards. In addition to the fact that urban development and infrastructural deficits obviously contrast with the very idea of social justice (and therefore clearly have a social dimension), there is a long tradition of associating the slums also with social 'deficits'. Following at least implicitly sociological theories of deviant behaviour (e.g. subculture theory), slums are credited with negative effects on the attitude and behaviour of their residents. In this vein slums are usually regarded as hotbeds of crime and violence for at least two reasons: (i) due to the vast numbers of people who live there and have no legal means of pursuing their objectives, but also (ii) because those socialised in this environment acquire and internalise anomic, i.e. socially unacceptable, patterns of behaviour. *Jacob A. Riis*, photographic chronicler of the Lower East Side in New York towards the end of the nineteenth century, summarised this view of the slums in a classic wording in the introduction to his main work. He described slums as "nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts (…) because, above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion" (*Riis* 1890, Introduction). However, it is important to note that the topos of the slum as a breeding ground for immorality and crime may indeed be no more than a myth, i.e. the result of an unproved and latently prejudiced ascription of deviant behaviour to the spatial and/or social living environment of people. Yet, this myth must be seen in conjunction with a 'real' social problem associated with

the slums: the stigmatisation of slum dwellers, i.e. the "lack of recognition of slum dwellers as being urban citizens at all" (UN Habitat 2003a: 104). Stigmatisation is to a great extent responsible for the exclusion of slum dwellers from jobs and housing in the 'formal' city, and from social advancement in general.

3.3 The institutional dimension: alleged moral neglect and lacking security of tenure

The widely assumed impact of the slums on socialisation is closely linked to a third problem dimension, which likewise plays a significant role in the discussion on slums without necessarily having to adopt a social determinist approach: the social fabric of norms and rules, i.e. the institutional framework which moulds everyday life in the slums and the activities of its residents. With regard to the slum phenomenon the issue of institutions crops up typically as the absence of rules – at least of those applied to maintain social order outside the confines of the slums. However, the perception of the institutional infrastructure of the slums, at least in academic discourse, has meanwhile undergone a shift: away from identifying 'moral neglect' in the slums to establishing that the absence of the state, i.e. of state authority, is primarily responsible for the wretched conditions in the slums, since violations against the legal norms that secure the cohesion of social interaction, commercial trade and construction are not sanctioned. The discussion on the institutional problems associated with the slums is dominated by yet another aspect: the often precarious ownership or disposal rights of slum residents to their own housing. Property relations in the slums are almost always complex (*Durand-Lasserve* and *Selod* 2009). Only in rare cases do slum residents have property rights to the land on which their dwelling is built. Many of the inhabitants are illegal occupants. They have occasionally been party to a planned invasion or signed illegal tenancy contracts with speculators or big landowners; on the other hand, these informal land rights often put 'older' slum tenants in the privileged position to rent parts of their dwelling to even poorer 'new' arrivals (*Amaral* 1994). As a result of these obscure tenure relations, numerous slum households live in constant dread of having to leave their houses, i.e. of being forcefully evicted – a serious stumbling block to any thoughts of investing in their own four walls or planning their lifes: "The twofold tenure problem of squatters – that is, that they have neither the owner's permission nor the permission of the local authorities

(…) – tends to render life there more tenuous and to discourage investment" (UN Habitat 2003a: 79). This dilemma is exacerbated by the sharp increase in property prices in many large and mega-cities in developing countries in recent decades. As a rule, properties close to the city (now) are beyond the means of less prosperous sections of the population: realty has been transformed from a "resource with a use value to a commodity with a market value" (UNCHS 1984: 25).

3.4 Alternatives to the problem-oriented approach towards slums: from 'slums of despair' to 'slums of hope'

By and large the problem-oriented focus on the world's slums has given way to a more differentiated perspective in the recent past. Hence, there is wide agreement now that the stigmatisation of the slums, and namely their residents, is anything but acceptable, justified and helpful. *Alan Gilbert* (2007), for instance, cautions against taking an oversimplified, stereotype approach that stigmatises the urban inhabitants of informal settlements. More importantly, *Gilbert* considers the term 'slum' itself problematic, since it confuses the physical features of the slum with the living conditions and characteristics of its residents. In addition an agenda for 'Cities without Slums' (cf. Cities Alliance 1999) would throw the door wide open to the risk of returning to standard strategies of local and national politics: "And, with so many unscrupulous governments in power around the world, the stereotype may be used to justify programmes of slum clearance" (*Gilbert* 2007: 710).

Beyond the largely undisputed plea for an unprejudiced appraisal of the slums and their inhabitants there are sharp differences in urban studies and urban politics as to how the slum phenomenon and the problems associated with it are to be tackled. The dichotomy between 'slums of hope' and 'slums of despair' which has become a standard in recent decades and proved very influential in both academic and public debates (cf., for example, *Owusu* et al. 2008) can be used to highlight these differences. These two terms were introduced in the 1960s (*Stokes* 1962) to counterpoint the blanket stigma attached to the slums by directing attention to the resources available in most slums that could help slum dwellers to extricate themselves from their misery (cf. *Neuwirth* 2007). In particular, the continuous improvements of dwellings carried out by the residents themselves which are evident in the vast majority of slums worldwide are taken as confirmation of

existing self-healing powers that characterise a 'slum of hope', as are the dynamic and mainly informal small trade and service enterprises that shape the commercial life of most slums. Both seem to indicate the strong will and the ability of the 'slum of hope' population to radically improve their own living conditions (*Lloyd* 1979). On the other hand, the 'slum of despair' denotes an area where the resources of people are so little – be it due to poverty, lack of financial and social capital, or prevailing anomy – that no positive development would sprout whatsoever. The inherent optimism contained in the slogan 'slum of hope' is strongly associated with a market-oriented approach towards the resolution of societal challenges, a fact that *Hernan de Soto* and his colleagues (1986) spelt out most clearly over a quarter of a century ago: In their view, the 'right' framework, i.e. parameters that guarantee market access, enables the residents of a 'slum of hope' to make the most of their opportunities. The overriding duty of the state towards the slums is therefore seen in setting up this framework, and not in investing in infrastructural measures or even social benefits. This idealising perspective on the slums stands in sharp contrast to the much more pessimistic attitude of other scholars who deal with the slum phenomenon. In his book 'Planet of Slums' the Californian social scientist *Mike Davis* (2006a) vehemently rejects the notion that slums are (also) places of self-help and a trigger for socio-economic processes of development. Although there are some doubts about the scientific seriousness of *Davis*' pointed argumentation (*Parnreiter* 2007), it is probably the most renowned example of a position frequently encountered in urban research, which can be defined as dedicated scandalising of the slums, thereby clearly alluding to the topos of the 'slum of despair'.

The aforementioned problem of insecure tenure which is paramount in many slums worldwide provides a marked example for how the 'slum of hope' perspective can shape actual slum policies. As a rule, market-oriented responses to this problem allude to the 'slum of hope' notion. These responses see the granting of ownership titles to slum households as indispensable. The reasoning is that slum dwellers once they have become property and house owners will concentrate their efforts on reinforcing and improving them and, as a result of this collective feat, contribute to the overall improvement of living standards in the slums (e.g. *Husock* 2009). At the other end of the scale there is the position that how legal security is institutionally designed is not important; far more vital is that slum households are guaranteed permanent residency *in*

situ (*Neuwirth* 2007). This is regarded a prerequisite for the successful implementation of further measures to consolidate and develop slum areas which will be dealt with in the next section.

4. Addressing the challenges: policy approaches and interventions

Since slums are universally perceived as a problem or a challenge, it is broadly accepted that their very existence calls for (urban planning) political action. A wide range of paradigms and approaches have been tried over the past decades, and until today there is no general agreement on what precisely constitutes this need for action or on the approach to the slums to be adopted. To gain a rough idea of the various positions on this topic, it is useful to first identify the major actors involved in the slum debate and highlight their perspectives.

4.1 Key actors

The discussion on the world's slums was and still is shaped by international development organisations, whose agendas prioritise the improvement of living conditions in the world's slums. At the head of the list is UN Habitat. Evidence of the significance of this organisation for the discussion on the slum phenomenon has already been indicated in the preceding sections. For years it has argued consistently for a policy of slum upgrading, which represents a marked departure from earlier clearance and resettlement strategies and

could be characterised as the resolute nurturing of self-reliance. It advocates that the existing potential in the slums should be utilised to gradually improve living conditions on site – notably by activating the informal sector of the economy (which is far larger in the slums than the formal economy) to serve this objective (UN Habitat 2003a: 165ff.). Other international organisations have not been determined by the UN Habitat as deviating from the previous 'slum clearance' strategy (*Gilbert* 2007). The principal goal of the 'Cities without Slums' campaign, for instance, remains the eradication of the slum phenomenon, which has been widely criticised as paving the way for slum clearances.

With their pioneer 'slum policy' projects and programmes, local authorities in the large and megacities of the global South have also contributed to the international slum discussion to great acclaim. In Latin America, in particular, the efforts of individual local administrations to improve the quality of life in the slums have had evident success and gained international recognition. Rio de Janeiro, for example, deviated in the 1980s from the previously unsuccessful national government strategy of eradicating the slum problem via resettlement programmes flanked by large-scale 'bulldozing'. The Colombian capital, Bogotá, drained by the repercussions of civil war and a draconian social imbalance, enjoyed a hitherto unthinkable renaissance in the 1990s, a circumstance that owed its success to a single-minded municipal image campaign and a policy of renewal of its inner city district including a rehabilitation of public spaces (*Gilbert* 2006). The launching of a 'Bus Rapid Transit' system to link districts located on the periphery with the city

Tab. 2   Common approaches to improving slum conditions (upgrading). Source: authors' own work

Dimension	Activities
Physical upgrading	Development of infrastructure (water, sanitary facilities, health centres, kindergartens and schools); design of public spaces; improvement of buildings (in accordance with environmental goals, e.g., water and electricity supply)
Property rights for land and housing	Land registration and formalisation of use rights; distribution of tenure; use contracts
Economic improvement	Income-generating measures; micro-credits
Social security and cohesion, integration	Symbolic upgrading; image campaigns; educational measures; programmes to combat violence
Risk reduction	Resettlement from high-risk areas (flood zones, landslide-prone slopes)
Public participation	Incentives for public participation in planning and implementation of measures; setting up of local organisations

centre was a vital component of this renewal strategy.

The most important stakeholders involved in the slum debate are undoubtedly the millions of slum residents themselves, i.e. the NGOs that represent them. Since the long debate on the slums rarely took place in the presence of those who live there, they have only recently appeared in public as an organised collective actor. In the meantime several slum organisations, some of which are internationally linked, participate audibly in the discussions on their living environment. The most well-known is the umbrella organisation 'Shack Dwellers International' (SDI) which is invited regularly to international events and forums addressing the slum phenomenon. SDI originated in India and today consists of an international network of community-based organisations that are particularly active in Asia and Africa. The chief objective of SDI is to provide housing and infrastructure for the urban poor. Advancing the skills and potential of local civic organisations is seen as the key to pushing this aim through against local authorities and other government institutions (*Satterthwaite* 2001). A number of further internationally active groups likewise represent slum residents' interests, such as the 'Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction' or the 'Society for the Promotion of Area Resources Centers'. Finally, there are countless local interest groups world-wide – an outstanding example is 'Abahali base Mjondolo', a group that was founded in 1995 during protests against a slum clearance in Durban and gained popular prominence for its spirited stance against rather than cooperation with the local elites and political decision-makers (consistently following *Henri Lefebvre*'s dictum of a right to the city) (*Pithouse* 2009).

4.2 Policy approaches and interventions

This selective sketch of some key actors indicates the broad spectrum of opinions that prevails on the kind of intervention to overcome the problems associated with the slums. It illustrates, for example, that the high-handed approach to the slums adopted for decades by the public sectors of the South, i.e. to (if possible!) resettle the slum population and wipe out their environment is increasingly being challenged. Instead, the voices that acknowledge the physical existence of slums have now taken centre stage in the global slum debate. They advocate approaches that help to improve the physical and social conditions of slum dwellers in their current location. Roughly

speaking, these opposite perspectives correspond to the black-and-white dichotomy of 'slums of hope' and 'slums of despair'. The latter position reflects a normative framing of slums that emphasises the inherent productive potential of the slums and their inhabitants. Policy approaches and interventions follow the principle of self-reliance. The former position categorically negates the likelihood that slum dwellers will be able to rescue themselves from their precarious circumstances and, instead, argues for a fundamental reorganisation of the societal relations for which slums are a visible expression. A look at the history of policy approaches and interventions in Latin America illustrates the strong influence of both these opposite positions and normative frames on who should lead action and what the right intervention is. Until the 1970s, massive state intervention was the prevailing strategy to overcome the slum problem in the cities of Latin America, which had already begun to expand at a dramatic pace as early as the mid-twentieth century (cf. *Werlin* 1999). Physical eradication of the slums and the resettlement of their residents in the course of 'site and service' projects (mostly located on the urban periphery) was not only considered an effective instrument of urban development policy but also remained the sole government response to a prolonged process of informal urbanisation. However, in the course of this 'slum clearance' policy probably more housing was destroyed than built. The negative outcome of such interventions has now been widely recognised and documented in numerous reports (e.g. *Perlman* 1976; *Valladares* 1978; *Rodríguez* and *Icaza* 1993: 68). Resettlement destroys existing social and economic networks, disrupts daily mobility with the result of longer journeys and higher costs and raises the price of accommodation. Furthermore, resettlement schemes as a strategy for the radical reduction of slum populations proved to be too costly and met with increasing resistance of a resolute nature.

The 1980s thus saw the gradual recognition of the need for fresh approaches. This led to a major shift in the interpretation of the role of various urban development actors, allowing the self-reliance approach to gain considerable ground. The debate on 'freedom to build' launched by *John F.C. Turner* became a cornerstone of this process of change (*Turner* 1976). Based on his own observations in Peru, *Turner* argued that the solution to the problem could not be the physical eradication of the slums but rather the improvement of the living conditions. The state must find a solution to existing sanitary deficits and guarantee

the provision of drinking water and waste water disposal systems. Substantial improvements to the slum environment would soon prompt slum dwellers to invest in upgrading their housing. *Turner* assumed that residents of informal settlements possessed the organisational talent required to maintain their own infrastructural supply and disposal systems (*Pugh* 1990). This made him an early trailblazer of the 'slums of hope' approach that gained momentum in international urban development debates in the 1980s under the heading of 'development from below' (cf. *Korten* 1989) and a series of 'slum-upgrading' schemes that were replacing the 'slum clearance' approach.

Slum upgrading programmes, notably under the aegis of international development cooperation, soon confronted specific challenges. For instance, the regular maintenance of the new infrastructure was repeatedly neglected for a number of reasons (cf. *Kessides* 1997): Firstly, it often proved rather difficult to establish who was liable for the costs (cf. *Israel* 1992); secondly, poor involvement of the communities concerned in the upgrading projects led to low acceptance of new infrastructure and the self-responsibility for its maintenance (*Kessides* 1997); thirdly, experience showed that persuading the slum population to participate actively in upgrading processes or the maintenance and refinancing of the technical infrastructure without a solution to the problem of security of tenure is almost impossible (*Werlin* 1999). In the meantime it has been widely accepted that plans to improve slum conditions must adopt a multidisciplinary approach (cf. *Tab. 2*).

Current urban development efforts committed to improving the quality of life in the slums attempt in most cases to adopt an integrated approach combining a number of the dimensions mentioned in *Table 2*. A prominent example is the 'Favela Bairro' programme set up by the Brazilian government in the mid-1990s (*Fiori* et al. 2001). It contains a variety of components: installation and reinforcement of water supply and sanitary systems, provision of electricity, design of public spaces, protection against extreme events, waste disposal, road repairs and construction of new roads and paths, and social infrastructure (kindergartens, community centres, educational centres, sports and leisure facilities, advice centres). These measures were linked to a policy of 'regularisation', which consisted in transferring the rights of tenure to slum households and introducing incentives to encourage joint implementation of the programme and enhance grass-roots participation. In parallel, federal government legislation underpinned the competence of the local authorities and enabled favelas to be declared 'zones of special interest'. This exempted the latter from standard planning norms without having to negate their 'official' existence as settlement areas. The 'City Statute' law, passed by the Brazilian government in 2001 and committed to the 'Right to the City' movement, provides the 'Favela Bairro' programme and the regularisation policy with legitimacy (*de Souza* 2001).

The practice of upgrading informal settlements has also been pursued more recently, with local authorities emerging more and more as the driving force. One example is the Colombian city of Medellín where recent years have seen the operation of a programme to integrate existing informal settlements into the formal city structure, both physically and socially (*Blanco* and *Kobayashi* 2009). It consists of the visible upgrading of the areas concerned with a technically ambitious and innovative infrastructure. The municipal authorities in Medellín introduced the first urban aerial cable car world-wide that connected slums built on steep hillsides to the urban traffic system (*Brand* and *Dávila* 2010). Two further lines were added in the following years (2008 and 2010). At the same time, traditional urban infrastructure was built and extended: playgrounds, public libraries and other social facilities. Measures were also introduced to promote income generation for the residents of what were seen as particularly unsafe living areas. This approach seeks to achieve the comprehensive functional and social inclusion of Medellín's informal settlements into the 'formal' city (Alcaldía de Medellín y Banco Interamericano de Desarollo 2008). Initial analysis of the impact of such interventions, which are termed 'social urbanism', points to the value of the attendant symbolic upgrading of areas once branded as highly dangerous (*Brand* and *Dávila* 2011).

5. Conclusion

This article pursued the general purpose to summarise the debate on slums with respect to three basic questions: How do we define a slum, what problems and challenges are associated with this form of settlement, and what policy approaches and interventions are being implemented to solve them. The presented overview on the recent debates about the world's slums demonstrates the complexity and contentiousness of the slum debate and the lack of clarity on the topic. With respect to the problem of definition, it reveals

that the term slum does not solely refer to physical living conditions of residents in a specific spatial environment. Rather, it almost inevitably includes notions about the social life and environment of people who live there. This 'social component' of the slum notion bears the danger of implicitly or explicitly articulated prejudice and stigmatisation of slum dwellers which raises doubts whether 'slum' is a useful name in the first place. In any case, the twofold definition of slums has structured the debate on the associated problems into material and social challenges. In addition, the debate identifies institutional problems characterised by the 'absence' of rules, neglect by the state and tenure insecurity. In contrast to a rather pessimistic interpretation of the material, social and institutional challenges associated with slums, there are opinions that emphasise their productive potential. The associated dichotomy of the 'slum of hope' and the 'slum of despair' is likewise reflected in the perspectives of the actors involved in debates on the world's slums and their practical approaches and interventions in slum communities. Until today the typology of action ranges from straightforward slum clearance to comprehensive urban upgrading schemes.

Finally, the exploration of the slum debate provides a few implications for research on slums. Firstly, research has to take up the challenge of dealing with a highly ambiguous and context-dependent topic. Thus, an important contribution of research is to make explicit the linkages between variations in the underlying normative framing of different actors and how this connects to their rhetoric and the advocated solutions. Secondly, despite their verifiable success, examples such as the integrated urban development projects in the city of Medellín remain showpiece projects and – in light of the statistics on informal settlements worldwide cited above – must be understood as a drop in the proverbial ocean. Research can contribute to assess replicability of successful projects of this kind. Thirdly, self-built informal settlements and their conditions are dynamic and constantly changing. For example, as cities are rapidly expanding, some of the settlements that were built in the urban periphery some decades ago nowadays find themselves as central locations with new opportunities and pressures for redevelopment. Interventions may be followed by an increase in property prices and rents and the displacement of their current population on the one hand, or new economic opportunities for residents on the other hand. Research can help to uncover and detect new trends, and understand tradeoffs and effects.

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