



GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Description of Committee

The General Assembly (GA) is the key representative body of the United Nations. It includes all 193 member states; each member state has one vote. It is empowered through Article 11 of the *UN Charter* to “consider the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security.” The GA addresses issues involving all aspects of UN work, including humanitarian, peace and security, and human rights matters. It refers threats to peace to the Security Council for discussion. Resolutions, or peaceful decisions, produced by the GA are not binding – the GA cannot force countries to take action on any issue – but because they are supported by the majority of countries in the world, they are important international documents. The actions of the General Assembly provide a code of sorts for other UN bodies as well as for the international community as a whole.

As a representative of your country’s government in the General Assembly of the United Nations, it is important to have a full understanding of the purpose, functions and abilities that the General Assembly possesses.

The General Assembly has the power to 1) make recommendations on peace and security; 2) elect members to UN organs; 3) decide admission, suspension and expulsion of members; 4) consider and approve the budget; 5) discuss and make recommendations regarding changes to the Charter and organs of the UN; 6) initiate studies and make recommendations to promote international political cooperation.¹

Every nation in the United Nations holds a seat in the General Assembly and has one vote during voting procedures. This system is used to promote equality – all votes hold the same amount of power regardless of a country’s size or population. For designated ‘important’ issues, a two-thirds majority is required for a resolution to pass; all other votes are held as a simple majority.

Topic: Creating Sustainable Solutions to Slums and Urban Poverty

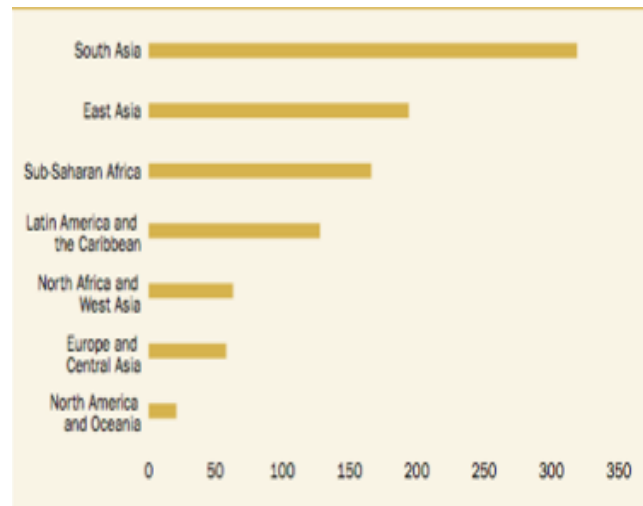
Introduction to Urbanization and Poverty

For most of history, humans have lived in small towns and villages. However, in modern times, the world population is quickly increasing, and more and more people are living in cities by way of a process called **urbanization**.²



According to the UN, half of the global population today lives in urban areas. City populations are growing at astonishing rates – by 2025, two thirds of the world’s people will live in cities.³ Most of this growth is predicted to occur in developing countries. Each year, over 70 million new people are living in urban areas of the developing world.

The World Bank speculates that during the next two decades, the urban population of the world’s two poorest regions – South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa – is expected to double.⁴



Number of slum dwellers by region (millions)

Source: UN Millennium Project⁵

Often, people are drawn to cities because they are attracted by the opportunities and quality of life that cities provide – better work, education, social services, and in some cases, an escape from strict rural traditions. In this regard, urbanization can bring economic prosperity to a country – more people in cities means more demand for jobs and services. However, in many developing countries, urbanization is happening faster than governments can handle, and their cities cannot provide the services, **infrastructure** and opportunities that people need to live quality lives. By 2050, it is estimated that 2.6 billion people will live in cities struggling to meet basic human needs.⁶

This **urbanization of poverty** is a serious concern for the international community.

Slums – Pockets of Poverty

The urban poor represent one quarter of the world’s population. Of that number, over 827 million people (about one third of total urban population of the world) currently live in **slums**, or especially poor areas of cities. By 2020 that number is estimated to grow to over 889 million people.⁷ The challenge to the international community is that this urbanization is occurring most rapidly in unplanned and underserved city slums in parts of the world that are least able to cope with the added demands.⁸

While the poor can be found in every city around the world, slums represent a particular aspect of urban poverty. The **United Nations Human Settlement Program (UN-HABITAT)** has created a specific definition of what officially characterizes as a ‘slum’:

A ‘slum household’ is defined by the UN as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following:

- 1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions*
- 2. Sufficient living space which means not more than three people sharing the same room*
- 3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price*
- 4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people*
- 5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions⁹*



Life in a Slum

Slums (sometimes referred to as ‘informal cities’) are residential urban areas where the residents lack basic services and **security of tenure**. These housing settlements are often located in the most dangerous or undesirable areas of a city – on steep hills, in dumps, along rivers, in polluted areas etc.

Slum dwellers face many challenges. The urban poor that live in slums are **marginalized** by society and are often ‘invisible’ to governments. Because of this they live in underdeveloped or unsafe areas of cities, where they often lack access to clean water, shelter, electricity and basic sanitation. These problems combined with overcrowding make it easy for disease to spread, and dangerous in cases of natural or man-made disasters. Getting proper healthcare, education, employment and other social services is often very difficult and costly. Because the government cannot or does not provide the infrastructure and services these people need, many are forced to pay much more to private vendors for things like water and food.¹¹ Slum settlements are also dangerous because they have of higher rates of crime and illegal activities than other city areas.¹²

Slum life denies people many basic human rights, specifically: the right to food, adequate housing, drinking water, health, education, work, and political representation. – United Nations Report¹⁰



¹² Child in a slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Photo Credit: Abigail Setterholm

These urban populations are not just deprived of physical needs, however. Many people live in constant fear of **eviction**, because they do not have legal permission to be there. In many cases around the world, the people who live in slums have little or no representation in local or national governments. This means that their problems and ideas for solutions are not being presented to important leaders who have the power to promote change.

International Action

The issues of urban poverty, slum eradication and sustainable urban development have only recently come to the attention of the international community. The UN Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT) came into being in 1978 with a mandate to help policy-makers and local communities understand urban issues and find workable, lasting solutions.¹³ The *Habitat Agenda* and *Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements* provide outlines of the goals and commitments of this organization. One notable program is the “Cities without Slums” initiative, a sub-regional program that focuses on strengthening institutions and partnerships that support the improvement of slum dwellers in cities in Eastern and Southern Africa.¹⁴

The UN Environmental Program (UNEP) and the recent United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in June 2012 specifically address the issue of sustainable urban development, creating environmentally friendly solutions to the growing needs of cities around the world. UN Development Program (UNDP) also carry out projects and mandates to improve the lives of the poor in cities. Many of their efforts regarding poverty and sustainable development fall in line with the **Millennium Development Goals (MGDs)**.



The Millennium Development Goals are eight international development goals agreed upon by all members of the United Nations. Each goal is comprised of several more specific “targets.” While all the goals relate to poverty and can be applied to issues of the urban poor, Target D of Goal 7 (Environmental Sustainability) specifically mentions the problem of the world’s slum population: *By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.*¹⁵

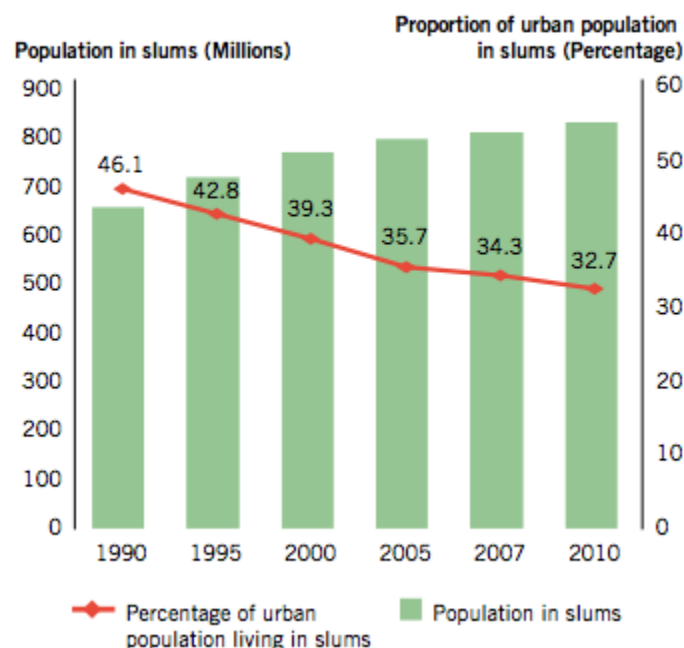
To monitor the progress of each MGD, the UN uses what are called “indicators.” Similar to **benchmarks**, these are used to measure the effectiveness of problem-solving efforts. The indicator used for Goal 7 Target D is listed as “The proportion of the urban population living in slums.” More specifically,

*The actual proportion of people living in slums is measured by a proxy, represented by the urban population living in households with at least one of the four characteristics: (a) lack of access to improved water supply; (b) lack of access to improved sanitation; (c) overcrowding – 3 or more persons per room; and (d) dwellings made of non-durable materials.*¹⁶

Current Situation

According to the UN-HABITAT, between the year 2000 and 2010, a total of 227 million people in the developing world have moved out of slum conditions. This means that the target stated in

Population living in slums and proportion of urban population living in slums, developing regions, 1990-2010



Source: UN MDG Report 2011

indicators to be established to improve the lives of the urban poor and to stop the global increase in slum populations.¹⁹

Goal 7 of the MDGs has already been met. However, while the proportion of urban populations living in slums has decreased, the total number of slum dwellers has grown considerably, and will continue to rise in the future.¹⁷

The progress made through the achievement of the MDG target is not enough to counter the growth of slums, especially in the developing world. If anything, it suggests that the goal was set too low. Because the slum target was set as an absolute number (for the whole world) this makes it difficult for each country to set their own individual targets as part of that goal. As a result, some governments do not make serious commitments because it is unclear what their responsibilities are.¹⁸

Some experts speculate that it is time for a revised target and set of



Finding Solutions

“Many cities are finding successful solutions. Smart cities recognize the importance of good governance, basic urban services for all, and streets and public spaces where women and children feel safe. They also recognize that better cities can help to mitigate global challenges such as climate change, by promoting energy conservation and environmental sustainability.”

-UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon²⁰

Improving the lives of the urban poor living in slums is more important now than ever before. Solving this issue, however, will not be simple. Sustainable urban development is a long-term process, and solutions must address its different social, economic, and environmental elements.

Delegates should consider how working towards all of the Millennium Development Goals can improve the lives of slum dwellers.²³ Housing, basic services, infrastructure (such as water and sanitation facilities), transport, energy, health, education, governance and access to affordable land with secure tenure are all possible paths towards improvement.²⁴ The challenge for delegates is to figure out which areas need the most assistance and how the international community can work together with organizations and local governments to carry out these strategies effectively.

Improving the lives of slum dwellers is the best way to achieve all the Millennium Development Goals.

– UN-Habitat Report²¹

Goal	Impact on slum dwellers
Goal 1 Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure tenure for women and men slum dwellers allows them to invest in their own housing and economic opportunities.
Goal 2 Achieve universal primary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive policies, including adequate public transport, allow children to attend school. Children do better at school when they have a more secure home life and access to essential services, such as water, sanitation, and electricity.
Goal 3 Promote gender equality and empower women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girls are less likely to be kept out of school if adequate services reduce household workloads. Providing women with secure tenure and access to credit is key to improving household stability and income generation. Access to reproductive health information and services can extend girls' education and provide opportunity and agency to women. Such services are often lacking in periurban, slum, and informal settings.
Goal 4 Reduce child mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive policies ensuring adequate housing and access to basic health services (including prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care; family planning services; and prevention of sexually transmitted infections) reduce health risks for mothers and children.
Goal 5 Improve maternal health	
Goal 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of diseases can be prevented by reducing overcrowding, improving the provision of water and sanitation, and implementing proper drainage and control of disease vectors. Slum dwellers are at high risk of contracting tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Inclusive policies improve access to treatment.
Goal 7 Ensure environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The provision of good-quality water, sanitation drainage, and solid waste management has an immediate impact on the urban environment. Tree planting and open space programs improve climate control, comfort, and health in slums. Solar technology programs—supported by local, national, and international assistance—benefit slum dwellers and the wider city by increasing economic and environmental sustainability.
Goal 8 Develop a global partnership for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships between slum dwellers, the private sector, and local government lay the foundations for sustainable local development. Slum dwellers, local governments, and other partners can best be supported by international development assistance provided on a programmatic, long-term basis.

Source: UN Millenium Project²²



Ideas to Consider

1. How can the MDG regarding slums be improved to make the international effort more effective? How can responsibility be distributed?
2. In order to meet international goals, some countries attempt to eradicate their cities' slums by simply evicting slum populations and demolishing their settlements. Can this be avoided? How and why?
3. Keep in mind the role of governance in urban policies. How can governments be strengthened and encouraged to improve the lives of their slum populations by providing better resources?
4. Tracking and accurately measuring the effects of improvement programs can be very difficult in slum areas, especially in the developing world. What benchmarks can be helpful for recording progress? How can the UN ensure that governments and other important actors are held **accountable** for their work?
5. While slums (as they are defined by the UN) most often exist in developing countries, there are still many instances of urban poverty in cities in the developed world. How can the needs of these urban poor populations be addressed?
6. What can the UN do to help *prevent* the growth of slums as part of the urbanization of poverty?
7. Some organizations say that "bottom-up" solutions, or projects taken on by the urban poor themselves, can make the biggest difference. What role can the UN play in these kinds of solutions?
8. "Cities that do not yet have full infrastructure have the chance to leapfrog over outmoded and wasteful systems created during the industrial revolution."²⁵ How can the international community encourage city governments to adopt forms of development that are sustainable and environmentally friendly, particularly in developing countries?

Guiding Questions for Country Research

1. Is your country a developing country? How does urbanization affect your country's cities and urban areas?
2. Does your country have slum areas (under the UN definition)? If not, are there poor areas of your country's cities that would benefit from better infrastructure, services or programs?
3. Are your country's poor populations represented in your government? How might this affect your official views on the issues of human poverty?
4. How is your country affected by the Millennium Development Goals? What programs and projects are most needed to help your country meet the MGD goals and improve the lives of the urban poor?



TERMS AND CONCEPTS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Urbanization: The enlargement of cities due to population increases and the movement of people from rural areas to urban areas.

Infrastructure: The basic physical structures needed to organize a country or city. For example: roads, water and sanitation systems, power grids, communication networks etc.

Urbanization of Poverty: When urbanization leads to saturated poverty in cities.

Slum: Especially poor area of a city, where people do not have adequate living space, access to clean water and sanitation, or security of tenure.

Security of Tenure: The ability to live in a place without the fear of eviction – or being “kicked out.” Owning land or renting a house through a legal system are a couple ways that someone can acquire security of tenure.

United Nations Human Settlement Program (UN-HABITAT): UN Agency for human settlements. It is mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all.

Marginalization: The process where someone or a group of people is pushed away from the rest because they are seen as inferior or not as important.

Eviction: The act of forcing someone or a group of people to leave their home.

Benchmarks: Standard points of reference against which things may be compared or assessed.

Accountability: Responsibility to carry out a certain activity.

Additional Resources

Websites

UN Habitat: Main website for the UN-HABITAT organization. Includes programs, country profiles and official statements. A good place to start country research! (www.unhabitat.org)

Millennium Development Goals: Detailed descriptions of the MDGs, as well as progress reports and goal-specific efforts. (www.un.org/millenniumgoals) and (www.undp.org/mdg)

Documents

UN-Habitat - State of the World's Cities (2010/2011): Recent report on the current situation of the world's cities, with a focus on urban poverty and slum issues.
(<http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=8051&catid=7&typeid=46>)



UN-Habitat - The Challenge of Slums (2003): Overview of slums and the many challenges slum dwellers face, as well as recommendations for action by the international community.

(<http://www.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=1156>)

Videos

The Fourth World: (2012) Directed by Mark Volkers (54 minutes); Award-winning indie documentary about the lives of slum dwellers, highlighting cities in Guatemala, Kenya and the Philippines.

(www.fourthworldfilm.com) and (https://play.google.com/store/movies/details/The_Fourth_World?id=uH-6iHLGUBg&feature=search_result#t=W251bGwsMSwyLDEsIm1vdmlILXVILTZpSExHVUJnIl0).

Slumdog Millionaire: (2008) Directed by Danny Boyle – **Rated “R”** (120 minutes); Award-winning fictional movie about a boy who grew up in the slums of Mumbai who then competes on the Indian version of “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?” Includes theatricized depictions of slum life.

“Life in the Slums”: (2009) CBS report on the Dharavi slum in India, used in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Criq7INq_yM (8 minutes)

Slum Survivors: (2011) United Nations documentary that tells the stories of slum dwellers in Kenya. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfW_r_4stqs (40 minutes)

UN-Habitat YouTube Channel: Contains many short topic-specific videos on urban issues such as sanitation and housing. <http://www.youtube.com/user/epitunhabitat>

REFERENCES

¹ “Functions and Powers of the General Assembly.” Welcome to the United Nations.

<http://www.un.org/ga/about/background.shtml>

² UNA-USA Sustainable Development of Megacities Background Guide. 2012.

³ “Preliminary Study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the promotion of human rights of the urban poor: strategies and best practices.” UNHRC. Accessed 14 July 2012.

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/advisorycommittee/docs/session8/A-HRC-AC-8-4_en.doc

⁴ “Urban Poverty: An Overview.” World Bank. Web. 2 July 2012.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTURBANDEVELOPMENT/EXTURBANPOVERTY/0,,contentMDK:20227679~menuPK:473804~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:341325,00.html>

⁵ “Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers: A Home in the city.” UN Millenium Project. Accessed 29 June 2012. <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/Slumdweller-complete.pdf>

⁶ “Urban Poverty.” Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. 2012. Web. 5 July 2012.

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/urban-poverty/pages/default.aspx>

³ “State of the World’s Cities 2010/2011 – Bridging the Urban Divide” UN-HABITAT Accessed 20 June 2012. <http://www.unhabitat.org/pmss/getElectronicVersion.aspx?nr=2917&alt=1>

³ “Global Urban Poverty – Setting the Agenda” USAID Accessed 20 June 2012.

http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADO607.pdf

⁹ “Slums: Some Definitions.” UN-HABITAT Accessed 20 June 2012.

http://www.unhabitat.org/documents/media_centre/sowcr2006/SOWCR%205.pdf



-
- ¹⁰ "Preliminary study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the promotion of human rights of the urban poor: strategies and best practices." UNHCR
- ¹¹ "Global Urban Poverty – Setting the Agenda" USAID
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ "UN-Habitat Mandate" UN-HABITAT Web. 12 July 2012.
<http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=2467&catid=1&typeid=24&subMenuId=0>
- ¹⁴ "Cities Without Slums – Sub-Regional Initiative." UN-HABITAT Web. 12 July 2012.
<http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=4568&catid=310&typeid=13>
- ¹⁵ "Goal 7 – Environmental Sustainability." United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Web. 9 July 2012. <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/envIRON.shtml>
- ¹⁶ "Millennium Development Goals Indicators." United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Web. 9 July 2012. <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/OfficialList.htm>
- ¹⁷ "State of the World's Cities 2010/2011 – Bridging the Urban Divide" UN-HABITAT
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ "Millennium Development Goals Report 2012." . " United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Web. 10 July 2012.
<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2012/English2012.pdf>
- ²⁰ "New York, 4 October 2010 – Secretary-General's message on World Habitat Day." United Nations Web. 15 July 2012. <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=4832>
- ²¹ "State of the World's Cities 2010/2011 – Bridging the Urban Divide" UN-HABITAT
- ²² "Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers: A Home in the city." UN Millenium Project.
- ²³ "State of the World's Cities 2010/2011 – Bridging the Urban Divide" UN-HABITAT
- ²⁴ "Millennium Development Goals Report 2011." . " United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Web. 10 July 2012. [http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2011/11-31339%20\(E\)%20MDG%20Report%202011_Book%20LR.pdf](http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2011/11-31339%20(E)%20MDG%20Report%202011_Book%20LR.pdf)
- ²⁵ Perlman, Janice, and Molly Sheehan. "Fighting Poverty and Environmental Injustice in Cities." In *State of the world 2007: our urban future : a Worldwatch Institute report on progress toward a sustainable society*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. 186.

