

Towards the inclusive city

True national development must give opportunity and dividends to all, writes **Laila Iskandar***

According to the 2003 UN report on "The Challenge of Slums," Cairo has three of the 30 largest mega-slums in the world. Two of these are Manchiyet Nasser and Embaba. The growth of informal settlements in the Greater Cairo area took place in a context of oversupply of formal housing units whose prices are beyond the financial capacities of low-income families and whose financing institutions served middle income rather than low income groups. Urbanisation on scarce agricultural land has been the dominant pattern in Egypt. Official prohibitions were not able to stem the loss of one million feddans of agricultural land to urbanisation.



It has been argued that slums are a manifestation of social injustice, and that social injustice is a breeding ground for violence, extremism and instability. The widening gap between the living conditions of people who live in the serviced, formal parts of the city and informal settlements calls for the design of special measures for the inclusion of the excluded urban poor.

By giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Muhammad Yunus Khan, the Nobel Committee supported the view that peace, social stability and security are inextricably linked to eradicating poverty, and that poverty is in fact a threat to peace and a denial of all human rights. It breeds hostility, feeds the frustrations of the deprived and produces an angry generation that threatens stability and security in any society. The creation of dignity and opportunity for the majority of slum dwellers, as well as among all impoverished people, is a pressing issue in Egypt today.

Around the world, upgrading so-called "informal areas" is no longer restricted to the limited aspects of physical infrastructure improvements. It encompasses people centred actions meant to create the "inclusive city": one where all people living in a given city enjoy decent living standards and share the common fruits of prosperity.

Around the world, informal settlement residents have organised and mobilised into coalitions that have engaged in constructive dialogue with government and the private sector around issues related to exclusion and the reality of life in slums. These efforts have given rise to internationally renowned groups, such as Slum Dwellers International in Asia, and Shack Dwellers International in Africa and Latin America. These coalitions represent the growing global population of informal settlement dwellers (close to one billion) and have demanded that the urban poor be integrated into the structure of formal economies. Some of these economies, such as India and China, have now penetrated global markets. They are now being called to

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manage cities in a manner that treats informal settlements as a major component of the city's economy and prosperity. This discussion has led to numerous innovative solutions for the myriad problems facing the urban poor.

The introduction of microfinance for shelter for the urban poor is one such innovation. Another is the integration of the informal economy with the formal one. This approach has proven that the poor can create their own business model if the right legal and business climate prevails. A third approach addresses the complicated procedures required for small informal businesses to register and formalise. Streamlining these procedures and facilitating the registration of small businesses is coupled with the diversion of pay offs to local government officials into tax funds that are specifically dedicated to infrastructure upgrading in informal settlements. A fourth approach is the simplification of land titling procedures to allow the urban poor to enjoy minimum standards of security of shelter.

In Egypt, NGOs have been active for over 20 years in informal settlements. They have innovated around urban poverty issues, such as child labour, registration of informal workshops, and local economic development. The Sohag Businessmen's Association has been extending credit to informal workshop owners for 18 years to assist them to register their businesses, upgrade their technology, institute health and safety standards and release working children for an hour to attend literacy and health awareness classes. The Spirit of Youth NGO in Manchiyet Nasser has partnered with Proctor & Gamble to bring illiterate boys out of the trash collection and scavenging businesses into the recycling trade. The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women in Manchiyet Nasser has extended 8,000 micro loans to women over the past 20 years, while offering literacy classes and assisting women in procuring birth certificates and ID cards. The Association for the Protection of the Environment in Manchiyet Nasser designed rag and paper recycling projects for hundreds of women and adolescent girls in a communal enterprise that offers producers the chance to learn and earn. The Eskan Sinaai Association in Shoubra El-Kheima has been providing child workers in local small and medium sized enterprises with literacy, recreation and a meal. El-Fustat NGO in Old Cairo removes children from hazardous occupations and places them in alternative safer occupations as an interim step towards their complete removal from the informal labour market.

While these efforts have tangible, direct impact on the lives of the people in the informal settlements, they have not yet coalesced to the point of presenting policy design proposals at the national level, the way Asian, African and Latin American coalitions have done. Community-based organisations representing the urban poor in Egypt have a wealth of ideas on how to create the "inclusive city". They have tested and legitimised their innovative solutions, yet they have not been able to reflect their practice in policy, legislation or government process. The climate in which NGOs operate does not yet allow them to come together to raise their collective and valuable experience in constructive discussion with the government or the private sector. Advocating for the poor does not mean taking an adversarial stance. Rather, it is the act of presenting viewpoints seen through a lens that might differ from the one used by policymakers -- one that is more connected to the reality of people living in informal settlements.

Infrastructure needs are a primary and critical priority in informal settlements. Communities need to be consulted on these and other issues concerning their lives. Proposing practices that have been tried by numerous grassroots organisations and that are worthy of integration into policy and practice on a broader scale is something worth undertaking if we are to seriously work on addressing the mounting problems facing people living in urban informal settlements, and at the same time to ensure stability, security and peace by grounding the notion of the inclusive city.

** The writer is Chair and Managing Director of Community and Institutional Development Association.*

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