

The Return of the Slum: Does Language Matter?

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Abstract

The 'cities without slums' initiative has resuscitated an old and dangerous term from the habitat vocabulary. Use of the word 'slum' will recreate many of the myths about poor people that years of careful research have discredited. The UN has employed the word in order to publicize the seriousness of urban problems and to improve its ability to attract funding with which to tackle the issue. But in using such an emotive word the UN risks opening a Pandora's box. The campaign implies that cities can actually rid themselves of slums, an idea that is wholly unachievable. The word is also dangerous because it confuses the physical problem of poor quality housing with the characteristics of the people living there. The UN knows that earlier research has rehabilitated most 'slum dwellers' but ignores the danger of conjuring up all of the old images. In the process, the campaign also offers an oblique invitation to governments to look for instant solutions to insoluble problems. Demagogic governments have always shown a willingness to demolish slums despite the fact that experience has shown that policy to be ineffective. I fear that the new campaign will encourage more to employ this foolish policy. Words need to be employed carefully.

Hundreds of millions of urban poor in the developing and transitional world have few options but to live in squalid, unsafe environments where they face multiple threats to their health and security. Slums and squatter settlements lack the most basic infrastructure and services. Their populations are marginalized and largely disenfranchised. They are exposed to disease, crime and vulnerable to natural disasters. Slum and squatter settlements are growing at alarming rates, projected to double in 25 years (World Bank/UNCHS, 2000: 1).

... rapid urban growth in the context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation, and state retrenchment has been an inevitable recipe for the mass production of slums (Davis, 2006: 17).

The new millennium has seen the return of the word 'slum' with all of its inglorious associations. With the launch of the 'cities without slums' initiative in 1999, the UN reintroduced this dangerous word into the habitat vocabulary.¹ After decades when most prudent academics and practitioners had avoided using it, the UN thrust the slum into full focus as the target of its main shelter programme and as one element of the millennium development goals campaign. The UN justifies its onslaught against the slum because: 'Although figures vary depending on the definition, hundreds of millions of slum dwellers exist world-wide, and the numbers are growing at unprecedented rates' (World Bank/UNCHS, 2000: 15).

'The "Cities Without Slums" initiative has been endorsed at the highest political level internationally as a challenging vision with specific actions and concrete targets to improve the living conditions of the world's most vulnerable and marginalized urban

1 For the history of the campaign, see <http://www.citiesalliance.org/activities-output/topics/slum-upgrading/action-plan.html>.

residents' (World Bank/UNCHS [Habitat], 2000). The goals of that initiative were documented more fully in the provocatively titled book *The Challenge of Slums* (UN-Habitat, 2003a).

If the slum has still not become front page news, the anti-slum initiative has managed to persuade a few more journalists and NGOs to address urban issues. The slum has also been the main focus of some recent well-known books (Verna, 2003; Maier, 2005; Davis, 2006). And, in a world where ordinary, grinding poverty is always displaced in news coverage by emergencies like that in Darfur or the Pakistan earthquake, that is no mean achievement.² A campaign is justified if it manages to remind liberal-minded people of the injustices that face so many in this world. However, a real danger exists that if journalists and others convey messages about shelter problems in too exaggerated a way, the campaign may backfire on the supposed beneficiaries. Emphasize too heavily the disease, crime and difficulties associated with slum life and it will refuel the kind of fears that already encourage the rich to move to their gated communities. To judge from recent articles from *The Guardian* newspaper, the media are all too keen to promote a message of doom, despondency and fear (McLean, 2006; Rowell, 2006; Seager, 2006).

In a squeezed square mile on the south-western outskirts of Nairobi, Kibera is home to nearly one million people — a third of the city's population. Most of them live in one-room mud or wattle huts or in wooden or basic stone houses, often windowless. It's Africa's biggest slum. The Kenyan state provides the huge, illegal sprawl with nothing — no sanitation, no roads, no hospitals. It is a massive ditch of mud and filth, with a brown dribble of a stream running through it. . . . Kibera won't be an extreme for much longer. . . . The UN predicts numbers of slum-dwellers will probably double in the next 30 years, meaning the developing world slum will become the primary habitat of mankind (McLean, 2006).

According to such reports, the world will soon be infested with slums, poverty and disease. Rather than journalists picking up the message that self-help settlements can and must be improved, it seems that they have picked up, and milked, the word 'slum'. By implication, their messages all say that every 'slum' is as bad as Kibera.

NGOs seem to have reacted in a similar way. The urban adviser of Care International has recently written: 'Every second, someone in the world moves into a slum. Over the next 30 years, the world's slum population will, on average, increase by 100,000 each day. Globally, we are seeing a shift from rural areas to cities and, before the year is out, a higher proportion of people will be living in cities than ever before' (Rowell, 2006).

Radical writers, like Mike Davis, are also jumping on the bandwagon. Davis (2006: 201) observes that 'peri-urban poverty — a grim human world largely cut off from the subsistence solidarities of life of the traditional city — is the radical new face of inequality'. He warns that these 'urban badlands' are the new territory from which insurgency will spring (*ibid.*: 202). Indeed, he seems almost to welcome that insurgency when he states that: 'the future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism'. Verma (2003) too gives a radical slant to the problem when she claims that the root cause of urban slumming in India lies not in urban poverty but in urban greed.

I am sure that each of these authors has the best interests of the poor at heart and only intends to draw attention to their neglect. More must be done to help the poor and inequality is a substantial part of the problem. But, because we have always had great difficulty in distinguishing real slums from apparent slums, a generally negative universal image can be dangerous. In particular, it may tempt politicians and planners to make play with the horrors of the urban future as embodied in the word 'slum'. Demagogic mayors and government ministers may claim that they will re-house the inhabitants of Kibera and its like; more authoritarian planners may simply threaten to

2 Is it wholly unconnected that two recent Oscar winning films, *Cidade de Deus* and *Tsotsi*, have been based in 'slums'?

demolish slums in order to ‘help’ the people. In the past, removing slums has rarely helped the residents, and as often as not assistance was never the principal aim. As such, anything that over-simplifies a complicated issue is dangerous, particularly when it employs a word that has as long and disreputable a history as the ‘slum’ (see below).

What is a slum?

Whenever action is required, it is necessary to identify the target population. So what is a slum?

Today, the noun ‘slum’ is employed in popular usage to describe ‘bad’ shelter. It is used at varying scales: anything from a house to a large settlement can be classified as a slum providing that it is perceived to be substandard and is occupied by the poor. The *Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary* (OED) provides two definitions: ‘an overcrowded and squalid back street, district, etc. usually in a city and inhabited by very poor people; and a house or building unfit for human habitation’ (Hawkins and Allen, 1991: 1369).

In practice, every city in the world tends to define slums differently, even though efforts have been made for years to establish objective measures with which to demarcate the major problem areas. Even in Victorian cities: ‘An essential backdrop to all nineteenth century slum campaigning was the development of the science of statistics’; a tendency ‘epitomised by the research of Charles Booth’ (Prunty, 1998: 5–6).

Recently, the Cities Alliance attempted to define what they meant by a slum (World Bank/UNCHS, 2000: 1):

Slums do not have:

- basic municipal services — water, sanitation, waste collection, storm drainage, street lighting, paved footpaths, roads for emergency access;
- schools and clinics within easy reach, safe areas for children to play;
- places for the community to meet and socialize.

Later deliberation refined that definition:

The operational definition of a slum that has recently been recommended [by a UN Expert Group Meeting] . . . defines a slum as an area that combines, to various extents, the following characteristics (restricted to the physical and legal characteristics of the settlement and *excluding the more difficult social dimensions*): inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding, and insecure residential status’ (italics added by this author) (UN-Habitat, 2003a: 12).

In attempting to define a slum, the UN is engaging in the modern and perfectly proper practice of establishing ‘targets’ against which progress can be measured. This task demands a baseline against which the future can be compared. To calculate that baseline, the UN has chosen to employ an absolute measure of deprivation: ‘“absolute” slum measurements rest on defining a minimal level of physical need, thus establishing a “slum line” below which a residence is classed as unfit for human occupation’ (Prunty, 1998: 4).

Unfortunately, there are problems in identifying slums through absolute measures. The first is that standards differ across the world so what is considered to be a slum by poor people in one country may be regarded as perfectly acceptable accommodation by much poorer people in another. What is considered to be unfit clearly varies from place to place and from social class to social class.

The second problem is that many low-income settlements in the world are anything but homogenous (see below). While some settlements lack every kind of service and infrastructure, many others are partially serviced. Those settlements without water may

be classified as slums but what about those settlements with provision but where some, even many, of the inhabitants cannot afford to pay for it? Diversity is inherent in many older shanty towns where some plots contain substantial houses with several storeys and others flimsy shacks. Even tenure is highly variable within older self-help housing areas because poor home owners let parts of their accommodation to tenants (Gilbert, 1993; UN-Habitat, 2003c).

However, there is a third and much more serious problem. The word 'slum' is not just an absolute but is also a relative concept. That is why Yelling (1986: 1) observes that the word is 'a term in the discourse of politics rather than science'. If a slum is a relative concept, viewed differently according to social class, culture and ideology, it cannot be defined safely in any universally acceptable way. Nor is the concept stable across time because what we consider to be a 'slum' changes. In cities where the general quality of housing gradually improves, areas that do not change become 'slums' because of their relative neglect. Outside toilets used to be acceptable in western Europe, but today houses without an inside toilet are considered to be unacceptable. This is precisely the same complication that confronts the measurement of poverty. In the EU, if some people become relatively richer, the index of poverty automatically classifies more people as poor.³ To make real sense, the baseline definition of a slum, like poverty, has to be both absolute and relative.

But if slums are relational and as much a figment of the mind as a physical construct, then it is difficult for any government or international organization to eliminate them. Indeed, as public expectations rise, and in a globalized world with ready access to television they are almost bound to do so, slums will increase in number as and when populations realized how absolute standards elsewhere are higher. If that is the case, why promise to eliminate them?

Recognizing that it had a problem, the Cities Alliance sensibly chose to measure progress on the basis of two criteria: '(i) the proportion of people with access to improved sanitation; and (ii) the proportion of people with access to secure tenure' (World Bank/ UNCHS, 2000).⁴ Notwithstanding the difficult measurement problems that this involves, particularly with the nebulous concept of secure tenure (UN-Habitat, 2003c), the choice of two simple criteria makes sense. But, if those two are the measure, why use an emotive term like 'slum'? Why, despite realizing the definitional problems is the slum being considered as 'a typology in itself to classify human settlements' (UN-Habitat, 2003b: 14)?

Why has the term been adopted?

Increasingly, UN and multi-national development organizations have to justify their existence, they have to be seen to be both useful and effective. They need to demonstrate that their designated domain addresses significant humanitarian issues that require serious and urgent action. If they cannot convince their financial masters that they have an important job to do, and that they are able to perform the task, their funding is likely to come under threat. The World Bank has struggled to identify its real role ever since the absolutes of the Washington Consensus came to be questioned and the appointment and recent difficulties of Paul Wolfowitz have hardly helped uphold the legitimacy of that august institution (Stiglitz, 2002; *The Economist*, 2007).

In the late 1990s, the UNCHS also had an identity problem and major funding difficulties. The institution has come out of that crisis by changing its name and by

- 3 Most EU countries define poor households as those whose income is less than 50% or 60% of the median income of the country. This means that poverty increases, even if in absolute terms the 'poor' have become better off over time. The USA errs on the other side by only using an absolute measure. For a simple explanation of the problem, see *The Economist* (2005).
- 4 The 'cities without slums' goal is now represented as target 11 of the millennium development goals.

appointing a new director, Anna Tibaijuka, who has been very successful in modifying the image of the organization. The organization has embraced the millennium development goals and taken responsibility for monitoring and implementing goal 7, target 11. It is helped in the task by the Cities Alliance, set up by a coalition of the World Bank, UN-Habitat, UNEP and the Asian Development Bank. The 'cities without slums' slogan was one of the means of establishing the importance of the organization's function.

Whether the initiative, along with the rest of the millennium development goals, will be successful is another question. Some, like Davis (2006: 76), argue that this is mere window dressing. 'The emerging "post-Washington consensus"', of which this clearly forms part, is 'better characterised as "soft imperialism", with the major NGOs captive to the agenda of the international donors, and grassroots groups similarly dependent upon the international NGOs'. The effect of this process '... as even some World Bank researchers acknowledge, has been to bureaucratize and deradicalize urban social movements'. I happen to disagree with that interpretation because I have no doubt that the officials in charge of the slums initiative want to improve housing conditions for the urban poor and genuinely believe that they can do so. I can also understand the bureaucratic reasons for their having adopted a high visibility slogan. However, I wholly agree with Davis's claim that: 'Syrupy official assurances about "enablement" and "good governance" sidestep core issues of global inequality and debt, and ultimately they are just language games that cloak the absence of any macro-strategy for alleviating urban poverty' (Davis, 2006: 79). My fear is that 'the language games', of which cities without slums forms part, may actually undermine the limited good that an otherwise commendable campaign will actually achieve.

What is dangerous about the term?

What makes the word 'slum' dangerous is the series of negative associations that the term conjures up, the false hopes that a campaign against slums raises and the mischief that unscrupulous politicians, developers and planners may do with the term. Since writing the first draft of this article I have discovered that Gans (1990) makes a similar complaint about the dangers inherent in using the term 'underclass'.⁵ The difference is that he is complaining about the dangers that are inherent in using a new, somewhat euphemistic, term. I am complaining about resuscitating an old, never euphemistic, stereotype; one that was long ago denounced as dangerous and yet has now resurfaced in the policy arena.

The negative associations

As previous authors have pointed out the word 'slum' has nearly always been used pejoratively or ideologically, often both at the same time. Yelling (1986: 1) observes that the word 'slum' 'carries a condemnation of existing conditions and, implicitly at least, a call for action'. Marris (1979: 419) points out that: 'The word "slum" is like the word "dirt": evocative, disapproving, and indefinable except in the context of our expectations of what should be'. More recently, Flood (2002: 3) has recognized that:

'Slum' has become an unfashionable term in the West, being strictly pejorative and associated with all forms of negative social outcomes and squalor expressed in a spatial or housing sense. It is a term very much in the spirit of Christian reformism and later Western capitalism, which has sought to define it as counterfactual, both conceptually and in the physical sense, to modernist ideals of social and physical order, morality, health, spaciousness and urban quality.

5 Thanks to one of the referees for directing me to that article.

Slums were identified as containing the poorest quality housing, the most unsanitary conditions, the poorest people: a refuge for marginal activities including crime, 'vice' and substance abuse; and a likely source for many epidemics that ravaged urban areas.

The very origins of the word 'slum' are cloaked in negativity. Insofar as we know when or where the word was first used, it seems that initially it did not apply to housing at all.⁶ The first written appearance of the term was apparently in 1812 when it appeared in Vaux's *Vocabulary of the Flash Language* (Davis, 2004: 12; *Oxford Economic Dictionary Online*, no date: 216), when a slum was inauspiciously labelled as being 'synonymous with "racket" or "criminal trade"' (Prunty, 1998: 2).⁷

When the slum did take physical form, it 'was just a single room — a place for slumber' (Dennis, 2004: 235). But it quickly grew in size to include whole areas, typically inner-city areas containing older housing of poor quality. The slum also changed form over time. In the nineteenth-century English city, slums were often found in basements and in the Victorian imagination: 'You went down into slums, into the abyss' (Dennis, 2004: 236). However, even then slums could also be found in attics at the top of houses — perhaps the origin of the commonly used epithet 'rookeries'. Much later, with the construction and subsequent deterioration of the post-war council estates of the developed world, many 'slums' went up. And, as the context changed, and shantytowns and self-help settlements proliferated, 'slums' climbed hillsides, spread into flood plains and generally occupied any land that was cheap or could be invaded. The only common element over time has been that 'slums' have always been perceived to be undesirable places in which to live.

The civic authorities in the nineteenth century began identifying 'slums' because they were dangerous to people's health: 'The relentless exposure of slum conditions, which characterized the early stages of the slum debate in Dublin (1798–1850s), was concerned mostly with infectious disease' (Prunty, 1998: 15–16). For this reason, it became increasingly common to call them 'unhealthy areas' a term that 'was derived from the 1875 Housing Act (the Cross Act) and passed into common use after 1919' (Garside, 1988: 24). Slums were dangerous to the people who lived there but, perhaps even more importantly, might launch an epidemic that would endanger everyone in the city.

But slums were also identified, and stigmatized, because they were seen to be centres of crime. In the 'earliest recorded definition' the 'slum' describes 'any particular branch of depredation practised by thieves, and a "lodging slum" [is] defined as "the practice of hiring ready furnished lodgings and stripping them of the plate, linen and other valuables"' (Prunty, 1998: 2). Is it by chance that Dickens (1846) housed Fagin and the Artful Dodger in a slum? In most cities around the world, the association between slums, ill-health and crime still resonates in most people's minds.

Indeed, it is this association between slums and the supposedly evil character of those who live there that is the most worrying aspect of our renewed use of the term. To some, the slum has always turned people into misfits. The architect and social reformer, George Godwin (1854: 1), long ago observed that: 'homes are the manufactories of men — as the home, so what it sends forth'. 'Dirty, dilapidated, and unwholesome dwellings destroy orderly and decent habits, degrade the character, and conduce to immorality' (*ibid.*: 45). Very much later, Oscar Lewis' studies of rental tenements argued that poor living conditions in Mexico City, New York and San Juan helped create a subculture of poverty (Lewis, 1959; 1966a; 1966b). In the 1980s, Alice Coleman had her 15 minutes of Warholian fame when the Thatcher government accepted that badly designed high-rise flats helped to produce rotten people and encourage criminality (Coleman, 1985).

6 Perhaps that is the origin of the term, a room for slumber? However, Prunty (1998: 2) notes that: 'Dictionary entries from the 1870s define "slums" as dirty, muddy back streets, and conjecture a possible German etymology, from *schlamm*, mire, as in the Bavarian *schlumpfen*, to be dirty'.

7 Hawkins and Allen (1991: 216) suggest that the word began as cant: '1. insincere pious or moral talk 2. ephemeral or fashionable catchwords 3. language peculiar to a class profession, sect, etc.; jargon'.

To others, of course, it was not the slum that made the people, but the people that made the slum. In Victorian London, 'in the more popular and influential literature of the day, it was character that was held to be responsible for the making of slums and, consequently, moral reformation that was advocated as the cure . . . The Irish were widely blamed for lowering housing standards and increasing overcrowding throughout central London' (Wohl, 1977: 9). The personality defects of the slum dweller are recognized in the OED's comment that only 'rarely' was the term used merely to describe 'a house materially unfit for human habitation'.

No doubt both interpretations are correct. Slums do contribute to making people's behaviour worse and some people's behaviour helps to produce slums. But what is critical is that so often slums and *all the people who live there* are tarred with the same brush. Slums and slum dwellers are viewed as constituting one undifferentiated problem with never a redeeming feature.

Was Godwin (1854: 2) not doing precisely this, when he observed: 'These densely-peopled clumps of houses, or "Rookeries" as they are called, are mostly inhabited by the poorest Irish lodging-house keepers, tramps, costermongers, thieves, and the lowest class of street-walkers'? Similarly, in a developing world context, was Stokes (1962: 188) not guilty of negative stereotyping when he argued that: 'the slum is the home of the poor and the stranger . . . These are the classes not (as yet) integrated into the life of the city'. Is Davis (2006: 178) not creating a similarly dangerous stereotype when he claims that: 'at the end of the day, the majority of the slum-dwelling laboring poor are truly and radically homeless in the contemporary international economy'?

The most worrying ingredient in most people's use of the word 'slum', therefore, is the survival of these wholly negative connotations. Slum dwellers are not just people living in poor housing; they are considered by others to be people with personal defects. In Brazil, a *favelado* is not just someone who lives in a *favela*, he or she is thought to be someone who deserves to live there.⁸ *Favelados* have always been seen as people who are different; the maid who lives there may be decent but most *favelados* are not, the negative stereotype is fixed solidly into the middle-class Brazilian psyche. In Rio, the *favelas* are regarded locally as seedbeds of crime and the homes of drug gangs, and few outside anthropology departments recognize many virtues beyond the fact that some *favelas* also contain excellent samba schools (Perlman, 1976; Goldstein, 2003; da Silva, 2000).

The same gut reaction is true of the middle class in most other cities in the world. As Marris (1979: 419) points out: 'A slum is only a slum in the eyes of someone for whom it is an anomaly — a disruption of the urban form and relationships which to that observer seem appropriate to his or her own values and perceptions'. The fundamental

8 The word *favela* is confined in Brazilian usage to settlements founded through a land invasion and established by some kind of 'self-help' process, which are to be distinguished from *loteamentos* (subdivisions) and *cortiços* (tenements). Nevertheless, the word is used to translate the word 'slum' into Portuguese — for example the title of Mike Davis's book is translated as *Planeta Favela*. In Spanish America, the housing of the poor is called more or less that, *barrios bajos* (lower-class neighbourhoods) or increasingly and, more euphemistically, *barrios populares* (ordinary or working-class neighbourhoods). The only commonly used descriptors with really negative connotations used to be the adjective *marginal*, a term that now appears rarely in the academic literature, or *tugurio*. Generally, most cities have their own local terms for shantytowns, most of which are descriptive of the look of the poor settlements or of the way that they were formed. The 'pirate urbanization' of Bogotá refers to the illegal sale of land and is to be distinguished from the even more 'illicit' invasion (Gilbert, 1981). In Argentina, sympathy imbues the term *villa miseria*, used to describe flimsy invasion settlements. In Chile, the *callampa* (mushroom) describes how flimsy settlement grows over night, the *toma* (taking) to the invasion of land, and the *población* (settlement) of the ordinary poor is contrasted to the *campamento* (camp) founded in the late 1960s by the parties of the Left. In Spanish America, the central tenements also have their local names, *conventillos* (little convents because they are formed around a central patio), *inquilinos*, *vecindades* — all associated with deterioration and over-crowding.

emotion that slums generate among non-slum dwellers is fear of the people who live there; a fear that stimulates demand for gated communities, hand guns and slum demolition.

Rather oddly, UN-Habitat (2003a: 9), while recognizing the prevalence of the stereotype, denies its importance. Although they accept that the 'catch-all term "slum" is loose and deprecatory' and 'is banned from many of the more sensitive, politically correct and academically rigorous lexicons', they choose to ignore this danger. Having defined a slum in the prologue as a place that is 'squalid, overcrowded and wretched', they then claim, somewhat ingenuously, that 'in developing countries, the term "slum", if it is used, mostly lacks the pejorative and divisive original connotation, and simply refers to lower-quality or informal housing'. Tell that to the slum dwellers of India or Pakistan, or the inhabitants of the *barrios* of Caracas or the informal settlements and townships of South Africa, and see what they say. In Rio, poor people claim that an address in a *favela* often means that they do not get a job (Leeds, 2007: 24). Even in Paris, 'discrimination is illegal, but *banlieue* residents routinely report that they are turned away once a potential employer spots an Arabic name or undesirable postal code' (Geary and Graff, 2005). As with the euphemism 'underclass': 'while it seems inoffensively technical on the surface, it hides within it all the moral opprobrium Americans have long felt towards those poor people who have been judged to be undeserving' (Gans, 1990: 273).

Slums are heterogeneous

Too many observers, including the UN and proselytizing authors like Davis and Verma, apply the term slum with broad strokes; it embraces any place that is problematic and any group of people that lives there is automatically included. Politicians, planners and the general public all tend to adopt the view that, if it looks like a duck, it must be a duck. All slums are bad and everyone living in them must suffer from the debilitating subculture that slum life produces. The term 'slum' is like the 'underclass' 'that lumps together a variety of highly diverse people who need different kinds of help' (Gans, 1990: 274).

In practice, most 'slums' are anything but homogenous and contain both a mixture of housing conditions and a wide diversity of people. That is why those academics, architects and planners who began to investigate the reality of life in the shantytowns in the 1950s found few Oscar Lewis type slums or slum dwellers (Abrams, 1964; Turner, 1965; 1967; Mangin, 1967; 1970; Portes, 1972; Cornelius, 1975; Koenigsberger, 1976). Life in these settlements was not as dismal as that described by Lewis in the central tenements of Mexico City or San Juan and many of these areas were clearly places that allowed people to gradually improve their lives. Turner (1969: 521) describes how studies of cities in seven countries discovered that: 'the peripheral settlers are almost always of a higher socio-economic status than central city slum or "provisional settlement" dwellers'. Based on his experience in Latin America, Mangin (1967: 65) noted that writers about squatter settlements in Latin America 'agree, sometimes to their own surprise, that it is difficult to describe squatter settlements as slums. The differentiation of squatter settlements from inner-city slums is, in fact, one of the first breaks from the widely shared mythology about them'.

Study after study during the 1960s and 1970s confirmed the fact that what might begin as a shantytown often developed into a serviced, consolidated, low-income suburb. The difference, according to Mangin (1970: xxix), was not about the people. 'The slum dwellers are basically the same kinds of people as the squatter settlement dwellers with regard to status characteristics. However, the slum dwellers do not view the future in the same way the people of the squatter settlements do. They exhibit more depression and alienation . . .' At this time, access to land, sufficient income to buy materials and sheer effort offered the poor a 'decent' home at least in the conceivable future. A terminological break-through came when Charles Stokes differentiated between 'slums of hope' and

'slums of despair'. This neatly summarized the growing consensus that poor-quality housing played a variety of roles and contained a great deal of heterogeneity. Stokes' (1962: 190) 'slums of "hope" disappear as migration slows down. Slums of "despair" do not disappear. For in the slums of "despair" live the poor'. If the word slum was still used, at least there were good slums and bad ones!

Thenceforth, most students of low-income areas in Latin America and Africa, although not generally in Asia, strenuously avoided the term slum. They replaced it with a gamut of terms, including informal housing, irregular settlement, spontaneous shelter and self-help housing (Abrams, 1964; Turner, 1965; 1967; Mangin, 1967; 1970; Portes, 1972; Cornelius, 1975; Koenigsberger, 1976). None of these terms managed to embrace the diversity of the settlements being described or the full range of processes involved, but each underlined an important dimension of the housing problem in poor countries: the reality was that people were essentially producing their own housing. People acquired land informally, sometimes illegally, and began to build, or at least design, their own accommodation. They lived initially without services but usually managed to improve the quality of their shelter over time and to use their home as part of a 'household survival strategy'. Providing that they earned enough money, and the government was vaguely competent, they were able to produce decent homes (Ward, 1976; Gilbert, 1992). Sometimes, the new terms used to describe the improving shantytowns were far too eulogistic, as when the new military government of Peru renamed its slums as 'young towns', but such a term at least had the advantage that the young towns were unlikely to be demolished by the state (Lloyd, 1981)!⁹

In the past, I have argued that it matters not what term one uses to describe low-income settlements providing that the limitations of the term being employed are recognized (Gilbert, 1992). At the time, I favoured the use of the adjectives 'spontaneous', 'irregular' and 'self-help' in relation to housing but suggested that it did not much matter if other terms were used. However, I am certain that this argument does not apply to the term 'slum' for the reasons given in this article.

Later, of course, the automatic association between the inner city of dilapidation and the shantytown of improvement came to be questioned. In Mexico City, Eckstein (2000: 185) observed that, 'the shantytown that I came to know over a thirty-year period increasingly housed tenants who were poorer than the homeowners'. And, 'as local economic opportunities deteriorated, social problems proliferated. Drug addiction, violence, theft, and assault all increased with the austerity policies and peso devaluation of the 1990s' (*ibid.*: 187). 'Thus, the shantytown had come to be described more aptly as a "slum of despair" than a "slum of hope", the opposite of what urbanists had theorized'. Her observations are based on too limited a sample and on a misunderstanding of the role of tenure but her central argument is correct: what is a slum at one point in time may improve, what was once an area of hope may deteriorate. Quite simply, urban areas change through time; like many neighbourhoods in a city, some slums are gentrified, some formerly 'decent' areas decay.¹⁰ If, as Flood (2002: 4) suggests, 'the reality of these unplanned settlements is quite different to the Western concept of slum, to the extent that "slum" may not be a meaningful description', using the term is at best misleading.

Has the heterogeneity of low-income settlement been recognized in the recent rediscovery of slums? Yes and no. The World Bank/UNCHS (2000: 1) recognizes that: 'Slums range from high density, squalid central city tenements to spontaneous squatter settlements without legal recognition or rights, sprawling at the edge of cities'. But, more worryingly, 'slums are neglected parts of cities where housing and living conditions are appallingly poor . . . Slums have various names . . . yet share the same miserable living conditions'.

9 Hernando de Soto (1989) wrote about the inhabitants as pioneers, the saviours of the Peruvian economy.

10 Perlman (2004) provides evidence about how certain areas in Rio de Janeiro have changed their character over 30 years.

Worse still, they declare that the urban situation is deteriorating unequivocally: 'In fact urban slum conditions are qualitatively and quantitatively worsening worldwide (World Bank/UNCHS, 2000: 9). This is part of the danger of the word and of campaigns generally. If you want to face up to the challenge of slums, you have to emphasize the worsening nature of the problem. Writers like Mike Davis are equally culpable in this regard. In the process, vast numbers of people are effectively labelled as 'undesirables'.

The paradox of providing solutions for an unachievable goal

If we take it at face value, the policy goal of the UN campaign is to reduce the number of slum dwellers by 2020 and hopefully to have eliminated it by some later date. But there is a major problem. In Victorian Britain, it is less than clear what proportion of the urban population lived in slums but, generally, the slum was perceived to be exceptional, the location of a minority, usually the undeserving and, not infrequently, the criminal. Normal housing was something other than a slum which meant that the anomaly could be 'treated'. Even though slums were relatively scarce in most developed countries, governments have never managed to rid us of our problem despite growing affluence and constant policy shifts. If that is reality in most developed countries, what chance is there in much less prosperous cities?

According to the UN's figures, slums in the cities of the South are no longer exceptional. Now that the term has been extended to the ill-served, flimsy accommodation of the periphery *most* urban Africans, Asians and Latin Americans live in slums. UN-Habitat (2003a: 15) estimates that 72% of urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa live in slums and 58% of those in South-Central Asia. Even Latin Americans cannot escape this fate because, seemingly, 'about two-thirds of the population of Mexico City live in what might be called a slum' (*ibid.*: xxix). Even more alarmingly, UN-Habitat (2003a: 81) estimates that, in 2001, 99.4% of the urban population of Ethiopia lived in slums and 98.5% of those in Afghanistan! In the urban areas of virtually all of the 49 least developed countries of the world, the majority lived in slums.

On the basis of such figures, Davis (2006: 19) claims that: 'the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay'. Even allowing for his rhetoric, if most people live in slums, what chance is there of improving life in the city? If all but 1 or 2% of the inhabitants of Addis Ababa or Kabul live in slums, how can the problem be treated, let alone solved?

Even if the initiative should prove successful in improving living conditions, slums will remain because as general housing standards rise, areas that fail to reach the new general standard will be newly categorized as slums. In the UK, rising expectations in terms of plumbing, damp courses and living space have turned many homes into slums that were once considered acceptable dwellings. I am all for raising standards but in the housing arena this tends to mean stigmatization of any housing that does not meet the new standards.

In the light of the enormous problem that needs to be tackled, one might expect policymakers to come up with relatively modest and realistic goals. If the problem is so large, then it cannot be solved; at best it can only be lessened.

To be fair to the 'cities without slums' initiative, the goal is not to rid the world of all slums by 2020. However, few politicians are so reasonable and far too many are wont to promise the electorate a happy future. Perhaps this is why the South African Housing Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, announced in 2004 that the government would eliminate the housing backlog over the next 10 years (Peta, 2004). The policy of offering small subsidies to the poor and encouraging the mass building of small owner-occupied dwellings would soon solve South Africa's vast housing problem.

Similar kinds of utopian thinking produced Brasília and Ciudad Guyana and a host of lesser versions across the globe. These cities were intended to be islands of prosperity and modernism in seas of poverty. They were meant to be perfect and to demonstrate the future. Unfortunately, they could only achieve perfection if the poor of the country were kept out. The results were dualistic: perfectly decent planned cities with wholly imperfect, albeit distant, unplanned, neighbourhoods (Holston, 1989; Macdonald and Macdonald, 1979; Peattie, 1987; Wright and Turkienicz, 1988). Experience in London, Paris, Brasília, Rio de Janeiro and virtually every other city in the world shows us that the 'slum' will always be with us; the 'eternal slum' as Wohl (1977) once called it.

Encouraging the adoption of dangerous 'solutions'

In the past, the solution to the slum problem often amounted to one word: clearance. In hindsight, it is clear that demolition often only added to the problem. The main achievement of slum clearance in London and Paris in the nineteenth century was to increase overcrowding elsewhere. It did more to improve transport than to solve the housing problem. Baron Haussmann, after all, is remembered for his boulevards, not for his solution to the *taudis* of Paris.¹¹ The construction of railways and New Oxford Street in London worsened the housing situation rather than improving it.

When, immediately after the first world war, the British government promised its returning forces 'houses fit for heroes', that meant demolishing the slums and building new homes in the suburbs. The British new town movement and, later, high-rise flats represented the modernist epitome of this idea. The housing that existed was hopeless and only modern architecture and planning techniques could create proper homes. While some of these efforts did improve housing conditions, too often they brought little benefit to people's lives (see below).

Since 1945, few governments have lacked good, modernizing ministers who promised to remove slums and build 'proper homes' in their place. Unfortunately, few of these efforts proved very successful. As Van Kempen and Musterd (1991: 83) observe: 'In the Western world social high-rise housing has become the symbol of the deficiencies and failure of post-war public housing policies and management . . . Apart from construction faults, failures and bad repairs, problems such as vacancies, rent arrears, a high turnover rate, filthiness, vandalism, feelings of insecurity and a high concentration of socially and economically weak families are supposed to characterize the occupancy and living conditions of these estates'. Taylor (1973) argues that, in the UK, much potentially decent terraced housing was reduced to rubble to produce the kinds of new social housing that was to prove so problematic. The construction of the *grands ensembles* on the edges of the large French cities seems to have proved no more successful. The first large estates were built on the periphery of Paris in 1953 and rapidly deteriorated. When 'riots occurred in Lyons in 1981 Mitterand set up a commission to deal with the more problematic estates. In the mid-1990s there were about 50 in the Île de France with an average population of 9,000' (Noin and White, 1997: 197–8). Despite changes in policy, the French *banlieues* have continued to explode, most recently in 2005.

In poor countries, past efforts at slum improvement too often led to displacement of the so-called beneficiaries. Supposedly benevolent leaders knocked down shanty accommodation in Caracas, Rio de Janeiro and Santiago and re-housed the population in purpose-built housing. The population were supposed to be happier as a result. And, 'since the 1970s it has become commonplace for governments everywhere to justify slum clearance as an indispensable means of fighting crime' (Davis, 2006: 111).

11 *Harraps New Standard Dictionary* defines *un taudis* as a miserable room, dirty hole, hovel and suggest that it can be used as in les taudis de Paris. A *taud* is a rain awning or tarpaulin.

In practice, most observers have always concluded that slum removal has had negative effects (Marris, 1960; Dwyer, 1975; Perlman, 1976; Valladares, 1978; Rodríguez and Icaza, 1993: 68). Relocation disrupts existing commercial and social networks, lengthens the journey to work, raises housing costs and generally disrupts people's lives. Fortunately, the validity of Abrams' (1964: 126) famous jibe against slum demolition was gradually absorbed in many cities: 'In a housing famine there is nothing that slum clearance can accomplish that cannot be done more efficiently by an earthquake . . . Demolition without replacement intensifies overcrowding and increases shelter cost'. By the 1970s, the World Bank among others was pushing the dual concept of slum upgrading and sites and services (World Bank, 1974; 1980). Neither approach was perfect, but both represented a huge improvement on either clearance or the pretence of building perfect homes for imperfect people (Werlin, 1999).

Unfortunately, there are still many governments anxious to demolish slums. Indeed, Davis (2006: 99) claims that this is part of an international conspiracy. 'In big Third World cities, the coercive Panoptican role of "Haussman" is typically played by special-purpose development agencies; financed by offshore lenders like the World Bank and immune to local vetoes, their mandate is to clear, build, and defend islands of cyber-modernity amidst unmet urban needs and general underdevelopment' (Davis, 2006: 99). Whatever the truth of that assertion, slum clearance continues and, subsequent to the 'cities without slums' initiative, large-scale demolition projects have been initiated in India, Kenya and Zimbabwe (AHRC, 2003; STP, 2004; COHRE, 2005; 2007; Punwani, 2005). The Mugabe regime's recent efforts to 'clean up' its cities through Operation Murambatsvina may have led to 700,000 people 'losing their home, their sources of livelihood or both' (COHRE, 2005). Let me emphasize that the Cities Alliance is wholly against this approach and UN-Habitat is actively campaigning against it. Nevertheless, their wise advice to upgrade settlements and avoid demolition is clearly being ignored by some governments. I have no doubt that the slogan 'cities without slums' is partly to blame.

Meanwhile, more humane approaches to the 'slum' problem elsewhere are proving less than effective. In Colombia and South Africa, for example, many poor people are being given subsidies to buy formal homes. However, not only is construction failing to keep up with demand, but some of the beneficiaries have sold their new homes because they cannot afford to pay the associated taxes and service charges (Huchzermeyer, 2003; Gilbert, 2004). In Chile, the only Latin American country where the housing deficit has actually been cut in recent years (Gilbert, 2001), new subsidized housing estates have arguably turned into social housing ghettos (Richards, 1995; Ducci, 1997). All three governments are determined to create nations of homeowners and to house the poor in 'proper' homes, despite their manifest inability to eliminate poverty. Metaphorically, the plan is to eliminate the slum, something akin to finding the Holy Grail.

Misunderstanding the central problem

The central dilemma facing housing improvement was understood many years ago. It was expressed in the Chairman of the London County Council Housing Committee's contentious questions: 'Does the slum make the slum dweller or the slum dweller the slum? Would someone who is "filthy in one room, be clean in two"?' (Barnes, 1926: 147)? An early test of the latter question was conducted in the late 1920s. McGonigle and Kirby's (1936) famous study compared the health and expenditure of a slum population in Stockton on Tees with that of a group that had been moved to modern housing.

The results were dramatic. Although the estate to which the families moved was carefully planned and well-built, and the houses were fitted with a bath, kitchen range, ventilated food store, wash boiler and all the most modern sanitary arrangements, the death rate of the families increased by 46 per cent over what it had previously been in the slum area they left behind (Garside, 1988: 39).

The simple explanation was that in order to pay for their new housing the families were able to spend much less on food. Poor people need cheap accommodation. If cheap accommodation is not available, they become homeless or they spend too much on housing. There is a conflict between improving the physical quality of housing and improving the housing conditions of poor people.

Arguably, social housing programmes in many developed countries solved that problem by heavily subsidizing the poor. However, the problems currently faced by the ageing council estates in the UK suggest that this policy has not always worked. Similarly, the social situation in the *grands ensembles* of urban France show that 'the marginalization of these estates is in reality more social and cultural than physical' (Noin and White, 1997: 197–8). High levels of unemployment, poor education and racial segregation sometimes combine to create new slums.

In poorer environments, Turner (1976) points out, little purpose is served in providing a poor family with a fully serviced, three-bedroom house if the family cannot afford the rent or mortgage payment. He once compared the housing situations of two families, one living in formal accommodation, the other, a rag picker, in a shack in the backyard of his godparent. While the living conditions of the first family were clearly far superior to those of the second, the housing expenditure of the first was far more than they could afford. Turner argued that given the circumstances of the two families at the time, the flimsy shack offered more appropriate accommodation than the three-bedroom house.

Similarly, as Marris (1979: 424) points out: 'Squalid housing, crime, ignorance and poverty come to be seen as a mutually reinforcing constellation of circumstances independent of the economic relationships which cause them. And this leads to another myth: that improvements in housing can abate other, more fundamental inequalities'. As such, 'Projects of slum clearance, site and service schemes, and model housing are too marginal to influence substantially either the flow of investment or the pattern of settlement and so, for the most part, are manipulated by the forces they seek to control' (*ibid.*: 440).

In cities with abject poverty, housing improvements can be counterproductive insofar as the priorities of the desperately poor almost always lie beyond shelter. Above all else, the poor need to eat and to drink clean water. Overcrowding is clearly undesirable but hunger is worse!

Conclusion

One of the aims of UN-Habitat is to draw attention to an extremely worrying and possibly growing symptom of urban poverty. As its executive director puts it: 'Awareness of the magnitude of slums in the world is the key' (UN-Habitat, 2003a: 1). Campaigns against poor housing are to be welcomed, but such campaigns have to demonstrate that they can really improve living conditions. If the 'cities without slums' campaign manages 'by 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers', we should celebrate. We should also praise the campaign insofar as it espouses upgrading projects rather than slum clearance.

At the same time, I fear that that by using the term 'slum', the campaign's main goal becomes blurred and obscures the real steps that need to be taken to improve living conditions. If the key problem to be addressed is to improve the quality of people's housing, then a campaign entitled 'In search of better shelter' would be much more accurate and honest. Most importantly, it would represent a reasonable goal and would not convey the negative images evoked by the use of the word 'slum'. 'Better shelter' suggests a progression: that housing problems are so complicated and deep seated that they cannot easily be resolved, let alone eliminated. Improving shelter does not demand the end of 'slums', which is unachievable, but to produce better housing conditions,

which is. The danger with the term 'cities without slums' is that it is just a slogan; rhetoric that carries with it an empty promise.

What worries me too is that use of the word slum will recreate many of the old stereotypes about poor people that years of careful research has discredited. By using an emotive word, the UN draws attention to a real problem but, in doing so, it evokes a response that it cannot control. As Gans (1990: 275) points out in his condemnation of the term 'underclass', if the term 'is turned into a synonym for the undeserving poor, the political conditions for reinstating effective antipoverty policy are removed'. The very word 'slum' confuses the physical problem of poor quality housing with the characteristics of the people living there. And, with so many unscrupulous governments in power around the world, the stereotype may be used to justify programmes of slum clearance. After all, how better to create cities without slums than by obliterating the eyesores?

Perhaps 'cities without slums' is just another mistaken attempt to create utopia in the middle of an imperfect world? Or, is it a way of masking the 'problem of warehousing this century's surplus humanity' and of preventing the 'great slums . . . waiting to erupt' (Davis, 2006: 201)? My own view is less Machiavellian, that it is the unfortunate result of a combination of genuine altruism and bureaucratic opportunism. After all, UN agencies need to justify their existence and this is one reason why in recent years their publications have appeared more frequently, the production glossier and the titles sexier. Other UN organizations and NGOs are putting different issues at the forefront of the global agenda so each must use the headlines to compete for funds. In that respect, the 'cities without slums' campaign is a sign of our times, it is a victory for the banner headline and for tabloid thinking. This is dumbing down and, worse, it is an invitation to look for instant solutions that will help no one, especially the newly stereotyped 'slum' dwellers.

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Résumé

L'initiative 'Villes sans taudis' a ressuscité un terme ancien et dangereux du vocabulaire de l'habitat. Utiliser le mot 'taudis' va recréer toute une mythologie sur les pauvres que des années de recherches consciencieuses avaient réfutée. L'ONU a fait ce choix pour souligner la gravité des problèmes urbains et renforcer sa capacité à attirer des fonds avec lesquels résoudre la question. Cependant, ce mot étant connoté émotionnellement, l'ONU risque d'ouvrir une boîte de Pandore. La campagne implique que les villes peuvent réellement se débarrasser des taudis, ce qui est totalement irréalisable. Le mot est dangereux aussi parce qu'il mélange le problème matériel de la piètre qualité des logements et les caractéristiques des populations qui y vivent. L'ONU sait que des études antérieures ont réhabilité la plupart des 'habitants de taudis', mais elle ignore le risque lié à l'évocation des vieilles images. Parallèlement, la campagne invite indirectement les gouvernements à trouver des solutions immédiates à des problèmes insolubles. Les gouvernements démagogues se sont toujours montrés disposés à démolir les taudis même si l'expérience a prouvé l'inefficacité de cette politique. Je crains que cette nouvelle campagne n'en encourage d'autres à appliquer cette stratégie insensée. Il faut employer les mots avec circonspection.