Revisiting ... Retrieving the baby from the bathwater: slum upgrading in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction
We are delighted and honored that our paper has generated enough interest to rank as ‘most downloaded’. We welcome this opportunity to write a postscript, not least because it gives us a chance to outline the evolution in our thinking on a crucial aspect of the paper—the factors determining quality of living conditions in slums and what can be done to improve them.

The impetus
This research project started at the World Bank in 2000. Urban practitioners working on the Africa region were concerned that almost all African cities were struggling with the slum problem—slums were everywhere and growing rapidly. It was clear that something needed to be done, but the ‘what’ was far from obvious.

A key issue was that the Bank’s own experience with investing in slums had not been resoundingly successful. The Bank pioneered slum upgrading programs in the 1970s and had invested heavily in them for the next two decades. By the early 1990s, however, the verdict was that these upgrading programs were not working and, consequently, the Bank’s financing for them had dwindled significantly. Additionally, there were few recent, large-scale, and representative studies of slums, especially in Africa. There were, hence, few reliable data on the numbers of people residing in these slums, the level of services they had, and their quality of life and living conditions.

The research team decided on a two-pronged approach—a retrospective that culled insights from prior project experience as well as existing literature, and an empirical update based on carefully sampled surveys of slum residents in a few African cities.

“Retrieving the baby from the bathwater: slum upgrading in Sub-Saharan Africa” (Gulyani and Bassett, 2007) is a part of the retrospective analysis. We ploughed through volumes of project documents and evaluations, specially commissioned updates from ten countries, and a huge body of academic literature. We were struck by the host of issues subsumed under ‘slum upgrading’ and the diversity of opinions on each. Clearly, there was variation in project performance and significant innovation in practice, but, on balance, the critics had been more articulate and seemed to have won the case.

In our paper, instead of debating whether upgrading was a success or failure, we decided to highlight ‘what had worked, what had not, and why?’ We also chose to focus on two aspects that were emerging as key determinants of living conditions in slums—tenure and infrastructure. Most of the literature focuses on either one or the other, but we felt that they are strongly related and needed to be understood in concert with each other.
The reaction
Reactions to the paper have been primarily positive and have emanated from both practitioners and academics. We have heard from students and professors who are grappling with the implications of an urban world—a “planet of slums” to quote Davis (2006)—and are interested in what has been and might be done to improve informal settlements. We have also heard from practitioners—including those working outside of Africa—who are experiencing the challenges of upgrading and are interested to learn from the experiences of other places. Less positively, our assertion that upgrading was unfashionable in the 1990s has been challenged (we stand by it); we also have been criticized for not dissecting and dismissing De Soto (not an aim of the paper).

Subsequent research and an epilogue: the living conditions diamond
In the two years since the paper was completed our own empirical research has forced us to question some of the prevailing conceptualizations of slums, and to recognize that the framework for understanding living conditions needs to be broader—tenure and infrastructure are indeed key factors influencing living conditions, but so are the housing unit and the neighborhood.

In our more recent research we propose that the quality of living conditions in any settlement (not just slums) can be conceptualized as a diamond with four dimensions—tenure, infrastructure, the unit, and the neighborhood—and that these factors interact with each other to collectively determine the outcome. These four dimensions also represent points of entry or intervention; action on any one or more of these dimensions affects the others and changes the overall quality of living conditions in a given settlement. Finally, many of these dimensions change over time—they can improve or worsen—and, consequently, settlement conditions also vary over time. This new framework, the ‘living conditions diamond’, is discussed and illustrated in more detail in a series of papers (eg Gulyani and Bassett, forthcoming; Gulyani and Talukdar, 2008; Gulyani et al, 2008).

Using the living conditions diamond we would now argue that the ‘infrastructure first’ versus ‘tenure first’ debate in the literature on slum upgrading is not useful. In our earlier paper we had taken sides in this debate and supported the infrastructure first approach with some caveats. This approach may well work in many slum settlements, but we have to acknowledge that it is likely to fail in others. Living conditions are a composite of four sets of interdependent factors, they are dynamic, and context matters. This means that the ‘right’ entry point, or combination of entry points, for improving conditions in a settlement will depend on context and the nature of linkages between the various dimensions in that place; it is a mistake to argue over the salience of any one dimension over another, devoid of both context and the recognition that they affect each other.

At a broader level, the diamond framework offers a step toward a more complete theory of living conditions and their dynamics—because it facilitates a multidimensional understanding of quality, highlights interactions among variables and over time, and helps to explain variation among contexts. It allows us to move beyond the simplistic notion that slums are homogeneously poor in quality, and facilitates comparative analyses that can reveal why they differ. For practitioners, the diamond can be a useful decision-making tool—that is, for deciding where to intervene and how. The diamond can reveal, for example, which settlements are the worst off, which of the four dimensions of quality need attention first, and which aspects of a single dimension need work (with respect to tenure, for example, is it the lack of title, tenancy relative to owner occupancy, resident turnover, and/or the threat of eviction that is affecting quality?). We hope this framework will contribute to more nuanced understanding of (slum) settlements and—equally important—help practitioners to devise more tailored, context-specific interventions that improve the efficacy and impact of upgrading projects.
References
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