

# Slumdog Sustainability

**When struggling to improve conditions in poor neighbourhoods in the developing world, sometimes the most important resources are the ones you can't see.**

Mark Redwood

**T**O THE OUTSIDER, Jakarta's Penjaringan neighbourhood might seem a symbol of the apparently intractable web of problems faced by roughly one billion slum-dwellers in the developing world. Tucked beneath an elevated highway that leads into the heart of the Indonesian capital, the area is a patchwork of tin-roofed, makeshift homes packed onto a small parcel of land. Thousands of people move, work and play in streets that are so narrow you can touch two homes with your arms outstretched.

Most of the 56,000 residents lack access to fresh water, and the absence of solid-waste collection means that streets are choked with garbage. Poorly constructed latrines and drainage canals leak into the groundwater, and drench streets when it rains, creating a significant public health hazard. The sour smell of wastewater and burning garbage permeates the air.

But beneath this stereotypic image lurks another reality. A pilot project underway in Penjaringan shows how a few key investments can leverage the latent creativity and energy that are hallmarks of community life.

Penjaringan is one of eight "living laboratories" on three continents that are part of the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) Focus Cities Research Initiative. In order to participate in the program, cities had to demonstrate that community associations, municipal governments and researchers were working together to confront the dual challenges of urban poverty and environmental decay.

Another common trait among participating cities is their belief that urban poverty, and the potential to overcome it, is more than just a matter of low income. Access to "financial assets" needed to purchase food and shelter, and

*Dr. Seydou Niang (foreground) and his team sample water from around the Mbeubeuss landfill in Dakar. Among other analyses, they test for heavy metals and pH levels.*



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Dakar, Senegal

**Worldwide, there are an estimated 750 million to 1.1 billion urban dwellers whose basic needs are not being met.**



## Focus Cities Research Initiative

- The Focus Cities Research Initiative (FCRI) aims to integrate research with policy making and to translate good, critical thinking into reality.
- IDRC devised the FCRI to build on what many urban thinkers and practitioners have already proposed: those living in informal settlements often have a proactive response and systems in place to ease the burden of poverty and create more opportunities for themselves. Attempts to improve conditions in poor neighbourhoods must build on what is already there.
- The eight cities involved in the FCRI are Cochabamba, Bolivia; Colombo, Sri Lanka; Dakar, Senegal; Jakarta, Indonesia; Kampala, Uganda; Ariana-Soukra, Tunisia; Lima, Peru; and Moreno, Argentina.
- One precondition for a city taking part in the FCRI is that a working relationship has been established between the municipal council and local community groups. It is critical that each city team have strong and senior buy-in from the local government.

“resource assets,” such as the ability to acquire land and water, are not sufficient for citizens to thrive in a complex urban setting. Residents also need “human health and capability assets,” which enable them to generate income, and “social and political assets,” which can unlock the availability of services ranging from electricity to education and health care (see figure 1).

For instance, a utility company in Penjaringan recently agreed to supply water through plastic “spaghetti pipes” to homes at a much lower price than residents were used to paying in the informal market. Weekend work brigades have begun cleaning out drainage gutters. This prevents them from overflowing, and brigade members receive a second benefit when they turn the collected sand and sludge into paving and wall bricks. Similarly, residents are generating income by converting food waste into compost.

Working with local research organizations, IDRC has come to recognize that these groups of assets are bound tightly together, and that a deficit in one diminishes the others. For example, a household that lacks running water is often forced to pay private vendors five times the metered rate. Similarly, people without access to decent land – those who live close to a garbage dump, for instance – tend to experience health problems, which can lead to financial loss.

That the opposite is also true – gains in one asset area may result in improvements in another – is borne out in Penjaringan, where the prospect for material advances has boosted the social assets of optimism and self-confidence.

Community members reacted to a fire that destroyed over 100 squatter homes in this part of Jakarta by cleaning up the area, painting it and establishing coffee shops. To decide how to renovate the charred space, residents held a design workshop and voted to open a social area. As one community member told the *Jakarta Post*, “Our



Kampala, Uganda

**More than 680 million people in cities have inadequate access to clean water.**

neighbourhood is changing for the better and we are making it happen.”

Indeed, IDRC and its partners in the Focus Cities project believe that the less tangible assets can be just as important, sometimes more so, than the concrete ones such as income and natural resources.

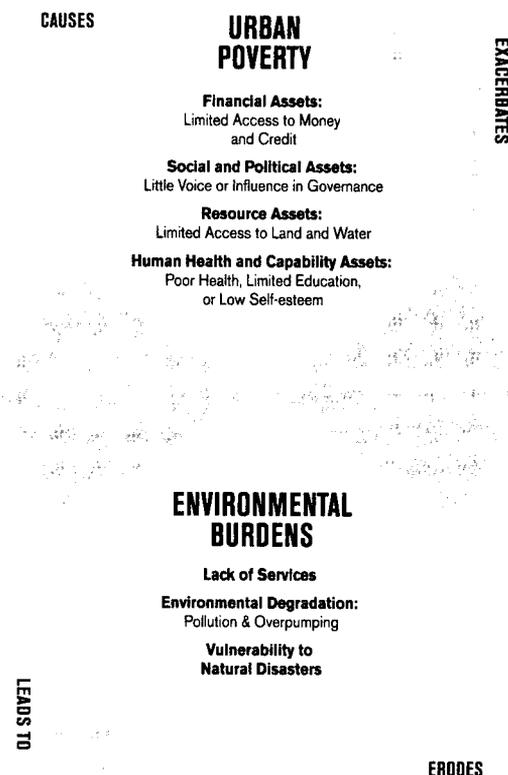
Consider the impact of having a political voice. Local officials often ignore squatter or informal communities, which can have disastrous consequences since receiving municipal services, such as water, sanitation and schooling, typically depends on official recognition. Thus, a dangerous downward cycle begins. “Illegal” communities fall deeper into despair, crime and drug abuse may increase, and the walls between communities may grow.

When municipalities and community groups work together, a very different dynamic unfolds. In the informal neighbourhood of Gothamipura in Colombo, Sri Lanka, for example, the city is connecting several thousand residents to the sanitation system, instituting solid-waste collection and granting land tenure to residents.

One of the chief benefits of collaboration is its power to unleash a community’s resourcefulness and entrepreneurial spirit. When this happens, problems can start to look like solutions. Many communities involved in the Focus Cities initiative are generating income by recycling wastes. In Penjaringan, the residents make bricks from sludge and turn garbage into marketable compost, while in Cochabamba, Bolivia, a women’s group uses scavenged waste paper as raw material for high-end greeting cards. Maria Luizanga, a woman who derives her living from picking waste in city dumps, notes, “Thanks to this garbage, my grandchildren and I can live.”

Government officials in the cities involved in the project are discovering that residents of marginal

FIGURE 1  
URBAN POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL BURDENS



*Overcoming urban poverty requires more than money. Residents also need resource assets, human health and capability assets, as well as social and political assets.*

More than 800 million people in urban areas lack proper sanitation.



Jakarta, Indonesia

communities should be enlisted as agents of change. Many of Cochabamba's waste pickers, for instance, make their living by combing through the K'ara K'ara dump, a facility that threatens public health and contaminates adjoining farmland. An attempt to mitigate these negative effects, through an integrated waste management plan, hinges on those same people taking on new roles in improved disposal and recycling systems. Gonzalo Terceros, the mayor of Cochabamba, points to the success of the waste management project, where 80 per cent of homes now sort their waste for its reuse: "What I like about this project is that it is attacking the problem at its roots, the home, making us all participate in the solution."

These complex projects require careful planning, which is why a third party, the research community, is collaborating with government and neighbourhood groups in Focus Cities. On the ground, precise, context-specific research is needed on everything from the economics of marketing recycled products, to the engineering implications of bringing sanitation to overcrowded areas, to questions of training, education and social mobilization.

Inevitably, there are setbacks and challenges. When municipal leadership changes, for instance, continuity becomes a problem. In Colombo, the President's firing of the mayor and his council threatened the entire project.

Other problems may arise from unequal power relationships among community members. As the famous urban critic Jane Jacobs said, "Being human is itself difficult, and therefore all kinds of settlements (except dream cities) have problems." Certain voices, women in particular, are less likely to be heard. As a result, teams involved in this initiative are advised to have inclusive decision making and negotiation processes.

Even success can complicate things. Giving legal status to informal settlements in Gothamipura would create a

new tax base to fund service delivery, but it could also put real estate prices out of reach for the poorest people.

Ultimately, success depends on whether these projects improve people's lives. But how do you measure that?

For this initiative, each community monitors and measures different combinations of the four types of assets, depending on their specific goals and challenges. In some cases, a boost to the community's self-esteem and confidence may be more important than increased cash flow. In a neighbourhood near Lima, Peru, for example, project participants measure environmental contamination since it is believed to be a major cause of social problems, such as drugs and gang life, which occur as young people seek refuge from inhospitable environments.

Incremental change in eight neighbourhoods scattered around the globe is a mere drop in the bucket when a billion people live in slums in developing countries. But the experiences in these living laboratories are providing valuable lessons for other "hopeless" communities. ♣

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*Photos: Normand Blouin pages 25,26; Sarah McCans page 27; Peter Bennett page 28. All courtesies of idrc.ca.*

As part of the Focus Cities Research Initiative, Montreal's Sarah McCans works with children from poverty-stricken districts in Kampala, Uganda. Her project, *Through Children's Eyes*, allows young people to communicate their experience of environmental issues through drawings. Revealing a stunning depth of understanding, many pictures clearly depict the steps connecting blocked latrines, flooding and sickness in these communities. View an audio slideshow by going to the online table of contents for this issue at [www.alternativesjournal.ca](http://www.alternativesjournal.ca).