

# When planning falls short: the challenges of informal settlements

By [Hesam Kamalipour et al.](#)

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[Informal settlements](#) house around [one-quarter of the world's urban population](#). This means roughly [1 billion](#) urban dwellers live in settlements that have emerged outside of the state's control.

The [Habitat III](#) conference in Quito in October recognised informal settlements as a [critical issue](#) for sustainable urban development. But how did informal settlements come to make up such a large part of the world's cities?

## Resorting to informal housing

Rates of urbanisation can fluctuate rapidly and be hard to predict. This makes planning for urban growth a challenge, especially in developing countries, [where more than 90% of urban growth](#) is occurring. When data or government capacity is limited, housing shortages often result.

With formal housing too expensive or unavailable, urban migrants must improvise. Many resort to informal housing.

Informal settlements are generally undocumented or hidden on official maps. This is because the state usually sees them as temporary or illegal.

Informal settlements are here to stay: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Hesam Kamalipour, Author provided

Over the past 50 years, governments have tried to deal with these areas in a number of ways. [Strategies](#) have included denial, tolerance, formalisation, demolition and displacement.

While efforts to improve settlements and anticipate future ones are becoming more common, the desire for eradication persists in many cities. Forced evictions in various parts of the world are [putting the rights of informal settlement dwellers at risk](#).

Over time, however, it has been recognised that poverty and inequality cannot be simply eradicated through demolition or eviction. In the developing world, one-third of the urban population [now lives in slums](#). In Africa, the proportion is 62%.

Many cities are looking for alternatives that formalise these areas through incremental, on-site upgrading. In addition to offering effective protection against forced evictions, it is critical to provide access to basic services, public facilities and inclusive public spaces.

We need to adopt integrated approaches that cut across urban scales and disciplines. These need to involve stakeholders from government, citizens and other organisations. Design thinking is essential in this process to meet the challenges of urbanisation.

## The role of the New Urban Agenda

The [Habitat III](#) conference [adopted](#) a [New Urban Agenda](#) for the United Nations. This document presents a road map for sustainable urban development until Habitat IV in 2036.

While the quality of life for some informal settlement dwellers has improved over recent decades, growing inequality pushes more people into informal housing. As a result, the growth rate of informal settlements often outstrips upgrading processes.

Inequality is both social and spatial in nature across cities such as Bangkok, Thailand. Hesam Kamalipour, Author provided

The UN Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) was one of the key agencies involved in Habitat III. Since Habitat II, UN-Habitat has worked extensively on [housing and slum upgrading](#). The New Urban Agenda incorporates lessons from this process.

An example is the need for innovative small investment models for informal housing and their inhabitants' transport needs. The agenda also acknowledges the informal settlements located in hazard-prone areas. Their inhabitants often need more help with reducing the risks and building resilience.

## The way forward

Dealing with informal settlements is an issue of inequality. This inequality is both social and spatial in nature, across cities worldwide.

It is problematic that spatial thinking [does not have a high profile](#) in the New Urban Agenda. While urban design by itself cannot reduce social inequality and urban poverty, much can be learned from [cutting-edge practices](#) that integrate design thinking into upgrading informal settlements.

One key lesson is that incremental housing (a step-by-step process of upgrading) can be a [critical part](#) of the solution. Incrementalism allows informal housing to be adapted over time. It also means community engagement is central to governments' handling of informal settlements.

Incremental, on-site upgrading, such as the Slum Rehabilitation Project in Pune, India, relies on a sophisticated understanding of informal settlement forms and adaptations. Hesam

Kamalipour, Author provided

Another learning is that evidence-based, multi-scale and multidisciplinary approaches are essential to tackle the challenges of informal settlements. Such integrated approaches intervene at multiple scales to provide a network of public open space and access to affordable public transport and facilities.

Most informal settlements – but for a few exceptions located in hazardous areas – need to be upgraded incrementally and on the same site.

Integrated approaches work at multiple scales to provide access to public space and affordable public transport and facilities, as seen in the Northeastern Urban Integration Project,

Medellin, Colombia. Hesam Kamalipour, Author provided

## Are we prepared?

When it comes to the critical role of design thinking in the process of urbanisation, built environment professionals need to be prepared to tackle the challenge of informal settlements.

Incremental and on-site upgrading relies on a sophisticated understanding of informal settlement forms and adaptations.

Universities have a key role in equipping future built environment professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to meet the real challenges of urbanisation. Informal settlements are here to stay.

To better integrate these settlements into cities globally, they need to be recognised – politically, socially and spatially – and made visible through the gaze of mapping and research.

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