LOCALLY LED ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE

About this series

This brief is part of a series celebrating the innovative efforts of organised groups of slum dwellers to tackle, recover from and mitigate against the overlapping crises and multifaceted vulnerabilities of urban informality they face, and to improve their communities' living conditions.

The pandemic unearthed hidden vulnerabilities, exacerbated deep inequalities and eroded development gains, taking a heavy toll on the socioeconomic and mental wellbeing of urban poor communities. But it has also called attention to the vital role of grassroots agency in effectively responding to shocks and (re)building resilience. Cities can use these lessons learnt to improve the ways they tackle today and tomorrow's crises – both acute and chronic.

The series showcases community-led initiatives of SDI federations undertaken as part of a partnership between **Cities Alliance** and **Slum Dwellers International (SDI)**, with financial support from the **Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)**. **The programme's** goal is to support sustainable and inclusive recovery efforts in and for informal settlement communities impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its current phase (2022–2024) is focused on rebuilding and locally-led climate adaptation initiatives identified and prioritised by slum dweller federations.

By locally leading, designing and implementing solutions themselves, SDI federations are redefining what sustainable, resilient urban development can look like.

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Cockle Bay is an informal settlement on the edge of an inland tidal creek in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Residents rely on proximity to the ocean for their livelihoods and can't afford formal housing. Instead, through a resourceful process known as banking, they reclaim land from the creek on which to build dwellings. Seasonal flooding and coastline erosion have made Cockle Bay a designated risk prone area. This means regular eviction threats and little chance of extending basic services to the area to improve communities' living conditions.

For lack of alternative housing or land options, informal and unplanned settlements are often located in climate vulnerable and environmentally degraded areas of cities and towns. Inadequate essential services and infrastructure worsen vulnerabilities to flooding, soil erosion and drought (for example, no formal waste collection leads to clogged drains). Risks to health, livelihoods and wellbeing caused by structural inequalities are further compounded by poverty and food insecurity.

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Organised SDI federation groups are experts in the areas where they live and operate. Daily, seasonally, regularly and irregularly, they experience how exclusionary policies exacerbate the impacts of environmental issues caused by both natural hazards and human actions on communities' lives, livelihoods and wellbeing.

Across the network, SDI affiliates are using grassroots knowledge to lead the way in applying holistic, locally-led approaches to climate adaptation and environmental management that look for:

Opportunities to have a **positive impact** on both the physical environment and urban poverty.

Strengthening communities voice in urban climate adaptation planning.

Ways to mitigate potential negative environmental risks of federations' own activities.

Designing solutions that work with nature to tackle the challenges communities face.

Understanding and addressing vulnerability to and risk from environmental threats, including climate impacts.

Improving understanding for a louder collective voice

Training and accessible information build local capacities to understand the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation in marginalised urban areas. This supports locally-led development interventions that are more effective and climate responsive. In **Zimbabwe**, **Brazil** and the **Philippines**, training for federation leaders covers climate risk preparedness and disaster risk reduction.

Data collection processes set the stage for informed engagements with decision-makers around environmental issues and climate change's disproportionate impacts on informal settlements. Work by the **Tanzanian** SDI affiliate on urban risk assessment has promoted environmental management as a resilience approach to mitigate climate risk, increasing understanding and commitment among a range of stakeholders including community members, local leaders, local government and private sector. In **Senegal** and **Botswana**, federation savings groups are supported to identify and analyse their areas' environmental issues, then come together to lobby local and national authorities. And **Senegalese** affiliate-led studies on waste, water and sanitation management have mapped areas with particular environmental challenges to collect precise information for targeted interventions.

The **South African** federation's standard settlement profiling questionnaire template contains a section on natural disasters like strong winds and flooding; routinely collecting information that is then used in local government engagements to advocate for preparedness and climate resilience. And in **Namibia**, federation planning for slum upgrading involves identifying settlements' environmental features that need to be protected, such as trees, as well as risks around pollution and waste management.

@Dialogue on Shelter, Zimbabwe

Waste solutions to environmental challenges

Many locally-led and informal solutions are responding to the various challenges caused by a lack of solid waste collection services in informal urban areas, such as clogged drainage systems, flood vulnerability, health risks and pollution. In **Uganda**, the affiliate's work profiling settlements for climate change risks maps existing waste management interventions. This allows them to learn from, identify and support saving groups already involved in waste collection and recycling as their main source of livelihoods. In **Ghana**, a federation awareness campaign about household level waste sorting is generating new insights about how communities can be supported to separate plastic waste for recycling from organic, biodegradable waste.

The **Malawian** SDI Alliance are creating employment for marginalised women and youth composting biodegradable waste to produce biogas and liquid fertilizers, and supporting waste enterprise groups to formalise. In **Liberia**, the affiliate is collaborating with Monrovia and Paynesville city authorities around waste services. The campaign will improve communication between waste management institutions and citizens, on the basis that people need to know what services are available to them before those services can be efficiently utilised.

@CCODE, Malawi

Greens and greening

Covid-19 also brought a food crisis for low income urban households across the majority of the world. For example, with restrictions on movement affecting informal vendors, many families' diets were suddenly lacking green vegetables.[1] Urban farming and gardening can contribute to a neighbourhood's food security, while protecting and greening land and at the same time provides farmers with extra household income. In **Namibia**, federation initiatives training communities in backyard gardening and nutrition are addressing soil degradation as well as food insecurity by drawing on permaculture practices. In the **Philippines**, the SDI alliance is developing green spaces in slums and supporting urban farming livelihood activities. And in **Zambia**, federation members are planting hundreds of sack gardens.

@NHAG, Namibia

Local solutions working with natural systems

In **Sierra Leone**, federation oyster and fish farming projects are finding alternative livelihoods for those involved in environmentally degrading sand mining and mangrove cutting activities that are contributing to coastal erosion. In Freetown they are coordinating and monitoring government-led mangrove planting in the creek where Cockle Bay is located, with an emphasis on ensuring project activities are also climate just. The planting is part of a Freetown campaign to plant trees, protect coastal areas and enhance climate resilience.

In **Kenya**, the SDI Alliance are involved in ongoing climate action to develop situational analyses and ecosystem plans for the rehabilitation of Nairobi's rivers. They are focusing on those that flow through informal settlements within a larger vision of clean rivers with well-used riparian reserves along their entire length. They have galvanised a wide civil society consortium to collaborate in a planning process that applies a climate adaptation lens and is driven by informal settlement residents in partnership with city authorities. So far, planning activities have included numbering buildings on riparian reserves in the targeted informal areas, and vulnerability mapping to identify risks to residents and groups engaged in livelihood activities along the rivers.

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@SDI-Kenya

ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES ARE FUNDAMENTAL FOR HUMAN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The core work of SDI federations is to develop community resilience to the shocks and stresses of urban informal living. Among these many are linked to environmental degradation, natural and manmade disasters and climate vulnerability. The urban poor live in marginalised areas, have fewer resources to adapt, and depend to a larger extent on local ecosystem services for their livelihoods and wellbeing. For SDI, building resilience means building the voice of the urban poor, so that they can seek solutions to their problems through self-assessment and by negotiating with duty bearers. Opportunities showcased here that are being recognised by SDI federations include protecting natural resources and improving resource efficiency, designing environmentally friendly livelihoods and provision of basic services, and integrating nature-based solutions into informal settlement upgrading projects.

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References

[1] Patel, S (2021). "What women want – part one". IIED blog, 18 May. International Institute for Environment and Development. Available online (accessed 17 July 2024).