

Almost two billion people live in urban regions in the developing world. This number is expected to double over the next 30 years, and urban dwellers will account for nearly half the global population. Most of these new urban dwellers are likely to be poor, resulting in a phenomenon called the “urbanization of poverty.” Slums are a physical sign of increasing urban poverty and the inequalities that exist within cities. However, slums do not accommodate all the urban poor, nor are all slum dwellers always poor.

It is estimated that up to one-third of the world's urban population lives in slums. The rapid growth of slums in the urban areas of developing countries suggests that the problems associated with slum dwelling will worsen in those areas that are already most vulnerable. More than 70 percent of the population in the least developed countries (LDCs) and of Sub-Saharan Africa's urban population lived in slums in 2001, and this will likely increase unless there is substantial intervention. In general, slum dwellers face greater challenges to quality of life (e.g., higher infant mortality rates, lower levels of water and sanitation services...) than the rest of the urban population and the rural population.

Although the term “slum” is considered an easily understandable “catch-all” term, it conceals the fact that it refers to a variety of types of settlements and communities. It includes shantytowns, squatter communities, temporary urban communities, refugee camps in urban centres, et cetera. However, slums can be divided into two broad classes:

- **Slums of hope:** “progressing” settlements, which are characterized by new, normally self-built structures, usually illegal (e.g., squatters) that are in, or have recently been through, a process of development, consolidation, and improvement
- **Slums of despair:** “declining” neighbourhoods, in which environmental conditions and domestic services are undergoing a process of degeneration

Slums are now viewed more positively by public decision makers than in the past. They are increasingly seen as places of opportunity, as “slums of hope” rather than “slums of despair.” National approaches to slums have generally shifted from negative policies such as forced eviction, neglect, and involuntary resettlement, to more positive policies such as self-help and on-the-spot upgrading, self-help programs, and rights-based policies.

(UN Habitat and Global Urban Observatory 4)

