



[Vol. 21, No. 4 \(January 1994\)](#)

Dispelling Myths about Social Service Provision

by Denise Deby

The shantytowns and the poorest rural areas of developing countries stand as stark reminders of the lack of basic shelter, education, health, sanitation, and other services for much of the population.

Yet investments in education, health, housing or other sectors do not in themselves guarantee access to services if other influences on social development are not addressed. Three IDRC-supported projects illustrate the need for a more integrated approach that zeroes in on the critical factors that determine access to services.

HOUSING WITHOUT SECURITY

A global project on evictions shows that access to secure housing depends on legislation and land-use practices, economic policies, and the ability of citizens to influence decision-making as much as on housing policies. Research in five countries was coordinated by Habitat International Coalition (HIC), a Mexico-based NGO with over 200 members working on shelter issues in more than 50 countries.

Evictions result not only from deliberate policies to eradicate housing, as in slum clearance or urban improvement projects, but also as 'side effects' of other public policies. Moreover, communities without access to policy-making and planning processes tend to be more vulnerable. In the Dominican Republic, researchers found that weak local governments and the absence of ways for people to participate in national decisions rendered them unable to influence economic and urban policies that affected their access to shelter.

Communities that can organize have greater success in resisting evictions. In South Africa, residents' committees or civic associations used strategies such as boycotts of rent and service charges, and negotiations with landowners to stop evictions. Support from external agents, primarily NGOs or church-based groups, also played a key role, as in the South Korean case.

Finally, evictions occur where residents lack protection under the legal system, where governments do not recognize rights to housing, or where people's claims to land and housing are not considered legitimate. Tenants, residents of informal settlements and poorer communities were most at risk. In contrast, public awareness of housing issues and support for tenants' rights and the human right to housing helped discourage evictions in the Canadian case, according to researcher Kris Olds of the University of British Columbia.

COMMUNITY SERVICE PROVIDERS

The African Research Network on Urban Management (ARNUM) is demonstrating that where people do obtain services, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods, it is often the work of communities or informal organizations rather than of governments.

In Tanzania, Dr. Mohammed Halfani of the University of Dar es Salaam is using interviews, government records and satellite imagery to investigate informal activity in squatter settlements in three towns. According to Dr. Halfani, housing, services, employment, and security are provided largely outside of formal regulations. For example, some 60% of houses in Tanzania are unregistered, do not conform to building standards, are untaxed, and receive no government services. Dr. Halfani says that by focusing only on the policy process, analyses of urban management fail to capture the nature and dynamics of development, and management systems are at odds with most urban activities.

In Uganda, Professor Arnest Wabwire of Makerere University is conducting research on informal sector organizations such as trade and market associations, savings and credit societies and mutual aid networks. The project investigates the potential for such organizations to improve local administration.

Case studies of selected organizations to examine how they form and operate will provide a more realistic basis for policies of social change and strategies for the provision of basic needs, according to Professor Wabwire.

EMERGING RESEARCH PRIORITIES

A group of social policy researchers in Eastern and Southern Africa considers it essential to understand the links between economic, social and other policies. As Dr. Stephen Ouma, of Makerere University, points out, virtually all government actions have implications for social welfare and social policy. The researchers also urge that the role of informal social support networks and NGOs, both important service providers, be studied. In Africa, recent cuts in government expenditures as a result of economic adjustment programs, exacerbated by crises such as AIDS and political conflict, have placed unprecedented burdens on both government and non-government services.

The work of Henry Manyire of Makerere University indicates that families face increasing difficulty in caring for extended family members, sharing in the costs of school fees or funerals, or rendering other forms of assistance. People's survival strategies include urban farming, informal trading, child employment, rotating savings and credit societies and informal health insurance schemes.

Nonetheless, Professor Manyire states, the traditional forms of extended family corporateness and cooperation are breaking down under economic pressure. Ironically, this is happening at a time when state welfare provisions are being reduced, and poverty is mounting among the population, hence the dire need for the restoration and enhancement of the support roles of traditional systems. Further research would permit a more complete understanding of these systems, the changes they are experiencing and how to support them.

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ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

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