

## Target 11 of the MDGs – Good Marksmanship Won't Help Much!

Panel Contribution to the Population-Environment Research Network Cyberseminar on  
Population Dynamics and Millennium Development Goal 7

<http://www.populationenvironmentresearch.org/seminars.jsp>

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*PERN Coordinator's Note: In his contribution, George Martine takes a critical look at Target 11. Contrary to recent postings that suggest that the MDGs may be overly ambitious, Martine writes that target 11 - which cites improvement in the lives of an absolute number of slum dwellers rather than a proportion of the total urban poor population - is significantly under the mark of what truly needs to be achieved. He writes that providing slum dwellers with sanitation is tied to tenure, and that the lack of secure tenure in urban informal settlements is "attributable to the failure to plan ahead, and the unwillingness to accept inevitable in-migration and growth in cities." He suggests that municipalities provide for the land needs of recently arrived migrants before the fact instead of trying to implement remedial actions in the context of haphazard development after the fact.*

*Target 11 proposes, "To have achieved, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers." **Indicators:** (1) Proportion of population with access to improved sanitation; (2) Proportion of population with access to secure land tenure.*

Four points merit discussion here:

- What does the improvement of environmental conditions for 100 million slum dwellers mean for urban poverty reduction?
- What actions are necessary to meet projected targets for improved sanitation?
- What needs to be done to secure land tenure for a huge number of slum dwellers?
- How do these issues fit in the overall picture of urban growth, poverty and P/E relations?

### **The 100 million mark**

Does improving the conditions of 100 million slum dwellers over a 20-year period signify a huge improvement for the world's urban poor?

According to UN HABITAT, the slum population of the developing world in 2001 was in the order of 924 million (<http://www.unhabitat.org/programmes/guo/documents/-Table4.pdf>). Urbanites tend to be better off than their rural counterparts, but the long-term trend is to increase the concentration of population and poverty in urban areas. By 2020, the slum population is projected to increase to 1,477 million. Hence, achieving Target 11 (of improving conditions for 100 million slum dwellers) would mean that only

11% of the original slum population would see a change for the better. It would also mean that, by 2020, the number of slum dwellers not attended by such measures would have swelled to nearly 1.4 billion. Clearly, the problem has to be approached from a different angle. Granted, the HABITAT figures may be inflated, but it seems beyond dispute that achieving the target will hardly make a dent in addressing the problem, let alone attacking its roots.

### **Improving Sanitation and Providing for Other Needs of Slum Populations**

Improving access to safe drinking water unquestionably reduces poverty. However, the ease with which slum dwellers can be provided with sanitation and other facilities is itself closely tied to land tenure. A significant part of the squalor and misery of the new urban populations stems from the fact that they are forced to live in uninhabitable areas and have little opportunity to improve their conditions because of precarious land tenure. This is attributable to the failure to plan ahead, and the unwillingness to accept inevitable immigration and growth in cities. The only option for poor people is to occupy those lands that nobody else wants, or to invade plots that are being held for speculation. Normally, the resulting pattern of occupation is haphazard. Thus, when slum dwellers try to improve their conditions, or when local governments finally try to provide them with minimal services and reduce negative ecological impacts, the costs of doing so become astronomical. Just putting in a road for public transportation, or providing channels for water or sewage, requires tearing down existing constructions. Lack of planning and inadequate location makes it very difficult to provide the poor with basic infrastructure – water, sanitation, electricity, access roads, and waste management services - or to redress the accumulated ecological damage *a posteriori*.

### **Access to Secure Land Tenure**

This is undoubtedly a key factor, as argued above, but improving land tenure for the poor requires a pro-active attitude that is rarely found in practice. Future urban growth will be fueled largely by poor people. If given secure access to a decent piece of land, poor people themselves often transform their residences and neighborhoods at minimal costs to the public sector. Traditionally, governments have taken a negative stance towards urban growth and this has prevented an effective approach to dealing with the land needs of the poor. The mechanisms that currently organize land markets—land speculation and serendipity—obviously cannot be trusted to provide social and environmental solutions. The failure to plan ahead for the accommodation of poor people also contributes to the ecological degradation of the cities themselves. Other alternatives – such as the public sector maintaining land banks and selling plots of land to poor people on the installment plan are difficult, yet feasible.

### **Broader Lessons for the Future**

The tragedy of Target 11 is not so much that it will inevitably fail to attend the needs of the great majority of slum dwellers by 2020, but that it inadvertently helps to shift attention away from the discussion on what really needs to be done in order to prepare for the inevitable short-term doubling of the urban population. The most effective way to minimize the problems of poor urban dwellers is to provide for their land needs *before*

the fact. This requires planning ahead, and learning to live with inevitable urban migration and growth, instead of partial remedial actions.

Planning for the land needs of the poor is critical but itself is only one aspect of a broader and critical issue of land use that will escalate rapidly as the world's urban population doubles in little more than a generation. Left to its own devices, urban expansion, especially in Asia and Africa, will sprawl over lands rich in biodiversity or agricultural soils, degrade water sources, deforest hinterlands, contaminate soils and saturate local capacities for absorbing solid waste. Regulating urban land use is, admittedly, extremely difficult; it requires a longer-term vision than the duration of most political mandates. Hence, no politician espousing this cause can expect to reap immediate political windfalls. New initiatives will require ingenuity and a political will that will not be forthcoming **unless** awareness is first raised drastically.

Who's worrying about this? Nobody, it appears. Indeed, there is precious little public support, at the national or international level for actions aimed at reducing the social, economic and environmental costs of enormous and inevitable urbanization in coming decades. Focusing on alleviating the symptoms – such as improving some slum areas – regrettably serves to detract attention from the broader issue and thus retards awareness that a much more ambitious approach needs to be taken urgently.

The MDGs and their respective targets evidently reflect the best of intentions. Nevertheless, they tend to have a narrow prism and induce people to focus on some of the trees, rather than on the forest; as a result, they concentrate world attention on patching up a few holes in the scenario when, in fact, a whole structure needs rebuilding. Target 11 is not only ineffectual, but it detracts attention from the broader issue, namely the need to take a proactive stance in order to deal effectively with inevitable and massive urban growth in the near future, and thus help reduce poverty and environmental degradation.