Think local

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Sheela Patel and David Satterthwaite call for community driven solutions to start meeting the Millennium Development Goals in towns and cities.

The urban population of Africa, Asia and Latin America is now nearly three times that of the rest of the world. UN projections suggest that most of the growth in the global population up to 2020 will be in urban areas and nearly all of it will be in those three continents. A large and growing proportion of the world's poor are urbandwellers, lacking adequate incomes, secure housing and basic services. Urban locations are the places to begin to fulfil the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

How long will most governments and international agencies continue to believe that poverty is mainly a rural phenomenon? It is to cities that the rural poor migrate to fulfil their aspirations for a better life.

Why have fifty yearsof development cooperation failed to address the needs of much of the urban population in low- and middle-income nations? One of the most plausible explanations is the failure of most development initiatives to consult and work with the urban poor (and, where possible, also with local governments) in devising solutions that are locally appropriate. Yet these people's needs are the justification for these development initiatives - and for all the agencies that fund them – and most international agencies claim to support 'participation'. There is not much evidence that this most basic limitation is even being recognized – let alone addressed.

Most discussions of how to meet the MDGs focus on large increases in aid, debt relief and national poverty reduction strategies. But they neglect the local changes on which the achievement of most of them depend. There are hundreds of millions of slum dwellers whose unmet needs for water, sanitation, health care, schools etc. will have to be addressed if the MDG targets are to be achieved. So these hundreds of millions of slum dwellers will have to get local organizations to change their approaches so they can have land for housing (or tenure of the land they already occupy), infrastructure and services (including water and sanitation), and finance to support the construction or improvement of their houses. Many of the deprivations suffered by slum dwellers are the result of local organizations refusing to work with them - or not being allowed to do so by higher authorities.

Discussions within the Millennium Project Taskforce on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers, on which we both served, emphasized the importance of community-driven solutions - and what governments and international agencies need to do support them. We place less emphasis on the need for very large increases in international assistance and more on the need for Governments and international agencies to change the way they work with urban poor groups. They need to be more accountable and transparent to them. We also have less faith in government-directed or international agency-directed, professionally managed solutions, unless urban poor groups are sufficiently strong, representative and organized to ensure that these address their needs and priorities.

How can local government organizations be made more pro-poor? Or less anti-poor? Or to phrase it another way, how can the relationship between those with unmet needs and local organizations, especially city and municipal governments, be changed? Other changes are, of course, needed from national governments and international agencies – but, in the end, the

effectiveness of many of these depend on whether they make local governments and other local organizations more effective in ensuring local needs are met, and more accountable to those with unmet ones. Local government does not provide for all needs, nor should it do so. But it has a major influence on how local markets operate, including those that are particularly important to low-income groups – such as those for land, housing and water and, in many instances, building materials and credit. It can also have a major influence on the effectiveness of local NGOs and their accountability to the urban poor.

Slum/shack dweller organizations are active in about 22 countries in Asia and Africa. Instead of waiting for development to come to them, they create spaces and scope for community groups (especially women) to take action themselves and to work together to negotiate with local government to address priority issues that they can't achieve by themselves.

Over the last decade - Shack Dwellers International (SDI) – a network of community organizations and federations of urban slum or shack dwellers - has increasingly supported communities in negotiating for land, housing, sanitation and water, and has created local networks that begin dialogues to bring change with their city and government institutions. Communities support each other in learning new skills and developing confidence to explore solutions that they previously never considered were within their realm.

In Mumbai, India, the communities developed a strategy for a program where communities they design, construct and maintain lavatories – while cities pay for their construction - ensuring that millions of people have access to sanitation where they had none.

In South Africa, community federations are working with the city of Durban in an ambitious programme to improve conditions in all its slums and shanty towns. They are also working with the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to locate unused church land and hand it over to communities needing land: they hope, in the process, to
encourage the state to speed up the pace of turning over its own unused land.

When slums near the railways in Nairobi faced demolition, the federations suggested to the Kenyan railways and to the government that they might visit Mumbai, where over 15,000 households along the tracks had been relocated through a joint venture between the community, the state and railways.

The Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI), a unique Thai government institution, helps over 2,000 communities in over 200 cities to work in partnership with municipalities to address the housing and other issues of the poor.

Decentralization has become a mantra of development and most solutions are, indeed, best developed at local levels. Whether in an emergency or in an ongoing development process, strong local actors produce more sustainable development solutions: the success of one phase acts as the foundation for the next set of activities and projects. But, crucially, this requires a strong centre - one that provides resources, helps build capacity and arbitrates the tensions that often lie between local actors and the differing priorities they represent.

Decentralization often occurs without building up strong stakeholders, without arbitration mechanisms that are transparent and deemed to be just, and without adequate resources. This makes it more a matter of "passing the buck" than of facilitating the process by which local actors, with seemingly different immediate goals, pool their capacities and resources together in pursuit of a longer term universally acceptable one. Global institutions and national

governments have crucial roles in facilitating the transfer of knowledge, of strategies and resources that will turn local clashes over resources into solutions acceptable to all.

Sheela Patel is the Director of the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres , in India, working in alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan, David Satterthwaite works at the International Institute for Environment and Development, and edits the journal *Environment and Urbanization*.