Informality as a Way of Life:

Introduction to the Penn IUR Series on Urban Informality

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Urban informality—individuals’ negotiation of jobs, shelter, and public services, outside of customary legal institutions—has exploded across the globe, largely in places with high rates of urbanization and poverty. In fact, for a large proportion of the world’s population informality has become a way of life. The proliferation of informal settlements or slums, now housing more than 900 million people (1/6 of the world population and 1/3 of all city dwellers) is one of its physical manifestations. Street vendors or ragpickers searching for funds or recyclables are another visible marker. Informality characterizes everyday transactions in cities around the world, whether it be in residents’ procuring food, transportation, health, education, employment, or other necessities of life.

An issue of global importance, informality has existed across time and cultures. Anticipated population projections guarantee that this subject will have resonance into the future. Decent shelter and associated services were scarce commodities in the 19th and 20th centuries in North America and Europe, and will continue to be so in the 21st century in Asia and Africa. The issue characterized as “slum-living” engages many disciplines. It serves as a vehicle for addressing a range of concerns from social justice (how do we house the disadvantaged?) to climate change (how do we deal with the majority of slums worldwide that are located on land vulnerable to natural disasters?). Among the fields concerned with slums are public health, social sciences (economics, sociology, anthropology), city planning, social work, architecture, business (real estate, finance), law, and the arts. They have a long history of exploring the topic, especially slums. Examples are singular 19th century portrayals of substandard housing by Edwin Chadwick (Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain [1843]), Friedrich Engels (The Condition of the Working Class in England [1845]), Charles Booth (Life and Labour of the People [1889, 1891]), Charles Dickens (Oliver Twist [1838]) and Jacob Riis (How the Other Half Lives, Studies Among the Tenements of New York [1890]). They often stimulated reform efforts.


While urban informality, especially through slums, has existed for centuries, its contemporary scale and trajectory has inspired significant interest in rethinking the topic, similar to the intellectual ferment that surrounded urbanization in the early 20th century. Notable from that time is sociologist Louis Wirth’s “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938), which described the impact of the rapid development of his adopted city, Chicago, which had added 1.2 million new residents in the first two decades of the 20th century—an annual growth rate of more than two percent. Wirth noted that this demographic tsunami had dramatic effects on the physical structure (the population base and spatial dimensions of the city), the social organization (the kinship structures and interpersonal relationships of residents), and the set of attitudes and ideas that framed individual and collective behavior in the Windy City.

Treating informality in a similar fashion, architect/planner Nezar AlSayyad reflected on its current manifestation as a unique phenomenon of 21st-century urbanization in “Urban Informality as a ‘New’ Way of Life” (2004). Here, he posits that “older modes of urbanism are being replaced by ‘new’ forms of urban informality that
challenge the relevance of previous thinking.” More recently, Nipesh Palat Narayanan has called for pushing the concept of informality beyond categories like “specific classes of people (e.g. the urban poor, subalterns, etc.)” and “specific places (e.g. slums, unauthorized colonies, etc.),” to instead “analyze urban informality through practices.” As our understanding of informality grows more expansive, this is mirrored by a proliferation of informality throughout the world’s metropolises, which are expected to absorb an additional 2.2 billion people over the next three decades.

Studies such as the International Labor Organization’s annual *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* add evidence to the prevalence of informality. This report records that some 61% of the global workforce (or two billion people) are employed informally. UN-Habitat provides other data, noting that around the world, one in seven live in informal settlements. No global overview exists for transportation, water, refuse collection, or education, but longtime observers report: “Informal transport is vital to billions of people living in rapidly growing cities in the Global South,” and “it remains the case that urban services are primarily produced or accessed informally.”

As the subject has commanded attention in recent years, an increasing tendency to focus on informality from within disciplinary silos, rather a single, holistic condition has emerged, perhaps for ease of analysis. The result has been a hardening of divides between objects of study like housing, transportation, and employment. But when looking closely at each of these discrete areas of study, the separation between “informal” and “formal” often becomes blurred.
Sympathetic policy-makers also tend to downplay the significance of informality or reinforce this disciplinary fragmentation. Within the global community, this most commonly occurs through initiatives by the United Nations to promote economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. In 2015-2016, in an unusual set of actions, the UN’s 193 members renewed and improved a cluster of such covenants, the Agenda 2030 initiative and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement, and the New Urban Agenda. Agenda 2030 treats particular areas such as health, education, cities, and gender separately. Further, although Agenda 2030 deals with issues related to urban informality, it only references the subject indirectly. For example, though it recommends important first steps such as encouraging the “formalization” of enterprises (SDG 8.3), achieving “decent work” (SDG 8.5), and ensuring access to “adequate” housing (SDG 11.1), Agenda 2030 neither considers urban informality as a contextual condition nor refers to it as something to be addressed. Likewise, the Paris Agreement makes no mention of local conditions, much less informality. Similar limitations exist in the scope of the New Urban Agenda, the outcome document of the 2016 Habitat III Conference. It has 19 direct references to informality—isolating it in references to housing, land consumption, transportation, safety, open space, and resilience—but does not portray informality as a broad, interconnected phenomenon.

Nonetheless, over time, societies have developed innovative approaches to ameliorating informal urban conditions, whether through inventing limited-dividend philanthropic housing in Victorian England or by constructing cable cars to connect slum dwellers to jobs in today’s Medellin, Colombia. Public and private decision-makers have acted, motivated by social justice, political expediency, and/or concern for the public good. At stake are questions of how to understand and support its benefits while addressing its costs. In sum, the issue is how reap its social capital while enhancing its economic strength.

The following papers explore these issues. The authors prepared them as a contribution to the roundtable “Why Cities? Informality as a Way of Life: Challenges to Sustainable Urban Development,” presented by the Office of the Provost, the Penn Institute for Urban Research, the Weitzman School of Design, and Perry World House on April 24, 2019. The papers are organized in three sections: Challenges, Solutions, and China’s Villages in the City. They can be accessed at the following link: https://penniur.upenn.edu/publications/informality-as-a-way-of-life-penn-iur-series-on-urban-informality.
NOTES


9. 8.3: Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services. 8.5: By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value. 11.1: By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums.