While the population living in slums represents almost one third of the urban population worldwide, these neighbourhoods are rarely represented on maps of cities. This deliberate invisibility goes hand in hand with a deficit of knowledge and recognition, which fosters stigmatisation and self-stigmatisation for many inhabitants. GRET has been working for 30 years in towns and cities in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and more recently in the French overseas territories in order for these neighbourhoods to be fully integrated and associated in the construction of inclusive, sustainable cities.

Stigmatised territories with contrasting realities

“Poor” neighbourhoods, “informal”, “illegal” or “spontaneous” settlements, and even “slums”: the first difficulty in dealing with these neighbourhoods is what to call them. All these labels are reductive. They refer to an urban planning and land use standard, which these neighbourhoods and their inhabitants apparently don’t comply with, and at the same time they point to the close links they have with the rest of the city.

Each country gives one or several names to these neighbourhoods, which are usually meaningful: kebbé (which literally means “dumping ground”) and gaza (which literally means “taken by force”) in Mauritania; achwaiy (“random”) and ghîr amena (“dangerous”) in Egypt; dibodo (“muddy zone”) in the Republic of Congo. These names reflect the way in which these territories and their inhabitants are regarded, and the often authoritarian way that they are dealt with by States. None of these names takes into account the diverse standards of living, conditions of housing and facilities, and land tenure status within these neighbourhoods. Realities vary according to regions, countries and cities, as well as within a single city, or even a single neighbourhood.

GRET uses the term “precarious neighbourhoods” to designate territories that combine one or several elements of precariousness and social stigmatisation, and that are most often characterised by social and urban diversity. These neighbourhoods share one common factor: some or all of their inhabitants lack any land rights that are recognised or secured by the current legal and institutional framework.

The expression “informal neighbourhoods” conveys the close relationship these neighbourhoods have with the formal sector and public authorities. Their creation and extension are a response to the lack or inappropriateness of the formal land and housing offer. Possession of informal land deeds, authorisation to occupy, payment for the right to move in, occupying a buildable or non-buildable plot, with or without a building permit, etc. Between complete illegality and full land, urban and administrative legality, there are numerous intermediary situations.

Living conditions in these neighbourhoods are extremely difficult: isolation, exposure to various risks, poorly functioning public services, precarious housing, pollution, insecurity, promiscuity, violence. Considered as illegitimate or dangerous, these neighbourhoods are often ignored, and sometimes even repressed or destroyed by public authorities.
Yet, created via popular, self-built initiatives and incremental improvements constructed by their inhabitants, they often possess qualities that in other places are sought in order to produce “sustainable cities”: strong identity, solid social ties, density, proximity with zones of employment and services, pedestrian commuting, efficient use of resources, recycling of waste, and mixing of residential and economic functions.

Achievements threatened by the liberalisation of land markets

Over 880 million urban residents today live in slums and UN-Habitat forecasts that this figure will increase to two billion by 2030. Over the same period, the surface of cities looks set to triple. These changes firstly affect Asia and Africa. They call for work on both existing cities and cities to be created.

On the one hand, this necessitates absorbing urban growth without amplifying spatial segregation and remoteness of precarious neighbourhoods and their inhabitants, and pushing them increasingly further from city centres where employment and services are located, or into areas at risk. On the other hand, it necessitates reducing greenhouse gas emissions in cities, facilitating their adaptation to climate change and preserving natural and agricultural spaces.

For approximately twenty years now, a consensus has been emerging in the international debate on the advantages of promoting in situ upgrading of precarious neighbourhoods as much as possible and fighting against evictions. In addition, awareness of the ecological risks relating to massive urbanization, the vulnerability of precarious neighbourhoods and the necessity for determined action is now widespread.

Increase in the empowerment of civil society and local authorities via decentralisation and de-concentration will also contribute to greater consideration of local contexts and expectations of city dwellers-citizens, in other words, to greater local democracy.

Yet, precarious neighbourhoods and their inhabitants are more than ever threatened by the financialisation of cities, which is demonstrated by the increasing weight of private investments (presence of large promoters and financial companies) in land and real estate markets, without sufficient public regulation. These changes are underpinned by cultural representations that glorify the values of attractiveness and competitiveness, cutting short the political and democratic debate on which cities we want in the medium and long term. The land value of precarious neighbourhoods is potentially huge and in the years to come, we may see massive evictions of populations.
Recommendations for greater inclusion of precarious neighbourhoods

Representations that oppose formal and informal, the “modern” city and the “archaic” or even “anarchic” city, are simplistic and highly ethnocentric. The model of reference city that consumes space, water and energy is not sustainable. Existing tools refer to a legal city that is far different from local realities, and are often ineffective.

These observations commit us to approaching these territories differently, and testing alternative propositions combining resource-efficient strategies, adapted standards in phase with local dynamics. This is an essentially political issue. It is therefore first and foremost at this level that progress must be sought.

* Incentivize national leaders

- To rethink standards. Standards must be adapted to local contexts in order to support incremental upgrading of neighbourhoods and new urbanization, in relation with the financial resources and aspirations of inhabitants and local authorities.
- To invest in long-term training programs. Countries and cities must invest in the implementation of long-term higher education training programs. Three domains should be prioritised: urban planning, territorial management and social support.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR SELF-BUILT RECONSTRUCTION

Following the earthquake of 12 January 2010, GRET set up a Centre to support reconstruction in the Baillergeau neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. It provides financial and technical support for families to ensure quality and safety of constructions. It also works on widening alleys and creating public space by reorganizing groups of houses.

* Convincing local political deciders

- To recognise the existence of precarious neighbourhoods. Public authorities have a huge responsibility in the existence of these neighbourhoods, because of actions led or, more often than not, their inaction. They are also overwhelmed by a rapidly increasing urbanization process, for which they lack resources to develop anticipatory and management policies.

Convincing deciders can be achieved by implementing socio-urban diagnoses in order to produce quantitative and qualitative knowledge to make the existence of these neighbourhoods and the real portion they occupy in cities visible, raise awareness of elected representatives on both the difficulties encountered by families and their capacities for contribution and initiatives, and propose relevant solutions.

Inhabitants also possess the capacity to influence political decisions, especially if they are organised collectively.

- Opting for in situ upgrading of precarious neighbourhoods and managing future informal urbanization. Upgrading projects should prioritise actions for the public space without excluding improvement of housing, facilities, economic & social development and environmental protection. As they are the first to be concerned, inhabitants and users will be involved in each stage and in the strategic choices of intervention.

All operations will be the subject of a financial and urban planning equation taking medium and long term impacts into consideration. They will be part of a city-wide strategy, in relation with its environment.

FIELD DIAGNOSES TO LAUNCH DEBATE

From 2011 to 2016, GRET and Pact worked in French Guyana in order to propose solutions for the spontaneous urbanization that is very rapidly developing in Saint-Laurent du Maroni. Counting of inhabitants using microlight aeroplanes demonstrated that this is not about a handful of houses, but several thousand. This triggered awareness amongst elected representatives. An in-depth diagnosis of practices, expectations and contributive capacities of families; of the legal and technical framework, as well as the continuous debate with elected representatives and technicians all resulted in social, technical, financial and legal innovations.
In terms of informal urbanization, which will represent over 50% of future urbanization, the priority is to define and implement the methods that are essential to “manage” it: define the urban fabric based on grey, green and blue belts; set aside areas for public spaces and facilities; prohibit at-risk areas and protect agricultural & natural spaces. This work on minimum planning is first and foremost the responsibility of local public authorities.

Two elements determine the feasibility of all operations: access to land and access to funding. Land must be taken from the market to guarantee security of tenure and control of prices. At financial level, efforts will be focused as a priority on local taxation and the implementation of micro-credit for housing.

**Changing the practices of urban project professionals and operators**

- Attribute greater importance to social support. Social support activities must be just as important as the technical and financial components of operations. It consists of activities to be conducted upstream of, during and after operations.

  Continuous information throughout operations, participation of inhabitants and post-operational support are strategic aspects.

- Positioning local authorities as leaders. Expanding operations to urban, economic, environmental and social dimensions calls traditional coordination methods into question. As managers of the territories concerned by operations, local authorities must play a central role in the multi-partner steering groups implemented. Their capacities will have to be strengthened to fulfil this role.

**Increasing international assistance for precarious neighbourhoods**

- More funding. Given the dimension of requirements, it is necessary to increase resources devoted to testing and deployment of in situ upgrading projects and of management of urbanization in large cities and towns. It is also necessary to extend the duration of projects to make it consistent with the length of time required for social and urban change. The existence of objective 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals - “Make cities and human establishments open to all, safe, resilient and sustainable” - can be an asset in this regard.

- Influence national political decisions. Donors have implemented international standards insisting that social and environmental impacts be taken into account in urban projects. They must be more demanding with national deciders and executive agencies regarding their applications, by making new funding conditional on results achieved.

- Support capitalisation and action-research. Donors have a role to play to support funding of capitalisation, mutual learning and networking, and funding of action-research associating researchers and professionals and focusing on the cities of the future.

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References


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