# Informal settlements:
## Research summary

## Context

This research summary covers key findings from seven city domain studies, which employed ACRC's conceptual framework to provide new insights into the challenges faced by informal settlement residents, and proposed ways in which those challenges might be addressed.

This conceptual framework uses political and systems analyses to understand the ways in which political interests and system failures define urban challenges and constrain solutions.

We analyse the informal settlements in **Accra**, **Dar es Salaam**, **Freetown**, **Harare**, **Kampala**, **Lilongwe** and **Mogadishu**. This set of cities offers a range of income levels, regions and security levels.

**Figure 1: Cities covered by the informal settlements domain research**



The city studies sought to understand the political economy of informal settlements and systems failings. We assume that the ways in which needs can be addressed, and potentialities/opportunities nurtured, are distinct and specific to informal settlements.

While there exist some commonalities across informal settlements in the seven cities, the paper avoids problematic generalisations and tries to engage with the particular ways in which informality and informal settlements are encountered in the specific contexts.

The domain integrates political settlements analysis to understand the underlying forms of power and politics, and how they shape systems of governance and institutions. Informal settlements are treated both as loci of power and, at the same time, as highly influenced by power dynamics at the city and national levels. This and other understandings are generated through city researchers' engagements with low-income communities, government officials (including local-level politicians who interface with these communities) and other stakeholders and knowledge communities within the seven cities contexts.

Listed below are the key questions (among other issues) that guided the study:

1. Who are the **key actors** that play roles in shaping urban development outcomes?

2. What **governance arrangements** exist in informal settlements and how can these be defined?

3. What are the **main ideologies and ideas** that are relevant to informal settlements?

4. What **policy approaches** have been proposed as solutions to the problems identified informal settlements and what do we know about their relative popularity and success? In addition, what new/alternative policy models are emerging that are being tracked?

5. What **city systems** are relevant to informal settlements?

6. What is the **political significance** of informal settlements?

7. How do **residents situate themselves** and respond to the changing circumstances in their settlements?

## Key findings

The seven-city study presents **four key findings** that expand our understanding of the contested efforts to improve living conditions in informal settlements.

Firstly, while there exist some commonalities across informal settlements in the seven cities that we studied, we understand that the **development opportunities and outcomes associated with specific informal settlements are closely tied to the category of land on which the settlements are located.**



Based on this, we identified four typologies of informal settlements across the seven cities:

1. Settlements on traditional or peri-urban land, which, over time, have become incorporated or form part of the city.

2. Formal settlements that have grown beyond intended residential capacity with informal extensions or tenancy over time

3. Settlements that have developed on public or private land that has been irregularly occupied.

4. Settlements established by some state authority on a "temporary" basis, without formal status ever being given. Additionally, despite the scale of new state initiatives, market approaches – that is, informal market provision of land and services – still dominate.

Secondly, **governance in informal settlements is multilayered**, with various actors exercising power through either competing or collaborative practices. Customary leaders emerge as important in the absence of effective service provision and secure tenure options, due to their own desire for authority, and their role as intermediaries between a governing elite that needs to demonstrate its ability to provide for informal residents, and informal residents needing to influence a spatially distant governing elite.

Political elites matter to informal settlement residents; in the context of diverse and competing political interests, residents adopt multiple collective identities and strategies to lobby elites to advance their interests.

Thirdly, there is political neglect, as **political elites and decisionmakers do not find systems failure politically significant or relevant and are therefore not incentivised to take action**. In certain cases, these neighbourhoods are significant for the electoral success of city elites, who try to win votes in exchange for the (partial and incomplete) provision of services. However, these political elites may also exploit the vulnerabilities of informality, by coercing residents and shifting populations to alter the electoral map.

Alternative political parties may dominate at the city level, creating conditions for contestation between city and national governments; however, regardless of city–government relations, informal settlements tend to remain neglected, with service provision being partial.

Fourthly, in terms of policy and planning, **there are in fact extensive policy and programming efforts supporting regularisation and upgrading, with positive outcomes in at least some neighbourhoods**. While coercive approaches continue, and individual neighbourhoods are threatened with relocation, the number of new initiatives suggests that governments are now keen to demonstrate their commitment to more positive options.

The challenge of policy and practice mismatch is still widespread, which means that neglect and failure still persist. In terms of programming, interventions, where they exist, are still at an insignificant scale. Mechanisms for meaningfully engaging with beneficiary communities during implementation also remain insufficient.



## Implications for urban reform

Findings from the domain research highlight informal settlements at a key frontier for practical and conceptual interventions which aim to respond to the changing nature of vulnerabilities in the city, coupled with growing levels of inequality. The studies suggest that there has been a shift in how problems in informal settlements are understood and interventions formulated, with residents being viewed as critical actors whose views must feed into policy to ensure their responsiveness. In part, this openness to consultation results from residents' own individual and collective action. Residents have developed data capabilities which they strategically deploy to engage with policymakers.

Findings also show that residents have amassed practical experience from different interventions that have been rolled out in their communities. Any engagements with informal settlements residents must acknowledge that residents and social movements are able to identify policy gaps and advocate for targeted policy, legislative and regulatory interventions. Efforts should focus on establishing effective mechanisms to put into practice the progressive policy proposals shaped by the residents of informal settlements. Additionally, there is a question of how to build better interfaces with policymakers to ensure scalability of interventions that are formulated.

City studies show that collective action by residents has grown in scale and sophistication to secure their needs and elevate their political project of recognition, even in the midst of dismissive attitudes that are still held by certain government officials. Informal settlements residents played vital roles in the city studies that informed this synthesis paper, particularly through the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) network.

The extensive engagements with residents which was undertaken in the city studies was done in recognition of their important and varying levels of capabilities, while taking cognisance of the broad scope of what "community" means. It is essential for external actors looking to engage with informal settlement residents to acknowledge the significance of this. It is also imperative for these engagements to recognise and respect the inclination of specific residents to maintain a level of invisibility. This becomes especially crucial in the current context, where there is heightened attention on informal settlements from political elites aiming to showcase their ability to address residents' concerns.

The renewed attention on informal settlements by political elites required a careful mapping by city researchers to understand the range of actors that influence various outcomes in informal settlements. The studies found that power in these settlements resides in formal and informal actors, who have varying levels of influence in decisionmaking at the settlement, city and national levels. Power is also dependent on the levels of influence that these actors are able to exert around issues of resource mobilisation and distribution, dispute resolution, mobilisation of internal community and external actors, and service delivery, among other things.

Relations of supervision, competition, cooperation, association and/or partnership are conspicuously present in these settlements. It was against this background that city studies suggested the need to critically examine the creative strategies employed by residents to negotiate with elites. This exploration can in turn enhance our understanding of how residents navigate clientelist arrangements to obtain material benefits and secure formal recognition. There is also space within such an analysis to engage with the multiscalar and multilayered structures employed by residents to organise, sensitise and mobilise for urban reform.

## About this summary

This is a summary of a Working Paper, written by the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) informal settlement domain leads: Smith Ouma, Daniela Cocco Beltrame, Diana Mitlin and Beth Chitekwe-Biti.

**Read the full paper**

**Photo information (by order of appearance)**:
1. Cockle Bay informal settlement in Freetown, Sierra Leone - ICLEI Africa; 2. Vingunguti informal settlement in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania - Diana Mitlin; 3. Aerial view over an informal settlement in Accra, Ghana; 4. Traders in an informal settlement in Harare, Zimbabwe - Know Your City TV; 5. Aerial view over an informal settlement in Lilongwe, Malawi - CCODE Malawi.

ACRC is funded by UK International Development.

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