

Critical approaches to compact cities and informal settlements in an urban world

Conveners:

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The world is becoming urban and increasingly interconnected through processes such as globalization, modernization and migration. At the same time development progress unevenly and important areas suffer from lack of access and mobility, socio-spatial segregation and poverty.

Today, half of humanity lives in cities and some 800 million people dwell in informal settlements or slums, without adequate shelter and services. In coming decades, approximately 95% of the urban expansion is calculated to take place in developing countries. Therefore, we foresee an increase in urban slums, characterised insecure tenure, precarious quality of housing and lack of connectivity and access to basic services.

The global challenge to improve quality of life for families in informal settlements is immense. Sustainable Development Goal 11 addresses this important challenge and aims to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Today, with changing structures of governance and local and global practices, the remaining questions are how will cities develop and change? What are the drivers? And what are the strategies developed by an array of actors to address these changes and their consequences?

UN-Habitat and other global agencies (UNEP, the World Bank and so on) maintain that compact cities deliver benefits, such as economic growth, social cohesion and that they minimize negative external impacts, such as those related to transport and travelling, pollution and waste.

In research, proximity and scale are said to promote resource efficiency, reduce developments on rural land, facilitate accessibility, lower infrastructure cost, higher quality of life, stimulate innovation and economic development, generate employment opportunities and social cohesion. Simultaneously, the same literature also questions whether increased density is the best recipe in informal settlements characterised by high densities.

Research shows how compact cities may lead to crowding, unaffordable housing, inequity, health problems, congestion, pollution and loss of important green space. Recent studies of informal housing areas in Jakarta find that geographical proximity does not translate into access to resources or social mobility. On the other hand, the rise of dense and informal settlements, and the creation of both informal housing and modern infrastructures, has been acknowledged as one of the most important social innovations in cities on the Global South.

This session calls for papers from manifold disciplines that critically contribute to expand the understanding of how dense and informal settlements relate in one way or another to the core issues of development, namely, poverty reduction, job creation, food security, health, education, participation and democracy, migration, safety and security, housing, justice, social innovations and entrepreneurship, or the environment, to mention a few.

In particular, papers informed by empirical studies are welcome to examine, for example, questions of self-help urbanism, informal economy and entrepreneurship, networks of solidarity and economies of reciprocity, the role of public spaces and streets as interfaces between houses/families, socio-economics, vulnerabilities and inequalities in marginalised communities, vibrancy and local imaginaries of ideal 'dense' cities; active citizenship and engagement, human capital, knowledge and creativity in compact informal settlements, or critical assessments of 'upgrading programs' in cities.