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Comments by W. Schoop

Dr. SETHURAMAN described the urbanization process in the future emphasizing the gap between the high population growth and the less rapid increase of labour opportunities. He stresses that living conditions within the informal sector are not well known and we have to consider that there is a variety of heterogeneous activities and a lot of invisible links between the formal and informal sector.

Several policies and measures are presented which can lead to an amelioration of living and labour market conditions within the informal sector. But we have to be very cautious because if we try to aid and help with our resources we might disturb and destroy self-help activities. On the other hand I am sceptical because it is not enough to improve resource allocation or technology or to give direct access to markets.

We should not forget the non-economic activities if we want to promote and foster self-help activities in the informal sector. It is necessary to know better the social, cultural and communal reality of the poor we work with. That is why I would like to give some additional remarks concerning these non-economic aspects within the informal sector. The knowledge of these self-help activities is a basis for NGO policy when we try to improve the situation of urban poor.

It would certainly be wrong to confine the informal sector to economic activities alone, since numerous forms of ex-

pression and activity which have come into existence as parallel structures in addition to the formal ones can be observed in the social, political or communicative life of the suburban slum population. These informal structures are in a way "niches of survival" the suburban slum population is looking for in all fields of life. However, all these numerous and various, mostly new expressions of communal life have to be considered in their appropriate context. Since only then the underlying correlations and basic characteristics in the above-mentioned fields will become evident.

The different non-economic fields of the informal sector can be listed as follows:

1. informal communal services,
2. informal construction and settlement,
3. informal socio-political organizations,
4. informal communication.

Let us have a closer look at these fields one by one:

1. Informal communal services

The organization of day nurseries and kindergartens is generally a great help for the families, since while the women are away at work, the children are looked after and grow up together with other children of their age group. Above all, in the numerous families, having lost their fathers for whatever reason, this self-organized service is a great support for the mothers.

In many urban districts, refuse disposal is organized on a self-help basis and it is often in this context that people

are also introduced to the significance of hygiene and preventive health care.

Communal kitchens have become particularly important for instance in Peru. A few women out of a larger group of 20 to 30 women are in charge of preparing the meals on specific days of the week on a rotation basis. This system enables them to go to work on five or six days a week. In addition to that, food can be purchased by bulk buying and nutrition will become more balanced and more hygienic. These groups of women and mothers developing in the context of communal kitchens can be an important take-off for further community activities.

Very often suburban slum dwellers have also organized their own internal law and order system. They will set up security services with all families participating. There are also elected committees, dispensing justice, for instance in matters of ground ownership problems, theft committed within the community, or wanton and willful damaging of the environment. Moreover it has been observed that men and women who have abandoned their families were forced to provide and care for them.

2. Informal construction and settlement

Many squatter settlements come into existence by a group of people occupying some land. For many squatters this is the only way to find place to live at all. Their shelters are usually overcrowded and they have, as the poor population in general, no access to the real estate market. With great imagination and cleverness they manage to take advantage of otherwise unused areas to establish their settlements there.

Informal construction of houses is also carried out without any legal basis. The poor population just does not have the financial resources to pay building contractors or experts. Thus people have no other choice than to build on a self-help and community activity basis without building permit and without an architect's expert advice. They usually proceed step by step and slowly using second-hand building material, and local craftsmen will be asked to help only with specific, more difficult jobs.

The infrastructure of a new urban district can be set up on a self-help basis, too. This is done by tapping public electricity supply lines, building communal latrines or access roads. The construction of additional rooms e.g. for kindergartens, schools and community centers has also turned out to strengthen and promote community development.

3. Informal socio-political organizations

The foundation of associations such as self-help groups, neighbourhood communities, mothers' clubs etc. is a characteristic feature of many squatter settlements in Latin American suburban areas. In many cases these organizations were set up on a territorial or problem-oriented rather than on a party-political basis. It is essential to note that the settlers are personally participating in the territorial committees (e.g. in their immediate neighbourhood and in their urban district) or in so-called functional committees (e.g. for health, youth or housing matters etc.).

In many cities "Federations of Self-help and Settlers' Groups" have come into existence on city level. It has also happened that nationwide movements have developed from such

local federations. What is new is that individual groups emerge first and then at a later stage the comprehensive organization is established, much in contrast to the political parties which usually formulate their ideological framework first and then begin to establish their local adherents' groups. These federations very often have a network structure which shows great stability. In some cities they even have considerable social and political influence.

4. Informal communication

In many suburban districts, groups of settlers publish their own self-made local newsletter. In most cases, these newsletters consist of individually hectographed pages, and their underlying conception tends to be very simple. Their contents focus on developments and problems specifically concerning their neighbourhood and urban district. As such newsletters are written by the settlers themselves, their style and language can be understood by everybody.

Informal expression has also been observed on the level of musical tradition. New instruments and new sounds are sometimes combined with properties of local traditional music. It is not unusual that socio-political lyrics with special reference to the local situation are made up to encourage and foster awareness building.

Settlers have also written their own pieces of amateur drama and have performed these plays themselves in the streets and on the market-places. They do not only provide good entertainment, but also present a message. As in these plays, too, developments and problems specifically concerning a particular urban district are taken up, they have a strong community-building and awareness-raising effect.

Other aspects and elements of the informal sector can be identified in a variety of different fields such as for example education, vocational training, health care or religious life (especially in Catholic basis communities and in the small groups of the Protestant Churches). It should be noted, however, that the formal and informal sectors cannot always be separated in a clear-cut way; they intermingle and overlap. Hence the difficulties to state exactly the total volume of the informal sector.

The fundamental characteristics of the informal sector in the fields mentioned above are the following:

Informal activities and expressions take place in geographically limited areas which can be grasped by the individual. They specifically refer to the local setting in many ways, and their size and scale are compatible with what the local people can take in and understand. They propose direct answers to real problems facing the poor, answers which are not based on theory but on experience.

The technical means available are usually very limited which necessitates ways of production and behaviour requiring a high input in terms of the amount of labour involved, but only a very small input in terms of material and financial resources. Community activities, doing things together, is an approach which acquires a new and strong meaning and relevance. The forms of organization can be described as networks rather than having hierarchical character; and above all, those concerned take the initiative themselves and become the active part. It is not least for this reason that informal ways of action and expression are very flexible, adaptive and versatile indeed.

However, when discussing problems of the informal sector, we are certainly not speaking about an idyllic way of life.

Much to the contrary, what is going on is a struggle for survival which is extremely tough and grim. The poor are resisting formal structures which at present they do not really stand a chance against, as these formal structures have the law and the power on their side. However, there are many signs today which suggest that the informal sector may be the beginning of a more humane communal life that could be extended to comprehend not only the poor but the whole of society.