Urban Issues: Slums

What are Slums?

Slums are illegal urban settlements on public land and usually grow over a period of time in a constant and irregular manner. Despite this fact. Slums are considered as an integral part of urbanization and as a manifestation of the overall socioeconomic policies and planning in the urban sector. The existence and rapid growth of slums have been noted as a general urban phenomena common prevalent throughout the globe.

Slums may also be described as “a chaotically occupied, unsystematically developed and generally neglected area, which is overpopulated by persons and overcrowded with ill-repaired and neglected structures" (Indian Conference, 1957). They have emerged out of the urban development process and are unplanned, unintended settlements ignored in the whole process of urban development.

* Asia's largest slum,**Dharavi,** lies on prime property right in the middle of Mumbai (Neza, in Mexico, is the world’s largest slum).
* Half-a-million people or so, live in the 230 hectares that is Dharavi.
* It was founded in 1882 at the time of British Raj. During the 18th century, unplanned localities started to grow when the process of urbanization of Mumbai was going on.
* Recently, the Maharashtra government signed an initiative: A special purpose vehicle with 80% private and 20% government stake to redevelop Dharavi as a whole rather than in separate sub-clusters as previously envisioned.

**Reasons for growing slums**

Population explosion and poverty force the urban poor to live in slums and that leads to an increase in the size of slums. Also, a regional imbalance in development creates rural to urban migration, thus increasing the overall urban population density which pressurizes the urban poor to move into slums.

In the past 15 years, India’s urban population density has increased by 45%. It is further estimated that 40% of the population will live in urban areas by 2026. With increasingly densified urban population, there exists a huge demand for land. This shortage of land forces the urban poor to live in increasingly dense communities creating slums in the process.

* Rising material costs and labor costs resulting from labor shortage is another reason for the growth of slums as it makes developers unable to deliver affordable housing to the market.
* Also, delayed procedures for land development forces people to stay in congested areas which further leads to creation of slums.
* A lack of efficiency of urban local bodies coupled with unplanned city management is also one of the major reasons for creation of slum areas.
* Moreover, social backwardness forces people to live in congested areas away from main areas. For example, more Scheduled Castes (SCs) live in slums - with one out of every five residents belonging to the SC category.
* A lack of political will for developing slums can also be seen, as slums provide cheap and steady labour (party-workers) to political parties.

**Way Forward**

* Poverty is the most significant reason behind the creation of slums. So, the issue of poverty must be addressed first by policymakers.
* There is also a need for future policies to support the livelihoods of the urban poor by enabling urban informal-sector activities to flourish and develop. Slum policies should be integrated within broader, people-focused urban poverty reduction policies that address the various dimensions of poverty.
* Easy geographical access to jobs through pro-poor transport should also be created.
* Adequate data should be gathered by conducting various studies before the formulation of any policy.
* There is also a need for investment in citywide infrastructure as a pre-condition for successful and affordable slum upgrading, which could also act as one strong mechanism for reversing the socio-economic exclusion of slum dwellers.
* Steps should be taken such that a higher and more stable income be made accessible to slum dwellers through their employment in productive jobs. This is because employment opportunities in urban centres that pay well has the potential to generate a healthy and sustainable lifestyle in the slums.
* Lastly, slums should be developed because developing slums also trigger local economic development, improve urban mobility and connectivity, and integrate the slums, which are enormous economically productive spheres, into the physical and socioeconomic fabric of the wider city.