

# **Addressing Questions of Poverty & Inequality in Human Settlements Practitioners views as expressed to the GPN**

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## **Summary**

This paper considers approaches to addressing issues of poverty and inequality as reported by the community of planners who have responded to the Global Planners Network's (GPN's) capacity self-assessment outreach programme. We examine planners' perceptions of their role in delivering sustainable development and how their work can contribute to the mitigation of poverty and inequality. We also report how respondents believe their capacity to do this can be enhanced through more targeted training, improved information resources and wider recognition of need to take a spatially-based approach to decision making.

Responses to the self-assessment thus depict the on-the-ground experiences of planners from around the world and demonstrate the strong commitment of the planning community to addressing the challenges of poverty and inequality. Their experiences provide essential practitioner insights about the practical challenges for planning, what the barriers are, what works in practice and what doesn't. They reinforce the GPN's contention that planning's spatially based approach to decision making for human settlements is essential in addressing these issues and their insights need to be reflected in future initiatives to develop global planning capacity.

## **1 Introduction**

There has been very little research about the capacity that exists worldwide for planning human settlements. At a time of accelerating urban change, the need for spatial planning to respond to the effects of population growth, urbanisation, climate change and natural disasters is becoming urgent. At its 2006 Congress in Vancouver, the GPN identified the existence of quantitative and qualitative gaps in capacity for planning at a global scale. Although unknown, the number of people with planning skills was evidently not keeping pace with the rate of urbanisation, planning systems and skills were not being updated to meet current needs, let alone the needs of the cities of the future.

Accordingly, the first steps taken by the GPN in responding to this situation have been to investigate the present capacity for planning around the world and to assess what are the most urgent gaps to capacity that need to be filled. An online self-diagnostic tool to help planners from around the world to assess the capacity for planning in their countries has been designed and this has been promoted in an outreach programme through GPN networks. The tool is tailored to obtain a local picture of capacity for planning in countries across the world. In five months following its launch, 1250 planners to date from over 100 countries in the 'global north' and the 'global south' have responded.

Addressing the issues of poverty and inequality is a constant theme to emerge from the respondents' self-diagnoses and their views are described in this paper. We use the local capacity assessments to give a broad-brush picture of the different elements of capacity globally. In writing this paper we have extracted the most relevant responses from a much larger body of data provided by respondents.

## 2 The Challenges of Poverty and Inequality

Our self-assessment tool began by asking respondents to reflect on national priorities that require planning skills to address. When considered in terms of key pressures on planning, the responses to this question are strikingly wide-ranging. We describe elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, how these pressures reflect the drivers of the planning system which are diverse given the diversity of the environments in which the respondents are working. This is something that we had anticipated.

What was less predictable was the consistent reference to the need to use planning skills to address poverty and inequality in the countries where the respondents work. No less than 61% of respondents to the question: 'In your country/territory what are the main challenges that require planning skills?' referred directly to these issues. Reflecting the diversity of respondents' interests and the countries where they come from, there are many different ways to address these issues, and we believe it is useful to begin simply by listing the range of the poverty and inequality challenges that respondents identified. This alone helps to illustrate the complexity of challenges confronting the planning community.

Aspects of tackling poverty that respondents highlight include the following:

- Sprawl and poor housing with the accompanying health risks
- Planning to ensure people can make a sustainable living
- Housing that is
  - Appropriate, good quality and affordable housing
  - Within acceptable density standards
  - In a safe environment
- Reduction of illegal land speculation
- Balance of interests with wealthy and landowners
- Vulnerable population groups, in part because of demographic changes, but also more generally those who are disenfranchised or who have particular needs e.g.
  - Displaced peoples
  - Marginalised people
  - Age-related groups - Youth opportunities and child care resources/ Older people
  - The sick
  - Migrants
  - Refugees
  - Slum dwellers
  - Those living in vulnerable and disaster prone areas (floods, etc)
- Informal settlements
- Size of slums, favelas etc. and speed of their growth
- Settlements with poor infrastructure
- Preservation of rural land for food supply
- Social programme implementation

Aspects of inequality that respondents highlight include:

- Access to/ease of availability of quality resources, especially land
- Distribution of economic value of land

- Balanced development under commercial and other pressures and agendas particularly as regards the free market economy and civil society
- Preservation of common resources and sources of wealth - especially
  - Public spaces
  - Water
  - Land
  - Fuel
  - Energy
  - Food supply
- Demand for sufficient equitable access to services and benefits of the built environment
  - Housing (affordable housing with good services)
  - Transport (all types of options for all types of budgets)
  - Property values being given equal protection
- Density and its uneven effects
- Disparate quality of life and living conditions within a territory
- Unequal participation in the processes, bureaucracy barrier to some and preferential treatment of others, planning can boost inclusiveness
- Involving all actors in order to help cope with un-ordered development in response to growth pressures
- Increasing local integration and shared community interests and visions for attractive balanced communities
  - Community building
  - Social cohesion
  - Regional Cohesion
- Equal access to infrastructure and basic amenities
  - Sanitation
  - Waste disposal
  - Security
- Legal structure and government policies of regulating desirable effects in a comprehensive way
- Regional and city to city parity of resource access, infrastructure service and economic competitiveness
- Minority population groups
  - Ethnic sub-groups and parity of many ethnic groups for cultural diversity
- Equitable distribution of rural land
- Polarised development especially sprawl, tackling pockets of deprivation
  - Regeneration
  - Connecting isolated areas
- Dealing with infrastructure legacies which did not favour all of society equitably especially
  - post-apartheid
  - city centres

### 3 The missed opportunities for a planning input

If these are the challenges facing the planning community, respondents to the self-assessment are clear that while planning has great potential to contribute to the reduction of poverty and inequality in particular, this potential is not being fully utilised.

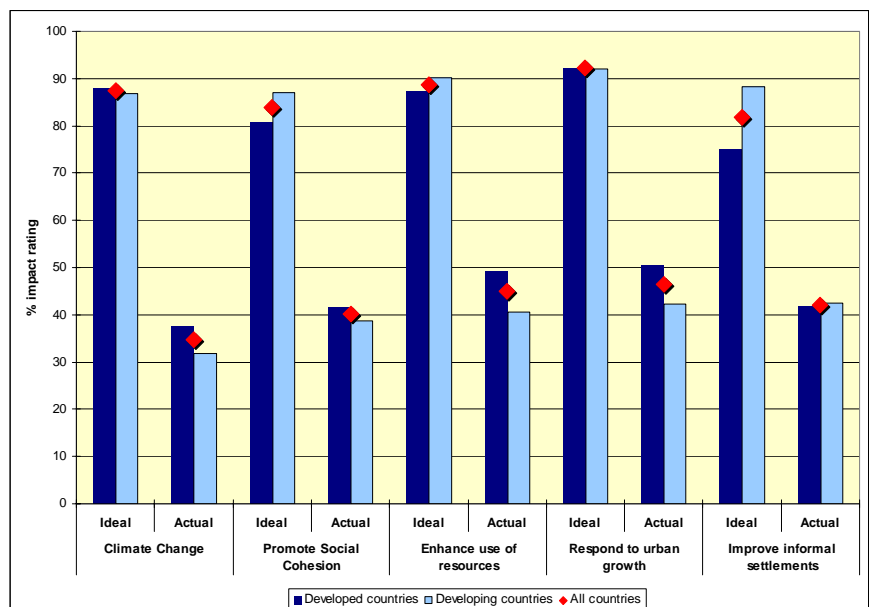
We examined the contribution that respondents believe that planning makes to improving human settlements by looking at their ratings of potential and actual impact, and measuring the difference between the two ratings. We then evaluated the size of the gap between ‘developed’ and ‘developing countries’ as defined by the UNDP<sup>ii</sup>, and because we are particularly interested in the contribution that planning makes in places with high levels of poverty and inequality, we have compared the data for a selection of countries with high self-assessment response-levels to the UN Habitat slum data.

Respondents to the self-diagnostic tool rated the potential for planning to influence five of key development concerns:

1. *Climate Change*
2. *Promote Social Cohesion*
3. *Enhance use of resources*
4. *Respond to urban growth*
5. *Improve informal settlements*

Respondents rated how much planning should ideally contribute to addressing these issues and how much it actually does. Chart 1 (right) depicts their responses, expressed in percentage terms of the maximum possible for each priority area and they are summarised for developed countries, developing countries and for all countries together.

Chart 1: Ideal and Actual impact of planning on development concerns, total and by UN category



Respondents reveal there to be a real difference between the ideal and the actual impact that planning has on addressing the five priority areas. The pattern is similar everywhere. For potential and actual impact in each of the five areas of development, planners in all countries report a notional difference of between 40 and 52%. The average potential impact scores were all above 80%, whereas the average actual impact scores were all below 50%, and this is true for both ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries. So, according to our respondents there is a significant untapped potential for planning to address the priority issues in all parts of the world.

#### Implications

Respondents to the diagnostic tool agree that planning’s potential to address priority development goals is untapped. This is the case throughout the world: there are no notable differences by ‘developed/developing’ countries. So planning can contribute more to development goals than it already does.

#### 4 Four dimensions of planning's impact

In their self-diagnoses, planners describe how they can add value to development through their role in helping to integrate spatially competing sectoral objectives. This role enables them to deliver benefits in four unique ways: 1. *Balanced Settlements* 2. *Environmental Custodianship* 3. *Quality of Life Issues* and 4. *Stakeholder Engagement*.

Almost all respondents to the self assessment tool refer to their role in at least one of these four areas. And while their work extends far beyond the topic into many other areas of concern, we examine how each dimension relates to addressing the issues of poverty and equality in human settlements.

- (i) Respondents describe their role of promoting 'Balanced Settlements' which pulls together the many facets of physical development and enhances the ways that settlements function efficiently as places where people live and work. Their role takes into account pressures of growth or decline on infrastructure and the need to resource an area especially with appropriate levels of energy and water. Better balanced settlements are perceived as beneficial to communities as a whole especially over the long term.

A joined up spatial planning approach to promoting balanced settlements can address poverty and inequality in many ways. Respondents report how maximising space for local employment opportunities, and service opportunities (especially viable transport & mobility) is important in preventing spatially institutionalised poverty and inequality. Specifically, planning can help by ensuring affordable housing, encouraging employment and capital investment to poorer areas and promoting the more equitable distribution of resources, burdens and benefits.

- (ii) 'Quality of Life' issues mean achieving land uses that are suited to local needs. Respondents describe how they use information about current and likely future social requirements to help create a better living environment for future residential populations. This role can include demographic and lifestyle trend monitoring, information provision to other development professionals and knowledge sharing, with sensitivity to local culture and history. A sense of place and aesthetic considerations of an area are also important for development in creating settlements that are desirable for habitation.

Respondents are clear that taking an integrated planning approach to improve 'quality of life' for urban dwellers, can secure direct benefits in reducing the effects of poverty and inequality. They describe how their work can help improve community facilities, promote more healthy living, give access to clean water, limit commuting times, maintain a high quality of urban environment with lower congestion and good air quality, and provide utilities especially sanitation. Respondents emphasise that the quality of life for people in the most marginalised communities can benefit most from their activities.

- (iii) Respondents to the self-assessment agree that questions about poverty and inequality must be addressed through community engagement and mediation processes. The self-diagnoses show how decision making about land use affects people unequally within cities, regions and even across territorial borders. Respondents report on the problems that arise when minority needs have no

advocate, which means their interests risk being unaddressed. Respondents to the self-assessment describe how planning processes using mediation can offer a structured way to negotiate interests at different all levels. The task is not a simple one because working with different interest groups can reveal very intense conflicts of interest. But it provides an essential way to balance such competing, economic, social and environmental objectives in a transparent way.

Respondents have found that engaging in these processes helps to increase awareness of the needs of poor and marginal communities. Promoting local participation in decision making empowers populations who may have no regular income to improve their living conditions. Through their activity, planners engage marginalised communities and those without wealth or power, take into account their priorities about health, safety and lifestyle. For instance, public space is especially important both in regard to the preservation of existing places that are valued and in fostering a shared sense of ownership and interest in new places being built.

Respondents describe how different interests in their society need to be considered when planning decisions are made and that a strong planning input can help balance the strong pressures from decision makers who may be competing to benefit from the outcomes of strategic decisions. Disputes between different interest groups are inevitable, and respondents understand that they can best respond to these by facilitating decision making through developing and applying skills in mediation. They demonstrate how the mediation approach in negotiation can promote community and shared interests, and can help to create what one respondent has termed an a shared vision for the future that is “informed” by all interested parties.

- (iv) We define the broad role of planning in planning for and adapting to environmental pressures as stewardship for a ‘Harmonious Environment’ – a concept that can include disaster management and planning for resilience, agricultural and environmental resource preservation and mediation, geological and weather trend monitoring, as well as the dissemination of information and knowledge in order to achieve the best human outcomes.

Respondents demonstrate the extent to which food insecurity affects the poorest sections of the community before any other, making it paramount that development decisions relating to such communities pay heed to this concern. Specifically through water quality protection, the preservation of sufficient agricultural and grazing land and maintenance of soil quality. Communities who live in disaster-prone and polluted areas are by definition particularly marginalised so that those who live in such areas have much to gain from a spatial planning approach.

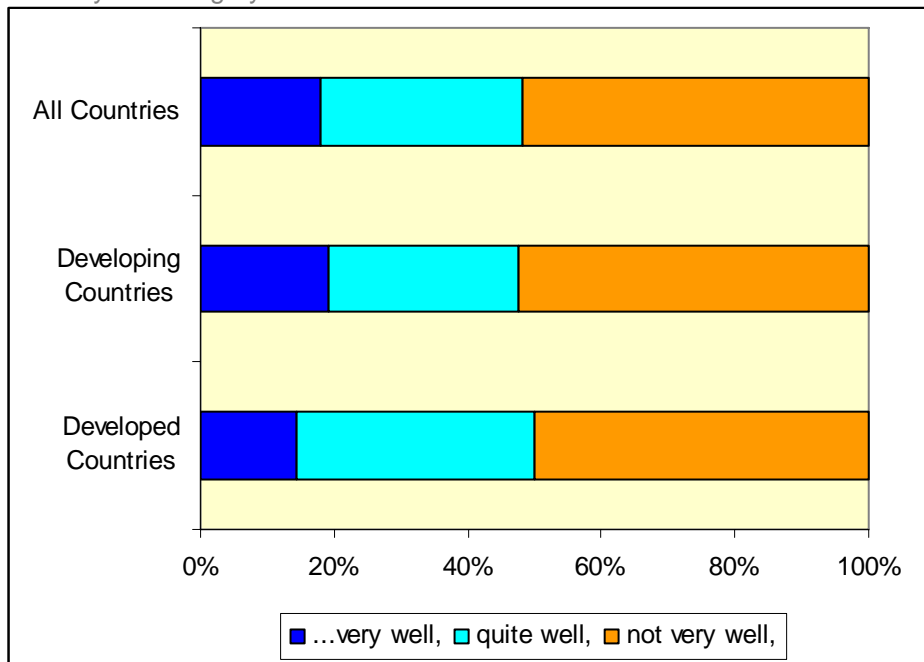
## 5 Internal and external barriers confronting the community of planners

If respondents to the self-diagnostic tool believe that planning could be used to far greater effect in reducing urban poverty and inequality, how do they think this can be done?

Respondents stress that the answers are not easy. People who plan human settlements do not often start with a blank sheet of paper – instead they have to work within what are invariably complex legislative, political, economic, social and cultural systems. A good understanding of these systems is imperative, and this demands that there must be a good representation of all groups in society within national planning communities. We therefore asked planning institutions to consider how representative their profession is of society as a whole within their country, and what the barriers are to improving it.

Chart 2 below describes the representativeness of planning practitioners worldwide as responding institutions perceive it. It suggests a profession that is not very representative of the population it serves, with around half saying it does not represent the local population very well.

Chart 2: How well planning profession represents local population, total and by UN category



Barriers to increasing the representativeness of practitioners are both internal and external as summarised in the boxes below. These responses indicate that many of the barriers can be extremely complex and intrinsically linked into local contexts. However, assuming the necessary institutional support, internal barriers can be addressed to a considerable extent by practitioners themselves. External barriers lie beyond the scope of this paper.

### External factors – barriers within the country

*“They are too complex due to the great cultural diversity that exists in our territory” Colombia*

- ⊙ Geographical scale of the country, specifically resulting in pockets of opportunities for working in the profession
- ⊙ Language barriers
- ⊙ Academic supremacy / inequities in education
- ⊙ Gender barriers
- ⊙ Traditional or historical cultural exclusivities
- ⊙ Ingrained cultural attitudes to ‘alternative’ careers

### **Internal factors – barriers within the profession**

*“It exists in our minds but not on ground” Egypt*

- ⊙ Issues of equity falling to the bottom of the list of priorities due to the pressure of the tasks at hand
- ⊙ Undue influence of those in positions of power
- ⊙ Lack of education and opportunities among certain groups
- ⊙ Lack of understanding among certain groups about the nature of the profession
- ⊙ Unattractive financial incentives as a career path

Looking at both boxes it is noticeable that the barriers to the profession becoming more representative of society are the same as those that cause poverty and inequality are given a lower priority than respondents consider that they merit. It is also true that the perceptions of the profession also have an effect.

## 6. Implications for Capacity Building

Enhanced planning capacity will provide important opportunities for poverty and equity concerns to play a more central role in human settlements planning. In the following section we therefore use the responses to the diagnostic tool to examine some of the specific areas of capacity where the potential of planning to respond to poverty and equity can be improved. These areas are

- i. greater support for planning by society and within government
- ii. targeted training for working with poor and excluded communities
- iii. increasing high quality information particularly in areas with high levels off slums.

### (i) Greater Support for Planning by society and within government.

There is a strong consensus that using a planning approach to address issues of poverty and inequality requires stronger backing by governmental and other higher-level institutions. Lacking such support, respondents remark that too much weight in decision making tends to be given to the short-term, and narrowly based economic returns from development. Commonly this can mean that these issues take given priority over more broader-based social objectives. Unequal access to key discussions can often leave poorer people on the periphery of decision making processes. The considerations necessary to secure finance for investment are crucial but so is obtaining the right 'balance' between responding to economic pressures and social requirements. of the essential actions to balancing interests include public consultations and the establishment of broad-based decision making in such activities as housing, education and social service committees.

Processes operate most effectively where planning systems are best established. A strong theme to emerge from respondents therefore is the need for governments to provide stronger support for building better settlements and for there to be appropriate legislation to make this happen. In countries where the planning system is not perceived to be well-embedded, decisions, can be unenforceable, even if they are taken by Government, and this can lead to patterns of development that are unsustainable, inefficient and even down right dangerous for the people who live in them. The outcomes are all too familiar - suburban sprawl and unserviced, and overcrowded informal settlement continue to grow, and cherished areas of open land disappear. In some cases respondents say

#### Indicators of weakly embedded planning systems

- Planning decisions being held up by allowing inappropriate levels of influence to individuals with little information about long term or broader implications
- Decisions requiring no notifications
- Planning application procedures unevenly used - a lottery system.
- Decisions always being made in the interests of wealthy individuals rather than the common interest or the poor communities
- Decision makers acting without listening to all interested parties
- Cynical manipulation of public information, and information blocking
- Money being used to influence decisions.
- Payment being given to buy consent
- Inappropriate government concessions on national resources like beaches, lakes and mines, against national policy
- Political manipulation of authorities

affected communities can only express themselves through ‘desperate’ means such as demonstrations and even violent opposition.

(ii) **Targeted training for working with poor and excluded communities**

We asked respondents how skills for working with poor and marginalised people were learned in their country. Firstly they selected from a list of options:

<b>skills are learned...</b>	
...on the job	26%
...informally	25%
...academic courses	17%
...professional training	15%
...through other means	9%

*\*Multiple responses permitted*

The most common way of learning these skills was on the job or informally, and it is disappointing that despite the millennium goals and other commitments by the international community to reduce world poverty that just one third of respondents had received any formal training in this area, and in particular how little professional training there appears to be.

We probed respondents to describe the ‘other means’ of acquiring the skills they need to work with poor communities. They replied that these other skills are learned through interaction either with other people who have experience of poverty and social exclusion, or with experienced professionals. Typical responses are described in the text box opposite and they highlight the need for planners to learn on the job through networking and discussion.

Respondents also considered what barriers they see as preventing the wider acquisition of the skills required to work with marginalised groups in their countries. Typical responses are provided in the text box opposite. Their answers highlight two things:

1. A lack of awareness of the need for these skills
2. Good opportunities to acquire them

These responses suggest that there remains rather little awareness within many countries of the problems of urban poverty and inequality, and as a consequence there are few opportunities to develop the skills required to address them. In some countries the lack of interest in the subject in the first place was a barrier. In others there was insufficient political will and leadership or deep fissures in society, and

**Means to acquire skills to work with poor and excluded communities.**

- Activities organised by community groups
- Networking with marginalised groups
- Networking with social science professionals
- Exchange with administrative bodies in excluded regions
- Working in regions that are themselves ‘excluded’ or poor
- Working abroad in less well off countries
- Working with specialist organisations
- Exchange with other planners who have professional experience

**Barriers to the acquisition of skills to work with marginal communities**

- “Lack of leadership and incentives in the area” *Planner in Panama*
- “Ignorance and lack of vision” *Planner in India*
- “The persistent problems of violence and handling of the marginal zones on the part of armed groups.” *Planner in Colombia*
- The obstacle is that for a normal national professional, work with marginalized sectors looks bad because it does not represent a source of economic income or related to the official welfare or the political party, or the charity of the churches.” *Planner in Mexico*

planners were not motivated to learn these skills, in part because of this. In others again, there was no popular backing or culture of acceptance of the core value of working with marginalised groups, which discouraged planners from gaining the appropriate skills. These issues appear to exist in both hemispheres and in developed as well as in developing countries.

Personnel with adequate experience or skills from which others might learn are lacking in some countries, and planning human resources are (as discussed throughout reporting on self-diagnostic assessments) precious – meaning that planners are in low supply and under a wide variety of pressures. Economic or financial support for teaching and studying these skills are also in low supply.

Even where teaching exists there are other hurdles for planners who wish gain skills that they can really use. Sometimes the location of the courses is prohibitive. Sometimes courses do not allow time to go into enough depth. Sometimes the underlying local issues are not fully grasped or forgotten in an attempt to simply ‘transplant’ knowledge from other regions instead of (e.g.) using it as a learning example. In any case, the supply of opportunities worldwide appears to be patchy.

#### The Implications for capacity building

There remains a considerable challenge in the need to raise awareness of the scale of the problem and the need to develop the capacity required to confront it. A better understanding of the skills required by planners taking a pro-poor approach is required.

### **(iii) Improving Information Resources**

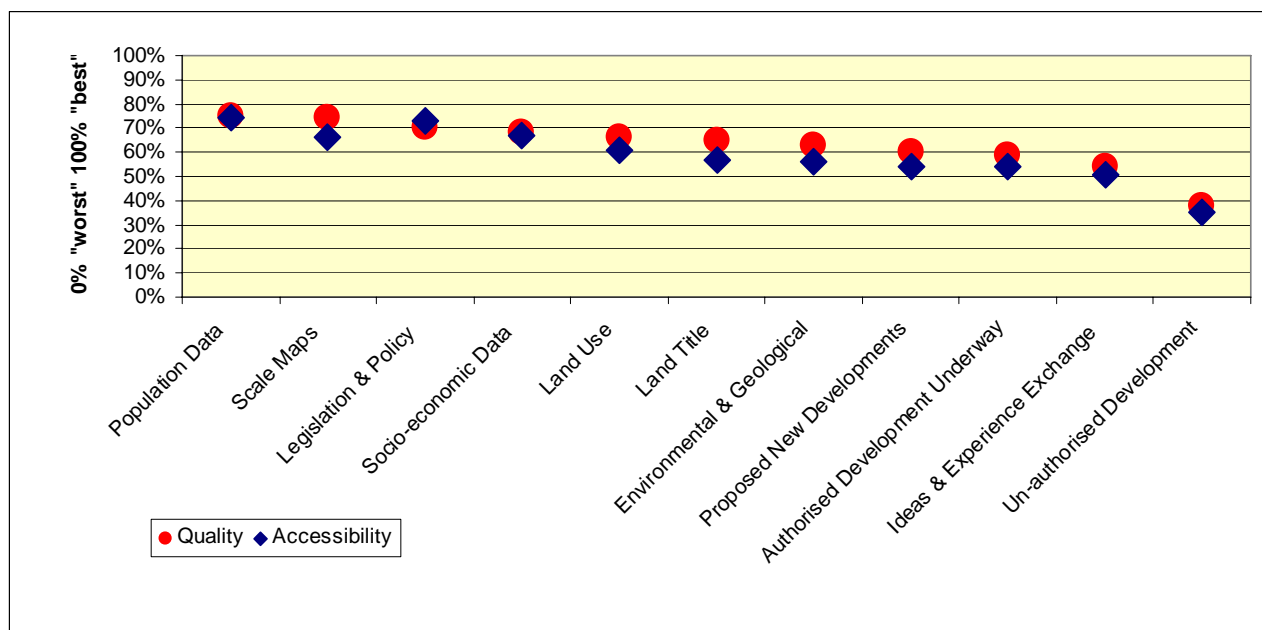
Information of all kinds is a critical input in the design and management of human settlements. In this final section, we examine responses to self-diagnostic assessments about the quality and availability of information for planning, particularly as it relates to poor people and informal settlements.

Respondents were asked to rate the quality and availability of specific types of information in their countries. These ratings were converted into % scores for ease of comprehension and charting as indicated in Chart 3 (next page)

#### **Barriers to the acquisition of skills to work with marginal communities - continued**

- “As long as planning will be a part of architecture, it will always be technical house / city building ... as in the 1960s” *Planner in Poland*
- “Work intensely, does not have the time” *Planner in China*
- “Planning education is still under development” *Planner in Ethiopia*
- “University of Prishtina in crisis; no/limited international networks” *Planner in Kosovo*
- “A packed curriculum already” *Planner in Australia*
- “Very much abstract and theoretical” *Planner in South Africa*
- “Although these are taught they are not always given sufficient time to apply in depth” *Planner in UK*
- “Don’t think this is a skill that a planner must possess...really there aren’t any writings that will mention this.” *Planner in China*
- “Planning education recreates a vision borrowed from ‘developed countries’ to be applied to formal, high- income and medium-income settlements, and it fails to address issues of informality, poor communities, etc.” *Planner in Costa Rica*

Chart 3: Quality and Accessibility ratings of information types



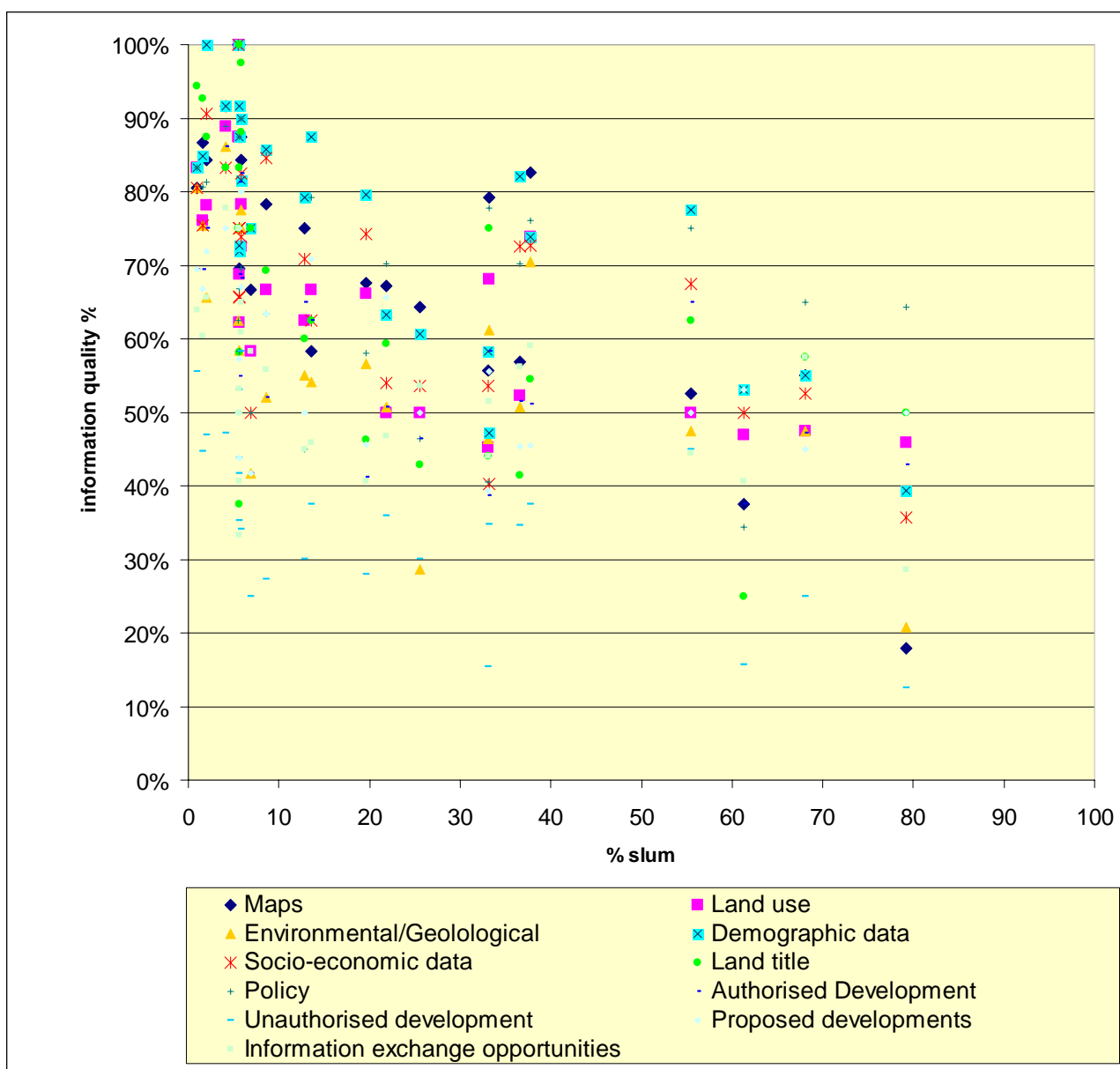
Generally, population data is considered the best and most accessible information while details of unauthorised developments are the worst. Details of unauthorised developments tend to be considered poor quality and difficult to access everywhere, but perhaps more surprisingly details even of authorised developments are not particularly good, compared with socio-economic data for example. Land title, scale maps and relevant environmental or geological information are also deficient in some areas. Opportunities to exchange new ideas and information are considered low across the board.

Next we looked at average ratings for individual countries in order to learn about the quality and availability of information existing in areas with different levels urban poverty. As a proxy indicator of urban poverty we have used UN habitat estimates on the proportion of dwellings that are categorised as slums in each country<sup>iii</sup>. When respondents' ratings of the quality of information resources in their country with the UN-HABITAT's estimates of the proportion of dwellings categorised as slums in each country a strong relationship emerges.

This relationship is depicted in Chart 4. Without naming them, the horizontal axis shows high reporting individual countries (i.e. countries with more than 7 responses) according to slum dwellings as a proportion of total housing stock. The vertical axis shows the respondents' average assessments of the quality of the different types of information resources available in those countries. A strong pattern can be identified whereby countries that have a lower proportion of slum dwellings tend to have better quality sources of information.

The inference that we suggest should be drawn from this is that in developing settlements that address issues poverty and slum formation it is necessary to develop key information resources, as well as the expertise and the IT resources to exploit them effectively.

Chart 4: National average quality rating of information types, by % slum dwellers in country



## Conclusion

In this paper we have described how 1250 people from around the world who have identified themselves as ‘planners’ see the challenges surrounding their task. Taken as a whole their responses reveal this group to have a very strong concern for using planning to address the issues of poverty and inequality in their country and they reveal a frustration that the potential for planning are not being sufficiently utilised at present.

Respondents to the self-assessment have many suggestions for improving planning’s contribution to addressing these issues, particularly in their demands for greater support from Government and other key influencers of their society, in their support for greater stakeholder engagement, for better training in methods of participation and working with disadvantaged groups and in the need to develop better information resources. A key theme that surrounds all of these approaches is the demand from planners working around the world to communicate better what it is they are seeking to do and to support one another in their activities. A global planning network offers respondents an enticing medium for them to do this.

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## REFERENCES

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- ii UNDP 2008 [Human Development Report 2007/2008](#)
- iii UN-Habitat (2005)Global Report (Slums of the World 2004)