

No way to deal with slums

The United Nations Special Envoy on Human Settlement Issues fact-finding mission in Zimbabwe discovered that about 700000 people lost their homes, businesses, or both, due to the government's ill-planned mass eviction which started in May.

Situations similar to those in Zimbabwe have arisen throughout the developing world. A slum clearance drive in Mumbai, India, demolished 90000 structures and left 300000 people homeless this year. According to the Centre for Housing Rights and Evictions in Nigeria, 30000 households, amounting to over 150000 people, were evicted in 2004. In both instances, the slum dwellers were not compensated or provided with alternative accommodation.

These evictions commonly occur as part of city beautification schemes. But governments in the developing world should put policies in place that prevent slums from forming. They must remove the barriers that block the private sector from building low-income housing and provide incentives for local developers to enter this market. Increasing opportunities in rural areas will stem the flow of urban migration.

Governments can allow the poorest populations to remain in the slum and give them ownership (or legal title) after they have resided there for a number of years. Ownership will give beneficiaries the incentive to transform slums into functioning communities.

Or, as done in the Philippines, those with some form of income should be allowed to form a grouping with others to borrow money from the state and buy a plot of well-located, discounted land. The group can pool their resources to pay the mortgage.

People who cannot afford a monthly mortgage of any kind should be temporarily relocated to any plot of available government land until other arrangements are made. Under no circumstance should someone be evicted without alternative accommodation.

Prof Bernadette Atuahene

Chicago-Kent College of Law Illinois, US