FOCUS ON
THE PAUCITY OF INTRA-URBAN DATA

Reliable statistics can help illuminate the plight of poor and marginalized children in urban settings – after all, it is difficult to argue with facts. However, this seemingly straightforward process is hampered by the limited availability of urban data that are meaningfully disaggregated – by wealth, residence, gender, ethnicity, city size or other relevant criteria.

Urban households – rich and poor – are often grouped together to provide a single average estimate of national urban poverty or malnutrition. This can be particularly misleading in countries characterized by high social and income inequality. Such averages mask the differences between cities and within urban communities whose residents have vastly divergent living standards.

Available population-based data sets may not lend themselves to further disaggregation at the urban level because sample sizes are often too small. In addition, although slum areas are generally included in census sample frames, they are seldom identified as slums.

Cost is a consideration. In order to obtain reliable estimates for slum areas, sample sizes would have to be increased significantly. Introducing additional categories of sampling (e.g., urban slums) to a survey increases its size and cost. But bigger surveys are not always better surveys. Keeping sample sizes down to manageable levels can yield data of higher quality as it enables survey managers to monitor progress and better train and supervise field staff who collect the data.

Where there is demand to incorporate urban slums into more surveys, designers can do so.

The difficulty of defining ‘urban’ and ‘slum’ poses another challenge. National criteria may not be fully transparent or may have changed over time. Definitions vary. Urban areas may be defined by administrative jurisdictions (e.g., municipalities), a threshold population size and/or density, or socio-economic conditions. The challenge of obtaining reasonable slum estimates is further complicated where slums are considered illegal settlements by national governments.

Urban-rural comparisons can also prove misleading. If assessed against a national wealth index, few urban residents are likely to fall in the poorer quintiles, or fifths, of the population, concealing the fact that while incomes may be higher in urban areas, so is the cost of living (rent, food, transport and basic services, for example). Many standard indicators, such as those relating to stunting or access to water and sanitation, are not readily comparable between rural and urban households. In a city, for instance, access to a reliable source of clean water may entail higher costs and longer queues.

While it is important to capture urban slum data, it should be emphasized that not all poor households are found in slums – and not all slum residents are poor. In fact, a 2005 study of 85 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) found that 1 in 10 of a poor household’s neighbours was relatively affluent, as measured by consumer durables and housing quality. This means that if efforts to reach the poor focus exclusively on slum areas, many poor households will be excluded.

Finally, some of the most vulnerable and marginalized – children living on the street or in institutions, or those engaged in child labour – are often excluded from the sample frame. Capturing the location and situation of these children remains a major challenge for international household surveys.

Experience indicates that showing the full spectrum of urban realities will require, at a minimum:

- Political will to establish urban data as a priority among competing interests
- Collaboration among agencies to collect, analyse and disseminate these data
- Clear definitions of ‘urban slums’ that reduce conceptual confusion and enable meaningful comparison
- Oversampling in slum areas to gather sufficient data for stratified analysis
- Making sure no slum has been overlooked, for example, by using such tools as Geographic Information Systems
- Going beyond national averages and rural-urban comparisons to analyse and document disparities within urban areas
- Devising new wealth indices that facilitate analysis and comparison of disparities within and between urban and rural areas.