Impoverished people, denied proper housing and security of tenure by inequitable economic and social policies and regulations governing land use and management, resort to renting or erecting illegal and often ramshackle dwellings. These typically include tenements (houses that have been subdivided), boarding houses, squatter settlements (vacant plots or buildings occupied by people who do not own, rent or have permission to use them) and illegal subdivisions (in which a house or hut is built in the backyard of another, for example). Squatter settlements became common in rapidly growing cities, particularly from the 1950s onward, because inexpensive housing was in short supply. Where informal settlements were established on vacant land, people were able to build their own homes.

Illegal dwellings are poor in quality, relatively cheap – though they will often still consume about a quarter of household income – and notorious for the many hazards they pose to health. Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions facilitate the transmission of disease – including pneumonia and diarrhoea, the two leading killers of children younger than 5 worldwide. Outbreaks of measles, tuberculosis and other vaccine-preventable diseases are also more frequent in these areas, where population density is high and immunization levels are low.

In addition to other perils, slum inhabitants frequently face the threat of eviction and maltreatment, not just by landlords but also from municipal authorities intent on ‘cleaning up’ the area. Evictions may take place because of a wish to encourage tourism, because the country is hosting a major sporting event or simply because the slum stands in the way of a major redevelopment. They may come without warning, let alone consultation, and very often proceed without compensation or involve moving to an unfeasible location. The evictions themselves cause major upheaval and can destroy long-established economic and social systems and support networks – the existence of which should come as no surprise if one ponders what it takes to survive and advance in such challenging settings. Even those who are not actually evicted can suffer significant stress and insecurity from the threat of removal. Moreover, the constant displacement and abuse of marginalized populations can further hinder access to essential services.

Despite their many deprivations, slum residents provide at least one essential service to the very societies from which they are marginalized – labour. Some of it is formal and some undocumented, but almost all is low-paid – for example, as factory hands, shop assistants, street vendors and domestic workers.

### Slums: The five deprivations

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) defines a slum household as one that lacks one or more of the following:

- **Access to improved water**
  An adequate quantity of water that is affordable and available without excessive physical effort and time

- **Access to improved sanitation**
  Access to an excreta disposal system, either in the form of a private toilet or a public toilet shared with a reasonable number of people

- **Security of tenure**
  Evidence or documentation that can be used as proof of secure tenure status or for protection from forced evictions

- **Durability of housing**
  Permanent and adequate structure in a non-hazardous location, protecting its inhabitants from the extremes of climatic conditions such as rain, heat, cold or humidity

- **Sufficient living area**
  Not more than three people sharing the same room