



The Oxford Handbook of the Modern Slum

Alan Mayne (ed.)

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190879457.001.0001>

Published: 2023

Online ISBN: 9780190879471

Print ISBN: 9780190879457

CHAPTER

20 NGO Representation of Informal Settlements: The Case of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI)

Marie Huchzermeyer

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190879457.013.26> Pages 373–C20P63

Published: 16 August 2023

Abstract

Slum/Shack Dwellers International or SDI is an international NGO with grassroots and NGO affiliates in twenty-three countries in 2018, the vast majority of these on the African continent. Its governance incorporates selected and remunerated grassroots representatives, and until 2019 was intertwined with that of global agencies. While framing itself as being made up of grassroots savings collectives engaging in a set of non-confrontational approaches based on self-reliance and exchanges, SDI increasingly purported to represent and chart solutions for the urban poor globally. The organization's savings-based structure of grassroots representation also sits at odds with an expansion drive, which had led to an uneven loosening of the methodological orthodoxy and therefore a diversification across the network. At the time of research in 2018, tensions existed between SDI's representational procedures, the de facto nature of the network and its global narrative. This chapter combines a review of the extensive published and grey literature on SDI with selected interviews at the height of the organization's global legitimacy.

Keywords: [Slum Dwellers International](#), [Shack Dwellers International](#), [SDI](#), [slum](#), [shack](#), [informal settlement](#), [international NGO](#), [NGO](#), [representation](#)

Subject: [World History](#), [Social and Cultural History](#), [History](#)

Series: [Oxford Handbooks](#)

Collection: [Oxford Handbooks Online](#)

INFORMAL settlements are a ubiquitous though complex and varied phenomenon across towns and cities of the Global South. Since the formation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, they have received collective global attention, with efforts to commit member states to measures that acknowledge the limited reach of state and private-sector housing delivery models. Participants in local and global agenda-setting forums have put forward a variety of approaches. As participants in such forums, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken on a representative role. Among the best known of these organizations is Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI). It is an international NGO that, since 2000, has sought to directly represent

informal settlement dwellers in national and global deliberations. Through donor-facilitated travel SDI was able to exert influence in these deliberations. However, in 2019 systems and forensic audits by SDI's main international funder raised serious systemic governance weaknesses¹ that led to a drastic reduction in SDI's international funding and necessitated review and restructuring within the organization. The covid-19 pandemic declared in March of the following year also shifted modes of international representation.

An extensive literature exists on SDI. The published narrative by SDI's staff and close associates has been a dominant, useful but also often unquestioned reference in this body of literature. Published studies by SDI and others have focused on one or more of SDI's national affiliates and their work at the grassroots level, including transnational exchanges. Little has been written on SDI's approach as an international network and NGO, and as representing the voice of the urban poor globally, a claim that SDI made in its branding and official communications up to 2019.

p. 374 It is therefore important to re-examine SDI as a whole, including its work at the global level with organizations such as Cities Alliance and UN-Habitat, in the period in which it enjoyed extensive international funding support. This re-examination involved reviewing published literature selected for its contribution to understanding the international and global dimension of SDI's work. It analyzed grey literature, including annual reports and website content as well as interviews with key individuals in global agencies that worked with SDI, and with key coordinators within the organization. These interviews were mostly conducted around UN-Habitat's ninth World Urban Forum in February 2018, in which SDI participated with over eighty delegates in collaboration with its global partner institutions.²

The Formation, Expansion, and Regional Footprint of SDI

SDI's history dates back to the mid-1990s, when it emerged as a result of various influences and historical confluences, including the much-anticipated dawn of democratic rule in South Africa. It formed out of preexisting networks, in particular the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), which was established in 1988 to take on coordination for Habitat International Coalition (HIC) in the Asian region.³ HIC in turn is a global network mainly of NGOs and social movements with roots in the shelter and urban land debates surrounding the UN's first Habitat Conference in 1976; at the time, it included the prominent self-help housing proponent John Turner.⁴ Both ACHR and HIC exist to date alongside SDI, but the former's relationship with HIC waned over time; SDI refers to it as tenuous, both ACHR and SDI interacting with HIC through the Geneva-based NGO UrbaMonde rather than as affiliates.⁵ Progressive Catholic-inspired approaches were central to ACHR and later SDI, and included transnational dialogues and community-to-community exchanges as a means to empower the grassroots.⁶ Catholic aid funded these activities. In the early 1990s, Catholic development networks invited a few South Africans to participate in exchanges and dialogues within ACHR, followed by dialogues in and exchange visits to South Africa, and subsequently other Sub-Saharan African countries.⁷

Through these exchanges, participants debated and embraced non-confrontational approaches of self-reliance through grassroots savings, self-representation by means of data collection, and partnership building. Key to this orientation was an alliance of three organizations in Mumbai (India), which participated in early exchange visits to South Africa: Mahila Milan, an organization of women pavement dwellers; the NGO Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), which helped organize pavement dwellers into Mahila Milan and provides ongoing support; and the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), which worked closely with SPARC, in particular through NSDF's charismatic and influential leader Jokin Arputham.⁸ Both NSDF and SPARC supported Mahila Milan in developing savings and credit schemes. These centered on self-reliance, the women in Mahila Milan having learnt to resist eviction threats through passive means that put forward bottom-up alternatives. Eviction threats across

p. 375

India in the 1970s had also led to the formation of NSDF, which in turn sought to learn savings methodologies from Mahila Milan.⁹ Through interaction with the pavement dwellers, NSDF leader Arputham was sensitized to categories of urban poor more vulnerable than the NSDF constituency, and became aware of the need to include their voices and needs.¹⁰

In the early 1990s, the transcontinental exchanges sparked the formation in South Africa of a support organization called People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter and a grassroots organization built around savings schemes, the South African Homeless People's Federation. Exchanges at the time were primarily between India and South Africa, though also including other African and Asian countries. NSDF leader Arputham put forward the idea of a transnational network of grassroots organizations of the urban poor and their dedicated support NGOs, as a counterpart to ACHR, which, at its inception, consisted mainly of NGOs, though today actively engaging networks of community organizations.¹¹ This led to the creation of Slum Dwellers International or SDI in 1996, which was formalized under this name in 2000. Two aspects were central to Arputham's idea. One was that through SDI, vulnerable groups were not only to be included but also to have voice and identity.¹² The other was that SDI should adopt the grassroots organizing methodology of horizontally federated savings collectives, to the point of this approach becoming non-negotiable. In an essay about the Indian Alliance and SDI, cultural anthropologist Appadurai observed that Arputham "sees daily savings as the bedrock of all federation activities; indeed it is not an exaggeration to say that in Jokin's organizational exhortations wherever he goes, federation equals savings."¹³ Since the formation of SDI, and until his unexpected passing in October 2018, Arputham maintained the position of the organization's president.¹⁴

In contrast to SDI, ACHR and HIC continued in a plural form, in that they were open to different types of member organizations and methodologies. Unlike SDI, HIC committed to democratic governing principles in its regional and international structures. This includes regular elections for its regional and international leadership positions, including president. HIC and ACHR brought together like-minded people or "stakeholders" from different organizational types spanning NGOs, academic institutions, social movements, and progressive government entities where these existed; they facilitated dialogue across different approaches to the shared concern for land and housing rights violations.¹⁵ HIC has also worked closely with the Global Platform for the Right to the City, which promotes advances in urban inclusion largely through legal and policy reform and campaigns against evictions. HIC is therefore associated with the embrace of "rights-based" approaches. Up to the early 2000s SDI actively participated in HIC, hosting HIC's secretariat with support from SDI's country affiliate in Cape Town for a short period in 2000.¹⁶ However, SDI's approach, which Patel and Mitlin portray as distinct from "rights-based" work, had little in common with many others within HIC, this contributing to a distance between the organizations.¹⁷

p. 376 SDI maintained a close working relationship with ACHR, sharing certain methodologies, in particular grassroots savings and credit schemes.¹⁸ However, as Astrid Ley, Josefine Fokdal, and Peter Herrle have pointed out, ACHR differed from SDI in that it "separated savings collectives from community-based organizing/political mobilization."¹⁹ A founding member of SDI, Celine D'Cruz, speaking in her personal capacity, recalls that savings did not take off in Asia as they did in South Africa and in several other African countries, where they flourished in the way envisaged by the SDI president.²⁰

SDI became known as a largely unitary network in the uniformity of the organizations it incorporated. The member organizations replicated a particular approach combining savings federations with rotating credit schemes, community-to-community exchanges, enumerations (self-collection of household and community data), modeling, self-construction and self-management of housing, the establishment of dedicated externally resourced funds, partnership-building, and a stance that avoided confrontation with governments.²¹ Bolnick talks of this set of approaches as an "orthodoxy," though not uncontested within the network, and practiced in different ways by its strongest proponents, namely the SDI affiliates in India, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.²² Through the orthodox approach of organizing through federated grassroots

savings groups, SDI undertook to represent pragmatic shack dwellers, rather than those organizing to hold their governments or other violators to account. There have been exceptions within SDI, although these are not emphasized in SDI's representations at the global level. As the network expanded it also opened gradually and somewhat ambiguously to embrace other organizational forms, and in the case of Nigeria an NGO that, in its online profile, is overtly rights-based. Bolnick speaks of an "increasing engagement of like-minded organizations who nevertheless use different approaches."²³

SDI's partnership-building between shack dwellers and governments has not excluded repressive regimes. Post-1999, when Zimbabwe's government enjoyed little or no legitimacy among urban citizens, SDI's Zimbabwean affiliates found they could achieve gains for savings scheme members through both conflict and pragmatism. This involved alliances with key individuals and entities of the Zimbabwean government, even if their philosophies or approaches were "at odds."²⁴ In SDI's partnerships with more legitimate governments, situations have arisen where SDI deemed certain interventions inevitable, even if it would have advocated for a different approach. In such cases, SDI has understood the partnership as an opportunity to shape (rather than oppose) such interventions. Thus SDI has come to be known (and drew concerned attention from researchers) for brokering and facilitating relocation of informal settlements or attempting to do so, rather than insisting on less disruptive land regularization and in situ upgrading, for instance in Mumbai, Nairobi, Cape Town, and Accra.²⁵

p. 377 The partnership building aspect of SDI's orthodoxy led to the organization's entry into global policy forums. In 2000, prominent former South African housing official in national and local government, Billy Cobbett, who had come to know SDI in that capacity through its partnership-building, had moved to the then UN Human Settlements Programme (UNCHS [Habitat]) to lead the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure. Cobbett invited SDI to partner with this campaign.²⁶ With its leader, the campaign subsequently relocated to the newly formed Cities Alliance, a "coalition of cities and their development partners, committed to address urban poverty reduction as a global public policy issue," hosted by the World Bank.²⁷ SDI and Cities Alliance entered into a longstanding mutually beneficial relationship. SDI and its affiliates have used their position in global organizations such as Cities Alliance consistently to build relationships and broker deals with key representatives of their own governments. As Cobbett explains, "Cities Alliance was a space they could use and exploit for themselves."²⁸

SDI maintains the relatively unitary nature of its structures through its governance system. This involves democratic election of leaders at the local level with some latitude for country-level federations to decide on exact procedures and terms, but careful selection, mentoring, and appointment of leaders for regional, national, and international leadership and representative roles, based on qualities and track record.²⁹ Donor funding allowed remuneration of these appointees,³⁰ meaning that SDI did not escape questions about self-perpetuation by its remunerated "grassroots" decision-makers. SDI's 2016 Annual Report explains grassroots involvement in its governance as follows: "SDI has a core team of community leadership with considerable experience in governing the global movement. These leaders have prioritised the mentorship of a cohort of second-tier leadership at the national level. National leaders, in turn, are actively engaged in the mentorship of a selection of regional and city leaders."³¹

The "core team" in 2018 was composed of national leaders from twelve country-level "alliances" that are deemed "mature" (see Table 20.1). These alliances continue to consist of a national federation of grassroots savings schemes and a "small professional secretariat" in the form of an NGO.³² The "core team" of national leaders of the mature alliances make up the "Council of Federations," SDI's central governing body, and are also represented on its board.³³ Other governance structures are the "professional secretariat" and a "federation-led Management Committee."³⁴ "Emerging" SDI affiliates in a further eleven countries practice aspects of SDI's approach but have not fully aligned themselves, or have dropped from SDI's management and decision-making structures as they no longer meet key criteria. Until his passing, SDI's President Arputham, though less active in the years leading up to 2018 due to his age, maintained control

over key decisions in SDI, but Coordinator Rose Molokoane (founding member of SDI and national leader for South Africa's federations) became the most prominent global voice and public speaker for grassroots within SDI. Among SDI's professional staff, Joel Bolnick (based in Cape Town, resigning from the organization in 2019 at the time of the forensic audit) and Sheela Patel (based in Mumbai) played leading roles in the NGO since inception, reinforcing the India–South Africa axis within SDI.

Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa undoubtedly forms the bedrock of SDI, in terms of the organization's reach. Ten of the twelve "mature" alliances and seven of the eleven "emerging" alliances were in this region in 2018 (see Table 20.2). On the Asian continent, the organization's two "mature" alliances were in India and the Philippines, these also being members of SDI's collaborator ACHR. Several erstwhile Asian affiliates of SDI now linked to it through ACHR and were no longer on SDI's governance structures.³⁵

↳

↳

↳

↳

In Latin America, SDI's presence was in the "emerging" category. SDI provided little information about its federation in Bolivia and its affiliates in Brazil. In SDI's 2016 and 2017 annual reports, which are structured according to "regional hubs," it is evident how much deeper and richer SDI's work is in the Southern, Eastern and Western African regional hubs, and in Asia where it overlaps with ACHR.³⁶

Table 20.1 SDI's Secretariat and "Mature" Affiliates as of 2018

SDI Secretariat (with date formed)			
Country	Component		
South Africa	SDI secretariat office (Cape Town) (1996)		
	Urban Poor Fund International – UPFI (a subsidiary of SDI) (Cape Town) (2007)		
	Inqolobane Trust (a subsidiary of SDI) (Cape Town) (2015)		
Netherlands	SDI Netherlands (The Hague) (2008)		
Ten “mature” SDI-affiliated alliances in Africa (with date of formation where available)			
Country	Federation	NGO support organization	Funds / other affiliates
South Africa	South African Homeless People’s Federation – SAHPF (1994–2006) ¹	People’s Dialogue – PD (1991–2006) ²	uTshani Fund (1995) ³
	Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor – FEDUP (2005)	Community Organisation Resource Centre – CORC (2002)	Informal Settlement Network – ISN (2009) ⁴
Namibia	Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia – SDFN (1998) ⁵	Namibia Housing Action Group – NHAG (1992), affiliated to SDI in 1998.	Urban Poor Fund (1999), Twahangana Fund
Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe Homeless People’s Federation – ZIHOPFE (1997/1998)	Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless in Zimbabwe Trust (1997)	Gungano Fund (1999)
Zambia	Zambia Homeless People’s Federation – ZHP (2000)	People’s Process on Housing and Poverty	
Malawi	Malawi Homeless People’s Federation (2003)	Centre for Community Organisation and Development – CCODE (2003)	Informal Settlement Network – ISN
Tanzania	Tanzanian Urban Poor Federation (TUPF) (2004)	Centre for Community Initiatives – CCI (2004)	
Kenya	Muungano wa Wanavijiji (1996, joined SDI 2001)	Pamoja Trust (2000, joined SDI 2001, exited SDI 2009) ⁶	Akiba Mashinani Trust – AMT (2003)
		Muungano Support Trust – MuST (2010–2015)	
		SDI Kenya (2016)	
Uganda	National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda – NSDFU (2002)	Act Together (first mentioned 2006)	
Nigeria	Nigeria Slum/Informal Settlement Federation – Naija Federation	Justice and Empowerment Initiatives – JEI	
Ghana	Savings groups (2003), Ghana Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor – GHAFUP (2004)	People’s Dialogue on Human Settlements Ghana – PD (2003)	

Two “mature” SDI-affiliated alliances in Asia (with date of formation where available)			
Country	Federation	NGO support organization	Funds/other affiliates
India	National Slum Dwellers Federation – NSDF (late 1970s)	Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres – SPARC (1985)	Community-Led Infrastructure Finance Facility (CLIFF)
	Mahila Milan (1986)		Nirman
Philippines	Homeless People’s Federation Philippines Inc. – HPFPI (formed between 1996 and 2000)	Initial NGO support from Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Fund Inc. – VMSDFI	Urban Poor Fund for Disaster Relief (2008 remained informal)
		Philippine Action for Community-led Shelter Initiatives, Inc – PACSII (2002)	Urban Poor Development Fund (1999)

Source: Author’s own construction from literature cited in this chapter and from comments made by Bolnick (personal communication).

- 1 The South African Homeless People’s Federation split from SDI in 2006 and continues to exist autonomously.
- 2 People’s Dialogue disbanded in 2006.
- 3 Other organizations mentioned as affiliated to SDI in the course of the South African Alliance’s history are People’s Environmental Planning (PEP; Astrid Ley, *Housing as Governance: Interfaces between Local Government and Civil Society Organisations in Cape Town, South Africa* [Münster: Lit Verlag, 2009]) and iKhayalami (Noah Schermbrucker, Scheela Patel, and Nico Keijzer, “A View from Below: What Shack Dwellers International [SDI] Has Learnt from Its Urban Poor Fund International [UPFI],” *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 8, no. 1 [2016]: 83–91).
- 4 ISN had a forerunner in a network called CUP.
- 5 Formerly Saamstaan, a housing cooperative founded in 1987, changing its name when it adopted SDI’s savings approach and joined SDI as an affiliated federation.
- 6 Pamoja Trust continues to exist outside of SDI, and Muungano continues to work with it.

Table 20.2 Sdi's Emerging Affiliates as of 2018

Eight “emerging” SDI-affiliated country level alliances in Africa (one of these Francophone) (with date of formation where available)			
Country	Federation	NGO support organization	Other linkage or affiliation
Swaziland	Federation (1999)		Supported from South Africa by PD, later CORC
Liberia	Slum Dwellers Association of Liberia – Slumdal Replaced by Federation of Liberian Urban Poor Savers (FOLUPS) (2014)	YMCA (Working with Cities Alliance and SDI since 2016)	SDI signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with City of Monrovia (2009)
Senegal	Senegalese Federation of Inhabitants – FSH (formed in 2014, affiliated to SDI in 2015)	urbaSen (2009)	
Botswana	Botswana Homeless and Poor People's Federation (BHPPF) ⁷		
Sierra Leone	Savings Groups (2007); Federation of Rural and Urban Poor – FEDURP (2011) ⁸	Centre of Dialogue on Human Settlement and Poverty Alleviation – CODOHSAPA (2011)	
Burkina Faso Federation	Savings groups (2012)	Laboratoire Citoyentés	
Lesotho	Savings groups (1998)		Supported by the South African federation
Togo	Federation	YMCA Togo	
Three “emerging” SDI-affiliated federations outside of Africa (with date of formation where available)			
Country	Federation	NGO support organization	Other linkage or affiliation
Sri Lanka	Women's Bank Development Federation (1999) ⁹	Janarakula ¹⁰	Federation supported by SDI affiliates in India.
Bolivia	Savings schemes (2009) “Bolivian Federation” (first mentioned 2013)	Red de Acción Comunitaria	
Brazil	Initially (mentioned in 1996) savings groups in Fortaleza, supported by Cearah Periferia	Interação: Rede Internacional de Ação Comunitária (2004) ¹¹	SDI made contact with Brazil's government and social movements (2003); MoU between SDI and Br gov. (2006); Santo Andre Santo Andre Municipality & eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality (Durban) signed MoU, Durban Metro Mun signed MoU (2006)

Source: Author's own construction from literature cited in this chapter and from comments made by Bolnick (personal communication).

- 7 SDI's management committee motivated for BHPPS's inclusion SDI's board of governors in 2016. This did not carry at council level (2017). This was to be reviewed in 2018.
- 8 FEDURP was categorized as "mature" but reverted to "emerging."
- 9 Dormant, revived in 2015 and considered "mature," but reverted to "emerging."
- 10 Currently dormant.
- 11 Had representation on SDI's council because it gave Latin America a presence on the SDI structures, but this decision was reversed by the council in 2012.

In sub-Saharan Africa, SDI expanded in various ways. Its pragmatism found fertile ground in countries with governments willing to partner effectively with grassroots federations. To SDI's erstwhile global partners, the savings group federations in Namibia and Uganda stood out as relative success stories.³⁷ However, in SDI's view, its federations in Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Nigeria were the "most active and effective," despite governments in these countries not being pro-poor.³⁸ The federations in Zimbabwe and Uganda emerged through transnational community-to-community exchanges. In Namibia and Kenya, preexisting grassroots movements transformed into SDI-affiliated savings group federations. With the gradual opening of SDI to greater diversity of organizational forms, SDI encouraged interested NGOs to provide support to newly forming savings groups; examples are the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in Liberia and other urban NGOs in Sierra Leone and Senegal. SDI also responded to existing organizations that expressed interest in joining it, "by offering to expose community groups to SDI methodologies without requiring organizational alignment or affiliation."³⁹ Another expansion modality was that SDI's secretariat collaborated with close contacts in, for instance, the Africa Regional Office of UN-Habitat, to "look for a good location [to] set something up."⁴⁰ In Burkina Faso, UN-Habitat's country program was able to include a component on which SDI served as advisor, facilitating "peer to peer ... exchanges of experience" around savings and enumerations with SDI affiliates in other African countries.⁴¹ The new savings groups that resulted continued to operate.⁴² However, language as well as the non-Anglophone urban legal and regulatory system proved difficult for SDI to navigate.⁴³

Shifts in the Representational Strategy Within SDI

SDI mentions a change in approach around 2008, the timeline on its website stating "SDI makes a major shift to informal settlement upgrading and incremental housing."⁴⁴ Bolnick refers to this as a "tipping point," with the SDI affiliates in South Africa, due to difficulties in securing housing subsidies, turning their main focus to incremental water, sanitation, and drainage improvements, which affiliates in many other countries had long prioritized.⁴⁵ He sees it as coincidental that this followed SDI's application in 2007 for formal membership of Cities Alliance.⁴⁶ Under its founding slogan "Cities Without Slums," Cities Alliance is tasked with promoting city-wide slum upgrading. Cities Alliance understood the significance of its granting of membership to SDI in 2008, less in terms of SDI's role in slum upgrading but rather in terms of its own relevance and legitimacy. For Cities Alliance, SDI "represented or purported to represent" Cities Alliance's "real target," namely the urban poor.⁴⁷ This "big shift"⁴⁸ and "historic step" by Cities Alliance⁴⁹ changed the composition of Cities Alliance and with it its deliberations. However, Cities Alliance's latitude opened more significantly with its move in 2013 out of the World Bank to become part of the UN Office for Project Service (UNOPS), the World Bank remaining available to Cities Alliance as funder and implementing partner.⁵⁰

In effect, SDI became closely intertwined with Cities Alliance and other global agencies, SDI sitting on their advisory bodies and vice versa, each seeking to influence the other, and to some extent succeeding. SDI's annual report of 2012 mentions "formal relationships" with Cities Alliance, the World Bank, United Cities

and Local Government (UCLG), and “a number of important bi-lateral agencies.”⁵¹ It observes that SDI “may be unique amongst international social movements insofar as it not only serves on the governance structures of some of these institutions but has representation from them, at Ministerial and Executive Director level on its own advisory boards.”⁵²

A representative from SDI served on the advisory board of UN-Habitat’s Slum Upgrading Facility.⁵³ UN-Habitat’s executive director served on the advisory board of SDI’s Urban Poor Fund International (UPFI), which formed part of SDI’s secretariat. Ministers from India, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Norway served on this board, and in 2018 it included ministerial or higher level representatives from South Africa, Namibia, Sweden, and Brazil.⁵⁴ At the time of research in 2018, SDI was merging this board with the Urban Poor Fund International facilitators from SDI’s Federations, in order to create one board that would consist of community members and professionals. This change meant that whereas it was expected that some ministers would still serve on the board, most would nominate experts from the urban development field in their countries.⁵⁵

In South Africa, SDI’s shift from self-help housing to incremental upgrading saw a prioritization of communal sanitation in informal settlements, which in many settlements required “re-blocking” to provide the necessary space. Re-blocking was already promoted within ACHR at the time.⁵⁶ Walter Fieuw and Diana Mitlin review six of roughly nine re-blocking projects SDI has facilitated in South Africa, only one having secured administrative recognition of the land occupation.⁵⁷ The others nevertheless remained put despite “being earmarked for relocation.”⁵⁸ As Fieuw and Mitlin acknowledge, the route to formal legal tenure security is not through re-blocking but through the statutory Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP), which the state adopted in 2004 but which has had uneven support from the South African state.⁵⁹ In the analysis in Huchzermeyer,⁶⁰ if SDI had championed UISP implementation, it could have speeded up the process toward permanent occupational rights through in situ upgrading; however, it left this task to “rights-based” movements or coalitions. Similarly in Ananya Roy’s analysis of SDI’s informal settlement work in Mumbai, sanitation took priority over securing formal land tenure.⁶¹

p. 384 SDI’s shift in 2008 responded in South Africa to a weakening of SDI’s methodological and representational hold through the approaches it espoused up to that point. ↳ The South African Federation, which is said to have peaked at a membership of eighty thousand,⁶² had experienced a decline, with only in the order of forty thousand actively saving individuals in federations across seven hundred settlements in 2007.⁶³ This coincided with a “steady decline” in SDI’s “shining characteristics,” namely “savings, collective action and self-reliance,” in turn the result of the “governance approach of a paternalistic state.”⁶⁴ The organization’s inability to significantly influence policy became evident in South Africa and was due to its partial and declining representation of informal settlements through membership in its savings schemes. At this stage SDI had already begun building a new type of grassroots affiliate, the Informal Settlement Network (ISN), “an agglomeration of settlement-level and nationwide community-based leadership structures” across several towns and cities in South Africa.⁶⁵ As Fieuw and Mitlin put it, there was a “shift in the Alliance’s strategy towards broad-based social movements to supplement the membership-based FEDUP [Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor].”⁶⁶ According to Bolnick, this had a precedent in aspects of the NSDF in India.⁶⁷ An ISN was also formed in Malawi,⁶⁸ although in late 2018 an anonymous board member of the SDI-affiliated support NGO in Malawi had no knowledge of this.⁶⁹ The Kenyan and Nigerian grassroots affiliates are understood by SDI as “a hybrid between a savings network and a network of neighbourhood-based organizations.”⁷⁰

A key activity that SDI has driven through ISN in South Africa is city-wide profiling of informal settlements, including those without SDI-affiliated savings schemes. However, setting up savings schemes where possible was also one reason, though not a precondition, for SDI to invest in building the ISN.⁷¹ Although a founder and key leader of the South African savings group federation FEDUP was appointed to coordinate and represent ISN nationally, tension arose between the two structures.⁷² Bolnick sees this as being rooted

in part in the “accountability, proof of participation and transparency in leadership selection” that the Federation and supporting NGO demanded and that it found to sit at odds with established practice in many settlements represented in the ISN.⁷³ Here SDI elevated its own system of appointed and mentored grassroots leadership over a range of self-organized approaches.

SDI and its affiliates since inception are associated with a distancing from “rights-based” approaches, which SDI frames as unhelpful claim-making through protest action and the use of courts.⁷⁴ Some ambiguity emerged as SDI in South Africa built ISN. Fieuw and Mitlin mention that in 2012 and 2014 “ISN organised large scale ... protest marches.”⁷⁵ SDI’s global coordinator and South African federation leader Rose Molokoane explains that where communities resort to courts or protest, SDI and its affiliates do not prevent this; they may provide advice and information, but such “rights-based” measures are not undertaken “under the auspices of SDI.”⁷⁶ In this way, SDI sets itself apart from organizations, for instance within HIC, that publicly support such action where it is deemed necessary to hold violating states and other actors to account. However, this distinction is uneven and shifting across the SDI network. As already mentioned, SDI’s NGO affiliate in Nigeria claims on its website to be rights based. In Kenya, SDI’s grassroots affiliate works with both the orthodox SDI-affiliated support organization and the more diverse Pamoja Trust, which joined HIC, cohosting its 2017 annual general meeting. Bolnick acknowledges that within SDI

p. 385 “the balance of power is shifting towards countries like Nigeria and Kenya (more pluralist) and away from India and South Africa (orthodox).”⁷⁷ This contradicted SDI’s representation at the global level, which continued to articulate non-association with protest and court action, an approach with which global agencies, funders, and governments are comfortable. SDI’s 2017 annual report refers to savings schemes as the “building blocks” of SDI.⁷⁸ Thus, while the ISN approach exists within SDI, it remained an orphan in SDI’s representations at the global level where ISN is seldom mentioned.⁷⁹

A different form of representation within SDI, which funders and global agencies were embracing and promoting, is by means of data. The 2013–2017 Strategic Plan promoted mobilization across SDI, not through settlement networks, but in the form of “community profiling, mapping and surveying.”⁸⁰ This elevated standardized data as a less directly mandated form of representation within SDI, one of making “‘visible’ the invisible communities,” particularly to the global level.⁸¹ SDI’s President Aprutham highlighted the persuasive power of numbers of standardized data and the importance of this for SDI’s global influence:

We need one SDI questionnaire, so we can use the information globally. We want to understand what the magnitude of our power is. We want to make different cases to different audiences. We want to collaborate with all the actors speaking about land, housing, infrastructure, all the people speaking about the urban poor ... [W]e want to have a voice at these forums.⁸²

SDI’s 2013 Annual Report focusses on city-wide data collection through the Know Your City Campaign, launched that year with support from Cities Alliance, UCLG-A [United Cities and Local Government—Africa], UN-Habitat, “and others.”⁸³ Know Your City (or KYC) built on and refined SDI’s erstwhile low-technology approach to enumeration and settlement profiling.⁸⁴ In Uganda, KYC activities in collaboration with Cities Alliance and UCLG-A allowed for the expansion of savings schemes to additional cities,⁸⁵ thus serving representational as well as mobilization, recruitment, or expansion agendas. As Bolnick notes, “profiling and enumeration are as much about information gathering as they are about mobilisation.”⁸⁶ SDI’s unsolicited city-wide and global “slum” data-collection has not been subjected to academic analysis. The possible dangers of visibility to unsupportive authorities is one dimension that will require scrutiny, particularly should the funding flow from donors open toward this form of representation.

SDI's Structure as an International ngo

p. 386 SDI is a formally constituted international NGO with a professional secretariat that provides financial and logistical support to a network of country-level professional NGOs. SDI's secretariat is based in Cape Town but has an office in the Netherlands ↪ termed "SDI Netherlands," not to be confused with "SDI Kenya," which is a recently re-constituted professional country-level affiliate. SDI Netherlands, led by a former staff member of SDI's early funder CORDAID, provides proximity to European funders. As Bolnick explains:

The main reason for SDI Netherlands is to try to manage international hard and soft currency challenges. A proportion of SDI's annual grants from northern agencies are held in a hard currency bank account in The Hague until they are drawn down by the various affiliates. While SDI's foreign currency regulations have become less stringent it remains more efficient to operate a hard currency account in the Netherlands.⁸⁷

SDI's annual reports up to 2019 disclose funding largely from the Global North. From 2014 to 2017, government-funded agencies in Norway and Sweden contributed the largest proportions.⁸⁸ More diverse government funding, though still largely from the Global North, is through Cities Alliance, SDI's second largest contributor in the 2016–2017 financial year. Prominent private foundations are Skoll and Ford, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation winding down its substantial support in 2016. SDI's earliest funders were Dutch and German Catholic aid organizations CORDAID and Misereor.

Like other NGOs based in the Global South but funded by agencies in the North, SDI does not identify itself as a northern NGO. SDI's main base is in South Africa, its roots in India and Asia, and its activities in countries of the Global South. However, its strongest academic links are two influential UK academics, Diana Mitlin (University of Manchester and International Institute for Environment and Development [IIED]) and David Satterthwaite (IIED and main editor of the academic and development journal *Environment and Urbanization*). Their writing has persistently represented SDI's orthodoxy as unquestionable to the Anglo-American and Anglophone academic and professional world.⁸⁹

International NGOs and Global Representation: What is at Stake?

p. 387 Any organization wishing to represent a defined constituency must build credibility and legitimacy in order to be taken seriously in such endeavors. SDI has done so over more than two decades by presenting a track record in its annual reports, website, newsletters, and academic portrayals. However, legitimacy in advocacy, as Lister notes, requires representativeness.⁹⁰ Democratic standards for representation in international NGO legitimacy may be derived through one or more of the following: the "claim to speak for an entire class of actors"; democratic processes; and the claim to speak on behalf of "selected stakeholders," usually members.⁹¹ In its orthodox approach, SDI is membership based through grassroots savings collectives. Its democratic procedure is not in the ↪ form of elections by its grassroots to the global level, but rather through appointed representatives deemed accountable in passing a mandate from the grassroots upward, but also tasked with ensuring adherence to the orthodoxy.

Since 2017 SDI professed to represent the entire global body of urban poor. Its 2017 annual report and staff business cards in 2018 claim "[t]he global voice of the urban poor." Molokoane is adamant that "our organization is a global organization."⁹² SDI underlined this through the growing number of countries in which it alleged to have affiliates. From within SDI and its academic partners, consistent claims were that its affiliated savings federations were in anything from "over thirty" to thirty-nine countries globally.⁹³ However, as Tables 20.1–3 show, countries with mature and emerging affiliates within SDI added up to only twenty-three, with a further three affiliated through the ACHR. Professionals within or close to SDI,

overstating its global reach by 30 to 70 percent, may be caught in the enthusiasm for global recognition of SDI. This may also explain the ease with which mere “expressions of interest” from within new countries were loosely added to the number of countries in which SDI claimed to have affiliates; Bolnick notes that such approaches from new countries “are not infrequent,” adding that SDI’s professional secretariat “tried to dissuade aggressive expansion.”⁹⁴

For representational purposes, accurately citing the number of countries in which SDI is active, even if closer to twenty than to thirty (as it finally does in its 2020 Annual report published on sdinet.org in 2022), should not detract from its credibility or reputation at the global level. The organization relies on data at various levels for the representation of needs of the urban poor. Thus data and its integrity at all levels could be added as a technical standard of legitimacy in Pallas, Gethings, and Harris’s categories of legitimacy standards for international NGOs. At the global level, distance from the grassroots limits scrutiny of integrity in representation.⁹⁵ This opens up space for simplification, exaggeration, and misrepresentation. Pallas, Gethings, and Harris point out that as global agencies’ and forums’ own legitimacy depends on their being seen as inclusive and relevant, they rely on international NGOs to assist with democratizing global governance, in particular by representing the voice of the poor.⁹⁶ This too may be exploited in NGOs’ representational approach, particularly where this eases the flow of funding on which these NGOs depend.

Most NGOs use several ways to claim or ensure legitimacy.⁹⁷ Technical standards through which NGOs derive the recognized right to represent include claims of effectiveness or achievement as well as expertise.⁹⁸ In this respect, since its initial inception in 1996 and as it consolidated its global role, SDI underwent a noticeable professionalization of its look, feel, and messaging through its own and its affiliates’ branding, websites, and communication. The almost trademark “anti-expert” position of SDI’s staff has retreated, as have grassroots tactics of making themselves heard by frequently disrupting global events with traditional song and dance.⁹⁹ Instead, federation leaders speak globally through a carefully crafted grassroots discourse that signals familiarity with professional terms, but affords itself a charming directness that is not permissible in professional presentations. Molokoane herself, occasional anti-intellectual utterances ↵

↵
aside, is recognized within the global agencies for her considerable experience, capability, and expertise.¹⁰⁰

p. 388
p. 389

Table 20.3 Other Countries that SDI Includes in the List of “Over 30,” as of 2018

Three countries linked to SDI only through ACHR ¹²		
Country	Organization	
Nepal	National Federation of Squatter Communities; National Federation of Women’s Savings Collectives. NGO: Lumanti	
Cambodia	Urban Poor Development Fund, now the Cambodia Development Fund (1996) and Community Savings Network of Cambodia	
Thailand	Community Organisation Development Initiative (CODI) (2000) Capital fund (2000)	
Six countries listed as having solidarity links with SDI or receiving minimal or no support from SDI (with date of formation where available)		
Country	Organization	Linkage
Egypt	Spirit of the Youth – SOY (in Zabaleen)	Exchanges to and from Kenya and South Africa resulting in solid waste groups in both countries.
Indonesia	Savings groups and profiling in Jakarta (2018)	Support from India and Philippines Federation
Peru	Savings schemes (2011)	Active – minimal support from SDI
Argentina		SDI mentions contact made with social movements (2002)
Haiti	Savings groups (2009)	Connected through Peer Africa, which continues to engage the groups on a regular basis.
Pakistan	Orangi Pilot Project	Key leaders have close ties to SDI and ACHR though not affiliated.
Four countries formerly linked to SDI or visited by SDI, but currently dormant or inactive		
Country	Organization	Linkage
Colombia	Federation (1999)	Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF) (2004) worked with indigenous communities forced into the city (Leticia) through urbanization and guerrilla war
Angola	Savings collectives (2008)	Savings groups in Southern Angola, supported by the Namibia Federation
Mozambique		SDI made contact with City of Maputo (2011)
Iran		Visits from SDI and efforts from one of SDI’s global partners

Source: Author’s own construction from literature cited in this chapter and from comments made by Bolnick (personal communication).

- 12 In Asia SDI and ACHR run the regional hub together, specifically holding at least one planning meeting per year. Funding and technical support comes from the secretariat of both networks.

Moral standards of legitimacy include the bases on which NGOs choose the social groups and political aims they represent, ensuring that these are the “right” ones.¹⁰¹ In Pallas Gethings, and Harris’s analysis, international NGOs therefore conform to particular “standards or beliefs” in order to “appear right.”¹⁰² Moral standards have implications for NGOs’ responsiveness and representation. In the intertwined case of SDI, this leads to a chicken-or-egg situation: To what extent has SDI’s consistent advocacy for a particular approach, in no small part through its academic production, influenced what global agencies consider “right,” and to what extent does SDI’s approach mirror what global agencies consider “right?” Lister uses institutional theory to introduce “symbols” into such debates, suggesting that terms such as “the South,” “local,” and “partners” are symbols that enhance legitimacy in particular of northern NGOs.¹⁰³ However, Lister concludes that “institutional theory is vague about how such symbols are created and gain legitimacy.”¹⁰⁴ In SDI’s own claims, it has agency to create such symbols at the global level, as well as an ongoing aspiration to lead the endeavor to define the right solution. In its twenty-year Annual Report of 2016, it refers to itself as “a global social movement solving the world’s problems.”¹⁰⁵ Further, its vision statement is “[t]o be the leading organisation in fighting global, urban poverty.”¹⁰⁶ However, efforts to comply with moral standards, especially if these are selected so as to be shared by governments and global agency partners, can open up fault lines in NGOs’ representational practice. In the case of SDI this applies to the moral differentiation between actively saving, pragmatically partnership-seeking individuals or groups, and those using protest and litigation.

Representation through the Terms “Slum” and “International”

At the coining of its name, SDI was an emerging network. Initially it called itself “the International Federation of the Homeless Poor, otherwise known as International Slum Dweller’s Network.”¹⁰⁷ In 2000, SDI registered as a nonprofit organization with the name “Slum Dwellers International.”¹⁰⁸ Once adopted, the name remained flexible, with various versions in use: “Shack Dwellers International,” “Slum Dwellers International,” “Slum/Shack Dwellers International,” or “Shack/Slum Dwellers International.” SDI explained the need for this flexibility not in response to the longstanding negative loading of the term “slum.”¹⁰⁹ Instead, more pragmatically, it argued that “slum” at the time was the more common term used in Asia and “shack” in Africa.¹¹⁰ As Bolnick recalls, “The term “slum” is widely used in Asia and one of the founder organizations, NSDF, has “slum” in its name. Leaders from other countries felt there was an important message in using the name to i) make a negative identity affirmative and ii) call a spade a spade.”¹¹¹

p. 390 However, with its rebranding in 2016, SDI shifted its communication to prioritize the acronym rather than the full name. Bolnick explains: “We are trying to drop the name Shack/Slum Dwellers International and just refer to ourselves and hopefully become known as SDI. This is because i) the name is so unwieldy and ii) slum or shack and international is rather paradoxical – especially to those who know nothing about us.”¹¹²

For most of its existence, SDI did not publicly discuss or question the term “international” in its name. Researchers have chosen to refer to SDI as “transnational” rather than “international” or “global.” The transnational nature of SDI’s work is the subject of several studies.¹¹³ However, Podlashuc notes SDI federations’ self-conscious choice to refer to themselves as “Shack/slum Dwellers International,” revitalizing the traditional counter-hegemonic and socialist appellation of the “International.”¹¹⁴ Podlashuc sees in SDI’s collective savings praxis the possibility of the formation of a transnational class of its own, an “internationalisation” with “a self-conscious common identity” that “approximates the Gramscian notion of a ‘moral-intellectual bloc,’ ” which could be seen as “a precursor to the ‘historical bloc’ capable of revolution.”¹¹⁵ He therefore presents a radical, and possibly romanticized, reading of SDI’s grassroots structures as “functional cells of a new order, organised on a collective and transnational basis,

prefiguring but never completing a globalised network that embraces the poor universally—in an International of Slum Dwellers.”¹¹⁶

Qualifying this reading, Bolnick describes “international” as reflecting “the SA- [South Africa-] India origins and the growing trans-national footprint” as savings schemes had “jumped borders” and were being set up in neighboring countries in particular.¹¹⁷ On the suggestion of a link between the acronym SDI and those such as SI (Situationist International), Bolnick explains there was no more than “a secret wink to the Situationists, a kind of inside joke”; whereas Situationist thought is not prominent in SDI, its “house modelling and street children and sanitation opening events are always referred to in India as ‘Mela,’ meaning festival.”¹¹⁸ Appadurai uses the term “toilet festival.”¹¹⁹ The Situationist term “festival” is the antonym of “spectacle,” which reflects a manufacturing of alienation, false consciousness, and delusion; it is invoked in Situationist critique of the complete colonization of society by commodities.¹²⁰ While critical of such “spectacles,” SDI does not fully avoid this approach. In studies on representation, the term “spectacle” is applied to reductionism and shallow or misleading imagery.¹²¹ International NGOs have not escaped criticism of deploying “spectacles” in the representational images they use.

Digital Representation and Appeal to Funders

p. 391 Websites are a pervasive communication mechanism for NGOs, their near-global accessibility making them particularly relevant for international NGOs, SDI being no exception. Photographic imagery used on such websites has “shrunk the world geographically” as well as “culturally, morally and emotionally.”¹²² As Katharine Millar notes, websites function as a means for NGOs to better control their representation to the public, NGOs deploying branding as well as visual techniques to “evoke an emotional response.”¹²³ Millar refers to “mediatization” in the representational practices of NGOs; this is captured in what she refers to as a “charitable media genre.”¹²⁴ Such representation of people and of places, particularly in the “Global South,” is understood as “an exercise of power” that shapes and through repetition also “fixes” thinking, responses, and action.¹²⁵ Exploiting this and also contributing to this trend, international NGOs govern compassion through images and technology.¹²⁶ NGOs employ this form of representation in their fundraising strategies, compassion being at the core of how images can motivate spectators into action. This is particularly so where private voluntary donations are elicited from individuals. As K  pyl   and Kennedy note, “donations from individuals ... are the single largest source (57%) of NGO funding” and “also the fastest growing segment.”¹²⁷ Indeed, at the time of research in 2018, fundraising from individuals was a key component of the websites of Oxfam, Save the Children, and SDI alike, and of several SDI-affiliated NGOs. SDI included this fundraising approach hesitantly “in response to donor recommendations” and income from this route was low.¹²⁸ In February 2019, SDI closed the website *sdinet.org* with this fundraising platform, later recreating it without this feature.

Humanitarian NGOs have a long tradition of soliciting public generosity through images of suffering, pity being the emotion they have sought to provoke in website spectators. Through this messaging, human existence in the Global South came to be stereotyped as famine, disease, homelessness, and suffering in general. However, somewhat delimiting the power wielded through imagery, Hall warns against the assumption that meaning can be “finally fixed,” although “strategies of stereotyping” attempt to achieve this.¹²⁹ Hall notes that “no one has complete control” over the connotations that “words and images carry,” and “counter-strategies exist.”¹³⁰ One of these is to replace negative images with positive ones, thus “righting the balance” and celebrating difference.¹³¹

Postcolonial criticism of the negative paradigm of pity has led NGOs to deploy images that elicit solidarity rather than pity, but in a way that analysts have framed as instrumentalizing and commodifying.¹³² Shani Orgad argues that in this new mode of “post-humanitarian communication,” the “positive” paradigm of

representation is promoted by “communications/campaigns/advocacy” departments within NGOs, although the old “negative” paradigm may still be promoted by “fundraising/marketing” departments because of the ease with which it pulls at heartstrings.¹³³ Orgad points to internal tensions between different parts of an NGO, the ultimate brand or imagery being the result of internal negotiation.¹³⁴

p. 392 In SDI’s case, its longstanding logo aligned with the negative paradigm. Though not showing a suffering human being, it was a sketch of a rickety shack threatening to fall apart. By early 2015, SDI replaced this with a neutral logo, a square with the capital letters SDI, followed by a full stop. A year later, SDI’s annual report displayed a further development of the logo, now a bouncy circle with the acronym in lower case followed by a full stop. In Bolnick’s words, “this is much more effective ... in the sense that its message is uncomplicated.”¹³⁵ At the same time, SDI built branding on its website *sdinet.org* around its federation leaders or grassroots figureheads. Photographed portraits radiate a cheerful confidence, indeed inviting friendship or solidarity. Attached to each image was a campaign of similar appeal: “I’m an Urban Poverty Fighter.” As one paged down, a gallery similarly profiled informal settlement dwellers driving livelihood projects. Molokoane was separately featured with the banner “[j]oin Rose Molokoane in the fight to end global poverty.”¹³⁶ For Molokoane, “it is the stories you see—hard data, rich stories. It is the stories of people who volunteered to be part of this process to try their level best to address the issues of poverty.”¹³⁷ However, the brand more than the stories dominated the website, and with frequent dollar signs invited the viewer to commit to once-off or monthly donations. Bolnick explains that the website was the result of pro bono rebranding work by the Swedish company YouMe Agency.¹³⁸ Its erstwhile website in turn displayed SDI’s 2016 Annual Report, circular logo, and Know Your City campaign as a branding example (alongside several commercial brands), signifying the SDI brand with “Typography Bold, Brave, Beautiful.”¹³⁹

Orgad describes an approach, evidently deployed by YouMe Agency, that seeks to counter an overly positive imaging; it is the “hero” model or image, portraying the subject, in its social context and often the full figure, looking straight into the camera.¹⁴⁰ This genre is also that of major international NGOs Save the Children and Oxfam, NGOs that Orgad’s respondents referred to as “mega-brands in the aid and development sector.”¹⁴¹ However, Hall notes challenges to the practice of replacing negative with positive images.¹⁴² Such measures may merely increase ways of representing, but actually neither “displace the negative” nor undermine the reductionist binary that is often inherent in representations, in particular in imagery.¹⁴³ Thus “complexity and ambivalence” prevail in representation, and it has been asked whether such strategies “evade difficult questions” and merely “appropriate ‘difference’ into a spectacle in order to sell a product.”¹⁴⁴ According to Bolnick, with SDI’s website the drive to “sell” was not in the first instance to raise funds from the public, but “to lift the SDI profile” to “the broader public,” so as “to popularize the challenges of urban poverty, and secondarily the responses of the SDI network to these challenges.”¹⁴⁵

p. 393 However, the SDI website also served the purpose of indirect or unsolicited slum dweller representation. It featured the KYC campaign or project, and it continued to do so on SDI’s erstwhile website, *knowyourcity.info* (now part of *sdinet.org*). This uses a standardized template to display the size, status, infrastructure level and community organization (including “number of savings groups” and “relationship with authorities”) of informal settlements in selected cities in fourteen African countries and the Philippines. Already with the erstwhile *sdinet.org*, with fundraising features, SDI saw KYC as the main feature of its website, the structure dating back to 2015, and the first KYC version “dating to 2012”; Bolnick added, “KYC 3.0 will launch in 2018” with “a substantive change to the structure of the site.”¹⁴⁶ Under the banner “Transform Your City,” the website was to see a return to engaging potential institutional partners more so than funding appeals to the public, and to profiling projects across SDI’s core themes rather than individuals and their livelihoods.¹⁴⁷

SDI’s websites have played a further role that is not mentioned in the literature on NGOs’ digital representation and NGO legitimacy cited in this chapter. In the interrelatedness between legitimacy and representation, one source of SDI’s legitimacy may be understood as that by association. A gallery of

partners' logos on SDI and most of its affiliates' websites displays respectable entities grouped in the categories of funders, multilateral agencies, international networks, and academic, research, or knowledge institutions. With SDI's shift toward representation through comparable data, it celebrated an association with the prestigious Global North data institution, the Santa Fe Institute.¹⁴⁸ Particularly relevant for SDI's African footprint, and signaling a further shift, is the partnership with the African Association of Planning Schools (AAPS). The willingness to work with students, but also to be researched by academics, is a departure from SDI's erstwhile "rationale ... to generate autonomous action from below," which had justified a "class-based suspicion" of academics.¹⁴⁹ In terms of representation, this opens opportunities for more diverse academic representations of SDI that may help balance the over fifty insider accounts in the journal *Environment and Urbanization*.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

The representational ambiguity and contradiction within SDI are dilemmas that are shared across various international NGOs. SDI's orthodox approach of organizing the poor into federated savings groups, engaging in local and transnational exchanges, self-collection of data, house modeling, self-construction, self-management, and partnership building has been associated with the moral standard of non-confrontation. This lent it legitimacy among government partners and global organizations representing governments.

At the national level and beyond, SDI's grassroots savings groups are represented by selected, trained, and remunerated leaders, an approach that is understood to ensure accountability within the hierarchy of the network. This procedure forms part of SDI's democratic or procedural standard of legitimacy through which it derived the right to represent slum dwellers in decision-making forums at the national and global level. Whereas SDI's grassroots representations at the global level primarily speak of actively saving slum dwellers, its discourse and branding included claims of global or universal representation of the urban poor.

At the grassroots, SDI's de facto representational practice went beyond savings collectives to include uneven iterations of settlement networks in at least four of the twenty-three countries in which it had active affiliates. However, SDI did not use settlement networks in claiming representation at the global level. Instead, it could be seen to derive legitimacy in speaking for a wider body of informal settlement dwellers through standardized city-wide data collection on informal settlements. Data collection and its integrity, as a technical standard, brought with it a process of professionalization within SDI, which also strengthened a common technical legitimacy claim among international NGOs, that of effectiveness and efficiency. However, this did not prevent inaccuracy in communicating its international reach and in 2019 an audit by an international funder finding fault with other aspects of the organization's integrity. In practice, both settlement-wide networking and data-collection are linked to SDI's ongoing efforts to mobilize the urban poor into savings collectives, SDI's orthodox moral standard that forefronts cooperative, pragmatic, and non-confrontational behavior by the urban poor.

The slow uptake of informal settlement networking in SDI's core countries over the past decade suggests that this was not an easy route through which to improve representational reach while maintaining SDI's orthodox moral standard, which was more appealing to many western donors. Standardized data-collection sat comfortably with SDI's global partners, some of which were directly involved in the Know Your City campaign. These partners themselves were a source of legitimacy by association for SDI, its partner relationships having permeated SDI's digital representation and branding in significant ways. One can therefore no longer assess SDI at the time of this research to be making entirely bottom-up choices in terms of its direction, but rather as maintaining a balance that ensured a flow of funding from the Global North. Its

“global” narrative and messaging invited engagement with multilateral agencies seeking replicable solutions and needing a credible linkage to grassroots.

As SDI expanded into additional countries, encouraged in part by its global agency partners, its affiliates diversified. However, rather than understanding SDI’s situation as being at a crossroads, with the possibility of representing a wider range of approaches and slum dweller formations, SDI still appeared committed to the pathway of its orthodoxy. In 2018, SDI was not considering consolidating its representation at the global level as primarily for the Anglophone regions of the African continent rather than the entire globe. SDI was not deriving a mandate for global representation through collaboration with diverse groups and formations, seeking instead to stand apart at the global level through a distinct branding and its orthodox approach. It was not adjusting its global discourse in accordance with the waning of its methodological hold, seemingly unable to shift the moral standard that lends legitimacy in the eyes of global partners. Thus a number of representational challenges put the post-Arputham ‘sdi.’ to test.

Notes

1. SDI Annual Report 2019–2020, 7, 57 (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International).
2. Before consenting to its staff, affiliates, and coordinators being interviewed, SDI requires researchers to agree to make draft analyses available to SDI’s secretariat for comment. The iterative process that unfolded around early drafts of this chapter included an email dialogue with Joel Bolnick of the SDI secretariat. This provided access to SDI’s own reflection on representational dilemmas it faces at the global level, including SDI’s recent digital forms of representation, of which there has been no mention or analysis in the published literature on SDI. This and the interviews granted by key individuals in various organizations complimented the review of the extensive archive that SDI has compiled of its work.
3. Environment and Urbanization, “NGO Profile: The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights,” *Environment and Urbanization* 5, no. 2 (1993): 153–165.
4. Environment and Urbanization, “Institutional Profile: Habitat International Coalition, 1976–2006,” *Environment and Urbanization* 18, no. 1 (2006): 219–236.
5. Joel Bolnick, Managing Director, Secretariat, SDI, Cape Town, March 29, May 18, 2018, personal communication by email.
6. Leopold N. Podlashuc, “*Class for Itself? Shack/Slum Dwellers International: The Praxis of a Transnational Poor Movement*” (PhD diss., Social Inquiry, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, 2007), 254.
7. Joel Bolnick, “People’s Dialogue on Land and Shelter: Community-driven Networking in South Africa’s Informal Settlements,” *Environment and Urbanization* 5, no. 1 (1993): 91–110.
8. Sheela Patel, Sundar Burra, and Celine d’Cruz, “Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI)—Foundations to Treetops,” *Environment and Urbanization* 13, no. 2 (2001): 45–59; C. d’Cruz, founding member of SDI speaking in her personal capacity, Beijing, October 2, 2018, personal communication by Skype.
9. Sheela Patel and Celine d’Cruz, “The Mahila Milan Crisis Credit Scheme: From a Seed to a Tree,” *Environment and Urbanization* 5, no. 1 (1993): 9–17.
10. D’Cruz, personal communication.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Arjun Appadurai, “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics,” *Environment and Urbanization* 13, no. 2 (2001): 33.
14. D’Cruz, personal communication.

15. Environment and Urbanization, "Institutional Profile."
16. HIC archives—Board Minutes June 2000, accessed electronically through longstanding HIC board member Joseph Schechla, Muhandisin.
17. Sheela Patel and Diana Mitlin, "Reinterpreting the Rights-Based Approach: A Grassroots Perspective on Rights and Development," in *Rights-Based Approaches to Development: Exploring the Potentials and Pitfalls*, ed. Sam Hickey and Diana Mitlin, 107–124 (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009).
18. Bolnick, personal communication
19. Astrid Ley, Josefine Fokdal, and Peter Herrle, "How Urban Poor Networks are Re-scaling the Housing Process in Thailand, the Philippines and South Africa," in *From Local Action to Global Networks: Housing the Urban Poor*, ed. Peter Herrle and Astrid Ley, 31–43 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 36.
20. D'Cruz, personal communication.
21. Patel, Burra, and d'Cruz, "Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI)"; D'Cruz, personal communication; Diana Mitlin and Sheela Patel, "The Urban Poor and Strategies for a Pro-poor Politics: Reflections on Shack/Slum Dwellers International," in *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, ed. Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 296–308.
22. Bolnick, personal communication.
23. Ibid.
24. Beth Chitekwe-Biti, "Struggles for Urban Land by the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation," *Environment and Urbanization* 21, no. 2 (2009): 362.
- p. 396 25. Ananya Roy, "Civic Governmentality: The Politics of Inclusion in Beirut and Mumbai," *Antipode* 41, no. 1 (2009): 159–17; Marie Huchzermeyer, *Cities with 'Slums': From Informal Settlement Eradication to a Right to the City in Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2011); Thomas A. Gillespie, "Accumulation by Urban Dispossession: Struggles over Urban Space in Accra, Ghana" (PhD diss., School of Geography, University of Leeds, 2013).
26. Patel, Burra, and d'Cruz, "Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI)"; D'Cruz, personal communication.
27. Cities Alliance, *2001 Annual Report* (Washington DC: Cities Alliance, 2001), 5.
28. William Cobbett, at the time Director, Cities Alliance, Brussels, February 21, 2018, personal communication by Skype.
29. Sarah Nandudu (Coordinator, National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda, SDI), Joseph Muturi (Coordinator, Muungano Wa Wanavijiji, SDI), and Rose Molokoane (Coordinator, SDI), February 12, 2018, group interview at the 9th World Urban Forum, Kuala Lumpur.
30. Klaus Teschner, Desk Officer, Urban Development, Misereor e.V. Africa Department, Kassel, March 8, 2018, personal communication by Skype.
31. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2016. 20th Anniversary Edition* (Cape Town, Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2016), 18.
32. Bolnick, personal communication.
33. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2016*, 20; SDI Annual Report 2020, 7.
34. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2017* (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2017), 6.
35. Bolnick, personal communication.
36. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2016*; SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2017*.
37. Teschner, personal communication; Rene P. Hohmann, Senior Urban Specialist, Cities Alliance, UNOPS, February 12, 2018, personal communication at the 9th World Urban Forum, Kuala Lumpur.

38. Bolnick, personal communication.
39. Ibid.
40. M. Spaliviero, Regional Office for Africa, UN-Habitat, Nairobi, personal communication by Skype.
41. Ibid.
42. Bolnick, personal communication.
43. Spaliviero, personal communication.
44. SDI, "Timeline up to 2015," Shack/Slum Dwellers International website, www.sdinet.org. Last visited, May 7, 2018 (website since discontinued).
45. Bolnick, personal communication.
46. Ibid.
47. Cobbett, personal communication.
48. Ibid.
49. Cities Alliance, *2008 Annual Report* (Washington DC: Cities Alliance, 2008), 89.
50. Cities Alliance, *2013 Annual Report* (Brussels: Cities Alliance, 2013).
51. SDI, *2012 Shack/Slum Dwellers International Annual Report* (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2012), 16.
52. Ibid.
53. Huchzermeyer, *Cities with 'Slums.'*
54. J. Bolnick, Managing Director, Secretariat, SDI, Cape Town, March 29, and May 18, 2018, by email.
- p. 397 55. Ibid.
56. Somsook Boonyabancha, "Scaling up Squatter Settlements Upgrading in Thailand Leading to Community-Driven Integrated Social Development at City-Wide Level," Paper presented at the Conference, "New Frontiers of Social Policy," Arusha, December 12–15, 2005.
57. Walter Fieuw and Diana Mitlin, "What the Experiences of South Africa's Mass Housing Programme Teach Us about the Contribution of Civil Society to Policy and Programme Reform," *Environment and Urbanization* 30, no. 1 (2018): 215–232.
58. Bolnick, personal communication.
59. Fieuw and Mitlin, "What the Experiences of South Africa's Mass Housing Programme Teach Us."
60. Huchzermeyer, *Cities with 'Slums.'*
61. Roy, "Civic Governmentality."
62. Diana Mitlin and Jan Mogaladi, "Social Movements and the Struggle for Shelter: A Case Study of eThekweni (Durban)," *Progress in Planning* 84 (2013): 19.
63. Astrid Ley and Peter Herrle, "Report on the Evaluation of SDI Strategies to Secure Land and Basic Services in South Africa and Malawi," Draft, October 31 (London and Cape Town: Oikos Human Settlements Research Group, commissioned by IIED and Slum Dwellers International, 2007), 10.
64. Joel Bolnick and Benjamin Bradlow, "'Rather a Better Shack Now Than Wait Twenty Years for a Formal House': Shack Dwellers International and Informal Settlement Upgrading in South Africa," *Dialog* 104 (2010): 38.
65. Ibid., 36.

66. Fieuw and Mitlin, "What the Experiences of South Africa's Mass Housing Programme Teach Us," 223.
67. Bolnick, personal communication.
68. Ibid.
69. Anonymous, board member of Centre for Community Organisation and Development, CCODE (Malawi), October 31, 2018.
70. Bolnick, personal communication.
71. Huchzermeyer, *Cities with 'Slums'*; Joel Bolnick, Untitled and undated position statement on the Informal Settlement Network, handed to the author by the uTshani Office, Johannesburg, September 2009; Bolnick, personal communication.
72. Ley, Fokdal, and Herrle, "How Urban Poor Networks are Re-scaling the Housing Process."
73. Bolnick, personal communication.
74. Ted Baumann, Joel Bolnick, and Diana Mitlin, "The Age of Cities and Organizations of the Urban Poor: The Work of the South African Homeless People's Federation," in *Empowering Squatter Citizen: Local Government, Civil Society and Urban Poverty Reduction*, ed. Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite (London: Earthscan, 2004), 245–277; Patel and Mitlin, "Reinterpreting the Rights-Based Approach"; Mitlin and Patel, "The Urban Poor and Strategies for a Pro-poor Politics."
75. Fieuw and Mitlin, "What the Experiences of South Africa's Mass Housing Programme Teach Us," 227.
76. R. Molokoane, Coordinator, SDI, February 12, 2018, personal communication in Kuala Lumpur.
77. Bolnick, personal communication.
78. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2017*, 6.
- p. 398 79. Author's notes of SDI's interventions at WUF9.
80. SDI, *Shack/Slum Dwellers International Strategic Plan, 2013–2017* (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2013), unpaginated.
81. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2013-2-14* (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2014), 7.
82. Jockin Arputham speaking at an enumerations meeting in Nairobi in 2013, quoted in Anni Beukes, "Making the Invisible Visible: Generating Data on 'Slums' at Local, City and Global Scales," Working Paper (London: International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED); Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), 2015), 11.
83. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2013-2-14*, 4.
84. Marie Huchzermeyer, "Enumeration as a Grassroot Tool Towards Securing Tenure in Slums: Insights from Kisumu, Kenya," *Urban Forum* 20, no.3 (2018): 271–292; Beukes, "Making the Invisible Visible," 14.
85. Molokoane, personal communication.
86. Bolnick, personal communication.
87. Ibid.
88. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2014-2-15* (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2015); SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2016*; SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2017*.
89. See David Satterthwaite, "Why Another Journal? Setting up *Environment and Urbanization* in 1989," *Urbanisation* 1, no. 1 (2016): 6–12.
90. Sarah Lister, "NGO Legitimacy: Technical Issue or Social Construct?," *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2003): 175–192.
91. Christopher Pallas, David Gethings, and Max Harris, "Do the Right Thing: The Impact of INGO Legitimacy Standards on Stakeholder Input," *Voluntas* 26 (2015): 1270.

92. Molokoane, personal communication.
93. For example, SDI, *2012 Shack/Slum Dwellers International Annual Report*; SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2016*; SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2017*; SDI, *Know Your City: Slum Dwellers Count* (Cape Town: Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2018); Diana Mitlin, Sarah Colenbrander, and David Satterthwaite, "Editorial: Finance for Community-led Local, City and National Development," *Environment and Urbanization* 30, no. 1 (2018): 3–14; Sheela Patel, Aseena Viccajee, and Jockin Arputham, "From Taking Money to Making Money: SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan Transform Low-Income Shelter Options in India," *Environment and Urbanization* 30, no. 1 (2018): 85–102.; Joel Bolnick, "Poverty No Longer Compounded Daily: SDI's Efforts to Address the Poverty Penalty Built into Housing Microfinance," *Environment and Urbanization* 30, no. 1 (2018): 141–154.
94. Bolnick, personal communication.
95. Pallas, Gethings, and Harris, "Do the Right Thing."
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid., 1270.
99. Podlashuc, "Class for Itself?," 7; Roy, "Civic Governmentality," 165.
100. Cobbett, personal communication; Spaliviero, personal communication.
101. Pallas, Gethings, and Harris, "Do the Right Thing," 1271.
102. Ibid., 1268.
103. Lister, "NGO Legitimacy."
104. Ibid., 118.
105. SDI, *SDI Annual Report 2016*, 9.
- p. 399 106. Ibid., 17.
107. Joel Boklnick, "uTshani buyakhuluma (the Grass Speaks): People's Dialogue and the South African People's Federation (1994–1996)," *Environment and Urbanization* 8, no. 2 (1996): 159.
108. Rajesh Tandon, Kaustov Bandyopadhyay, Sohela Nazneen, and Matt Nohn, "Review of the Urban Poor Fund International (UPFI)," (Submitted to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Norwegian Government, and Slum Dwellers International and their affiliated national and local federations, 2010), 11.
109. See Alan Mayne, *Slums: The History of a Global Injustice* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).
110. Patel, Burra, and d'Cruz, "Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI)," 45
111. Bolnick, personal communication.
112. Ibid.
113. Colin McFarlane, "Translocal Assemblages: Space, Power and Social Movements," *Geoforum* 40 (2009): 561–567; Peter Herrle, Astrid Ley, and Josefine Fokdal, eds., *From Local Action to Global Networks: Housing the Urban Poor* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).
114. Podlashuc, "Class for Itself?," 249.
115. Ibid.
116. Ibid.
117. Bolnick, personal communication.

118. Ibid.
119. Appadurai, "Deep Democracy," 37.
120. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: The Zone, 1967/1994).
121. Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 223–290.
122. Juha Käpylä and Denis Kennedy, "Cruel to Care? Investigating the Governance of Compassion in the Humanitarian Imaginary," *International Theory* 6, no. 2 (2014): 259.
123. Katharine Millar, "'They Need Our Help': Non-governmental Organizations and the Subjectifying Dynamics of the Military as Social Cause," *Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 1 (2018): 11, 12.
124. Ibid., 10, 11.
125. Glen Williams, Paula Meth, and Katie Willis, *Geographies of Developing Areas: The Global South in a Changing World*, 2nd ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 9.
126. Käpylä and Kennedy, "Cruel to Care?"
127. Ibid., 270.
128. Bolnick, personal communication.
129. Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 270.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid., 272.
132. Shani Orgad, "Visualizers of Solidarity: Organizational Politics in Humanitarian and International Development NGOs," *Visual Communication* 12, no. 3 (2013): 295–314.
133. Ibid., 302, 310.
134. Ibid.
135. Bolnick, personal communication.
136. Shack/Slum Dwellers International discontinued website, www.sdinet.org.
137. Molokoane, personal communication.
138. Bolnick, personal communication.
- p. 400 139. YouMe Agency, "SDI Global Vision Och Varumärke," <http://youmeagency.se/projekt/sdi-global-vision-och-varumärke/>.
140. Orgad, "Visualizers of Solidarity," 303.
141. Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 308.
142. Ibid.
143. Ibid., 274.
144. Ibid., 273, 276.
145. Bolnick, personal communication.
146. Ibid.
147. Ibid.

148. Also mentioned in Beukes, "Making the Invisible Visible."
149. Podlashuc, "*Class for Itself?*," 7.
150. Satterthwaite, "Why Another Journal?"

Bibliography

Appadurai, Arjun. "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics." *Environment and Urbanization* 13 no. 2 (2001): 23–43.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Bolnick, Joel. "People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter: Community-Driven Networking in South Africa's Informal Settlements." *Environment and Urbanization* 5, no. 1 (1993): 91–110.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Chitekwe-Biti, Beth. "Struggles for Urban Land by the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation." *Environment and Urbanization* 21, no. 2 (2009): 347–266.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'" In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, 223–290. London: Sage, 1997.

Herrle, Peter, Astrid Ley, and Josefine Fokdal, eds. *From Local Action to Global Networks: Housing the Urban Poor*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Käpylä, Juha, and Denis Kennedy. "Cruel to Care? Investigating the Governance of Compassion in the Humanitarian Imaginary." *International Theory* 6, no. 2 (2014): 255–292.

Lister, Sarah. "NGO Legitimacy: Technical Issue or Social Construct?" *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2003): 175–192.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

McFarlane, Colin. "Translocal Assemblages: Space, Power and Social Movements." *Geoforum* 40 (2009): 561–567.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Millar, K. "'They Need Our Help': Non-governmental Organizations and the Subjectifying Dynamics of the Military as Social Cause." *Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 1 (2018): 9–26.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Mitlin, Diana, and Sheela Patel. "The Urban Poor and Strategies for a Pro-poor Politics: Reflections on Shack/Slum Dwellers International." In *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, edited by Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield, 296–308. Oxon: Routledge, 2014.

[Google Scholar](#) [Google Preview](#) [WorldCat](#) [COPAC](#)

Orgad, Shani. "Visualizers of Solidarity: Organizational Politics in Humanitarian and International Development NGOs." *Visual Communication* 12, no. 3 (2013): 295–314.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Pallas, Christopher, David Gethings, and Max Harris. "Do the Right Thing: The Impact of INGO Legitimacy Standards on Stakeholder Input." *Voluntas* 26 (2015): 1261–1287.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)

Roy, Aanaya. "Civic Governmentality: The Politics of Inclusion in Beirut and Mumbai." *Antipode* 41 no. 1 (2009): 159–179.

[Google Scholar](#) [WorldCat](#)