

# **Reducing Risks for Low-Income and Disadvantaged Communities in Urban Areas of the global South**

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## **1. Introduction: understanding risk and vulnerability**

What is the scale of risk to premature death, serious injury and impoverishment in urban areas of the global South and what are the sources of risk? We do not know the full range and scale of risks facing the 2.5 billion residents of towns and cities in the global South (Satterthwaite and Bartlett 2017). We do know some of the causes of risk. An estimated 880 million live in informal settlements in towns and cities of the global South; these populations lack access to essential services and/or face insecure tenure (UN-Habitat 2016). We also know that much of the urban population work informally; 82 per cent of non-agricultural employment is informal in south Asia (Chen 2014; Chen et al. 2016).

But there are many risks that we do not know enough about. There is surprisingly little information on the most serious life and health threatening risks they face. Particular health-related blind spots include the huge scale of premature death, illness, serious injury and impoverishment that is not recorded (especially for those living in informal settlements). Vital registration systems that are essential to understanding the main cause of premature death are no longer functioning or were never set up in many nations. Demographic and Health Surveys contain a lot of relevant data on risk but they have sample sizes too small to provide this data for each urban centre or district. There are few local records on many serious health problems and lack of detailed information on these problems at the street, ward, district and urban centre level makes it impossible to plan and realise responses.

In addition, discussion of health risks often fails to include the ‘everyday’ risks from infectious and parasitic diseases even though these are usually the main causes of premature death in informal settlements. The lack of basic “risk reducing” services such as safe, sufficient, affordable water; good-quality sanitation and electricity; all-weather access roads; and street lighting and the lack of risk-reducing services (including health care, household waste collection, emergency services, rule of law/policing and road traffic management) are only partially documented. The risks associated with living in dense neighbourhoods with immediately proximate dwellings constructed from scrap and low-cost materials are insufficiently recorded. There is a growing awareness of the scale of disasters. While “large” disasters are recorded, insufficient efforts are made to record floods or other disaster events that are too small to be classified as disasters. However, these disasters may be among the main causes of premature death, injury and poverty in informal settlements. They also result in considerable loss of basic possessions such as clothes, tools and personal documents, and damage living areas. The occupational health and safety risks associated with work are considerable for those working both formally and informally. Informal workers face a lack of secure income – and may face considerable risks within the workplace due to a failure to comply with health and safety requirements. Lack of work alternatives may also lead to them pursuing high-risk occupations such as prostitution. The risks of violence in informal settlements are recognised but again they are usually not recorded. Such violence may be both inside and outside of the home (Moser and McIlwaine 2014). This context results in considerable risk of mental ill-health related to the stress related to the likelihood of facing risk and/or an inability to act on that fear. It is now accepted that insufficient attention has

been paid to such risks especially in the context of growing inequalities (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Risk results from the interaction of hazard, exposure and vulnerability. The three levels co-determine the significance of risk and they need to be identified and understood. The hazard, be it loss of income, presence of dengue or malaria spreading mosquitos, a fire or a flood, is an event that occurs; it may be more or less likely depending on the specific circumstances in the locality. The exposure – how many residents are exposed to the hazard – is a further factor influencing risk. So too is vulnerability – who is more susceptible to the risk or less able to cope and adapt. How vulnerable, for example, is the family on that source of income (5 or 95 per cent of their total income); are there alternative sources of income they can draw on? Can they escape to safer sites when there is a fire or a flood; how easily can they avoid accidental fire risk (safe building materials) or flood (a second storey)?

Everything that has impoverished, harmed or killed an individual or individuals in a city can in theory be recorded. Many of the causes of impoverishment, harm or death can be reduced and/or avoided. This paper discusses such risks and what can be done to reduce them. The following section explores the nature of urban poverty and outlines the difficulties (i.e. hazards) that low-income urban households and groups face. The third section discusses approaches to reducing poverty and how their effectiveness can be maximised. The fourth section focuses on the impacts of climate change and the additional measures required. The fifth section considers social protection and social insurance. Section six concludes.

## **2. The causes and nature of urban poverty**

### **2.1 Summary of the eight components of urban poverty**

The figure in Annex one summarises the key components that determine poverty and disadvantage in urban areas (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013). Without an understanding of these components, critical dimensions of risk for disadvantaged groups will not be addressed.

In a context in which all essential items are, for most urban dwellers, commodified, income is important and income poverty is a major problem in many urban areas. Attention has to be given to the instability of many incomes with large numbers earning their living in informal enterprises with very low earnings and/or as day labourers without employment security.

Low-income populations living in informal settlements, particularly those on the periphery, may face high prices for goods due both to transport costs and limited competition. While some households may be able to grow some of their own food or raise crops or livestock for sale to supplement their incomes, this is not possible for most informal settlement dwellers. In the absence of having income for transport, people have to walk.

Lack of assets, including the inability of many households to save money, means that when they face an emergency (for example, the poor health of the primary income earner) they have to borrow money and/or go without needed treatment and medicines. Poor health or injury is a major reason for households that are just managing to fall into chronic poverty. Informal borrowing is likely to be associated with high interest rates (for example, 10 per cent a month). Formal and informal savings groups frequently require fixed monthly contributions and so exclude the lowest-income households.

The majority of households living in urban poverty in the global South have no safety net. While universal old-age pensions have been introduced in some nations, in most, they are lacking. If other family members are unable to take care of them, old people have to carry on working.

Low-income urban dwellers have to find shelter in a context in which land is often in high demand especially in the larger cities. Living in an informal and/or living informally in formal areas involves costs even where households are squatters. Households are increasingly unable to secure shelter in areas where there are income-earning opportunities closeby – including in walking distance. In many cities, most low-income groups rent accommodation. The lowest-income households rent one small room usually constructed from poor quality materials; low-income individuals may rent beds by the hour (the hotbed system).

Lack of public investment in informal areas results in a lack of risk-reducing infrastructure and services. In the absence of public provision, households access essential services such as water informally or pay for limited public services through standpipes or kiosks at rates that are frequently than those charged for piped supplies. Access to sanitation and washing facilities is often through pay to use facilities. Access to electricity may be similarly limited.

Lack of access to essential services frequently accompanies a lack of infrastructure. The education, health care and security that higher-income groups take for granted or buy privately are unavailable to low-income groups. The experiences of low-income populations with respect to the police and judiciary are captured in Perlman (2010) and Piper and Africa (2012) respectively

There is considerable evidence that it is the organization of low-income and vulnerable groups that enables them to contest the multiple forms of exclusion and disadvantage that they face and reduce their risk burden (Tarrow 1998; Satterthwaite and Mitlin 2014). However, many low-income households and neighbourhoods are embedded within clientelist relations that may provide avenues for the relatively well off to secure some access to political elites but which offer little to low-income groups.

## **2.2 Understanding vulnerability**

The discussion above focuses on primary sources of poverty and disadvantage. What is also required is attention to the sensitivity or susceptibility to risk of particular groups within the broad category of “those living in poverty and disadvantage”. An individual or household is said to be more vulnerable to a hazard (e.g. malaria-spreading mosquitoes, contaminated water or a flood) if they are more susceptible to being harmed or killed. For instance, the lives of infants and young children are generally more at risk from malaria and contaminated water than adults. Groups more at risk to loss of their livelihood, income or asset and with less capacity to cope and adapt are also vulnerable. Within the New Urban Agenda, the word vulnerable appears 15 times and those who are said to be in vulnerable situations include women, children and youth, older persons and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples and local communities (paragraph 34) and communities that are most vulnerable to disasters (paragraph 29). But this means that almost all the world’s population is vulnerable. The only people who are not vulnerable according to this list are working age men that are not old or migrants or disabled or indigenous or community members or in communities most vulnerable to disasters.

Interviews with households who had been flooded in Niamey (Niger) in 2015 showed large differences in household capacity to cope and adapt. “Unfortunately, many households reported being resigned to flooding but lacked strategies to fight against these shocks. Households in very low and low resilience classes were also the most affected and did not have a strategy to adapt” (Boubacar et al. 2017, page 47) Banks (2013) examines intra-household relations in Dhaka (Bangladesh) and suggests that attitudes to women’s employment have a particular significance in terms of household incomes and hence vulnerabilities.

Vulnerability in the urban context is related to particular characteristics of households, families and other groups. There are those who are vulnerable because of where they live and/or work and their inability to secure alternatives. There are those who are vulnerable due to their age, sex and/or health status that make them more susceptible to hazards and/or have limited capacities to avoid, cope with or adapt to hazards. There are those who face increased risks or decreased capacities to cope and adapt due to discrimination; for example, women who face violence at home and/ who are embedded in patriarchal cultures that reinforce the legitimacy of such violence. There are also those with less (household and collective) capacity to adapt (i.e. reduce their own exposure to risk) and who have less support from state and other such agencies. In a context in which capitalism is both a dominant ideology and means of access to both production and consumption, having low incomes is itself a reason to be vulnerable due to social discrimination against such groups and because of lack of access to essential resources.

### **2.3 From understanding to reducing urban poverty and vulnerability**

The following section discusses approaches to urban poverty reduction. However, it is important to recognise that there is much that we do not know about the scale and nature of urban poverty, vulnerability and risk. The introduction summarises our lack of knowledge. Much of this could be addressed if governments and other development assistance agencies prioritised these issues.

All too often urban poverty is ignored through being misunderstood and/or de-valued. Insufficient consideration is given to non-food components of the poverty line by those responsible for measuring poverty. There is insufficient investment in low-income areas and when investment does take place there is insufficient attention given to the affordability of services for low-income households. Too often local government lacks vision, commitment and capacity in terms of urban inclusion with substantial deficits in urban planning. Donors have shown little interest in supporting interventions that change outcomes at a sufficient scale and which secure equitable and sustainable development in towns and cities of the global South.

## **3. Effective measures to reduce urban poverty**

Although investment in addressing urban poverty and vulnerability has been lacking at the scale required, there have been multiple and diverse efforts to address needs and/or secure justice.

### **3.1 Categories of interventions**

There has been a considerable experience with urban poverty reduction although little at an appropriate scale, breadth and depth. Civil society organizations have been particularly active, with Southern-based NGOs working in towns and cities in Latin America and Asia being responsible for much innovation for the 1970-1990s. More recently a new tradition of civil society agencies in urban sub-Saharan Africa has emerged. The discussion below divides interventions by the risks and vulnerabilities that they address. It is widely recognised that integrated interventions are likely to be the most effective although that obviously requires increased resources and local capacities.

The importance of **participation and voice in addressing risk** has been recognised. From early experiences in Brazil, the participatory budgeting movement has grown to include 1700 local authorities (Cabannes 2015). While the process is recognised to be more effective in terms of strengthening democratic practice in some locations than others, it is acknowledged to have shifted municipal investment budgets towards the priorities identified by the residents of low-income neighbourhoods. In addition to material improvements in low-income areas, the practices nurtured by an annual budget cycle appears important to strengthening political inclusion and building capacity to monitor state agencies at the local level. In Uganda, the Municipal Development Forums introduced as a result of the involvement of the Ugandan Slum Dwellers Federation have strengthened a dialogue between low-income communities and other stakeholders including local government and have enabled capital investments to improve access to basic services (King and Kasaija forthcoming)

Much greater attention has been given to **rights and entitlements** in recent decades. This includes efforts to strengthen constitutional and other legislative rights, including democratic decentralization and devolution. Civil society agencies have placed particular emphasis on this approach to reducing poverty and vulnerability (Hickey and Mitlin 2009). There have been continuing concerns about evictions related to both residency and livelihoods, and discrimination against particular groups be they defined by gender, ethnicity and/or sexuality. However, in this work civil society agencies are highlighting the continuing lack of rights and entitlements that protect and enable the improvement of development options of vulnerable groups. Drinkwater (2009) discusses how prostitutes were empowered through their own organizations and able to challenge discrimination. Informal workers may also work together to strengthen their ability to negotiate.

**Social movement** strategies continue to contest current practices and outcomes through explicit political demands although it is widely recognised that local residents' organizations pursue multiple approaches to advance their needs and interests. In terms of the former the political significance of these actions is widely recognised. However as shown by the protests to advance democracy across North Africa progress can be difficult to achieve. Even when movements are strong enough to secure control of the state as in Brazil, the urban reform movements have had limited success in the context of speculative activities of real estate developers (Rolnik 2011).

In terms of the multiplicity of strategies followed by both individual and networked residents' associations, there is a considerable literature on both the potentials and the challenges. In India, for example, informal entrepreneurs make use of **clientelist** strategies which offer them some level of protection against the master plans of formal agencies (Benjamin 2008), and households have taken up housing options where possible (Anand and Rademacher 2011). However, what is evident is that the kinds of options that emerge work best for slightly higher income groups rather than those who are most disadvantaged. Patel (2013) discusses

the outcomes of upgrading schemes supported by the Government of India's JNNURM in 11 cities and highlight that progress has been limited. Where more progressive efforts have been made this has been due to a change in strategies away from new build on either peripheral sites or redeveloped informal settlements, towards incremental upgrading that maintains the existing populations and supports them to improve housing. The National Slum Dwellers Federation groups that work with SPARC and *Mahila Milan* (a partnership known as the Indian Alliance) have been able to secure this option in both Pune and Bhubaneswar (Burra et al forthcoming).

The success of the Indian Alliance draws on their methodology of **savings-based organizing** the tools commonly used such as savings and loans funds, data collection about conditions and capacities in informal settlements, and precedents to illustrate effective investments. The methodology seeks to strengthen relations between organized communities and local government enabling the coproduction of tenure security, infrastructure and housing. There are now 37 countries where there are national or city-based federations of slum or shack dwellers who use these methods and who are members of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI).

**Co-productive approaches** involve individuals, civil society and the state jointly producing a range of goods and services. The approach was first identified in studies of policing in the US which recognised the limitations of bureaucratic modalities of state action and the need to draw on the contribution of citizens. There are multiple contributions from non-state agencies including design, planning, finance, management, implementation, and learning and evaluation. Savings-based organizing draws women into a more active role in local organizations than in the case in many traditional residents' associations. It also draws them into networks of capacitated local groups and empowers community leaders in their negotiations with the state. The value of coproduction is to ensure that investments are used effectively to address the needs and interests of those who are excluded from top-down formally-planned interventions. A further value is that the direct contributions of citizens (financial and in-kind) help to scale up the facilities that are provided.

Coproduction is being widely used across the SDI network through their partnerships with local government and other state agencies, and has also been used by civil society organizations participating in the Asian Coalition for Community Action programme of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (Boonyabanha et al. 2012). The Philippine Homeless People's Federation has been particularly active in using savings-based organizing to assist neighbourhoods facing disasters. Following their experiences with a dump-site collapse in Metro-Manila they recognised the merits of the approach in this context and have been working across the Philippines with this approach (Carcellar et al 2011).

City authorities have recognised the significance of improved **urban management** both generally to improve economic development in urban areas and to create opportunities for more inclusive cities. In Durban (eThekweni), South Africa, Warwick Market exemplifies the ways in which informal vending can take place alongside a transport hub (Alfers et al 2016). Although this experience also shows the real tensions in ensuring that authorities continue to act in ways that address the needs of disadvantaged groups. In Brazil informal waste recyclers have been incentivised to participate in cooperatives and become a part of formal waste management services (Fergutz et al. 2011); and this is an approach also used in Pune,

India.<sup>1</sup> In Blantyre, the water authority has sought to improve residents' access to water, and has instituted pricing regimes that favour those buying through kiosks (CCODE, personal communication).

The emphasis on the state on improving access to infrastructure and services is both to directly reduce risks and vulnerabilities and to enable increases in income that will enhance well-being and increase capacity to cope with external shocks. Chen et al (2016) recognise the importance of infrastructure improvements for informal workers whether in public spaces or in their homes. There have been numerous efforts to strengthen the livelihood activities of informal settlement dwellers and other low-income residents. Established additional modalities include **micro-finance**, and improved access to loan and savings facilities. Such approaches tend to work best in contexts that have higher levels of economic growth where new market options are developing. Only some of these efforts are orientated to low-income groups. Weru et al (2017) discuss the difficulties of reaching very low-income groups through a loan fund closely aligned to women's led savings groups and the Kenyan Homeless People's Federation, the Akiba Mashinani Trust. The Trust has provided almost 7,000 households with loans for shelter and just over 6,000 with livelihood loans. Despite various strategies including savings, small loans and community lending platforms for solidarity, they remain concerned that some very low-income households cannot afford to access loans in part due to the requirement for 20 per cent deposit. It has been recognised that one of the challenges with micro-finance has been the exclusionary impacts at the very local level (Copestake 2002). However, low-income households may still be advantaged if new markets and demand develops.

In recognition of the limits of both market-based interventions and civil society efforts, state agencies continue to strengthen **welfare provision and social assistance** in some nations. Major programmes to provide substantial safety nets require a relatively wealthy state and have not been introduced in the lowest-income countries. However, there has been a great expansion in the provision of cash transfers and in countries such as Brazil, China and South Africa, increased social protection has been provided (Barrientos 2013). Much of this has been through conditional cash transfers which offer financial support, generally for the women household head, if particular "conditions" are achieved (generally related to health checks and children's participation in school). They have been recognised to increase incomes but their substantial impacts are harder to assess. For example, it is not clear if local costs such as rents increase. The use of pensions appears to have increased in recent years and this is also of considerable benefit to a particularly vulnerable age group. There is some evidence that these pension related income flows are made available to other family members.

### **3.2 Understanding the reduction of poverty vulnerability and risk**

Analysis of multiple urban poverty reduction programmes highlights a set of consistent factors.

First, reducing risk and vulnerability requires the central involvement of organized communities able to participate as active designers and implementers; and usually requires the support of local government, especially if it seeks to act at scale. Context matters and what works in one locality may not be appropriate in others. The engagement of local

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.swachcoop.com/about-swachpune.html>

communities helps to ensure that overly simplistic replications are replaced by nuanced amendments. Only organized local communities can address the local politics that will prevent interventions addressing the needs of low-income households. However, only local governments can ensure that regulatory changes are introduced and effective interventions are scaled citywide. Organized communities can work with professionals to improve the quality of their contribution and provide the basis for long-term collaboration – as in the work of the Community Architects Network supporting ‘slum’ upgrading initiatives in many Asian nations (Archer et al 2012).

Second, effective interventions recognise the complexity of urban livelihoods and the need to both increase incomes and reduce the cost of essential items in the commodified urban context. Interventions are also designed in recognition of the informality of urban livelihoods and residency. The dysfunctionality of state-led ministry and departmental windows is recognised. Finance provided by multiple sources is built into the programme design: typically including community contributions, state subsidies and access to subsidised loan finance. A particularly successful example is the Thai government’s Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) which through its Baan Mankong (secure tenure) programme provides support to community-directed upgrading (Boonyabantha 2009; Satterthwaite and Mitlin 2014).

Third, is the centrality of gender issues and the importance of building platforms that secure women’s participation (Mitlin, Satterthwaite and Bartlett 2011). Gender is a major axis of disadvantage. For example, women are disadvantaged in labour markets with lower pay and less income security; they may also face disadvantage at home with limited control over their income and the potential of male violence. Gendered roles and responsibilities with an emphasis on women having to care for dependents and those with particular vulnerabilities within the family are a further reason for women’s centrality in development efforts. If women are empowered to be decision-makers, community leaders and programme implementers, then activities to address such needs are more likely to be centre-stage.

Fourth, is the willingness to sustain learning and improve on performance. It is simply not possible for interventions to always get it right first time. What marks out success is the willingness to learn from experience, draw on stakeholders for potential improvements, carefully assess the potential amendments and re-design the intervention so that it is more effective. A consistent investment in rigorous learning and re-design is required. A key component of this learning is the strengthening of data availability.

#### **4. The potential contribution of climate change strategies (mitigation or adaptation) to poverty eradication**

The realities of climate change including higher temperatures, rising sea level, more extreme weather and changed patterns of precipitation are now recognised. Three measures are going to be particularly important to ensure that risks do not increase and poverty is not exacerbated.

There is a need for improved investment in risk-reducing infrastructure and services (like safe, sufficient, affordable water, good-quality sanitation and drainage, electricity, health care and household waste collection) – for development, for resilience to many climate change impacts and often for disaster risk reduction. This is not a question of improving investments



that are already in place. Rather it is a need to use climate adaptation monies to invest in the infrastructure and services that has, for too long, been lacking.

Well-functioning local governments that are seeking to address conventional development agendas will almost certainly lower disaster risk and risk from direct or indirect climate change impacts. This means finding ways to support the infrastructure and service developments mentioned above. It also means listening to local residents, and responding to their priorities.

The densification of urban areas offers benefits both for low-income populations and climate change. The pressure that low-income groups face from globalization processes that seek to exclude them from inner city areas has been widely documented. See Bhan (2009) for a discussion of Delhi's informal residents and Crossa (2009) for a discussion of informal vendors in Mexico City. However, the energy costs of urban sprawl (and its carbon intensity) are also widely recognised. Efforts to densify cities and secure compact urban form that is well suited to public transport are likely to favour lower-income groups who need well-located accommodation close to livelihood and income-earning opportunities. Through reducing transport needs and with high quality public transport reducing private automobile use, this will contribute to mitigation. The densification of populations may also offer opportunities for the more cost-effective installation of infrastructure and services.

## **5. The contribution of social protection measures/social insurance schemes to mitigating climate-change related risks and building resilience of low-income and disadvantaged communities**

It is clear that increased government action to target low-income groups and support the improvement of their set of development options and the improvement of their capacity to take up such options is critical to ensuring inclusive and equitable cities. Affordable adequate supplies of key basic services including water, sanitation, drainage, electricity, transport, health and education will all assist with increasing livelihood options, improving health and human capital and ensuring well-being. Improved access to water, sanitation, drainage and health services are particularly important to reducing poor health, injury and premature death. Improved access to water, power, transport and education will help to ensure that opportunities for productive work and income generation are increased. Subsidies to ensure that there is universal access to such essential basic needs must be a priority for state agencies and local government. Such measures need to be designed to include all of those in need including tenants. This will do much to ensure that vulnerabilities are reduced and risks can be managed; in so doing it offers essential social protection.

The advantage of targeting improved and universal access to basic infrastructure and services is that household expenditures are reduced and therefore real income is increased. Such measures will, through improving health, reduce days lost from work and hence the likelihood of households shifting from just coping to chronic poverty. Such measures do not require income transfers which may simply result in increased rents and other goods for which there is an element of monopoly supply in a specific location. They are also experiences in micro-insurance that require payments risk excluding those with the lowest and unstable incomes.

## **6. Conclusion**

Priorities for immediate action are fourfold.

**Recognize how little we know:** We have to start by admitting how little we know about the hazards facing much of the world's urban population, and thus also how little we know about the most serious risks they face. Above we discuss what might be done, but to have the incentive and the resources for action, the relevant agencies need to begin by recognizing their need to know the bigger picture.

**Get a more complete picture and enhance the information base:** Getting a more complete picture for any urban centre of the full spectrum of risks, and who is most at risk and why (and where they live), is a key underpinning for more effective action. This should also highlight where risk reduction is needed and is possible. There are multiple needs, and multiple priorities. Drawing local residents into data collection and analysis provides an immediate platform of prioritization (Beukes 2014).

**Changing perceptions, changing priorities:** Why is it that higher levels of government and international agencies give so little attention to risk reduction in urban areas? Why is there so little funding for city-wide provision for water, sanitation, drainage and solid waste removal? Why do we know so much about the global burden of disease but so little about the burden of disease in each locality (which is where the data are actually needed to guide action)? Achieving universal access to basic infrastructure and services will do much to reduce risks and address poverty.

**Building platforms for change:** In urban areas, responsibility for addressing most life- and health-threatening risks (and meeting most of the Sustainable Development Goals) falls to local governments. Yet far too little attention is given to this – and to the means to increase local governments' competence and capacity to act and their accountability to local populations. Much of the innovation in urban poverty reduction over the last 20 years comes from federations of slum/shack dwellers and their capacities to work with local government. So the issue is how to get national and international support for local action: International agencies have to recognize the need to support local action by local governments, local universities and local civil society organizations, as they work on assessing the most serious everyday risks and small and large disaster risks facing the inhabitants in each settlement. There is a lot that international agencies can do – help these local groups to access all available relevant data from different government agencies at each level; make national statistical offices and census bureaus learn to serve and support local governments and other local groups with the data they require in a useful form; learn to support co-production between local governments and groups at risk; and develop a capacity to help fund and support a range of initiatives in each locality, including civil society initiatives and their partnerships with local government (Weru et al 2017, Shand 2016, Bolnick 2017, Patel et al 2017).

**See Figure 6.1**

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