

Urban Sustainability and the Politics of Exclusion: Slum Settlements and SDG 11 in India

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Urban sustainability in India cannot be meaningfully examined without addressing the persistence of slum settlements and the politics of exclusion that shape them. This paper aims to explore how slums, far from being incidental outcomes of urbanisation, are politically produced spaces of vulnerability that challenge the inclusive aspirations of Sustainable Development Goal number 11. Grounded in the theoretical lenses of informality and just sustainability, the paper situates slum settlements within the broader debates on citizenship, governance, and equity in urban planning. This paper argues that slum settlements are not accidental by-products of rapid urbanisation but politically and institutionally produced spaces of vulnerability, shaped by inadequate urban planning, insecure land-tenure arrangements, unequal access to basic services, and processes of socio-political exclusion. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on secondary data and policy analysis across four major cities: Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai. The findings reveal that flagship programmes such as PMAY-U and the Smart Cities Mission often reproduce exclusion through forced relocation, weak participatory mechanisms, and technocratic bias. Updated indices, including the Sustainable Development Report (2025) and the Global Hunger Index (2024), highlight the persistent gap between policy discourse and the lived realities of slum residents, particularly in housing, sanitation, and health. These outcomes point out the structural nature of exclusion in India's urban governance. The scholarly contribution of the article lies in integrating critical urban theory with empirical evidence to argue that slums must be recognised as legitimate urban spaces and that their residents are citizens entitled to rights and protections. By reframing slum settlements as central to the politics of sustainability, the paper advances a justice-oriented perspective that challenges bureaucratic planning and calls for equity-centred, participatory approaches to achieving SDG 11.

Keywords: Urban Sustainability, Slum Settlements, Politics of Exclusion, SDG 11, Just Sustainability

Introduction

Urban sustainability has emerged as a central concern in global development debates, particularly in rapidly urbanizing countries such as India. Yet sustainability cannot be understood only in terms of developed infrastructure or environmental resilience; it must also be examined through the lens of social justice and inclusion. One of the most visible reflections of this paradox is the proliferation of slum settlements, spaces characterized by insecure housing, inadequate public services, and systemic marginalization. In India, where more than 65 million people reside in slums (Census of India, 2011ⁱ), any discussion of sustainable urban futures must necessarily engage with the empirically studied living conditions of slum communities as reflected in secondary data and case studies. This paper advances the central argument that slum settlements are not accidental outcomes of urbanization but politically produced environments of vulnerability, shaped by a lack of proper planning, land tenure regimes, and socio-political exclusion. By emphasizing slums within the discourse on Sustainable Development Goal 11, the study seeks to demonstrate that India's pursuit of "inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities" (UN-Habitatⁱⁱ, 2015, p. 23) remains aspirational unless slum residents are recognized as legitimate urban citizens entitled to rights and protections.

The research objectives are: first, to critically interrogate how national programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana–Urban (PMAY-U) and the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) reproduce exclusion through relocation, administrative barriers and restrictive procedural requirements, and weak participatory mechanisms; second, to analyse the gap between global frameworks and local realities using case studies from Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai; and third, to contribute to theoretical debates on urban sustainability by integrating perspectives on informality and just sustainability with empirical evidence from Indian cities. Through this approach, the paper positions slum

ⁱ Although this study refers to the Census of India 2011 data, it remains the most recent official enumeration of slum populations available. The 2021 Census was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, as of 2026, has not been conducted. Consequently, Census 2011 continues to serve as the authoritative source for demographic and housing statistics in India, despite its limitations in reflecting current realities.

ⁱⁱ UN-Habitat is the UN agency responsible for promoting socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities. Its World Cities Report 2018 offers a global assessment of urbanisation and sustainability challenges, serving as a key reference for SDG 11.

settlements not as marginal spaces but as central to the politics of urban sustainability.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative design grounded in secondary data analysis. Policy documents, government reports, and scholarly critiques are examined alongside statistical data from the Census of India (2011), the Sustainable Development Report (2025), and the Global Hunger Index (2024). Case studies illustrate recurring patterns of exclusion across diverse urban contexts, ranging from large-scale redevelopment projects to resettlement colonies. Analytical framing is guided by postcolonial urban theory, which highlights how informality and exclusion are structurally placed within governance.

The contribution of this study lies in reframing debates on urban sustainability in India. Rather than understanding slums as failures of planning or temporary irregularities, the paper argues that they are deliberate outcomes of policy choices and exclusions. By integrating theory with empirical evidence, it advances a justice-oriented perspective that challenges technocratic, top-down models of planning and calls for equity-centred, participatory approaches. In this way, the study adds to the literature on urban sustainability and exclusion by insisting that slum settlements must be recognized as legitimate urban spaces and their residents as citizens entitled to rights and protections, central to any vision of sustainable futures in India and beyond.

Conceptual Basis of Urban Sustainability

Urbanization has become a defining feature of modern development, yet persistent disparities have marked its evolution. As Butcher (2020) observes,

We live in an increasingly urban, increasingly inequitable world. This is nowhere more evident than in cities of the global south, where many residents face deep injustices in their ability to access vital services, participate in decision-making, or have their rights recognized as citizens (p. 11).

This statement reflects the paradox of urbanization: while cities are celebrated as engines of growth and innovation, they are also sites of exclusion, vulnerability, and inequality.

Urban sustainability is often described as the ability of cities to maintain and improve living standards for present and future generations while reducing ecological footprints and promoting social justice (Michalina et al., 2021). Wu (2010) conceptualizes it as an adaptive process that sustains a positive cycle

between ecosystem services and human well-being through coordinated ecological, economic, and social measures. This definition highlights the dynamic and integrative nature of sustainability, requiring a balance of social inclusion, environmental protection, and economic vitality.

Spiliotopoulou and Roseland (2020) identify three fundamental dimensions commonly used to operationalize the concept of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social. Environmental sustainability focuses on improving resilience to climate change, reducing pollution, and conserving natural resources. Economic sustainability emphasizes resource efficiency, job creation, and inclusive growth. Social sustainability highlights fair access to housing, healthcare, education, and democratic governance. While these dimensions provide a helpful framework, they remain insufficient to capture the complexity of urban realities, particularly in post-colonial contexts where structural inequalities and contested governance shape the lived experiences of cities.

Despite its widespread use, urban sustainability remains contested and context-dependent. Hamman (2018) notes that the absence of a universally accepted definition has allowed flexibility but also led to fragmented policy design and inconsistent evaluation. Kamble and Bahadure (2024) argue that “urban sustainability must be interpreted as a state in which the level of resource consumption and waste generation remains below the carrying capacity of the supporting systems” (p. 368). While this ecological framing is valuable, it risks neglecting the political, cultural, and historical dimensions of urban life.

Critical scholars emphasize that sustainability is not merely a technical or ecological issue but a profoundly political one. For example, Agyeman et al. (2002) introduced the notion of *just sustainability*, which insists that equity and justice must be central to sustainability debates. Similarly, Campbell’s (1996) *planner’s triangle* highlights the tensions between economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity, showing that sustainability often involves trade-offs rather than harmonious integration.

Post-colonial scholarship adds another layer of critique, emphasizing how colonial legacies of segregation, dispossession, and uneven development continue to shape contemporary urban landscapes. Ananya Roy (2009) argues that informality is not a marginal or accidental phenomenon but a mode of urbanization produced by state practices and governance structures. Gautam Bhan (2016) similarly contends that exclusion from housing and citizenship

rights in cities is politically constructed, reflecting deliberate policy choices rather than planning failures.

This perspective challenges technocratic approaches that treat slums as anomalies to be upgraded or eradicated. Instead, it situates them within broader histories of inequality and exclusion. As UN-Habitat (2020) insists, “urban sustainability must be rooted in the lived experiences of all residents, especially those in slum settlements, to be truly inclusive and resilient.”

The literature reveals two broad strands of thinking about urban sustainability. The first is a technocratic approach, which emphasizes infrastructure, ecological balance, and economic efficiency. The second is a justice-oriented approach, which foregrounds participation, rights, and recognition. While the technocratic perspective dominates global policy frameworks, the justice-oriented strand is increasingly advocated by scholars and activists who argue that sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing structural inequalities. This tension is particularly salient in post-colonial contexts, where historical legacies and contemporary governance practices combine to produce exclusionary urban futures.

To move beyond descriptive engagement, this study systematically operationalizes its theoretical framework into three analytical categories. First, urban informality is treated not as a residual condition but as a governance practice that actively produces precarious housing arrangements; this lens guides the analysis of relocation schemes and land tenure regimes. Second, just sustainability is applied as a normative benchmark to assess whether urban programmes balance efficiency with equity, directing attention to the absence of participatory mechanisms and the marginalization of vulnerable groups. Third, exclusion is used as a category to interpret the denial of rights, services, and recognition to slum residents, highlighting how policy choices reproduce structural inequalities. Together, these categories provide a coherent framework that informs the interpretation of evidence across case studies and supports the central argument that slum settlements must be recognized as legitimate urban spaces within the pursuit of SDG 11.

From MDGs to SDGs: Shifting Paradigms in Global Development

The transition from the MDGs to the SDGs marked a significant paradigm shift in the global development agenda. The MDGs, adopted in 2000, were framed around eight goals that primarily targeted poverty reduction, improved health, and increased access to education in developing countries. While they

achieved notable progress, such as a 50% reduction in extreme poverty and improved primary school enrolment, their scope was limited, and their design reflected a top-down, donor-driven approach (Sachs, 2012).

By contrast, the SDGs, adopted in 2015, represent a more ambitious, universal, and integrated framework. Comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, they cover economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development (National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog)ⁱⁱⁱ, 2019). Revi (2016) describes this shift as historic, noting that the SDGs are not only broader in scope but also explicitly applicable to all countries, developed and developing alike. This universality signals a recognition that sustainability challenges, climate change, inequality, and urbanization are global in nature and require collective responsibility.

The MDGs were criticized for their narrow focus and lack of inclusivity. They focused on aggregate outcomes, such as poverty reduction and maternal health, but often neglected structural inequalities, governance issues, and environmental sustainability (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Moreover, they were primarily designed by international agencies with limited input from local actors, thereby reducing their relevance across diverse contexts. As Hulme (2009) argues, the MDGs reflected a northern agenda for southern problems, sustaining dependency rather than promoting local ownership.

The SDGs sought to address these limitations by emphasizing universality, inclusiveness, and interconnectedness. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs^{iv} (DESA-UNPD, 2019) projects that by 2050, 68% of the global population will reside in urban areas, with three-quarters of cities more unequal than in 1996. This growing disparity has been described as the “urbanization of inequalities” (Butcher et al., 2021, p. 4), explaining the need for development frameworks that explicitly tackle urban challenges.

Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs integrate environmental sustainability and social equity into the development agenda. They also stress the principle of *leaving no one behind*, which requires governments to prioritize marginalized groups and ensure that progress is measured not only in aggregate terms but also in terms of

ⁱⁱⁱ NITI Aayog is the Government of India’s premier policy think tank. Established in 2015 to replace the Planning Commission, it provides strategic and technical advice to central and state governments.

^{iv} DESA-UNPD is responsible for producing the official global demographic estimates and projections, including the World Urbanisation Prospects reports, which provide authoritative data on urban growth and inequality trends.

inclusivity. As NITI Aayog (2019) notes in its presentation to Indian states, “SDGs apply to all countries, with a stronger focus on the responsibility of developed nations and a clear focus on ‘leaving no one behind’.”

Among the 17 goals, SDG 11 is most directly related to urban development. Its targets include:

- Target 11.1: Access to safe, affordable, and adequate housing.
- Target 11.2: Sustainable transport systems.
- Target 11.3: Inclusive urbanization and participatory planning.
- Target 11.6: Reducing environmental harm through improved waste management and air quality.
- Target 11.7: Universal access to public and green spaces.

This goal differs from earlier frameworks because it explicitly recognizes the urban poor, slum settlements, and the need for participatory governance. UN-Habitat (2020) stresses that SDG 11 “cannot be achieved without addressing the conditions of nearly one billion slum dwellers worldwide.” This recognition marks a significant departure from the MDGs, which largely ignored urban poverty and slum conditions.

The move from the MDGs to the SDGs reflects a broader shift in development thinking. This transition marks a move from poverty alleviation to sustainability and resilience, from top-down frameworks to participatory and inclusive approaches, and from a developing-country focus to universal applicability. The shift is particularly significant for urban sustainability, as cities are now recognized not only as engines of growth but also as sites of inequality, exclusion, and environmental stress. The SDGs provide a framework for addressing these challenges holistically, yet their effectiveness ultimately depends on how they are translated into national and local policies.

Despite this rhetorical shift, significant implementation challenges remain. In India, the transition from MDGs to SDGs has been marked by fragmented governance, overlapping schemes, and weak participatory mechanisms. Flagship missions such as the Smart Cities Mission and PMAY-U illustrate how ambitious targets often fail to translate into equitable outcomes. For example, while SDG 11 emphasizes inclusivity, relocation under PMAY-U frequently results in loss of livelihoods and social dislocation, undermining the principle of leaving no one behind. Similarly, the Smart Cities Mission privileges technologically advanced urban cores, sidelining informal settlements and perpetuating exclusion. Scholars such as Kandpal and Okitasari (2023) argue that localization of SDG 11 in India has been hindered by limited institutional

capacity and inadequate recognition of slum communities as legitimate urban actors. These challenges reveal that the transition from MDGs to SDGs, though conceptually progressive, risks reproducing earlier patterns of exclusion unless grounded in participatory governance and equity-centred planning.

Recent debates also caution against assuming that the SDGs' universal framing automatically translates into equitable outcomes. The Centre for Public Policy Research (2025) notes that India's localisation of SDG 11 remains uneven, with city-level frameworks struggling to integrate housing, transport, and participatory planning. Slum livelihoods research (Lucknow study, 2023) further shows that informal work remains precarious, limiting resilience despite policy commitments. These findings highlight that while the SDGs represent a paradigm shift, their implementation in India continues to reproduce exclusionary patterns, particularly in slum settlements.

SDG 11 and Urban Slums in India: Gaps Between Policy and Reality

Urban sustainability is important in the Indian context due to the persistence of informal settlements and the significant scope of urban expansion. It is not merely a technical problem but a political issue, shaped by poor governance, uneven development, and exclusionary planning (Gahlot, Singh, & Abidin, 2023; Roy, 2022). Dominant policy conversations emphasize infrastructure, innovative technologies, and economic growth, while often ignoring the questions of fairness, access, and participation.

The environmental, economic, and social aspects of urban sustainability provide a valuable framework; however, they frequently neglect the political and spatial dynamics that influence urban life in India (See Table 1). Academics contend that sustainability should be redefined to include equity, recognition, and participation, particularly in environments characterized by informal housing, caste hierarchies, and fragmented governance (Agyeman, 2002 & Bhan, 2016). Niranjana Sahoo (2016) notes that exclusionary urbanization benefits certain social groups at the expense of others, directs resources to large metropolises, and deprives small and medium towns of the funds needed for infrastructure and essential services. This uneven development path runs counter to the idea of sustainability that includes everyone and worsens spatial inequality.

Table 1
Dimensions of Urban Sustainability

Dimension	Indicators (India Context)	Challenges in Slum Areas
Environmental	Air/water quality, green cover, waste management	Poor sanitation, high pollution exposure
Economic	Employment, housing affordability, and infrastructure access	Informal labour, insecure tenure, low investment
Social	Access to education, healthcare, and public services	Marginalisation, lack of citizenship recognition

Source: Adapted from UN-Habitat (2021).

UN-Habitat (2020) emphasizes that urban sustainability must be rooted in the lived experiences of all residents, especially those in informal settlements, to be truly inclusive and resilient. Based on this, it is clear that technocratic planning alone will not make cities in India more sustainable. Cities must change how they see and interact with their most marginalized residents. Participatory governance, inclusive data practices, and tenure security are fundamental requirements; they are necessary for a sustainable urban future. Indian cities can only become sustainable if they make equity and recognition central to their urban policies.

India's engagement with SDG 11, to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, has been articulated through flagship missions such as the SCM, Atal Mission for Urban Rejuvenation and Transformation (AMRUT), PMAYU, and the National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM). These programs aim to revitalize urban areas, improve infrastructure, and expand affordable housing. However, despite their scale, the lived realities of slum residents reveal persistent gaps between policy aspirations and outcomes.

Figure: 1
SDG Dashboards and Trends in India



Source: Sustainable Development Report, 2025.

According to the Sustainable Development Report (2025), 41.4% of India’s urban population continues to live in slums, a figure rated “D” on the SDG dashboard (see Figure 1), which shows severe challenges in housing quality, access to basic services, and infrastructure. While access to drinking water (93.3%) and sanitation (78.4%) has improved, wastewater treatment remains critically low at 19.2%, disproportionately affecting slum communities. Health indicators also reflect deprivation: tuberculosis incidence stands at 195 per 100,000, and under-five mortality at 27.7 per 1,000 live births. According to The Hindu (2024), India ranks 105th in the Global Hunger Index (GHI), categorized as serious. The GHI evaluates undernourishment and child mortality across 127 countries, reflecting broader development challenges that impact urban populations, especially in slums. These outcomes discuss how slums remain sites of concentrated poverty and vulnerability, despite aggregate progress on SDGs.

The PMAYU, launched in 2015, is central to India’s *Housing for All* vision. More than 11.2 million homes have been sanctioned across 4,318 cities, yet demand continues to outpace supply. The scheme’s *In Situ Slum Redevelopment* (ISSR)^v component was designed to leverage land as a resource

^v ISSR is a component of the PMAY-U, designed to redevelop slums on government or private land by leveraging land as a resource and attracting private participation. Eligible

and attract private investment. However, critical analyses reveal low occupancy rates, stalled projects, and limited private sector interest. In PMAYU 2.0 (approved in 2024), ISSR was subsumed under other components, reflecting institutional fragmentation and weak implementation capacity.

The Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT have focused on infrastructure modernization, but critics argue that these schemes privilege technologically advanced urban cores while neglecting slum settlements. Rai (2024) notes that affordable housing remains a major problem, especially for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), making it very hard to find affordable housing. This inadequacy forces low-income groups into informal housing, perpetuating exclusion. Several structural issues undermine SDG 11 implementation in India: overlapping schemes create inefficiencies, slums are treated as *illegal encroachments* rather than legitimate urban spaces, planning processes remain top-down, and metropolitan land markets exclude the poor. As Jha (2023) argues, Indian cities need to work to reduce, and eventually eliminate, slums, but this is not happening on the scale it needs to. The persistence of slums reflects not only housing shortages but also governance failures and policy biases.

Recent indices highlight the scale of India's urban challenges. According to the Sustainable Development Report 2025, 41.4% of India's urban population continues to live in slums, a figure rated "D" on the SDG dashboard, signaling severe housing and service deficits. The Global Hunger Index 2024 ranks India 105th out of 127 countries, with a score of 27.3, placing it in the "serious" category. Indicators show 13.7% of the population is undernourished, 35.5% of children under five are stunted, and 18.7% are wasted.

National data also highlights the persistence of deprivation. As of March 2025, 6.54 crore people (1.39 crore households) live in slums nationwide, while 90.6 lakh houses have been delivered under PMAY-U, far short of demand. Estimates project 14.2 million slum households by 2025, reflecting continued rural-to-urban migration and housing shortages. Sanitation and health indicators remain critical: wastewater treatment coverage is only 19.2%, tuberculosis incidence is 195 per 100,000, and under-five mortality stands at 27.7 per 1,000 live births. These figures substantiate the argument that despite flagship missions, India's pursuit of SDG 11 remains aspirational. The persistence of slum

slum households receive a central assistance grant. At the same time, states and cities provide incentives such as additional Floor Space Index (FSI) or Transferable Development Rights (TDR) to make projects financially viable.

populations, inadequate housing delivery, and poor health outcomes demonstrate that implementation challenges are structural, not incidental.

Case studies illustrate these contradictions vividly. Across Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai, exclusionary governance consistently produces vulnerability. A comparative reading shows structural imbalances between growth, equity, and recognition, confirming that slum exclusion is structurally institutionalised in India's urban policy frameworks.

Dharavi in Mumbai, home to nearly one million people, has long been targeted for redevelopment. Redevelopment illustrates how informality is reproduced through governance itself, as insecure housing is generated by exclusionary land markets. The Dharavi Redevelopment Project, first proposed in 2004, remains stalled due to land disputes and fears of displacement. Despite Dharavi's economic vibrancy, its small industries generate an estimated \$1 billion annually, but residents face exclusion from planning processes, showing how redevelopment prioritizes real estate interests over community rights (Bhan, 2016). The Dharavi Redevelopment Project illustrates Roy's (2009) argument that informality is actively produced by state practices. Despite Dharavi's economic vibrancy, redevelopment prioritizes real estate interests over community rights, showing how exclusion is politically constructed rather than incidental. This directly supports the broader claim that slum settlements are outcomes of governance choices that undermine SDG 11's inclusivity.

In Delhi's JJ clusters^{vi}, PMAYU's ISSR component aimed to upgrade settlements, but many residents were relocated to peripheral areas with poor connectivity and limited services. Reports by the Housing and Land Rights Network (2023)^{vii} highlight how relocation often results in loss of livelihoods and social dislocation, undermining SDG 11's promise of adequate housing. Relocation of JJ clusters exposes the politics of exclusion, where citizenship is redefined through the denial of tenure and recognition. The relocation of JJ cluster residents to peripheral areas reflects Bhan's (2016) analysis of citizenship exclusion, where urban poor are denied recognition as legitimate city dwellers.

^{vi} JJ clusters (Jhuggi Jhopri clusters) are informal squatter settlements in Delhi, consisting of rows of temporary hutments built on public or private land. They are considered encroachments rather than legally recognised housing, and thus often excluded from formal planning and service delivery frameworks.

^{vii} The Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) is a New Delhi-based civil society organisation that works on housing rights, land governance, and urban policy. Its 2023 reports document the impacts of forced evictions and resettlement in Indian cities, highlighting how relocation undermines livelihoods and social inclusion.

The resulting livelihood losses and social dislocation demonstrate how housing policies reproduce inequality, reinforcing the argument that slums are politically produced spaces of vulnerability.

Bengaluru's slum settlements reveal another dimension. At the same time, the Smart Cities Mission invested in digital infrastructure and surveillance systems, but slum communities were excluded from planning. Basic services such as sanitation and waste management remained neglected (Raman, 2022). This case illustrates the technocratic bias of urban missions, where smartness is equated with technology rather than equity. The Smart Cities Mission in Bengaluru highlights Campbell's (1996) planner's triangle, where growth and technological modernisation are prioritized over equity. The neglect of sanitation and waste management in slum settlements shows how technocratic approaches sideline justice, confirming Agyeman's (2002) critique that sustainability without equity is incomplete.

In Chennai, resettlement colonies such as Perumbakkam provided formal housing but were located far from employment centres, schools, and hospitals. Residents reported increased hardship due to commuting costs and loss of social networks (Coelho & Maringanti, 2018). This shows how housing policies, though aligned with SDG 11, can exacerbate exclusion when they fail to integrate livelihoods and social infrastructure. Resettlement colonies such as Perumbakkam reveal the limits of infrastructure-led housing policies. By relocating communities far from employment and services, these schemes exacerbate exclusion, illustrating the trade-off between growth and equity. This case reinforces the broader argument that slum policies, even when aligned with SDG 11, fail to deliver justice-oriented sustainability.

Taken together, these cases reveal systematic policy dilemmas: redevelopment in Mumbai privileges capital, relocation in Delhi undermines citizenship, bureaucratic planning in Bengaluru neglects justice, and resettlement in Chennai compromises livelihoods. The comparative lens shows that despite contextual differences; exclusion is consistently reproduced through governance frameworks. This strengthens the theoretical claim that slums are politically produced spaces of vulnerability.

Scholars such as Gilbert (2007) raise concerns about the uncritical use of the term slum, which can perpetuate stigma and justify demolition rather than inclusive upgrading. UN-Habitat (2018) defines slum households as lacking durable housing, sufficient living space, safe water, adequate sanitation, or security of tenure. These criteria highlight that slums are not simply illegal spaces

but manifestations of systemic exclusion. From a post-colonial perspective, slums must be understood as politically produced spaces. Gautam Bhan (2016) argues that exclusion from housing and citizenship rights is incorporated in governance structures, while Ananya Roy (2009) highlights how state practices actively produce informality.

To reduce the gap between SDG 11's goals and slum dwellers' realities, India requires integrated governance across urban missions, meaningful community participation in planning processes, and legal acknowledgement of slum settlements as valid components of the urban landscape. Targeted housing, sanitation, and healthcare initiatives are critical for addressing the structural inequities that lead to deprivation. As UN-Habitat (2020) emphasizes, urban sustainability must be rooted in the lived experiences of all residents, especially those in slum settlements, to be truly inclusive and resilient. Without embedding equity and recognition at the core of urban policy, India's pursuit of SDG 11 risks remaining aspirational rather than transformative.

Overall, these empirical observations confirm that slum exclusion in India is not accidental but structurally incorporated in governance and policy frameworks. By applying theoretical lenses of informality, just sustainability, and planners' trade-offs, the analysis demonstrates that slums are politically produced spaces of vulnerability. This linkage between empirical evidence and theory strengthens the argument that India's pursuit of SDG 11 will remain aspirational unless equity and recognition are placed at the centre of urban policy.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that India's pursuit of urban sustainability is systematically undermined by exclusionary governance. Across Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai, the evidence reveals that slum vulnerability is not incidental but structurally entrenched: redevelopment in Mumbai privileges capital, relocation in Delhi undermines citizenship, smart city investments in Bengaluru marginalize justice, and resettlement in Chennai compromises livelihoods and safety. Collectively, these cases show that exclusion persists across diverse governance models, confirming that slum settlements are politically produced spaces rather than anomalies of planning.

Theoretically, the study extends debates on informality (Roy, 2009), citizenship exclusion (Bhan, 2016), and just sustainability (Agyeman, 2002) by situating them within the empirical context of SDG 11. It demonstrates that sustainability cannot be reduced to infrastructure or technocratic planning; rather,

it must be redefined to include equity, recognition, and participation. The integration of recent datasets, such as the Sustainable Development Report 2025, Economic Survey 2023–24, and IRCUDC's studies on Chennai resettlement, strengthens the claim that national missions reproduce inequality despite their stated inclusivity. These findings contribute new comparative evidence on how slum exclusion is reproduced across India's metropolitan centres.

Policy-wise, the analysis emphasizes that slum-sensitive strategies are not optional but foundational. Participatory governance, incremental upgrading, and recognition of informal economies must be central to urban policy, not peripheral. Global frameworks, such as UN-Habitat's five pillars, provide useful direction. However, they must be critically adapted to India's socio-political realities, ensuring that slum dwellers are treated as active agents of transformation rather than passive recipients.

In sum, India's urban future will remain unsustainable unless slum settlements are recognized as legitimate urban spaces and their residents as citizens. Justice-oriented urbanism anchored in rights, recognition, and participation constitutes the very foundation of sustainability. By rooting equity at the centre of urban policy, India can move beyond technocratic promises and create pathways toward truly inclusive and resilient cities.

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