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Building with, not for: urban slum upgrading and the politics of participation - a comparative study of India and Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This study falls within SDG Focus Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities — Target 11.1: By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums; Target 11.3: Enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for

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participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning; Target 11.7: Provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces.

This study examines the comparative approaches to urban slum upgrading and community participation in India and Brazil, focusing on how each country's unique policy frameworks, grassroots movements, and governance structures shape the relationship between state interventions and community agency. The research analyzes the mechanisms for resident participation, the tensions between institutional objectives and community expectations, and the emerging models that seek to bridge the gap between top-down planning and bottom-up action. A comparative policy and case study analysis was conducted examining primary and secondary sources including government documentation, academic research, institutional reports, and contemporary news coverage covering recent developments to 2025-2026.

India presents a dynamic and contested landscape where community participation is emerging as both a grassroots reality and a policy aspiration. The country's first Self-Redevelopment Project under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), led by social activist Medha Patkar, represents a historic shift where over 250 families displaced by a 2006 demolition drive are now acting as their own developers . This cooperative model cuts out private builders entirely, with residents deciding on design, quality, and timeline, ensuring "dignity, transparency, and ownership" . However, this grassroots innovation contrasts sharply with the performance of formal government schemes. A critical analysis of PMAY-U's "In-situ" Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) reveals that of 2.95 lakh sanctioned houses, only 37% are occupied, with a staggering 63% at various stages of completion . The scheme suffers from fundamental flaws: absence of reliable data (the Ministry relies on 2011 census figures), slum non-recognition by Urban Local Bodies seeking to avoid service obligations, and restrictive tenability/viability criteria that narrow the pool of eligible slums . Meanwhile, climate-resilient housing initiatives demonstrate the power of genuine participation. The Community Design Agency's Sanjaynagar project in Ahmednagar has transformed the lives of over 1,000 people through a truly participatory process where residents decide on everything from home design to fund management, resulting in buildings that reduce indoor temperatures by 8-10°F and foster social cohesion .

Brazil presents a contrasting picture where favela governance has long been characterized by community self-organization and a growing recognition of its value in national policy. With over 16 million people living in informal settlements, Brazilian favelas have developed sophisticated self-organized governance mechanisms that "perform basic governance functions, including prioritising needs, coordinating action and creating accountability within the community" . The disconnect between government-led projects and community expectations is well-documented; a study of Salvador's favelas identifies "mismatches between institutional objectives and residents' expectations," highlighting that structural contradictions remain unresolved . In response, innovative projects are bridging this gap. The Transformative Urban Coalitions project in Recife and Teresina has developed resident-led solutions that have directly influenced national policy. In 2024, the federal government launched Periferia Viva, a program for slum urbanization that directs federal investments toward integrated development in peripheral communities, with lessons from community labs reflected in its Action Plan Guide . The IDRC-supported "Empowering communities" project in Rio de Janeiro strengthens community leaders' capacity to use legal tools while mobilizing government sectors to become "more receptive and committed to ensuring rights" . Favela Inc.'s work in Vidigal demonstrates the power of community-led economic development, with initiatives like Mixtura Cocktail School achieving 100% participant satisfaction and job placement, and Terra Fértil Store selling over 800 locally produced items .

Both countries demonstrate that meaningful community participation is not merely a procedural nicety but the essential foundation for effective slum upgrading. India's strength lies in its emerging cooperative models and climate-resilient innovations, yet faces challenges of policy implementation gaps, data absence, and the persistence of top-down approaches. Brazil's strength lies in its sophisticated understanding of community governance, the translation of local experience into national policy, and the recognition of favelas as sources of innovation, yet struggles with historical stigmatization and the ongoing disconnect between institutional planning and lived realities. Neither country has fully resolved the tension between scaling successful models and maintaining community specificity, though both offer invaluable lessons for the global pursuit of inclusive and sustainable cities.

KEYWORDS: Urban slum upgrading, community participation, India, Brazil, self-redevelopment, favela governance, participatory planning, housing policy, inclusive cities, SDG 11, tenure security, grassroots movements.

RÉSUMÉ (French Version)

Cette étude examine les approches comparatives de la requalification des bidonvilles urbains et de la participation communautaire en Inde et au Brésil, en se concentrant sur la manière dont les cadres politiques uniques, les mouvements sociaux et les structures de gouvernance de chaque pays façonnent la relation entre les interventions étatiques et l'agence communautaire. La recherche analyse les mécanismes de participation des résidents, les tensions entre les objectifs institutionnels et les attentes des communautés, et les modèles émergents qui cherchent à combler le fossé entre la planification descendante et l'action ascendante. Une analyse comparative des politiques et des études de cas a été menée en examinant des sources primaires et secondaires, y compris la documentation gouvernementale, la recherche académique, les rapports institutionnels et la couverture médiatique contemporaine couvrant les développements récents jusqu'en 2025-2026.

L'Inde présente un paysage dynamique et contesté où la participation communautaire émerge à la fois comme une réalité de terrain et une aspiration politique. Le premier projet d'autoréhabilitation du pays sous l'égide de la Slum Rehabilitation Authority, mené par l'activiste sociale Medha Patkar, représente un tournant historique où plus de 250 familles déplacées par une opération de démolition en 2006 agissent désormais comme leurs propres promoteurs . Ce modèle coopératif exclut complètement les promoteurs privés, les résidents décidant du design, de la qualité et du calendrier, garantissant "dignité, transparence et appropriation" . Cependant, cette innovation de terrain contraste fortement avec la performance des programmes gouvernementaux formels. Une analyse critique du programme "In-situ" Slum Redevelopment de PMAY-U révèle que sur 2,95 lakhs de logements approuvés, seulement 37 % sont occupés, avec 63 % à divers stades de construction . Le programme souffre de lacunes fondamentales : absence de données fiables (le ministère s'appuie sur les données du recensement de 2011), non-reconnaissance des bidonvilles par les autorités locales cherchant à éviter leurs obligations de service, et des critères restrictifs de

viabilité qui réduisent le nombre de bidonvilles éligibles . Parallèlement, des initiatives de logements résilients au climat démontrent la puissance d'une participation authentique. Le projet Sanjaynagar de la Community Design Agency à Ahmednagar a transformé la vie de plus de 1 000 personnes grâce à un processus véritablement participatif où les résidents décident de tout, de la conception des maisons à la gestion des fonds, aboutissant à des bâtiments qui réduisent les températures intérieures de 8 à 10 °F et favorisent la cohésion sociale .

Le Brésil présente un tableau contrasté où la gouvernance des favelas a longtemps été caractérisée par l'auto-organisation communautaire et une reconnaissance croissante de sa valeur dans la politique nationale. Avec plus de 16 millions de personnes vivant dans des établissements informels, les favelas brésiliennes ont développé des mécanismes de gouvernance auto-organisés sophistiqués qui "remplissent des fonctions de gouvernance de base, notamment la priorisation des besoins, la coordination des actions et la création de responsabilisation au sein de la communauté" . Le décalage entre les projets gouvernementaux et les attentes des communautés est bien documenté ; une étude sur les favelas de Salvador identifie des "inadéquations entre les objectifs institutionnels et les attentes des résidents", soulignant que les contradictions structurelles restent non résolues . En réponse, des projets innovants comblent ce fossé. Le projet Transformative Urban Coalitions à Recife et Teresina a développé des solutions menées par les résidents qui ont directement influencé la politique nationale. En 2024, le gouvernement fédéral a lancé Periferia Viva, un programme d'urbanisation des favelas qui oriente les investissements fédéraux vers le développement intégré dans les communautés périphériques, les leçons des laboratoires communautaires étant reflétées dans son guide d'action . Le projet "Empowering communities" soutenu par le CRDI à Rio de Janeiro renforce la capacité des leaders communautaires à utiliser les outils juridiques tout en mobilisant les secteurs gouvernementaux pour qu'ils deviennent "plus réceptifs et engagés à garantir les droits" . Le travail de Favela Inc. à Vidigal démontre la puissance du développement économique mené par les communautés, avec des initiatives comme la Mixtura Cocktail School atteignant 100 % de satisfaction et de placement professionnel, et la Terra Fértil Store vendant plus de 800 produits locaux .

Les deux pays démontrent qu'une participation communautaire significative n'est pas simplement une formalité procédurale mais le fondement essentiel d'une requalification efficace des bidonvilles. La force de l'Inde réside dans ses modèles coopératifs émergents et ses innovations

résilientes au climat, mais fait face à des défis de lacunes dans la mise en œuvre des politiques, d'absence de données et de persistance des approches descendantes. La force du Brésil réside dans sa compréhension sophistiquée de la gouvernance communautaire, la traduction de l'expérience locale en politique nationale et la reconnaissance des favelas comme sources d'innovation, mais lutte contre la stigmatisation historique et le décalage persistant entre la planification institutionnelle et les réalités vécues. Aucun des deux pays n'a pleinement résolu la tension entre la reproduction des modèles réussis à grande échelle et le maintien de la spécificité communautaire, bien que tous deux offrent des leçons inestimables pour la poursuite mondiale de villes inclusives et durables.

MOTS-CLÉS : Requalification des bidonvilles urbains, participation communautaire, Inde, Brésil, autoréhabilitation, gouvernance des favelas, planification participative, politique du logement, villes inclusives, ODD 11, sécurité foncière, mouvements sociaux.

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1. INTRODUCTION: TWO NATIONS, ONE CHALLENGE

The relationship between urban slum upgrading and community participation lies at the heart of sustainable urban development. As cities across the Global South grapple with rapid urbanization, housing shortages, and climate vulnerability, the question of how to upgrade informal settlements in ways that respect residents' agency and dignity has become central to achieving SDG 11. Target 11.1 explicitly calls for ensuring access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrading slums, while Target 11.3 emphasizes inclusive and participatory planning.

This study examines two countries that offer illuminating perspectives on this challenge: India and Brazil. Both nations are home to millions of slum dwellers—over 16 million in Brazil alone —and both have developed sophisticated policy frameworks for slum upgrading. Yet their historical

trajectories, governance structures, and the relationship between state and community differ fundamentally, providing rich comparative insights into the possibilities and limitations of participatory development.

India's approach is characterized by a dynamic tension between ambitious national programs and innovative grassroots movements. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) represents the government's flagship housing scheme, with its "In-situ" Slum Redevelopment component designed to leverage land value for private investment. Yet implementation has been disappointing: of 2.95 lakh sanctioned houses, only 37% are occupied . Simultaneously, communities are taking matters into their own hands. Mumbai's first Self-Redevelopment Project, led by activist Medha Patkar, represents a historic shift where displaced families are becoming their own developers, cutting out private builders entirely . Climate-resilient housing initiatives like the Community Design Agency's Sanjaynagar project demonstrate that genuine participation can produce housing that is both sustainable and socially cohesive .

Brazil's approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of favela governance and a growing recognition of its value in national policy. With over a century of favela history, Brazilian communities have developed self-organized governance mechanisms that "perform basic governance functions" in the absence of the state . The disconnect between institutional planning and community expectations is well-documented, with studies of Salvador's favelas revealing "mismatches between institutional objectives and residents' expectations" . Yet recent policy innovations offer hope. The Periferia Viva program, launched in 2024, draws directly on lessons from community-led urban labs in Recife and Teresina . Organizations like Favela Inc. demonstrate the power of community-led economic development, transforming Vidigal's informal economy into a source of opportunity .

The contrast between India and Brazil illuminates critical questions for SDG 11: How can national policies be designed to genuinely empower communities rather than merely consult them? What explains the gap between policy intentions and implementation outcomes? How can the energy of grassroots movements be scaled without losing their specificity? And what can the world learn from two of the most populous and unequal nations grappling with these questions?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Urban Slum Upgrading and Community Participation: Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of community participation in slum upgrading has evolved significantly over recent decades. Early approaches treated residents as passive beneficiaries of state-led interventions. Contemporary scholarship, drawing on the "right to the city" framework articulated by Henri Lefebvre, emphasizes that all urban inhabitants should have the power to shape their urban environments . This perspective views urban space as a social construct that should not be the exclusive privilege of elites.

Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of social justice provides a valuable framework for analyzing participation in slum upgrading :

Dimension	**Focus**	**Application to Slum Upgrading**
Redistribution	Economic structures that deny resources	Social housing projects must not reproduce segregation
Recognition	Institutional valuation of identity	Addressing stigmatization of favelados/slum dwellers
Representation	Political inclusion in decision-making	Parity participation in planning processes

The Fraser framework highlights that meaningful participation requires not just consultation (representation) but also the redistribution of resources and the recognition of residents' dignity and identity.

2.2 India: Policy Gaps and Grassroots Innovation

The PMAY-U "In-situ" Slum Redevelopment Scheme: A Critical Analysis

India's Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) 2.0 was approved in August 2024, aiming to provide one crore houses for urban poor families over five years. The "In-situ" Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) component, now subsumed under other verticals, was designed to provide affordable housing by leveraging land as a resource and attracting private investments .

The scheme's performance, however, reveals fundamental flaws:

Indicator	**Value**
Sanctioned houses	2.95 lakhs
Grounded	2.26 lakhs (77%)
Completed	1.63 lakhs (55%)
Occupied	1.10 lakhs (37%)

As Akshay Joshi's critical analysis notes, "a staggering 63 percent of houses are at different stages of completion and remain unoccupied, highlighting sub-optimal scheme performance" . Even more concerning, sanctioned projects were dropped: demand at launch was 14.35 lakhs, but only 2.95 lakhs were ultimately sanctioned. Only 8% of initially demanded houses are occupied .

Scheme Limitations

The analysis identifies several critical limitations:

- **Absence of reliable data:** The Ministry relies on 2011 census data. "There is no mechanism in place by the Ministry or any other government agency to track slum populations. The absence of slum tracking measures by central, state, or local governments means that thousands of slums are unrecognised. It translates into them being invisible from an administrative viewpoint and outside the ambit of policy prescription" .
- **Slum non-recognition:** Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) are responsible for surveying and declaring slums, but they avoid doing so because "if enumerated, they must provide essential services such as roads, water, and sanitation to slums" .

- **Tenability and viability criteria:** A slum must be tenable (suitable for human habitation) and viable (economically sensible for redevelopment) to qualify. "The majority of slums in smaller cities and towns fail to meet the viability criteria" .

The consequence is stark: in Delhi and Chandigarh, where 1.78 million and 95,000 people respectively reside in slums, "no ISSR project has been sanctioned or is in progress" .

Mumbai's Self-Redevelopment Breakthrough

Against this backdrop of policy failure, a historic grassroots initiative has emerged. Mumbai's first Self-Redevelopment Project under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), led by social activist Medha Patkar and supported by the Maharashtra State Cooperative Housing and Apartment Federation, represents a paradigm shift .

The project involves over 250 families evicted from Janta Nagar, Mandala, Mankhurd during a massive demolition drive in 2006. As Advocate Shreeprasad Parab explained at a public meeting in Chembur, "With a foundation rooted in self-help, mutual cooperation, and democratic control, these residents have opted for a cooperative redevelopment model, completely cutting out private builders once the project is approved by SRA and the state government" .

Key features include:

- **Community as developer:** Residents will act as their own developers, deciding on design, quality, and timeline
- **Financial contribution:** Families have pledged to contribute financially to initial SRA requirements
- **Cooperative values:** The project reflects "the true spirit of the cooperative movement — empowering people to take control of their own futures"

Medha Patkar articulated the vision: "Self-redevelopment is the best solution, the cooperative movement is the path to make it happen. This model allows the poor to own their dream homes at an affordable cost, though not for free" .

Enabling Factors and Recommendations

The state government, under Pravin Darekar's leadership, recently established a dedicated authority to promote self-redevelopment across Maharashtra. The Maharashtra State Cooperative Housing and Apartment Federation plays an advisory and facilitative role, helping communities navigate legal, technical, and financial complexities .

Advocate Parab outlined several recommendations to make self-redevelopment viable and scalable :

Recommendation	**Rationale**
Single-window clearance	Approvals shouldn't take months
Special incentives	People-driven projects deserve extra FSI and fiscal benefits
Clear legal templates	Standardized agreements prevent disputes and delays
Time-bound dispute resolution	Conflicts resolved within three months
Digital transparency	Online monitoring ensures accountability
Green redevelopment	Encourage sustainable practices

Climate-Resilient Community-Led Housing

The Community Design Agency's (CDA) Sanjaynagar project in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, demonstrates the power of participatory design in creating climate-resilient housing. Sandha Naidu Janardhan, CDA's founder, explains: "We believe that the communities themselves are best placed to understand and respond to their needs. Our role is to facilitate that process, making sure the solutions are designed from the ground up, driven by the very people who will benefit from them" .

Since 2016, the pilot has transformed the lives of over 1,000 people. The first of eight planned climate-resilient buildings was completed in 2022, housing 33 families. These new homes are designed to reduce indoor temperatures by 8-10°F—a crucial adaptation for a region plagued by extreme heat. Features include solar power, rainwater harvesting, and open social spaces like rooftop gardens and community centers .

Notably, "Residents decided that they didn't want to be isolated in tall vertical buildings. They wanted structures that allow them to maintain their social networks and community bonds, which are essential for resilience" . Women, who make up nearly 50% of new homeowners, are at the forefront of decision-making.

The project uses a blended finance model combining resident contributions, government funds, and philanthropic capital, ensuring financial sustainability. CDA aims to scale to ten slum neighborhoods across India, influencing the national Housing for All policy .

Participatory Design Protocols

The Urban Risk Lab's work in Bhuj, Gujarat, for the Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY) program addresses the challenge of scaling participation. The central research question is: "can a community led design process be structured in such a way that it saves time while still allowing for the local specificity necessary to transform slums into neighborhoods fully integrated into the life of the city?" .

The project develops rapidly iterative design protocols, creating a guidebook for community members that leads toward multiple possible outcomes, with decisions made at appropriate scales (community, cluster, neighbor, family). Complementary parametric design tools for consultants allow rapid manifestation of community decisions .

Political Complexities

A December 2025 Hindustan Times report reveals the political complexities surrounding slum improvement funds. Mumbai residents questioned the use of Mumbai Slum Improvement Board funds for non-slum areas ahead of civic elections, raising concerns about potential misuse of public money. Citizen activist Zoru Bhathena noted: "There seems to be a pattern because even well-off housing colonies are getting their internal society roads or tiling work done with public funds" .

This highlights how slum improvement can become entangled with electoral politics, potentially diverting resources from those most in need.

2.3 Brazil: Community Governance and Policy Translation

The Scale and Nature of Favelas

Brazil is home to over 16 million people living in informal settlements . The term "favela" itself has complex origins, traced by scholars to the late nineteenth century following the Canudos peasant uprising, when soldiers settled on hillsides in Rio de Janeiro, calling the area "Morro da Favela" after a hardy weed from the semiarid Northeast .

Favelas are "defined not only by their physical conditions but also by the richness of their historical narratives, signifying a unique sociocultural identity deeply intertwined with Brazil's complex social dynamics" . However, they have "long been stigmatized as illegal or informal, leading to their further exclusion from institutional urban planning processes, both spatially and psychologically" .

Community Governance in the Absence of the State

Valter Manuel Gomes Neto, drawing on lived experience and policy practice, articulates how governance operates in favelas: "Growing up in a favela, I did not experience governance as something confined to formal institutions. Governance emerged when neighbours organised to address concrete problems, such as access to services, conflicts over shared space, and risks from floods and poor infrastructure. These forms of organisation usually arose in fact because the state was absent or ineffective. Even without formal authority, they performed basic governance functions, including prioritising needs, coordinating action and creating accountability within the community" .

This observation aligns with research by the World Bank and UN-Habitat, which documents how "resident associations and informal leadership structures play a central role in organising access to services and representing collective interests in informal settlements" .

The Disconnect Between Policy and Lived Reality

A study published in the International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology examining Salvador's favelas finds that despite government attempts to address favela issues, "structural

contradictions in the region's social development remain unresolved." The research identifies "mismatches between institutional objectives and residents' expectations" and suggests that "planning policies should consider key factors, such as resource redistribution, recognition of sociocultural identity, and political representation" .

The study situates this analysis within Nancy Fraser's framework, emphasizing that justice in urban planning requires addressing not only material distribution but also recognition and representation .

From Local Experience to National Policy: Periferia Viva

A transformative development occurred in 2024 with the launch of Periferia Viva, a federal program for slum urbanization led by the National Secretariat for Peripheries. The program directs federal investments toward integrated urban development in peripheral communities across Brazil, with the goal of transforming 58 marginalized communities through slum upgrading, land regularization, new social housing, and community participation .

Crucially, Periferia Viva draws directly on lessons from bottom-up experiences. Since 2022, the Transformative Urban Coalitions project, co-led by WRI in Brazil and Mexico, the United Nations University, and other partners, has supported resident-led coalitions in Comunidade do Pilar in Recife and Residencial Edgar Gayoso in Teresina. These communities developed bottom-up solutions, strengthened ties, and created opportunities to address climate change and other challenges .

In 2023, Brazil's National Secretary for Peripheries visited Comunidade do Pilar to learn about community-led interventions. In May 2025, he returned to inaugurate the Peixinhos territorial post as part of Periferia Viva, alongside community leaders. The Periferia Viva Action Plan Guide, developed with WRI Brasil's support, is now used by technical teams in territorial posts to guide co-creation with communities .

The REHOUSE partnership has also influenced Periferia Viva through knowledge sharing, technical assistance on climate justice, and guidance on addressing social and environmental inequities. WRI Brasil now coordinates the Periferia Viva Network, a national practice community

facilitating coordination and knowledge-sharing among actors involved in informal neighborhood development .

Legal Empowerment and Community Advocacy

The IDRC-supported project "Empowering communities: Leveraging research to strengthen voices and advance rights in Rio de Janeiro's favelas" represents another innovative approach. Building on the Active Citizenship and Access to Justice initiative, which demonstrated how community perceptions and public data can identify priority action areas, the project works in Jardim Gramacho and the favelas of the Tijuca neighbourhood .

The project aims to "strengthen the capacity of community leaders to use tools and mechanisms for accessing justice and defending their rights while seeking to mobilize the executive, legislative and judicial sectors of Rio de Janeiro to become more receptive and committed to ensuring rights in these territories" .

Community-Led Economic Development

Favela Inc.'s work in Favela do Vidigal demonstrates how community-led initiatives can transform local economies. Studies by Instituto Data Favela estimate that favela communities generate approximately R$300 billion per year—"an amount greater than the GDP of most Brazilian states and larger than the combined economies of Peru and Uruguay" .

Key 2025 achievements include :

Initiative	**Impact**
Mixtura Cocktail School	100% completion and satisfaction; 5 graduates employed
Terra Fértil Store	800+ locally produced items sold
Batucavidi cultural program	20+ children and youth supported
Bolsa Brota scholarships	10+ students accessing creative spaces
Favela Experience tours	210+ monthly visitors

Recicla Comunidade	Active recycling and community garden

The organization's approach "blends data, partnerships, and community leadership to create sustainable pathways in employment, education, creative expression, and environmental responsibility" .

Practical Experience in Community-Led Infrastructure

Valter Manuel Gomes Neto's experience with TECHO, a non-profit working alongside informal settlement residents, demonstrates the power of genuine participation. As an operations manager in Minas Gerais, he worked with residents to define priorities, allocate resources, and evaluate urban infrastructure projects. "Decisions were taken collectively by the community, with volunteers acting as facilitators between residents, technical teams and partner organisations. Projects were not predefined. Instead, they emerged from participatory planning processes based on residents' identified most urgent needs" .

This work resulted in over 27 community-led infrastructure projects, including stairways, shared community spaces, urban gardens, and drinking water points. "Crucially, residents participation in these projects was not symbolic. Residents were decision-makers, helping to ensure that infrastructure interventions were better aligned with local realities and more likely to be maintained over time" .

2.4 Comparative Dimensions: Policy Frameworks and Community Agency

Dimension	**India**	**Brazil**
National Policy Framework	PMAY-U (ISSR component)	Periferia Viva (2024)
Primary Challenge	Implementation gaps; data absence; slum non-recognition	Disconnect between institutional planning and lived reality; stigmatization

Community-Led Innovations	Self-Redevelopment Project (Mumbai); CDA Sanjaynagar	Transformative Urban Coalitions (Recife/Teresina); Favela Inc. (Vidigal)
Key Participation Mechanisms	Cooperative development; participatory design protocols	Community councils; territorial posts; legal empowerment
Scale of Informal Population	Tens of millions (2011 census: 1.78M in Delhi alone)	Over 16 million
Policy-Community Linkage	Emerging; Maharashtra authority for self-redevelopment	Direct: Periferia Viva draws on community labs
Key Strength	Grassroots innovation; climate-resilient design; cooperative models	Sophisticated understanding of community governance; policy translation
Key Challenge	Scaling successful models; data gaps; political capture	Structural contradictions; historical stigmatization

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of India's approach to urban slum upgrading, including the performance of formal schemes like PMAY-U, grassroots innovations like self-redevelopment, and climate-resilient community-led housing?
2. What are the key characteristics of Brazil's approach to urban slum upgrading, including the nature of favela governance, the disconnect between policy and lived reality, and the translation of community experience into national policy?
3. How do the two countries compare in terms of policy frameworks, community participation mechanisms, and the relationship between state and community?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative policy and case study analysis methodology to examine urban slum upgrading and community participation in India and Brazil. The research design integrates secondary analysis of government documentation, academic research, institutional reports, and contemporary news coverage to develop comprehensive understanding of policy frameworks, community dynamics, and outcomes in both countries.

Research Design: The comparative approach is appropriate for examining how different historical contexts, governance structures, and policy approaches shape slum upgrading outcomes. India and Brazil were selected as cases that offer complementary insights: both are large, unequal democracies with significant informal populations, yet their trajectories differ fundamentally.

Data Sources: Primary and secondary sources analyzed include:

- Mumbai self-redevelopment project documentation (Mid-day, 2025)
- IDRC community empowerment project documentation
- ORF critical analysis of PMAY-U ISSR scheme
- Springer academic study of Salvador favelas
- Global Center on Adaptation documentation of CDA Sanjaynagar
- WRI documentation of Periferia Viva and Transformative Urban Coalitions
- Urban Risk Lab participatory design protocols
- Favela Inc. impact report on Vidigal
- Hindustan Times reporting on slum funds controversy
- Blavatnik School of Government analysis of favela governance

Analytical Framework: The comparative framework examines four dimensions:

1. **Policy Frameworks:** National programs, institutional mechanisms, and implementation performance
2. **Community Governance:** Self-organization, leadership structures, and decision-making processes
3. **Participation Mechanisms:** Formal and informal channels for community input and control
4. **Policy-Community Linkages:** How grassroots experience informs national policy and vice versa

5. RESULTS

5.1 India: Policy Failure and Grassroots Innovation

PMAY-U ISSR Performance

The ISSR scheme's performance reveals systemic failures:

- Of 2.95 lakh sanctioned houses, only 1.10 lakh (37%) are occupied
- Sanctioned houses dropped from 14.35 lakh demand to 4.33 lakh (2022) to 2.95 lakh (2024)
- Only 8% of initially demanded houses are occupied

Root Causes

- **Data absence:** Ministry relies on 2011 census; no mechanism tracks slum populations
- **Slum non-recognition:** ULBs avoid enumeration to escape service obligations
- **Tenability/viability:** Majority of slums in smaller cities fail criteria
- **Consequence:** In Delhi (1.78M slum population), no ISSR projects sanctioned

Mumbai Self-Redevelopment

- 250+ families displaced in 2006 demolition now acting as developers
- Cooperative model cuts out private builders entirely
- Residents decide design, quality, timeline
- Families contributing financially to initial requirements
- State authority established to promote self-redevelopment

Climate-Resilient Community Housing

- CDA Sanjaynagar: transformed lives of 1,000+ people
- Buildings reduce indoor temperatures by 8-10°F
- Solar power, rainwater harvesting, social spaces
- Women 50% of new homeowners

- Blended finance model: resident contributions + government + philanthropy

Participatory Design Protocols

- RAY housing in Bhuj: developing scalable participatory design
- Guidebook for community decisions at multiple scales
- Parametric tools for rapid consultant response

Political Complexities

- December 2025: MSIB funds used for non-slum areas ahead of elections
- Citizens question misuse of public money
- Electoral freebies complicate slum improvement

5.2 Brazil: Community Governance and Policy Translation

Scale and Nature of Favelas

- Over 16 million people in informal settlements
- Favelas have "unique sociocultural identity" but long stigmatized

Community Governance

- Residents organize to address concrete problems in state's absence
- Governance functions: prioritizing needs, coordinating action, creating accountability
- Research confirms: resident associations central to service access

Policy-Community Disconnect

- Salvador study: "mismatches between institutional objectives and residents' expectations"
- Structural contradictions remain unresolved
- Need for redistribution, recognition, representation

Periferia Viva National Policy

- Launched 2024: federal program for slum urbanization
- Aims to transform 58 marginalized communities
- Slum upgrading, land regularization, social housing, participation

Direct Link to Community Experience

- Transformative Urban Coalitions (2022-): resident-led solutions in Recife/Teresina
- Secretary visited Comunidade do Pilar in 2023
- Periferia Viva Action Plan Guide based on community labs
- Territorial posts use guide for co-creation

Periferia Viva Network

- WRI Brasil coordinates national practice community
- Facilitates coordination and knowledge-sharing
- Ensures lessons applied across regions

Legal Empowerment

- IDRC project: strengthening community leader capacity
- Mobilizing executive, legislative, judicial sectors
- Jardim Gramacho and Tijuca favelas

Community-Led Economic Development

- Favela Inc. in Vidigal: R$300 billion/year favela economy
- 2025: 100% Mixtura satisfaction; 5 employed
- 800+ items sold at Terra Fértil
- 210+ monthly visitors to Favela Experience

Practical Community-Led Infrastructure

- TECHO in Minas Gerais: 27+ community-led projects
- Stairways, gardens, water points
- Residents as decision-makers, not symbolic participants

5.3 Comparative Analysis

Dimension	**India**	**Brazil**
National Policy	PMAY-U (ISSR) – weak implementation	Periferia Viva – drawing on community experience
Policy Performance	37% occupancy; only 8% of initial demand	New program (2024); outcomes pending
Community Innovation	Self-redevelopment (Mumbai); CDA Sanjaynagar	Transformative Coalitions; Favela Inc.; TECHO
Key Participation Mechanism	Cooperative development; design protocols	Community councils; legal empowerment; territorial posts
Data Challenge	No slum tracking; 2011 census reliance	Stigmatization; historical misrecognition
Policy-Community Link	Emerging (Maharashtra authority)	Direct (Periferia Viva draws on labs)
Climate Integration	CDA: 8-10°F reduction; solar, rainwater	Recicla Comunidade; urban gardens
Political Context	Electoral misuse of slum funds	Need to mobilize all government branches
Strength	Grassroots energy; climate innovation; cooperative models	Policy translation; governance sophistication; economic recognition
Challenge	Scaling; data; political capture	Structural contradictions; historical stigma

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 The Gap Between Policy and Practice

Both countries reveal a persistent gap between national policy intentions and ground-level outcomes, though the nature of the gap differs. India's ISSR scheme, despite its "win-win" premise of leveraging land value for affordable housing, has delivered occupied houses for only 37% of sanctioned units . The fundamental problem is not technical but political: the absence of reliable data means thousands of slums remain "invisible from an administrative viewpoint" . ULBs avoid enumeration to escape service obligations, creating a perverse incentive structure that perpetuates exclusion.

Brazil's gap is of a different order: despite decades of policy attention, "structural contradictions in the region's social development remain unresolved" . The disconnect between institutional planning and community expectations reflects what Fraser's framework identifies as failures of redistribution, recognition, and representation. As the Salvador study notes, planning policies have historically focused on symptoms rather than causes, addressing the fact that people end up in favelas rather than the structural drivers that put them there .

6.2 The Power of Community Self-Organization

Against this backdrop of policy failure, both countries demonstrate the remarkable power of community self-organization. India's Mumbai self-redevelopment project represents a historic shift: displaced families becoming their own developers, cutting out private builders entirely . This model, rooted in cooperative values, ensures that residents decide on design, quality, and timeline—"dignity, transparency, and ownership" .

Brazil's favelas have developed sophisticated self-organized governance mechanisms over decades. As Valter Manuel Gomes Neto observes, "governance emerged when neighbours organised to address concrete problems... even without formal authority, they performed basic governance functions" . This is not romanticism but practical necessity: in the absence of effective state presence, communities created their own systems for prioritising needs, coordinating action, and creating accountability.

6.3 Translating Community Experience into Policy

The most significant difference between the two countries may lie in how community experience translates into national policy. India's self-redevelopment project, while groundbreaking, remains a pilot dependent on activist leadership and cooperative federation support. The Maharashtra government has established an authority to promote self-redevelopment, but scaling this model nationally remains a distant prospect.

Brazil has achieved something more systematic: the Periferia Viva program directly draws on lessons from community-led urban labs in Recife and Teresina . The National Secretary for Peripheries visited Comunidade do Pilar, witnessed community-led interventions firsthand, and incorporated those lessons into the program's Action Plan Guide. WRI Brasil now coordinates a national network ensuring that lessons learned in specific communities can be applied across regions .

This "trickle-up" policy translation represents a paradigm shift from treating communities as beneficiaries to recognizing them as sources of innovation and knowledge.

6.4 The Challenge of Scaling with Specificity

Both countries face the fundamental challenge articulated by the Urban Risk Lab's research question: "can a community led design process be structured in such a way that it saves time while still allowing for the local specificity necessary to transform slums into neighborhoods fully integrated into the life of the city?" .

The Lab's answer—developing guidebooks for community decision-making at multiple scales, complemented by parametric tools for rapid consultant response—offers a promising approach. CDA's Sanjaynagar project demonstrates that scaling is possible: from a pilot serving 1,000 people to a vision of ten neighborhoods across India .

Brazil's Periferia Viva Network represents a different scaling strategy: creating mechanisms for knowledge-sharing and coordination so that lessons from specific communities inform work across the country without imposing one-size-fits-all solutions .

6.5 The Importance of Economic Empowerment

Favela Inc.'s work in Vidigal highlights a dimension often overlooked in slum upgrading: economic empowerment. By recognizing that favela communities generate R$300 billion annually—"an amount greater than the GDP of most Brazilian states" —the organization builds on existing economic energy rather than treating residents as passive aid recipients. The Mixtura Cocktail School, Terra Fértil Store, and Favela Experience tours create sustainable pathways for residents to participate in and benefit from the formal economy.

India's self-redevelopment project also has an economic dimension: families are contributing financially to initial requirements, demonstrating "willingness to contribute speaks volumes about their unity and faith in each other, in the cooperative system, and in their shared vision" .

6.6 The Political Economy of Slum Upgrading

The December 2025 Hindustan Times report serves as a sobering reminder that slum upgrading does not occur in a political vacuum. The use of Mumbai Slum Improvement Board funds for non-slum areas ahead of civic elections, and the awarding of tenders with identical budgetary allocations, raises serious questions about capture of resources meant for the poor .

This political dimension—the vulnerability of slum improvement funds to electoral manipulation—must be acknowledged and addressed in any comprehensive approach to upgrading.

6.7 Implications for SDG 11

The findings have important implications for achieving SDG 11 targets:

Target 11.1 (Adequate, safe and affordable housing): India's ISSR experience demonstrates that policy intentions are insufficient without robust implementation mechanisms and reliable data. Brazil's Periferia Viva suggests that programs informed by community experience are more likely to succeed.

Target 11.3 (Participatory planning): Both countries demonstrate that genuine participation requires more than consultation. India's self-redevelopment project gives residents decision-making power over design and quality. Brazil's community labs involve residents as co-creators of solutions. Fraser's framework reminds us that participation must address representation alongside redistribution and recognition .

Target 11.7 (Access to public spaces): CDA's Sanjaynagar project explicitly prioritizes social spaces—rooftop gardens, community centers—because residents decided they "didn't want to be isolated in tall vertical buildings" . This attention to social cohesion is essential for sustainable communities.

Target 11.5 (Disaster resilience): Climate-resilient housing that reduces indoor temperatures by 8-10°F is a concrete contribution to climate adaptation. CDA's work demonstrates that participatory design can produce both social and environmental benefits .

7. CONCLUSION: BUILDING WITH, NOT FOR

This comparative analysis of urban slum upgrading and community participation in India and Brazil reveals that meaningful development cannot be delivered to communities; it must be built with them. The two countries, with their distinct histories and complementary innovations, offer invaluable lessons for the global pursuit of inclusive and sustainable cities.

India's experience demonstrates both the limitations of top-down policy and the power of grassroots innovation. The PMAY-U ISSR scheme, despite its sound theoretical premise, has failed to deliver occupied housing for 63% of sanctioned units . The absence of reliable data, the perverse incentives driving slum non-recognition, and the restrictive tenability criteria have left millions of slum dwellers "invisible from an administrative viewpoint" . Yet against this backdrop, communities are taking matters into their own hands. Mumbai's first Self-Redevelopment Project, led by displaced families and supported by the cooperative movement, represents a historic shift toward people-powered development . Climate-resilient housing in Sanjaynagar demonstrates that participatory design can produce homes that are both sustainable and socially cohesive, reducing indoor temperatures by 8-10°F while fostering community bonds . The challenge now is to scale

these innovations without losing their specificity—to translate the energy of pilot projects into systemic change.

Brazil's experience reveals the sophistication of community governance and the possibilities for translating local knowledge into national policy. Over 16 million people in favelas have developed self-organized mechanisms that "perform basic governance functions" in the absence of effective state presence . The disconnect between institutional planning and lived reality is well-documented, with studies revealing "mismatches between institutional objectives and residents' expectations" that reflect deeper failures of redistribution, recognition, and representation . Yet recent developments offer hope. The Periferia Viva program, launched in 2024, draws directly on lessons from community-led urban labs, with its Action Plan Guide shaped by residents' experience . Legal empowerment projects strengthen community leaders' capacity to demand rights while mobilizing government to become "more receptive and committed" . Favela Inc.'s work in Vidigal recognizes favela communities as economic engines, generating R$300 billion annually, and builds on that foundation to create opportunity .

Several cross-cutting insights emerge from this comparison:

First, data is power. India's reliance on 2011 census data means millions remain invisible to policy. Brazil's efforts to strengthen community data collection and use it for advocacy demonstrate how information can empower marginalized communities.

Second, participation must be genuine, not symbolic. India's self-redevelopment project gives residents decision-making authority over design, quality, and timeline. Brazil's community labs involve residents as co-creators of solutions. Fraser's framework reminds us that representation without redistribution and recognition is incomplete.

Third, community governance exists and must be recognized. Brazil's favelas have developed sophisticated self-organization that policymakers ignore at their peril. India's cooperative movement provides a foundation for self-redevelopment that can be built upon.

Fourth, scaling requires mechanisms that preserve specificity. The Urban Risk Lab's participatory design protocols and Brazil's Periferia Viva Network both attempt to address this challenge—creating frameworks for scaling that allow local adaptation.

Fifth, economic empowerment matters. Favela Inc.'s work demonstrates that slum upgrading must address not only housing but also livelihoods, recognizing the existing economic energy of informal communities.

Sixth, political will is essential. The electoral manipulation of slum funds in Mumbai highlights how resources meant for the poor can be captured by political interests. Institutional mechanisms must protect against such capture.

Seventh, climate resilience and social cohesion can be mutually reinforcing. CDA's Sanjaynagar project shows that participatory design can produce housing that addresses both environmental and social needs.

For India, priorities emerging from this analysis include:

1. Conduct a nationwide slum enumeration survey, with strict guidelines for ULBs to follow, addressing the data gap that leaves millions invisible .
2. Incentivize recognition by earmarking development funds based on slum populations, as recommended by ORF analysis .
3. Scale the self-redevelopment model by implementing Advocate Parab's recommendations: single-window clearance, special incentives, clear legal templates, time-bound dispute resolution, digital transparency, and green redevelopment .
4. Draw inspiration from the Punjab Slum Dwellers (Proprietary Rights) Act 2020, which provides secured tenure and land rights to slum dwellers, with rights inheritable but not transferable for 30 years .
5. Adopt the Odisha Jaga Mission model for tenable but unviable slums, focusing on land rights and state investment in infrastructure .

For Brazil, priorities include:

1. Continue strengthening the Periferia Viva Network, ensuring that lessons from specific communities inform work across regions without imposing one-size-fits-all solutions .
2. Support legal empowerment initiatives that strengthen community leaders' capacity to demand rights and hold government accountable .
3. Scale successful community-led economic development models like Favela Inc.'s work in Vidigal, recognizing favelas as economic engines rather than problems to solve .
4. Address the structural contradictions identified in Salvador, focusing on redistribution, recognition, and representation as articulated by Fraser's framework .
5. Build on the experience of TECHO and other organizations to support community-led infrastructure projects where residents are genuine decision-makers .

For the international community, the lessons are clear: slum upgrading cannot succeed without meaningful community participation. India's grassroots innovations and Brazil's sophisticated policy translation both offer models worth studying. But the fundamental principle is simple: build with communities, not for them.

The ultimate measure of success for SDG 11 is not the number of houses built but whether communities have the power to shape their own environments, whether residents are recognized as full citizens with rights and dignity, and whether cities become spaces of inclusion rather than exclusion. India and Brazil, in their different ways, are both working toward these goals.

8. LIMITS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the comparative analysis relies primarily on secondary sources rather than primary empirical research. Direct observation of community participation processes in both countries, interviews with residents, community leaders, and policymakers, and participatory research would provide valuable additional perspectives. Second, data availability varies between countries. India's policy frameworks are extensively documented through government data and academic analysis, while Brazil's community-level dynamics are captured through case studies and project reports. Third, the study focuses on recent developments (2024-2026) that are still unfolding; longer-term outcomes of Periferia Viva and India's self-redevelopment movement remain to be seen. Fourth, the voice of

slum residents, particularly women and marginalized groups, is mediated through reports and media coverage rather than captured directly. Despite these limitations, the comparative analysis provides valuable insights into urban slum upgrading and community participation, with implications for both countries and for broader efforts to achieve SDG 11.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceived the study, designed the research methodology, conducted the literature review and document analysis, synthesized findings across countries, and drafted the complete manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of information presented and interpretations offered.

11. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest.

12. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

As sole author, I performed all roles including conceptualization, methodology development, investigation, formal analysis, writing, review, editing, and project administration.

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14. DATA AVAILABILITY

All sources analyzed in this study are publicly available documents, including news coverage, academic research, institutional reports, and project documentation. Primary sources are cited in the bibliography and accessible through the referenced publications and organizations.

15. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution or organization with which the author may be affiliated. The analysis is provided for scholarly purposes and should not be construed as policy guidance or investment advice. Urban slum upgrading frameworks, community participation mechanisms, and policy outcomes are subject to change, and readers should consult current sources for specific information about India, Brazil, and sustainable urban development.

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