

# Urban Poverty and Social Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities in Developing Cities



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KEY WORDS	ABSTRACT
Urban poverty, social mobility, developing cities, economic opportunities, inequality.	Urban poverty remains a persistent challenge in developing cities, where rapid urbanization often outpaces economic opportunities and social mobility. This literature review aims to explore the complex relationship between urban poverty and social mobility, identifying the structural barriers and potential opportunities that exist within developing urban environments. The analysis draws upon a range of academic studies, reports, and case studies focusing on cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Key factors contributing to the entrenchment of poverty include inadequate access to education, limited employment opportunities, and poor urban infrastructure. Additionally, social inequalities, such as discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, further impede upward mobility. However, the review also highlights emerging opportunities that can foster social mobility, including targeted social programs, economic policies promoting entrepreneurship, and investments in education and skills development. The role of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in mitigating poverty through innovative approaches is emphasized. Findings suggest that while urban poverty in developing cities presents substantial challenges, there are actionable strategies that can promote social mobility and alleviate poverty. However, a multifaceted approach involving policymakers, the private sector, and civil society is necessary to create sustainable change. This review underscores the importance of addressing urban poverty with comprehensive, long-term strategies that empower marginalized populations and enable inclusive economic growth.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urban poverty has become an increasingly pressing issue in developing cities, where rapid urbanization is outpacing the capacity of governments and local economies to provide adequate services, employment opportunities, and social mobility pathways. As millions of people migrate to cities in search of better living conditions, many find themselves trapped in cycles of poverty, with limited access to education, healthcare, and decent employment. The burgeoning population in urban slums and

informal settlements exacerbates this problem, creating environments where basic human needs often go unmet, and opportunities for upward mobility are severely restricted. This phenomenon has made urban poverty a critical area of concern for policymakers and development agencies worldwide.

Despite the growing body of research on urban poverty, a significant research gap exists in understanding how social mobility can be effectively promoted in developing cities. While previous studies have focused extensively on



poverty alleviation efforts, such as microfinance programs and social safety nets, there remains a lack of comprehensive analysis on how structural barriers, such as inequality, inadequate education, and limited access to formal employment, hinder social mobility for the urban poor. Moreover, most research has been fragmented, often focusing on specific regions or cities without offering a comparative analysis across multiple developing regions.

The urgency of this research lies in its potential to provide solutions to one of the most pressing challenges facing developing cities today: the persistent cycle of poverty that limits social and economic development. Addressing urban poverty is not only a matter of improving living conditions but also of fostering social mobility, which can lead to sustainable economic growth and the reduction of inequality. As cities are the economic engines of many developing countries, ensuring that the urban poor have access to the means for upward mobility is essential for national development.

Previous studies, such as those by Fields (2012) and Tacoli (2017), have highlighted the connections between urbanization and poverty, while others, like Desai and Potter (2019), have examined the impact of social programs on poverty alleviation. However, few studies have focused specifically on the role of social mobility as a mechanism for breaking the poverty cycle in urban settings. This research seeks to fill that gap by investigating both the challenges and opportunities for promoting social mobility in the context of urban poverty in developing cities.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive approach to understanding how social mobility can be fostered in developing urban environments through a combination of

targeted social programs, educational investments, and policy interventions. Unlike previous research that primarily focuses on poverty alleviation through financial support or short-term measures, this study emphasizes long-term strategies aimed at enhancing social mobility for marginalized populations.

The purpose of this study is to identify the key structural barriers that prevent upward mobility among the urban poor and to explore potential opportunities for overcoming these challenges. The findings of this research will provide valuable insights for policymakers, development agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to address urban poverty and promote sustainable social mobility.

The benefit of this research is twofold: it not only contributes to the academic understanding of urban poverty and social mobility but also offers practical recommendations for improving the socioeconomic conditions of millions of people living in urban poverty. By addressing the root causes of inequality and providing pathways for social mobility, this study aims to support the development of more inclusive and equitable cities.

## **2. METHOD**

### **Study Design**

This research employs a systematic literature review methodology to analyze the existing body of knowledge on urban poverty and social mobility in developing cities. A systematic review is a type of research that gathers, critically appraises, and synthesizes findings from relevant academic literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. The purpose of this method is to evaluate the challenges and opportunities related to social mobility in urban environments

by examining previous studies, reports, and case studies.

### **Data Sources**

The data for this study were sourced from a range of peer-reviewed academic journals, books, and policy reports. Major databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, and Scopus were utilized to identify relevant literature. The search was focused on studies published between 2000 and 2025 to ensure both historical and contemporary perspectives on urban poverty and social mobility. Keywords and search terms included "urban poverty," "social mobility," "developing cities," "inequality," "urbanization," and "economic development."

### **Data Collection Techniques**

A systematic search strategy was adopted to collect relevant data. The literature selection process involved the following steps:

1. **Initial Search:** Relevant studies were identified through keyword searches in the databases mentioned above. This phase involved scanning titles and abstracts for relevance.
2. **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** The studies included in this review met the following criteria:
  - Focused on urban poverty or social mobility in developing cities.
  - Published in peer-reviewed journals or as credible policy reports.
  - Provided empirical or theoretical insights into structural barriers or opportunities for social mobility.Studies were excluded if they did not directly address the research topic or lacked sufficient empirical evidence.
3. **Full-Text Review:** Articles that passed the initial screening were thoroughly

reviewed to assess their relevance and quality. This process ensured that only studies with rigorous methodologies and significant contributions to the topic were included in the final analysis.

### **Data Analysis Method**

The data collected were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach, which allows for the systematic coding and synthesis of key themes across the selected literature. The analysis followed these steps:

1. **Coding of Data:** The literature was coded for common themes, including barriers to social mobility, the impact of urban poverty, the role of government interventions, and opportunities for policy reform.
2. **Thematic Synthesis:** Key themes were grouped to identify recurring patterns related to social mobility and urban poverty. This included examining the relationship between inequality, access to education, employment opportunities, and other socioeconomic factors.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** The findings were compared across different regions and contexts to identify commonalities and differences in the challenges and opportunities for social mobility in developing cities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since this study is based on the analysis of previously published literature, it does not involve human or animal subjects, and therefore, no ethical approval was required. However, all reviewed studies were vetted for ethical compliance in their original research. This systematic literature review method ensures a thorough and objective evaluation of existing knowledge, providing valuable insights into the interplay between urban poverty and

social mobility in developing cities. The findings from this analysis will inform policy recommendations aimed at fostering social mobility and alleviating poverty in urban environments.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the literature on urban poverty and social mobility in developing cities reveals a complex and multifaceted relationship between structural inequalities and the limited opportunities for upward mobility among the urban poor. Rapid urbanization in developing countries has created a paradox where cities, while being centers of economic activity and innovation, have also become spaces where poverty is increasingly concentrated. The literature suggests that urban poverty is not only a result of insufficient income but is deeply entrenched in systemic barriers such as inadequate access to education, employment, and basic services, all of which play a crucial role in determining social mobility.

One of the most prominent themes in the literature is the role of education as a critical determinant of social mobility. Numerous studies highlight that access to quality education remains limited for the urban poor, particularly in informal settlements and slums. Schools in these areas are often underfunded, overcrowded, and lack the resources necessary to provide a competitive education, further perpetuating cycles of poverty. This lack of access to education directly affects the ability of individuals to secure formal employment, leaving many trapped in low-wage, informal jobs with little chance for advancement. The literature consistently points out that without targeted interventions to improve education access and quality, it is unlikely that social mobility will improve for the urban poor.

Employment opportunities, or the lack thereof, are another key factor impeding social mobility in developing cities. The shift from rural to urban areas has not been accompanied by a proportional increase in formal employment opportunities. Many of the urban poor are relegated to the informal sector, which is characterized by job insecurity, low wages, and a lack of social protections. This precarious employment situation exacerbates income inequality and limits the capacity for upward mobility. The literature underscores the importance of creating formal employment opportunities and providing vocational training to enhance the employability of the urban poor. However, there is a recurring challenge in that the economic growth experienced by many developing cities has been unevenly distributed, with wealth often concentrated in certain sectors and geographic areas, leaving the urban poor with limited access to the benefits of urbanization.

In addition to education and employment, urban infrastructure plays a critical role in either facilitating or hindering social mobility. Many developing cities suffer from poor infrastructure, particularly in the areas where the urban poor reside. Lack of access to clean water, sanitation, transportation, and healthcare services further marginalizes these populations and limits their ability to improve their socioeconomic status. The literature highlights that without substantial investment in urban infrastructure, especially in slum areas, the prospects for social mobility remain bleak. The absence of basic services not only impacts the quality of life but also restricts access to opportunities that could facilitate upward mobility, such as reliable transportation to job markets or access to healthcare that allows individuals to maintain their capacity to

work.

Social inequality, particularly related to gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, is another recurrent theme in the literature. Discrimination and social exclusion further limit the ability of marginalized groups to access the resources and opportunities necessary for social mobility. Women, in particular, face additional barriers due to gender-based discrimination, which limits their access to education and employment opportunities. Similarly, ethnic minorities and migrants in many developing cities are disproportionately affected by poverty and face systemic barriers to upward mobility. The literature indicates that addressing these inequalities is crucial for creating more inclusive pathways to social mobility. Policies that promote gender equality, reduce discrimination, and protect the rights of ethnic minorities are seen as essential components of any strategy aimed at reducing urban poverty and increasing social mobility.

Despite the significant challenges, the literature also identifies several opportunities for promoting social mobility in developing cities. Targeted social programs, such as cash transfers, scholarships, and employment subsidies, have shown promise in helping lift individuals out of poverty and providing them with the means to improve their socioeconomic status. Investments in education and skills development, particularly vocational training, are also seen as critical to enhancing the employability of the urban poor and facilitating their entry into the formal labor market. Moreover, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based initiatives in providing support services and advocating for the rights of the urban poor is frequently cited as a positive force for change.

The literature suggests that a collaborative approach, involving government, the private sector, and civil society, is essential for addressing the multifaceted nature of urban poverty and fostering social mobility.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed in this study highlights the deep structural challenges that limit social mobility for the urban poor in developing cities. Barriers related to education, employment, infrastructure, and social inequality create an environment where poverty is not only persistent but often intergenerational. However, the review also underscores the potential for targeted interventions and policy reforms to mitigate these barriers and create pathways to upward mobility. While the challenges are significant, the opportunities for progress exist, particularly through comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches that address the root causes of inequality and promote inclusive economic growth. The findings of this analysis provide valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers working to reduce urban poverty and improve social mobility in developing cities.

### **The Impact of Education on Social Mobility in Urban Poverty**

One of the most critical determinants of social mobility in developing cities is access to education. The literature consistently shows that urban poverty is exacerbated by the inability of the poor to access quality education, which is essential for securing better economic opportunities. In many developing cities, schools in low-income areas are under-resourced, overcrowded, and lack trained teachers, creating an environment that hampers educational achievement. As a result, children growing up in poverty often experience lower educational attainment, which in turn limits



their chances for social mobility.

Further, the geographical divide between urban centers and informal settlements often leads to stark disparities in educational access and quality. For instance, many urban slums are located far from schools or public institutions, making it difficult for children to attend regularly. Additionally, where schools do exist, the lack of infrastructure, such as proper sanitation, classrooms, and learning materials, severely impedes the learning process. This structural disadvantage perpetuates the cycle of poverty, as children from impoverished backgrounds are unable to compete on an equal footing with their more affluent counterparts.

Education is not only a pathway to better employment opportunities but also a means to improve other aspects of life, including health, civic participation, and access to information. However, the literature reveals that even in instances where children from poor urban backgrounds do manage to complete their education, they often face discrimination and limited access to higher education or vocational training programs. Social barriers such as ethnicity, gender, and family background further compound the difficulties these students face in pursuing higher levels of education.

Moreover, the economic burden of education, even in public schools, is a significant obstacle for families living in urban poverty. Many parents cannot afford school fees, uniforms, or transportation costs, leading to high dropout rates among children in impoverished areas. This lack of investment in human capital stifles social mobility and perpetuates the entrenchment of poverty. Therefore, the literature emphasizes the need for more targeted policies that provide financial support, scholarships, and improved infrastructure to

enhance educational access for the urban poor.

Overall, the literature suggests that education reforms targeting marginalized urban populations are essential for breaking the cycle of poverty. These reforms should not only focus on expanding access to education but also on improving the quality of instruction and ensuring that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have an equal opportunity to succeed. Without significant improvements in the education system, the potential for social mobility among the urban poor remains limited.

### **Employment and Economic Opportunities in Developing Cities**

Employment remains one of the most significant factors influencing social mobility in urban areas, particularly for individuals trapped in cycles of poverty. In many developing cities, formal employment opportunities are limited, and a large proportion of the urban poor is engaged in the informal sector, which offers little job security, low wages, and few social protections. The informal economy, while providing short-term employment, does not offer a sustainable path to upward mobility due to its instability and lack of access to labor rights.

The literature highlights that economic growth in developing cities is often uneven, with wealth and job opportunities concentrated in specific sectors such as technology, finance, and tourism, while other sectors, such as manufacturing and agriculture, fail to provide adequate employment for the majority of the population. This disparity creates a dual economy in which a small elite benefits from high-paying jobs, while the majority of the urban population is left in low-paying, precarious employment. The urban poor,

especially those without education or vocational training, are particularly disadvantaged in this dual economy.

In addition to the lack of formal job opportunities, the rise of automation and technology in many urban areas has further displaced low-skilled workers, reducing their already limited chances of finding stable employment. As industries shift towards more capital-intensive processes, the demand for unskilled labor declines, leaving the urban poor with fewer opportunities to secure meaningful work. The literature indicates that without targeted policies to create employment opportunities for low-skilled workers, social mobility in urban areas will continue to be constrained.

Vocational training and skills development programs have been identified as crucial tools for improving the employability of the urban poor. However, access to these programs is often limited, particularly for women, ethnic minorities, and migrants, who face additional barriers to participation. The literature suggests that governments and private sector initiatives must work together to provide more inclusive and accessible training programs that address the specific needs of marginalized groups. By equipping the urban poor with the skills needed in the labor market, such programs can help bridge the gap between poverty and social mobility.

In summary, employment and economic opportunities play a central role in determining social mobility in developing cities. Without access to stable, well-paying jobs, the urban poor are unlikely to escape poverty. Policymakers must therefore focus on creating a more inclusive economy that provides opportunities for all individuals, regardless of

their background or skill level. This includes investing in education, vocational training, and labor market reforms that promote job creation in sectors that can absorb a larger portion of the urban population.

### Urban Infrastructure and Its Role in Social Mobility

The availability and quality of urban infrastructure, such as transportation, healthcare, housing, and sanitation, have a direct impact on the social mobility of the urban poor. In many developing cities, the lack of adequate infrastructure disproportionately affects low-income residents living in informal settlements or slum areas. Poor infrastructure not only impedes access to basic services but also restricts individuals' ability to participate fully in the economic and social life of the city.

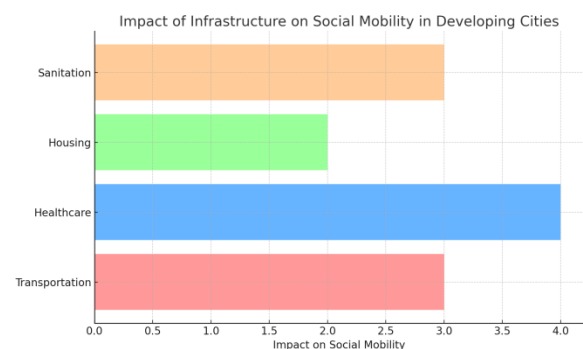


Figure 1, Impact of infrastructure on social mobility in developing cities

The figure above represents how different aspects of urban infrastructure—transportation, healthcare, housing, and sanitation—affect the social mobility of the urban poor in developing cities. In many cases, inadequate infrastructure disproportionately impacts residents of informal settlements and slum areas, limiting their access to essential services and opportunities.

For instance, transportation barriers make it difficult for low-income individuals to access

jobs, schools, and healthcare services, reducing their ability to participate in the economy and improve their living standards. Healthcare issues, such as the lack of affordable and accessible medical services, exacerbate health problems that can prevent individuals from maintaining stable employment or advancing in their careers.

Inadequate housing, especially in overcrowded or unsafe environments, further restricts opportunities for upward mobility, while insufficient sanitation services contribute to poor health and diminished quality of life, which also restricts social participation and economic advancement.

Addressing these infrastructure deficits is crucial for enhancing social mobility, as it provides the urban poor with the necessary tools to access opportunities, improve their living conditions, and break the cycle of poverty.

Transportation, for instance, is a major barrier to social mobility in many cities. The urban poor often reside in peripheral areas far from the city center, where job opportunities, schools, and healthcare facilities are located. Without reliable and affordable public transportation, they are effectively cut off from these essential services, further entrenching their poverty. The literature indicates that investments in urban transportation systems can have a profound impact on improving access to opportunities and increasing the mobility of the urban poor.

Healthcare is another critical component of urban infrastructure that affects social mobility. Inadequate access to healthcare services in poor urban areas leads to higher rates of illness, disability, and mortality, which in turn reduces

individuals' ability to work and support their families. Chronic health issues caused by unsanitary living conditions or lack of preventive care further exacerbate the challenges faced by the urban poor. The literature emphasizes the need for more equitable healthcare systems that provide access to affordable and quality services for all urban residents.

Housing is also a significant issue in developing cities, where rapid urbanization has led to the proliferation of informal settlements. These areas often lack access to clean water, electricity, and sanitation, creating environments that are not conducive to upward mobility. The literature suggests that improving housing conditions through slum upgrading programs, affordable housing initiatives, and infrastructure development is essential for fostering social mobility. Without adequate living conditions, the urban poor remain marginalized and unable to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Urban infrastructure is a key determinant of social mobility in developing cities. Investments in transportation, healthcare, and housing are necessary to provide the urban poor with the tools they need to improve their socioeconomic status. Policymakers must prioritize infrastructure development in low-income areas to ensure that all residents have equal access to the resources and opportunities that cities have to offer.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Urban poverty in developing cities presents significant challenges to social mobility, with structural barriers such as limited access to education, formal employment, and essential infrastructure impeding the upward movement





of the urban poor. The entrenched inequalities related to gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status further exacerbate these challenges, creating cycles of poverty that are difficult to escape. However, opportunities for improvement exist through targeted social programs, vocational training, and infrastructure development. By addressing these systemic issues and fostering inclusive economic policies, developing cities can create environments where upward social mobility becomes a realistic goal for marginalized populations, promoting more equitable and sustainable urban growth.

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