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Tools and methods for empowerment developed by slum and pavement dwellers' federations in India

by SHEELA PATEL

Introduction

This paper describes the 'slum' enumerations, settlement mapping, community-to-community exchanges, house modelling, precedent-setting and other tools and methods developed and used by organisations and federations of slum, squatter and pavement dwellers over the last 20 years¹. It focuses mainly on the use of these tools by an alliance of three organisations in India – the National Slum Dwellers' Federation (NSDF) (and its many member federations), *Mahila Milan* (savings cooperatives formed by women slum and pavement dwellers) and the Indian NGO, SPARC². This

alliance is active in over 50 cities in India and engaged in a variety of initiatives to reduce urban poverty involving millions of urban dwellers. These tools and methods were developed by the 'slum' and pavement dwellers and their own organisations to ensure that they remained at the centre of planning and managing initiatives (including conceiving how participation should be done) and of the negotiations with all external agencies (including local governments). The paper describes the use of these tools and methods in community-managed resettlement programmes and in community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks – although they are also widely used in the alliance's other programmes such as 'slum' upgrading and new house development.

These tools and methods are also central to the work of urban poor/homeless organisations in many nations other than India. In 11 nations, federations formed by urban poor and homeless groups have developed their own poverty reduction programmes, drawing on their own resources and capacities and negotiating with local and national government and international agencies for support – in India, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Philippines; in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and Swaziland. As in India, in virtually all these nations, there are also support NGOs that work in very close partnership with the federations. In many other nations, comparable organisations and federations are developing and also using a comparable set of tools and methods, although adapted to local circum-

¹ This article draws on documentation developed by the Indian NGO SPARC. For more details, see SPARC's web-site www.sparcindia.org; see also Patel, Sheela, Sundar Burra and Celine D'Cruz (2001), 'Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI): foundations to treetops', *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 13 No 2, pages 45-59; Patel, Sheela, Celine D'Cruz and Sundar Burra (2002), 'Beyond evictions in a global city: people-managed resettlement in Mumbai', *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 14, No. 1, pages 159-172; Burra, Sundar, Sheela Patel and Tom Kerr (2003), 'Community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks in Indian cities', *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pages 11-32 and Patel, Sheela and Diana Mitlin (2004), 'The work of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers' Federation and Mahila Milan' in (eds) Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite, *Empowering Squatter Citizen: The Roles of Local Governments and Civil Society in Reducing Urban Poverty*, Earthscan Publications: London.

² Sheela Patel is the founder-director of SPARC (The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres), which is the Mumbai-based NGO within the Alliance of SPARC, *Mahila Milan* and the National Slum Dwellers' Federation.

Part of a poster painting prepared by the National Slum Dwellers' Federation for their Yearly Convention



Photo: Homeless International

stances and practices. This use of a common set of tools is in part because of the constant interchange between the federations, so they have learnt the utility of these tools from each other and also learnt how to apply them. This interchange has been supported by an umbrella organisation, Slum/Shack Dwellers International, to which all the federations belong. But these tools are also widely used in different nations because, despite very different contexts, the federations face comparable difficulties in their engagement with governments and international agencies.

All these federations are engaged in projects to build or improve housing and infrastructure, provide services and create new income-earning opportunities. They are also demonstrating approaches to reducing urban poverty that are usually more cost-effective and sustainable than those developed by governments and international agencies. They

also succeed in including the poorest individuals and households in their programmes. Women have central roles in all of them. Most of these urban poor federations are now working at a considerable scale – reaching tens of thousands, while some are reaching hundreds of thousands or millions of people. Most have also succeeded in changing laws and official rules and regulations to make these more pro-poor (or at least less anti-poor). Most federations now manage their own 'urban poor fund'.

These tools and methods developed by the urban poor or homeless federations are participatory in two senses. First, in the sense of encouraging and supporting widespread involvement of urban poor groups and the community organisations and the federations which they form in designing and implementing initiatives. Second, in ensuring that the organisations of the urban poor and homeless retain the central role in what

is designed and implemented, and how it is managed and evaluated, when working with local governments, national agencies or international donors. The tools described below are to contribute to more equal relations between urban poor groups and the other (usually more powerful) groups with whom they have to work and negotiate.

Background

In India, the development of these tools and methods drew on the same questioning of conventional 'development' and of the role of external professionals that fuelled *Participatory Learning and Action* and its predecessors. The growing acceptance of participatory tools and methods by many professionals working in development in Europe and North America and by some governments and international agencies, helped legitimate the tools and methods used by the urban poor federations. The recognition by international agencies of the importance of civil society and within this of community organisations and local NGOs also contributed to this legitimisation. But from the mid and late 1980s as the alliance of SPARC, *Mahila Milan* and the National Slum Dwellers' Federation in India developed, the tools and methods they used had certain characteristics that made them different from most of the early experiences with participatory tools that were documented in *RRA/PLA Notes*:

- The main focuses from the outset were strengthening community organisations formed by the (urban) poor (also ensuring that these were democratic and accountable to their members) and supporting these groups, changing their relationship with local governments (and where relevant with other official bodies, including international agencies).
- The tools and methods were designed, implemented and refined by the homeless and the 'slum-dwellers.' They were done for particular purposes or projects but always within a broader concern to create a more equal and productive relationship with local government agencies. So they were very political from the outset and concerned with 'governance' but as this paper describes, generally not a politics of confrontation but of negotiation and of showing alternatives.
- The tools and methods were rooted in addressing problems that low-income groups face in urban (mostly large city) contexts. One reason why the innovations in tools and methods described in this paper were in urban areas was because of a prior history of strong community organisations formed around getting shelter (usually through illegal land occupation) or to counter the threat to the urban poor's shelters from 'bad government', especially forced

Box 1: Innovation in urban areas

There was considerable innovation in urban areas in many Latin American and some Asian and African nations during the 1970s and 1980s in the ways that professionals (mostly from local NGOs) worked with low income households and their community organisations that have parallels with the changes promoted by RRA-PRA-PLA. These were often underpinned by strong community organisations and social movements among the urban poor, often fighting for land or against eviction, and also part of civil society struggles against dictatorships and for democracy. These are documented in many case studies and these set many precedents for new ways of working by professionals and professional development organisations (see for instance Turner, 1988). But the body of international professionals promoting and supporting these was much smaller (although with important exceptions as in the central role of *Selavip News*, a newsletter with details of community struggles and projects that linked urban community activists all round the world). There was also little response from international agencies, most of whom did not support measures to reduce urban poverty reduction or were reluctant to do so. There were also some interesting North-South interchanges as many professionals working in urban programmes in high-income nations had supported more participatory engagements with citizens and community organisations from the 1960s onwards – see *RRA Notes 21*, especially Gibson 1994 and Wratten 1994.

eviction from their settlements (see Box 1). Poor groups in the larger or more successful cities within each nation may face more problems from 'bad' government than most rural groups, especially over where they can find or build their own shelters and set up informal enterprises. The main route out of poverty in many rural contexts is access to productive land and the means to make better use of it; the main route out of poverty in most urban contexts is better paid and less exploitative employment opportunities. Urban contexts also mean greater numbers of poorer groups concentrated together which can make it easier for them to organise, make demands and work together.³

- The demands made centred on access to secure housing (or land on which housing could be built) and the services associated with it – provision for water, sanitation, drainage etc. This is a different focus to most early experiences with participatory tools and methods in rural areas. In part, this is because in urban areas, local governments can help provide these or at least allow community-developed solutions; higher wages or better employment opportunities were obviously high priorities for all low-income urban

³Since urban and rural contexts are diverse, there are probably few valid generalisations about the differences in rural and urban contexts. But perhaps too little attention has been given to understanding these differences. In addition, apart from a special issue of *RRA Notes* in 1994 (No 21) on urban areas, the early editions of *RRA/PLA Notes* paid little attention to urban areas.

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dwellers but local government agencies usually have little influence on these. Housing also has characteristics in most urban contexts that are central to livelihoods, especially the importance of location within any urban area in relation to income-earning opportunities and, for households able to develop their own home, the value of the house itself as an asset. This focus on housing and services usually meant more opportunity for women to become central to this movement in circumstances where women face many barriers to equal participation.

- The change in tactics, adopted by community leaders. In the mid 1980s, many leaders within the slum dwellers’ federations in India recognised that they had to move from making demands of government (with changes in government policy towards ‘slum’ dwellers seen as the solution) to demonstrating their own solutions, working with governments.
- The innovators and teachers of these new tools and methods were the urban poor, both within and between nations (with teaching and training done mainly through community-to-community exchanges).
- The role of (local) NGOs was to avoid doing anything that the representative organisations of the urban poor could do themselves.

Savings and credit

In India, community-managed savings and credit groups in which each member saves each day is the foundation of the slum dwellers federations and of the cooperatives formed by women slum and pavement dwellers. They are ‘the glue’ that holds the Federation together. There is no minimum amount that savers have to contribute each day. Women are particularly attracted to these savings groups because they provide crisis credit and can develop into savings accounts that help fund housing improvement or new housing and loan facili-

ties for income generation. Women also find that their participation in savings groups transforms their relationships with each other, their family and community. The daily contact between each saver and the community representative who collects the savings also acts as a constant source of information on what people’s difficulties are and how they can be addressed. When people want access to credit, the savings collector has personal knowledge of family circumstances and can vouch for them. The savings are usually managed at local ‘area resource centres’, which serve also as a place for community discussion, and for planning and managing community initiatives. Savings groups often work together to develop their plans for new housing or other initiatives.

These savings groups are managed by community organisations, not professional staff. They serve not only to provide members with credit for their needs but also to develop decentralised mechanisms for large federations to manage finance. Savings and credit groups build community organisations’ capacity to manage finance collectively, which also helps develop their capacity to plan and implement projects within the learning cycle outlined below.

The external image of these savings groups is usually that of efficiently generated and managed savings. But for the federations, the most important function of savings and credit is that it mobilises large numbers of people who manage money together. This collective management of money and the trust it builds also increases community organisations’ capacity to work together, to address problems and to manage or resolve conflicts. It also creates a larger federation that is able to negotiate with external agencies on behalf of all its members. In effect, it is building good governance from the bottom up.

The capacity to innovate and the learning cycle

Poor people know what their problems are and generally have good ideas regarding what solutions they want. But they lack the resources or capacities to demonstrate that they can produce a solution. So the federations support their members to try out solutions in what can be termed a ‘learning cycle’. Some solutions work so well that they are adopted and adapted by many others. Some set precedents that allow more external support to be negotiated from governments or international agencies and also allow changes in rules and procedures to be negotiated (as explained in more detail below). Some fail – but even here, the learning from the failures is widely shared.

Among the tools and methods described below are

'slum' enumerations/surveys, mapping, pilot projects, house modelling, community exchanges and precedent setting. These take place within a learning cycle that includes several stages:

- identifying priority concerns;
- trying out solutions;
- learning from each other as these solutions develop;
- refining solutions and supporting more groups to try them; and
- using solutions as precedents to encourage change in government policies, programmes or regulations.

Low-income communities identify their priority concerns – for instance for sanitation, upgrading or new housing. A debate then takes place within the Alliance, generally leading to the formulation of a strategy for seeking a solution. One or more community organisations come forward with a scheme to address the problems. The Alliance assists these groups financially and organisationally because they offer a living 'laboratory' of how change can occur, and they help the Federation to develop a solution from which all can learn. For instance, women pavement dwellers in Mumbai have succeeded in obtaining a land site where they can build their own houses and they are currently building housing to accommodate 530 of them. The pavement dwellers had put pressure on the local government to provide them with land; when the local government claimed that there was no land available, the pavement dwellers organised a survey around the city, cataloguing just how much vacant land was available. When they obtained this site, they designed the housing units and the common spaces within them and they are now supervising its construction. This project encourages negotiations for land and government support for other such schemes for pavement dwellers.

Once a crude solution has been developed in a settlement, many groups within the federation visit it to see what has been achieved and to learn how it was organised and how much it cost. This leads to the next generation of volunteers who want to try out similar actions. Refinements to the solution emerge as other communities go through the process. Progress is always made although many delays take place when external factors prevent communities from achieving change. Once a refined solution has been established, it is explored with officials from local governments who also come to visit it. Pilot projects help set precedents that can be used to promote changes in official policies, practices or standards (as described in more detail below). The learning is shared with other federation groups and other city officials through exchange visits (see below for more details).

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The Federation then creates a core team from people in the first settlement that experimented with the solution and they visit other cities to demonstrate the solution that has been developed. This process may have a long gestation period because large numbers of people need to participate to create the confidence in a local people's movement to believe that it can transform their situation. More and more communities are exposed to the innovation and they put pressure on local officials and politicians for change and support. Depending on the external situation, there may be many possibilities for scaling up through participation in major government projects.

The Alliance's training process involves several critical principles:

- there are never resident trainers, always visiting ones;
- major training events (including house modelling – see below) are done by community leaders;
- training encourages women to participate in the processes;
- training teaches by doing rather than by telling;
- the trainers learn through training, acknowledge this and never consider themselves experts; and
- the process helps people to develop a working relationship with professionals and other stakeholders, and helps to ensure they are not treated as 'beneficiaries'.

This process helps more and more communities align with the Federation, learn new skills and begin to reconsider their interaction with local government and other external agencies.

Surveys

Community-directed household, settlement and city surveys or enumerations are important in helping communities to look at their own situation, consider their priorities, strengthen their organisation and create a capacity to articulate their knowledge of their members and their communities to government agencies and other external organisations. The Alliance helps

Box 2: Surveys and people-managed resettlement programmes in Mumbai

Mumbai relies on its extensive suburban railway system to get its workforce in and out of the central city. On average, over seven million passenger-trips are made each day on its five main railway corridors. But the capacity of the railway system is kept down by illegal settlements that crowd each side of the tracks. By 1999, more than 20,000 households lived in shacks next to the tracks, including many living within less than a metre of passing trains. The households lived there because they had no better option they could afford, because they needed the central location to get to and from work. Yet they had to face not only the constant risk of injury or death from the trains but also high noise levels, insecurity, overcrowding, poor quality shelters and no provision for water and sanitation. Indian Railways, which owned the land, would not allow the municipal corporation to provide basic amenities for fear that this would legitimate the land occupation and encourage the inhabitants to consolidate their dwellings. So the inhabitants had to spend long hours fetching and carrying water – a task that generally fell to women. Most people had no toilet facility and had to defecate in the open. Discussions within the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation (to which the majority of households along the railway tracks belonged) made clear that most wanted to move if they could get a home with secure tenure in an appropriate location.

A relocation programme was developed as part of the larger scheme to improve the quality,

speed and frequency of the trains. This was unusual on three counts. First, it did not impoverish those who moved (as is generally the case when poor groups are moved to make way for infrastructure development). Secondly, the actual move involving some 60,000 people was voluntary and needed neither police nor municipal force to enforce it. And third, the resettled people were involved in designing, planning and implementing the resettlement programme and in managing the settlements to which they moved. The process was not entirely problem free – for instance the Indian Railways started demolishing huts along one railway line and 2,000 huts were destroyed before the Alliance managed to get the state government to decree that the demolitions must stop. Land sites were identified to accommodate the evicted households and the Federation was given the responsibility for managing the resettlement programme.

Perhaps the most important feature of this resettlement programme was the extent to which those who were to be resettled were organised and involved before the move. First, all huts along the railway tracks and their inhabitants were counted by teams of Federation leaders, community residents and NGO staff – and done in such a way that the inhabitants' questions about what was being done and how the move would be organised could be answered. Then maps were prepared with residents where each hut was identified with a number. Draft registers of all inhabitants

were prepared with the results returned to communities for checking. Households were then grouped into units of 50 and these house groupings were used to recheck that all details about their members were correct and to provide the basis for allowing households to move to the new site together. Identify cards were prepared for all those to be moved. And visits were made to the resettlement sites. Then the move took place with some households moving to apartments and others moving to transit camps while better quality accommodation was being prepared.

Interviews with the relocatees in 2002 highlighted the support that the inhabitants gave to the resettlement and their pleasure in having secure, safe housing with basic amenities. No process involving so many people moving so quickly is problem free – for instance the schools in the area to which they moved could not expand enough to cope with the number of children, many households had difficulties getting ration cards (which allow them access to cheap food staples and kerosene) and the electricity company overcharged them. The resettlement would have been better if there had been more lead-time, with sites identified by those to be relocated and prepared prior to the resettlement. But this programme worked much better than other large resettlement programmes and has set precedents in how to fully involved those to be relocated in the whole process – and it is hoped that other public agencies in India will follow.

low-income communities to undertake surveys at various levels, including city-wide or area-wide 'slum' surveys that provide documentation of all 'slums', informal settlements or pavement dwellings. It also undertakes very detailed household enumerations and intra-household surveys. These surveys proved particularly important in allowing community organisations to manage a large resettlement programme for those who lived beside the railway tracks in Mumbai, and this in turn developed precedents that are being used in other resettlement programmes (see Box 2).

The information-gathering process for a 'slum' enumeration often begins with a hut count when a community is visited for the first time, and many men and women from the Federation and *Mahila Milan* meet with residents and talk about their work and why they have come. Questionnaires and other survey methodologies are discussed with

communities and modified as necessary. All data collected is fed back to community organisations (especially the savings groups) to be checked and, where needed, modified. The repeated interaction with a community through hut counts, household surveys and settlement profiles establishes a rapport with them and creates a knowledge base that the community own and control. These 'slum' enumerations also provide the organisational base from which to plan upgrading and new-house development.

Mapping

As part of household enumerations and hut counts, the Alliance works with communities to build their skills in developing detailed maps of houses, infrastructure, services, resources, problems etc, so that they can get a visual representation of their present physical situation. These maps are

particularly useful in developing plans for improvements with external agencies.

House modelling

As communities secure land, they are eager to build. Federation members need to develop many related skills such as house construction, materials costing and how to manage the architects and planners who seek to influence their hopes and ambitions. There are also other options to be explored, such as the production of building materials and the installation of infrastructure. Designs and costings for houses are explored by designs developed by community members. Life-size models are developed collectively – usually using a wooden frame covered by cotton cloth to show the walls – and discussed, with many people and groups coming to visit the models and discussing possible changes in the design and their implications for internal space and for total costs.

Community exchanges

Exchange visits between community organisations have been continually developed because they serve many ends. They:

- are a means of drawing large numbers of people into a process of change, supporting local reflection and analysis, enabling the urban poor themselves to own the process of knowledge creation and change;
- enable the poor to reach out and federate, thereby developing a collective vision and collective strength; and
- help create strong, personal bonds between communities who share common problems, both presenting them with a range of options to choose from and negotiate for, and assuring them that they are not alone in their struggles.

Since 1988, there has been a constant process of exchanges between slum and pavement communities in India (the federations and women's cooperatives have members in over 50 cities). Representatives from savings groups formed by women pavement dwellers in Mumbai were the first to travel to other settlements in their own city and later to other cities in India to visit other communities. They shared their knowledge about the savings and credit groups they had developed and managed themselves and found many people who were interested in acquiring their skills. Although most exchanges are within cities or between cities, there have also been many international exchanges, with community organisers from India visiting many other countries (including South Africa, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya), and community organisers from these and from many other countries visiting slum and pavement communities in India.

Rehmat, a member of Mahila Milan and a pavement dweller in Mumbai, participating in a House Model in Uganda. She now manages a good share of the toilet constructions in Mumbai



Photo: Homeless International

These exchanges build upon the logic of 'doing is knowing'. Exchanges lead to a good sharing of experience. In the exchange process, communities and their leadership have the potential to learn new skills and share teaching. The exchanges maintain a rapid learning and teaching curve, within which the Alliance's core team supports new learning and helps more people to teach and to learn from each other. From the first community exchanges between the pavement dwellers on the streets of Mumbai, there has now developed Shack/Slum Dwellers International, an umbrella organisation to support all the federations. This links the urban poor organisations in different countries through community exchanges (including many visits to nations where federations have not yet developed or are only in early stages of development) and supports them in their negotiations with international agencies.⁴

Precedent setting

The Alliance in India has always been conscious of the need to work at a scale beyond conventional NGO projects and

⁴ One particularly significant international exchange was the visit of senior officials from Kenyan Railways and senior planners from Nairobi to Mumbai in April 2004, to see how the resettlement of the people from beside the railway tracks was organised there. Thousands of low-income households living in informal settlements close to the railway tracks in Nairobi have been threatened with eviction – and this visit showed the Kenyans the possibilities of community-managed resettlement which benefits those who are resettled, as well as clearing the tracks to allow faster and more frequent train services.

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therefore to work with government. It also recognised the need to change the way that government agencies operated, including their working relationships with urban poor groups. But the conventional way in which NGOs seek to change governments is through policy advocacy. They generally base this on consultations with communities and draw from these consultations to suggest alternative policies to government, which they campaign to have accepted. Often, the policies suggested are good and much needed, but these rarely influence government policy. Even when they do, most communities lack the training, exposure or capacity to take advantage of them.

The Alliance decided to follow another route – that of setting precedents and using these precedents to negotiate for changes in policies and practices. Precedent setting begins by recognising that the strategies used by the poor are probably the most effective starting point although they may need to be improved. Precedents are set as the Alliance supports community organisations to try out pilot projects and then to refine and develop them within the learning cycle described above. Because they emerge from the poor’s existing practices, they make sense to other grassroots organisations, become widely supported, and can easily be scaled up. But these precedents often contravene official rules and standards. For instance, the Alliance promoted the use of a mezzanine floor in the design of houses developed by the Federation because this provides households with more room and more flexibility in their homes but costs much less than a two-storey unit. Government designs did not allow this. So the Federation demonstrated what could be done (and how well it worked) before negotiating its approval. Now this design is being built in a new housing development for pavement dwellers and in housing being built within one of Mumbai’s densest and largest ‘slums’

(Dharavi) to allow all the inhabitants to get better quality accommodation. The community-directed house modelling described earlier has also produced precedents showing how particular designs better serve low-income households’ needs; so too have the community-designed and managed toilets that are described below.

Precedent setting with community toilets

One of the Alliance’s largest initiatives is the design, construction and management of community toilets. This followed the ‘learning cycle’ and precedent setting noted above. Many ‘slums’ in Mumbai and other Indian cities had government designed, contractor-built public toilets that did not work well because of poor designs, poor quality construction and lack of maintenance. To have any chance of negotiating with governments for better provision, the Federation knew that it had to demonstrate to government that better design and management was possible. New designs for community toilets were developed and built in various cities and used as learning experiences both for those who built them and for those who visited them (through community exchanges). They set precedents in the ways that toilet blocks were designed, built and managed that could be demonstrated to government officials. They incorporated many innovative features that made them work better, including:

- separate toilets and queues for men and women (in standard government designs with only one queue, men often jump the queue);
- measures to ensure water was always available (for instance having large reservoir tanks to draw on when mains supplies were interrupted); and
- special toilets for children (because children were not using the conventional toilets because they were frightened of falling into the hole and of dark smelly rooms and they also were often pushed out of the queues).

The new toilet block designs also included accommodation for a caretaker and often space for community-meeting places (if communities meet regularly within the toilet complex, it also brings pressure to ensure it is kept clean). These new toilet blocks also cost the government less than the poor-quality contractor-built toilets that they had previously supported. This led to government support for hundreds of community toilet blocks in Mumbai and Pune that now serve hundreds of thousands of households. The federation is also advising various other city authorities in India on implementing large-scale community toilet programmes.

Why did the Federation begin work on community toilets?**To bring communities together**

...because everyone uses them and has opinions about them. A toilet project is small enough to be planned and built within a small budget and time frame but large enough to start many things happening, including involving women, allowing people to work together, tapping skills in the community to manage money and, finally, allowing people to enjoy defecating in private. If you have squatted along an open drain all your life, it is hard to imagine toilets being clean places. If they are clean and well-cared for, they become points of congregation. The next step is the realisation that slums do not have to be dirty places, but can be beautiful communities in which to live.

To test new pro-poor policies

Given the lack of provision for sanitation in cities, this was an important chance to advocate for and test new pro-poor policies.

To expand livelihood options

Developing a toilet block was the first time that many poor communities were involved in working together on this scale. Although the poor are constantly involved in informal small-scale construction, there is never space and resources for their more formal participation. The construction and management of toilet blocks expanded their livelihood options and developed their skills.

To expand the Federation

Most of the 'slums' in which community toilets were built were non-federated. Working in these areas greatly expanded the Federation's base and trained them to work in different settings.

To strengthen the relationship with municipal authorities

Municipal authorities have learnt much about developing minimum sanitation from the community toilet blocks. The large-scale programmes in Pune and Mumbai encouraged staff and politicians from other municipalities to learn how to initiate and manage such a process. These programmes also encouraged federations in other cities to negotiate with municipal authorities to work on this issue.

In Mumbai and Pune, the subject of sanitation for the slums entered the public domain, as municipal commissioners and other dignitaries were invited to inaugurate the new

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community-built toilet blocks. Opening each community toilet block is a celebration to which local government staff and politicians can be invited. This also creates a chance for dialogue over other issues such as water supply, electricity, paved roads and secure tenure. The traditional relationship of politicians as patrons and voters as clients underwent a transformation. Whereas previously, a toilet block was the 'gift' of a local councillor, member of the legislative assembly or Member of Parliament, now citizens saw toilet blocks as their right. Their involvement in designing, building and maintaining each toilet block built their strength and confidence to negotiate with local municipal officials on other issues. As pressures build from below, administrative and political processes are compelled to respond. The culture of silence and subservience begins to give way to a more substantively democratic process.

Changing national policies

The Alliance also seeks to change attitudes and policies at national level. It worked with the UN Human Settlements Programme to launch a good governance campaign in India in 2000, and the National Slum Dwellers' Federation demanded that sanitation be seen as an indicator of good governance, especially women and children's access to it. The Indian government has introduced a new programme where a 50% subsidy for the construction of community toilets is available to local bodies and public authorities – and this was influenced by the community toilets built in Pune and Mumbai.

Adding to the repertoire of the poor

The community toilet-building programme encouraged hundreds of communities to undertake projects and to create an environment that makes room for experimentation. Externally supported interventions like this do not set new standards, but alter and influence the circumstances that allow communities to develop standards of their own.

“The demands for sanitation by urban poor organisations are less threatening than any demand for land or for land tenure. Of all the basic services that the poor have begun to demand, sanitation has begun to be less contested than others”

Making room for communities to learn by experimenting and by making mistakes

Solutions to complicated problems do not happen quickly, and generally come from trial and error. Learning for any individual generally means having to do something more than once and making mistakes before finally getting it right. This is also true for poor communities, but solutions are far more complicated. To those professionals or government officials mistrustful of community involvement in urban improvement, mistakes only confirm entrenched attitudes towards the poor as being ignorant or lazy. Built into many community participation programmes is ‘only one chance’ which does not allow the learning and training capital produced by mistakes to be reinvested in new processes. It stops participation at the first sign of error. Poor communities are unable to experiment because they have no margin within their limited resources to absorb mistakes. This is one of the crises of poverty, and this is why these toilet projects make room for, and even encourage, mistakes.

The toilets are not theoretical ideas on paper, but real buildings, built in real slums. They are visited, discussed and analysed within the Federation/*Mahila Milan* network, and outside it. Their mistakes and successes are widely discussed and considered, and they catalyse the projects that follow. The people who build them take their experiences to other settlements, other cities, and become trainers themselves. In this way, the evolution and refinement of ideas occur in practice, in different situations.

People on the move: training others and breaking isolation

People in communities that have built their own toilets are the best teachers for others interested in doing the same. Whether or not their project was successful, their experience can give a head start to other communities who do not have to start from scratch. For skills to be refined and spread around, it is important that as many people as possible visit the toilets,

participate in their building, and return to their own settlements filled with new ideas. In this way, the learning potential of these experiences is maximised, and their successes and failures are discussed and digested by many others.

Each new toilet that is built is better than the last one

With the widespread dissemination of experiences, each time it gets easier, the ‘circle of preparation’ shrinks and the number of people able and willing to get things done grows considerably. Each time a toilet block is built, it is also cause for a festival to celebrate its opening, and each festival draws a larger crowd. **It is the ability of the Federation/*Mahila Milan* network to link people and help them take control of toilet construction and management that makes this whole process possible.**

These toilet constructions did not emerge entirely and spontaneously from the communities in which they were built. The lack of toilets is one of the most frequent and urgently articulated problems of slum dwellers, but all these projects involved an external intervention – somebody coming in from the outside, shaking things up, asking questions, posing challenges, and intentionally pushing forward what is required for communities to plan and carry out solutions to their own sanitation problems. In this case, the outside group is the NSDF/*Mahila Milan*/SPARC Alliance.

No two toilet blocks are alike

The toilet projects all work along the lines of some of the Federation’s fundamental ideas about building the capacities of communities, but all toilet blocks are different as they represent tailor-made responses to particular local needs and realities, reflecting different political climates, different negotiating strategies, different degrees of official support, different materials markets, different skill levels, different site realities, different access to sewer and water mains, and different community dynamics.

Don’t wait for ideal conditions

None of these toilet blocks are perfect. Most were built under circumstances that could be considered impossible. But every toilet block represents a vital investment in learning and human capacity. These are the building blocks of large-scale change, much more than perfect designs or innovative engineering. One of the Federation’s principles is that you should never allow your work to be held up while waiting for something else to be ready or some other condition to be in place. You have to get going, since circumstances will never be perfect, no matter how long you wait.

Start with sanitation rather than land tenure

The Alliance originally developed to fight the insecurity into which most poor communities are locked because they occupy land illegally. Local governments will not allocate land to allow the poor to get secure housing, so their houses and neighbourhoods encroach on lands publicly or privately owned and designated for other uses, such as parks, railway lines or airport perimeters. Communities living on land to which they have no acknowledged right become perpetual supplicants and have to comply with the demands of the landowners. The informality of their settlements means that they cannot demand the same rights as legal landowners and homeowners from city administrations – including provision for water, sanitation and electricity. Instead, they have to resort to informal feudal linkages for 'protection', and often pay more for services such as water than 'formal' citizens. They also face the indirect costs from the health problems that arise from poor quality, overcrowded housing and a lack of a safe water supply and inadequate sanitation. For organisations of the poor, the demand for sanitation is strategic: city government and civil society can easily see the relationship between the sanitation needs of the poor and their own health and well-being. The demands for sanitation by urban poor organisations are less threatening than any demand for land or for land tenure. Of all the basic services that the poor have begun to demand, sanitation has begun to be less contested than others. This is especially so when the sensibilities of middle-class citizens are affected by seeing people defecate in the open. It takes longer to make the connection between housing and the sense of security that the urban poor need for their well-being and quality of life.

Why the poor make good sanitation partners

In the toilet projects, there was a fundamental change in roles, as urban poor communities in different cities took part in designing, building and managing their own toilets and then invited the city to come and inspect what they had built. The poor no longer have to beg the city administration for basic services. They own the process, and tell the city how they would like it to progress. Behind this transformation are some clear ideas. Providing basic services to any large city is always a vast field of shared responsibility and involves many people: officials setting priorities, engineers drafting plans, contractors doing civil work, water and sewage departments overseeing maintenance, and special interests seeking some advantage within the process.

“Using a federation structure, possibilities for communities to conceptualise, design and manage vital assets become visible and this, in turn, raises the possibility of the poor, and women in particular, being able to participate in an exploration of new roles with their communities”

At the edge of this field of decisions are all the people who need water taps and toilets. It has been assumed that these people, particularly the poor, cannot be involved in infrastructure decisions because they lack the necessary technical expertise. But the technicalities of toilets, water supply and sewerage are not beyond them. Poor people can analyse their own sanitation needs, and plan, construct and maintain their own toilets.

Developing standards that are realistic for and work for poor communities

When city governments build toilet blocks, they use the same old standard designs – expensive, difficult to maintain and mostly doomed to deteriorate rapidly and become unusable. Yet the standard models are still duplicated, partly because nobody has a better idea. Fresh, workable standards for community improvement are badly needed but they can only emerge from a reality which poor people understand better than bureaucrats, and can only be developed through practice. The toilet projects were a search for better standards – for financing, designing, constructing and maintaining toilets that are replicable and that work within the realities of poor communities. Some ideas they test catch on, others do not. It is from this fertile process of experimentation that new standards emerge.

The distinction between public toilets and community toilets

This distinction is important because building a toilet, like any amenity, changes people's perceptions of their own settlement. Public toilets serve the needs of whoever happens to be passing, whether a local or a stranger. A community toilet belongs to and is controlled by a community – not the city or the government or a passing stranger. To build a community toilet is to acknowledge that a community exists, and that

“Starting with small initiatives can show both government and communities that change is possible. Convince officials that they can use their limited powers to make a little change. First, they might only give limited consent, but later, when they see things change even in small ways, consent might become support. Support is the first step in the creation of a genuine partnership”

inside that community live women, men and children who have legitimate needs. Within the murky politics of land and land tenure in Indian cities, the construction of a community toilet can be a powerful manoeuvre, especially if it is built by the community itself.

Why community toilets rather than individual toilets?

Because they can provide everyone, even the poorest, with sanitation. And the costs of provision for everyone can be afforded. Those who are better off can, and will, gradually build individual facilities for themselves in their homes. In this way, the pressure on community toilets will probably diminish over time, but everyone will continue to have access.

Why community-managed and controlled?

Because the toilet blocks produce a possibility of change that helps develop new leaders, new relationships within communities and new relationships with external agencies. Community organisations usually emerge to address negative issues: to fight eviction and demolition, to cope with extortion. This produces leadership that brokers relationships with those with power, including ‘patrons’ and those who informally need to be bribed or given favours. Many community leaders have similar relationships with the community – their linkages to the political and administrative wings of government are often negative and exploitative of themselves and their communities. For real change to occur, different leadership and different relationships within the community and with the outside world are needed. Yet unless there is some need, and the possibility for change exists, it is extremely difficult to motivate the poor and their nascent leadership to explore this path. Using a federation structure, possibilities for

communities to conceptualise, design and manage vital assets become visible and this, in turn, raises the possibility of the poor, and women in particular, being able to participate in an exploration of new roles with their communities.

Why community construction?

Because the construction of toilet blocks is something that with some assistance, anyone can do. Community involvement in design and construction provides insights into maintenance needs. When the criteria of quality are explained to community leaders (such as the basic mixing of concrete, materials for plumbing etc.), they will supervise the construction, leading to a better quality toilet block. But the most important aspect is to do with linking livelihoods and producing entrepreneurial behaviour among the poor. Most slum people face barriers to getting better-paid jobs. By taking the opportunity to become contractors for toilet blocks (sometimes as individuals and sometimes as collectives), they develop new skills and enhance the possibilities of better jobs in the future. The upgrading of slums will continue into the future, so it is vital to invest in the capacity and skills of the poor to be the builders **and** the managers of such projects.

Notes on the art of gentle negotiation

A necessary step in working with government agencies is convincing reluctant and often suspicious government staff to stop seeing poor communities as problems and start seeing them as contributors to good solutions for city-wide problems. That means negotiation. Below are some of the Alliance’s negotiating strategies.

Start small and keep pressing

Community organisations start small – for instance negotiating for local government to provide hand pumps and water taps in slums. Through those negotiations, they gradually gain the confidence, persistence and visibility to press for the next level – for instance community toilets. Starting with small initiatives can show both government and communities that change is possible. Convince officials that they can use their limited powers to make a little change. First, they might only give limited consent, but later, when they see things change even in small ways, consent might become support. Support is the first step in the creation of a genuine partnership.

Paint beautiful pictures

Sometimes, grassroots activism involves a great deal of scolding and finger-pointing: ‘Isn’t this awful!’ This has limited use if you are seeking new ways to bring the poor and the state

**The National
Slum Dwellers'
Federation
Convention**

Photo: Homeless International

together to solve city problems. People in power are more likely to retreat into their bureaucratic shells when pelted with 'awfuls' and 'shamefuls'. A better approach is to kindle their imaginations by describing possibilities in ways that make clear how they can contribute.

Know more than they do

When community organisations enter into negotiations with governments or other external agencies well-prepared with enumeration reports that have data on all households in the settlement, with toilet construction or upgrading or new house costs worked out and tested, with knowledge of city infrastructure grids, and with examples of community-state partnerships in other cities, it becomes harder for government or aid agency officials to argue against their proposals.

Unpicking the change processes

The Alliance's experience has shown the importance of three distinct but linked change processes.

Organisation for empowerment – creating organisational capability within low-income settlements and linkages between the community and their peers

This is realised primarily through the Federation network and through savings and loan activities. Community groups need to develop democratic internal organisational capabilities. They need to explore relationships based on equity, which ensure inclusiveness. These are essential for sustaining the participation of the poor in demanding change, both within their communities and with external organisations. An investment in strengthening democratic organisation within low-income communities has many long-term implications, and if undertaken with care and patience, is the most powerful legacy of any developmental intervention. It also becomes crucial in ensuring the long-term sustainability of any process that is introduced. The philosophy and practice of this approach can be contrasted with the more conventional development approach to housing development and urban poverty reduction to highlight some distinctive differences in the Federation's way of working. Whilst the change

processes discussed above including the tools and methods used focus on the delivery of tangibles, these tangibles are actually entry points for mobilisation rather than organisational goals in themselves. This is an important distinction – and one that many development organisations (especially government agencies) fail to understand.

Community-based problem solving – building skills and locating and building resources within and outside communities to solve problems

The Federation's experience has shown that the problems low-income communities face often require them to reflect collectively on deconstructing problems and identifying solutions. Communities need time and space to explore all possible choices. They need to examine the feasibility and implications of each available option, and to understand the degree of control, which they, as communities, can have over different 'solutions'. It is therefore important for communities to examine the internal resources they can use when they design alternatives at the initial phase of the problem-solving process.

Learning to negotiate

Arriving at long-term solutions requires communities to

negotiate with city and state governments and other groups. Often, municipalities, state institutions, and even developmental organisations do not know how to work with poor communities to arrive at solutions. The usual approach is for external agencies to get communities to 'do something' which they believe poor people need to do. All the tools and methods described in this paper are in effect to change this, to create a more equal relationship between poor communities and external agencies in identifying problems and developing solutions. Also to support poor communities in demonstrating to these external agencies the competence, capacity and resources they can bring to this. Also to constantly remind the staff of external agencies that they should be supporting local processes that communities need to own. These communities are the ones who are going to stay there and be affected by what is done (or not done). For most international agencies, this implies that they have to modify their conventional project cycles so they support the kinds of long-term processes described above. This also means not imposing unrealistic demands for the achievement of short-term goals that so often undermine the long-term processes that can produce **real** poverty reduction.

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