One David and Three Goliaths

By Sheela Patel and Kalpana Sharma

This is the story of David and Goliath, except that the David in this story had to encounter three Goliaths. Whether he won in the end cannot be determined as yet. But the chances look good.

When organisations commit themselves to work with urban poor communities, they are often faced with difficult choices. Should they confront and challenge the powers that determine and rule their lives or should they work around the problem and negotiate? What do they need themselves to be in a position of strength, should they choose the latter path? Can their interests be served if they choose to confront without fashioning their own solutions?

This has been a perennial problem that SPARC, Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres has faced ever since it began its work with poor women living on Mumbai's pavements in 1984. Today, with the advantage of hindsight, SPARC has come to several conclusions about what organisations need to undertake within themselves if they are to be in a position to contribute to problem-solving in cities as well as protecting the interests of the urban poor.

This case study looks at events which link the lives of some of Mumbai's poorest communities to Mumbai's transport problems and how efforts to improve the transport situation impact their lives depending on choices that the state government and others investing in the solutions make. It demonstrates two important points: One, that development projects in the city are not isolated activities but are historically linked to many other processes that impinge directly on the lives of the poor; and two, that communities of the poor and their organisations, given time, space and opportunity, can be centrally involved in designing solutions that benefit both communities and cities.

Transporting millions

The transport problems of a city of 9.93 million people can never be easy. When that city happens to be Mumbai, India's commercial capital that draws to it migrants from distant parts of the country looking for work, then the challenge becomes formidable. For it is Mumbai's ability to employ all those who come, and to transport them over long distances through a relatively inexpensive and surprisingly efficient public transport system, that makes the city even more attractive. But ironically, it is this draw of the city that is also resulting in the virtual collapse of what was, until recently, probably the best public transport system in the country.

Mumbai has grown from an island city -- or rather a city that grew out of the joining together of seven islands -- into a vast urban agglomerate, spreading many miles into what was once undeveloped hinterland. It is the sixth most populous city in the world. It generates more wealth, both through production from its industrial base, now mainly on the outskirts of the city, and its service sector, than many cities put together in India.

Mumbai produces 10% of India's industrial output, it handles 60 %of the maritime trade, accounts for 33% of the total income tax collection and 60% of the customs duty and also has the single largest share in the services sector. It has registered an employment growth of 59% between 1971-91. Mumbai's population grew from 5.97 million in 1971 to the present 9.93 million, a 66 % growth which is attributed to the employment opportunities that the city offers. (Source: Mumbai Metro Study by Mumbai Metro Planning Group).

Yet, the wealth of Mumbai is not evenly spread. For while the average per capita income is three times higher than that of the state of which it is the capital, Maharashtra, one quarter of its residents live below the poverty line and half live in slums and informal settlements. These slums are located on land owned by the central and state governments, the municipal corporation, private individuals and lands belonging to the airport authority, the port authorities and the railways. It is the settlements located in the last three locations that have direct impact on the city's transport.

Presently, Mumbai is served by five railway corridors. All these originate in the south of the city and then branch out to the north and Northeast. The most recent corridor connected the city to an increasingly important new residential and industrial hub, Navi Mumbai.

An incredible 88 per cent of all travel in Mumbai is by bus and rail. This statistic in itself illustrates the popularity and the necessity of the public transport system, particularly the railways. The trains can carry four times the traffic load of city buses in terms of passenger kms of travel. The local trains carry 5.5 million passengers every day. Although the normal capacity of the trains is 1700, at peak hours more than 4000 people crowd into them. On a typical day, according to the MMPG study, Western Railways operate 923 trains and Central Railways 1072 trains. During the peak period between 9 and 11 am, 118,000 passengers travel in these trains.

Breaking down

But the pressure has begun to tell. In the last 40 years, although passengers on the trains have increased five times, the number of train trips have increased only 2.5 times. As a result, there are constant breakdowns with irate passengers taking out their anger on railway property.

The city has been unable to raise resources to improve its existing public transport system. Both bus and train services are subsidised and the fare collection cannot pay for the services leave alone their expansion. Raising fares is a politically explosive issue which no democratically elected government has been able to tackle.

The World Bank was approached for funding in the 1970s and the first Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTPI) worth $25 million was negotiated. This added 700 buses and improved three road intersection by building flyovers. MUTP II is presently being negotiated and only recently has the last hurdle, the World Bank's condition that the railways set up a separate corporation for suburban railway services, been cleared..

At present, because of the overcrowding of existing facilities, and the easy availability finance schemes, the number of individually owned vehicles on the roads has grown exponentially. The consequence: overcrowded roads, high levels of vehicular pollution and a general deterioration in the quality of life. In Mumbai, road transport is made more difficult by the fact that most business and government offices are located in the southern tip of the island city while the majority of people live in the north and north-eastern suburbs. This forces most vehicular traffic to move from north to south in the morning and in the reverse direction in the evenings. An alternate route along the docks is crowded out by lorry traffic

as Mumbai port handles an increasing amount of sea traffic in the absence of another port of an equivalent size in the vicinity of the industrial belt along the west coast.

The obvious solution is to strengthen and improve the public transport facilities so that more people will use them. The plan to build a sixth and seventh rail corridor, in addition to the existing five, has been on the anvil for many years. There is also talk now of a metro rail project. But in the interim, there are steps that can be taken to improve the existing system by increasing the speed of the trains.

Mumbai has the peculiar problem of railway slums, that is slums that have grown alongside the railway lines on land that has been handed over by the state government to the railways. The latter paid no heed to these slums in the initial years. It dealt with them in the same manner as all private landowners or the government did, that is by ignoring them and at same time allowing informal rent collection with the direct participation of junior staff of the organisation. Such a strategy is based on the belief that if these settlements are not formalised by the provision of basic amenities and services. then their illegal status would be maintained. In the future, as and when the land was needed, the settlements would be demolished and residents could be evicted. It is as though people would just disappear into the thin air, and what happened to them was of no consequence to the landowner.

But over time things have changed. Slums have become crucial vote banks in various city, state and central electoral processes. Today they are constituencies that politicians have to defend. Thus over the years, although these communities have no real security of tenure, especially on central government land, most slums on state or private lands have now been provided basic amenities and are protected from demolitions.

This has resulted in a stand off of sorts specially in the settlements along the railway tracks. These slums are located just a few feet, often as close as three feet, away from the railway line. As a result, even the fast and superfast trains that run at peak hours have to slow down when they pass these sections. The safety commissioner of the railways requires trains to reduce speed to 5 km an hour when the slums are within 30 feet of the track. Such a situation prevails on around 11 to 15 points along the tracks. This is not only hazardous -- people are injured or killed almost every day -- but also reduces the turnaround time for the rakes. The railways have calculated that if only these parts of the tracks could be cleared of slums, each train journey would be speeded up and this would be equivalent, in monetary terms, to laying a new track.

People and transport

This then is the starting point for this case study. Can the state government, the railways and the affected communities work together so that everyone benefits?

The three Goliaths in this study are the state government -- in the case of Maharashtra this is a state with almost 50 million people, one of the most industrialised and urbanised states in India and also the most prosperous. The second Goliath is the Indian Railways, a vast and impressive network that cuts across state governments and in fact, has a budget that is separate and not part of the central budget. Each year the railway budget is presented before the central budget in Parliament. And the third Goliath is the World Bank, about which not much needs to be said.

The David in this story is an alliance of SPARC, an NGO, the National Slum Dwellers' Federation (NSDF), a people's organisation and Mahila Milan, women's collectives that work in slums on issues of savings and credit as well as housing. (See attached annexe "About Us")

SPARC is a registered voluntary organisation that was established in 1984 as a vehicle to explore ways for cities to work with poor communities through partnerships. It is based in Mumbai but is also active in 21 cities in India. It began to work with the most vulnerable and insecure group of all, women living on pavements, part of 125,000 people who have had no option but to live there, some for as long as 30 years in the same spot. They survive regular demolition efforts by the city government, reconstruct their makeshift tenements and continue to live there without sanitation or water.

These women were clear that they wanted secure housing and were prepared to work towards attaining it. It is this motivation that led them to form women's collectives called Mahila Milan. What began as informal women's collectives who undertook savings, went about in groups to get ration cards, and access to hospitals and police stations has now grown into a network of collectives who can negotiate with formal institutions and with the informal leadership in their communities. The women have designed and built houses and toilets as well as trained others in these skills. Through a process of peer exchanges, they have spread their experience and knowledge not just to other cities in India but to groups of urban poor in countries as far away and disparate as South Africa at one end and Cambodia at the other.

Living on the tracks

In 1988, when negotiating with the Department of Housing on behalf of groups of slumdwellers in other parts of the city, SPARC first came to know of the discussions between the Railway and the State government. They were discussing the possibility of undertaking a census of slums near the tracks and were about to assign this task to the Collector of Encroachments, a government official. SPARC offered to do the survey jointly with the Collector and the Railways by arguing that State machinery never fully enumerates settlements and can never solicit community participation. The State government agreed, and "Beyond the Beaten Track: Census of slums on the railway tracks" was published in 1989. The process of enumeration led to these communities creating their own organisation, the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation (RSDF), which is affiliated to the NSDF. The enumeration established that there were 18,000 households living along the tracks. In the last ten years, their number has grown to 25,000.

Regardless of whether the railways want to increase the speed of their trains, or want to build additional corridors, it is evident that these communities will have to be relocated. As part of an ongoing debate within the RSDF, there was an exploration of what people wanted. The majority of people were willing and eager to move, on condition that they were guaranteed secure tenure in their new location. The RSDF identified five areas where pilot projects of relocation could be undertaken and also endorsed the suggestion of the Railways that a wall should be built separating railway settlements from the tracks. In its report, it also set out clearly the reasons why settlements come up in the first place. Despite a clear list of suggestions and the apparent urgency to clear the tracks, there was no response from the Railways or the state government. In the meantime, the railway slumdwellers formed cooperatives, began savings and formulated their plans for alternative housing.

A major window of opportunity appeared on the horizon with the decision of the Railways to extend the fifth line, the Harbour Line, across the Thane creek to Belapur. This could not be done unless a settlement, Bharat Nagar, of 800 to 900 households was relocated

SPARC had already been working with this community through the RSDF. Thus when the question of moving was mooted, the community was ready. They were offered government-

built houses a short distance away for Rs. 58,000 each. All except 150 households, who could not afford the price, accepted the offer. The state government agreed to give these 150 households a piece of land which they would develop and build their own houses with the help of SPARC.   In the interim, they were moved to a transit camp.

These 150 households were part of SPARC's initial experiment in housing. The community located vacant land adjacent to the government housing which the government released for their use. They formed themselves into the Jan Kalyan Cooperative Housing Society. With SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan, they planned the layout and designed the houses. Rather than building high-rises, they chose low rise, semi-detached structures. Each household got a single room, with a 14 foot high ceiling which had a loft. Thus a 15 ft by 10 ft plot yielded not just 150 sq. ft but an additional 100 sq. ft in the loft. The community agreed to have common toilets which were built in different parts of the plot so that they would be accessible and could be maintained by the households they served.

The cost of each dwelling was estimated at Rs.16,000 at 1990 prices, now Rs. 30,000, less than half compared to the walk up flats of the state which cost 58,000 at that time. Both aesthetically and in quality of construction the former were much better. Each household paid a down payment from its savings and SPARC arranged a low interest loan to be paid over 15 years in easily manageable instalments.

Despite this remarkable initiative taken by the community, the state was not supportive. It took Jan Kalyan three years to get their water connection after completing construction and moving in.

SPARC expected that the Jan Kalyan experiment would prove the ability of communities to manage their own housing as long as they were guaranteed land and infrastructure. But this did not happen. On the contrary, even the government and railways had suspended discussions on rehabilitation.

A second chance

The process got a new lease of life when the Urban Development Department, at that time headed by a concerned bureaucrat, Mr. D. T. Joseph, who knew of SPARC's record, revived the negotiations at a time when Mumbai's irate rail travellers where burning stations and destroying property when they faced delays and train cancellations. This resulted in another experiment.

Mr. Joseph suggested that the Railways work with an NGO like SPARC to see if, as a first step, communities living closest to the tracks could be persuaded to move back at least 30 ft. As the process of consultation had already been initiated, consequent to the railway census, he felt it would not be a difficult task. People expressed their willingness to move back 30 feet from the railway line so that the movement of the trains was not hindered and their own people were secure. They also agreed that a wall be built to prevent any further encroachments within 30 feet of the railway line. Until then, the railways were not ready to believe that people would move back. So, as a confidence building exercise and as demonstration of people's capability, SPARC raised funds to build a wall adjoining one settlement.

But this was only an interim solution. In the long-term people would have to be resettled and for this all the actors, the communities, the government and the railways would have to agree.

Even as this experimental project was being implemented, the government, the railways and the World Bank were discussing the larger project, of building two more corridors as part of MUTP II. Some of the areas where SPARC had begun working with communities fell within the scope of this larger project.

In 1995, at a time when these two experiments had been completed, the state government appointed a task force headed by a retired civil servant to look into the problem of resettling communities in urban areas who would be affected by the MUTP II project. The committee had representatives from the departments of revenue, finance, public works and housing as well as three NGOs and four
representatives of private finance.

For the first time, a resettlement and rehabilitation policy, in an urban context, was formulated. Thus far the state government had an R&R policy that applied to people affected by infrastructure projects such as dams etc. The policy, however, did not have specific provisions for affected people in urban areas.

The task force's recommendations dove-tailed into one of the principal conditionalities laid down by the World Bank, before it was willing to commit funding the MUTP II, namely R&R. The Bank also wanted NGOs to be involved in implementing this component of the project.

SPARC was one of these NGOs. It participated in the policy formulation by sharing what had been designed and developed by communities living on pavements as part of their rehabilitation and showing the kind of documentation communities design and maintain. This formed the basis of the entire section of the recommendations relating to informal settlements. Following the task force's recommendations, three NGOs were assigned the task of enumerating all the settlements along the railway tracks and creating the information base for planning the projects.

Lessons learned

Although the World Bank's insistence on NGO participation in the R&R component of the project proved a useful entry point, some of the Bank's requirements placed almost insurmountable hurdles for such a participation to continue. For instance, the World Bank requires to centralise and standardise all its procedures to meet international standards. On paper, this is appropriate. But in practice, this impinges on the rights and capabilities of local actors to move and grow with the process. Ironically, the central process of enumeration , which everyone agreed should be done with the involvement of local organisations, became the first point of conflict between the World Bank and the NGOs.

When communities and volunteers from slums undertake data collection, it is not just a mechanical process. The data they produce is enriched by their overall understanding of the problems. The process is used to mobilise the community so that they have a sense of ownership of the census and the data. But, by its very nature, such documentation often contains inaccuracies and missing information. This can be corrected over time. Instead it is often dismissed as being unprofessional.

SPARC had a difficult choice to make when it was charged with being unprofessional and incapable of managing the survey. It could have withdrawn from the contract, or it could have hired professionals to do the job, or it could have just plodded along until it got it right. It chose the third option. Thus, although survey reports were delayed, the final outcome will show that the choice was right. For as a result, communities who participated in the process are now organised and their volunteers have been trained to meet the standards demanded by the World Bank.

Thus, even when the MUTP II negotiations broke down, the alliance and communities were able to convincingly demonstrate to the Railways and the State government their ability to manage a solution to the problem. As a result, work on one major section of the 5th and 6th railway corridor has begun, despite the withdrawal of World Bank funding. There is a good chance that the negotiations with the World Bank will begin again. If and when they do, the pilot rehabilitation scheme will be implemented according to the design developed by communities.

The lesson that this experience holds out for NGOs is the need to remain involved with communities irrespective of the project. If the organisation's commitment is to the process and not to the project, then the difficulties that the it encounters while negotiating with any agency -- provincial, national or international -- need not deter if from continuing.

An important pre-requisite is for NGOs to ensure that they are not dependent on a single source of funding. SPARC, for instance, has multiple sources. As a result, it can work with a great degree of autonomy. Thus, even when the World Bank pulled out of MUTP II earlier this year, SPARC's work was not affected. Its investment in the enumeration and survey process was part of its long-term strategy of mobilising communities, building their capacity to negotiate and initiate solutions, and working with them to implement these solutions.

Another lesson that SPARC has learned from this experience is that NGOs need to have a proven record of working with communities before they can confidently participate in processes where the cards are stacked against them. In MUTP II, for instance, if SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan had not already mobilised and worked with urban poor settlements on issues of housing and finance, they would not have been able to counter the suggestions of the three Goliaths which precluded real consultation with the affected communities.

And finally, it is essential that the solutions that are worked out in any given situation have clearly defined ingredients that can be adapted in other situations. For instance, notwithstanding the World Bank's decision regarding its role in the MUTP II, SPARC had resolved that it would work with the state government and the railways to work out a resettlement plan for railway slumdwellers. The formula that was worked out required the state government to give the land, the railways to provide or pay for the infrastructure such as water and electricity and the community to work out its housing. Such an arrangement had already been demonstrated through the successful Jan Kalyan project.

This very formula has been applied in other relocation efforts involving pavement dwellers, people living on land belonging to the airport authorities etc. In other words, these ingredients -- where land, infrastructure and subsidised finance are provided to communities who devise their own housing strategies -- can form their basis of urban rehabilitation and resettlement strategies.

But while this is the skeleton of the solution, much more is needed to flesh it out.

What is needed

SPARC 's experience in this area has shown that institutional support of a kind that is designed to help the poor, has to be in place if pilot projects are to be replicated on a larger scale. For it is one thing to work with 150 households as in Jan Kalyan. But when the numbers are multiplied by a factor of 10 or 1000, then the scale of the operation is beyond anything that a single NGO can manage.

Existing institutions are not geared to facilitate poor communities. Take for instance housing finance institutions. Their procedures are bureaucratic and not pro-poor and the delays interminable. As communities have no other source of finance, they are forced to wait until all these hurdles are overcome. As a result, they are faced with cost escalation and the unviability of their projects.

It is clear that new, more responsive, institutions are needed. Either the state must create these, through consultation and with the participation of the affected communities. Or the urban poor must set up their own institutions. As there are few precedents in this area, a great deal of experimentation, flexibility and innovation will be needed.

Secondly, as investment in urban infrastructure grows, the potential for greater investment in addressing resettlement and rehabilitation also increases. Therefore, it is important that this task is entrusted to a separate body. At the moment, there are too many different departments of government that are involved. As a result the response time is extremely slow and often there is no agreement between the different parties. SPARC has argued that a separate autonomous body, which would have representatives of all the stakeholders, could be given the task of designing R&R for communities affected by infrastructure development in urban areas. Such a body should be a part of the State because only then will the interests of equity be served. If efficiency and profit are the motive, then equity will be the first casualty.

Sustainable solutions

Finally, how do you sustain and multiply such solutions? Obviously, there are no universal formulae. But SPARC's experience suggests that solutions can be worked out by first identifying what poor people can and want to do themselves. The next step is to work out the other ingredients that are required to implement these solutions. And the third step is to locate the institutions that can deliver the ingredients that are outside the control of poor people. Such a formula not only involves communities in the process but make them real participants.

Such solutions can be sustained if the benefits are such that they help not just one community but help a much larger community. For instance, if the process begun with MUTP II can result in a R&R policy and mechanisms that ensure full and honest consultation with poor communities, then many more will gain than just the railway slumdwellers. Similarly, if this process results in the creation of institutions for housing finance, for instance, which are designed to meet the needs of the urban poor, the gains will be long-term.

Increasingly, the effective components of urban poverty alleviation are providing security of tenure and basic amenities for poor people. It would thus be in everyone's interests to facilitate a process whereby affected communities have a stake in the solutions being worked out. These communities have already contributed by developing the land on which they squat. But real poverty alleviation in the urban context is possible only if we ensure that more people benefit from the city and its services. If services are created to benefit only a few, while the majority are left to scrounge for crumbs, then you create conditions for anarchy and the perpetuation of poverty.

This has already become apparent in Mumbai where a lack of a comprehensive R & R policy has driven away new investments from the city. Economics alone suggests that it is cost-effective to design R&R policies in which the poor have a sense of ownership because they have participated in designing and implementing them.

But to come back to the beginning, what has the process taught David and the three Goliaths? The communities that participated in the process have seen the need to strengthen their own capacity to manage their solutions. The state government and the railways have recognised that people can, in fact, work in partnership with them to arrive at solutions that benefit everyone. And we hope that the World Bank has seen the value of being patient -- and adopting a flexible approach -- when working with community organisations and demonstrating the genuineness of its commitment to such a partnership.

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