

A presentation on Empowerment and Infrastructure

The organization I work for, Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), is an NGO that addresses issues of urban poverty. We work in alliance with National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and Mahila Milan (MM), two people's organizations. NSDF is made up of pavement dwellers and slum dwellers from over 30 cities and towns in India and is affiliated to the Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), an international people's organization, that operates with constituent federations in 11 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Mahila Milan or "Women Together" in English is made up of decentralized collectives of women pavement and slum dwellers organized around savings and credit. SPARC's role in the alliance is to act as a bridge between NSDF/MM, on the one hand, and the formal world of mainstream institutions like governments and municipalities, housing finance companies and banks, Northern donors and international financial institutions, on the other. Moreover, SPARC raises funds, documents the work done and provides general support. NSDF and MM build capacities of the urban poor - with a special focus upon women - to enable them to negotiate with the State and its agencies for their entitlements of land and infrastructure, housing finance and credit for income-generation and all the myriad goods and services the State controls

In the course of the work of the alliance, we have been closely involved with two projects to be financed by the World Bank - the Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP) and the Mumbai Sewage Disposal Project (MSDP). These projects have been at different stages of development for the last seven to ten years and MUTP is yet to be finalized. During this period, we have been in close touch with the Bank staff, the Government of Maharashtra (GOM) (of which Mumbai is the capital) and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai- In my presentation, I hope to bring out how the project concepts underwent change and the implications for empowerment and infrastructure.

Consider the case of MUTP whose aim is to improve the traffic and transportation system of the city. Amongst other components is a sub-project of resetting and rehabilitating 19,000 families living along the railway tracks in such close proximity that the train speeds are drastically reduced, injuries and death are familiar occurrences to the slum dwellers and the overall efficiency of the suburban rail system is adversely affected- The NSDF had been working along the railway tracks for more than 13 years through its component federation - the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation (RSDF), of which about 80% of those who live along the tracks are members. They had been organised into housing cooperatives, had saved money towards their housing, undergone shelter training and been in active negotiations with the Indian Railways (IR) and the State Government for many years over the issue of their resettlement. This involvement predated MUTP by some years and **the basic demand of the RSDF was that if access to land and infrastructure** was provided at affordable rates, they would then build their own houses by arranging housing finance and use their savings as down payments- It will not be out of place to mention here that real estate prices in Mumbai were, until recently, higher than those in Tokyo, London and New York.

Here were community based organizations - the RSDF and NSDF demanding of government only that which they could not obtain on their own. As in many other post-colonial societies, the State and different public agencies own large tracts of land in the city and exercise vast control over its use through laws and development plans. Traditionally, the State in India had acted as a 'provider' of housing though budgetary constraints meant that only a limited number of houses could be provided to the urban

poor: even what little was built did not reach the targeted population since elites would come the benefits. In a city of more than 11 million people where more than 55% of the people lived in slums - on only 6% of the area - public housing programmes were miniscule in relation to the size of the problem.

While negotiations on MUTP proceeded at a snail's pace, the IR wanted to lay new tracks between Thane and Kurla, two stations on the suburban line, to relieve congestion. Tempers of commuters were on a short fuse because of overcrowding and delays and the productivity of the city's economy was affected. The GOM gave a piece of land, the IR promised to pay for infrastructure, SPARC was appointed as facilitator and 900 families were to shift into transit accommodation to be built by taking loans. In course of time, permanent accommodation in multi-storeyed buildings was to be built at the same site for over 2000 families- This two-phase resettlement strategy would enable the IR to begin their work immediately and reduce project costs, which would otherwise have soared over a 2 or 3 year period - the time it would take to put up permanent buildings. In a span of less than a year, these 900 families shifted voluntarily to the new location and demolished their old homes on the tracks. They were now safe from the threat of accidents.

The Kanjur Marg experiment - as it is called - proved to be an eye opener. It marked a radical departure from earlier resettlements in Mumbai's slums which were usually marked by the use of municipal or police force and the complete absence of people's participation in selecting the new site or planning and constructing their own houses. The transit tenements were 120 sq.ft. in area and community water supply and sanitation facilities, as well as electricity, were provided. This must be appreciated in the context of their earlier homes being mostly less than 80 or 90 sq.ft. with non-existent or meagre amenities or services.

Kanjur Marg demonstrated the power of community mobilization and **people's participation**. It also revealed the benefits of partnership between **State agencies, NGOs and CBOs**. The State provided land, the IR paid for infrastructure and the people planned their own housing. This was a new way **of doing things and reflected** a realignment of roles and relationships amongst the stakeholders where the State and its agencies confined themselves to **what the** communities could not obtain on their own. There was some criticism from the World Bank staff initially that the houses were too small compared to the norm of **225 sq.ft.** but the criticism was both ill-informed and made without even visiting the site and talking to the people. The community itself rejoiced in the move and its outcomes. However, over a period of time, both the State Government and the World Bank began to appreciate this low-cost, participatory and speedy resettlement and rehabilitation and Kanjur Marg became a model for MUTP. The two phase strategy saved money and community involvement was key to its success.

In early 2000, the Indian Railways demolished a couple of thousands of slum houses along the railway tracks. This went against the spirit of MUTP and was opposed by the alliance of SPARC/NSDF/MM, the State Government and the World Bank mission. Demolitions were stopped but more than 2000 families had to be immediately resettled. Who was to build houses for them and how quickly could it be done? The procedures of the Bank dictated the calling of tenders, selection of a contractor and then only would construction begin. The sheer paper work involved would take some months and physical construction even longer. Where were these families to stay in the meantime? The alliance of SPARC/NSDF/MM made an offer to build the houses at about two-thirds of the cost estimated by the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority and

said that the balance would be raised as loans by the people themselves. Bank procedures would have to be relaxed so that community choices could be accommodated. It took a number of meetings in Mumbai, New Delhi and Washington but finally, the proposal of the alliance was accepted and 2500 transit tenements have been built and occupied in a few months.

Even as this work was going on, a Public Interest Litigation in the High Court demanded the immediate removal of all slum-dwellers along the tracks. The Government of Maharashtra gave a time-table to the Court and asked for time, which was given. The alliance of SPARC/NSDF/MM offered to take up the job of doing baseline socio-economic surveys, preparing Resettlement Action Plans and implementing them. But Bank procedure of calling for tenders stood in the way: once again, protracted negotiations both in New Delhi and Washington paved the way for a sole source contract being given to the alliance for all the R&R tasks. There was another hiccup when a Bank rule was discovered that an NGO could not be given more than a certain sum of money at one time. Discussions and dialogue resolved this problem as well.

In the course of the last year, more than 8000 families living along the railway tracks have been resettled and rehabilitated. No force was used: people voluntarily demolished their old homes and occupied their new ones. Between the stations of Mankhurd and Kurla, the speed of trains has gone up from 30 to 70 kms. an hour. The Railways are building a wall to protect the **spaces along the** tracks now vacated. The PAPs are safe and secure in their new habitations. This must be ranked as one of the success stories of urban resettlement and rehabilitation. But what were the ingredients of the recipe?

First and foremost, the existence of a strong people's organization **the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation** - was a sine qua non for this operation. The grassroots community base of RSDF meant that social mobilization and community participation were ensured. Secondly, the Government of Maharashtra and its nodal agency for MUTP, the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority, were wholly supportive and handed over to the alliance many functions they traditionally performed - like the verification of the eligibility of PAPs and the management of different aspects of R&R like the physical shifting and allocation of tenements. Thirdly, the World Bank changed its procedures and policies in order to accommodate the voices of the community. This partnership amongst all the stakeholders had its anxious moments and its tensions but the basic trust that existed amongst all the players enabled the partnership to continue. If by now 8000 families have been resettled, another 11,000 odd are to be shifted over the course of the project. There is every hope that the R&R will be as smooth as it has been so far.

Since the title of this session is "Empowerment and Infrastructure", it would be appropriate to comment upon that relationship. In most post-colonial societies, infrastructure is usually controlled by State agencies which act as patrons to the general population of clients, The inequality of the relationship is marked - more particularly when the client population is the urban poor. When the State and its agencies are prepared to shed some of their powers and abdicate some of their roles to community based organizations, the possibility of empowerment emerges. When the Bank and other international agencies use their clout to bring in civil society organizations into the conversation, that supports the process of empowerment. When these institutions of governance are willing to amend and alter their policies and rules in favour of the disadvantaged, breakthroughs of the kind described above can take place. And partnerships can evolve that are based upon relative equality.

Unfortunately, the debate about infrastructure has centered around the merits and demerits of privatization and state control. Inadequate attention has been paid to the potential of community based organizations taking over many aspects of infrastructure. For example, why cannot a CBO take over the distribution of water in the slums of a city as also cost recovery? Cannot cooperatives of the poor manage their own electricity from bulk supply at a given point? There may not be many examples of success in the field to buttress the case but have these possibilities been even given a fair trial? Locating, designing, constructing and maintaining sanitation facilities in slums is another area ripe for community control. To this issue we now turn.

Slum sanitation in India has traditionally been provided by Municipalities or other public bodies. The process has been engineer and contractor driven. No one thinks of consulting the community about the **location of a sanitation** block; much less are they involved in any aspect of **design, construction** or maintenance. Technical personnel design the building **and contractors construct** them. They are to be maintained by municipal **sanitary staff. As a consequence**, there is no community participation and hence no sense of 'ownership' of the asset created on the part of the community. The result is there for all to see: these toilet blocks become defunct in a year or two. Municipal sanitary staff are notorious for evading their duties and the bureaucratic apparatus is unable to discipline them. Moreover, since they are not beholden to the local community, they cannot be held accountable by them.

The alternative of 'pay-and-use' toilets run by private contractors has been tried out in some Indian cities. These are certainly useful at vast concourses like railway stations or bus terminus where there are large, floating populations. But they are not suitable for slum sanitation. For one thing, at a rupee a use, it becomes too expensive for a 5 or 6 member family to patronize it. We have a joke that if such a family was in the grip of diarrhea, their daily earnings or a substantial proportion of these earnings would merely be spent on using the toilet! Caught between the defunct toilets of the public system and the expensive toilets of the private sector, most people in slums resolve the Hobson's choice by defecating in the open. Apart from being a threat to public health, this practice results in enduring embarrassment for women and gastric disorders since they try to relieve themselves only under cover of darkness.

The third alternative - not yet so far given a fair chance - is for urban poor communities themselves to locate, design, construct and maintain their own toilet blocks. This is being tried out for the last 2 years in the city of Pune, 120 kms. from Mumbai, the educational and cultural centre of the State of Maharashtra. An energetic and enthusiastic Municipal Commissioner decided to have slum sanitation managed from start to finish by NGOs and CBOs, provided they quoted rates at least 15% below estimated costs. His reasoning was that since NGOs and CBOs are not for profit organizations, they could well afford the construction at the above rates. All those, with some track record, who applied were given contracts. In the first phase, some 7 or 8 agencies took up the challenge and the alliance of SPARC/NSDF/MM was amongst them.

The arrangement was that the Municipality would pay for capital costs and supply water and electricity. But the running bills for these utilities would have to be met by community contribution and the maintenance of the facility was also in their hands. The programme has been a spectacular success and it is anticipated that by September, 2001, there will not be a slum in the city without sanitation facilities in the prescribed ratio. A silent revolution has been taking place in public health as well.

The alliance of SPARC/NSDF/MM is one of the agencies involved. The strategy of organizing women into savings and credit groups, exposing them to building materials, features of design and construction processes proved useful in tackling the ground realities. Support of an engineer and architect **was made available** to the community groups. Illiterate slum women came up with extraordinarily" percipient suggestions on design and construction **processes**. They started speaking of foundations, plinths and lintels and their **experience and knowledge grew with** each new toilet block. One person came up with the idea of building a room for a caretaker's family; this would act as an incentive for anyone living in slums. Another had the idea of a community hall built on top of the toilet. This would earn an income for maintaining the facility when it was rented out and its very presence would act as a powerful incentive to keep the place clean. Children, who could never compete with adults for the use of over-crowded toilets, had separate communal toilets built for them. Community preferences in locating the women's and men's sections separately were respected. A committee of slum women would fix monthly charges to be paid by different families depending upon their sizes and circumstances, collect the charges and oversee the caretaker. Thus, there would be a fine tuning of the charges nuanced according to economic and social contexts. There would be a tremendous savings on municipal staff earmarked for sanitation as they would no longer be needed.

The project has been in progress for nearly 2 years. The Municipal Commissioner would hold weekly meetings to monitor developments, sort out problems and instruct his staff. Community women would attend these meetings and express their opinions to the highest civic authority in the city- In hierarchical Indian society, this was surely a step forward that the Chief Executive of the Corporation was sitting across the table from slum women and giving them a patient hearing. As their confidence grew, this confidence would overflow into the other areas of their lives - in their interaction with other government departments and the world at large. It was then not merely an improved understanding or technical skills relating to toilet design and construction that were gained. Rather, they came out of the private world of the family and entered the public world of the market, the State and the community. A process of empowerment encompassing unrelated arenas began with the project of slum sanitation. In course of time, this will surely affect their subordinate position in the family and the community at large. Each dimension of empowerment interacts and influences the other

This story is to be read alongside that of the Mumbai Sewage Disposal Project (MDSP). Many years in the gestation, it is only recently that it has started to take off. Why did it get stalled for nearly 7 years? The design of the *Project* - or of the component dealing with slum sanitation - envisaged 5 different agencies or organizations to do 5 different tasks. The first Job was to prepare and design publicity material to inform the community about the scheme, the second was to do the actual publicity, the third was to form a community based organization, the fourth was to design the toilet and the **fifth was** to construct it. These were all discrete activities to be undertaken by 5 different agencies. Nobody remained in contact with the community right from the beginning to the end to ensure follow-up, for continuity and to be accountable for results- This administrative haphazardness in project design led to project failure and little there was to show for all the money spent. The alliance of **SPARC/NSDF/MM** had been in intermittent contact with the Municipal Corporation and Bank Staff, maintaining a distance when they did **not agree with the** proposed course of action

The good news in that the lessons of the past have been learnt and the project has been thoroughly overhauled. Some NGOs, including the alliance, took up pilot projects

and we are now involved in constructions 320 toilet blocks or 6400 toilet seats in the slums of Mumbai. A people's process has been set into motion whereby savings and credit groups of women are engaging with all aspects of toilet construction - locational issues, interaction with the elected Councillors of the Municipal Corporation, the technical aspects of toilet design, building materials and physical construction. A team of engineers and architects to support this process has been set in place. The year 2001 saw the beginning of this work. As in the case of Pune, we anticipate that the project will generate outcomes like the empowerment of poor communities -particularly the women amongst them.

Yet, there is considerable scope for improvement in project design. For one thing, tenders were called to select the agency. The eligibility criteria for tendering included a condition that the tenderer ought to have done work worth a certain sum: this has automatically kept most NGOs out of the running. Had it not been for the work done in Pune and other cities and countries, the alliance would have been disqualified from the start. Terms for bid security involved making huge deposits, which NGOs simply don't have. The Bank and the Corporation need to revisit their procedures to see how things could be done otherwise. Again, in order to draw money for the work, bank guarantees have to be obtained to secure advances. Most NGOs would not have the funds to do so. How can this be changed? The argument that tendering is essential because it promotes transparency has some weight but it must be kept in mind that many tenders are finalized for extraneous considerations in many contexts. Sole source contracts can be awarded with complete fairness as in the case of MUTP. If the objective of involving civil society organizations is paramount and the need for participatory, bottom - up development is recognized, then we will have to alter and amend procedures and policies that stand in the way, whether on the part of the implementing agency or the Bank- In all fairness, it must be said that both the Corporation and the Bank have - in the last couple of years - been responsive to these concerns.

The focus of this paper on empowerment and infrastructure has been upon the importance of partnerships, the role of community based **organizations** and the obligations placed upon international **financial organizations** like the World Bank to go beyond strait-jacketed perspectives. Can we develop in this area, using the philosopher John Rawls's evocative phrase, an 'overlapping consensus' to involve communities of the poor in the production and maintenance of infrastructure? I am sure this forum will throw more light on this question.

Sundar Burra Adviser, SPARC