Sharing experiences and changing lives

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I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Community exchange programmes are proving to be a powerful mechanism for supporting and strengthening the capacity of community organizations to participate in urban development. Groups in Asia and Southern Africa have developed an exchange methodology to strengthen the capacity of local grassroots organizations to devise new development alternatives, be recognised by municipalities for their work, and scale up community innovations from project to city and from practice to policy.

Exchanges start by recognising the knowledge that people, especially the very poor, have created through their livelihood struggles. This knowledge forms the basis of the survival strategies of the poor but it is rarely acknowledged by external groups or used as the foundation on which new learning occurs. By enabling communities to share and explore such knowledge, a very powerful process is triggered, whereby community exchanges transform development, thus helping to ensure that the poor themselves play a definitive role.

Initially, the language and ideas that emerge from local exchanges remain with local communities. Then, as the links between communities became stronger and as more people experiment with this new learning, ideas are refined and put into practice, use is scaled up, replication and adaptation take place. During this process, the poor, now both teachers and consumers, use their knowledge to further their own interests. From this learning, sharing and collective action, strong sustained and mobilised networks of communities emerge. These networks use their critical mass to create a basis for change, opening space for negotiation and encouraging development groups to adjust their perspectives of the poor. Professional agencies become interested in community activities and they may be willing to consider the innovations and experimentation undertaken by the urban poor themselves.

Section II of this paper explores the experience with participation and with participatory tools and methods, often seen as the panacea for top-down development. Section III then describes the development of this methodology by the National Slum Dwellers Federation, SPARC (an NGO) and *Mahila Milan* (a federation of women's cooperatives) in India. Section IV examines a number of benefits of the exchange process and considers why exchanges are such an effective methodology for supporting a process of people centred development. Section V then reviews some of the necessary conditions for the exchange process to be fully effective. These conditions also point to the distinctive characteristics of the exchange process vis-à-vis other participation methodology. The paper concludes by drawing together some of the wider implications of this approach.

II. PARTICIPATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Many development agencies now recognise the importance of citizen involvement in development interventions. In urban areas, governments have been urged to change their approach to the development of informal areas in favour of ‘enablement strategies’ which offer better support to local initiatives. To ensure local ‘ownership’, development agencies have sought to both improve consultation and, in some cases, offer local residents joint programme management (see Nelson and Wright, 1997: 2-6) for a discussion of the policy positions of the World Bank, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, GTZ and DFID).

There are a number of reasons to account for this growing interest in enablement, ownership and participation. One is an increasing recognition that the models of social welfare that have been

developed may be counter-productive, increasing dependency and apathy. The greater involvement of the "beneficiaries" in the management and implementation of any grant finance is seen as mitigating these negative impacts. A second reason is the recognition of the failure of programmes and projects that have not involved local residents. Too many development projects have offered those they seek to help poorly located water taps, training for trades for which there is a limited market, land too far from jobs, to mention just a few of the problems. Third, the neo-liberalist politics that has characterised government policies of the 1980s and 1990s has been associated with attempts to minimise the role of the state. During the first of these decades, great emphasis was placed on market based solutions for development. As the inability of the market to address issues of poverty became evident, governments turned to civil society and voluntary self-help activities.

Despite this interest and commitment from many parties, it may not be easy to secure an effective participatory process. Many recognise that a critical component of effective participation is some form of citizen empowerment and the more equal sharing of power between the strong and the weak (Lane, 1997: 188; Nelson and Wright, 1997: 8; Paul, 1987). However, development interven tions that seek participation on these terms frequently face one or more of three problems. First, the nature of power within the community may mean that the poorest members are both unable to get their demands tabled and considered (Gavanta, 1998: 4) and/or may not feel able to take part in the processes (see, for example, the discussion of Mosse's work in Robinson-Pant, 1995: 79). Hence, there is an issue about "who participates?" Second, the process of securing participation and empowerment may involve conflict, often within the community itself, because it involves changing social relationships such that there is a new set of winners and losers. This raises a set of issues about how such conflicts can be managed successfully. More generally it raises the issue of "who manages the process of participation?" Third, and particularly relevant in the context of urban development, the participation of residents is often located within a project cycle of three or five years despite the fact that substantive development in habitat issues is likely to take ten years or more. Such project related interventions beg the question "what is participation for?"

To address these and other concerns, a range of participatory tools and methods has been developed to assist in the interface between development professionals and the local community. As the importance of community involvement is increasingly acknowledged, the attention given to participatory research and development methodologies in recent years has grown considerably. Such tools and methods may be found within a broad range of disciplines and they are grouped together under a variety of names. Within agriculture and rural development, these approaches are associated with the term Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and within the public health sector, Rapid Assessment Procedure (RAP). Other names for similar methodologies include Participatory Learning Methods (PALM), Participatory Action Research (PAR) and *Méthode Accélérée de Recherche Participative* (MARP). These methodologies seek to change the planning process so that communities can be more effectively involved in the design and management of development interventions that affect their lives.

However, whilst the use of participatory tools and methods may enhance interaction between professionals and the community, it is now widely recognised that their use in not without problems. Although the participatory process is meant to be controlled from within, it is invariably stimulated by an external, generally professional, agency. Eyben and Ladbury (1997: 197) argue that professional intervention may hold back a participatory process because of the inability of professionals to raise the right issues with the community:

> "Lack of community participation in projects can therefore be the result of professionals assuming the role of knowledge specialists who do not take users' views into account because users do not 'know enough' to make decisions."

Cooke (1998: 2) emphasises that the outsider responsible for making the intervention brings with them a particular set of associations, all of which have local meaning, hence "...the very presence of the interventionists changes things." Related to the problem of external instigators is an awareness by

some professional participatory specialists that such tools and methods are utilised within different concepts of knowledge and understanding, hence their meanings and associations are different for the professional and community participants (Robinson-Pant 1995: 78).

Mosse (1995) also raises further and important questions about the sufficiency of participatory tools and methods and the role of outsiders in knowledge creation. He emphasises the need for the analytical role to remain with outsiders. Reflecting on the need for analysis in order to make successful development interventions, he suggests:

> "…[such data]...were not, and probably *could* not, have been generated in *group* discussions by villagers...they represented an external view... Of course, local people already have the sophisticated knowledge necessary for everyday social life. Often this knowledge remains tacit and need not, or cannot without risk of conflict, be made explicit. The often used polarity between 'extractive' and 'participatory' research modes thus overlooks the fact that some types of knowledge employed in participatory projects are *necessarily* external and analytical." (Mosse 1995: 32)

The association that Mosse makes between analytical and external knowledge clearly has implications for the way in which knowledge and understanding about local communities is created and validated. As Biggs and Smith (1998: 241) suggest, this contribution suggests a need to extend the discussion about insider and outsider roles "...beyond schematic portrayals of professional-client relationships..." to the recognition that "...more subtle issues are at stake involving power and knowledge transactions and role negotiations." More generally, there is a need to recognise how knowledge about communities, their development perspectives and their development needs is created, validated and used.

This paper explores the use of community to community exchanges whereby the poor themselves are the communicators and the instigators of a participatory development process. Community exchanges root an experiential learning process within the homes and the communities of poor people themselves. In so doing, they seek to avoid some of the problems that have been summarised above. For the last ten years, innovative NGOs in Asia and South Africa have been committed to supporting community exchanges in order to transform urban development, thereby enabling poor people to plan, control and negotiate their own development strategies. As the process has evolved, international exchanges between the urban poor have spread, offering a practical illustration of both the workings and significance of civil society, locally, nationally and internationally.

Before describing and analysing the community to community exchange process, the next section introduces the work of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan,* the groups who initiated this methdology. This section explains how exchanges are located within a broader approach to community learning and people's empowerment.

III. LEARNING BY DOING

SPARC is an Indian NGO which started work in E ward in the Byculla area of Mumbai in 1984. From the beginning, they focused upon the most vulnerable in the city, namely, women pavement dwellers, and their intention was to develop a process of support for the women living in Byculla. The staff recognised that women had to play a central role in such a support process as they are central to survival strategies, being the main community managers and creating systems to deal with water, sanitation and with delaying the frequent demolition of houses.

Two years after starting work, SPARC entered into a partnership with the National Slum Dwellers' Federation, a national organization of leaders of informal settlements around India. The Federation was set up in 1974 by community leaders who wished to secure land tenure and basic amenities for its members. The Federation had previously worked with several NGOs but had always found that the

latter sought to control the development process. After observing how SPARC engaged communities of pavement dwellers in E ward, the Federation began to explore the possibility of an alliance. The NSDF/SPARC alliance has, from the beginning, combined the strength of both organizations, with SPARC providing the interface with formal development authorities and the NSDF mobilising communities at the grassroots.

Mahila Milan emerged as the third partner in the alliance. Both the initial partners shared a common vision that women should be the main focal point within improvement initiatives. The informal networks of women who first worked with SPARC gradually consolidated around savings and loan activities, eventually forming *Mahila Milan* (Women Together), a network of women collectives who manage women's savings and loan groups. Many of the tools that the alliance uses today, such as daily savings, housing training, land search, housing exhibitions and the enumeration of settlements, were all created by SPARC and women's collectives on the pavements of Byculla. Women's collectives became trainers for many groups around Mumbai and other cities, as they visited other settlements and shared what they had learnt. Slowly, peer learning practices were created among groups mobilised by the Federation.

The daily activities of the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* have all been initiated, explored and consolidated through the exchange process. Some of the core activities are summarised in Box 1. Exchanges provide a means for common approaches to be identified and refined. These approaches are then multiplied through the exchange process, as they are shared with other communities. This ensures that there is a sufficient mass of local demand to secure the required policy change. Hence, what is important is both the identification of approaches that will work for many people and the mobilisation of the people around such options.

Box 1: The Multiple Activities of the Alliance

Savings and credit: Women's savings groups are set up and these become the central point through which the exchange process takes place. Women particularly are attracted to saving and find that it transforms their relationships with each other, with their families and with the wider community. Pooled savings are used to finance a capital fund for crisis loans. Women who are interested in taking part are drawn into the training process and are shown how such crisis credit funds work in other communities. Within three months, most settlements are able to understand, agree and manage the rules and regulations to make the crisis credit fund operational. Using additional capital from state agencies, savings schemes can lend for income generation and can access housing loans.

Surveys: Settlement and city surveys are an important tool in educating communities to look at themselves and in creating a capacity for communities to articulate their knowledge of themselves to those with whom they interact. The alliance helps communities to undertake surveys on various levels including the listing of all settlements, household enumeration and intra-household surveys. Questionnaires and other survey methodologies are discussed with communities and modified as necessary.

Mapping: The alliance also works with communities to build their skills in mapping services, settlements, resources, problems, etc. so that they can get a visual representation of how their present physical situation relates to them. Mapping is part of the qualitative aspects of surveying and data-gathering; it becomes especially useful in building community skills to deal with physical interventions, when communities have to look at maps and drawings prepared for settlement improvement.

Pilot projects: Pilot projects are universally accepted as experimental learning tools that can be used to test possible solutions, strategies and management systems. The 'pilot projects' set up by the

alliance are activities which a particular community wants to undertake to solve one of its problems. For the wider membership, the pilot can demonstrate a potential new alternative. The focus remains firmly on what communities can do themselves and not what can be done for them. Once a task is accomplished, both the community and others, such as the state or the municipality, calculate what it would cost to scale up the pilot.

Housing training: As communities secure land, they are eager to build. Federation members need to learn or improve many related skills such as house construction, material costing and how to manage the architects and planners who seek to influence their hopes and ambitions. Then there are additional options such as the production of building materials (which reduces construction costs) and the installation of infrastructure. All these skills have to be acquired rapidly to make the most of opportunities.

The alliance's commitment to the community to community exchange process emerges from their understanding of community participation. All three partners believe that there can be no social change to the benefit of low-income communities if the poor do not participate in designing, managing and realising that process of change. Community involvement in conceptualising participation is as important as participation itself. Central to this learning has been the process of community to community exchange. SPARC describes their community exchange programme and its significance thus:

> "The exchange process builds upon the logic of 'doing is knowing'. Exchanges lead to good sharing of experience and therefore a new set of people learning new skills... Exchanges between communities have been continually developed because they serve many ends. They draw large numbers of people into a process of change and help to enable the poor to reach out and federate, thereby developing a collective vision. In addition, they help to create personalised and strong bonds between communities who share common problems, both presenting them with a wide range of options to choose from and negotiate for, and ensuring them they are not alone in their struggles."

Where professionals are the agents of change, the locus of learning is taken away from the community. As a consequence, many development interventions fail to address their needs. Some of these problems, such as lack of ownership, related dependency on external agencies and 'improvements' that are inappropriate for practical or cultural reasons, have already been mentioned in the sections above. There are, also, further problems. The solutions are determined within the understanding and practices of professionals and, often, they are too expensive for the poor. If subsidies are required, then the interventions are unlikely to achieve the necessary scale. Critically, because the solutions are external to the community, local residents are not motivated to be involved in their implementation. Whilst there may be some involvement, this is often limited to physical labour or attending meetings. Residents are not *actively* involved, thinking about alternatives and assessing them, working out the different options and modifying interventions accordingly.

When learning is located in people's neighbourhoods through an exchange process, communities are brought together to consider their common needs. Genuine federations and networks of poor urban communities emerge to support this learning process. Moreover, these federations start to play an active role in city and national debates. The poor gain a voice in city affairs, together with the empowerment and solidarity that this can build. In South Africa, for example, the savings groups that started in 1992 shared their experiences through exchanges to one another's settlements. In 1994, the groups agreed to come together to form the South African Homeless People's Federation. The Federation now supports its member organizations through a range of regional centres that provide advice to individual organizations and give the opportunity for all groups to meet. Federation leaders have constant interaction with government agencies and sit on several state bodies at the national and provincial level.

IV. COMMUNITY EXCHANGES – HOW THEY WORK, HOW THEY SPREAD

As described above, community exchanges enable the urban poor themselves to articulate and develop their knowledge and understanding of their situation and how it can be addressed.

Exchanges start by encouraging communities to reflect on their own situation. Together, neighbours identify their problems and explore possible solutions; they then either visit a group close by or invite them to their own settlement. Within the city, these exchanges occur rapidly and informally. The first few visits are facilitated by the more experienced core trainers of the local federation, then people organize their own exchanges. Gradually, groups visit each other spontaneously. Two types of exchanges occur: in one, core trainers travel to assist city level groups, in the other, local community leaders, now confident and capable, visit other nearby settlements.

Most exchanges involve groups of four or five women and two men (the implications for gender are discussed in the concluding section). Members of recently organized communities meet leaders and/or visit established community organizations, and share their experience and frustrations. The more established groups then begin the process of assisting new settlement organizations. Since all learning is by observation and participation, new leaders accompany seasoned ones on visits to nearby settlements and begin a dialogue with each other's communities. Often, the emergent groups make a commitment to the broader process and establish local savings groups.

> "On the 1st October 1998, we held a meeting with the Cape Town people. The aim was to see how we were working. They saw how our daily savings work and they wished to see how a staircase is built and to find out whether there are any problems they can solve concerning the saving schemes. We told them the reason why daily savings and meetings are so important is because it is where problems are identified, analysed and perhaps solved or a step leading to a solution is taken." - V. Madondo, South African Homeless People's Federation, Kwa-Zulu Natal.
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> (Source: Box 2: Exchange Programme Report – VukuZenzele Housing Savings Scheme (Cape Town) – to the savings schemes in Piesang River, Durban. VukuZenzele is a housing savings scheme based in Cape Town that is currently developing 235 houses on a greenfield site. Some of these houses are double storey, hence the interest in staircases. The exchange with Piesang River took place at a time when building was just starting.)

Once communication systems between communities are well-developed, problem solving, pilot projects, exhibitions, enumeration and other activities begin. In all instances, there are rituals and routines that communities undertake to address long-established dependencies. The development interventions that emerge from these rituals are summarised in Box 1 whilst Box 2 describes how two of these rituals are introduced into the community. Exchange visits generally have a focus, for example, Box 2 describes the introduction of mapping and modelling. Other foci include savings, housing building, dealing with corruption and mis-use of funds, preparing for negotiations with state agencies, land identification and such like. However, there are also exchanges that are simply exploratory with no specific agenda except an open sharing of issues and problems.

The exchange process helps community leaders feel comfortable about participating in change. They gain this through interaction with their peers and through understanding the process of change that has taken place in other settlements. Hence, exchanges have an important role to play. Through these processes, leaders learn to being patient and to position themselves within larger-scale development processes in a way that enables them to drive them. They learn to accept the support offered by more experienced groups, knowing that, one day, they too will help someone else.

The Growth of International Exchanges

Until 1988, all exchanges were local and national. In 1988, SPARC, as one of the founder NGOs of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), a regional grouping of professional agencies working with the urban poor, began to share the methodology of exchanges with other NGOs and community based organizations in Asia. In 1988, SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* hosted the first women's exchange, with 56 women from eight countries. Later, the alliance participated in the peoples' assembly in South Korea when communities gathered in solidarity towards the urban poor in Seoul who were being evicted due to the Olympic games.

During the early 1990s, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* began a regular programme of exchanges with communities working with the People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter, a South African NGO. In 1994, the South African savings schemes established by *Mahila Milan* formalised their links by joining together in the South African Homeless People's Federation. SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* have since developed links with a number of other Asian countries, both independently and through the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. These countries include Cambodia, Nepal and the Philippines. In Africa, community to community exchanges by the South African Federation of Homeless People have extended the network to include people's organizations in Namibia, Kenya, Senegal and Zimbabwe.

The participants in international exchanges are generally the national leadership or experienced community leaders with something special to offer. The style of learning and teaching is similar to that of a local exchange but the international aspect requires greater patience as translation is needed. In many ways, the value of the international exchange process takes longer to emerge as community leaders need to understand each other's situation, politics and culture. International exchanges cannot replace local and national exchanges but, rather, they build on an active national process. If such a local process involving organized communities does not already exist, the international exposure needs to trigger its creation and support its growth.

International exchanges contribute both to the day-to-day activities of the host community organization and, simultaneously, to a global process. This global process is a movement of solidarity and mutual understanding between the urban poor, not a process that focuses on international policies and practices but rather one that is global in outreach, strengthening groups' capacity to deal with what is oppressive and exploitative within their local environment. From these international exchanges, Shack/Slum Dwellers International has emerged, a formalisation of this international network.

The next section explains why the urban poor are interested in being involved in such a movement, through looking at some of the benefits that can be secured.

V. THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY EXCHANGES

Community to community exchanges strengthen the ability of poor women to control the development process. Poor people, especially poor women, are sceptical about the solutions presented to them by professional experts but they are unable to respond in kind. Through exchanges, the capacity to teach, to disseminate new ideas, to explore current events and to analyse beyond the level of an individual settlement, to take on new skilled activities and to manage relationships with powerful bodies becomes vested in individuals who are inside the community. Opportunities for growth and development can now be controlled by the poor themselves. Through exchanges with other groups similarly placed, communities better understand the political and other dimensions behind these issues, they learn why they must persist even if it appears impossible to influence those making the decisions.

> "We learnt the experience of *Mahila Milan*, and we were impressed. But still we did not believe it would work. It started to catch on gradually, until today people question me when they do not see me every day. I learnt from my neighbour about the savings system. I am shy, and can't talk to people easily, but I know my neighbour, and I decided to give it a try. I did not always want to come to the meetings because I felt uncomfortable, but they would come and ask me to join them anyway. They said: you will learn and become less shy over time. At the meetings I was forced to speak by the others. At first I thought they were against me, but it worked: here I am! I live in my own house, and I come to India now to share my experiences." - Xoliswa Tiso, South Africa.

The benefits that community to community exchanges offer can broadly be divided into three areas. The first is a strengthening of knowledge creation and more specific organizational skills within savings schemes through helping them to determine priorities and preferred development options. The second is a strengthening of the ability to manage relations with external groups, and this is especially true with regard to relationships with all levels of government. The third is the exchange of technical skills with regard to common activities such as financial management and house building. Some of the most significant benefits in each area are explored below.

Strengthening Knowledge and a Capacity for Organization

Central to any development process is the creation of knowledge. Exchange processes take what is happening in a local community and 'shake it all up'. Local residents gain a new understanding as they repeat what they know in a different environment. As they look at themselves through the eyes of others, their knowledge increases. They start to explore some of their own frailties in a non-defensive way as they talk about their experiences, positive and negative, in order to assist the development of others.

The SPARC/*Mahila Milan*/NSDF experience has shown that resolving the problems faced by low-income communities requires the communities to collectively reflect on these problems, to deconstruct them and then identify solutions. Communities need to explore their expanding options. They need to allow time and space for exploring all the possible choices, need to examine the feasibility of the options available and look at the resource implications, and they need to understand the degree of control which they, as communities, can have over the solutions. Finally, they need to have a sense of solidarity with the groups with which they have such an exploration. Peer exchanges between communities of the poor can achieve this.

Problem solving, wherever and by whomever, often follows a similar path. People begin with what they know and understand. Then they move, often very slowly, from this starting point. Often, there is no solution within their present perspective. To find a solution, they need to view the problem differently. Often, the 'ingredients' for a new solution are not immediately available and people do not know where to look. Exchanges offer a supportive and changing environment, and opening up new possibilities is obviously greatest with international exchanges. Exploring old issues in a new context often provides a creative opportunity for establishing a new perspective. The change from their home environment suddenly takes community leaders outside of accepted relationships, norms and patterns; in this context, problem solving gains a new creativity.

Exchanges scale-up and speed-up known development processes by effectively transmitting relevant information and understanding to new communities. Capacity and confidence is built up within communities and their development options are extended. People become involved because they get something out of the process but, in the course of this, they build their collective consciousness. Confidence is also key; they see others doing it and they believe that they can do it too. Through community exchanges, the urban poor explore development options and articulate their choices. They give their time freely and willingly to this process because it addresses their immediate development needs.

Exchanges also enable communities to learn about alternative gender roles. Many things change during the apparently simple process of a group of predominantly women visiting another community. Families are encouraged to allow women to travel, others take care of their chores and support the household. There are opportunities for many women to travel away from their families for the first time, to visit cities (and now countries) they would never have gone to and to begin interacting with others in a way they would never have considered in the past. The more they talk about their own growth and the more they are aware of it, the more confidently they speak and the greater their capacity to be role models to others.

Through exchanges, women are trained to play key leadership roles in their communities and are able to gain recognition in their respective settlements. Women-led housing savings schemes manage processes within their communities in co-operation with the traditional male leadership in order to strengthen the capacities of the poor to manage relations with external groups. Over time, women in communities gain both the capacity and the confidence to manage all the assets owned and controlled by the community and, eventually, they become empowered to re-negotiate their relationships with the traditional male leaders. Gradually, men and women begin to work together, and men no longer feel the need to compete and push down women.

Managing Relations with Groups outside the Community

Managing exchanges, and the events associated with them, pushes forward the development of local capacity. An important part of organizational capability is the ability to plan and manage. International community exchanges add a new dimension to the capacity of already experienced communities. Providing new opportunities to stretch the existing capacity of active groups is important for their growth.

Exchanges may be associated with a public event that further adds to the skills and capacities of local communities. This process can be illustrated by a recent housing exhibition in Kanpur in which the community managed a housing exhibition that involved 5,000 local visitors (from other federation groups and government officials), 200 leaders from other cities around India and 45 international guests from seven countries. Communities that can manage all this gain increased confidence and a considerable reputation within the city in which they are working.

When preparing for visits (international, national and local), community members have to decide what they need to do and how they might do it. They have to form committees and work together. This process can be used as a catalyst for addressing other problems within the community and, in so doing, becomes a practical training in governance. In the experience of SPARC and its partners, setting up the institutions is the easy part; making these institutions effective is much more difficult. Inevitably, these institutions reflect society and there are members who seek to block activities or to dominate events. The community as a whole needs to address and solve such problems. Participation in a larger federation helps them to do this, and in a way that reinforces their capacity to manage. Equally, through their engagement in the local process, regional and national leadership develop their skills. International exchanges further strengthen this through allowing peer sharing between national and regional leadership.

With respect to learning new skills in managing relationships, community leaders from the visiting community also have much to gain. Federation leaders often have to deal with guests brought to their settlements by the city officials or NGOs but, during such visits, they are passive observers. With an international exchange, the host community reverses the role; they ‘create the wave of excitement’, they call the press and TV and they give their officials and local dignitaries a chance to meet these outsiders. They may have to present their work to the local mayor, be interviewed by TV and radio journalists, and suddenly find that they are the valued ‘experts’. Being drawn into these new roles transforms these individuals; they find themselves invited to take up positions from which they have

long been excluded. This process makes them re-examine their expectations for themselves and other community members. Once they have played these roles in another country, they are more ready and confident at home as well.

Such activities act as catalysts in the host community by opening up new opportunities and prompting local government and service providers to respond more effectively to the community's needs. Further opportunities for building relationships with government officials are created and communities also learn how to articulate principles and purpose through public events. The high level of public exposure associated with exchanges, particularly international exchanges, makes new demands on community leaders within a supportive context, extending their capacities and confidence.

When government officials visit the local community during an international exchange, there are further benefits. The negotiating position of the local organization is immediately improved. The audience is on their side; the intense discussions between community members and the longstanding commitment between the national federations taking part mean that there is a good understanding and a strong bond of solidarity between the host community and the visitors. For the government officials, the international visitors are unknown; in general, the officials become more considered in what they say and are anxious that it sounds both reasonable and sensitive to the needs of the urban poor. Meanwhile, the international visitors can raise issues which others cannot. For example, corruption may be a problem. The visiting community can place this subject neutrally into the discussion, using their own experience (far away) as an example. The officials will give reassurance that such difficulties will not be a problem here and, later, the local community can use these pledges to ensure that corruption is less of a problem in the allocation of funds.

The Acquisition of Technical Skills

> "When I asked the technician (who works with us in Dakar) to show us how layout plans are designed, he used such sophisticated jargon that I barely understood a word he said. In Protea South (Gauteng uFunde Zufe, South Africa) during our last evening, we asked a woman to draw us a plan. When she explained house modelling, I understood and felt that I too could do it." - Aminata Mbaye, Senegalese Savings and Loan Network communicating with the South African Federation through translation.

Community to community exchanges provide for the effective and low-cost transfer of skills. The importance of learning has been discussed above. However, in addition to the general capacity to create knowledge, the exchange process helps to ensure that communities have the necessary skills to participate in the development process.

These skills are obviously specific to the development intervention that is required. With respect to the initiatives described here, these include financial management skills for savings and loans, any skills required to obtain government entitlements, such as ration cards in India and housing subsidies in South Africa, and building and construction skills. The power of the exchange process in creating skills is several-fold. First, community members quickly believe that they too can do it. When they see professionals undertaking an activity, they may be sceptical about how easily they might take it over. When they see another community member doing it, they know it is possible. Second, the teaching is appropriate, as is evident from the quote by Mbaye. Moreover, community members find it easy to say "Stop, I do not understand" whenever it is necessary. Third, the transfer of skills is done through practical demonstration, enabling many people to see how easily they can do what is required. A further benefit of the practical demonstration is mobilisation, whereby other local residents come and see what is going on. The process is exemplified through the story of a mapping and modelling exercise in Dhowrinager, India which involved an Indian and South African exchange with more experienced community members.

Box 2: Community Based Enumeration in an Indian Slum

"What we try and do is to use each settlement in need of such a training as a training and learning ground for at least ten other areas. So collectives of men and women from many areas gather together and participate in this process." - Rose and Rachel (from South Africa)

The first task is to form groups and divide the entire settlement into zones, covered by different teams. The teams begin by counting huts and families. Because the teams are from the community, often they know that more than one family lives in one hut. As they pass through the area, they walk every path and observe all the structures. Once every team has finished the exercise, they gather on the main square and compile the information. This is put on a map marking out the houses, the roads, temples, toilets and so on.

At this time, the number of volunteers doubles due to interest by women from the community, and work speeds up. The community then organizes a meal for everyone. Experiences of such activities in other settlements and other countries are discussed. In the afternoon, household enumeration begins. This looks at who lives together, their ages, relationships, education, sex, occupations and incomes. This is followed by a migration history of the family, its savings and investment history and participation in community organizational processes.

One group then compiles this information while another group works with sections of the community to begin house and settlement modelling. Everyone working on this process now has a detailed understanding of his or her settlement. Using this information, they begin to design houses and neighbourhoods and, before long, cardboard boxes, tins and other such tools are used to construct a model. The day ends with everyone talking about what they have learnt from the process. On the first day, images of people from their settlement and other areas create conditions in which the whole settlement can talk about their own area, their structures and their layouts collectively. Because the process purposely creates conditions for women to take the lead, it unlocks the knowledge and skills that women have already developed in creating their homes and in managing their settlements.

Until they go through this process, communities tend to believe that only professionals can undertake this task and they shy away from contributing. After the training programme - if and when professionals come - the community has a set of ideas and inputs which can guide the settlement design. By the second day, only a small team remains and the rest of the outsiders leave. Their jobs are taken over by local people supported by the community trainers.

General Benefits

In addition to the immediate benefits for the neighbourhoods participating in the exchange programme, there are city-wide benefits as local perspectives start to change. Understanding urban issues and problems is taken beyond the immediate needs of the settlement, encouraging the establishment of networks and federations of community activists. Community members start becoming involved in articulating and exploring city-wide strategies for addressing their problems. This ensures that city policies and practices can begin to work in ways which support neighbourhood level development efforts.

Membership provides communities with a feeling of ownership over the federation and a consciousness of being a part of a much larger collective. The learning process initiated at the community level reduces their sense of marginalization. A sense of togetherness helps them to develop the confidence and determination to seek out city officials, government departments and other resource-providing organizations. Without such groupings, communities are generally not

represented in city decision-making and they lack a voice in city affairs. Thus, another benefit of exchanges is the empowerment of poor communities and the working towards more democratic local governance. Exchanges between different cities and countries create a growing solidarity and sharing of experience between poor urban communities on an international scale. It is from this experience that Shack/Slum Dwellers International has grown.

Most notably perhaps, in a number of countries the development processes supported by exchanges have helped to push forward changes in policy and practice in favour of the urban poor. In Mumbai (India), changes in the building regulations in high-density, low-income areas have enabled federation groups to collaborate with commercial developers to enable a cross-subsidy in favour of the poor. In South Africa, community organizations have been enabled to draw down the state housing subsidy directly, increasing its worth to them by two or three times. What is significant is that policy changes have coincided with a local capacity to implement these policies and this is further explored in the following section.

VI. UNDERSTANDING SUCCESS

The last decade of experience with community to community exchanges has highlighted several characteristics of the exchange process that both distinguishes it from other participatory tools and methods and which points to where the process might go wrong.

First, the communities undertaking exchanges need to be linked together in a network or federation. It is the regional and national leaders that keep in touch with the many communities that participate in the process and which determine who requires support, of what kind and from whom. Without such a network, the exchanges cannot be planned effectively and appropriate support given as and where it is needed. It would be difficult for any professional to bring communities together with a sufficiently accurate understanding of the issues and problems that need to be explored and resolved, and to do this task at the required scale would be hugely expensive.

Organizing through a federation or community managed network ensures that the solutions that are explored and elaborated are those that emerge from the communities' own experience in addressing poverty and which have the potential to be embedded in community practice and scaled up. The role of the federation is critical to this scaling up. As mentioned above, it is through the federation that a leadership emerges that will have a city, provincial and/or national impact. For policy changes to be secured, such a leadership is necessary, as is a mobilized membership able to exert political influence. The federative process becomes a way of identifying and consolidating the innovations that can make sense to a large number of communities. These are the ones that are rapidly picked up and spread. Developing a self-aware network of organized communities engaged in similar solution processes is essential to securing sufficient momentum for change. Without such momentum, approaches remain as pilot projects, reaching only a small number of those in need. With a mass movement, policy changes can be secured and taken up through local action on the ground.

This issue can be illustrated through the South African Homeless People's Federation success in securing the opportunity for state housing subsidies to be released directly to grassroots organizations. Communities wishing to use this opportunity successfully need to be able to manage finance and to build houses themselves. The policy change which enables grassroots organizations to access the subsidy is insignificant by itself. It needs to be secured within a context in which there is a local capacity to use this change in policy. Through community to community exchanges, these skills have been acquired by over 300 communities throughout South Africa. The policy is in place and is being used. If there were not such local take up, the policy change would soon be reversed with commercial construction companies claiming that there is no demand for people's driven development from local residents.

Without a federation or network, the communities remain fragmented. Although learning takes place, changes in the way in which development is undertaken cannot consolidate across or within communities. There is little understanding of when an innovation or a problem is significant enough for it to require a substantive response, or when it is peripheral to the needs of most people. Hence, learning is not placed within a coherent strategy that enables one community to build on the advances of other communities to address the needs of the urban poor at scale.

Secondly, the exchange process points to a very different role for the professional. No matter how expertly a professional intervention is made, by its very nature it takes learning away from the community. Learning is experiential, 'training' by outsiders cannot diffuse it successfully. Hence, professionals need to stand back to enable the communities to direct the learning. Whilst they may have a role to play in the process, through their somewhat different perspective, it is very different from their traditional position.

The fundamental reason why low-income communities must set priorities is not that they are always correct. It is, rather, that the poor are much more committed to the solutions - even if they take a very long time - if they see that change is possible using their own strategies and processes, and is aimed at priorities they have set themselves.

This discussion points to two of the critical areas to 'get right' in using the methodology of community to community exchanges. First, individual community experiences need to be brought together in a federative or networking process. Second, there should be very little, or no, professional intervention in the learning process.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Many professionals involved in development projects fail to involve communities and support grassroots activism because, however they seek to avoid it, they remain in control of community processes. SPARC was founded as an exploration of how professionals could work in partnership with the urban poor to explore new and more community driven processes of change which follow the priorities of communities. Through working with the urban poor, tools and mechanisms have been identified that enable grassroots organizations to create, strengthen and refine systems of learning and mobilisation. Central to this process has been the sharing of experiences between communities, first at very local levels, then in the city, then nationally and then internationally, thereby creating a network of solidarity and support. From this solidarity grows a problem solving dialogue for change with other city based institutions and thus the systems are 'scaled up'. Autonomous and independent community organizations that represent the urban poor have been encouraged and a development process that provides a positive space for communities to learn with and from one another has been realised. This strategy has had profound implications, both for the urban poor in India and, through international community exchanges, urban citizens around the world.

The Implications for Participation

With respect to tools and methods for participation, community exchanges add substantively to existing approaches.

The issues raised in Section II and an understanding of how such issues can be addressed can be looked at through the experience of the exchange process. In the case of conflict for example, the community networks that have emerged from exchanges recognise that attempts to change iniquitous relations are likely to create conflict. However, they also believe that such conflicts are opportunities. Supported by other communities, local leaders can intervene successfully if the whole community is involved in making choices about the speed and extent of the changes that they are able to secure and

maintain. There is a potential to achieve a new status quo which can be more gender balanced, more equity based and transparent; but the local leadership has to feel ready to deal with it. A vital role for the larger federation is to absorb the tensions created from a local conflict. They do this by creating a more open process within which information and discussion is shared. At the same time, the new leadership is supported through exchanges with other communities that have successfully managed similar problems. These groups offer practical suggestions and psychological support.

Within an exchange process, the external instigator is a group of community leaders from another settlement, generally within the same city. The dynamic between an instigator from another low-income community and local residents is very different from situations in which the instigator is a professional. Firstly, the concerns of Eyben and Ladbury (1997) are addressed because the knowledge held by the instigators is more likely to be appropriate to local needs. Perhaps more importantly, the visitors cannot use status or privileged access to information to win their arguments. They have to use an authority based on rationality, demonstrating how they have reduced their own poverty and vulnerability and how other communities can achieve the same. In this peer exchange, the dynamic for change is located within the urban poor themselves. As residents in the new community are offered choices about what is possible and a tangible demonstration of how a similar group of low-income women and men have changed their lives, their own vision of the future begins to change.

As exchanges offer exposure to a range of different situations and demands that the visitors share experiences, the local leadership within each settlement is encouraged to develop an analytical capacity. The emphasis that Mosse (1995) places on the need for an understanding of social relationships and social processes for successful development is reinforced by the experiences of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan*. However, his claim that such knowledge is necessarily external is challenged. Through exchanges, this knowledge is both created and explicitly articulated by the urban poor themselves. At the same time, the knowledge becomes embedded within the solutions that are articulated and developed. Through this process, the power that emerges from analytical understanding and which has traditionally been held by professionals is owned by and located within the urban poor.

The interaction between the communities, the bringing together of often isolated settlements within a federation and the identification of member organizations with each other through a common set of interventions, all these factors mobilise local residents. With mobilisation, the poor are able to build new relationships with their local and national governments, demonstrating at scale an alternative set of development interventions. It is the combination of learning and mobilisation that makes community exchanges such a powerful methodology. Local communities develop their own improvements to the difficult situations that they face; and have the critical mass that is needed to move from proposal to policy change (Shah 1997). In this emphasis, the methodology can be recognised as belonging to the “action” rather than the “research” tradition of participatory approaches. But research in the sense of knowledge creation is also central. The process of participation becomes one of creating an understanding of what is needed together with a capacity to use such an understanding.

NOTE: Community to community exchanges emerged within an urban context. These communities are characterised by many features including inadequate incomes, many of which are obtained within the informal sector, poor infrastructure and housing. Whilst community organizations exist in many low-income settlements, many are unrepresentative of sections of the population.

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