

Community Empowerment of the Poor – Building Capacity of Pavement Dwellers

(A Case Study of Participatory Approach, SPARC/Mahila Milan/NSDF, India)

Summary:

SPARC is an NGO established in 1984, and aims to solve the problem faced by slum dwellers and pavement dwellers. SPARC facilitates to empower slum dwellers by organising communities and *puts the great importance on community-based, community-led, and community-focused organisational process.*

SPARC works closely with its partner organisations, NSDF (National Slum Dwellers' Federation) and Mahila Milan (literally translated into English as 'Women Together'); they form SPARC/Mahila Milan/NSDF alliance. NSDF was established in the mid 1970s by the leaders of the slum communities for integration of their communities. Mahila Milan, a women's organisation, was founded in 1984 with the support of SPARC. The SPARC/Mahila Milan/NSDF alliance *emphasises on women's participation* because women are the centres of the family unit.

SPARC/NSDF considers in-balance of growth of the city, unequal distribution of power and wealth including land, and lack of understanding on the importance of informal sector, as possible causes of poverty. The main issue is that poor people are out of the urban system and are not given an opportunity to participate in the social system.

SPARC/NSDF feels that the current urban poverty programmes do not really address the need for the poor. Furthermore, the benefit of the programme does not reach to the group who really needs help as urban poor themselves are not much involved in the process. Therefore, it is necessary *to bring the poor as a partner.*

Through the innovative bottom-up approaches, the SPARC/NSDF/Mahila Milan alliance demonstrated that the community could save their houses by forming saving groups that are also empowered to negotiate with the government. These pavement-dwellers are also able to provide tangible inputs into the design and construction of their houses.

Their impact has been remarkable that the work of SPARC/NSDF/Mahila Milan successfully resulted in community empowerment and capacity building of women.

Project Initiator

- SPARC/Mahila Milan/NSDF Alliance

Main Actors and Their Roles

- Municipality of Mumbai (local government) – to have joint projects-resources partnership.
- State Government of Housing, Urban Development and Social Welfare (.....) – to have joint partnership and resources.
- MMRDA, Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (national level organisation) – to have partnership and provide resources.
- MHADA, Maharashtra Housing Development Authority (national government) – to have partnership and provide resources.
- World Bank (international organisation) - to have partnership and provide resources.
- Railway Board (national level organisation) - to have partnership and provide resources.
- Airport Authorities (national level organisation) - to have partnership and provide resources.
- Asian Coalition for Asian Network Housing Rights (ACHR) (international NGO) – to give network.

Nature of Co-operation

SPARC/NSDF has been partnered with various organisations, and received resources from them, for instance, Municipality of Bombay (Mumbai), State Government of Housing, Urban Development and

Social Welfare, MMRDA, MHADA, World Bank, Railway Road and so on. ACHR (Asian Coalition for Asian Network Housing Rights) has supported SPARC/NSDF in terms of giving a network.

Characterisation of the Problem

The situation where pavement-dwellers of Mumbai live is said to be worse than that of slum dwellers. They can be considered as one of the most vulnerable groups because they face unsolved problems such as demolishment of their houses, hazards of pollution and accidents, the issue of water and sanitation etc. Before formation of Mahila Milan in 1985, demolition was undertaken almost everyday. Poor community had no opportunity to express their wish to negotiate with the government.

Process and Project Implementation and Management

SPARC/NSDF has given a support to women pavement dwellers to organise a women's organisation "Mahila Milan." They are encouraged to save money through the formation of micro-credit system which could lead to the basis of community participation. The savings are used as loans, and according to the saving booklet, the people use loan for small business and other things. The saving scheme was introduced to Nepal. At the beginning Mahila Milan was formed, it only covered 536 families. However, the number has risen dramatically, and it currently covers 10,000 families. Mahila Milan is now formed in 27 cities in India.

The approaches of the alliance include the following:

- *Shelter Training Program*: It provided public meeting to discuss possible strategies and solutions for their problems. The Shelter Training Program was conducted for 600 women for the first time, and the women pavement dwellers got an opportunity to interact with each other and share their experiences. It was made sure that all the problems were discussed on the basis of the community. The reason why women were focused was that they are the ones who are making a home. The next step was to see the land that is available for them. Therefore, the training programme was for gathering information and making visits to see the availability of land. This could also build the network of the people in different communities.
- *Group-Building*: It identified collective leadership amongst the group. One leader was chosen from every 15 house, and the leaders form Area Committees. They had meetings together to strengthen the network. Enumeration was very important to give them confidence a sense of accomplishment. Mahila-Milan was structured and divided into four committees: Finance Committee, Material Purchase Committee, Labour Committee, and Municipality Committee. The Finance Committee was responsible for collecting money door-to-door for the saving scheme. The function of the Material Purchase Committee was to find the cheapest and best housing materials and purchase them. The Labour Committee had to take care of labours in terms of transportation and so on. The Municipality Committee was responsible for negotiating with local government.
- *Participatory approach or Participatory Design*: It involved the design of the settlement. Through analysis, they identified the requirements of individual dwelling. They also had discussion with architects, engineers, and officials from housing authority in presence of SPARC. Finally, women in the first training programme built the full-scale dwelling models. For the dwelling models, timber, cloth and paper were used. An exhibition was also organised where other slum-dwellers, professionals and Government officials visited. Through the training, the women learnt about the building materials, and started to save up money for their future homes, and have been negotiating with the State authorities for land. The experience in housing issues were successfully learnt and shared. A model-house exhibition was also introduced to other parts of the world.

The approach taken by SPARC/Mahila Milan/NSDF is fundamentally community-based, community-led, community-initiated and community-focused process. Thus, this could lead to the establishment of sustainable and effective organisations in the community.

After formation of Mahila Milan, The squatters became able to live in more stable life in the same place without worrying about demolition and moving out. Community is now able to negotiate with the government, organise themselves and know how to start their own business.

Strategies Used

- Facilitate exchanges among community leaders through meetings to establish communication systems, and to discuss possible strategies and solutions for their problems.
- Data gathering is done in order to help the community to understand it is the basis of the allocation of the entitlement.
- Mapping is undertaken to give the community a clear idea of their situation.
- Needs assessment is conducted for letting the community know how external interventions could benefit them.
- Educate the communities through trainings and give them resources for finding the solution of their problems.
- Set up saving groups that is the basis of community participation, especially women's participation.
- Pilot demonstration projects are implemented in order to test possible solutions and strategies for the problems.
- Collective leadership amongst the group is identified for group-building.

Key Successes and Lessons Learnt

- People's empowerment and participation for dealing with their problems.
- Building and strengthening capacity of women in their settlements by the formation of Mahila Milan.
- Community-based problem-solving was achieved through the training programme.
- Self-help of the poor and their ability to design better shelter was proved.
- Co-operation among the residents of neighbouring settlements was established for designing a battle plan against demolition.
- Community participation and community empowerment were encouraged through formation of saving groups for their growth and development.
- Interaction and negotiation with the government were achieved, which could lead to the long-term solution for their problems.

Difficulties Faced in the Project

- Time taken to convince the governments for the project's concepts and approaches.

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