

INDIA

COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING FOR BASIC SERVICES IN CALCUTTA

This initiative by the West Bengal Government set out to improve the environmental conditions of two suburban towns in Calcutta Metropolitan Area. Infrastructure facilities have been extended to the slums to reduce environmental health hazards and make the city fabric more cohesive.

With the decline of the local jute industry over the last two decades, the economic condition of Titagarh, a town within Calcutta Metropolitan Area in India, is poor. The economic decline of Titagarh is reflected in the physical environment. Choked drains, open defecation, overflowing public urinals, and inefficient garbage disposal systems are a health risk. The town's poor, now mostly self-employed, live in decaying housing without adequate sanitation facilities and water connections. This housing is organised around courtyards with a single entrance called badis, initially they were intended for male migrant labourers, but now inhabited by whole families, often with as many as 5-6 adults living in one room units. The community toilets that are provided by the jute mills are not adequate for the increased population and are in a dilapidated state, the municipality is unable to improve or extend them due to lack of resources and apparent lack of political will.



Designed as a pilot project for the Calcutta Urban Services for Poor Program (CUSP), the Calcutta Slum Improvement Project (CSIP) demonstrates a good example of the devolution of power to the local municipality and strengthening of poor people's CBOs. CSIP, piloted with UK DFID funding, caters for around 7000 households in the slum settlements of Titagarh and Barrackpore municipalities. The project

seeks ways of working directly with CBOs in slum settlements in partnership with local urban government, rather than with bureaucratic development authorities, as has been the practice in the past.

At the outset of the programme, micro-planning exercises were carried out by both municipalities with the objective of better understanding the needs of the community. The municipality officials made visits to each *badi* of the slum settlements and encouraged the residents of the slums to form pada committees, a local civic body comprising of both men and women. Municipal officials discussed with the pada committee members, the planned services and how they could be best implemented. This interaction was beneficial in allowing the residents to voice their opinions, and building rapport between them. Municipal officials themselves acknowledged that although they had been employed in local government for up to 30 years, they had never made an effort to visit these *badis*. During the micro-planning exercises, conducted mostly in the courtyards of different badis, large-scale maps were drawn by the community with the location of the sanitation facilities they desired. The community drew their desired locations for the water taps and toilets and debated options publicly. Later on, these drawings were translated into technical drawings by the municipality engineers. As locals had been involved in devising this, they had the authority to challenge any derivation from the agreed plan.

In addition to installing infrastructure the municipalities also conducted various activities to raise awareness among the community about health and hygiene related issues. Activities like role-play, street theatre by community children and women were conducted throughout the project period to generate awareness. This also allowed the community to come together and interact. Initially the women from the community were shy about participating or interacting with the (mainly male) municipal officials. The women, coming from a very poor background had no previous experience in public speaking and lacked self-esteem. To build up their confidence, the women of the pada committee were made to wear badges in every workshop, a simple innovation by the municipality that gave them a lot of pride and helped them to think of themselves as a group.

Pada committees are involved in overseeing the implementation of construction work in the badis, informally supervising the quality of construction. In

cases of disagreement with the contractors they can bring pressure have work stopped. The women members of the pada committee are specially trained by the municipality in construction details to do this work effectively. Furthermore, the municipality aims to delegate the responsibility of post operation and maintenance of the assets created in the slum settlements to these committees.

At the end of the third year of the programme there is a distinct change in the quality of the physical environment of both Titagarh and Barrackpore. In the last monsoon there was almost no water logging inside the badis, previously a seasonal hazard that would restrict the movements of the residents and provided a site for mosquito breeding (a recent study done by DFID indicates that there has been a drop in cases of malaria and diarrhoea). The paving of courtyards means that local people have a place to sit and play and enjoy a better quality of life. Local women have taken the initiative in cleaning and maintaining these assets, as they feel involved in the entire programme.

However, there are still some issues that remain unresolved. One major concern is that after the intervention the property prices escalated and landlords are therefore threatening to increase the rents at an unreasonable rate. The pada committee members, through the local councillors, are able to pressurise the landlords not to raise rents but the sustainability of this is under question. Another issue is maintenance - as most members of the pada committee are tenants, not owners, it is doubtful that they will retain their willingness to continue such tasks.

On the whole, however, the programme has achieved the objectives it set out with. Now it needs to be seen how the lessons can be scaled up in the CUSP program throughout Calcutta.



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