Mumbai 2009

A reflection by Tricia Hackett

Transformation. It is a word that can conjure images of change on a grand scale. Conversely, it is a term so over- and misused that it has nearly been rendered meaningless. And yet we – a team of ten MSc students from nine countries and varying disciplinary backgrounds – sat in a classroom 4,477 miles from Mumbai and attempted to synthesize our disparate interpretations of the significance of transformation in relation to the lives of pavement dwellers half a world away. Despite its connotative flaws or perhaps because of them, the struggle to create a definition and method to measure transformation was arduous and at times frustrating. The "transformation" challenge was not only the fault of a battered and tired word. The amorphous and capricious nature of the term brought to the surface the inherent complexity, nuance, and contradictions in the larger issues of urban development that we were grappling with: social justice, globalisation, active citizenship, sustainable livelihoods, and the roles of the state and private sector. Our definition of transformation evolved over the five months of the project as we arrived at moments of "periodic consensus"1 in an effort to construct a meaningful foundation for our conceptual framework.

One of two multinational teams of student-researchers from the MSc programme in Urban Development Planning, we travelled to Mumbai in May 2009 after several months of London-based preparation which included secondary research and presentations from experts. The research for our field trip was guided by specific terms of reference (ToRs), entitled Community-Driven Housing Policy and Planning: Partnerships of Co-operative Conflict in Mumbai, India, which directed us to explore and discern the economic, social, physical and environmental outcomes experienced by two communities of relocated pavement dwellers. In Laloobhai, pavement dwellers were relocated in a state-led process while in Milan Nagar pavement dwellers were active participants in a community-led relocation process. The ToRs directed us to assess and compare the weaknesses and strengths of the strategies that were employed by various actors and stakeholders in each relocation scheme.

While in Mumbai, we endeavoured not only to research on-the-ground and institutional conditions but to develop strategies that could strengthen the process of future relocations so that they may truly be transformative for the lives of the urban poor – women, men, boys, and girls. To this end, we employed various methods to collect qualitative data that would be used for our diagnosis and eventually for strategy formulation.

We had a total of fourteen days in the field to carry out our research. Our long days were scheduled in close collaboration with SPARC, an Indian NGO that together with the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and Mahila Milan (MM) forms the Alliance which organises hundreds of thousands of slum dwellers and pavement dwellers to address issues related to urban poverty.2 To better understand the current milieu – in reality and in policy – we met with high level government officials, seasoned Alliance staff and community members, architects, journalists, and activists.
In order for us to even begin to understand the conditions of pavement dwellers before relocation, SPARC arranged for us to visit Byculla where most of the residents of Milan Nagar had lived prior to relocation. In the blistering mid-day heat, we went in pairs to survey the pavement dwellers who were still waiting – some for decades – to be relocated from this busy centrally-located urban neighbourhood.
It is a neighbourhood with poorly paved streets rife with pools of fetid standing water and rotting garbage. The residents live under constant threat of eviction and they have no security of tenure or access to basic water and sanitation infrastructure. It is also a place where people know their neighbours and look out for one another. Several of the children told us that they attended after-school activities such as dance and English classes. Because of its central location, residents are able to find employment with relative ease. Most of the people that we spoke to live near their work and so they reported having more time to spend with their families than if they commuted a long distance.

Our remaining days in the field were spent interviewing pavement dwellers who had been relocated to Laloobhai and Milan Nagar. These communities were located more than an hour outside central Mumbai in the dusty and relatively isolated periphery. Through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, photography and drawing workshops with children and teenagers, some key findings emerged. We found that the relocated residents of both communities felt a heightened sense dignity as a result of having

security of tenure. A negative impact emerged as both processes seemed have lack sufficient regard for the shock of relocation on livelihoods and the resultant negative financial impact. Further, our research revealed that the residents of the community-led process in Milan Nagar were strengthened through the capacity building that was intrinsic to the process. The same was not true in the state-led process where the pavement dwellers had little or no say in the process of relocation. And finally, both relocation processes lacked recognition of the aspirations of the youth and the key role that public space plays in their integration in the social environment.[3]

With these key findings, we constructed strategies to be presented to SPARC and MM members and shared with influential government officials that aimed to strengthen the process for the inevitable relocations of the tens of thousands of central Mumbai pavement dwellers. As we devised these strategies, we were cognisant of the contradictions that had arisen in the definition that we were using for transformation and the way the term was employed by the Mumbai Transformation Support Unit, a World Bank and USAID funded initiative that oversees massive infrastructure redevelopment and whose remit among other things is to make Mumbai a consumption centre, lower tax rates, and boost economic growth[4] in the dogged pursuit of creating the conditions for Mumbai to become a "world class" city.

By contrast, our laboriously constructed conceptual framework for pro-poor urban development envisions transformation to be a process that restructures power relations through strategic action among actors in the city leading towards active citizenship and sustainable livelihoods (also much-debated and fraught concepts) and in so doing creates the institutional conditions for well-being and human flourishing as measured by social dignity, knowledge and political capital, savings capacity, educational skills, access to health and basic infrastructure and services as well as safe and hazard-free social space for the urban poor.

Did we succeed in creating a creditable and enduring framework for transformation to be measured through efficacious pro-poor policies? Possibly not. And of course that wasn't the ultimate goal anyway. The field trip and all of the steps all the way gave each of us an invaluable opportunity to critically assess some of the biggest challenges in contemporary urban development: social justice, good governance, equity, authentic participation and inclusion of the urban poor.

Our field research was made exponentially more authentic through the generosity of time and spirit offered by the women, men, boys, and girls of Byculla, Milan Nagar, and Laloohbai as they invited us into their homes – and if we were lucky offered us a steaming hot chai - and shared their daily burdens as well as their fears and aspirations for the future. As a reflective practitioner, I can think of no better place to start to dig to find the roots of transformation.

1 Levy, C. (2007) Defining Strategic Action Planning Led by Civil Society Organisations: The Case of CLIFF.
2 www.sparcindia.org.
3 UDP Pavement Dweller Group Final Report (June 2009)
4 www.visionmumbai.org/about_us.asp