



From professionally driven to people-driven poverty reduction: reflections on the role of Shack/Slum Dwellers International

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I. THE LIMITS OF MOST PROFESSIONALLY DETERMINED SOLUTIONS

PERHAPS THE SINGLE most important factor in the limited success or scope of so many housing and urban projects supported by governments and international agencies over the last 40 years is the lack of influence allowed groups of the urban poor in their conception, location, design, resource mobilization, financing, implementation and management, and evaluation. Or, going beyond this, the very limited support for urban poor groups to develop their own local representative organizations that can influence these projects or develop their own – and for these organizations to be able to work together in larger federations at municipal, city, regional or national level to influence policies, laws and resource allocations beyond the local levels.

In many nations, it is not only a question of lack of support for organizations formed by the urban poor but of official disapproval, harassment or suppression. But it is difficult to envisage much success for the new emphasis given by some governments and many international agencies to poverty reduction without organized, representative urban poor groups at neighbourhood and city level. It is difficult to envisage successful national and international “poverty reduction” policies if these are not influenced by these groups. However, this depends on urban poor groups having the capacity (and political space) to produce representative organizations able to work at national and international level, as well as in their own locality.

The discourse about urban development (and within this the discourse about reducing urban poverty) is dominated by professionals – the staff of NGOs, government departments and international agencies. These professionals have long had the means and resources to learn from each other – through their capacity to travel and through journals (including *Environment and Urbanization*), newsletters, seminars and conferences. Urban poor groups have to rely on these professionals to articulate their needs at national and international levels, and this includes the many official reports and speeches produced by governments and international agencies about “the problems of the poor”; however, the politicians, civil servants or consultants who produce these have very rarely consulted the urban poor groups. When reading official reports produced by national governments about their enabling housing strategies or their commitment

to upgrading or to providing water and sanitation or other basic services, one can easily be beguiled into thinking that things are getting better for the urban poor. Attending international conferences where governments and international agencies present their plans or describe their achievements can also give this impression. It is worth reading the national reports produced by governments for the first UN Conference on Human Settlements in 1976 and the commitments that 132 government representatives made at this conference to meeting human needs and to supporting community development, and comparing this to what has actually happened in the last 25 years in each country. This provides stark evidence of the gap between government pronouncements of what they are doing and will do and what they actually do.⁽¹⁾

II. NEW APPROACHES AND FORMS OF REPRESENTATION

WHAT HAS BEEN missing from most national and international documents and debates has been the views of the people and organizations who have the legitimate right to speak on behalf of the diverse groups that make up the urban poor and to negotiate on their behalf as policies are developed, recommendations made and national and international institutions set up or changed. This is where Shack/Slum Dwellers International comes in. It is accountable to the many national federations that form it – and each national federation is accountable to its members, the community-level savings groups. Its knowledge-strategy is not to provide learning opportunities for professionals but, rather, learning opportunities for representatives of urban poor groups – through community-to-community exchanges. As described in the various papers in this issue, community savings groups visit each other to learn from each other. Perhaps as importantly, the NGOs that support each federation (and the savings groups that form it) have redefined the role of professionals away from being the talkers, managers and solution generators to being listeners and supporters of community-generated solutions:

I can remember my surprise when first learning about these new approaches:

- Watching the Indian NGO SPARC redefine the roles and relationships between NGOs and urban poor groups in the mid-1980s with its work with cooperatives formed by women pavement dwellers (Mahila Milan).⁽²⁾
- Seeing, from the early 1980s, how the Pakistan NGO Orangi Pilot Project redefined how to address what is among the most difficult and expensive urban problems – good quality sanitation and drainage for low-income groups – and managed to implement realistic, good quality and lasting solutions for hundreds of thousands of low-income groups without the need for external funding and external expertise. And later, to see how this same local NGO could demonstrate just how wrong external expertise and external funding agencies were when the latter sought to promote an over-expensive, poorly designed solution to Karachi's inadequate sewer system.⁽³⁾
- Watching the stress on dialogue with, and on professionals listening to, urban poor groups in the late 1980s as the South African NGO People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter supported the emergence of a South African Homeless People's Federation.⁽⁴⁾

1. The first task of my Institute's Human Settlements Programme, which was launched in 1977 and founded by Jorge E Hardoy, was to review what governments were doing and planning after Habitat, the UN Conference on Human Settlements held in Vancouver in 1976. In particular, this evaluated their policies against the recommendations that they had formally endorsed at the conference. I remember being impressed by the many new laws, institutions, policies and plans on housing and basic services evident in many nations. However, the grave limitations of most of these became apparent as teams visited 31 nations over a period of ten years to assess them. A summary of the findings from these assessments was published in Hardoy, Jorge E and David Satterthwaite (1989), *Squatter Citizen: Life in the Urban Third World*, Earthscan, London.

2. SELAVIP Newsletter (journal of low-income housing in Asia and the world) has long been one of the best sources on community-level innovations – see, for instance, Jorge Anzorena writing about the work of SPARC in SELAVIP Newsletter in 1988. For more details about SPARC and its work with Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation, see Patel, Sheela and Celine D'Cruz (1993), "The Mahila Milan crisis credit scheme; from a seed to a tree", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 5, No 1, April pages 9-17; Patel, Sheela and Kalpana Sharma (1998), "One David and three Goliaths: avoiding anti-poor solutions to Mumbai's transport problems", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 10, No 2, April pages 149-159; Patel, Sheela and Diana Mitlin (2001), *The Work of SPARC and its Partners Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation in India*,

IIED Working Paper 5 on Urban Poverty Reduction, IIED, London (which can be downloaded free of charge from the urban programme's download site at www.iied.org).

3. Hasan, Arif (1999), *Understanding Karachi: Planning and Reform for the Future*, City Press, Karachi, 171 pages.

4. Bolnick, Joel (1993), "The People's Dialogue on land and shelter; community-driven networking in South Africa's informal settlements", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 5, No 1, October, pages 91-110.

5. Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (1989), "Evictions in Seoul, South Korea", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 1, No 1, April, pages 89-94.

6. Hardoy, Ana, Jorge E Hardoy and Ricardo Schusterman (1991), "Building community organization: the history of a squatter settlement and its own organizations in Buenos Aires", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 3, No 2, October, pages 104-120.

7. Boonyabancha, Somsook (1996), *The Urban Community Development Office*, IED Paper Series on Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas, IIED, London; and UCDO (2000), UCDO (Urban Community Development Office) Update No 2, Urban Community Development Office, Bangkok, 32 pages. See also the paper by Somsook Boonyabancha in this issue.

8. One example of this became apparent when we discussed the "slum" or "shack" censuses that some of the national federations have undertaken. These are methods by which low-income groups can develop maps and other information about their settlement. Once community leaders have agreed to undertake the task, a rough map is prepared,

- Watching, during the late 1980s, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights linking with urban poor groups in different countries to challenge the approach of governments.⁽⁵⁾
- Watching, from 1987, how IIED-America Latina developed a long-term support programme for informal settlements, rather than implementing one-off projects in Buenos Aires.⁽⁶⁾
- Observing the formation and development of the Urban Community Development Office in the early 1990s in Thailand, which showed new ways of defining the roles and relationships between a government agency and urban poor groups (and which developed into the Community Organization Development Institute (which has since become the Community Organizations Development Institute/CODI).⁽⁷⁾
- Watching how all these groups learnt from each other and supported each other – and the expansion of this learning network to include urban poor federations in other countries, including the Philippines, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Cambodia (as described by papers in this issue).

One of the reasons that we founded the journal *Environment and Urbanization* in 1989 was to help document these new approaches and to allow this documentation to reach a wide audience in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

III. THE DIFFICULTIES FACING PROFESSIONALS

THESE FEDERATIONS AND Shack/Slum Dwellers International itself make life uncomfortable for professionals such as myself. They rightly question many of our conclusions. They raise issues in public discussions and debates which question the accuracy of our "knowledge" and the relevance of our proposals. They question the relevance (or even legitimacy) of some of the research methodologies we use. They raise questions that we often find uncomfortable, including who has the legitimacy to speak about the needs and priorities of urban poor groups. They bring a much-needed critical focus regarding what research is needed on urban problems and how it should be undertaken, but this can also question the legitimacy of what we plan to do (which provides the basis for our livelihoods).⁽⁸⁾ And they can also be difficult for international agencies to work with because they question the appropriateness of these agencies' rules and procedures. I am sure that the World Bank found it very difficult when the Indian NGO SPARC questioned their tendering procedures.⁽⁹⁾ Very few international agencies have any provision for allowing urban poor groups to review the appropriateness of their projects and procedures. International agencies also find it difficult when the federations, or particular savings groups within them, have refused to accept these agencies' funding where they regard the conditions or procedures attached to the funding to be inappropriate; there is little that is more frustrating for a funding agency that needs to spend its funds (or increase its loans) to have a "recipient" refuse its funding.

But the real cause of these difficulties is that most official agencies that work in urban development have made little or no provision to allow the organizations of the urban poor the influence that they should have. This is the case for most local NGOs and local government agencies, and for most larger NGOs, national agencies and international agencies. If these are able to change so they can work in partnership with urban poor

groups and their organizations and federations, it will bring far greater possibilities for new approaches and new scales of impact for the most intractable and difficult urban problems. This is a tremendous institutional challenge for official agencies, but, if it is not faced how can the poverty reduction targets that these agencies have committed themselves to be met?

This is also a tremendous personal challenge for all professionals working in these agencies as it challenges us to change the way we work – that is, to learn to support the representative organizations formed by the urban poor. Very few professionals working on urban problems have more than a very limited knowledge of the realities of daily life for those whom we call “the urban poor”. Professionals know very little about how to survive with very low incomes. Only rarely has their training equipped them to be able to provide the kind of advice that is of most use to low-income groups. Very rarely has their training taught them how to listen rather than talk.

IV. WILL INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES CHANGE?

SHACK/SLUM DWELLERS International and the organizations and federations that form it are getting increasing international recognition. They are invited to speak at conferences, workshops and seminars by large and powerful international agencies. As the legitimacy and relevance of what they say becomes more widely recognized, so the demands made on them will grow – for instance, requests to contribute to international events, to join advisory boards, to meet senior officials from governments and donor agencies... It is now difficult to envisage any seminar, discussion or workshop on urban poverty where there has been no attempt to include someone from organizations or federations formed by urban poor groups. But this acknowledgment and inclusion at international meetings can take place without any restructuring within the international agencies or any change in their strategies. Although many staff in these international agencies now acknowledge the validity of what the members of Shack/Slum Dwellers International are pushing for, they rarely try to change their own procedures, practices and policies to enable the poor to have control (or even influence) over their programmes on the ground. We have 40 years of reminders of how international agencies appropriate the vocabulary of innovation without changing what they do.⁽¹⁰⁾ Or they support innovation at their margins, leaving untouched the rest of the institution. Many international agencies will also have difficulties supporting urban poor groups whose main focus is to change the ways that their local and national governments operate. The main focus of the members of Shack/Slum Dwellers International is not on donor-funded projects but on changing government institutions and policies within each locality and nationally so that they respond to the needs and priorities of urban poor groups. International funding can play an important role – but do the donors have the capacity to change the procedures through which their funding can be accessed, that would allow them to support this aim? Without doing so, the international targets for poverty reduction will not be met in urban areas – or if they are, it will only be so by using “measures” of urban poverty defined by international agencies which do not reflect the scale and nature of urban poverty.⁽¹¹⁾

along with a series of photographs to orient those who will undertake the shack counting. Groups of citizens then walk through different areas of the settlement, counting and numbering shacks, shops, churches and other buildings and noting key landmarks such as rivers, hills, paths, roads, drains and electricity lines. They also talk to people as they do this. These informal discussions between squatters are very useful for identifying the feelings, frustrations and expectations of the inhabitants. I commented that they did not need to talk to every household in a settlement to get an accurate picture of conditions there – but the response was that these censuses were not only a way of producing a more accurate and detailed information base on conditions (which was produced and owned by the inhabitants of the settlement) but also a way of involving all the inhabitants – hence the lack of interest in developing a “representative sample” for the interviews.

9. See reference 2, Patel and Mitlin (2001).

10. It is perhaps worth recalling that “the enabling approach” was originally developed and promoted in the late 1960s and early 1970s to make governments support community-led development and to ensure that urban poor groups had the resources they needed (including land and basic services); only much later did it become a term used to promote a reduction in the role of the state and an “enabling” of markets.

11. This point is discussed in more detail in Satterthwaite, David (2001), “Reducing urban poverty: constraints on the effectiveness of aid agencies and development banks and some suggestions for change”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 13 No 1, April pages 137-157.