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Community toilets in Pune and other Indian cities

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Introduction

In Pune, a partnership between the municipal government, NGOs and community-based organisations has built more than 400 community toilet blocks. These have greatly improved sanitation for more than half a million people. They have also demonstrated the potential of municipal community partnerships to improve conditions for low-income groups. This paper reflects on the experience of one of these NGOs, working with the municipality and with community organisations.

Pune has 2.8 million inhabitants, two-fifths of whom live in over 500 'slums'. Various local government bodies such as slum boards, housing authorities, development authorities and municipal corporations are meant to provide and maintain public toilets in these settlements. But provision is far below what is needed; indeed, for much of the 1990s, the city of Pune failed to use much of the budget allocated for public toilets. In addition, in those settlements for which toilet blocks were built, there was no consultation with the inhabitants regarding the location, design and construction, and the agencies responsible for construction and maintenance had little accountability to the communities in which they were located. There was no sense of ownership by local communities. The quality of toilet construction (undertaken by contractors) was often poor and the design often inappropriate – for instance with limited water supplies and no access to drainage. The municipal staff, whose job was to clean the toilets, did not do so – or communities had to pay them extra to do the job for which they were already being paid. The toilet blocks often fell into disrepair and disuse and the space around them became used for open defecation and garbage dumping. In Pune, as in most other Indian cities, large sections of the population have no alternative to open defecation since they have no toilets in their home and no public toilets they can use (or afford). Widespread open defecation in turn produces a very large health burden and contributes to high infant and child death rates. Although ensuring provision for toilets in each house might seem preferable, this would be far more expensive; it is also particularly difficult in many settlements because they are so densely populated with so many people living in each small shelter and with only small and winding alleyways between houses where pipes could be installed. There are also the uncertainties regarding who owns each unit: public toilets have the advantage of serving both tenants and owners.

Community participation towards better sanitation

Charitable trusts and other Indian NGOs have built better quality, better maintained public toilets, and while these work well in public places such as railway stations and bus stops,

the prices charged (typically one rupee per use) make them too expensive for slum communities. In 1999, the Municipal Commissioner in Pune, Ratnakar Gaikwad, sought to greatly increase the scale of public toilet construction and to ensure that more appropriate toilets got built by inviting NGOs to make bids for toilet construction. Between 1992 and 1999, only 22 toilet blocks had been constructed; the new programme planned to build 220 blocks during 1999–2000 and another 220 during 2000–2001. The contracts were not only for building toilets but also for maintenance. In awarding contracts, priority was given to settlements with more than 500 inhabitants and no toilet facilities and, after these, to areas where facilities were so dilapidated that they needed replacement. Bids from eight NGOs were accepted, after a review of their track record.

One of the NGOs that received contracts, SPARC, had long had a partnership with two people's organisations, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan (a network of slum and pavement women's savings and credit groups). The three institutions had been working in Pune for five years prior to this, supporting a vibrant savings and credit movement among women slum dwellers, which had included experiments with community toilets. This Alliance became one of the principal contractors and constructed 114 toilet blocks (with a total of more than 2000 toilet seats and 500 children's toilet seats). The Alliance designed and costed the project, the city provided the capital costs and the communities developed the capacity for management and maintenance.

One factor that did constrain community participation was the municipal commissioner's desire to complete the programme while he was still in office. Despite this limitation, in many places, the inhabitants were involved in the design and construction of these toilets. Some women community leaders took on contracts themselves and managed the whole construction process, supported by engineers and architects from SPARC. It took a while for the (usually) illiterate women in each community to develop the confidence that they could manage this process. As one leader, Savita Sonawane noted:

In the beginning, we did not know what a drawing or a plinth was. We did not understand what a foundation was or how to do the plastering. But as we went along, we learnt more and more and now we can build toilets with our eyes closed.

Over time, these women's groups gained confidence and as they learnt how to deal with the local government bureaucracy, they became active in dealing with other government officials. They also kept a close watch on costs. But there were many prejudices against community management that had to be overcome. For instance, when a group of women began to negotiate with shopkeepers for materials to build the toilets, seeking the lowest price, they found that they were not taken seriously and had to take their husbands along. Some government staff did not want to work with organised women's groups because they felt unable to ask women's groups for the bribes they usually received from contractors. Government staff often demanded extra payments for tasks that they were meant to do. In the first phase of the programme, about half the toilet blocks were built by slum communities; in the second phase this rose to three quarters.

"The city government recognised the capacity of community organisations to develop their own solutions, supported by local NGOs"

The design of the toilet blocks introduced several innovations. Unlike the previous models, they were bright and well ventilated, with better quality construction (which also made cleaning and maintenance easier). They had large storage tanks to ensure there was enough water for users to wash after defecation and to keep the toilets clean. Each toilet block had separate entrances and facilities for men and women. A block of children's toilets was included, in part because children always lose out to adults when there are queues for a toilet, in part because many young children are frightened to use conventional latrines. The children's toilets were specially designed for children's use – including smaller squat plates, handles (to prevent overbalancing when squatting) and no large pit openings. In many toilet blocks, there were also toilets designed for easier use by the elderly and the disabled. Toilet blocks also included a room where the caretaker and their family could live – which meant lower wages could be paid for maintenance, thus reducing the running costs. In some toilet blocks, where there was sufficient space, a community hall was built; small fees charged for its use could also help cover maintenance costs, and having a community hall right on top of the toilets also brings pressure on the caretaker to keep the complex clean. Despite these innovations, the actual cost of the toilet blocks was 5% less than the municipal corporation's costing. The whole toilet block programme was also celebrated in a toilet festival at

which the contribution of all those who had helped in the programme could be acknowledged – including people from government agencies and from communities.

There has been considerable debate about how best to fund the maintenance of these toilets. The Alliance of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan promoted a system whereby each family pays for a pass costing 20 rupees a month. This is much cheaper than the one rupee per use charge used by other public toilets (which for a family of five would cost 150 rupees a month even if each household member only used the toilet once a day). However, some elected municipal council members have been demanding that there be no payments and this has depressed collection rates in some toilet blocks. Many municipal councillors actively opposed the community toilets, in part because these provided councillors with no 'cut', in part as they represented a contractors' lobby objecting to the loss of contracts. Community management went against the long and dishonourable tradition of contractors, engineers and councillors getting a cut from each project, often through inflating the cost estimates. However, some councillors were supporters from the outset while many others became supporters, when they saw the results and the popularity of the community toilets.

The community toilets in Pune encouraged visits from officials and community representatives from other cities, and similar kinds of community-managed toilets are now being developed in Mumbai and Bangalore. This includes a programme to build 320 toilet blocks in Mumbai that SPARC is undertaking with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan.

Conclusion

This programme brought about a reconfiguration of the relationship between the city government, NGOs and communities. The city government recognised the capacity of community organisations to develop their own solutions, supported by local NGOs. The city authorities changed their role from being a toilet provider to setting standards, funding the capital cost of construction and providing water and electricity. This programme was also unusual for India in its transparency and accountability. There was constant communication between senior government officials and community leaders. Weekly meetings brought all stakeholders together to review progress and identify problems that needed to be addressed. All aspects of costing and of financing were publicly available. And the access that community organisers had to senior officials, also kept in check the petty corruption that characterises so many communities' relationships with local government agencies.

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NOTES
Sheela Patel is the founder-Director of SPARC, and Sundar Burra is an advisor to SPARC. SPARC is the NGO in the Indian Alliance of SPARC, Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation.

This article draws from Burra, S. (2001), Slum Sanitation in Pune, SPARC, Patel, S. and Burra, S. (NBA), A Note on Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, SPARC, and from the SPARC video on Pune Toilets.