



One David and three Goliaths: avoiding anti-poor solutions to Mumbai's transport problems

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SUMMARY: *The paper describes how community organizations representing the inhabitants of "slum" communities living along Mumbai's railway tracks and supportive Indian NGOs demonstrated effective and pro-poor solutions to the need to move people to increase the speed of Mumbai's overloaded commuter rail system. In so doing, it discusses the slow and often difficult negotiations they had in seeking such solutions with the three Goliaths – the state government, the railways board and the World Bank.*

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1. For more details of SPARC's work, see SPARC (1996), *SPARC and its Work with the National Slum Dwellers' Federation and Mahila Milan, India*, IIED Paper Series on Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas, IIED, London; see also SPARC (1990), "SPARC – Developing new NGO lines", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol. 2, No. 1, April, pages 91-104.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS IS THE story of David and Goliath, except that the David in this story has to encounter three Goliaths. Whether he will win in the end cannot be determined as yet. But the chances look good, depending on how the victory is defined.

When organizations commit themselves to working with urban poor communities, they are often faced with difficult choices. Should they confront and challenge the powers that determine and rule their lives or should they work around the problem and negotiate? More importantly, with what end in mind should NGOs embark on either of these paths? How can they know what is the most strategic response? How can they ensure that their ultimate choice, in terms of a course of action, ultimately benefits urban poor communities?

This has been a perennial concern for the Indian NGO SPARC (Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres) ever since it began its work in 1984 with poor women living on Mumbai's pavements.⁽¹⁾ Today, with the advantage of hindsight, SPARC has arrived at several conclusions concerning what organizations need to do, both organizationally and in terms of capacity-building of communities and their institutions, so that they can more effectively negotiate with the state. This is premised on the belief, born out of our experience, that strategies concern-

ing poverty and access to resources for the poor cannot be undertaken without engaging with the state.

This case study looks at events which link the lives of some of Mumbai's poorest communities to Mumbai's transport problems, and examines how the state's efforts to improve transport impacts upon the lives of the poor. It demonstrates two important points: first, that development projects in the city are not isolated islands of activity but are inevitably linked to many other processes that impinge directly upon the lives of the poor; and secondly, that communities of the poor and their organizations, given time, space and opportunity, can be centrally involved in designing solutions that benefit both the individual communities that are affected and the wider population in the city.

II. MUMBAI TRANSPORT CASE STUDY

a. Transporting Millions

THE TRANSPORT PROBLEMS of a city of over 10 million people (and over 13 million in its wider metropolitan area) can never be easy. When that city happens to be Mumbai, India's commercial capital which draws migrants from distant areas of the country looking for work, then the challenge becomes formidable. It is Mumbai's ability to employ all those who come, and to carry them over even from settlements that are a long way from the city centre using a relatively inexpensive and surprisingly efficient public transport system, that makes the city even more attractive. But, ironically, this draw of the city is also resulting in the virtual collapse of what was, until recently, probably the best public transport system in India.

Mumbai has grown from an island city – or rather a city that grew out of the joining together of seven islands – into a vast urban agglomeration, spreading many miles into what was once undeveloped hinterland. By 1990, it was the world's sixth most populous metropolitan centre.⁽²⁾ It also generates more wealth, both through production from its industrial base, now mainly on the outskirts of the city, and from its service sector, than many cities in India put together. The city produces 10 per cent of India's industrial output, handles 60 per cent of the maritime trade, accounts for 33 per cent of total income tax collection and 60 per cent of customs duty, and has the single largest share of the services sector. It registered an employment growth of 59 per cent between 1971-91, and its population grew from 5.97 million in 1971 to the present 9.93 million, a 66 per cent increase attributed to the employment opportunities offered by the city.⁽³⁾

Yet, the wealth of Mumbai is not evenly spread. For while the average per capita income is three times higher than that of the state of which it is the capital, Maharashtra, one quarter of its residents live below the poverty line and half live in low-income areas designated by the government as "slums" and informal settlements. These slum areas are located on land owned by the central and state governments, the municipal corporation and private individuals, and land which belongs to the airport au-

2. UNCHS (1996), *An Urbanizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements 1996*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 556 pages.

3. Mumbai Metro Planning Group – MMPG (1997), "Use public transport; save the city", Mumbai Metro Study (Seventh Rail Corridor), Draft Report, June.

thority, the port authorities and the railways. It is the settlements located in the last three locations that have a direct impact on the city's transport system, particularly in the case of the railways.

At present, Mumbai is served by five railway corridors. All originate in the south of the city and then branch out to the north and north-east. The most recent corridor connected the city to an increasingly important new residential and industrial hub, Navi Mumbai (New Mumbai).

An incredible 88 per cent of all travel in Mumbai is by bus and rail. This statistic in itself illustrates the popularity and the necessity of the public transport system, particularly the railways. The trains can carry four times the traffic load of city buses in terms of passenger kilometres of travel. The local trains carry 5.5 million passengers every day. Although the normal capacity of each train is 1,700, at peak hours more than 4,000 people crowd onto them. On a typical day, according to the Mumbai Metro Planning Group study, Western Railways operate 923 trains and Central Railways 1,072 trains. During the peak period between 9 and 11 am, 118,000 passengers travel on these trains.

b. Breaking Down

But the pressure has begun to tell. In the last 40 years, although the number of train passengers has increased five-fold, the number of train journeys has increased only 2.5 times. With this scale of over-use, maintenance has been a problem and there are constant breakdowns with irate passengers taking out their anger on railway property.

The city has been unable to raise resources to improve the existing public transport system. Both bus and train services are subsidized and income from fares is insufficient to pay for the upkeep of the services let alone their expansion. Raising fares is a politically explosive issue which no democratically elected government has been able to tackle.

In the 1970s, the World Bank was approached by the state government for funds to improve Mumbai's public transport system. This resulted in the first Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP I), worth US\$ 25 million, which financed an additional 700 buses and flyovers at three important road intersections. MUTP II is being negotiated currently and only recently has the last hurdle, the World Bank's condition that the railways set up a separate corporation for suburban railway services, been cleared.

Because of overcrowding on the existing public transport facilities and the easy availability of finance schemes, the number of individually owned vehicles on the roads has grown exponentially. The consequences are overcrowded roads, high levels of vehicular pollution and a general deterioration in the quality of life. Road travel in Mumbai is particularly difficult because most business and government offices are located in the southern tip of the island city while the majority of people live in the north and north-eastern suburbs, resulting in heavy

north-south vehicular traffic in the morning and the reverse in the evening. An alternate route along the docks is overcrowded with lorries as Mumbai port handles an increasing amount of sea traffic in the absence of another equivalent sized port in the vicinity of the industrial belt along the west coast.

The obvious solution is to strengthen and improve the public transport facilities so that more people use them. A plan to build a sixth and seventh railway corridor has been proposed for many years and there is also talk of a metro rail project but, in the interim, steps can be taken to improve the existing system by increasing the speed of the trains.

c. Railway Settlements

Mumbai suffers from the particular problem of railway settlements, that is, neighbourhoods that have grown alongside the railway lines on land that was handed over to the railways by the state government many decades earlier to establish the national rail network. The railways paid no heed to these houses in the initial years. It dealt with them in the same way that all private landowners or the government did, that is, by ignoring them while, at same time, allowing informal rent collection by the junior staff from the organization. Such a strategy was based on the belief that, if these settlements are not formalized by the provision of basic amenities and services, then they would continue to be illegal. In the future, as and when the land was needed, the residents could be evicted and the settlements demolished. Where the people would go and what would happen to them was of no consequence to the landowner.

But over time, things have changed. Slum areas have become crucial sources of votes during city, state and central elections and they are constituencies that politicians have to defend. Although these communities have had no real security of tenure, most of these areas on state and private land have been provided with basic amenities and are protected from demolition.

This has resulted in a stand-off of sorts, especially in the settlements alongside the railway tracks. Some of the buildings come to within a metre (three feet) of the railway lines. As a result, the fast and superfast trains that run at peak hours have to slow down when they pass these sections. The railways safety commissioner requires trains to reduce their speed to five kilometres per hour where slums are within 30 feet (c. nine metres) of the track, a situation which occurs at around 11 to 15 points along the tracks. Thus, the location of these slums is not only hazardous – people are injured or killed almost every day – but also reduces the turnaround time for the rakes. The railways have calculated that, if these parts of the tracks could be cleared of slums, each train journey would be speeded up which would be the equivalent, in monetary terms, of laying a new track.

d. People and Transport

The question of whether the state government, the railways

and the affected communities can work together so that everyone benefits forms the starting point of this case study.

The three Goliaths in the study are the state government of Maharashtra, the Indian Railways and the World Bank. Maharashtra is a state with almost 50 million people, one of the most industrialized and urbanized states in India and also the most prosperous. The Indian Railways constitute a vast and impressive network that cuts across state governments, with a budget that is separate from and, in Parliament, presented prior to the central budget. The World Bank is a well-known institution.

The David in this story is an alliance of SPARC (an NGO), the National Slum Dwellers' Federation (NSDF – a people's organization) and Mahila Milan (women's collectives who work in slums on issues of savings and credit as well as housing).⁽⁴⁾

SPARC was established in 1984 and began to work with the most vulnerable and insecure group of all, women living on pavements, some of the 125,000 people who have no option but to live there, sometimes for as long as 30 years. They survive regular demolition efforts by the city government, reconstruct their makeshift tenements and continue to live there without sanitation or water. These women were clear that they wanted secure housing and were prepared to work towards attaining it. It is this motivation that led them to form women's collectives called Mahila Milan. What began as informal women's collectives undertaking savings and going about in groups to get ration cards and gain access to hospitals and police stations has now grown into a network of collectives that can negotiate both with formal institutions and with the informal leadership in their communities. The women have designed and built houses and toilets as well as trained others in these skills.

e. Living on the Tracks

In 1988, whilst negotiating with the Department of Housing on behalf of groups of slum dwellers from other parts of the city, SPARC first came to know of discussions between the railways and the Maharashtra state government relating to the possibility of undertaking a census of slums alongside the tracks. They were about to assign the task to the Collector of Encroachments, a government official. SPARC offered to do the survey jointly with the collector and the railways arguing that state machinery never fully enumerated settlements and could never solicit community participation. The state government agreed and "Beyond the Beaten Track: census of slums on the railway tracks" was published in 1989.⁽⁵⁾ The process of enumeration led to these communities creating their own organization, the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation (RSDF), which is affiliated to the NSDF. The enumeration established that there were 18,000 households living alongside the tracks; in the last ten years, this number has grown to 25,000.

Regardless of whether the railways want to increase the speed of their trains or build additional corridors, it is evident that these communities will have to be relocated. As part of an ongo-

4. For more details of the work of Mahila Milan and NSDF, see SPARC 1996 in reference 1; see also 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, pages 9-17.

5. SPARC (1989), *Beyond the Beaten Track – Resettlement Initiative of People who live along the railways tracks in Bombay*, SPARC, Bombay, 29 pages.

ing debate within the Railway Federation, people were questioned about what they wanted. The majority were willing and eager to move, on condition they were guaranteed security of tenure in their new location. Five areas were identified as being suitable for pilot relocation projects and the Federation also endorsed the railways' suggestion that walls be built separating railway settlements from the tracks. Despite a clear list of suggestions and the apparent urgency of the need to clear the tracks, there was no response from the railways or the state government. In the meantime, the railway dwellers formed cooperatives, began saving and formulated plans for alternative housing.

A major opportunity emerged with the decision by the railways to extend the fifth line, the Harbour Line, across the Thane creek to Belapur. This extension necessitated the relocation of a settlement of 800 to 900 households, Bharat Nagar. SPARC had already begun working with this community through the Railway Slum Dwellers' Federation. Thus, when the question of moving was mooted, the community sought to understand the choices before them. They were offered government built houses a short distance away for Rs. 58,000 each. All, except 150 households who could not afford the price, accepted the offer. The state government agreed to give these 150 households a piece of land which they could develop and on which they could build their own houses with the help of SPARC. In the interim, they were moved to a transit camp.

These 150 households were part of SPARC's initial experiment in housing. The community identified vacant land adjacent to the government housing, which the government released for their use, and they formed the Jan Kalyan Cooperative Housing Society. With help from SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan, they planned the layout and designed the houses. Rather than building high-rises, they chose low-rise, high-density, semi-detached structures. Each household got a single room, with a ceiling that is 4.2 metres (14 foot) high which included a loft. Thus, a plot of 18 by 10 foot (5.5 by three metres) yielded 180 square feet/16 square metres (and an additional 100 square feet/9.2 square metres in the loft). The community agreed to have common toilets, built so as to be accessible and maintainable by the households they served. The cost of each dwelling was estimated at Rs. 16,000 (1990 prices - now Rs. 30,000), less than half that of the state provided walk-up flats which cost Rs. 58,000 at the time. Both aesthetically and in construction quality, the houses were much better. Each household made a down-payment from savings and SPARC arranged a low-interest loan for the cooperative to be paid over 15 years in easily manageable instalments.

Despite this remarkable community initiative, the state was not supportive. After completing construction and moving in, it took Jan Kalyan three years to obtain their water connection and they faced innumerable impediments from various state and municipal departments who were unfamiliar with self-constructed housing. SPARC expected that the Jan Kalyan experiment would prove that communities had the ability to manage

their own housing as long as they were guaranteed land and infrastructure. But this was not the case. On the contrary, the government and railways suspended discussions on rehabilitation.

f. A Second Chance

The railway process got a new lease of life when the Urban Development Department, at that time headed by a concerned bureaucrat, Mr. D.T. Joseph, revived the negotiations. This was a time when Mumbai's irate rail travellers were burning stations and destroying property in the face of constant delays and train cancellations. Mr. Joseph suggested that the railways work with an NGO such as SPARC to see if, as a first step, communities living closest to the tracks in two locations could be persuaded to move back at least 30 feet (9.1 metres). As the process of consultation had already been initiated, he felt that it would not be too difficult a task.

People expressed their willingness to move further away from the railway line so that the movement of trains was not hindered and the people were safe. They also agreed to a wall being built to prevent further encroachment within 30 feet/9.1 metres of the track. The railway authorities did not believe that people would move back so, as a confidence-building exercise and as a demonstration of people's capability, SPARC raised funds to build a wall adjoining one settlement. Following this pilot, the process was then continued in the two locations.

But this was only an interim solution; whilst it would allow an increase in the speed of the trains, build linkages between communities and the railways, and establish the basis for dialogue for permanent rehabilitation, in the long-term, people would have to be resettled and for this, all the actors, the communities, the government and the railways would have to agree.

Even as this experimental project was being implemented, the government, the railways and the World Bank were discussing the larger project, that of building two more rail corridors as part of MUTP II. Some of the areas where SPARC had begun working with communities fell within the scope of this larger project. In 1995, just as the construction of the wall was being completed and communities were moving further away at two locations alongside the tracks, the state government appointed a task force, headed by a retired civil servant, to look into the problem of resettling communities in urban areas which would be affected by the MUTP II project. The committee had representatives from the departments of revenue, finance, public works and housing as well as from three NGOs, and four representatives from the finance, law, architecture and engineering sectors.

Thus, for the first time, a resettlement and rehabilitation policy in an urban context was formulated. Until then, the state government had had a resettlement and rehabilitation policy which applied to people affected by infrastructure projects such as dams but which did not have specific provisions for affected people in urban areas. The task force's recommendations fitted

into one of the principal conditions laid down by the World Bank before it was willing to commit funds to MUTP II, namely resettlement and rehabilitation. The Bank also wanted NGOs to be involved in implementing this component of the project.

SPARC then participated in policy formulation by sharing what had been designed and developed by communities living on pavements as part of their rehabilitation, and by presenting the kind of documentation that communities had designed and were maintaining in preparation for future settlements. This formed the basis of the entire section of recommendations relating to informal settlements that faced displacement. Following the task force's recommendations, three NGOs were assigned the task of enumerating all the settlements alongside the railway tracks and creating the information base for planning the projects.

g. Lessons Learned

Although the World Bank's insistence on NGO participation in the resettlement and rehabilitation component of the project proved a useful entry point, some of the Bank's requirements proved almost too much to allow such participation to continue. Ironically, the central process of enumeration, which everyone agreed should be undertaken with the involvement of local organizations, became the first point of conflict between the World Bank and the NGOs. For instance, the World Bank required that all procedures be centralized and standardized to meet international standards, and it laid down the format of the questionnaire and the subsequent analysis. In theory, this may have been appropriate but, in practice, it impinged on the rights and capabilities of local actors to move and grow with the process. As a result, the opportunity to use enumeration to build the capacities and skills of NGOs and communities to manage large data bases or to understand the value of information for grievance redressal, and managing and designing projects was lost.

When slum communities and volunteers undertake data collection, it is not just a mechanical process. The data they produce is enriched by their overall understanding of the problems. Often, the quantification process cannot collate this rich information base, and innovative and new experimental strategies need to be explored to document this knowledge. The process is used to mobilize the community so that they have a sense of ownership of the census and the data. By its very nature, such documentation often contains inaccuracies and missing information but this can be corrected over time. Communities' central participation in managing these distortions is itself a vital part of the future use of this data when the project gets implemented. However, instead, these processes were dismissed as being unprofessional.

SPARC had a difficult choice to make when it was charged with being unprofessional and incapable of managing the survey. It could either withdraw from the contract, hire professionals to do the job or simply work on until it got it right. It chose the third option. Thus, although survey reports have been delayed, the final outcome shows that this choice was right. The

communities who participated in the process are now organized and their volunteers have been trained to meet the standards demanded by the World Bank. It also vindicates the very reason why NGOs were selected to do the survey in the first place. Unlike professional market research agencies or consultants, NGOs such as SPARC have a long-term commitment to the communities with whom they work. As a result, they have the skills and capacities required to support communities through the problems which result from the delays or even the cancellation of projects. They are also committed to continue working with communities long after the data collection is complete. Most importantly, community level organizational abilities begin to grow after the enumeration process is complete, which prepares them to participate in the development of the project.

Thus, even when the MUTP II negotiations broke down, the alliance and communities were able to convincingly demonstrate to the railways and the state government their ability to manage a solution to the problem. As a result, work on one major section of the fifth and sixth railway corridors, which overlap, has begun despite the withdrawal of World Bank funding. In this first phase, 1,500 households needing rehabilitation will be grouped into 22 cooperative societies and SPARC has helped them to plan their own rehabilitation on land that the state government has given for this project. There is a good chance that negotiations with the World Bank will begin again. If and when they do, the pilot rehabilitation scheme will be implemented according to the design developed by the communities.

The lesson that this experience holds for NGOs is the need to remain involved with communities irrespective of the project. If the organization's commitment is to the process and not to the project, then the difficulties that it encounters while negotiating with any agency – provincial, national or international – need not deter it from continuing. An important prerequisite is for NGOs to ensure that they are not dependent on a single source of funding. SPARC, for instance, has multiple sources. As a result, it can work with a great degree of autonomy. Thus, even when the World Bank pulled out of MUTP II earlier this year, SPARC's work was not affected. Its investment in the enumeration and survey process was part of its long-term strategy of mobilizing communities, building their capacity to negotiate and initiate solutions, and working with them to implement these solutions.

Another lesson that SPARC has learned from this experience is that NGOs need to have a proven record of working with communities before they can confidently participate in processes where the cards are stacked against them. In MUTP II, for instance, if SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan had not already mobilized and worked with urban poor settlements on issues of housing and finance, they would not have been able to counter the suggestions of the three Goliaths which precluded real consultation with the affected communities.

Finally, it is essential that the solutions that are worked out in any given situation have clearly defined ingredients that can be adapted in other situations. For instance, notwithstanding the

World Bank's decision regarding its role in the MUTP II, SPARC had resolved that it would work with the state government and the railways to evolve a resettlement plan for railway slum dwellers. The formula required the state government to give the land, the railways to provide or pay for the infrastructure such as water and electricity, and for the community to work out its housing. Such an arrangement had already been demonstrated in the successful Jan Kalyan project. Where land, infrastructure and subsidized finance are provided to communities who have devised their own housing approaches, they can themselves develop alternatives which form the basis of urban rehabilitation and resettlement strategies. However, this is merely the beginning of a solution and much more is needed.

h. What is Needed

SPARC's experience in this area has shown that institutional support of a kind designed to help the poor has to be in place if pilot projects are to be replicated on a larger scale. It is one thing to work with 150 households, as in the case of Jan Kalyan, but when the numbers are multiplied by a factor of 10 or 1,000, it is necessary to ensure that all state and municipal institutional arrangements support the process. Existing institutions are not geared to facilitating poor communities. Take, for instance, housing finance institutions: their procedures are bureaucratic and not pro-poor, and the delays interminable. As communities have no other source of finance, they are forced to wait until all these hurdles are overcome, as a result of which they are faced with escalating costs and a lack of project viability.

Secondly, as investment in urban infrastructure grows, more attention must be paid to addressing resettlement and rehabilitation. The debate has now moved on to exploring whether there should be a separate agency for this and what the different stakeholders' roles should be. State agencies who own the land must recognize this as a process where their role is crucial, otherwise they will not be persuaded to contribute land and resources which form the nucleus of the rehabilitation process. Similarly, communities also must have their own organization which can represent them and can effectively engage in a dialogue to bring about change.

Economics alone suggests that it is cost-effective to design resettlement and rehabilitation policies in which the poor have a sense of ownership because they have participated in designing and implementing them. In Mumbai the lack of such a comprehensive policy is already having an impact as fresh investments are being driven away from the city.

i. Sustainable Solutions

Finally, how do you sustain and multiply such solutions? Obviously, there are no universal formulae. But SPARC's experience suggests that solutions can be worked out by first identifying what poor people can and want to do themselves. The next

step is to work out the other ingredients that are required to implement these solutions. Finally, the third step is to locate the institutions that can deliver the ingredients that are outside the control of poor people. Such a formula not only involves communities in the process but makes them real participants.

Such solutions can be sustained if the benefits are such that they help not just one community but have a much wider scope. For instance, if the process begun with MUTP II can result in a resettlement and rehabilitation policy and mechanisms that ensure full and honest consultation with poor communities, then many more will gain than just the railway slum dwellers.

Increasingly, the effective components of urban poverty alleviation are providing security of tenure and basic amenities for poor people. It would thus be in everyone's interests to facilitate a process whereby affected communities have a stake in the solutions being worked out. These communities have already contributed by developing the land on which they squat. But real poverty alleviation in the urban context is possible only if we ensure that more people benefit from the city and its services. If services are created to benefit only a few, while the majority are left to scrounge for crumbs, then you create conditions for anarchy and the perpetuation of poverty.

To return to the beginning: what has the process taught David and the three Goliaths? The communities that participated in the process have recognized the need to strengthen their own capacity to manage their solutions. The state government and the railways have recognized that people can, in fact, work in partnership with them to arrive at solutions that benefit everyone. And we hope that the World Bank has seen the value of being patient – and adopting a flexible approach – when working with community organizations and demonstrating the genuineness of its commitment to such a partnership.

