

HOW WE BEGAN

SPARC was registered in 1984 by its founders - social workers, researchers, students, doctors and other professionals who wished to participate in the creation of an institution which would explore new forms of partnerships with the poor in their quest for equity and social justice.

The acronym SPARC stands for "Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres". It attempts to fulfill a vision of our beliefs, strategies and roles. We believe that the poor must be organized, and in order to sustain this, it is they who need to develop skills. Hence it becomes essential to create a physical, emotional and social space for people to pool their human resources and facilitate learning. An Area Resource Centre (ARC) is the term which we have coined to describe that space. We, at SPARC would attempt to create, strengthen and develop such ARCs.

CREATING A BASIS FOR CHANGE : When we began, we made a strong effort to ensure that the issues would be identified by the communities of the poor, and not by us. The subsequent strategy of intervention would evolve out of our interaction with them.

Our collective understanding of how the problems could be solved on the one hand, and the larger social, political and economic scenario within which we were located, and which affected this process, would form the basis of our work.

While we allowed communities to set priorities for areas of change, we set certain parameters guiding our own work for ourselves : namely, which groups among the poor to focus on, whom within these groups to work with, and the basis on which to operate.

We decided to begin with the poorest of the urban poor. In Bombay, it was the pavement dwellers. Within them we focussed on women, and we initiated the process by understanding their situation and their past and present styles of problem solving. Our intervention was to facilitate the formation of women's collectives whom we assisted in getting the support of their communities. These collectives and their communities are seen to be our partners, and they identify the issues on which to work. We concentrate on setting up processes of organizing, education and action. We were emphatic not to undertake service delivery, but we instead assist communities to do this themselves, whenever ready to do so.

EXAMINING OUR CHOICES:

WHY THE URBAN POOR ?

When we started in 1984, India had just gone through its biggest wave of urbanization, for the past decade. This led to a massive proliferation of slums and pavement settlements and NGOs in cities were struggling hard to respond to the resultant problem.

The responses were clearly inadequate. Most NGO interventions in cities are welfare measures and do not question allocation of resources or their distribution to the city dwellers. Furthermore, because India's image of itself is a land of villages, most developmental intervention has been in rural areas, where NGOs have worked hand in hand with people's movements on land, and related issues.

SPARC wanted to create a process of NGO's working hand in hand with poor communities in cities: to create equity in the oasis of resources, create mechanisms by which those who migrate to cities have organisational networks to fall back upon in times of crisis or when they sought to fulfill their aspirations. Ten years later this projection has become a reality, as Asia and India are rapidly urbanizing and the problems of human settlements is on the increase. This rationale which was not fully acceptable in 1984, now, in 1994 has become an urgent need.

WHY PAVEMENT DWELLERS ?

Pavement dwellings are seemingly makeshift structures which exist mainly on sidewalks or pavements of the city. In Bombay, the plight of pavement dwellers is most obvious and yet least acknowledged. They are the most vulnerable and invisible of the urban poor.

By beginning our work with them we could ensure

- * That the poorest were acknowledged.

- * If the solution (however long it took to develop) worked for them, it could work for others.

- * By creating the nucleus of an urban movement from the poorest and worst off, other groups of the urban poor could also rally in solidarity. The reverse is rarely true.

WHY WOMEN :

In any vulnerable group women bear the consequence of deprivation, and yet despite that create innovative means of survival with available resources. They nurture these resources and sustain mechanisms against all odds. In the event of development intervention, there has been no acknowledgement of this role played by them, either by the women themselves or by the community, the NGO or the State.

Yet, since women do play a crucial role in existing community problem solving processes, any successful alternative must ensure their central involvement in designing the solution and executing it.

WHY SHELTER?

Very early in our work the 1985 Supreme Court of India Judgement decreed that the Bombay Municipal Corporation could evict pavement dwellers and demolish their houses. In the period 1985- 86 it became evident that there was no ready made

solution. That, to prepare a solution, the communities, the city and state would all have to create a viable strategy that addressed the problems of all. This was the watershed which helped SPARC formulate its role, functions and strategy.

The women from pavement settlements stated categorically that secure shelter was their main priority. Neither they nor we understood this issue well. We realized that secure habitat was indeed the very foundation of any transformation from poverty, towards proper socialization, citizen building and constructive community practice and yet it was the most difficult area to work in.

For most of 1986-87 we began to explore along with 600 women from 7 pavement settlements, every area, issue and concern related to secure shelter. In the process we educated ourselves on land, development planning, housing norms, construction standards and materials. We strengthened the internal organization of these settlements, created structures, leadership collectives and problem solving forums. And most powerful of all, we developed our own house and settlement model plan and began to acquire skills to articulate these dreams and aspirations and initiate ways to make the city and government listen to us.

Savings groups for housing were started, construction skills were acquired and on this foundation we sought to build a movement of the urban poor with a central thrust on secure shelter.

OUR PARTNERS:

MM : MAHILA MILAN which means "women together" was what the 600 women from pavement settlements called themselves. These women were strong, confident and articulate as a result of their training and while they sought to strengthen their own work, they also began to link up and share experiences with other settlements.

NSDF : NATIONAL SLUM DWELLERS FEDERATION was started in the mid 1970s by slum leaders from several cities who wished to participate in all policy discussions affecting the poor. On observing SPARC and the MM they sought to align themselves with this partnership. As a result, several objectives were fulfilled.

SPARC wanted to expand its work, and while maintaining its thrust of work with pavement dwellers as its nucleus, it also recognised that unless other groups of the poor, presently ignoring the pavement dweller's plight, linked with them, pavement dwellers would continue to be isolated. NSDF saw the power of women's participation and SPARC's advocacy as a major sustaining factor of slum mobilization.

The roles emerged clearly: MM would be a network of women's collectives from the communities which were affiliated to NSDF. The network would assist women's collectives, assist them to get recognition and support from the settlements, and train them to undertake activities, and skills needed for them to become central in the community's decision making process.

NSDF would organise and mobilise the social and political environment which would create conditions for the poor to negotiate with resource providing institutions. SPARC would train, educate, advocate and lobby to set up this process, and when the resources were made available, MM collectives on behalf of their settlements would administer and manage their resources.

FEDERATIONS AND SADAK CHAAP :

Our involvement with street children began in 1988, when we undertook a survey of those children who are roofless and rootless in the city of Bombay. Mahila Milan and the Federations felt a strong bond with these children. Rather than try and constrain them in an environment which is hostile to their needs, it was felt that a more effective strategy would be to allow them to form their own loose federation, which could then link up with the SPARC-NSDF-MM nexus. The children decided to call this federation "Sadak Chaap" which literally means the stamp of the street.

The main problem which these children face is that of night shelters, and this need has been met to an extent by allowing the Byculla resource centre to be used as one. Other problems such as antagonism by the police and on-the-spot medical care are also being looked after by the older members of all the federations. The main support which these children need is in their transition into adulthood, and this is provided by the women of Mahila Milan.

HORIZONTAL LEARNING :

People learn most effectively from peers and through an experiential methodology. This is doubly true for women - teaching refines and sharpens self-learning and improves articulation. The initial group of mahila milan women were able to participate in this process by first visiting other settlements in Bombay, and later on other cities.

In 1986 we began to work in Dindoshi, Goregaon where slum and pavement dwellers were resettled, and in 1987 in Dharavi where government had begun an ambitious redevelopment programme; in 1988 in slums on Railway land and 1989 on slums in Airport Authority Land.

Simultaneously NSDF reawakened its contacts in 15-20 cities all over India and a team from Bombay representing SPARC/NSDF visited each of these cities, shared experiences and began to form local federations in which each group set its own priorities. Today, the cities of Bangalore, Madras, Madurai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad and Kanpur have the most active federations.

The "exchanges", which started within city, then between cities in India has today moved on to other cities in Asia, Latin America and South Africa. These exchanges reiterate the need for the poor to first participate in political and social change before seeking technical skills and balancing the learning of both. So as each group hosts others they feel their organisation and practical skills expanding and strengthening their local work.

STIRRING MANY POTS :

Decentralised and multi-faceted action is the catch word. Each group furthers its own exploration with support from all others. If they succeed in getting ahead, then they share their knowledge/skills with everyone else. This does not pressurise any one to succeed - because success rarely depends on internal preparedness. Yet once a skill is appropriated by any one group it is made available to all.

As a result many seeds are sown, and many flowers bloom and the experiences add a rich diversity to the process. Many training programmes have emerged and learning is occurring all the time strengthening solidarity between groups and expanding cycles of new learning.

NOTE:dear Kalpana, please ask me what I think is meant by this poetic turn! aLSO SEE IF YOU THINK SOME OF THE OTHER SECTIONS OF STIRRING MANY POTS NEEDS TO BE MADE A LITTLE MORE CONCISE.

CRISIS CREDIT AND WOMEN :

One of the needs which women have is to constantly seek sources of credit for themselves to meet with day-to-day crisis. Given the lack of resource availability in their lives, they either borrow from each other, or else fall into the hands of exploitative elements. Mahila Milan felt that this was one area in which they would collectively create a system for themselves. The genesis of the savings scheme lay in the housing training process, in which women analysed both the immediate and the long term monetary needs. While they were putting money aside in the bank for their shelter requirements, they made a part not to withdraw from this amount. Instead, they created another pool, which would serve their day-to-day loan requirements.

The actual process was indeed very simple : Every settlement identified one woman per 10-15 households, who assumed the responsibility of visiting them to undertake all monetary transactions - deposits, loans and repayments, both for the housing savings in the bank as well as the Mahila Milan Crisis Credit Scheme. Each of these representatives was part of a Committee, which was in charge of loan disbursements. Each group developed its own rules of lending and repayment. The crucial factor was that money could be given out at any time, since it was handled entirely by the women of the community.

As with many program outcomes, Mahila Milan started this in Byculla. But, as they visited other settlements, many groups in Bombay and other cities in India adopted the scheme as something which addressed their needs. Although the actual amounts may be modest, this scheme has a strategic value in that it not only fulfils basic community needs, but also trains women to handle transactions and negotiations. This is visible to the entire community and has affected the equation between the men and women. In any instances, the records of loan repayments maintained by the community has become the basis on which women apply to banks and financial institutions for further loans.

ENUMERATION OF HOUSEHOLDS/SETTLEMENTS :

Effective settlement planning necessitates having accurate information. Usually it is professionals and outsiders who undertake this, and have a better information base

than the communities. However, since the first pavement dweller census undertaken by SPARC in 1985, the value of this has been appreciated by the federations. Today they have a simple questionnaire, which they administer to the households, and create an information base, over which they have control. The women ask the questions and ensure that accurate information is gathered. They may not know how to write, but they seek accurate answers because they understand how this information will be later used, both for internal problem-solving as well as negotiations with the State.

For example, when they found that in one physical structure, a very large extended family lived, or if there are sub-tenants, the women decide how to plan for a future settlement, rather than allowing an outside agency the right to decide eligibility criteria. Conversely, it is they who will make the choice if one person owns more than one physical structure. Similarly when designing a settlement, not only affordability, but also occupation patterns will be considered for the future.

MAHILA MILAN MODEL HOUSES :

The Housing Training was based on the concept that the issues of women and shelter were intrinsically linked, as is concretely seen by the fact that women understand the design of their own home. In the training, women began by evaluating how they had utilised the space in their own home and the rationale behind it. Then they moved on to understand which of these elements needed to be changed, and how this could be brought about given the constraints of costs and availability. In other words, how could they optimally utilise the resources available to them.

Large numbers of women were involved in the very process of design. Other members of the communities were also informed about the house models, and finally they were to agree on 2 to 3 models. Life size model houses were constructed out of cardboard, wood, cloth and sometimes even concrete. This was done, so that people could get a feel of the alternative. The women then had to defend their design not only to their peers, but also to government officials and other professionals. This was based on the philosophy that what the poor want should become the touchstone of an alternative shelter planning process.

The house models were first constructed in Byculla, and then extended to the railway settlements and Dharavi. In India today, the Mahila Milan design of a 280-320 sq. ft. house, with 14 ft. height and a mezzanine has emerged as a standard design.

TOILETS AND COMMUNITY SANITATION :

In all settlements, women's need for privacy and the lack of facilities currently available, make this issue an urgent one. Yet, women are constantly resigned to their fate, since they have been told that in the cities you cannot have toilets without the intervention of the State.

Mahila Milan got involved in the issue of toilets when they were pre-occupied with settlement design. They analysed why the current toilets were dirty :

1. The design was such that a large block of toilets existed at a considerable distance, and the ratio of toilets to households being greater than 1 is to 4 was hopelessly inadequate.
2. The toilets were not properly managed or maintained. Hence, since inferior material was used, they were invariably blocked and dysfunctional.
3. Since adults and children had to compete, the children were invariably pushed aside, and they sat outside, soiling the place further.
4. The present toilet design was dangerous for children, and many accidents had occurred.

In designing an alternative, women were very clear that they preferred community v/s individual toilets, giving the following reasons :

1. In order to link up each individual toilet to the main sewerage system, the cost per unit would be very high.
2. Since the area of the house is small, and the water supply inadequate, it is difficult to keep the toilet clean, and this would pose problems of hygiene due to close proximity to the kitchen.
3. If the ratio of water taps and community toilets is high, relative to the number of households, the community will be able to manage it collectively.

Mahila Milan designed the toilets, bearing in mind the needs of the children. The permission to build was an arduous process and only in 1993-94 was actual construction started in Bombay. Federations in Kanpur, Bangalore, Madurai and Cochin initiated similar processes. The land and cost of construction was from the State - the women contribute labour, supervise the construction and subsequent management.

FEDERATIONS AND HOUSE CONSTRUCTION :

It is always a misnomer that acquisition of land is a pre-requisite to Housing. For poor communities, high costs and substandard material can make the process of house construction a nightmare and divide communities. Mahila Milan felt that whether or not the land was made available, they should develop expertise to understand the quality of material and its procurement. In order to reduce the cost and ensure that everyone understood the dynamics of "pucca" housing, the women would contribute labour. Those who showed a potential for this sort of work would get more involved. For women, this had many benefits : for one, many of them who had previously earned very little, now received minimum wage. Once the skill was acquired, they would benefit in the job market. The federations and women were trained in the development of pre-fab material. This could be provided initially to their own settlements and later on to others. Since the women were in charge of material

management themselves, there was no question of wastage or theft, and correct amounts of cement were used. This also had implications for long-term maintenance.

HOUSING FINANCE AND THE POOR :

Poor people do not usually get money from Institutions to construct houses, and their organisations never aspire to demand this. As more and more federation members are seeking land tenure, understanding the areas of house construction and managing other forms to credit, they have gained the confidence to seek Institutional arrangements. Their strength lies in the fact that they are able to collectively stand guarantee for loans made to individual co-operatives. This started in a very small way when an individual co-operative got access to land and then approached institutional finance sources with the backing of the federation.

The challenge lies in how federations and women can collectively pool their money for the future, so that it becomes a block of money which can stand guarantee to any of their members seeking housing loans. This requires not only regular savings on their part, but also convincing the formal Institutions and governments that this is indeed a viable alternative.

THE POOR AND RATION CARDS :

For the poor, ration cards do not provide mere access to cheaper food and fuel, but also serve as a means of identification in the city. Every citizen has a right to a ration card, it is only a question of whether it is temporary or permanent. In the past it had been difficult for individual families to understand the bureaucratic procedures involved. However, when groups of women put in a collective application, not only did they find that they obtained ration cards, but it was in the woman's name ! The main stumbling block, namely an address had been overcome, in getting the ration officers to realise that the pavement dwellers were not a transient population. In fact, after five years of a temporary card, the officers were even willing to issue permanent cards. This has become a standard procedure now, and when women visit other cities, this is one of the first procedures that they ask the communities there to follow.

Today the street children have also been granted ration cards by the authorities, since the Mahila Milan women have provided an address, which is a pre-requisite. This has been a major breakthrough for the Sadak Chaap federation.

DEALING WITH RIOTS AND CRISES :

January 1993 was a traumatic month for all the settlements in Bombay, since it was the first time that they had to deal with communal violence. It was only a matter of degree, but every single member of the federations in the city were directly affected by the insanity which prevailed. People drew strength from one another, when they first met as a collective and heard not only about how each settlement had been affected, but also about various strategies which had been used to cope with the situation.

SPARC, along with NSDF and Mahila Milan gathered all its resources for relief work among the poor communities. The strategy used was for SPARC to collect all material resources, and for the federations to distribute these through their local networks. We felt that this would ensure that the recipients would be able to retain a sense of dignity. Short-term relief in terms of food and material distribution, as well as an increment in the crisis credit loan scheme, specifically for the riot-affected was effectively implemented. However, except for a few households, we were unable to undertake any wide-spread house construction, since our approach was radical, as well as a gradual process, in which community involvement was expected to be very high. This was confusing for communities especially those where we were relative new-comers, since many other outside agencies were offering rapid, though short-term construction. For the federations, this experience was very emotional, especially since they had in the past only a vicarious understanding of communal violence. It has cemented certain existing relationships, but at the same time left a lot of tentative feelings and even doubts, which only time may heal.

MAKING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION GENDER SENSITIVE :

Women are centrally involved in all issues related to the home and the community. But, their contribution tends to be invisible and taken for granted by them and the community. The challenge in bringing about meaningful change lies in making this contribution visible and providing women with the skills, support and resources to participate in a more formalised intervention. If this is not taken up consciously, women tend to abdicate their role and the men then assume positions of leadership.

Involving women is both a means as well as an end. It is an end in itself as it ensures greater equality and more rights for women. It is a means, because it ensures sustainability and practical solutions and democracy in peoples movements. Most of all, it accommodates the reality which is also clear to all practitioners, that those who execute solutions must participate in problem solving processes and must judge the validity of the solution.

Women also have the following essential qualities : they ensure that the process is equitable in distribution of resources; they have a commitment to a sustainable process; the spirit of collective behavior makes it democratic. It is an end because giving women recognition and equality ensures them a rightful place in the social fabric.

By strengthening what women do and getting recognition for its usefulness by men, the women grow both individually and collectively and become an invaluable asset to the community. Collective participation makes it difficult to ignore them in external interventions. This reverses traditional community organisation which always develops intervention strategy around a single male leader.