

How can poor people benefit from research results?

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Research is an essential activity which has a great deal of value for the communities of the poor who are otherwise treated as 'subjects' of research. Often, the right to create knowledge, use it and develop tools to appropriate it, are not provided to all, and development intervention often gives resources to some and not to others, thereby creating the right of some and not others to undertake research. In a globalising world with inter-connectivity, there is potential for not only a wide spectrum of people doing research to work together, but for a range of strategies through which the research undertaken by different groups using varying techniques can be linked to produce new insights and knowledge that the earlier type of research activity could not produce.

SPARC stands for Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres. It is an NGO which I started in 1984, along with 12 other people who had been working on issues of urban poverty. We felt at the time that what we were doing was somehow not working to address the real issues of poverty and inequity in cities, and that we needed to develop more effective ways to work with poor communities rather than for poor communities, and try to find sustainable strategies which poor communities themselves can use to address their aspirations and problems. We had no fixed plan and no resources, only some insights which emerged from our earlier experience guided us.

Ideas

What were these insights? We had learned:

- a. That cities operate as geographic areas, and poor communities locate themselves in physical spaces which suit their vital activities; this should be kept in mind when working with these communities. The area resource centre concept sought to create a space which would allow those who began to participate in exploring what they wanted to have, conditions which facilitated that exploration.
- b. That nothing trickles down, so starting to work with the better off in poor neighbourhoods, cannot lead to a solution that has universal application; instead if you begin to work with the poorest communities and create a solution that works for them, this solution can be used to help others.
- c. Women in poor communities are the innovators and managers of all meagre resources. In fact the poorer the community the more the women are in charge of the process.... If you begin to work with the poorest communities, the chances are that women can participate centrally in a process of change, and when they participate in these transformations, it creates internal equity management in a way that no other system can.

Therefore, we began to work with pavement dwellers in Bombay in the E ward (district) of the city which had the largest pavement slums of the city, and began a dialogue with women in these communities.

Invisible

As we began to work with pavement dwellers, we began to realise that the communities who reside on the pavements were an invisible population not only for the city administration, but also to the rest of the city and, unbelievably, even to the communities themselves.

What does being invisible in the city mean? Cities are dense spaces whose day to day management is by its municipalities, the lowest arm of the state, which provides services and amenities. Its 'governance' in cities creates conditions to organise water sanitation, housing and other services at a

massive scale for the purposes of a 'population' that resides in the city. Statistics are means through which planning is done, and cities, especially those in the south, tend to plan for the citizens who live in formal housing, attempting to ignore, and thereby not cater to, those who live in informal settlements.

Until the 1970s all informal settlements in Indian cities, especially in Bombay, were thus ignored. However, as their ratio increased and they began to get the right to vote, they became valuable vote banks, and a trickle of services began to flow into the cities' slums. The city began to use their labour, but first did not consider it their responsibility to develop a city plan to house them and provide them adequate services. While gradually this situation began to improve, it did not change for the people residing on the pavements.

Although historically all migrants who came from the rural areas in search for work 'squatted' close to where they would get work, those who accidentally squatted in pavements 'lost out' because the municipality decided that there was no way these people could be included in the municipal services. The municipality not only ignored them but constantly demolished their houses in the hope of evicting them. This led to a war of attrition between the municipality and the community and impoverished the pavement dwellers because they kept rebuilding their humble houses. The pavement dwellers reconstructed their houses with soft materials which were perishable and they needed to invest in refurbishing each year, even if the dwelling was not demolished. They did so because when they knew of impending demolition they could dismantle their homes. The insecurity of their homes thus created conditions for investment in their homes which never really got upgraded. And it never seemed a possibility that the State and the municipality could work together to re-house them elsewhere.

Survey

SPARC personnel began to understand this vicious cycle which kept these communities at the bottom of the city's population. We began to see that the other poor people in the city who were better organised, also ignored the pavement dwellers. So there was no organisation that represented them, no networks with other communities. There seemed no way out for these families, whose life in the village was over as they had no land, no home and no work.

In 1985, the Supreme Court of India gave a judgement which allowed the Municipality to evict the pavement dwellers and this created the kind of hysteria and panic in the settlements which cut through the apathy and despair. SPARC, still a new and fledging organisation itself, started, together with the women it had begun to work with, to look for ways to deal with the crisis. Everywhere we went there were myths about pavement dwellers which did not match what we knew to be the reality of how they survived in the city. Research institutions of repute and the municipality were not inclined to study their problems and understand who they were; they did not feel it was possible to do so.

SPARC then decided to do a survey. With no financial resources and very little time before the eviction date, we gathered college students and community leaders, and tested a questionnaire in which we asked questions about these pavement dwellers: where did they come from, when and why had they come to the city, what work did they do here and what did they do before in the village.

In three months we undertook a census of about 6000 households residing in a ward (E WARD) and the three main arterial roads of the old city. The results of the survey were dramatic: Most pavement dwellers were from the poorest districts of the country, they were landless agricultural labourers and artisans who had no property or assets in the village, they had come over 20 years ago (in 1985), and more than half the population (more than the national average) worked, and yet earned less than a

minimum wage. Most walked to work as a means of subsidising their transport costs, so staying near the pace of work was essential.

The survey did not ask 'how do you feel about' questions that reflect opinions, just collected the basic facts which demonstrate in quantifiable terms the circumstances of these people. All interviewees made sure they were present when the questions were asked, and everyone made sure the answers were accurate as it was clear that it was a representation of their reality... it was a tool through which they were talking to the rest of the city.

The report had major impacts. The most significant was on the communities, who, as a result of this exercise, now began to see themselves as a group with common needs and aspirations and began to explore the possibilities of organising themselves. They saw themselves as 'not being alone' and the empowerment that results from such an exercise needs to be stressed. They began to understand the politics for cities: if you are not counted then you are invisible and cannot ask for your entitlements.

Researchers and practitioners at institutions and NGOs, who had hitherto not seen these people as a 'population', now began to do so, and increasingly began to include the pavement dwellers as a category among the poor. Interestingly, in the past all possible resources allocated by the state to the poor excluded the pavement dwellers. Now the demands for their inclusion began, because the survey also demonstrated that they were indeed the poorest and the most vulnerable.

We were able to stave off mass demolitions with what we did, but now everyone, all who had protested, the women collectives and the communities, had gone into high gear and asked what next? The women emphatically said they now wanted to make sure they got a house. Could SPARC give them a house? We said we didn't know anything about housing, but, instead of despairing or asking someone else to tell us, we decided to 'research' this business about housing. The women knew and we knew that we could not give each other any assurances, but we would explore this together.

Federation of slum dwellers

The National Slum Dwellers' Federation, NSDF, was set up by slum dwellers in 1975. In the twenty years preceding that year many slum dwellers had to face demolitions and evictions like pavement dwellers, and they had begun to get frustrated at the activities of NGOs who came to slums to provide health care or education, but did not want to address issues of land security and tenure because they felt they could not secure this. Yet, as far as the poor communities were concerned, this remained at the heart of their problems. If their physical address cannot be secure, there cannot be any consolidation of assets and no security. If there is no security there can be no creating of any assets and wealth.

So in response they formed their own federation and worked towards their goals for mainstreaming issues of urban poverty in city issues. Its leadership followed the survey with interest. The concepts of gathering data about the poor by SPARC and the pavement dwellers was similar to their own strategy. But new was the combination of community and professionals; this created conditions for information to reach places where poor communities alone could not take it.

The federation and SPARC explored a possible alliance. SPARC wanted to maintain its commitment to women and to developing strategies with the poorest. NSDF presented a huge network of slums whose political and mass base would help the cause of the pavement dwellers who had so far been excluded from that origination. Together they agreed to establish a third organisation, Mahila Milan, which would create systems and mechanism for women's collectives to build skills and credibility to work in local communities. Originally, Mahila Milan was what the women from E ward who wanted to explore the housing process called themselves. Now, many women groups form part of Mahila

Milan and get trained to manage community affairs. They are also the major managers of data and information in the communities and information to the alliance is provided by these networks.

Housing research

The alliance of SPARC, Mahila Milan and NSDF undertook research on the issues of housing for pavement dwellers and began to understand why poor people can never get a house, why all housing for the poor is taken by others and how the design and construction strategy developed by professionals for the poor, not only excludes them in all aspects of planning and execution but is also dysfunctional to the needs and financial capabilities of the poor. Thus a strategy designed for the pavement dwellers now began to make sense to all slum dwellers and within a matter of ten years the alliance began to work in 28 cities in 6 states of the Country and had a membership of 350,000 households.

Through this research, the alliance came in a central position to challenge the information of the state about the poor. For every strategy formulated by the state to address issues of the poor, the alliance could not only produce counter arguments, but could demonstrate a better working alternative. More censuses of specific populations were undertaken (Dharavi Census of structures 1987, Beyond the Beaten Track 1988) by the alliance which demonstrate how poor communities can not only gather information about themselves, but can challenge the inaccurate and spuriously inadequate information that the state uses for reallocating resources for the poor in cities. This began to change their relationship with these institutions and their self perception.

International network

In 1988, along with several other grassroots NGOs in Asia, we founded ACHR, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. Through this regional institution we could make sure that our voices reached Asian forums where international and national agencies discussed issues of urban poverty and the poor. We were able to share our experiences and help each other with strategies, and we also began to explore linkages with other institutions which did research, or undertook projects on urban poverty issues. For instance, in Cambodia, NSDF, SPARC and Mahila Milan recently began to work with informal settlements of people who had fled to the rural areas during the war and now returned and lived in slums and roof tops. The Slums and Urban Poor Federation of Pnom Penh now works actively with the municipality to develop alternative housing, exploring ways by which the resources of the poor and the city along with international aid can help provide the poor with urban facilities and amenities.

In 1991, we linked up with the newly formed organisations in South Africa that were beginning to examine what was to happen in South Africa after majority rule (Peoples Dialogue for Land and Shelter, and South African Homeless People's Federation). Using the experience of the poor in India, we began to share with them the harsh facts that democracy does not automatically give you the right to have a house and job. What it does, is give you equal opportunity of assembly and advocacy through which you can make demands on the state for the use of its resources to fulfil your aspirations. Initially this was not believed, until the leadership actually came to India and saw the situation of the poor. They also saw the tools which the Indian poor communities aligned with NSDF used, the most powerful ones being enumeration and savings. Using the strategies we use in India, the South Africans began to enumerate Black town ships, federate settlements and when the majority rule came to South Africa, they began a dialogue with the government to seek land tenure, amenities and services for the poor. Through these censuses they gathered information about townships where earlier there were either no data or inaccurate data. Moreover, this information was available to the poor themselves and, organising themselves, their organisations became acknowledged as the representatives of the poorest of the poor in the townships all over South Africa. Nowadays, the South African Homeless People's Federation cannot be ignored when policies on resource allocation and other aspects affecting the poor are formulated and executed.

Now, national federations of the poor from 11 countries form Slum Dweller's International (1996); they exchange strategies and help each other strengthen their local presence and voice their concerns in a global policy environment.

Slum dwellers in India and the World Bank

These international linkages and exposure coupled with confidence and capacity to do focused research along with communities has helped to make the alliance a strong contender in development, as the example of the World Bank Project called MUTP II (1995-97) demonstrates. The Mumbai Urban Transport Project II is a project in which the government of the state Maharashtra (Maharashtra) and the Central government Department of Railways have jointly borrowed money to improve the public transport system of the city of Mumbai. The scheme seeks to lay out additional train tracks, to improve the efficiency of the present train services, to improve road and public bus systems, and so on.

It was estimated that over 35,000 households would need to be relocated, most of them squatters and slum dwellers. As the World Bank has a very stringent set of norms to guide such involuntary resettlement of project-affected people, the bank suggested that the state develop a policy for this resettlement and rehabilitation. SPARC and two other NGOs were on the committee to prepare the policy. The entire process of how to design a baseline research, who should do the survey and how, was recommended by SPARC, on the basis of its work with pavement dwellers who were planning their own relocation. The policy is commonly known in Mumbai as the Sukhtankar Committee Report and is now the policy guiding the rehabilitation process.

Since 1995 when the report came out, SPARC has, together with the federation, enumerated 7000 of the households and will facilitate the rehabilitation of the households, with the active participation of the communities. There is an active federation of these households which now has both the capacity and the strength to challenge the traditional 'professional driven' rehabilitation strategies demanding that communities, assisted by the NGO, design and execute these projects themselves.

Valuable impact

The most valuable impact of the enumeration stems from the process of participation in the enumeration: building organisations and through that a movement of the poor which they own, drive and manage emerges. The poor are often unable to combine their most valuable asset -critical mass - when seeking to obtain resources and services. Their lack of material resources and knowledge of how information drives the choices made by the state, puts them in a weak and fragmented situation. Therefore, the process of gathering factual information about households is very important; individuals and communities receive training, become 'students and learners' and build confidence and capacities to influence the process. When the real situation of the poor is seen and understood by the poor themselves, their ability to develop specific collective priorities, to identify solutions and to seek internal resources towards that solution, helps to build an organisational framework based on sound work and not on some wild aspirations of one of the leaders minds. Thereby, the processes within the organisation become focused and sound. Leadership has a clearer direction as well, and can count on the support of the members.

One of the features which makes such federations unique is that they do not expect 'others', that is the state or philanthropy, to solve their problems. Instead, they seek to define the problems and design the solution. To drive this process, they need membership to understand and believe that they have the capacity to make choices, and resources to invest. The enumeration provides the information to define priorities and to design resource flows. These strategies are as new for communities as they are for professional and donors, hence they have added value in terms of project designing and donor education as well.

It also impacts the negotiating processes with the state and with institutions of civil society. The state and, very often, civil society organisations have a habit of patronising the poor, treating them as though they have no capacity, no resources and no information. More than anything else, it is a powerful equaliser which demands respect and therefore changes the equation of the poor with the state and civil society.

The strategy has also been able to impact policy. In India, South Africa and Cambodia organisations of the poor came into being, which were able to demonstrate to their international funders the need to change the manner in which resources can be used, and eventually to create a dialogue with the state on the development of programmes for the poor designed and managed by the community. This makes the investment produce outputs which make the organisations sustainable and serve the needs of the community and society. As the strategy can be transferred, scaled up and replicated, its universal application has also been demonstrated.

There is also added value in locating the design and execution within the communities assisted by NGOs instead of attracting an outsider or consultant. Doing the research builds a knowledge base within the communities, and it upgrades their skills; they can build upon, upgraded and further use these. When such research is done solely by the outsiders, the investments leave the community after the research.

It is useful to make the information gathered and owned by the communities also available for other forms of analysis. The partnerships of NGO, CBO and researchers which have already occurred with SPARC and NSDF indicate that the kind of extrapolations researchers are able to do, can benefit the communities and the poor by creating new insights and knowledge in the sector. However, this requires willingness on both sides to dialogue and work in partnerships.

Discussion

After the lecture, Mr A.P.R. Visser, Head Poverty Analyses and Policy/Directory Social and Institutional Development, acts as discussant. He notes that there is still little insight in the causes of poverty; too much poverty research of the last 25 years has focused on questions of definition and measurement. Economists and social scientists come up with some answers, but in a kind of defensive and 'outsiders' way: they point to lack of access to markets and credit, to shortages and absence. The focus of his division is different from Ms Patel's, more concerned with macro processes. Bringing in the perspectives of the poor by engaging in the kind of research partnerships Ms Patel describes is important. Mr Visser suggests that both kinds of research are necessary and can mutually benefit. Ms Patel agrees that it is not an issue of right or wrong, indeed macro research is useful. She feels that there is no need for the two to compete as each has a role in society and it has great potential to connect and correlate to each other. But she also points out that her kind of research is hardly recognised while Mr Visser's is respected and dominant.

At the discussion with the audience, the question was posed about the validity of the research process. Ms Patel explains that there is often a perception of external research as being objective and capable of finding the truth, while internally generated information is seen as biased and false. She points out that all information has biases regardless of who and how it is communicated. The issue is how honest and transparent are those biases? The information gathering for enumeration has some very well developed rules: It never seeks opinions, it never seeks to judge values. It always asks questions about facts. Discussion about views of the communities, possible choices for solutions etc. takes place in group meetings. When the enumeration is done, there is an internal consensus that the process is *quantifying* what is the reality of the poor, not commenting on it. As to what kinds of details are asked about the poor, Ms Patel relates that the questionnaire begins with data about the individuals, households and communities as they are located in geographic relationship to each other. The enumeration covers socio-economic data at the households level,

information about access to services and amenities required for day to day survival and how communities obtain it, about the work people do, how much they earn and so on, and about their migration history at the household and settlement levels. Depending on the local situation, some more specific questions can be added.

A question is asked about the effectiveness of resettlement: won't others replace them, leaving the poverty trap intact? Ms Patel reacts that since the case of MUTP II which requires resettlement, this question has come up. The stand of the federation is that land security is vital in addressing issues of poverty and equity in relationship to basic amenities in cities. Initially, most cities ignored the need to allocate land and make it accessible to the poor for housing and community life. Consequently, the community squats on whatever land it can find and slums spring up. Dealing with this phenomenon ranged from ignoring to actively demolishing houses and evicting households. This creates depletion poor people's resources, loss of wages and huge problems of insecurity. Research in these situations often provides the basis for designing the solutions. Some strategies we use are: A. analysis of the wastage of resources of both the communities and the state in attempting demolitions which don't provide solutions, of the implications for the relationship between the state and community and the detrimental effect on designing a long term solution. B. We then examine the possibilities of obtaining tenure for the communities on the land they presently live on. C. We look at what circumstances require people to move, both for their own safety as for the larger good for society, and at some of the preconditions for the solutions. We find that such an exploration produces reasonable responses from both communities and society, and although it takes much time, it is a valuable tool for working together in partnerships. So finally our answer is that resettlement designed and driven by communities is OK.

Upon the question whether institutions like the World Bank are convinced about this methodology, Ms Patel reacts that in principal the World Bank promotes such a process aimed at developing rehabilitation which works for the community. However, the bank has difficulty to fit such a process into their time-schedules and are not used to give resources for institutional capabilities either. Procedures and strategies are more driven by professionals competing with each other for contracts; communities just become 'beneficiaries' for which everything is done in a spirit of patronage. The federations resent this and have been working to contest with the Bank. Within the MUTP II project it is now gradually being accepted and NGOs and CBOs designing and managing projects is being incorporated in the process.

Lastly, Ms Patel reflected on Northern researchers coming to the South to do research. Not all researchers, whether northern and southern, are the same. Their attitudes and strategies differ according to their past exposure and awareness of grass root movements and knowledge of their work. Their attitude also depends upon who funds them. When the funding demands that the communities and NGOs are involved and partnerships are encourages, and when the process of financing allows communities to have equal access to resources to hire northern and southern researchers, then the partnership often produces great results. Otherwise the southern communities just become data collecting 'fields work' sites and no knowledge and information comes back.