

## **Stitching Coats that Fit: Supporting People's Processes is a Risk Worth Taking**

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The World Bank now has a stated commitment to support development that is driven by poor communities. Having appropriated the words, and having begun to make investments in programmes such as social funds, clearly the Bank has made a dramatic shift. But is that enough?

On behalf of the coalitions and alliances of the urban poor that I represent, we say it is not enough! Powerful institutions such as the World Bank and other international development organizations that are presently driving the development agenda need to also examine the nature of how poor communities presently survive, and track their progress when they get resources, space and leveraging capacity.

The World Bank needs to "put the money where its mouth is". Simple ideas and concepts are the hardest to execute in this complex world of traditions and rituals that have patronized the poor for time immemorial. The real big idea is that in the world of tomorrow, poor people, when given opportunities, can work with others and create solutions. Transformation can come out of communities which design solutions and manage resources. For instance, in Thailand, the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) manages a fund of over several million dollars provided by the state, and managed by a board of community non-governmental organizations and state officials. The state and numerous community-based organizations have established a partnership-driven programme. Together they manage millions of Thai Bhats worth of funds that are directly lent to federations and networks of community organizations to undertake whatever investment communities elect to make. These resources then leverage further funds from cities and local authorities, communities and the private sector. What makes this partnership unique is that the UCDO community federation takes the lead, not the State or the organizations. That is truly a just vehicle.

In Cambodia, the City of Phnom Penh and the Slum and Urban Poor Federation (SUPF) has begun a city fund that is a joint venture between the community and the municipal authorities. Two of the first relocation projects there have been conceived, designed and executed by the communities.

Whether it is in India, the Philippines, Thailand or Cambodia, the international aid consortia have great difficulty dealing with such simple arrangements. The goals and rhetoric of the World Bank and other multilateral and bilateral development actors are great. But they are still locked in the prescriptions by everyone else but the people living in poverty. The international development community still measures the cloth (read resources) and still stitches the coat. And if communities are lucky, their measurements can be taken.

Top-down programmes are not sustainable and they begin to die when the external agencies leave. Such problems have made everyone sit back and reflect and this, in turn, has provided space for the communities to demonstrate their own alternatives. These alternatives may be messy and confusing but they work because they are located in real time and in real life. These processes have inspired many individuals within the national State and local levels of government to experiment with partnerships with communities. In many instances, they are the beginning of unique partnerships between international agencies, national and local governments and communities.

UNCHS (Habitat)'s Global Campaign for Secure Tenure has made a huge leap forward. On 16 July 2000, it signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) of India in the presence of the Government of India (national, provincial and municipal). The agreement between UNCHS (Habitat) and NSDF is written in terms in which NSDF will promote the Global Campaign in partnership with cities, with the support of

all levels of government in India. The NSDF will negotiate with the cities and the state and already many cities have begun to explore providing tenure to slums through this process. The UN's endorsement of the process is important as it helps the NSDF to remind the Government of India of its obligations.

In India, the World Bank and UNCHS (Habitat) have set up a programme together with other international development agencies known as the Cities Alliance. In discussion and dialogue the commitment to partnerships are very strong, but in practice the process still distances the communities from being beneficiaries. Although the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), SPARC (an NGO) and Mahila Milan (a women's initiative) are called "partners," the multilateral and bilateral agencies are still not clear how to drive this partnership forward. They still have that need to measure and stitch...There remain many people within various donor organizations who feel very fearful of making this risky journey. But again, why is it so hard for the development establishment to let go? Let us take all the programmes and let us ask some simple questions:

- Who designs these projects?
- Who controls the resources?
- Who determines the criteria?
- Whose institutional capacities are being developed?
- Who will own the history of that experience?

It is crucial for development agencies to take the time to understand more deeply how very poor people can get organized. It cannot be a project activity <sup>¾</sup> it must span 10 to 20 years. In India, South Africa, and other countries, it takes 3 to 5 years to create a national federation and another 5 years for these federations to establish workable, balanced relations with governments and international agencies. But with the crucial investment of time, engagement by international development agencies is far more viable and worthy. 20 years is not a long time when we consider the limited outcomes of conventional development projects implemented in the 1970s and 1980s. Supporting the creation of strong people's processes is a risk worth taking, and it needs a new way of envisioning the future.

But how do we collectively address this issue of risk, of complacency, of not wanting to challenge convention? We need to create a path to build local and global institutional capacities of community-driven networks to take over projects, or at least the thinking inherent in a "project-based" approach. This begins with those who are ready and can help develop new joint ventures that truly build the capacities of communities <sup>¾</sup> institutionally. Change of this kind also entails creating opportunities that help both national governments and international development agencies to link proactively and in partnership with the communities and their processes and institutions.

Slum Dwellers International (SDI) is a growing network of local and grassroots initiatives in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It is ready to engage with governments and international donor organizations. It has a huge pool of experience and talent that can really move the process of engagement. But they need to measure and stitch the cloth of that movement themselves.

We must now create mechanisms to encourage egalitarian joint ventures between communities, government and international development agencies. All partners in the process must also have the right to debate their own roles and responsibilities, which will enable them to revisit the questions and assumptions on which the collaboration is based.