

SPARC from a Volunteer's View

This was written by Ken Friis and Lucas Sinclair, two volunteers from London who visited SPARC during the month of February 2004. They had just finished high school and were about to enter university.

Our first stop was at the Kanjumarg transit camp. After an initial look around we went into the Mahila Milan office where residents come to pay in their savings and where the accounts are done. The office was well kept with photos of meetings and articles on the wall. Here we spoke to a member of the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation. He explained about the camp, how it had been there for six years and that some people had recently moved to Mankhurd and their transit accommodation demolished for new permanent housing. Those that had been there the longest were given priority to move.

We initially thought that people would jump at this chance, especially when considering how long they had been at the transit camp. It's more complicated than that though. Some choose to stay either because they have jobs in the area, as the standard of education is not as good in Mankhurd or their present financial situation does not allow for the move. He told us that they had been in Mankhurd for so long because of land disputes with the government over highway plans.

We were shown the savings books the families use. They have daily savings, which they are encouraged to use, and general savings, which will go towards the maintenance of the permanent housing, once they move in. They can also take loans out at the office. Families are expected to pay Rs400 (around \$8) per month towards maintenance. However only 40% of families can make that amount



For example, the lifts will stop working, as we later discovered had happened at Mankhurd. For this reason they had wanted 5 storey buildings but were restricted to the same storey to the same 7 storeys high ones as at Mankhurd. He was frustrated by the amount of time he had spent at the transit camp.

Conditions here are not ideal; the roofs leak in the monsoon and they had suffered a water shortage recently but it was still far better than in the slums. Lucas asked him if the people in the transit camp felt positive about their future. He said that they were

excited about their future; the only worry was the maintenance costs.

After this we met a very friendly man outside who was our age and he showed us around Kanjumarg. He showed us the foundations being laid for the permanent housing, some more transit housing that was being built and around the camp. We picked up quite an entourage en route and everyone was extremely friendly.



The living conditions seemed good compared to those we had seen by the railways and on the pavement around Mumbai although we were still struck by how little space large families had to manage in.



Mankhurd was an eye-opener because it gave us the opportunity to see exactly what an NGO such as SPARC was capable of. The buildings here had been completed for some time and they were very impressive. We walked through a very community orientated estate where there was even sufficient space for the children to play cricket. We were invited into the SPARC office where we were able to better understand the workings of the system.

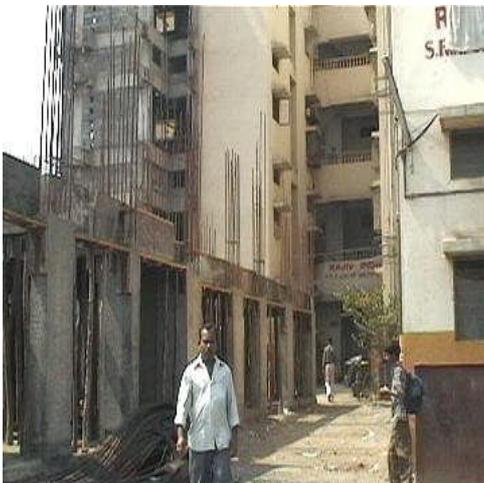
There were savings records boards for a large list of families and groups showing a well-organized structure. The office is also the place where residents can meet and voice their concerns and manage their savings. It was good to know that the residents can take an active part in their community. However, as previously mentioned, we did notice that the lifts were out of order which serves to highlight the fact that there is still some way to go in terms of communities managing their savings.

At Jogeshwari-Oshiwara, the sheer scale of the work that was being undertaken struck us. Initially we saw one building in the early stages of construction but upon walking around the site we saw numerous blocks under development. Some belonged to the SPARC project but there were also many other building sites and some already



We were able to take a closer look at the construction. Here laborers were working hard laying bricks and smoothing edges. We learnt that laborers earn Rs150 per day while skilled workers earn Rs220. It became clear to us how hard many people in the developing world had to work for sums that we in MEDCs take for granted.

Rajiv Indira was the site the Prince of Wales visited in 2003. We went to the SPARC office where newspaper articles of his visit were proudly on show. Here we learnt, from a community contractor, the kind of problems they and SPARC has to deal with.



Apart from the large amount of government red tape and bureaucracy, there are a series of social factors to be appreciated. In some cases slum dwellers are very apprehensive over moving into permanent housing. For some, their dwellings are currently larger than the new housing and when you have a large household then that has to be considered.

Some families are able to set up a shop in the front of their dwellings or rent out the top floor if they have one. There will be no such opportunity in the new housing and thus a vital income is lost. The community contractor told us that unless he can convince a minimum of 70% of a community of slum residents to move, a project would not go ahead. The opportunity to move into free permanent housing may be lost forever. When each new apartment has a market value of Rs600,000 (\$12,500) it would take a long time for a slum dweller to afford to buy an apartment themselves. This value was substantially more than we had expected and shows how expensive Mumbai real estate is and what a great opportunity it is for slum dwellers to make the move.

Community contractors are used rather than private contractors because they live in the community and know the locals. This has many advantages but causes some problems. A community contractor cares about the needs of the community while a private contractor is there for profit and will overlook certain issues such as some households seeking two apartments. However, because the community contractor has to deal with such issues,

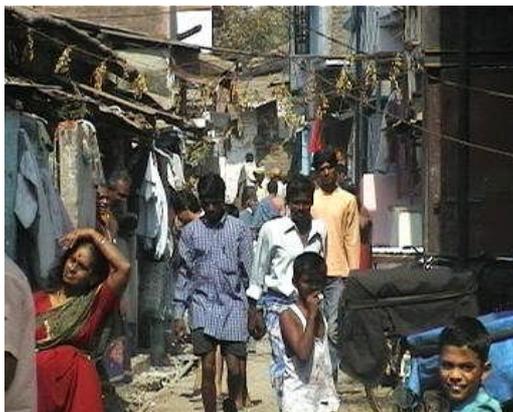
those residents that do cause problems such as these become frustrated with him.

SPARC builds an additional block of flats with each project and sells off these to private buyers, which allows them to cover the costs of the free housing they provide.

We were then allowed inside one of the flats to witness the finished article, which was fully furnished. It was a larger space than we had expected. It had a higher section with a collapsible aluminum staircase, where the children slept. Even so, it was understandable how large families might be apprehensive about moving into such a space.



Earlier Ken had asked Devika whether she thought that all families would be better off in the new housing when all the factors of finance and space were put into consideration. Upon walking through the Dharavi slum, his question was answered. Dharavi is one of the oldest slums in Asia and the conditions are relatively good when compared to the railway slums. The houses were similar to those in the Kanjumarg. However, there was still open sewage, poor hygiene and sanitation and cramped conditions. At times it was even hard to see due to an abundance of flies swarming over rubbish tips. It was an eye-opening and humbling experience that will stay with us forever.



We walked through Dharavi to Bharat Janata where we saw a SPARC toilet block providing the much needed sanitation. Here was the very beginning of construction of more housing blocks. The residents and kids were very friendly and inquisitive and made us feel very welcome.

We had now seen SPARC projects in all the various stages of completion, from the bare bones of Bharat Janata to the fully furnished flats at Rajiv Indira and Mankhurd. In our time at SPARC we had gained an insight into its workings and learnt of the multitude of factors and problems involved in making a difference to people's lives.



Ken Friis & Lucas Sinclair