

## **Creating space for poor women's voices in municipal planning**

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### **Poverty, women, urban local government**

In countries such as India new forms of decentralisation and local governance potentially offer new spaces for citizen's voice and the construction of new forms of citizenship. However, it is apparent that not all groups have equal opportunity and ability to put forward their views and be heard. Exclusion of the poor and marginalized from development processes has given rise to the concerns for active citizenship, responsible participation of people and accountability in the development process. Such concerns seek alternate forms of development, which foster more inclusive and deliberative forms of citizen engagement (Tandon, 2002).

Seen from this perspective, creating space for poor women's voices in municipal decision-making is essentially to do with including the excluded. It is about recognizing that there are practical limitations for some citizens to express their demands and also for local government to address these demands. It is about good governance and state responsiveness to a group that is most deprived in terms of availability of civic services and access to institutions that can bring about a change. It is also about addressing the lack of capacity of a large number of citizens to make demands on the state because of their multiple handicaps such as unequal power relations, low incomes, illiteracy and adverse cultural practices. Even if this capacity were to be created through awareness and knowledge, it would not be effective until and unless there are clearly laid out processes of engagement that legitimize demand-making. The rules of the game must be laid out and known to all players.

There is no shortage of examples of collective and individual struggles of poor women in trying to cope with everyday living and shocks. There is also no shortage of examples of poor women's triumphs in overcoming difficulties and vulnerabilities in their lives and creating a better world for themselves, their families and their communities. There are many stories of women's movements, community based efforts, successful individual and collective entrepreneurship that have challenged the system and persisted in spite of heavy odds. Some have succeeded in gaining what they wanted, others continue to struggle or have given up. They certainly inspire respect and support. But they also bring to mind the overwhelming backdrop of exclusion from development processes that necessitates such action in the first place.

This observation is also true of India, where the government is fully committed to gender equality and the national Constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens. It is also recognized that this equality cannot be presumed simply because it is a right and exists in policy. Special ministries, commissions and departments have been created to look after women's interests. The NGO lobby is working relentlessly to influence policy and to convert policy intentions into reality. The State too is not inactive and has attempted to give teeth to policy in the form of a number of legislative measures and programmes.

Of particular interest here are measures that are expected to be implemented by urban local government. The decentralisation efforts of the last decade have been accompanied by democratisation and grass-roots representation with special opportunities for women. The 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment (GoI, 1992) recognises local government as the third tier of government and Municipal Councils are democratically elected. One third of the council seats

are reserved for women. These decentralisation and democratisation initiatives of government provide a good starting point for reforms to make place for women's voice in municipal decision-making.

The Central Government's current urban poverty schemes focus on poor women and make funds available to all urban local bodies in the country for implementation. Municipalities are responsible for facilitating the formation of a structure of representative women-only community based organisations in slums. Resident Community Volunteers (RCVs) are elected for a neighbourhood group (NHG) of 20 – 40 households; RCVs in a slum or ward form a Neighbourhood Committee (NHC); one of the RCVs is elected as a Convenor. NHC Convenors form the Community Development Society (CDS) at the town level and elect their own office bearers. Programmes such as SJSRY for economic and social development of the poor and NSDP<sup>1</sup> (Ministry of Urban Affairs and Employment, 1998, i, ii) for infrastructure improvement in slums are expected to be implemented with the active involvement of the CDS structure. This has institutionalised the representation of poor women and given municipalities direct responsibility to engage with them (Banerjee, 2002).

However, it has been seen that policy commitment and central government programmes are important supports but not enough to ensure that poor women are included in municipal decision making. For instance, a recent study found that in a large number of municipalities the male family members of elected women councilors act as proxy decision makers (Hindustan Times, XXXX). In Andhra Pradesh, one of the more progressive states, a review of community structures and participatory mechanisms in urban local bodies found that the lower tiers of the structure were not active in most towns; women representatives had very little knowledge or skills to perform the tasks required of them and a few dominant individuals or councilors made decisions and interacted with the municipality. Most municipalities did not have appropriate staff, structures or systems in place to support the formation and working of community groups, but had nevertheless hastily undertaken the task because it was a qualifying requirement for funding (APUSP, 2000).

The contention of this paper is that meaningful results can be expected only if the demand-making capacity of poor people is strengthened; if spaces and mechanisms are created to legitimize the process of such demand making; and finally, if institutions become responsive and accountable to citizens, particularly poor people. Making space for poor women's voices really serves as a touch-stone, indicative of deliberate efforts of a civic institution to be inclusive. It needs to be embedded in the working of development institutions and constitutes nothing short of major reform..

From this point of view the Andhra Pradesh Urban Services for the Poor (APUSP) programme, currently being implemented in 32 Indian towns, provides an interesting example that attempts to address the above issues in a practical context. The seven-year project is supported by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID), and is expected to benefit more than 5.5 million people, of which one third are poor.

## **Introduction to Andhra Pradesh Urban Services for the Poor (APUSP)**

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<sup>1</sup> SJSRY stands for Swarna Jayanti Shahariya rojgar Yojna; NSDP stands for National Slum Development programme, both started in 1997.

The concept of poverty reduction in APUSP is based on three premises. First, reforms are required within municipalities in order to improve their performance in poverty reduction activities. Second, improvements in environmental infrastructure in slums have multiple impacts on improving the conditions of poor people, but need to be based on the demands of poor people and on the capacity of the municipality to operate and maintain this infrastructure. Third, civil society should be strengthened as a way to invigorate the interaction between poor people and the municipality and to stimulate policies in favour of the poor. This reflects the notion that poverty reduction requires the building of partnerships in both government and community or civil society, and that it needs to be based on the actual needs of poor people (Banerjee, 2002). The project goal of sustained reduction in poverty and vulnerability is expected to be achieved through a three pronged approach: improvement of municipal services in areas inhabited by the poor; municipal reforms to sustain infrastructure improvements; and strengthened civil society.

The key stakeholders of APUSP are municipalities and women-only community based organisations. The project introduces several innovative processes at municipal and state level through a gradual step by step approach over a seven year period. The setting up of a participatory planning process, institution development of municipalities and capacity building of municipalities and community based organizations are key features for planning, implementation and sustenance of pro-poor reforms and infrastructure investments.

### **Municipal Action Plan for Poverty Reduction**

The concept of poverty reduction in APUSP translates into three interlinked components: municipal reform, environmental infrastructure for the poor and strengthening civil society. These elements are brought together in a medium term rolling plan, the Municipal Action Plan for Poverty Reduction (MAPP). The preparation of the MAPP is a mandatory requirement of the APUSP and is seen as a key instrument in bringing about pro-poor reforms in municipalities. The MAPP is formulated within the strategy adopted by APUSP to build on existing initiatives of good governance on one hand, and work through the already set up CDS structures of the poor, on the other. The parallel civil society initiative is expected to improve the quality of participation and the poverty and vulnerability focus of the MAPP.

The MAPP process and its roll out into the 32 towns has, in itself, been a highly rewarding exercise in innovation and its diffusion. The MAPP is seen as a transparent and inclusive process that places the poor at the centre of municipal planning, and that allows consensus building on difficult issues like increase in taxes.

In four years of project implementation, participatory planning has already been accepted by the participating municipalities. The advantages are clearly seen by all, including the State Government, which has made a policy decision to adopt the MAPP process across all the 106 municipalities.

In the process people of the town, representing different and diverse interest groups are invited by the municipality to participate in the preparation of the MAPP. They include elected representatives from all parties, municipal officers and staff, poor women representing Neighborhood Committees (NHCs), residents welfare associations, trade associations, NGOs, professional bodies, chambers of commerce, government departments and others. All these people go through a series of guided workshops and working sessions, in which they work together to:

- Articulate a shared vision for the town
- Identify the nature of problems related to living conditions of the poor and other citizens
- Analyse strengths and weaknesses of the municipality to address problems and perform effectively
- Agree on priority poor settlements for improvement and priority municipal performance improvement measures
- Prepare an action plan for the medium term specifying actions, locations, responsibilities, costs, resource requirements, including requirement for external financial and professional support

The MAPP guidelines have been prepared and tested by a team of state government officials and consultants in consultation with municipalities. They support municipalities to go through a cyclic process. This process takes advantage of the federated structure of women's groups already existing in the towns to involve poor women in shared roles at critical decision-making stages. Table-1 summarises the stages in the preparation of the Basic MAPP document, the starting point of MAPP cycles and the positioning of poor women in the process:

Table 1: Basic MAPP preparation process

Stage	Process	Participants	Key outputs/decisions
1. Getting started	Municipality introduces APUSP, MAPP, Municipal Reforms Committee (MRC) & Municipal task force (MTF) <sup>2</sup> in open meeting	> 200; municipal staff, elected representatives, range of stakeholders including RCVs, NHC convenors and CDS	1. Date for problem identification workshop 2. Awareness 3. CDS President in MRC
2. Problem Identification	a. One-day Workshop using participatory techniques, particularly working in mixed groups	60-100; municipal staff, elected representatives, range of stakeholders including RCVs, NHC convenors and CDS	1. Vision statement 2. Key problems impacting on poor 3. Key municipal performance issues 4. Formation of Working Groups
	b. Working Group 1 on Municipal Performance Improvement uses SWOT analysis to identify performance issues and reform measures	Municipal Commissioner; heads of Municipal departments, councilors, representatives of civil society organizations	1. Objectives for municipal performance improvement 2. List of proposals for consideration of Strategy Workshop
	c. Working Group 2 on Poverty and Infrastructure Deficiency uses poverty and infrastructure deficiency matrix to rank poor settlements	Mayor/ Municipal Chairperson, Municipal Engineer, Community Development Officer, representatives of Councilors, HNCs and NGOs	Poor settlements ranked in order of poverty and infrastructure deficiency
3. Strategy formulation	Two-day Workshop using participatory techniques, particularly working in mixed groups	60-100; municipal staff, elected representatives, range of stakeholders including RCVs, NHC convenors and CDS	Agreement on municipal performance measures; agreement on priority poor settlements for infrastructure improvements
4. Proposals for Municipal Performance Improvement	4-5 weeks preparation of performance improvement proposals for institutional development, revenue	MTF with reference to Working Group 1.	Detailed proposals with costs, human resource and outsourcing implications and time frame.

<sup>2</sup> MRC and MTF are set up for MAPP. MRC is headed by the Mayor/ Municipal Chairperson and gives policy and strategic direction. The CDS President and secretary are members. MTF is headed by Municipal Commissioner and oversees the day to day task of MAPP preparation and implementation.

	improvement and capacity building		
5. Proposals for Environmental Infrastructure Improvement	a. Micro-planning in priority poor settlements using participatory problem identification and mapping and technical feasibility checks.	Lead role of NHC Convenors and RCVs, supported by multi-disciplinary field team of municipality, NGOs, grass-roots govt. workers, local Councilor	1. Participatory settlement micro-plan showing status of existing infrastructure and improvement proposals 2. Technical feasibility of in-settlement and linking infrastructure. 3. Agreed Settlement Plan for Environmental Infrastructure
	b. Preparation of Sub-project proposals based on Settlement Plan for Environmental Infrastructure	Municipal Engineers in consultation with NHCs, RCVs and Community Organisers	Detailed proposals for in-settlement and linked infrastructure with costs, human resource and outsourcing implications and time frame.
6. MAPP Document Preparation and approval	Consolidated MAPP document with proposals for DFID funding and other initiatives	MTF responsible for document preparation, MRC for ratification and Municipal Council for approval and request to state government for appraisal.	MAPP Document

Source: APUSP, Basic MAPP Guidelines

By its well defined and simple participatory planning mechanisms the MAPP makes it possible for municipalities to engage purposefully with poor communities at both town and settlement levels. Commonly used tools and techniques have been made simple and adapted for the MAPP process to assist municipalities to analyse their own situation and prepare their action plans. The requirement for collective and transparent decision making at different stages of the MAPP process ensure cooperation and lead to consensus building, no matter how much opinions vary. The analytical tools help to support this decision making process.

Poor communities are represented by women, who were already familiar with the rudiments of participation, but only in their neighborhoods. They could easily graduate to Micro-planning in the MAPP and working with the field staff of the municipality with short initial training. However, the transition from the slum to the town hall and sharing a platform with the mayor, councilors, municipal officers and other civil society representatives was a completely new experience.

An introspective study of the first round of MAPP preparation showed that many of the women were initially intimidated but the participatory tools were seen to be quite useful in stimulating interaction, particularly because they demonstrated that only articulated demands will be met. In recalling the participatory process, most interviewed women gave greatest value to being able to sit with “big people” and discuss problems to which they actually responded (Dove, 2003).

In the same introspection municipal staff and elected representatives appreciated the ease with which they could consult with “poor women from slums” and learn lessons from them because of the clear guidelines. On the other hand, others complained about the time consuming process. Clearly, allowing civil society, particularly poor women, into decision-making on civic investment proved to be a simpler task because of the guidelines. Even middle class civil society representatives found that they could support and amplify the demands of the poor. In short, the MAPP methodology is seen as a useful starting point for building diverse efforts and multiple

voices in favour of the poor. It is expected that repeated cycles and State Government acceptance of the methodology will institutionalize and sustain it beyond DFID support.

## **Capacity Building**

The importance of strengthening municipalities through various means to work with poor women cannot be overstressed. Municipalities play a dual role of first, strengthening poor communities to participate in making their demands and be involved in strategic planning processes, and second, responding to these demands effectively. For this reason training, appropriate institutional practices and adequate staff strength are seen as essential components of the reform process in APUSP.

The MAPP process itself is a capacity building measure and gives all stakeholders equal opportunity to participate and also makes the municipality accountable. In addition, specific training programmes are included as individual MAPP proposals for improving the skill and knowledge base of municipal staff and community groups and orienting councilors to reforms.

The APUSP Team conducts interactive workshops to familiarize senior elected and executive functionaries of the municipalities with the guidelines and processes, and to build their capacity to undertake the preparation of their MAPPs. The first cycle of MAPP workshops were heavily supported by the Municipal Strengthening Unit (MSU) at State Government level, which also conduct field based training programmes for micro-planning and are often called in to support the working of different committees. Some municipalities have shown that they are capable of taking over the process right from the beginning, while others have needed substantial assistance. A group of experienced consultants were initially available to give professional support to the project team for developing guidelines and rolling out MAPPs.

The MAPP process has institutionalized multi-disciplinary working in the municipality. However, the efforts need improvement in subsequent cycles of the MAPP. Municipal Micro Planning Teams, for instance, consist of engineering, sanitation and revenue staff, who is not used to working with communities. The brief orientation to micro planning is not sufficient to promote the skills and attitudes required to work with poor communities.

A major capacity building activity would be to develop skills and attitudes of staff, particularly engineers, for working with the poor. Micro planning, contract management, operation and maintenance of infrastructure all require engineers to work with community groups. This is seen as an important part of the municipal performance improvement activity in terms of being able to address the demands of the poor. The other is the training of elected representatives to be more responsive to poor communities. But these efforts do not address the inherent limitations in the municipal staffing structure for strengthening the demand-making capacity of the poor.

Experience from the Basic MAPPs shows that representing their communities is a new experience for many of the RCVs. They are not even fully aware of their general roles and responsibilities. The brief training on micro planning is not enough of a basis for effective participation. There is also a concern about “missing” RCVs, or the insufficient build up of the lowest tier of the CDS structure (APUSP, 2000). This has affected the quality of the micro-planning process in the first round of MAPP. The MAPP process itself has also made municipalities realise this limitation and thirteen of them have included poverty studies and capacity building of NHCs as part of their reform proposals

One of the measures recommended in the APUSP project proposal was the immediate requirement for recruiting community developers, who were present in only eight of the 32 municipalities (DFID, 2000). A ban on staff recruitment resulting from the World Bank's Administrative Restructuring Programme made this a difficult matter, which could be resolved only three years after project start up. Induction of community development staff has helped to improve the quality of community participation and, to some extent, stimulated the engagement of other civil society groups as well. It has also facilitated convergence with other government and NGO programmes. Project funds support community development staff at present. It is assumed that they will be continued after the project period, as higher revenues generated by financial reform will meet expenditure towards their salaries. That, of course, may not happen in all towns, making it a challenge for municipalities to look for other means. The importance of strengthening municipalities for working with poor women for their voices to be heard through various means cannot be overstressed. For this reason training, appropriate institutional practices and adequate staff strength are seen as essential components of the reform process in APUSP.

### **Accountable and transparent municipality**

The MAPP methodology has inbuilt elements of transparency and accountability during the planning and implementation stages. The CDS structures are also involved in activities such as field appraisal of the MAPP proposals and progress monitoring. The appraisal indicators give sufficient weight to the quality of participation and responsiveness of proposals to expressed priorities.

The first round of MAPP clearly threw up the need for strengthening appropriate communication and information tools particularly with poor women in mind as partners and consumers of municipal services. Unexpectedly, the MAPP process has opened up the municipality to citizens even beyond MAPP preparation, and has given practical shape to existing instruments such as the Citizens' Charter, thus strengthening the voice of the poor with support from other civil society groups. In this connection civil society groups in some towns are doing commendable work in demystifying and popularising the Citizens' Charters, which all municipalities have, but about which the poor have practically no knowledge, leave alone demanding services based on the Charter.

MAPPs of some towns have included proposals to build on and expand the activities of the present Citizens' Service Centres, set up in all municipalities to include information services on municipal and government programmes for the poor. It is realized that poor women, with low levels of literacy and mobility require means other than computerization of information and communication services in the conventional sense. Also, at the other end, the ability of poor women to access municipal services through information technology can be built up by linking it to existing functional literacy programmes.

### **In conclusion**

The APUSP project is a good basis for sowing the seeds of change towards municipalities that include and listen to the voices of poor women in planning and decision-making. This is by including them actively in planning and responding to their expressed priorities. The investment

on infrastructure improvement forms the starting point for immediate municipal performance improvement in terms of working with the poor, improved analysis of problems and targeting, multidisciplinary working and allocation for operation and maintenance of improved services. It remains to be seen whether or not revenue increases as a result of reform are actually used later for improving the conditions of the poor and for supporting institutional arrangements for working with them. A better informed and vibrant civil society and transparent processes may actually make that happen.

The MAPP institutionalizes and legitimizes the participation of women representatives of poor communities at strategic and grass roots level decision-making processes, and establishes a link between the different levels. Transparent processes and opening up of opportunities for participation of a wide range of stakeholders is already beginning to have spin off effects in terms of creating a town-wide constituency for the poor. This will be taken further through civil society partnerships and networks.

The functional and purposeful approach to participation in the MAPP needs to be supported by an awareness of rights and responsibilities and empowerment strategies through the civil society component of APUSP for medium and long-term benefits.

The analytical and rolling nature of the MAPP allows weaknesses in the areas of service delivery and working with the poor to either be addressed as part of the reforms component or to be taken up in the next MAPP cycle (e.g. improving data on poor settlements, improving the CDS representative structure).

APUSP virtually places the municipality in the position of a 'mother institution' for poverty reduction. Not only is it expected to imbibe responsive procedures towards delivery of services for the poor and their sustenance, but also be involved in the parallel civil society initiatives. This brings into focus the importance of municipal reform and performance improvement and links up directly with the policy perspective of the Government of decentralization and municipal responsibility for poverty alleviation. It is for this reason that municipal capacity building is high on the agenda of APUSP.

The APUSP project principles, its multi-pronged approach, and the down to earth mechanism of the MAPP to translate these in the context of each municipality create a highly conducive environment for building in the voices of poor women in municipal planning in a sustainable way. In the words of the Secretary of the local Chamber of Commerce of one of the towns and an active participant in the MAPP preparation process, "A dialogue has been started between the municipality and citizens, which is quite different from the blame game we are used to. Well off people and the poor are given an opportunity to form a partnership with the municipality. That is the beginning of reform".

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