

Reflections on the access of the poor to decision making over urban planning

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“The rule of law does not do away with the unequal distribution of wealth and power, but reinforces that inequality with the authority of law. It allocates wealth and poverty...in such complicated and indirect ways as to leave the victim bewildered” Howard Zinn

Reflection on the access of the poor to the decision making process can be advanced from three different angles; the barriers the poor face, the different ways in which they have succeeded in spite of these barriers and the role of the administration and the political leaders.

The poor face many barriers when trying to have an impact on decision making in cities; it is a question of the relations of power in societies. To be far from the centre of decisions, to lack the resources necessary to influence decisions is nearly a definition of poverty. Most often the local governments do not make any realistic effort to encourage the poor to gain access to power. Equality before the law is not guaranteed. Most societies include forms of discrimination against the poor, the marginalized, those excluded for reasons of race, religion, ethnic group, caste, or socio-cultural status. This discrimination keeps the poor from developing a power base. Two of the eight aspects of poverty developed by David Satterthwaite and the IIED, are *“Inadequate protection of poorer groups rights through operation of the law”* and *“Poorer groups voicelessness and powerlessness within political systems and bureaucratic structures”*. (Satterthwaite. 2004)¹

There are a multitude of ways in which the powerful dominate the poor and their spokesmen, appeasing them, manipulating them or ignoring them completely. The poor by definition are those who lack not only financial resources but the status that gives them access to the decision making process, to the protection of the law and to the techniques of communication that would make them credible and allow them to deal on an equal footing with the decision makers. Access to decision making requires a certain amount of political clout and credibility which is exactly what they lack. To wield political clout involves both having contacts with the powerful and having a certain type of knowledge: how the political system works, who makes the decisions and where they are made. Not only do the poor lack these, but it is also very often the case that those with the power are very reluctant to give up what decision making power they have to anyone, and especially to the poor. At best the decision makers believe that they know what is best for the poor and do not give up their prerogatives because they feel they are doing the right thing and at worst they are using their power over decision making to enrich themselves or to obtain more power over others. In any case as some observers put it, “Policy makers are not used to involving communities in their processes and communities are not practiced in working with policy makers.” Gloekner, Mkanga and Ndezi, 2004.

When the poor do manage to organize large numbers to create a political base and they are usually considered a threat and either crushed or manipulated so that their action

does not upset the status quo. The laws of the country are used against them not to protect them. Thus it is hardly surprising that the poor have little or no access to decision making.

When it comes to urban space and housing, the stakes are exceptionally high. For city authorities, developers and their planners control over urban space and housing is an important element of their power and a major source of enrichment. It is often the case that politicians do not believe it is in their interest to help the poor or that they have any obligation to the poor. A typical reaction is that of the prime minister of Dominica, a small island in the Caribbean, who told me it was not the role of the government to help house the poor. But her government was, in fact, helping the not so poor, its clients, to be housed.

My experience in Ho-Chi-Minh City also indicates that city authorities are often more interested in developing commercial areas and expensive housing than in helping the poor. When approached concerning a project aimed at upgrading a slum area to improve the lives of the poor population, the local officials came up with a counter proposal which consisted in simply removing the low income population in order to build a large road for commercial development. Then two years later, once the community oriented upgrading project was completed and the facilitators had left, the local people's committee immediately shut down the evening school program for children unable to go to the regular school and took control of the micro credit program giving the community no voice in these matters.

A well documented example of how power hierarchies dominate decision making concerning housing on a larger scale can be found in a work on a slum in Madras "Policy, Politics and the Urban Poor", by Joop W. de Wit 1996 . This book documents the lack of access of poor people to decision making concerning the relocation of their slum. It shows how the political party heads take over the role of leadership and create division among the slum dwellers , how they use the poor as vote banks, buying the votes very cheaply, how they act as brokers between the state agencies and the poor but obtain little for them and keep them in a state of dependency. This exemplifies one of the major barriers to access of the poor to decision making. Lacking their own leaders who feel competent to communicate with authorities, they are represented by others who do not necessarily share the same goals.

Very often slums and shanty towns are considered to be cancers in the flesh of the city that must be gotten rid of; the inhabitants of these slums are thought to be the cause of this malignancy and the most efficient treatment cutting them out by strong armed evictions.

Equality before the law is not guaranteed for the poor. Even where the laws are pro-poor and against eviction it happens that courts allow evictions. For this reason many housing activists are convinced that the legal system cannot help them. At a brainstorming session on evictions held at the IIED office in October 2002 for a gathering of senior community leaders, housing specialists, NGOs, and government officials the following comments were made. (ACHR, p.23)

- *“We have a formal written policy of non-eviction in Nairobi, but there are clearly evictions going on – very big ones. So the work of preventing eviction and creating secure housing for people in our cities is not about written law; its constantly about changing the power politics. And that comes from the practices and the customs in development on the ground and the rules that we make our selves.” Jane Weru; Pamoja Trust, Kenya.*
- *“In many of our cities eviction problems come from problems of power – from the huge differences in power between the state and the people on the ground. When we emphasize laws in solving these problems, we are emphasizing the same group of people who hold power. The power of the poor as scattered families or scattered communities is very weak. But the power of broadly linked community groups is strong enough that they have a stronger position in the negotiation – as a group. When people link together this way – and especially when they link through concrete development activities- it is a way of adjusting that power. And this is what makes change.” Somsook Boonyabancha; CODI, Thailand.*
- *“The legal process can be very powerful at the intellectual and conceptual level, but a lot of us who are working on the ground have realized that ultimately it does very little for the lives of the people that we are having all this discussion for. At the end of the day those poor people’s houses are still being demolished, their belongings still being confiscated, their jobs still being lost, their lives still being turned upside down. . . . The real crisis in this situation is that even if all this hot air leads to some policy or other, it never gets enacted. I think that where we have failed in the last 25 years . . . is that there isn’t a strong parallel ground swell which is being empowered to challenge this process and say, ‘The city belongs to us as much as it belongs to you’.” Sheela Patel, SPARK, India.*
- *“I think that those customs and practices which lead to alternatives to evictions change only when the power relationships in the cities change. As long as those power relationships are unequal, those customs and practices will not change. Legal and institutional arrangements are important but its also important to find ways to support and promote the building of networks of community organizations who play a role around proactive strategies to avoid evictions and by creating a much stronger constituency of people’s organizations at the global level who are able to articulate their own strategies for dealing with forced evictions. And to create opportunities for those groups to share their knowledge and experience together.” Joel Bolnick, People’s Dialogue, South Africa.*

These four voices from strong movements in the south all concur on two points: Legal rights and access to the courts is not often effective. On the other hand building up a power base is the most important way to have poor peoples voices heard. “Changing power politics”, “strong broadly linked community groups linked through concrete development activities”, “a strong parallel grass roots ground swell” “strong constituencies of people’s organizations” these expressions refer to empowering the poor communities.

Another type of barrier can be caused by the attitude “we know better” . Whether by members of government or international or local NGOs, doing things for people rather than with them prevents the poor from expressing their own views. There is a good example of this sort of attitude in a government program in Jamaica . A project called PRIDE, which sought to help low income squatters acquire land for housing, was planned with the intention of having the program be directed by the communities themselves. The households had to save money to contribute to a community infrastructure fund which the community organisation was then to run. This project had a grant for \$270,000 from the IDB . An official account based on field research and the opinions of the beneficiaries

reports that Operation Pride has deviated from its stated policy of mobilizing communities to make the decisions on the infrastructure upgrading. The staff of PRIDE made the decisions in the place of the community and excluded them from the selection of professionals who prepare the plans and the contractors who implement them and in many other of the important decisions concerning the upgrading process. This attitude is an example of bureaucratic paternalism when government agents “*alone know best when designing and delivering policies and services*”. As a result “*most PRIDE community organisations suffered two main setbacks that prevented them from becoming effective organisations capable of empowering their members. Not only have they been dominated by PRIDE officials, which has tended to undermine a sense of project ownership by community –organisation members, but these organisations have also generally lacked the necessary professional guidance to enhance leadership skills and promote a balance of power in favour of community organisation members.* (Tindigarukayo 2004, p207).

It is not always outsiders that prevent communities from getting their voice to be heard. It can also be indigenous people who become leaders and who learn how to get on with officialdom, to get grants and run offices and who soon lose contact with their base. An article on the transformation of an NGO in Jakarta describes just this sort of upward mobility of male community leaders and the change it brought to the NGO .

“We had started as a small grass roots project driven by the needs and capacities of local women. We became a complex, top-down, technically oriented, capital intensive bureaucracy guided by government and big international donor agencies.”

“We moved from a collective leadership strongly influenced by women and social workers to an autocratic male leadership dominated by technically oriented men. From a focus on grassroots communication and networking we had moved to an emphasis on formal office meetings, increasingly out of touch with what was happening on the ground.” (Lea Jellinek, 2003,p. 179)

However, in spite of the barriers it does happen that the poor succeed in getting access to decision making, or are able to influence decisions in urban planning. There are a variety of circumstances in which the poor have overcome these handicaps, have developed political clout and have had an impact. Some have been gained by conflict, others by some sort of co-operation with the authorities but all have necessitated the determined organisation of large numbers. There are many different approaches to empowering the poor depending on the socio-cultural background.

One method used in a context in which the poor have never been listened to has been to have the community members be the ones who collect the data and analyse the situation. An example this can be seen in the study of Water Aid in Dar es Salaam, a this city which has a continuing water and sanitation crisis; one aspect of the study was a programme of community mapping in which the local people were helped to map out their own community. This is a technique that has been successfully applied in Asia and Africa for development planning and for community mobilising and empowerment. It is not only a useful tool for those providing infrastructure but it is a great step towards empowerment and giving poor people access to the decision making process.. “*This participatory process helps to uncover issues particular to a given settlement that residents are struggling to develop. By collecting information of their settlement, community members come to understand their situation better and can conceptualise a process of change within it..*” Other than providing data the community mapping helped to: “*To build the capacity of local organisations to influence decision-making processes*”. and “*to use the data collected to establish links between the micro level and the macro level.* (Glockner, Mkanga & Ndezi, 2004 P 187-188).

The history of the Giraudel-Eggleston Reconstruction Committee in the Commonwealth of Dominica shows that not only poor people can get things done, but when they do - in this case rebuild housing - they can do a better job than the authorities. Their action occurred after their villages had been severely damaged by a hurricane. It took a few local people who had the necessary contacts and some sensible ideas for this project to succeed. The reconstruction of houses blown down by a cyclone was organised and managed by local poor people whose houses had been destroyed or damaged. The local priest was instrumental in finding an NGO to make a grant that was used as a revolving fund to buy the building material. The local committee drew up the plans for the reconstruction of the houses with the owners. Nearly all the construction was done by collective self-help under the direction of a few of the skilled builders in the community who volunteered some time and got some pay. The role of the government was to offer free transport of the building materials. This project was one of the very few on that island that succeeded in helping the extremely low income families. As the local people initiated the project and took responsibility for it, they were able to judge how much they could afford. They were also able to organise the community participation successfully. In comparison to what the government was doing they were way ahead. They were able to reconstruct one third of the homes in the area whereas the government was barely able to provide 200 new houses for the whole island of 80,000,000. (Coit, 1988). Furthermore, their houses were much cheaper than those built by the government. These poor villagers were able to carry off their action as they had the support of a few local people of a certain status who had credibility in the eyes of the government. They were well organised and pulled together on the project and were able to obtain financial support from an outside source .

One of the best known examples of poor people influencing decision making is that of the Mahila Milan, the pavement dwellers of Mumbai who have been at the root of an important movement, (D’Cruz pp. 10-12). It all began with the actions of some women pavement dwellers of the streets of Mumbai. When confronted with a court order to demolish their homes, rather than to prepare for confrontation, which is the usual reaction, this group of women chose to look for a solution that would not arouse the hostility of the municipality. With the help of SPARC , (an NGO created in 1984 by professionals social workers concerned with urban poverty in Mumbai,) they first conducted a survey of pavement slum dwellers in the E ward which was published in a document called *We The Invisible* that caught the attention of the authorities. In this report they proposed that the government of Maharashtra and the Central government participate with them in finding a solution. They formed the association called Mahila Milan (women together) at this time and it rapidly gathered in numbers and influence. The next steps were to inventory all the vacant land, to talk to banks to find out why they couldn’t get loans to make savings of their own and to draw up designs for cheap housing. The municipality began to listen to them. The idea was that:

- “ The state provide land free or at subsidised costs,
- the Municipal Corporation provide off site infrastructure like it does to all its citizens,
- communities design (build)and manage their settlements spearheaded by the women, who having built their capacity to manage savings, create an information base and supervise construction.” (D’Cruz, 2002 p.2)

This strategy of compromise by the community was supported by the NGO, SPARC, that did not speak **for** the community but helped them create a dialogue and to get results. One result has been that in 1995 the government of Maharashtra enacted the “Slum Rehabilitation Act” . The core group of women of Mahila Milan obtained a piece of land to build on , and there is now a policy for the relocation of the 20,000 pavement dwellers households covered by the census of Mahila Milani. This co-operation came about because of the way the slum dwellers were able to focus on common ground with the city ; they were able to get a favourable public opinion in other parts of the city, they were able to show the city that the urban poor had capabilities and skills useful to the city. In 1995 they joined with a third organisation, the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and the 3 groups formed a network called the **Alliance**. This helped them form a critical mass able to create momentum. They created other Mahila Milan all over the city with slum and pavement dwellers and then sent teams to other cities to create more Mahila Milan . The major innovative elements of the practices of Mahila Milan and the Alliance which have allowed them to develop the political clout necessary to be able to dialogue with the authorities are :

- their willingness to negotiate with whoever is in power,
- their commitment to methods of organisation and mobilisation that build on the knowledge and the capacity of the poor, (“the poor are the best drivers of shared solutions”);
- the importance of the savings of the poor themselves. This is fundamental not only for the revenues which give them their own collateral but in that the women must show a certain discipline and pull together in a savings group . (D’Cruz, 2002 pp10-12).

As well as promoting individual savings and self-help construction of housing they support the building and managing of urban services and environmental upgrading by the local communities . For instance in many neighbourhoods of Mumbai and other cities, the Alliance has been able to obtain the funding and the support from the municipalities for the community construction and management of badly needed public toilets. The Alliance gains credibility and prestige as these commodities, when managed locally, are usually much more efficient.

News of the actions and tactics of Mahala Milan and the Alliance have been communicated to other countries and continents via the network of federations of slum or shanty dwellers (SDI)of which The Alliance was one of the founding members. One of their more successful ways of communicating their strategies and tactics and training communities in these methods has been via grass roots exchanges of SDI members. Contact between grass roots groups of slum or shack dwellers has proved to be a very effective way of mobilising communities that have not previously been active. The Zimbabwe Homeless People’s Federation, for instance is the result of a visit made there by the South Africans People’s Federation. After regular contacts between these groups for more groups were formed in Zimbabwe. At first most of the local governments in Zimbabwe had not listened to these groups. However, the international exchanges as well as the funds that were saved in the groups lent them legitimacy and caused the authorities to change their attitude . The savings schemes had 20,000 members by 2002 (Chitekwe and Mitlin pp 85 – 102..) Whereas until 2001 it was very difficult for the poor to obtain local access to land, recently, under pressure from the Homeless Peoples

Federation, city councillors have begun to re-examine their politics for the urban poor. Nine local authorities have committed themselves to releasing municipal land for the poor and seven have released plots. SDI is important not only for the promotion of grass roots exchanges but also for the international support it gives to local actions adding credibility to the actions and thus enhancing the “ rapport de force”

If these different poor communities have had access to decision making it is because they have been able to create a more equal relation of power between grass roots groups and the administration. Their power is based on their having been able to develop:

- a “critical mass” , that is large numbers
- co-operation and common goals among the community groups (that is “pulling together”)
- the support of public opinion, sometimes international public opinion
- talented indigenous leaders who remain faithful to their communities.
- professionals or activists willing to help the communities to have a voice rather than speaking **for** them.
- their ability to build up individual and community savings
- their capacity to provide useful data such as an enumeration of slum dweller or community mapping.

With these attributes the poor have a better chance that elected officials and the government agents will listen to them.

It happens, but less frequently, that programmes within the framework of local governments aimed at improving infrastructure and services for the poor do provide access for the poor to decision making. An evaluation (or to use the new vocabulary “introspection”) of the *Andhra Pradesh Urban Services for the Poor* in India indicates that poor women have been given more of a voice through a participatory process in which they were involved in “microplanning” for the infrastructure (Dove, pp. 95 – 106). Their relationship with other stake holders has begun to change. One comment from a political representative was “*In the old system, everything went according to the wishes of the councillor. In (this process) , apart from my opinion, the wishes of the people have to be taken into account*”. (Dove, p.105)

In these examples, the “rapport de force” we have discussed has been between the poor people’s organisations and the public officials with little mention of the major decision makers, the private sector, the landowners, developers and bankers. The owners of urban land and real estate and the suppliers of urban services and finance have the greatest control over urban space. Much of the decision making power is in their hands. However, it is not usual for the poor to deal directly with them; the government is needed to mediate between the In these examples, the “rapport de force” we have discussed has been between the poor people’s organisations and the public officials with little mention of the major decision makers, the private sector, the landowners, developers and bankers. The owners of urban land poor and these decision makers. Government has thus a key role to play enabling the poor if they are to have access to decision making; the difficulty is in forcing it to play this role. As we have seen, legislation protecting the poor is of little or no use if it is not enforced. For poor peoples’ organisations, developing political clout is the best way to get governments to enforce pro-poor programmes and actions. The minimum one should be able to expect

of governments is to provide for the poor the same rights as for other people and to prevent anti-poor private sector actions such as evictions without decent appropriate relocation. At best governments can be a major factor in supporting poor community groups by providing land, or tenure on land, low cost services, infrastructure and loan. Their role should be an enabling one, allowing access decision making not one of doing things for the poor. To have access to decision making the poor need their rights to be defended, credibility and encouragement.

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