



Successful tools and methods that can support grassroots-led development in urban areas: Building a federation of the urban poor in Uganda

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ABSTRACT:

In many countries today, there is evidence that grassroots-led approaches in urban development have the capacity to achieve significant improvements in the lives of the urban poor and the institutionalisation of social justice in urban affairs. This suggests a need to engage with and support representative organisations of the urban poor that seek to work in partnership with the government towards achieving such goals. Yet such type of support appears to call for a different type of approach from what most development actors are used to providing.

The paper will draw on the experience of implementing Shack/Slum Dwellers International approach to grassroots-led urban poverty alleviation and slum upgrading in Uganda. It describes the specific tools and methods which have successfully contributed to strengthening representative organisations of the urban poor in the urban development process, the conditions and requirements they demand, and the challenges they can bring.

These tools highlight the importance of recognising the grassroots as the first agent of their development in their effort to mobilise and organise within and between communities, build on their capacities, and negotiate a political space to secure developmental benefits in urban development. The role of support organisation on the ground is also an important one. It plays a catalytic function to assist the grassroots claim their own economic, social and political rights. Supporting grassroots-led urban development is a continuous learning process which evolves at the pace of social processes and the changes in relations with the government authorities to bring sustainable improvement in the social justice of urban affairs.

PAPER

In many countries today, there is evidence that the community-driven approaches developed by representative organisations of the urban poor have the capacity to achieve significant improvements in the lives of the urban poor in ways that best respond to their needs and priorities. This has important implications for the development agencies which are committed to reducing urban poverty and meeting the Millennium Development targets; it suggests a need to engage with and support the grassroots organisations that seek to bring institutional changes towards improved social justice in urban affairs. Yet such support would need to be different from what most development agencies are used to providing. The experience of Shack/Slum Dwellers International and its affiliate organisation in developing community-driven slum upgrading solutions in Uganda provide an interesting insight of the tools and methods that can effectively support grassroots-led urban development processes.

The development of slums and urban poverty often accompanies the rapid urbanisation process of most countries, and Uganda, with an estimated urban growth rate of 5.1%, is not exceptional. While detailed data on urban poverty in Uganda may not be available, it is estimated that between 60% and 70% of residents in urban areas stay in unplanned settlements which can be considered as slums. Past slum upgrading experience in Uganda have emphasized the need for long-term planned slum upgrading initiatives that are able to account for the socio-economic conditions of the slum dwellers communities, and for the important role that these communities can play in working out solutions to the problems of slums and urban poverty.

A new counter strategy to the issue of slums development and urban poverty was developed in 2003 when an international social movement of the urban poor, Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) linked up with the Ugandan Ministry for Housing, and started providing technical support to slum dweller communities through the sharing of important tools and rituals successfully used by slum dwellers communities in other SDI countries. They signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry and local authorities to initiate a pilot slum upgrading programme in the Kisenyi slum, Kampala. The programme was initially housed in the Ministry for Housing and underpinned by a joint working group with SDI and the Kampala Central Division Council. Yet SDI's work in Uganda was constrained by the lack of a local professional support team that could work with the slum dwellers communities on a daily basis. The NGO Actogether Uganda was set up in September 2006 to address this issue.

This paper will draw on the Ugandan experience of putting into practice the SDI tools and methods with the aim of building a strong constituency from grassroots level so that it becomes a stronger and more visible force in the urban development process; Tools which, in turn, seek to strengthen the capacities of the urban poor and their representative organizations so they can play a central role in the design and implementation of development strategies in urban areas. It will highlight the strategies that have worked in Uganda, the conditions and requirements they demand, and the challenges they can bring.

FIRST INGREDIENT: STRONG MOBILISATION AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATION AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL

At the core of grassroots-led development is a mobilised and well-organised community, which can define their needs and priorities, and tackle their problems together.

Mobilisation is about bringing people together around their common issues in a network of mutual trust and support; It is about bringing people to reflect together on how to work out solutions to their problems, in a *collective* way. It is about breeding people's confidence that together, they can bring change and find ways to improve their living conditions.

Organisation is what helps the community to structure and manage their mobilisation in a certain governance system that reflects their collective identity, aims and approach; and enables them to link together and work towards their goal. Unless this governance system is accountable to all, and all can identify him/herself in it, the mobilisation of the community will be weakened. At the same time, the governance structures must be strong and well-organised to allow for collective action, and successful achievements.

Central to the SDI approach is to encourage mobilisation and organisation among the urban poor communities through the setting up of settlement-based savings schemes. This methodology has originally been adopted from the *Indian Alliance* toolbox, and has helped build social capital in thousands of slum dweller communities around the world. More than a mechanism for meeting daily monetary needs and sharing resources among a settlement-based urban poor community, savings can help to create bonds of trust among the communities, and establish the foundation for community governance structures that can effectively address the issues affecting the community.

In Uganda, the first pilot savings schemes were set up with the help of the SDI network in a large slum in central Kampala in 2003. Less than three years later, most of the savings groups had died out and their members lost motivation and interest. Indeed, the communities adopted the savings methods under the impulsion of SDI and the Housing Ministry, expecting to benefit with better living conditions in the near future. One would save as a pre-requirement to getting one of the promised houses. As months went by and no physical improvement or benefit would come from SDI nor the ministry as they expected, the community saw in their daily savings practice no other purpose than filling the progress reports of the ministry's officials and most chose to withdraw their money from the group's account. Worse even, many members soon realised they had lost their savings to the hands of a happy few collectors, and this triggered numerous quarrels and divisions among the community. The daily savings practice established by SDI failed to take root at first because people saw it more as a means to benefiting from a certain donor-funded project, than as a method which can help them improve their daily lives and living conditions. Indeed, most members already save in other savings groups within their settlement, especially women who take part in *gift circles*¹. What the experience in Uganda has shown is that the methodology of daily savings cannot build social capital *per se* unless the community is mobilised and confident enough so they can understand it as a response to their needs. Moreover, daily savings actually contributes to disorganising and dividing the community if people are not empowered and encouraged to learn to set up their own organisational structures which enable them to manage their savings together.

Daily, continuous, long-term guidance is essential for savings schemes to be a truly effective tool that can support the mobilisation and organisation of the community. When savings are imported as a mobilisation tool into urban poor communities, it is important to introduce it as a means that can help them to help themselves. It requires an effort to listen to the grassroots' needs and

¹ Gift circle is a common practice in Uganda as in most African communities. Generally, a group of 5 to 15 members (often women) contribute their savings to the gift circle once every week or month. The money collected is given to one of the member to buy him/herself a gift, each member benefiting on a rotative basis.

problems, in their own context, and to understand with them, how undertaking daily savings in their community could bring improvements in their lives. This takes more than a visit. The communities are not easily convinced and will expect quick outcomes. Setting the organisational structures for their daily savings demands from them a certain level of commitment, and they are bound to go through many mistakes and setbacks before they can set up the right governance structures that best fit to their needs and profile.

The Ugandan example has shown that daily savings proves to be, in many aspects, an effective tool to build social capital among the urban poor, when communities are understood, followed, encouraged and supported on a continuous basis throughout their mobilisation and organisation process. The creation of a support organisation, which is based on the ground and engaged in daily community support activities, helped the Ugandan slum dwellers to understand the system of savings and the meaning of bringing people together. Those groups which had been founded by SDI and the Ministry gradually re-designed their savings schemes by drawing lessons from their past mistakes. New savings groups were initiated in other slum areas in Kampala and Jinja, supported by the older savings groups and the support NGO. In less than six month time, these new groups had set up their own organisational rules and structures and had saved as much money as the older groups had in the past four years. As the word spreads, new groups now decide to undertake daily savings in their settlement spontaneously around Kampala and Jinja.

“Collecting money, collecting people”²

In all the groups, savings are collected daily or weekly and banked in common bank accounts. The door-to-door collection of savings is a strong tool for collecting information among the community members and building social bonds across the pre-existing community networks. In Kisenyi II, the savers were reluctant to open their group to the Somalis community, on the ground that they were short-term squatters who had no real interest in the development of the neighbourhood. During the enumeration exercise, savers went knocking on different doors within their settlement and started talking about their savings. Gradually, Somalis, Congolese and other Ugandan ethnic minorities were encouraged to participate to meetings and joined the savings group. Because of the language barriers, the group decided to choose collectors who could speak French, Kiswahili or Somali. This has greatly improved links of mutual trust between the different communities of Kisenyi II. Long-term residents better understand the issues and concerns of the migrant communities, who, in turn, feel better integrated in the slum settlement.

The culture of savings

Members can save for building a house, securing tenure, implementing a development project in to improve their living environment, or for their own individual purposes. The urban poor in Uganda have difficult access to cheap credit. As members of a savings group, they can receive financial support from their fellow members in the form of a welfare grant or a small loan, which they are able to pay back at a low and flexible rate. Every savings group has its own profile and character. Those in market areas will be very keen on issuing small loans for their members to boost their commerce. In residential area, the women will use their savings to support each other in case of crisis, to pay school fees, or for consumption or income-generating purposes.

Through savings, communities learn the basics of financial management and accountability. Before the NGO was created, there were numerous cases of misuse of funds and poor systems

² A common saying among the slum dwellers federations

of accountability to members. This also prevented the information and knowledge to be spread among the savers. With the help of the NGO, the Ugandan savers learnt how to put up the right mechanism that can ensure accountability and transparency within their group. The result was eminent: not only the number of savers doubled after the first audit reports were released in Kisenyi, but savers renewed their involvement in the savings schemes, with a better understanding of their own rules and mechanisms.

PUTTING THE EMPHASIS ON WOMEN

A frequently heard story whenever SDI tries to initiate savings in any new community is of past leaders running away with the money. This was also experienced by the savings groups initially set up by SDI in 2003 . The schemes quickly evolved to resemble other local male-dominated neighbourhood associations, with the major function of furthering the incomes and/or political ambitions of the local leaders: All decisions and information rested in a core team of leaders at best, or in the hands of one parish leader who used the privilege of direct relations with the Housing Ministry to his/her own benefit. For the new NGO, stepping into this preset web of power relations and vested interests around the SDI initiative was the first major challenge. In its attempt to initiate dialogue with the slum dwellers, it had to face much opposition from local leaders and the Ministry. This created confusion in the community and people were reluctant to participate or even come to meetings.

A successful strategy was to support the women to resume the savings collection and gradually take on the management responsibilities linked to the savings. For example, the NGO encouraged poor women to join the audit team. At first, most leaders refused to leave them the task, yet as they quickly realised the work was long, tedious and voluntary-based, they quickly lost interest and the women started learning the financial mechanisms and their linked responsibilities. The power of information was back into their hands. As time went by the savings started flourishing again and the scheme gained momentum in the settlement, the local leaders came back to join and guide the scheme into a wider network of shared responsibilities within the community.

OPENING WINDOWS: COMMUNITY LEARNING AND THE BUILDING OF INFORMATION NETWORKS AMONG THE URBAN POOR

The most important vehicle for community learning and knowledge creation among SDI groups is the exchange of information, experience and skills between urban poor communities³. Community exchanges draw large numbers of people into a process of mutual learning and change, something a single NGO cannot do on its own. Exchanges between slum dwellers communities take place at city level, between cities, and across countries and regions. Communities discuss their issues, share their ideas and past experiences through series of visits, meetings and discussions that offer opportunities for collective reflection on slum development issues and ways of coping with them.

³ Patel Sheela and Mitlin Diana (2004) "The Work of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan" in Mitlin Diana and Satterthwaite David (eds) *Empowering Squatter Citizen; the Roles of Local Governments and Civil Society in Reducing Urban Poverty*, Earthscan Publications, London, pp 216-44

A strong mobilisation and empowerment tool

Community exchanges give the slum dwellers a chance to interact with people outside their immediate community. Exchange visits from the Kenyan, Indian and South African federations of urban poor in Uganda have played a catalyst role on the mobilisation of the Ugandan slum dwellers. It has brought them the confidence that they, too, can develop solutions to improve their living conditions. Visits from the members of the Kenyan federation (*Muungano*), which have been the most regular, have greatly encouraged Ugandans to understand savings as a self-help tool, which can help them organise and bring changes. Ugandans who went for exchange in Kenya brought back much enthusiasm, success stories, slogans, and pictures of houses which were spread and discussed among their community. Many members chose to join the savings group again after hearing about slum dwellers achievements in Kenya.

Community exchanges also became the chief tool for initiating new savings groups in other slum areas of Kampala and Jinja. Most settlements visited by the older groups from Kisenyi were eager to start their own savings and come to Kisenyi to learn more about their visitors' experience.

An essential learning tool

Peer-to-peer learning is the most effective learning tool for communities. They meet and discuss the issues they face together, and contrast their differences. Exchanges provide the communities with information through a different channel than externally driven participatory approach. This knowledge is then used by the groups to better define their needs and priorities, as slum dwellers, and to determine choices within their local community.

All visits are designed and constructed according to the learning needs of both the host community and the visiting community. For instance, as one community goes to visit another slum settlement and teaches them skills in auditing and loans, they discover another type of community organisation that makes them reflect on their own. At their return, they discuss their visit with their fellow members and think of how they can boost their own savings and organise their meetings in a more ordered fashion. A curriculum based on each community's experience and learning needs is created and spread again to other communities⁴. Such focus on local learning and community knowledge enables knowledge within each community to consolidate so that activities reflect local knowledge and local commitment.

On a wider scale, bringing together communities through horizontal exchanges ensures that more than a small number of communities can benefit from their experience. The construction methods and skills learnt in Kenya and Malawi are shared in less experienced countries like Uganda and Tanzania, to prepare other slum communities to undertake pilot projects and manage their associated risks. Exchanges are also a great learning tool for the NGO professionals and government officials who are regularly invited to participate.

Building networks between local groups

Community exchanges are also the experiential means by which local groups are linked together into a federation. Through visits local groups lose their isolation and gain their solidarity. It helped slum dwellers in Uganda to create strong personalized bonds between communities, locating the basis of federating within the members of savings schemes themselves, rather than

⁴ See SDI website: www.sdinet.org

making it exclusive to the leadership. On an international scale, regular exchanges between the Kenyan, Tanzanian and Ugandan federation members have nurtured a sense of belonging to a regional movement across countries. Ugandans participated to housing construction and enumeration exercises in Kenya. They went to Dar-Es-Salaam to support the Tanzanian federation to develop a counter strategy against the eviction of thousands of squatter families next to the industrial port. At their return to Kampala, the groups decided to launch an enumeration exercise in Kisenyi and engage the national government in negotiating the resettlement of families threatened by eviction and economic development. Exchanges between the three countries in the last year have strengthened the links between the savings groups to the extent that they now talk of an emerging East African federation of the urban poor.

CREATING A STRONG PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES AND SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS: “THE NGO IS OUR BEST FRIEND”

In their effort to mobilise and organise, and when talking new initiatives and risks, it is essential that people feel backed and encouraged by external professional support. This is especially important at the start, when confidence within the community is still shaking and savings seem to bring more problems than solutions. A support organisation based on the ground, which holds a vision of united and empowered urban poor communities, helps to assure that risks and efforts are worth taking. Professionals that can offer guidance, skills and support are essential to accompany the community in every step of their progress, learn and find solutions to problems with them, and provide the tools to strengthen their capacity. The NGO is there to support and strengthen the grassroots in their struggle to build their ability to voice, promote, and effectively negotiate for their interests and priorities within the urban development processes.

All-time availability

Such a partnership is not easily created. It is a long and continuous process in itself. The Ugandan experience confirms how mutual trust and understanding between the slum dwellers communities and their support organisation grows with time, shared achievements and mistakes. The relationship needs to be continuously revisited, and adapted to the support and learning needs of both parties.

One could never emphasise enough the first important role of a support organisation: Being there; On the ground; Every day; Being available and ready to support as new problem arises; Following all matters related to the slums and slum dwellers communities; Listening to people’s issues, and offering them assistance in tackling these issues. The listening and availability skills of support professionals are an essential tool for the community to feel secured and understood (and not just *guided*). One of the most rewarding achievements for our Ugandan NGO was to gradually see slum dwellers coming in and out of office, bringing news from the slum, sharing problems, following progress in other slum communities.

For the NGO, this constitutes the main source of information and knowledge. The quality of the support an organisation can provide to grassroots communities is very much determined by the capacity of its professionals to learn from the grassroots, their issues, ways of working and learning. This is something that we all strongly felt within Actogether after a year of community support work in the slums of Kampala and Jinja. With time and continuous dialogue, the solutions we manage to develop with the slum dwellers communities are increasingly better fit to people’s needs and context, and bringing more sustainable outcomes.

Building skills and capacities: fuelling confidence and empowerment

True, slum dwellers best learn from other slum dwellers. But providing the young groups with professional skills, and helping them adapt it to their needs greatly facilitates their progress in setting up the financial management and accountability systems within their group. This is also a good means for empowerment and self-confidence: Communities are proud to be able to manage their finances by themselves, just as professionals would.

The communities can benefit from professional skills and support in many areas: financial management for auditing and loans; organising meetings; managing community facilities (toilets, community hall etc.); starting up businesses; negotiating with urban authorities and providers of urban services; data collection and processing; urban planning; mapping; designing houses; construction; procurement of material; proposal drafting; etc.. The slum dwellers are very eager to learn such skills, and usually learn fast. The challenge is to find the right timing balance that can ensure such skills are brought when the community has understood why and how they need it. It has proved inefficient to rush the process and train people in new skills before they have allowed themselves the time to realise they need such skills to progress in their development. Again, this requires much time flexibility, but also listening and understanding on the part of the professional support team, so as to move *along* with the community. We have realised in Uganda that communities are much quicker and better at setting up auditing and accountability systems once they have experienced misuse of funds or financial mismanagement issues. Also, introducing loans systems when the community has not asked for it may bring more confusion than benefits.

A neutral external actor

The support organisation can also help the community to solve their internal issues by playing the role of a neutral external party. It is rare to find individuals or organisations in the slums which do not hold political, religious or ethnic colours. Once it has built a relationship of trust with the people, the NGO can bring help in the mediation of conflicts and disputes among the community.

In this role, it is important that the NGO does not take part and confine its role to one of being supportive in finding solutions. Hence, when the community quarrels around the issue of misuse of savings money by collectors, the NGO will help the audit team to make their investigation in a transparent manner, and encourage them to discuss the problem with the concerned people (without the NGO) to convince them to pay back progressively before presenting their report. The NGO preferably avoids participating to community meetings when audit reports are presented to the savers, or when internal negotiations are discussed. This allows the community to feel fully responsible and opened when dealing with their problems.

A window to the formal world

A professional support organisation can help linking the urban poor with other external stakeholders in the field of urban development and aid assistance. This gives communities opportunities to learn about the field of urban development and to negotiate their interests and priorities as they realise their position and the role they can play within the urban development processes. The NGO can take the lead when city officials are hostile or when dealing with professionals in funding and other development agencies.

However, the NGO's role is often not an easy one. It has a double obligation of protecting and delivering to the savings groups while meeting the demands from the formal world. When there

is a lot of pressure for the NGOs to give into demands from the government or donors, the saving groups' logic of doing things on the ground sometimes turn formal systems on their heads. It needs tremendous amount of patience and experience to analyse problems and find solutions that work for the local groups and the external agencies. The lack of immediate and instant success often creates tensions that push the leadership within SDI and the support NGO to renegotiate their internal relationships. At the same time, the savings schemes and federations constantly grow stronger and take on new tasks as their local capacity is developed⁵.

GIVING THE URBAN POOR A VOICE: THE POWER OF LOCALLY-OWNED INFORMATION

Information is a powerful tool in urban development planning. National and local governments use census-taking and statistical enumeration to decide on the distribution of finite state resources. Information is used to justify "subjective choices" normally determined by "political processes". Putting information in the hand of the poor and vulnerable is a great counter-strategy towards more pro-poor and grassroots-led urban development.

Following the SDI approach, the Ugandan saving groups have adopted community enumeration and survey exercises as a way to teach members how to gather reliable and complete data about households in their own communities. The urban poor start looking at their settlement through a wider frame and realise the strength of standing together as a cohesive community.

The activity of collecting and processing data by the community generates self-knowledge and new skills among the communities. It is them who decide on what information is needed; why and how is it being collected, what purposes it will serve and how the information will be used. The NGO offers the Ugandan groups support and guidance along the process, but only in the form of a working partnership. Nothing, from designing and testing the questionnaires, to the organisation of data collection and data analysis, is done without the active involvement and decision-power of the slum dwellers. This is a strong empowering tool for the communities, who realise that they can 'take things into hand' and acquire the skills generally reserved to professionals. The enthusiasm of the women entering and processing data on their computer station couldn't say less! Once they have developed a sense of collective ownership of their information, the slum dwellers start using it as their own planning tool, to select among themselves the first beneficiaries to move into new houses, or to allocate jerry cans of safe water when they face a water shortage in their settlement

Such data also turns out very useful in negotiations with external actors for resources such as land, housing, government grants. It not only sheds light on the situation and living conditions of the slum dwellers, but also shows that they are an integrated part of the city playing a significant economic and political role in its development. The report of the enumeration carried out in Kisenyi has had considerable impact on both governments and donors in Uganda. It has helped to convince the Ministry for Housing that resettling the Kisenyi residents outside the city is no solution, since most of them either work or have businesses that are based in the city centre and contribute to its development. It has pushed the urban planners of the Kampala City Council to organise participatory planning meetings in every parish of the Kisenyi slum. It has brought the National Water and Sewerage Company to come and consult the collected data before working

⁵ D'Cruz Celine and Mitlin Diana (2005) "Shack/Slum Dwellers International: One experience of the contribution of membership organizations to pro-poor urban development", available from SDI website: www.sdinet.org

at extending all water pipes in the area. As the East African savers like to say “Power is information; Information is our power”.

“TOGETHER IS OUR STRENGTH”: FEDERATING THE SLUM DWELLERS

The concept of nurturing a federative movement of the urban poor at regional and national scale is inspired from the experience of slum dwellers groups around the SDI network, who have realised that addressing needs such as secure tenure and access to basic urban services, require a political strategy and an all-inclusive position that promotes unity across the slum settlements. The urban poor federations and their savings schemes thus seek to build a critical mass movement by strengthening inclusive local organisations, which, through federating, can develop the potential to negotiate with the various levels of government better housing and living conditions. In this way, the participatory approach is taken to a further level: The federations attempt to institutionalise the poor’ inclusion in the urban development process by linking together a series of local groups controlled by their members in a horizontally-driven federating process, mutually reinforce a process that takes the central agency of the poor (participation) to a point of being able to determine development activities⁶.

SDI’s core organizing principles establish the pre-conditions for such collective political action by the poor. Savings reinforces bonds of trust and mutual support among a local community. Exchanges enable these communities to reach out and federate at a larger level to develop city and national strategies. Every learning and knowledge creation activity engages the slum dwellers, within their community, between different communities, and between the members of the federation.

In Uganda, the concept of the urban poor federation was imported along with the savings tools by visits from the Indian, Kenyan and South African federations. They encouraged Ugandans to form federation committees in the three pilot parishes of Kisenyi, with an umbrella core leadership committee representing the young National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda. Unfortunately, this proved out to be too premature a strategy for Uganda. The leadership structure was formed and empowered, without giving the necessary room for a more thorough mobilisation and organisation process to develop among the community. More time was needed for the savings culture to spread down to the poorest, yet most of the knowledge, responsibilities and power were already put in the hands of pre-existing local leaders - since the savings schemes could not yet see a new leadership emerge at this early stage of the mobilisation process. Put in direct relation with the Ministry, the leadership sought to achieve their own political ambitions along with those of the federation. This very quickly resulted in quarrels and fights among the core team and various committees of the federation, who would only meet for SDI visits to Uganda to ensure that one group would not benefit more than the other. More sadly, resting all information and decision power with local leaders caused to privilege the interests of small circles within the community while the needs of the collectivity, and those of the most vulnerable, remained unaddressed. The savings schemes became to resemble local neighbourhood associations embedded within existing systems of political patronage, and better

⁶ See Appadurai Arjun (2001) “Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics” in *Environment & Urbanisation*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp.23-43; and D’Cruz Celine and Mitlin Diana (2005) “Shack/Slum Dwellers International: One experience of the contribution of membership organizations to pro-poor urban development”, available from SDI website: www.sdinet.org

designed to secure benefits for a few rather than social justice for many. The first challenge for SDI is to support local groups to overcome such problems.

The experience in Uganda shows how much the role of the local collective in learning is essential for the process to encompass large numbers and develop bottom-up organisation and leadership structures. There is a need to allow the mobilisation process to move beyond the initial leadership of individuals, to the problems faced by the community at large. 'Being strong together' is a concept the community needs to grasp, and understand as a strategy to address their problems. This not only means it requires time and support for people to develop trust and participation within their local group, first, then between communities. But it also takes them to realise - at their own learning pace - that they share common problems; that solutions to their major problems are political ones that can only be tackled by acting together; and that these are problems they have to address themselves, as slum dwellers. Only then can the grassroots truly own the process and begin to build the capacities and organisational structures they need to achieve it.

The federation process is thus not something SDI nor an NGO, nor any individual leader can force. Its essence needs to come from the slum dwellers themselves. "The experience of SDI suggests that the federating process is very significant in changing the nature of the way in which local community organizations function"⁷. As savings schemes learn to work together and participate in community exchanges, they begin to gain a sense of their collective identity and take on responsibility for accumulating knowledge. Once they have realised the political importance of federating, they start looking at their network as more than a peer-to-peer learning tool. The federation becomes an arena to share experiences towards developing local *and* national strategies to address the issues faced by the urban poor. The leadership that emerges from such movement can then help guide the federation to achieve its political vision. All of these are fundamental steps of a long federating process that requires time, continuous support, numerous exchanges and experiences, and the building of a collective learning capital.

Though the National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda was created with the support of the president of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India, most Ugandan groups do not refer to it in their activities. They are still confused to what political meaning this federation can have, and how federating their efforts can help each community achieve their goal. They don't see their goals as shared with those of other communities yet. They prefer to deal directly with the government on the basis of their local group. Yet, the seeds of a federative process are slowly emerging on a regional level: In their struggle to secure land for a housing project, the savings groups in Jinja have realised that by joining together as a 'Jinja federation', they could strengthen their stand in the negotiations with the municipality. Trust remains to be built as each group is aiming at securing land for their own members in priority. But the groups now understand that they need to face the challenge together, and be able to develop a common strategy to achieve their goal.

The challenge of including the poorest

As an emerging political mass movement of the slum dwellers develops, and a leadership appears, a difficult challenge is to prevent the progression of exclusivity, which can threaten to push the poorest away. In Uganda where the slum dwellers still represent the overwhelming majority of urban residents (75%), some are certainly more included than others. There is,

⁷ Ibid

inevitably, an inner core of strong savings scheme members in each neighbourhood and a wider outer core of less committed and more hesitant participants who become more involved as they gain confidence in the process, or as their personal situation changes. There will also always be a pressure from community leaders and stronger community voices to redefine the notion of 'membership' to the savings scheme and the federation. If such membership is built around the needs, perspectives and capacities of those with higher incomes, there is a strong probability it will exclude the very poor from many ongoing activities and the benefits they present. Building a federation of savings schemes offers a capacity to reflect on and strategise to avoid such processes⁸, yet it remains an important challenge for the Ugandan groups to face.

Striking inequalities: a pre-requisite for grassroots-led urban development?

Compared to Mumbai, Nairobi or Johannesburg, the city of Kampala is still relatively small and under-developed. The whole city suffers from weak urban planning and lack of urban infrastructure and services provision, though the most well-off have the means to privately cater for better living conditions. While the city is rapidly developing and progressing towards a dual urban development model with increasing inequalities, until recent years, there was little grasping of the notion of belonging to a category of urban poor that is economically and politically excluded from the rest of the city. For example, the problem of eviction was not perceived as a real threat by slum dwellers. This is now becoming a phenomenon of increasing concern for the residents of central Kampala, and it is interesting to see how this is gradually founding a collective conscience at the root of the federation process. Whereas people hold a strong sense of being an integral part of the city, repeated cases of evictions in the central slums of Kampala makes them to identify with other slum residents, and breeds a collective conscience of exclusion among the slum dwellers. In Jinja and other areas of Kampala on the other hand, one can witness how local groups remain very much embedded in a logic of *benefiting* from the government or donors' favour, at the despite of other groups. This can bring about reflection on the degree to which a certain collective sense of exclusion among the grassroots can trigger the need for people to develop a strategy based on joint action and mutual support in order to bring structural change.

OPENING DOORS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE: KEEPING CONTINUOUS NEGOTIATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT AND OTHER URBAN STAKEHOLDERS

If the poor can play a considerable role in making urban development more socially just, no sustainable solutions to the problems of slums and urban poverty can be found without the involvement and commitment of the different levels of government. The goal is thus not to leave the government off the hook but to work in partnership when this is possible, and to broker deals that work for the poor, as well as for the city as a whole.

Building a working relationship of mutual respect and commitment between the government and representative organisations of the urban poor on the long run is the most effective strategy to negotiate sustainable change from the state in favour of the urban poor. This is a politics of accommodation, negotiation and long-term pressure rather than of confrontation or threats of political reprisal⁹. An effective method is to constantly involve the government in the work and

⁸ Ibid

⁹ SDI website: www.sdinet.org

activities initiated by the slum dwellers groups. In Uganda, local government officials are regularly invited to the slum for local exchanges or community meetings. During enumeration, they were encouraged to participate to the data collection and processing exercises. Some of them were selected to come and supervise the construction work carried out by the slum dwellers, along with representatives of the community and their support NGO. Officials from the various levels of the government have also been invited to participate to international community exchanges. This allows the people from communities to share and learn with government officials from best practices and ideas in community-driven approaches to urban development. Just as how the urban poor need to learn how to deal and work with the government, the government needs to better understand the urban poor, their issues, their ways of working and the solutions they can offer in tackling the issues of slums and urban poverty. This was very well shown by the change in local government officials' attitude towards the 'Kisenyi problem'. The Central Division Council of Kampala was initially reluctant at supporting the people to build low-cost housing in an area as strategic as Kisenyi, which the government plans to develop as a commercial area. With time and continuous efforts to engage the Division officials in their activities and negotiations, the communities and their NGO were able to get the Division council to secure up to two plots of land within Kisenyi for pilot construction projects. In Jinja, officials from the municipal council now regularly go to attend to the community meetings organised by the savers.

Throughout their discussions and interactions with government officials, the communities build up strong negotiation skills. The women especially, grow in self-assurance as they gain the recognition of external stakeholders for their work and efforts. An encouraging achievement is to see slum dwellers of Kampala and Jinja approach the government with more confidence, and able to state their needs and defend their goals in a constructive manner.

It is important that they strive to do so without any affiliation with political parties or coalitions, which is not without challenges. For the federation and their savings groups' members, avoiding political colours initially seems like an original way of building of political mass movement: Uganda presents a fairly decentralised governance system, and most slum dwellers in Kampala are involved in local politics and elections. Many government officials and politicians will also try to turn debates politically, be it about slum development or evictions. Bribery is another common practice, which the communities need to confront during their negotiation. Again, the importance of keeping a neutral stand in politics, religion or any other party, is something that the slum dwellers need to progressively understand *themselves*, not only as a principle, but as a strategy to avoid internal divisions and therefore maintain their collective strength. In Uganda, the savings groups realised that to allow a maximum number of savers to participate, they had to ensure that all issues of politics, elections or ethnic divisions be kept away from their savings. As their saying goes during meetings: "please leave your political colour at the door"! In their negotiation with government officials, slum dwellers are also realising that only by multiplying their political allies would they be able to achieve sustainable improvement in their relationship with the government.

"Making big noise": Advocating for the rights and interests of the urban poor

The default social position of the urban poor is generally one of civic invisibility. The slum dwellers groups and their support organisation engage in advocacy work for the voice of the urban poor to be better heard in the debates of urban development. The activities of SDI-affiliated groups, such as housing exhibitions, ground breaking ceremonies, enumeration

launches etc. provide a means of creating physical events that allow slum dwellers to strengthen their political visibility, and gain official recognition and legitimacy for their work.

House model exhibitions are large, open-air events attended by housing professionals and government officials and politicians. Communities gather to show house models designed and constructed by them. During the first slum dwellers house exhibition organised in Uganda¹⁰, representatives of DFID, Homeless International and Cities Alliance were present. This gave the slum dwellers an opportunity to discuss and debate housing designs best suited to their needs, and present the public with alternatives for the development of their neighbourhood. At the same time, it was used to demonstrate what slum dwellers communities have been able to achieve under similar initiatives in other countries.

Using the media also revealed to be a powerful weapon to raise awareness on the issues faced by the slum dwellers in Uganda. Radio talk shows, or inviting the press to communities' events and slum visits aim at changing mentalities by showing the public how much the urban poor contribute to their city's development; This advocacy work also targets urban service providers, NGO, aid organisations and other international agencies. The goal is to attract attention on the solutions offered by locally-driven initiatives and reduce the exclusion of the urban poor in the formal development aid system.

OFFERING TIME AND OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCES AND MISTAKES

As savings schemes become strong enough to put forward their own development ideas and options, pilot projects are an effective means for the communities to try-out and demonstrate their own approaches to improving living conditions in the slum. Following the example of SDI-affiliates, the Ugandan savings groups try to innovate new practices in areas such as land subdivision, settlement planning and resettlement, water/drainage installation, and construction of toilet blocks, community facilities and housing development. These precedents open up a space for dialogue with city officials. They show to senior policy makers and the general public that it is possible to do things differently, with a pro-poor approach that is also effective and sustainable. Experience among SDI members has shown that pro-poor policy alone is not strong enough and a 'precedent' that works is what creates the legitimacy needed to bring about change¹¹. Pilot project initiatives seek to demonstrate the capabilities of urban poor communities in identifying problems and developing solutions. Another characteristic is that they strive to recover costs wherever possible. This is to demonstrate how limited funding can reach large numbers and make better housing/living conditions affordable for the urban poor.

Involvement in services delivery becomes a way of strengthening local organizations and developing strategies that more effectively address the needs of the poor, and which can be refined and tested in other areas, through the exchange of ideas and discussions. The savings groups, the federation, the support NGO and city governments, all learn from the processes involved in development innovations and the mistakes that are made. Essential skills are built and passed on much more effectively when demonstrated through real practice that can provide a proof of what is possible.

¹⁰ 7th March 2003, at Nakivubo Primary School, Kampala

¹¹ D'Cruz Celine and Mitlin Diana (2005) "Shack/Slum Dwellers International: One experience of the contribution of membership organizations to pro-poor urban development", available from SDI website: www.sdinet.org

To optimise its learning and empowerment, an effective means is to lay a maximum number of responsibilities and tasks in the hands of the community. There is only one formula for the design, construction and management of pilot initiatives: the projects must be designed, implemented and managed by the community members. Slum dwellers need to be the main actors of their development initiatives, the NGO and the government are just there to offer support and witness. Pilot experiences are an effective way to find the right balance between all stakeholders.

Yet, it is important to resist the rush of tackling pilot initiatives before the community has reached a certain level of organisation and mutual trust. Managing savings and loans provides the community with new skills and enables the saving groups to manage more complex funds and initiatives. Without these skills and the capacity to manage collective savings and their systems of accountability, a pilot project may lead the community to be at lost with how to manage construction and costs, and feel discouraged. They also need a certain level of organisation to understand and learn from their mistakes in a constructive manner. This is one of the main lessons learnt from the construction of the first community sanitation block between 2003-05 in Uganda. The project was initiated with SDI funding, through the Ugandan Housing Ministry, a year after the setting up savings schemes. The community was highly motivated yet could not perceive the project differently than any other donor-funded infrastructure delivery project. Bonds of trust and organisation within the community was still weak, and leaders could easily take the opportunity of using 'free money' from donors and building personal links with the Ministry to their own profit. The result was one of the most expensive sanitation blocks built in all SDI history, an empowered (and enriched) local leader with all information and decision power in his hand, humongous losses of savers' money, and a discouraged community who could not understand the point of saving while waiting for the next donor to come in and build for them houses. Preparing for their second pilot projects, the community has undergone a long and tedious re-mobilisation and organisation process, giving their group a new face, with increased participation of women, and stronger systems of accountability and decision-making. The progress made by the group shows how important it was to relieve the pressure of building fast and to stop pouring funds in, so as to give the community the necessary time and support to develop their capacities and strengthen their mobilisation. It also illustrates that learning from mistakes is just as important as learning from the good practices.

CONCLUSION: SUPPORTING GRASSROOTS-LED URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The approach here described is based on a vision of the transformation of the conditions of urban poverty by the poor in the long run. SDI groups seek to open a political space for the urban poor, and then use this space to secure developmental benefits, around secure tenure, infrastructure, services and housing, that both address immediate needs and build the capacity of the poor to innovate, strategise and negotiate for further benefits. Yet this is not possible unless there is a demand and commitment from the urban poor themselves to change the quality of their lives through organized effort. It is a long and slow process that builds up from local success and long-term asset building.

This reflection highlights two key areas for external support: Firstly to provide long-term funding to the intermediary NGOs who can offer continuous assistance to urban poor communities, allowing local organisations to grow and develop at the pace of social processes and the changes in relations with the government authorities, without the pressure for immediate material change; And secondly, to provide flexible funding contribution to support the multiplication and scaling-up of grassroots-led initiatives for their scope to become evident. Aid

agencies thus “need to avoid funding that damages or competes with local development processes”¹² and recognise that these can be slow, conflict-laden processes that must not be subject to external pressure for rapid implementation or quick spending¹³. The support required by grassroots-led development processes is one that can fine-tune decision making and disbursement timetables to the dynamic of local processes.

¹² D'CRUZ Celine and SATTERTHWAITE David (2005) Building homes, changing official approaches: The work of Urban Poor Organisations and their Federations and their contributions to meeting the Millennium Development Goals in urban areas, International Institute for Environment and Development Working Paper on Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas no. 16 (May), IIED, London: p. 65

¹³ See HASAN Arif, PATEL Sheela and SATTERTHWAITE David (2005) “How to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in urban areas”, *Environment and Urbanisation*, Vol.17 No.1, London: pp. 3-19