SLUM IMPROVEMENT: WHO BENEFITS?

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Photos: R. Charbonneau

Community participation and self-help — catchwords for nearly two decades, mentioned often in the literature on slums and squatter settlements in cities in the Third World. But what do they mean?

Flimsily built shanties precariously perched on hill slopes and river banks, tattered polythene providing a roof for whole families... The squalor and quagmire of squatter areas became familiar sights as cities began to grow rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s and the proportion of people living in squatter settlements started increasing at what was perceived to be an "alarming" rate. The middle and upper classes believed such illegal and unhygienic settlements existed solely because of the lack of prompt and stern action by the authorities to demolish such structures.

Governments attempted, although on a negligible scale, slum clearance and rehousing of people in walk-up flats or high-rise buildings. Experience has shown that this approach is unsustainable. Constraints and competing demands on resources permit only small budgetary allocations for public housing programmes (less than 3.5 percent of GDP in Asia and Africa and 5.5 percent in Latin America). And since housing is regarded as a welfare activity, it is accorded a low priority.

Heavy subsidies are needed to bring housing within the reach of low-income families. The inability of the poor to afford new housing leads to sub-letting to better-off families. However, when affordable housing is scarce even for the better-off, the poor or original beneficiaries end up selling their homes to higher income families. The poor are thus dispossessed because they trade their housing space for cash to add to their meagre incomes and resort to building hovels in squatter settlements. This is often interpreted as their preference for living in squalid conditions — a manifestation of their "slum mentality". In reality, however, this must be understood as their economic rationality since living in a "decent" house cannot be a substitute for desperately needed food or medical care.

Public housing has made no more than a negligible contribution towards ameliorating the problem of shelter that is so visible in Third World cities. While the "urban explosion" continues unabated, an increasingly larger proportion of the urban population is having to live in abysmally deplorable conditions. Nearly half the population of Bombay, Bogota or Dacca lives in what can only be an apology for shelter.

Towards the end of the 1960s, a British architect, based on his work with squatter communities in Lima, Peru, presented a view of their settlements which contradicted what was popularly believed. He stressed that squatter settlements are not a problem but a solution to the problem of housing: the barriada is not a slum but a building site. The people know their own needs and priorities better than planners and government officials: based on their requirements and preferences, they choose vacant land and build their houses progressively. He urged decision makers to recognize and support self-help efforts of squatters in establishing their homes and communities.

A new approach has emerged based on isolated "success" stories of squatter communities organizing house building, improving housing and managing their environment. In the past two decades, the "self-help school" has presented one of the most persuasive arguments in defence

of squatters. Over the years, governments have co-opted the new terminology. They mention community participation as a key factor in the success of any programme. Recent Indian housing policy documents, for instance, clearly state that rather than building houses for the low-income population, the government should facilitate and not regulate housing activity. A pertinent question is: why have the "revolutionary" ideas of community participation and self-help found acceptance in government circles?

This question cannot be answered without looking at the legislation and practice of urban development. India can serve as a good illustration — it has a long tradition of Town Planning. The first Town Planning Act, introduced by the British, was passed in 1915. Since then, it has been superseded and its scope enlarged, but its essential features remain unchanged to this day. Each city/town authority must prepare a Development Plan for the area within its jurisdiction.

A Development Plan is primarily a land-use map. It is prepared after making detailed surveys of the existing housing situation including facilities and amenities. Based on population projections for the next decade, it assesses the need for housing and infrastructure (such as roads, sewerage, water supply, schools, open spaces, traffic and transportation networks), and proposes a plan for their fulfillment.

In spite of Town Planning efforts over the past seven decades, towns and cities in India bear vivid testimony to the ever worsening living conditions of a majority of urban residents. Experience has shown that the extent to which these elaborately prepared Development Plans take concrete shape is woefully small. For instance, only 10 percent of the proposals made in the last

Development Plan of Bombay actually materialised during that decade. The principal constraint is the lack of funds.

If this is the situation, why is the cumbersome and time-consuming exercise of preparing Development Plans done ritually every ten years or so?

Town Planning determines the distribution of a city's resources such as land and water among different groups of city residents. Since it takes place within the context of the urban land market and real estate development, it creates infrastructural advantages (roads, open spaces, transport facilities) so that private builders can reap benefits.

Land is one of the most important determinants of city plans. Accessibility and neighborhood characteristics determine the price of urban land. The price curve shows that land prices decline from the city centre (the centre of commercial activity) to the periphery; the fall is more gradual along main roads and land prices rise around secondary centres. Prices dictate land-use. Over time, land-use changes to conform to the price. In most Indian cities, for instance, the residential density in inner cities has decreased in order to make room for more remunerative commercial activity.

The poor who are incapable of competing in the land and housing market, are driven to illegal squatting, overcrowding in dilapidated housing or forced to live long distances from their workplaces on relatively inexpensive land.

As squatters, which lands can they occupy? Generally those that are either unsuitable or unattractive for real estate development: land subject to flooding; steep slopes of hills; marshy land; land under litigation; government-owned land; peripheral land; land reserved in the Development Plan for pub-

lic purposes but vacant for many years because there is no money to buy it. Thus, in the name of creating an orderly, hygienic and aesthetically pleasing environment, Town Planning, in fact, denies the poor access to even minimum authorized housing and basic services such as potable water, latrines, and drainage.

"Slum improvement" is offered to squatters as a palliative — the provision of communal water taps and latrines, paved pathways, open drains and street lighting. Even these services are provided on such an inadequate scale that they rarely improve the sanitation situation. This program does not reduce the intolerably high densities in squatter settlements. Above all, residents are not granted tenure and in the eyes of the law they remain unauthorized occupiers of the land. The original owner retains ownership of the land under "slum improvement" and has the option of expelling slum dwellers to marginal lands (after fulfilling certain conditions) and using the "improved" sites (with services) for real estate development, if the land occupied is or becomes prime land. This is done in the name of rehousing or rehabilitation. It is important to understand that the process of urban development gives very little urban land and services to a population that cannot compete in the land and housing market.

In this situation, the strategy of encouraging community participation and self-help efforts of the poor makes them responsible for their own affairs and leaves them to their own devices while conceding to them a minimal amount of the city's resources. This follows the dominant ideology which sees the poor as responsible for their own plight. In official strategies, therefore, the onus of improving their living conditions is put on the poor. And while appearing to satisfy their needs, the strategies,

in reality, reinforce conditions that serve the interests of developers and dominant groups.

This is not to deny the importance of community participation and self-help in improving living conditions for the poor. There are a number of Third World cities that have demonstrated the advantages low-income communities gain when they organize themselves. But they have also shown that there are several factors external to individual settlements which facilitate or arrest the success of self-help efforts and united action by the people. These factors become apparent when the phenomenon of squatter settlements is analyzed in the context of the wider processes of urban development and market forces in which the deprivation of the poor is rooted. Unless urban development strategies are cast in a manner that paves the way towards social justice by making interventions that bring greater benefits to the poor and lead to equitable distribution of a city's resources, the strategy to encourage community participation and self-help efforts of the poor will remain a tool for their exploitation. ∎

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