

**REFLECTIONS ON INNOVATION,
ASSESSMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE
PROCESSES:
A SPARC CASE STUDY, INDIA**

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Foreword

Between May 2005 and November 2006, a small group of development professionals discussed the opportunities and challenges for assessing and learning about social change in ways that, in turn, provide valuable insights and strengthen the change process. This group was composed of individuals whose position in relation to the topic represented important voices to be heard: activists, researchers, evaluators, facilitators, and international and local NGO staff. This group called itself the ‘assessing social change’ or ASC group.

Central to the group’s discussions was a common concern with the chasm between the need for reflective social change practice and the existing understanding and repertoire of approaches for assessment and learning. The group debated and shared through a series of facilitated e-discussions, case studies and two workshops.

The ASC group was coordinated by Irene Guijt of Learning by Design, and was part of an initiative by the Power, Participation and Social Change Team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK. This initiative had emerged from earlier discussions in Canada between US-based activists and evaluators and Southern development professionals around the same topic, seeking to construct exchanges that could help strengthen social change work. Both phases of the work were supported by the Ford Foundation. The North American discussions have continued in parallel as the ‘Learning Group on Organizational Learning and Organizational Development’ under the guidance of Vicki Creed, with Andy Mott and Francois Pierre-Louis.

The ASC project has led to several outputs: four case studies (Mwasaru 2007, Patel 2007, Reilly 2007, Samba 2007); a literature review (Guijt 2007); and a synthesis paper that draws on the readings here, the case studies and the group discussions (Guijt 2007). All outputs and details of the ASC initiative and participants can be found at: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/Part/proj/socialchange.html>

1. The Need, the Success and the Challenge for Assessment

Between 1998 and 2005 in Mumbai, 18,000 households voluntarily demolished their shacks along the railroad tracks so that the city could make long-overdue improvements to its vital railroad system which provides public transport for over 70% of all trips taken in the city. There were no confrontations, no coercion, no bulldozers, teargas or police. In a time of unprecedented numbers of forced, and even violent, evictions in the world, this was an unusual event.

Millions of people in Mumbai's narrow island city confines depend on the north-south railways to get to work each day. The tracks are the city's lifeline, but service had become overcrowded, outdated, and slow. A critical problem was the sheer number of people living within feet of the tracks. Wherever shacks were built within 30 feet of a running track, trains were required to slow down to 5 km per hour, adding considerably to the congestion of the entire system.

When Indian Railways and the Government of Maharashtra finally embarked on long-planned improvements, these 18,000 households, with support from our NGO, SPARC, planned and managed their own resettlement, avoiding the turmoil and impoverishment that so commonly results from forced displacement.

As cities grow and new or improved infrastructure becomes necessary, inevitably some displacement will occur. But it is rare that this turns out to be a success for all involved. This resettlement was successful by any standard – for the railways, state and local governments, the World Bank, millions of commuters and the railway dwellers themselves. It was also an important achievement for SPARC – a demonstration of our capacity to support federations of the urban poor in dealing with the intractable problems they face – and at a scale unprecedented for us.

In terms of assessment standards, this project was clearly successful and its impact as a precedent clear. There were tangible, quantifiable outcomes. Large numbers of people were affordably resettled over a short period. There were partnerships involved, good governance, gender equity, and civil society participation – all the buzz words we use to accompany numbers in describing 'a successful project'.

And yet from the perspective of SPARC and the urban poor federations we support, this kind of assessment is unsatisfactory and even misleading. It only describes the tip of an iceberg. This resettlement was the culmination of years of work which laid the essential ground work. In some ways, the 'success' part was an accident of history, of opportunities that emerged at a particular point in time. We are happy to claim it as an achievement but find it frustrating that the larger part of this iceberg remains invisible. The real story in our minds is about the dense underpinning of values, principles, processes and relationships built over many years, and how they made it possible to seize the opportunity when it came along.

Over the 22 years since we set up SPARC, our achievements and sphere of influence have increased. Our ability to advocate the roles of the urban poor in development has certainly grown a great deal. One thing that has not changed, however, is our frustration in trying to explain who we are, what we do, why we do it and how we do it.

We still have to participate in a donor-driven evaluation process based on assumptions and values different from ours. We participate willingly in this process because we want to reconcile what we believe in with the beliefs of those who give us money. We do feel accountable to the process. But the clash of perspectives emerges every time. This

assessment process results too often in anxiety and tensions with those who have tried hard to support us with grants and friendship.

One basic mismatch is around the understanding of how NGOs should approach social change. Our model revolves around catalyzing communities. The more accepted approach is the direct delivery of activities and services. Another mismatch is our focus on urban land security and on the entitlement of the urban poor to basic amenities. Our persistent dialogue with government or municipal agencies on these issues is seen as quixotic. They want the poor to go back to their villages. Most governments still believe they can slow down or even reverse urbanization by investing in rural areas. This perspective also drives development assistance, and is echoed by the academic world of development studies. Most urban activism skirts around these issues of land, housing and basic amenities.

The most problematic mismatch has to do with risk. Donors are constitutionally averse to taking risks. But our alliance with the urban poor is defined and driven by risk-taking. Our conviction that solutions necessarily involve exploring unfamiliar possibilities, our confidence about this route, our capacity to celebrate the risks we take to change the status quo, are often seen by donors as arrogant or even irresponsible behaviour.

Different perceptions about the process of assessment is itself also part of this value mismatch. For donors, assessment means describing results and establishing accountability. For us, it is a vital part of an ongoing process – the ‘critical intent’ that makes real learning possible and that is the basis for genuine social change.

This case study is an attempt to present the full story of the railroad resettlement, mismatches and all. A shorter version would simply describe our response to a specific opportunity at a particular moment in time. This longer story means going back and clarifying what made various responses en route possible. We want to communicate to peers, policy makers and development actors how we define and promote social change and what assessment means to us in that context. We hope this will open the discussions on how assessment of social change processes need to be viewed and approached differently than is currently the case.

This paper continues with three sections. The first section describes the evolution of SPARC’s approach and how learning and assessment are embedded within the development process. The next section describes the methodology and partnerships that underpin the change process. Section 3 describes in some detail the story of ups and downs, tos and fros of the Mumbai Urban Transport project. It illustrates the non-linear, dynamic, unpredictable, long term nature of change that challenges conventional assessment approaches. The paper concludes with challenges for the key actors involved that can enable assessment to make a genuinely enabling contribution to the types of social change processes that SPARC is and upholds.

2. The evolution of SPARC and the Alliance: Understanding social change as a learning process

Much of what we do today is based on values, rituals and practices that date back to our formative years. We believe that knowledge of this history is integral to understanding the logic that informs our specific decisions and actions and which, in turn, shapes the choices we have made in relation to assessment and learning.

2.1. *How we began and first principles*

Between 1974 and 1984, some of us worked in a community centre in the inner city of Bombay. When we wanted to contest the evictions of pavement dwellers, we found our management unwilling to risk the centre's reputation on this issue. It became clear to us that our institution, like other urban NGOs, provided services based on what was convenient to deliver rather than what people actually needed. If you were a health professional, for example, you wrote a proposal for a health project, and then located a slum where you diligently delivered that service. These poorest and most vulnerable pavement dwellers surely needed those services but, more critically, their homes were being demolished each fortnight by the municipality. As an agency we did not question why this was. At best we provided them with a place to hide their belongings. Then we went back to delivering nutritional supplements and health care. Without a long term resolution of their housing crisis, these things remained band aid solutions.

To cut a long story short, some of us felt it was a waste of time to continue working this way and began to look at the possibility of founding our own institution to explore doing things a different way.

Beliefs and values, explicit or not, inform the choices we make as individuals and organizations. We attempted collectively to articulate these beliefs when we founded SPARC – the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers, a name explained below. Over time, we have often re-examined these values, attempting to link them to the strategies and institutional processes we developed.

Women have to be at the centre of development interventions. Women bear the primary burden of poverty. As the nurturers of their families, they manage to develop amazing survival strategies in the most difficult circumstances. If women are central to coping with poverty, they must also be at the centre of development interventions. This includes their central role in developing a vision, identifying strategies, building capacities, assessing and learning.

Development never trickles down. To ensure the success of development strategies, they are often intentionally set up within communities that are able to participate in the change. These strategies rarely work for the poorest who are too disorganized and disempowered to take advantage of resources. We believed that making change work for the most vulnerable was crucial. Solutions designed for the bottom 30% can be adapted to work for the better off – but the reverse rarely happens. We made a commitment to locate the poorest households and decided to begin with the pavement dwellers in Byculla, an area with which we were familiar.

The poor, vulnerable and disempowered, given enough time and space, can compile the ingredients of solutions to their problems. Communities of the poor are often considered passive beneficiaries. But these communities, especially the women, knew what changes they wanted. They might not have had the resources or capacities to develop solutions, but they could judge whether a solution would work or not. But to develop the experience, skills and capacities to start reflecting collectively on their situation, they needed a safe, local space where they could gather. Being marginalized and isolated means being cut off from networks and spaces of information and communication. The challenge for us was to break through this reality as a process of empowerment in and of itself. Being able to understand what knowledge these women had, how it could connect to the knowledge they needed for change, and how to use that knowledge was a process they had to experience. We became the 'Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers' because of our belief in the need for a physical space where this process could happen.

The involvement of the nation state is vital in addressing poverty. In the 1980s, NGOs and development assistance sought to replace the state with alternatives due to the state's inability to respond to poverty. We believed then, as we do now, that the nation state must drive the poverty alleviation agenda. NGOs can innovate with their strategies and demand accountability but should engage with government and in no way become the lead actor in this transformation.

These core principles have various implications for assessment and learning. Although these and many similar commitments guide a community driven process, it has been our experience that stating this as a rhetoric and actualising them present a huge challenge – as they transform who defines agendas, who measures the process and results and how risks which are often objective and financially measured get transformed into risks taken collectively and mitigated with social capital of collective decision making by those whose lives will be transformed by the very actions they take. If these principles are of value, then the rituals and practices and time frame to make this happen tend to be different from a top down, externally driven project framework that guides many projects today. They indicate, for example:

- who should be the shapers and guardians of assessment – the disempowered, the 30% poorest (especially women), and whose stories and versions of change count;
- what aspects must be valued en route, such as strengthening of poor women's knowledge base and the merits of innovative processes;
- which critical relationships must be considered in both strategising and assessing – that of the state and people's organisations; and
- the time frame for being able to say 'this sustainable change has happened' to address the needs of the 30% poorest.

2.2. *Learning from experience along the way*

We brought these values and beliefs along with us to this new enterprise but experience over time led to other insights as well. In terms of implications for assessment processes, while we could predefine and envision what change we sought, we could not pre-determine what the route was, and could not assume – in predefined ways – how we would direct the scale or rate of uptake of their strategies or activities, as it all revolved around emerging needs and capacities of communities to explore these choices, women's own visions of how they wished to focus and sequence development, and the women's ability and interest to assist others. These aspects are further illustrated with the MUTP story in section 3.

Building on local knowledge and priorities. We used women's own experiences of surviving in the city as a starting point for dialogue. We shared the stories of our own choices and how we had come to what we were doing now. Women shared their lives on the pavements and their daily survival challenges. The trust emerging from the exchange formed a firm basis for our relationship and for the women, who began to see themselves as a collective. Their shared strategies began to expand each woman's repertoire of action in the face of crisis and established the specific issues they wanted to take on to test the power of their collective action.

In those early days, women were very specific about what they wanted: to get ration cards, to deal with the police without fear, to avoid the demolition of their houses by the municipality, to be able to go to the hospital and be treated as human beings, to register their children in schools which was only possible with the birth certificates that they did not have. In each instance, we explored together what they did presently, what they

believed the solution might be, what procedure state policy prescribed; then we went collectively to demonstrate that this procedure was applicable to them. Once the first group achieved some goal, they supported and assisted the next group to do the same. Our challenge was not to create the expectation that we would give them anything and not to allow our past expertise to determine the focus of our dialogue.

Women sought empowerment to improve the situation for their families, rather than for themselves. We wanted to focus on the women and began in the conventional way with their own transformation, seeking to assist them start with empowering themselves to change their lives first. However, the women led us towards other processes with which they were more comfortable. They helped us to understand that by first improving the situation of their households and communities, and demonstrating that their involvement helped everyone, they would then be able to renegotiate their own roles within family and community. This led to the creation of collectives of women asking to obtain public services for their families and communities that were otherwise inaccessible to them, such as ration cards and hospital care. These gradually growing repertoire of collective actions taken by women for their families, not only gave women a great deal of confidence in themselves and their collective actions, it made families acknowledge that women giving their time to organisational work was benefiting households and communities.

It is vital at this point to state that it was not as though such access was impossible initially. Traditional male leaders connected to local power centres had become agents who provided this access, but for a payment. Initially there were some tensions about power and control between the traditional male leaders and women's collectives but in almost all cases, the men conceded defeat and gradually joined forces with the women's collectives. In instances where they did not, the larger alignment with the Alliance of the women's collectives helped neutralise the power and leadership of these men. This has been one of the most vital learning insights for those of us whose education and middle class background would have chosen a faster and more confrontational strategy.

Finding an identity. Within eight months of setting up SPARC, a judgment on a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court gave the city permission to demolish all pavement slums. Other NGOs in the city wanted to resist and fight. But the women we were working with wanted no fights. They feared that the police would jail their men and that they, the poor women as mothers and wives, would as always bear the consequences of violence. They asked us to see if any negotiation was possible. We would readily have embraced a strategy of resistance, but for our commitment to explore solutions jointly. And the women had clearly indicated their preferred strategy of negotiating rather than fighting.

Those of us who went to visit various officials encountered much ignorance about the pavement dwellers. Officials commonly assumed that they were migrants who came and went. We knew that some families had been there for two or three decades and thought that academic research institutions might be able to legitimate our claim. However, those we approached shared the official view and were unwilling to take on such a study. With the deadline for demolition approaching, we decided to undertake a census of the pavement dwellers, our first, which we published as "We the Invisible".¹ As a result of this challenge to the official version of reality, the demolition did not take place.

Advocacy effects aside, the impact of this documentation was far reaching. It produced a collective identity among women who had felt alone and isolated. They shared their

¹ See www.sparcindia.org/docs/invisrev.doc

stories, began to visit each other and explored with SPARC how to access various services in the city. When the massive demolition was halted, the women began to seek long term housing options. Had we been asked to anticipate the results and impacts of resisting demolition through the strategy of a survey, we could not have imagined this. And yet that is precisely what conventional assessment procedures demand.

Starting to save. A common refrain of the pavement dweller women was their constant anxiety about finding the money to manage their homes on a daily basis. On days when there were no earnings, money had to be borrowed to eat, to travel to work, and for other basic survival needs. Any savings ended up being used for one crisis or another. Out of discussions came an innovative solution. What if women in each collective put whatever money was left at the end of the day into a pool on which they all could draw? One of them would keep the money, so it was available night and day, and when cash was drawn out, it would be returned as soon as possible.²

The response was amazing. By collecting this money on a daily basis, the women became intimately linked to each other, learning to trust the process and one another. Families stopped having to borrow from money lenders. Women learned to manage money, to understand simple financial procedures and to make decisions about loans and repayments. To the outside world, this was a remarkable process because, however meagre the amounts, this was a system the women had developed themselves. Today, millions of women are actively linked into this savings and strengthening process that became known as Mahila Milan, the formal name of the emerging network of these women's collectives. Again, this was a case where little did we know ahead of time what would be the phenomenal scope and impact of the simple strategy of daily savings that the women had devised.

Allying, organizing and federating to challenge existing political systems, standards and norms.

Government has always used the labour of migrants informally to assist in urban production and service delivery, but denied them the benefits of development. The poor have built their homes wherever space permitted, accepting demolition when the city needed that land for other purposes or accepting the need to pay bribes. Seeking change clearly meant challenging the very basis of these practices – a deeply political process requiring the organization of large numbers of poor people. As an NGO, we could not touch the political process that actually defines land use. This is where the Alliance became critical.

Over time, the women's collectives began to play a greater role and Mahila Milan became the vehicle for spreading the process. At this point, in early 1986 we met up with National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF). The leadership of this national slum dwellers federation, mostly men, had a long history of fighting evictions and were fed up with NGOs that wanted to work with them on issues that were not their priorities. They sought to explore a partnership, which was finalised in 1987. SPARC agreed to allow the communities to drive the process and NSDF agreed to take on the issue of pavement dwellers whom they had previously excluded from their federations, and to build the capacity of Mahila Milan, as a sister organization, to take on collective leadership. Together, we became the Alliance.

All government activities are defined in terms of geographic divisions, and people needed to organize themselves based on these divisions. The ownership of the land on which

² See Patel, S. and C. D'Cruz. 1993. The Mahila Milan crisis credit scheme: from a seed to a tree. *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 9-17.

people squatted was also a basis for organization – those squatting on pavements owned by the municipal corporation and those on land owned by Indian Railways, for instance, had different political and regulatory realities with which to deal. The formation of a federation to fight for land security and basic services was based on the aggregation of these local organized groups at city and state levels. Implicit in that federating strategy is the recognition of how decision-making occurs. All bureaucracies and administrations kick upstairs whatever they do not want to act on. The process of organizing needed to be able to deal with a continuum of decision-making from local to national. As our federations of the poor became linked locally and then nationally, they provided the political muscle for addressing issues at different levels.

2.3. *The evolution of a 'tool kit'*

Over the past two decades, the Alliance of SPARC, Mahila Milan and NSDF has evolved a set of working processes that constitute what we call 'the tool kit'. These are systematized and institutionalized interventions that began with the logical exploration of ways to deepen and strengthen what communities knew, what they could learn and teach each other, and how they could form supportive networks to sustain their momentum in addressing the tough issues of land and housing. The toolkit, therefore, represents both the nuts and bolts of assessment and learning as an embedded process in social change, but also the core values that guide the change process. Over the years, we have collectively realised that each 'tool' emerged from a need faced by a specific group, after which its usage was consolidated by others who saw its value and impact. We then refined and developed them into strategic rituals that produced new levels of scale we had not imagined possible. As a result of these insights, with hindsight, now we can articulate them more succinctly than we could when they emerged.

1. Creating an agenda. Our decision not to define objectives in advance led to the gradual development of a format – communities first discussed priorities amongst themselves and then presented them to SPARC for joint exploration. Over time, this has produced a continuous system of agenda-setting that, by and large, emerges from the federations. Due to the close working relationship that has evolved over time, issues can now be raised by both sides and are explored jointly.

2. An information base that belongs to people. After the 1985 Public Interest Litigation threatening the women with eviction, we had responded to the complete lack of knowledge about pavement dwellers by using traditional survey methods. In partnership with the women, we developed a simple but robust method through which they produced a database. By clarifying how long they had been in the city and the working roles they played there, they demonstrated to themselves and to others that they were part of the city.

Any group joining the federation now routinely undertakes a survey of its members. Our experience shows that federation building tends to begin when a large number of people see the similarities of their needs through this participatory strategy of enumeration.

These enumerations also mean that community federations can contest the incomplete and outdated information that the state has about them and can demonstrate that so-called 'knowledge' about the poor is often a set of myths born from a need to justify the neglect of this population. In almost all cases, community data produced by the federation has been accepted by the state, with communities now invited to produce these databases themselves. Computerization of data is managed by the SPARC team but all data gathering is undertaken by federation volunteers.

3. *Savings and credit groups.* Over time, the initial savings groups developed by the Mahila Milan women became the more complex savings and credit programme that is now the signature of the federation membership process. Communities that do not save cannot join the federation. This stipulation is not related to concerns about ensuring that money circulates but due to the rigour of organizational processes that the savings and credit efforts trigger.

SPARC supports the formal end of these processes, updating and computerizing data at national levels, providing feedback on outstanding loans and overall savings, and negotiating for credit to ensure that needs are met.

4. *Exchanges between collectives.* The creation of all the processes described so far in this paper began with five communities of pavement dwellers and then expanded to cover all 45 pavement settlements in Byculla. Today it covers 550,000 households in nine states and in 70 cities in India. This scaling-up has occurred through a process of community exchanges that is driven by demand.

The conventional strategy of meetings and workshops managed by the NGO was not acceptable to the community leadership. They said poor people would have more trust in changes they saw for themselves. Seeing women on pavements managing complex negotiations was more powerful than being told about it. These face-to-face exchanges allow the reproduction of the Alliance strategy that is led by the women and men who have taken the initial risks to explore options for change.

Word of mouth was the initial basis of exchange. NSDF and Mahila Milan core leadership began to invite others to come and see. Over time, the process was replicated not only within, but across, cities. This then extended to exchanges between countries through Shack Dwellers International, the international network that links federations in different countries and supports leaders to visit each other. These exchanges have grown to include not only representatives of poor communities, but also their partners from within local authorities who find it valuable to meet with their peers in other places, exchanging their experiences of working with the urban poor in contexts that do not always make this easy. From the most local to the international level, these exchanges are the basis for the kind of critical reflection and learning that is basic to our process. Far from being a frill or a junket, these visits are the lifeblood of this growing movement.

5. *Creating precedents.* Exploring change through tangible precedent setting is a risky business but it becomes a form of advocacy and innovation that is the hallmark of the Alliance. Abstract policy does not trigger the imagination of the poor. They cannot test its value and often do not know how to use it. If they develop, refine and defend a tangible solution themselves, then they can reach large numbers of people who will back that solution. This makes it a political process in real terms.

A typical example is the construction of a house model. People who had always lived on 60 square feet of pavement could not understand design questions of height and size until the house models were actually developed. So, for instance, when the pavement dwellers and Mahila Milan first began to discuss their housing, miniature house models just did not produce any excitement or remarks. Then, as an experiment, women brought their saris which are 1 meter wide and 6 meters long, and produced a floor plan of their ideal house by laying saris on the floor to understand sq meters and using straw mats to produce the walls. Suddenly the space came alive. Gradually building on this, in 1988, four house models were designed by four groups in life-size models with wood and cloth. Over 6000 households who had been involved in the census were invited to come and cast their votes. Government officials and professional also attended and the famous 14 ft high mezzanine house is now the minimum standard that the federation first

explores as the core house. In the architecture design, many norms and standards of design and construction were challenged that limit the vision of housing for the urban poor that is prevalent in the construction industry and among officials.

Women decided that unless their houses were more than 250 sq feet, there would be no toilets inside the house. This then led to the design of a community sanitation facility that the federation now suggests to government for producing universal sanitation. Over the last 20 years, almost every community exploring housing now undertakes this ritual. Once the land is acquired, then a brick and mortar live model is constructed. It serves both as an educational tool and a mobilising tool. But it has also proven its worth as an advocacy tool. In 2000, one such house model was built in the UN building in New York at the time of the Istanbul Plus five review.

Creating such practical precedents can involve the public breaching of existing norms. When policy makers are invited to review these tangible examples of innovation, they are often forced to accept the practicality of the strategy developed and to shift their ideas and even policies on what is acceptable.

So how does the toolkit link to the need for assessment and learning? First, each of these tools is about assessing needs, assessing vision, assessing opinions, taking stock of experiences, reflecting critically together on the agenda that evolves and is implemented. Learning is embedded deeply in the exchange visits, the surveys, and through the sharing of stories and needs in the savings and credit groups. Assessment is based on local needs, rather than procedural requirements, while learning is a feature of the ongoing dialogues and relationships that drive the pavement dwellers' change process. This image of assessment and learning is vastly different from the formalised monitoring and evaluation processes that accompany pre-set plans. And this is where the tensions lie with donors, which the paper addresses in the final section.

2.4. SPARC's role in the evolving partnership

Scaling up of efforts and impact occurs through people's leadership development and not by an ever-expanding NGO or NGO-focused investment. An important challenge for SPARC has been to avoid the common trap that many NGOs fall into of consolidating their own organisation, influence and skills, rather than those of the people driving the development process. SPARC has used five strategies:

1. Only develop own skills based on what is needed to assist federations;
2. Scaling up through people's leadership development;
3. Maintaining unstructured financial resources to anticipate emerging experimentation;
4. Continual negotiation for skill upgrading; and
5. Continual abdication of roles, responsibilities and decision-making.

First, SPARC develops its own skills and has its roles identified based on what is needed to assist and support federations. The principle that guides this is that SPARC does not do what the poor can do for themselves. One way to deal with this self-set condition was to maintain a very small team that could not possibly manage all the activities, thereby requiring community leaders and their emerging organizations to take on those roles. SPARC representatives initially stand by as the federation leaders explore a new process, and gradually begin to backstop them where this is needed.

Early in our partnership, we discovered that when SPARC staff trained communities, the political message of self-driven development did not hit home. People learned specific skills but in the end, still expected that SPARC would lead the delivery process. By contrast, when community leaders led the training of specific skill sets, they embedded it

in a perspective of collective advocacy, so that federation members understood that change was in their hands and involved a sustained struggle. This lesson first came through to us after that first house model exhibition. Prior to that, the federations and SPARC had walked the communities through a exploration of why poor people do not get land and that demanding something requires you to have a strategy on hand to show that you have not come empty handed. This is to underline the point that your own contribution will produce the outcomes, even though the state is expected to make a substantial contribution. Initially, a junior member of SPARC who was very enthusiastic wanted to scale up this training programme and completed two exploration groups. At the end of that, the response of the community was “Okay, you trained us. We did everything you asked. Now can we have our houses please?” In contrast, when the federations undertook this task, it resulted in a deep political understanding that land issues needed a political solution which is why federations were vital to join. Since then, the explorations once undertaken were scaled up by the collective leaders of the federation, with SPARC back stopping, planning and review functions, and managing the backstage financing, with shared advocacy roles.

As a result, although SPARC is always involved in the development of a strategy, it then moves away only participating in review, quality control, documentation, evaluation and scaling up. This may seem to imply we are a kind of consultant who ‘suggests or informs’ clients what to do and then walks away. Behind such a sentence lies, however, a complex and very deeply symbiotic relationship between SPARC and the people’s organisations in the Alliance. In each activity undertaken by the communities affiliated to the Alliance, a team from SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan reviews and discusses the choices available to the community. The communities are encouraged to take the actions themselves to the extent that they can, and as and when any of the three organisation leadership’s skills are needed, that support is given. The main aim is to decentralise action as much as possible.

Over the years, this role has increasingly taken place at local levels in each city and federations by the leadership there. The Alliance leadership receives reports of what has happened and what is being planned. As SPARC abdicates roles in directing action, it begins to see and analyse the trends and the strategies that work or do not work and reflects on this with the Alliance. SPARC’s role in strategy development then focuses on creating mechanisms to get the state to acknowledge the policy implications of such community-driven processes and then to support this. All other aspects of scaling up are driven by the federation leadership by helping other community federations to learn to do what they themselves have found to be effective.

In the issue of securing the rights of the railway slum dwellers, the federations create opportunities to produce enumeration that the city needed, ensure that its quality and method was able to produce a local federation and was acceptable by the railways body and the state government, maintained dialogue and negotiated with the state for land security while designing relocation with communities. Each aspect of the development reflects a cycle of assessment and monitoring of events and defining options on which to take choices. These strategies were taken up from the pavement dwellers process which is another federation, and so forth. Many others in Indian cities and other country federations affiliated with SDI also came to learn from this process. Such knowledge sharing processes cannot take place unless this has been validated internally as a strategy that can be assessed and shared in terms of what communities can exchange between themselves and what aspects need to be shared with policy makers and government institutions.

The most vital element in the assessment and internal review process is that the communities who have actively participated in the process remain at the centre of the process and own that process and the larger alliance nurtures their capacity to talk about it, review its implications and communicate this.

The third element, of consciously abdicating roles and responsibilities, is a common rhetoric of many activists. But doing it is tough and painful. As an NGO associated with the federations, we have no ownership, cannot micromanage and have no control of the process. Many SPARC staff – skilled, dedicated and talented – have left because of feeling left out of the process. It is clear to us at SPARC that owning and controlling the process means locking it in the bottleneck of our minute capacities, while releasing it to the federation means opening up opportunities for multiplication that serve the learner who learns better from the peer than a middle class person, and the trainer who gains in deeper understanding as it is only when you teach that your knowledge is refined and reflection deepens. Parallel to this, everyone also mentors many others. Each one of us in SPARC and federations and Mahila Milan explore something new each year. Over time, we have developed a strategy by which everyone in SPARC and the federations gives up part of their job each year to someone else. It leaves senior and seasoned leadership the chance to explore new and tougher challenges, besides being an explicit mechanism to abdicate roles and decision making to others.

Skills upgrading, when undertaken in a partnership context such as the Alliance, must be continually (re)negotiated: When several federations within NSDF and Mahila Milan and SPARC have to work together, it requires constant dialogue and negotiations on several fronts. Nothing builds our collective capacities to negotiate with the outside world more than these internal negotiations. Over time, processes to sustain these discussions that enable ongoing communication channels to sustain mobilization and micro-community involvement are part of the support that federations receive from the Alliance leadership. This is central to a continuous process of sharing that underpins assessment and learning as an ongoing and embedded aspect of the development process.

Finally, a most difficult aspect for donors to understand and accept, we explicitly maintain unstructured financial resources to anticipate emerging experimentation and respond to the needs of strategic advocacy work. During the evolution of our work in the Alliance, we quickly learned how difficult it was to anticipate what would need to be undertaken and how much it would cost. There were always surprises en route, as the next section illustrates in detail. While we continued to budget for routine expenses, it made more sense to leave a large part of the budget unallocated as a resource that could be accessed as the need arose.

These five strategies have implications for learning and assessment, particularly with challenge for the donors. First, they mean that an NGO-centric monitoring and evaluation process is not an option. It is not about strengthening the NGO, nor is it a process that can be demanded and driven by the NGO of the people. Devolving responsibility for change to federation members has meant that control over structured donor-imposed assessment processes cannot be guaranteed. Change cannot be counted in terms of workshops or numbers trained, nor can SPARC pinpoint its precise contribution. It emerges from the daily interactions and discussions at so many levels in the federation.

3. The Railway Resettlement story: Recognising the challenges for change and for assessment

The story in this section, of the railway resettlement process, is shared with the intention of illustrating what the challenges are for assessment and learning that come from a conventional donor set of requirements. It highlights various features of social change that make for an awkward fit with standard monitoring and evaluation processes.

3.1. Origins of the Mumbai Urban Transport Project

Mumbai has developed over the last two centuries around its port and its north-south railway lines, which are critical to the life of the city. Constructed in the British colonial period to link the mainland railways to the Bombay Port, the system had become rundown and outdated, and was seriously overcrowded, often carrying two or three times the number of people for which it was designed. Critical slowdowns in response to the shacks along the tracks affected millions of people who used the service and the economy of the entire city. The whole system was in need of huge investment. By the early 1980s, the Government of Maharashtra and Indian Railways decided to undertake the necessary improvements jointly.

In order to fund what became the Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP), which focused not only the railroads but public transport generally in the city, they began to explore a loan from the World Bank. One basic condition for such a loan was relocation and resettlement for all project-affected people – and these were initially estimated at 35,000. Between 1985 and 1995, the World Bank project went into cold storage, as there was no agreement on the resettlement requirement or other procurement demands of the World Bank. But this did not stop action by others to deal with the situation, the first being to meet the state's need for an accurate census of the people requiring relocation.

3.2. The 1988-89 railway enumeration and formation of the RSDF

Based on our successful 1985 pavement dwellers' enumeration, the Alliance was in a position to offer to undertake this census, an offer that was not rejected outright. It was finally agreed that the railways and the Collector's office would participate in the effort, and would check the data before it was deemed official – an unprecedented offer. NSDF agreed to undertake the survey on condition that SPARC would support the formation of a federation of those surveyed, and lobby with the state and Indian Railways for solutions to their concerns.

This was by far our largest enumeration to date. Every structure within 80 feet of the tracks was mapped and numbered, and household and community surveys were undertaken. The data was computerized and then checked by the Mumbai Collector, the office in charge of government property issues. A special officer walked the tracks with the federation teams, as did the estate manager of the railways. When the survey was complete in 1989, we brought out a report called 'Beyond the Beaten Track'.

The communities covered by the survey formed their own Railway Slum Dwellers Federation (RSDF) and began to identify their priorities, the most significant of which was their desire to move away from the tracks. They lived in this noisy, dirty and unsafe environment without the most basic services and with many people killed or injured by the trains each year. Their desperation to be in the city had led people over the years to squat here, dangerous as it was.

Women led the demand for relocation. They wanted to be as close as possible to their present location, in order to hold on to jobs and other ties. Where there was space to

build a wall and move back from the track, they wanted to negotiate this possibility with the state and Indian Railways. In a housing exhibition in 1989 (one of the regular events organised by the federation), they designed and showed the ideal structure they wanted to build wherever land became available. From that day on, the women began to save for their future homes and in 1990 the Alliance began advocating for the relocation of these slums along the railway lines.

3.3. Precedent setters successful and stalled: the Bharat Nagar relocation, the Jan Kalyan cooperative and voluntary moving

Around that time, another opportunity presented itself. A rail link had long been planned to connect the last train stop for Greater Mumbai with the first train stop for Navi Mumbai, a magnet area for the growth of our huge city. But for twenty five years, this vital connection had failed to materialize because a large slum, Bharat Nagar, was right where the station needed to be. The Alliance assisted in negotiating the relocation of Bharat Nagar's residents, demonstrating how the needs of the poor and the city could be reconciled. More than 900 households were to be rehoused in relatively low cost government-built apartments.

However, well over 100 households could not afford these apartments. They formed a cooperative called Jankalyan Society and developed their own innovative strategy: the state provided land and promised infrastructure, and the Alliance supported them in designing, constructing and financing their own houses that would be only one third of the cost of the government-built housing. This experience produced credibility, both within the Alliance and with the government, around the potential for reconciling city and community needs through dialogue and exploration.

The federations wanted to take the process further by addressing the concerns of the RSDF around sanitation and garbage collection. The absence of alternatives meant that residents used the tracks for defecating and dumping garbage, which was gradually corroding the wooden track ties. Though an issue of considerable practical interest to Indian Railways, it had always refused to address it for fear of setting a precedent that would force them deal with similar problems across the country. They claimed that, in any event, no solutions could be developed on railway land.

The Alliance tried to persuade the state to arbitrate in the situation and to present to Indian Railways the possibility of moving the squatters to just beyond the 30 feet safety corridor, where a wall would be built by the state and Indian Railways. This would address both the safety issue and permit faster train service. When the state's Urban Development Department refused to believe that people would actually agree to move, the Alliance located a community of 180 households which volunteered to move their huts beyond the 30 feet zone and build a protective wall – another typical example of precedent setting that was so crucial to break norms and mindsets. A northern NGO was persuaded to contribute to the construction of the wall and the realignment of huts. But discussions stopped there. Government officials argued that there was “no process or policy” for urban relocation because of their fundamental aversion to “giving” benefits to “encroachers”.

3.4. Re-engagement with the World Bank

While these events during the early 1990s laid the groundwork for communication between various important stakeholders, re-engagement of the Government of Maharashtra and Indian Railways with the World Bank only occurred in 1995. Public ire about Mumbai's transport problems certainly fed this engagement. One of many preparatory activities was to draft a policy for the relocation of the railway dwellers.

SPARC and two other NGOs were represented in the drafting committee. The committee accepted some of the tried and tested strategies of the Alliance, among them, community-driven and -managed enumeration. The responsibility for undertaking these surveys was given to the three NGOs represented on the committee. SPARC was to work with communities affected by the railway project and the other two NGOs with those affected by improvements to roads and bridges. But half way through this initial survey, negotiations with the World Bank collapsed again.

3.5. Progress continues with the Kanjurmarg relocation

Meanwhile, by 1997, the relationships between Indian Railways, the Government of Maharashtra and the Alliance were strong. Officials, fed up with the on and off process of the MUTP, wanted to make use of 10 crores (US\$ 2,200,000), which had been allocated for a section of rail improvement, but which remained unutilized due to slum encroachments. In a joint venture, it was agreed that the Alliance would relocate 900 households on land provided by the state, with infrastructure funded by Indian Railways. This agreement was the basis on which SPARC invested 1.37 crores (around US\$ 300,000) to develop the infrastructure using its precedent-setting funds. While the initial 1 crores were reimbursed to SPARC in the next few years, the rest remained outstanding and was only reimbursed to SPARC in early 2007 after five years of seeking this money.

These households needed to move within six months. But housing construction under the existing slum rehabilitation policy³ would take three years so transit housing was to be built as an interim solution. RSDF identified a site in Kanjurmarg, two kilometres from their current dwellings and in 1998 people moved to single room dwellings, while remaining engaged in planning their permanent apartments. This exercise created a 'protocol' of engagement for Indian Railways, the Government of Maharashtra and the Alliance in managing the later relocation. This was yet another example of precedent setting that had become possible after years of strategising, pressure and seeking collaboration.

3.6. Threat of eviction in 1998 and an ally in the World Bank

Later that year, dialogue with World Bank restarted and the larger relocation project was back on track. But a new crisis emerged. A Public Interest Litigation was brought in the high court by citizens' groups seeking the eviction of slum dwellers along the railway in order to expedite train service. SPARC and NSDF became interveners in the litigation on behalf of RSDF. A judgment was reached whereby the state would provide the court with a timetable for relocating slum households, who would not then face evictions.

In January of that year, the project manager of the World Bank's infrastructure division came to check out progress with SPARC and the Alliance. His exploration was refreshingly different from that of previous consulting teams hired by the World Bank, which had routinely claimed the relocation should be led by 'professionals'. This World Bank project manager spent an intensive weekend with RSDF, observed the degree of preparation and organization among the communities and became a committed arbitrator within the World Bank, advocating this new strategy for managing relocations. He was convinced, too, by the gradual but sustained scaling up which had taken place in the course of the Jan Kalyan and Kanjurmarg relocations.

³ See the slum rehabilitation policy of the government of Maharashtra 1995.

3.7. Dealing with yet another eviction crisis

At this point, the Harbour line, one of the three north-south railway lines with the most serious encroachments, had almost reached the point where it needed to be closed down. Relocation for this line had been intended as the last phase of the project. However, the Alliance suggested that if relocation was started there, where its federation was the strongest, it would immediately improve the quality of rail service and simultaneously demonstrate how relocation would work.

Although one eviction had been warded off, in March 2002 the Indian Railways started demolishing 3000 house structures along the Harbour line, claiming that they had been built after 1995 (state law protected dwellings built prior to this date.). The Alliance immediately demonstrated that 99% of these structures had already been identified for relocation as part of the MUTP. After five days, the state government decreed that the demolitions had to stop. As restitution, the Alliance demanded the immediate relocation of these households to all currently available government-constructed buildings, which would house about 1900 households. For the remaining households, land was to be made available for transit tenements to be constructed by the Alliance as in Kanjurmarg. The World Bank saw this as a breach of their procurement procedures on many fronts, but was finally persuaded to accept this expedited process, and the communities were assisted in their relocation.

3.8. The major railroad relocation

Since the early 1990s, various preliminary relocations had taken place, each larger than the one before – the Jan Kalyan group, the households that moved behind the wall, those that moved to Kanjurmarg, and most recently the evicted households from along the Harbour line. Between 2001 and 2005, another 18,000 households moved from their homes beside the tracks, most of them to Mankhurd, about four station stops away. Some moved into seven storey apartment blocks, previously built and purchased from the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority; and some moved into Alliance-built transit housing, awaiting the construction of further buildings. The level of organization and preparation had been intense, with clear processes for any grievances. This massive relocation went smoothly. People even demolished their own homes before moving on, leaving the land cleared for 30 feet on either side of the tracks.

Although the transition went as well as could be hoped, with so many households involved, transitional problems inevitably emerged. Many people had to travel further to work each day or to look for work in the new locale; local schools were quickly filled and many children had to travel each day back to schools at the old site; ration shops were initially hard to access as were hospitals and post offices; and although everyone had secure housing with basic amenities, most families were unused to paying for utilities, so electricity bills, for example, were a challenge requiring adjustment. But most people were pleased with the relocation, and with the self-governance processes which gave them the framework for addressing their new challenges.

3.9. Never a dull moment - new challenges for the Alliance

Up to this point, the process had been led by a constructive relationship with the state and the railways. While each of the agencies involved challenged the others, there was mutual respect and appreciation of the roles and functions that each served. The Alliance's ability to move in response to events and to support relocation without police or court intervention was highly appreciated by the authorities. In turn, state officials and others had maintained a measure of flexibility and responsiveness, and many challenges had been dealt with based on the mutual trust that had emerged.

Then suddenly the mood changed. Political parties saw the relocation sites as an opportunity to create vote banks. They seized on the initial difficulties faced by relocated households and held them up as an indication of failure, publicly highlighting the concerns of disgruntled individuals. Government distanced itself, saying that SPARC was responsible. World Bank officials, never entirely comfortable with the unconventional style of the Alliance, sought 'more professional' responses (hiring more consultants), implying that the initial relocation discomforts could have been better 'managed'.

Meanwhile, the Alliance, at the behest of government, had taken on a road widening project, a component added to the MUTP after the project was underway. A group of shopkeepers located adjacent to the project and unhappy with the suggested relocation site, wrote to the inspection panel of the World Bank seeking its intervention. A huge furore ensued. Despite the inspection panel's claim that it was only reviewing the role of World Bank staff, an assumption arose that the project would be changed. A well-known activist joined the cause, claiming to be the champion of the shopkeepers and also of the relocated households. There were allusions to rampant corruption within SPARC that required detailed scrutiny. SPARC willingly opened its books, with no irregularities found after nine months of fiduciary scrutiny. However, the World Bank failed to acknowledge this publicly, leaving local actors free to discredit the Alliance and to use these allegations for quick political entry into the relocation sites.

There are still 1500 households waiting for relocation. At the time of writing, the much touted partnership is non-functional – state government and the World Bank treat the Alliance as one of many sub-contractors engaged to deliver services. SPARC's senior staff, given their preference, would have angrily exited this process. But NSDF insists on managing the situation on their own terms, moving people when and where they can, constantly reminding us of the value of the process. Not only have 18,000 families achieved a secure home, but there is the basis for this to happen for millions of others. Despite changes in the relationship with other MUTP partners, almost all large infrastructure projects currently taken up by state and central government discuss their relocation plans with the Alliance. Through the international network of federations, Shack Dwellers International, this process is now being explored by several other countries. In Kenya, Philippines and Thailand, similar processes have begun for those who encroach on railway lands.

4. Conclusions

4.1. *A different vision of assessment and learning*

So what does our history, and the MUTP story of persistence, precedents, dialogue, disappointments, shifting mindsets and relationships tell us about the need for changes in assessment and learning?

This could be reported as a relatively simple story of communities, supported by SPARC and the federations working in a constructive partnership with government at different levels, that show it is possible to manage relocation quickly and effectively, with a minimum of problems. In conventional terms, the success would be recorded as numbers relocated sustainably with minimal costs and conflict.

However, without the full examination of the depth of the relationships of trust that evolved over years, the risk taking and creativity that produced workable innovations, the 'toolkit' processes that were refined and systematized over time, the story is a thin one. If the years of working and waiting, of two steps forward and one back, are not valued and not given their due, then the final resulting success is not properly understood. This not

only fails to recognise the difficulties, tensions, triumphs and very essence of development, it then fails to help us change our understanding of development – perpetuating strategies and policies that have stood in the way of change that has benefited the poor. We need to see the full complexity and non-linear nature of such social change processes if we are to learn how to ‘do development’ differently.

When evaluating development success, do we seek to count the number of people who were relocated, or to understand the experiences that made that possible? Do assessments focus on tracking the number of those with skills to do accurate surveys, or is change about the political awareness, self-confidence and relationships that doing a survey has led to and that enable these communities and households to deal with the new challenges, to tackle poverty from this new vantage point, and to serve as an inspiration and resource for others?

In the experiences of SPARC and the Alliance in general, evaluation is embedded in relationships and dialogues. It emerges from the continual interaction that surrounds the intense processes of defining visions, identifying strategies, daring to think of innovations, working side-by-side in surveys and lobby activities. Surveys are not counting exercises but rather confidence-building and political awareness-raising processes that are the foundation of sustained change.

Internally during the past 15 years, learning exchanges have taken place between these communities and residents from other cities and countries. The first step of assessment is what and how this social change development strategy and process as described here is communicated and what its impact is on those who give and take.

Scaling of the *process* is another critical element of the assessment... and scaling will only happen if the elements of the strategy is seen as useful to others, can be picked up by them and transferred, and modified and adapted to various situations. To track this transfer and where it goes and what it seeds is a vital element of our assessment. Any strategy or process which is not robust to move to scale in its location or move and be transported is of no value and is put aside. Sometimes such ideas may be before their time and work later. For example, the women in pavement slums designed community toilets for their settlement which excited the federations. However, the state was not responsive in the 1980s and 90s. Since 2000, however, many cities and state governments are exploring these options again and inviting communities to do this together.

Clearly the demands and expectations of the communities have to be accepted by the city or state and some agency to produce the resources. The federations review and assess how and where to advocate for this policy, very carefully laying a strategy for opening up space, seeking sympathetic officers and demonstrating the value added of the investments that the communities bring. These are time-consuming, on and off. forward and backward movements that are reviewed over time. The Alliance has now begun to see patterns and identify mechanisms that have made the community capacity building period shorter, and more importantly, demonstrated that the large federation can help new groups leverage the track record and credibility of other groups in their negotiations. Demonstrating how it happened elsewhere is a valuable asset of the Alliance and one it shares nationally and internationally. This is tracked and assessed very carefully.

Every process produces leadership and each of these groups demonstrate their capacity to be trainers as they mentor and assist others. This huge pool of leaders who can train others nationally and internationally are also vital in the assessment process.

4.2. *What a new vision asks of donors*

It is now 22 years since we set up SPARC, a great deal has remained the same and a great deal has changed. One thing that has not changed is our frustration at having to explain who we are, what we do, why we do what we do, and how we do it. Over time our articulation (so it seems) has improved, our tangible outcomes, sphere of influence has increased and our ability to advocate the roles of the urban poor in development have certainly grown a great deal.

Yet we still have to participate in a donor driven evaluation process whose assumptions and values remain different from ours. So while we seek to participate in these processes because we want to reconcile what we believe in with those who give us money, because we do feel accountable to that process, the clash of perspectives and values emerges every single time. This process has resulted in tensions and anxieties between those who have tried very hard to support us with grants and friendships. In one case, it ended with funding drying up all together, in other instances we somehow managed to resurrect the relationships. But clearly the basis on which these reviews, assessments and evaluations (whatever they are termed) are made, they end up producing a painful mismatch of values, expectations and assumptions that does not help the poor, hinders the work of the Alliance, and keeps the donors locked into a limited perspective.

Donors can make an important contribution to such development processes that recognise the value of local social change such as described here. It requires them to loosen their focus on pre-planned interventions that lay out years ahead of time what is to be achieved, how and by when. It requires them to open their minds to the possibility of change happening in non-linear and unpredictable ways, and that social change occurs perhaps more slowly than they thought. It means allowing trust in the underlying principles of a methodology and a partnership to guide funding arrangements through bumpy patches.

In a very practical sense, what our experiences and the MUTP story tells is that donors should allow for different models of evaluation and learning to guide such social change processes. We urge them to consider the following principles as central:

- *A learning perspective which has continuity.* The Alliance and its work represent new and innovative bottom-up strategies that donors need to feel excited about and of which they want to understand the internal dynamics. To do this, there needs to be some sustainability of presence. In all donor relations, we have no continuous relationships and often have a project officer challenging a strategy accepted by his or her predecessor which formed the basis of funding.
- *Real management of risks.* Real development and empowerment is about taking risks. How the poor take risks, how development assistance helps those who take risks and how these get reflected on the donors has to be deeply discussed and understood. Rarely is there time and opportunity for such reflections.
- *Understanding the real architecture of scale.* All donors have to demonstrate impact at scale to their constituency. Yet there is a huge differential in the range of frameworks of how it's produced, how it will be sustained and who drives it.
- *Understanding the deep politics of development and change.* Unfortunately, 'management' as understood in a well-developed country in the North forms the template of how projects as well as social movements seeking change are supposed to be managed. Efficiency and management systems alone cannot produce these changes. Building community capacities to undertake these processes and manage them demand different strategies from professional NGO-managing projects.

- *Finally, there is very little explored in the capacity of these southern social movements to come and present their stories in the midst of donor support audiences. Reports rarely bring the reality of what the processes are in these poor neighbourhoods. We know that much of the pressure that donors cast on us comes from their constituencies. So who better than the community leaders to share their stories and for the resource providers to understand these realities?*

A model of assessment and learning that is based on these principles would reflect much more accurately the type of social change development processes that we have come to see are those that can make the difference that the poorest need. This is a process which we call **the golden goose**. It is that charting of the process, how it multiplies, how many can explore their demands through it, and maintaining a certain quality of capacity building and sustained pressure on the state to engage with communities. Each of these outcomes is a golden egg. The constant focus on the egg, rather than the nurturing of the goose is the crisis of development. With few insights about how to understand it and measure its level of maturity and sustainability, external assessment processes are too rigid to understand these dynamics. Sadly, the goose is often killed due to lack of understanding.