



## V. POOR NO MORE: REDUCING POVERTY THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

This session comprised a specific case study of Colombo and a review of a range of poverty-reduction initiatives and experiences across Asia.

The point that poverty can be substantially and effectively reduced only through partnerships among various stakeholder groups—the local government, private business sector, civil society, and indeed, the poor communities themselves—was reinforced by the presentation on the initiatives of the City of Colombo. The Mayor of Colombo, Mr. Omar Kamil, outlined briefly the urbanization and development scenario in Sri Lanka and went on to describe the initiatives of the city of Colombo in reducing poverty.

Most of the under-served settlements have been encouraged to form community-based organizations called community development councils. The community leaders are encouraged to meet council staff weekly to obtain attention on the services required. Mr. Kamil described a program wherein Rs1.5 million has been made available to each of the 53 elected councilors for provision of services in under-served settlements.

Dr. Mary Racelis gave an in-depth overview of poverty reduction initiatives in Asian cities. She underscored and illustrated the fact that involvement of urban poor people in the process of consultation for development decision making is a time-tested measure to enhance the appropriateness and sustainability of any actions. It is imperative,

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therefore, to strengthen mechanisms for on-going, systematic consultations with the urban poor, NGOs, and other civil society supporters. She emphasized that local and national governments must perceive and treat the urban poor as citizens deserving support and dignified treatment, in order to be able to tap their initiatives effectively and develop win-win solutions to problems of urban poverty.

Examples from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, in particular, highlighted that for poverty alleviation efforts to succeed, there must be a shift in traditional bureaucratic approaches to contemporary management orientation. The onus of initiating and building partnerships lies most definitely with city governments. The city leadership must have a clearly articulated vision, well-defined goals, and a willingness to engage stakeholders in a "dialogue for development."

**OMAR Z. KAMIL**

Mayor, Colombo, Sri Lanka

The City of Colombo is the financial and commercial center of Sri Lanka, probably because the port of Colombo for the last one or two centuries served as the hub of the import-export economy of the country. Colombo is a coastal town, 37.25 square kilometers in extent. It has a resident population of nearly 1 million people and a daily transient population of 500,000, who commute for commercial, educational, and other purposes.

The Colombo Municipal Council, a democratically elected body, is entrusted with the task of local administration, and is not only the oldest local authority in Sri Lanka but also one of the oldest in South Asia.

## Colombo and Poverty Reduction Efforts

Colombo has launched a number of poverty reduction exercises in which the participatory approach has been of focal importance. About 400,000 residents live in settlements whose identity is marked by inadequate services and small plot size, although this group enjoys a reasonable income through various means.

As a means of mobilizing community interest, most of these settlements have been encouraged to form community-based organizations called community development councils (CDCs). The community leaders are encouraged to meet council staff weekly to obtain attention on the services required. The mayor presides over monthly meetings in the Town Hall to discuss development needs and every Wednesday, the mayor, the commissioner, heads of departments, and other officers are available at one location to bring concerted attention on the multidimensional problems of the community members.

Some of the large-scale development efforts launched in the city failed to recognize and respond to the smaller-scale problems of the community in the settlements. In order to provide and improve basic services for them, the council has now made available Rs1.5 million to each of the 53 elected councilors. They can now identify projects in low-income areas, which are not necessarily vested as council property, to provide facilities such as drinking water, sewerage connections, toilets, paving of roads with concrete slabs, metalling of roads, electrical lighting for common areas, and many others. By 1999, 627 projects had been implemented under this scheme and by the end of 2000 the number should exceed 1,000.

The Council also undertakes welfare measures aimed at major identified public health issues. The following welfare measures are provided

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until such time that the settlements have adequate essential infrastructure:

- free western medicine dispensaries;
- free *ayurvedic* dispensaries;
- free maternity homes;
- free community centers;
- subsidized reception halls; and
- free midday meals for children attending religious schools.

Other projects are undertaken to provide the poor with better chances for social mobility, including sewing training centers, educational counseling, career guidance, preschools, day-care centers, study halls, information technology facilities, and a free library service.

## Conclusion

*A major gap in the system to reduce poverty has been the lack of mechanisms to identify and respond to needs.*

Poverty in Colombo has numerous facets that continually change due to social, political, and financial reasons. A major gap in the system to reduce poverty has been the lack of mechanisms to identify and respond to needs. The informal sector has to be recognized as an important part of the population and incorporated into the mainstream of the economy and culture. The barriers to education, entertainment, asset ownership, and other fields should be opened to them.

## MARY RACELIS

Director, Institute of Philippine Culture  
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Those closest to the problem are best able to offer workable solutions. This adage has by now become widely accepted in social change circles, corresponding as it does to the principle of people's

participation in decision making. If poverty is to be overcome, the voices of Asia's urban poor, who make up one third to more than one half of metropolitan populations, need to be heard systematically on policy formulation, planning, implementation, and evaluation of government actions impinging on their lives.

These assertions highlight several basic features of good governance—accountability, transparency, efficiency, and equity through participation. Moreover, the involvement of urban poor citizens in governance enhances the sustainability of any agreed-upon actions to improve their lot. As distinguished urban specialists, David Satterthwaite and the late Jorge Hardoy, have emphasized, "The most important resource for the future city is the knowledge, ingenuity and organizational capacity of citizens themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Government and private-sector leaders aiming at overcoming poverty in their cities, therefore, are well advised to strengthen mechanisms for ongoing, systematic consultations with the urban poor and their supporters among NGOs and other civil society groups. This does not mean that poor people's views must prevail under any and all circumstances. Rather it implies that government entities are responsible for leveling the playing field and encouraging disadvantaged communities to negotiate as peers around their own interests. In that way, they stand a chance of gaining their fair share of assets, information, and a decent life.

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## **Reinforcing Multisectoral Partnerships in Megacities**

But how do urban governments in rapidly growing metropolitan regions develop principled

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<sup>1</sup> Anon. 1997. *Asia-Pacific (AP) 2000, Cities and Citizens; the AP 2000 Experience*. Manila: Inter Press Service, Asia-Pacific.

partnerships with the most disadvantaged groups of poor people? How can community-level interaction between government and people take place in the context of megacity settings? It is appropriate to recall here the famous adage, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." One must resolutely resist the temptation to find the scale of the problem so daunting as to invite a kind of paralysis or inertia. Rather, one simply takes the first step. This means government officials periodically meeting face-to-face with a range of poor men and women in their neighborhoods, since vulnerable groups feel most at ease in their home turf.

This sets the stage for building and strengthening community initiatives. Government officials need not, indeed should not, offer anything initially, but simply listen and learn. This crucial process is followed by developing in an interactive way government responses that take people's concerns seriously, that produce results closely adhering to the constituents' wishes, and that build these processes into mega-urban administrative systems.

Fortunately, the late-20th century provided ample evidence of urban poor communities in Asian cities with an already sound track-record for undertaking self-help activities. These may have developed under their own aegis, through partnerships with community-based NGOs or, occasionally, academic groups, or alternatively, with enlightened government entities. Whatever the case, successful partnerships take time and a good deal of interaction before reaching levels of genuine trust and collaboration. What often starts out as a contentious relationship, fuelled by suspicion, distrust, and frustration on all sides, can—through good will, exploratory actions, and flexibility—turn into fruitful partnerships. Citizens satisfied with their government's performance offer proof that the latter is doing things right.

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To overcome poverty in Asian cities, mayors need to center their attention and resources firmly on the poor. When poverty is defined as the lack of something, like housing, credit, water, and sanitation, governments tend to initiate welfare programs of service delivery that provide basic income or food, and enhance access to services, credit, shelter, and skills. Efficient bureaucracies offer simple and clear objectives, identify the poor, and focus on their needs with some precision, and create exclusive delivery systems targeting the neediest.

If, however, poverty is seen in its broader multidimensional aspects of powerlessness and deprivation, people empowerment sets the terms for service delivery. In this case, NGOs usually take the lead in helping people learn how to articulate their views, decide on and take the requisite actions, and gain a sense of control over their future. They organize people's involvement in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of the program, and work toward its sustainability. This experience increases poor people's capacities to tackle local problems in increasingly sophisticated ways as issues grow in complexity<sup>2</sup>.

People's participation in urban poverty alleviation covers a wide range of community-based activities in Asia, some in partnership with government. They include construction of housing; upgrading of local infrastructure for water; sewerage, drainage systems, and roads; and periodically mobilizing for community clean-ups. Local poor groups have organized ways to counteract illness among their infants and children through immunization campaigns; improve nutrition, health education, and early child development; and

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<sup>2</sup> Shubert, Clarence. 1996. Overview. In *Building Partnerships for Urban Poverty Alleviation; Community-Based Programmes in Asia*, edited by Clarence Shubert. Bangkok: United Nations Centre for Human Settlements Urban Management Programme. p.1-22.

mosquito spraying during dengue outbreaks. They have warded off threats to safety and well-being, like child abuse, idleness, and drug-experimentation among out-of-school youth; violence against women; alcoholism and joblessness among men; and depression, deteriorating health, and a declining sense of self-worth among older persons.

Together they have accumulated immense reservoirs of social capital by building chapels, temples or shrines; sharing assets, skills, and contacts with powerful people; setting up savings clubs; organizing participation in the festivals that renew family and community bonds; engaging in reciprocal favors like borrowing and lending money, food, chairs, and eating or cooking instruments; accompanying a friend to the police station to bail out a drunken husband; assisting neighbors during births, marriages, homecomings, and deaths; settling fights and other community conflicts; and building up their collective firefighting and policing capabilities. The intensity of interaction in urban poor settlements generates communication links that inform households of impending evictions, land acquisition opportunities, job openings, the arrival of important people, and impending government plans for the settlement, especially if they pose threats like demolition and eviction.

Governments that recognize the importance of community bonds and build on their strengths are most likely to nurture effective and lasting people-NGO-government partnerships. The advantages of these links lie in the "ownership" and ready implementation by community residents of programs aimed at transforming them into income-earning families with satisfactory levels of living and enhanced well-being. In the process, their sense of commitment to the broader concept of community encourages them to work out ways of voluntarily keeping public spaces clean, attractive, and danger-free; seeing to the upkeep of local infrastructure like

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footpaths, meeting centers, public latrines, drainage canals, and garbage disposal systems; and helping childless older people survive.

## Learning from People and NGOs

Asia offers abundant examples of community-initiated and -sustained self-help activities and, fortunately, more and more instances of governments willing to back these efforts. They set the tone for "the informal city," a concept that emphasizes the dominance of informal-sector activities that serve not only poor people and communities but Asian cities as a whole. The economically better-off formal sector could not operate without the wide range of cheap products manufactured in small slum establishments, the recycling of goods through an extensive second- and third-hand market, and the availability of services ranging from domestic help to construction labor, from small-scale transport to street vendors and their wide array of products conveniently and cheaply furnished<sup>3</sup>. The informal city in which poor men and women live is the context in which stakeholder partnerships flourish. A few examples illustrate this point.

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Focusing on the poor and enabling them to become poverty-free by 2005 drives the Grameen Trust's goals for two thirds of its estimated 3 million member-borrowers in over 26 countries. This large Bangladesh NGO knows from experience that utilizing people's own criteria for success in poverty reduction results in programs most useful to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Hasan, Arif. 1999. A Case Study of the Urban Basic Services Programme in Sukkur, Sindh Province, Pakistan. In *Building Partnerships for Urban Poverty Alleviation; Community Based Programmes in Asia*, edited by Clarence Shubert. Bangkok: United Nations Centre for Human Settlements Urban Management Programme. p.93-126.

A group of poor Bangladeshis worked out their 10 criteria for a poverty-free life in this way<sup>4</sup>:

- a tin-roofed house;
- beds or cots for all family members;
- access to safe drinking water;
- access to a sanitary latrine;
- school attendance by all school-aged children;
- sufficient warm clothing for the winter;
- mosquito nets;
- a home vegetable garden;
- no food shortage even during the most difficult time of a very difficult year; and
- sufficient income-earning opportunities for all adult members of the family.

In India, an alliance involving the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC), the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), and *Mahila Milan* (MM) showed the Government that if it turned land for low-income dwellings over to poor people, the latter could build cheaper and better houses than the Government could. As a result, pavement dwellers and railway informal settlers in Mumbai organized five projects that acquired land and built homes for 3,551 families. In Sholapur, two projects obtained land for 1,184 families; in Pune, three projects housed 1,301 families; in Kanpur, four projects for 486 families; and in Bangalore, two projects for 316 families. In other cities, poor groups showed remarkable creativity by hiring a contractor to construct a medium-rise building and selling 24 of its flats to middle-income families, thereby enabling 74 poor families to obtain their flats free.

In the first decade of its existence, the alliance learned a great deal as it tried new

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<sup>4</sup> Yunus, Muhammad. 1999. Action Plan 1998-2005: Microcredit—Most Powerful Weapon to Fight Poverty. *SELAVIP Newsletter—Journal of Low-Income Housing in Asia and the World* April: p. 37-39.

approaches to housing large populations. Where they once had to plead with the Government for decent shelter, today communities demand land tenure and access to loans for self-help housing. In constructing these homes, they have challenged existing norms and building standards that used to exclude poor people from decent housing. The alliance transformed the mindset and accompanying behavior of poor people by (1) creating organizational capability in their settlements and linkages between the community and outside stakeholders; (2) building capacities and locating resources within and outside communities to facilitate problem-solving processes; and (3) enhancing people's abilities to negotiate with city, state, and other officials for long-term solutions<sup>5</sup>.

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In General Santos City, Philippines, centralized top-down decision making during the dictatorial Marcos era of the 1970s and 1980s resulted in forced evictions of many urban poor families to four relocation sites far from the city center. The lack of basic facilities, distance from livelihood sources, and inhuman demolitions so incensed the relocatees that they formed solid alliances to resist eviction. When the city government ignored their suggestions for alternative sites, they sought the intervention of national authorities and, to illustrate their determination, invaded the alternate site. This show of power and a new city administration more open to consultations with the people led to a land acquisition scheme negotiated with urban landowners through KPS, a support NGO.

The new city mayor acted favorably on an appeal from the people's organization that a nearby government site, originally intended for a nursery and city jail, be transformed into a resettlement site.

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<sup>5</sup> SPARC/MM/NSDF. 1999. Housing projects of the SPARC/NSDF/MM Alliance in 1998. *SELAVIP Newsletter—Journal of Low-income Housing in Asia and the World* April: 55-60.

Her decision to accredit KPS as the task arm of the local government's Urban Poor Council boosted that NGO's credibility, especially among landowners, and facilitated cooperation among the city, community associations, and the KPS. By the time the voluntary relocation took place, the landowner had installed a water system and donated a soap-making machine for income generation; the city engineer had made his trucks available for the move; the city agriculturist had provided fruit tree seedlings for the new settlement; and the city Economic Management and Cooperative Development Office was organizing the community association into a cooperative for soap making and related activities.

By 1995, the city had established the City Housing and Land Management Office and the Urban and Development Housing Act Coordinating Council. It implemented 12 land acquisition projects with KPS, furnishing financial assistance, equipment, and infrastructure for the relocation site, and engaging in land-dispute resolution. At the same time, the contributions of the community and KPS made the project affordable to the city government. "Moving out day" became a festive occasion attended by city officials and well covered by the local media, as the people transferred to their new settlement. The partnership of government-KPS-people's organization continued to prosper, illustrating among other things that innovative, pro-poor local governments could forge effective partnerships without having to wait for national government initiatives to get underway<sup>6</sup>.

In Thailand, the Government allocated US\$50 million in 1992 to initiate the Urban Poor Development Program under the National Economic and Social Development Plan. A new Urban Community Development Office (UCDO)

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<sup>6</sup> Akazawa, Akira. 1999. Local Initiatives in Land Acquisition in General Santos City. *SELAVIP Newsletter—Journal of Low-Income Housing in Asia and the World* April: 135-142.

was to implement the program under the National Housing Authority (NHA), yet remain independent of the NHA by virtue of having its own project committee and administrative system. Its Board was composed of three government officials, three community leaders, two NGOs, and a representative from the private sector. With Government cast as one of the important stakeholders rather than the sole decision maker, genuine partnering arrangements evolved.

Given the UCDO's autonomy and its dynamic people-oriented leadership, the community-based organizations (CBOs) thrived. People's capabilities were recognized and reinforced through land identification, housing loans, saving and credit associations, and various training programs in community planning and management. UCDO's role was that of facilitator, while communities formulated and implemented their plans. They generated substantial funds for development and decided how these were to be allocated. Here again, one finds that community self-managed projects are quicker, cheaper, more flexible, and show better repayment rates than government housing schemes.

Not all went smoothly, however. NGOs and CBOs whose previous orientation had featured confrontational modes against the central Government had as much difficulty adjusting to the spirit of partnership and decentralization as did local government officials. Conservative rules and regulations governing existing bureaucratic structures, exacerbated by turf-conscious ministries, proved to be incompatible with the new bottom-up processes and dynamic community institutions. A great deal of creativity, good will, and negotiation

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had to come into play, often spurred by NGOs, in order to reorient the recalcitrant bureaucracy<sup>7</sup>.

In Cambodia, participatory urban development among urban informal settlers in low-lying slum areas of Phnom Penh had communities doing site planning and selecting infrastructure options. The Municipality of Phnom Penh constructed the major storm drain, purchased land for relocation, and undertook earth filling, while residents agreed to work on drainage and garbage removal, water supply, land improvement, stronger walkways, street lighting, and savings and credit schemes. To affirm their agreements, Government, community, and the NGO jointly signed a community contract detailing infrastructure service contributions<sup>8</sup>.

Nepal's Lonhla Drainage Construction Project, which envisioned a sewerage system that included the building of toilets to serve a lower-caste community of butcher (*khadgi*) families, brought strong protests from neighboring farmers. They feared that the butchers would dump their animal wastes and the remains of slaughtered buffaloes in the sewerage ditch. Several meetings between the two communities, NGOs, and ward personnel were held at which the engineers explained the project dimensions, answered questions, and reviewed a range of issues with all parties until people were satisfied enough to forge agreements. In working out the frictions that inevitably emerged in the course of implementing this agreement, the engineers agreed to reposition the sewer line. Each set of stakeholders gained a

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<sup>7</sup> Boonyabancha, Somsook. 1998. Enabling Communities through Savings and Integrated Credit Schemes as a Strategy for Dealing with Poverty Alleviation. In *Urban Governance and Poverty Alleviation in Southeast Asia; Trends and Prospects*. Emma Porio, and contributors. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University. p. 172-181.

<sup>8</sup> Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. 1998. A Trip to Cambodia. *SELAVIP Newsletter; Journal of Low-income Housing in Asia and the World*: 47-48.

clearer understanding of what its particular role was to be. The municipal corporation and the ward committee rendered financial support and undertook coordinated construction in the communities with the cooperation of the residents. The latter provided labor and materials for constructing the toilets, the butchers refrained from dumping wastes into the canal, and the NGO coordinated the multistakeholder activities. When the Government immediately repaired a water pipe its work crews had damaged, its credibility rose. The project saw relatively smooth sailing after that. Its successful completion illustrates the importance of reinforcing trust among the stakeholders, especially the intended beneficiaries.

Pakistan's world-renowned Orangi Pilot Project, detailed elsewhere in this volume, has demonstrated how an informal settlement of 900,000 people living in 94,122 houses in the hills west of Karachi made dramatic changes for the better to their communities. Contributing their own funds and labor, low-income families built flush latrines in their homes, laid underground sewerage pipelines in their lanes and maintained the neighborhood intermediate collector drain. Large-scale treatment plants and sewerage lines were constructed under government aegis. Such fruitful internal-external collaboration brings maximum benefits to the success of such projects.

Equally impressive examples of how significantly empowered groups can contribute to upgrading urban settings appear everywhere in Asia. While they give cause for rejoicing, one cannot ignore the darker side of the picture: genuine partnerships still remain the exception rather than the rule. Most urban officials continue to adopt stances ranging from passive noncooperation at best to outright retaliation against communities that dare exert claims over services, asset sharing, and information.

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Partnerships between initially hostile stakeholders like CBOs and government entities or landowners are not easily forged. Typically, they require a great deal of patience, a modicum of trust, and large doses of mutual respect. Modes of interaction may feature extensive negotiation, argument, and protest, and considerable pressure from one side or the other. In the process, government officials lament the perceived shortcomings of NGOs, charging them with everything from naivete and ignorance of government policies and procedures, to deliberately misleading community groups and to being communist agents!

While the first generation of rural-urban migrants 30 years ago may have tolerated neglect and succumbed to government-developer-led forced evictions, happy simply to have some kind of toe-hold in the city, their urban-born children are proving less submissive and more demanding—in the manner of true urbanites. Over the past decades, more and more of them have organized ways to improve their surroundings and build up the social capital of collaborative, helping behavior that brings about infrastructure improvement, establishes locally-managed safety measures, and enhances neighborly interaction and quality of life. When local and national governments support rather than repress these initiatives, they benefit from an enormous reservoir of energy, talent, and commitment that is an asset to any city administration.

Yet, all too often, it is only when communities are organized, informed, and aware of their rights that government departments are forced to respond and grudgingly turn their rhetoric about poverty alleviation into reality.

## Principled Partnerships to Overcome Urban Poverty

The wide-ranging cases cited above of successful community action, heightened by collaborative problem solving with government and private-sector groups, yield important insights for overcoming poverty. These can help reorient government approaches to promoting multistakeholder partnerships and alliances that benefit the poor.

While many guidelines already exist<sup>9</sup>, it is important to ground them in the emerging realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century megacities as well as in rapidly growing secondary cities and towns. The major imperative is to foster mechanisms enabling the citizenry to mobilize on the basis of community or street/lane clusters, neighborhood blocks, and local political units, and that systematically facilitate people-friendly access to higher local and national officials. Included here is everything from traditional face-to-face communication between people and politicians/government bureaucrats, on the one hand, to well-staffed community relations offices and computerized city services, on the other.

In Andhra Pradesh, India, for example, computerized municipal governments can now issue permits and certificates to their constituents in a manner of minutes, where formerly the latter had to wait days or weeks. Corruption was rife and the inefficient system particularly victimized the poor, who had to keep returning to follow up the papers. Oppressed by officious bureaucrats seeking bribes "to locate their files" and facing the prospect of yet another day's earnings lost, the defenseless poor client would have to pay the price. Today, citizens can complain about corrupt officials and

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<sup>9</sup> See Racelis, Mary. 1999. Cities for Twenty-First Century People. *Regional Development Dialogue (RDD)*. Nagoya, Japan: United Nations Centre for Regional Development 20(1): 1-15.

practices at the regular quarterly community consultations that all officials are required to conduct. There, government representatives and their constituents review the commitments made during previous visits and assess progress in their implementation. Lagging officials are taken to task for inaction or slow responses by the community and eventually by their supervisors as well.

The London-based City Development Strategies Initiative has identified 18,000 key figures in the largest 500 cities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. They form a network furnishing a monthly database for sharing important information among urban authorities worldwide. Available on electronic mail are case studies, expert views, examples of best practices, and information on plans, projects, and opportunities related to cities and urbanization (E-mail: [info@citydev.org](mailto:info@citydev.org) and Internet: [www.citydev.org](http://www.citydev.org)).

### **Lessons learned**

- Urban poor communities worldwide have the capacity to organize themselves around issues of common concern and take responsible action to promote their well-being and that of the city as a whole.
- Partnerships between government entities, people's or community organizations, and NGOs require time, personal and institutional commitment, and a problem-solving approach to achieve the levels of mutual respect and trust needed for success and sustainability.
- Urban governments aiming at poverty eradication need to understand and appreciate people's efforts at improving their lives, to listen to their voices, and support their proposals for government participation in their developmental activities.

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- Urban and national government entities that perceive the urban poor as citizens deserving support and dignified treatment rather than as problems or as undesirable, undeserving residents, will be better able to tap people's initiatives effectively and work out win-win solutions to local problems of urban poverty.
- Urban poor groups lack information on government procedures, laws and ordinances, and technical requirements in order to move ahead successfully on their initiatives; when they overcome this gap, often in partnership with NGOs, they move forward quickly.
- Identifying the interests of other stakeholders, like private business, media, labor unions, religious institutions, academic organizations, and others, and drawing them into consultative processes improve multistakeholder partnerships.
- Communities and neighborhoods are not homogeneous, being made up of diverse groups with differential levels of power. The more vulnerable and least empowered among them, who deserve special attention in participatory governance, are the poorest of the poor, women, children and youth, older persons, disabled persons, ethnic and religious minorities, and other marginalized groups.
- Despite their often disadvantaged personal situations, urban poor women make up a large proportion of strong leaders and members of community organizations, and sustain the greatest interest in pursuing activities to improve the lives of their families and communities.
- Important as people's participation in governance is for poverty eradication, the structural causes of poverty and increasing

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disparities between rich and poor on the national and global scene likewise demand serious attention.

### **Orienting Urban Governments toward Poverty Eradication**

Remembering the lessons already cited, urban mayors interested in working toward poverty-free cities can take a number of actions through partnerships with people, NGOs, other civil society groups, and business. Included in this roster are local and national governance mechanisms able to respond to, and support, strong participation of the organized urban poor in decisions about their communities, their cities, their nation, and their world. This calls for mayors and city officials who prioritize the needs and voices of the poor, and serve notice to their staff that performance evaluations will focus on their adherence to poverty-oriented criteria.

#### *Pro-poor governance*

*Of great help are well-staffed, people-friendly, community relations offices in city hall.*

Pro-poor orientation means more frequent visits to low-income communities for discussions with residents and implementation of their recommendations. Of great help are well-staffed, people-friendly, community relations offices in city hall, where people feel welcome to raise issues, seek redress, and obtain information related to their community needs. Also important are budgetary allocations by local councils giving priority to basic services in poor communities like clean water, sanitation, health, drainage, family planning, education, housing, site upgrading, recreation, anti-pollution measures, and environmental considerations. Linking neighborhood committees with their counterparts on the city or municipal council will allow better sharing of resources,

especially access to land, and will highlight the importance of public services, including street lights, public telephones, postal services, convenient transport, police precincts and patrols, and fire fighting equipment in the area.

Training neighborhood leaders in the intricacies of public administration and finance, and demystifying information and other forms of new technology will greatly expand the rapport between people and a modernizing government. Community radio and television, and locally accessible websites can disseminate key information. Indeed, the entire process of legislation, planning, and budgeting needs to be open and shared, with public hearings and their agenda announced widely and well in advance.

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Drop-in centers for street and working children offering bathing facilities, a bed for the night, health care, job training, counseling, and scholarship programs to keep working children in school even as they continue to help support their families, will minimize their drift toward becoming full-time street children. Without this kind of attention, they face increasing alienation from their families and the prospect of being lured into criminal gangs, prostitution, and drug syndicates. A special desk at the police station staffed by trained police women, social workers, and counselors catering to women and children in conflict with the law further reduces victimization and alienation.

Providing credit, training, and marketing assistance for small-scale entrepreneurs, and curtailing police harassment of petty traders and peddlers will greatly enhance the income potential of poor families. So too will legitimizing the myriad informal businesses that poor communities generate and rely on, like neighborhood nursery schools, mini-factories, family-run food stalls, small shops selling minimal stocks of basic commodities, informal transport like pushcarts and motorized

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pedi-cabs, water and electricity distribution, repair shops, and waste recycling services. Minimizing forced evictions in favor of on-site upgrading or nearby relocation will keep earning opportunities intact and not subject economically struggling families to the severe disruptions posed by sudden relocation to distant out-of-town settlements offering few immediate economic opportunities.

It is important to remember that in fighting to remain in their shanty sites, urban poor people are making rational economic choices, opting for trade-offs that improve their welfare levels. Poverty and the conditions of cities limit their choices and virtually compel them to live in slums in order to be near the people who will purchase their services. Their choices, therefore, need to be broadened through rising income levels or changes in land and housing markets beneficial to them. An urban land reform program aimed at poor beneficiaries would, for example, drastically minimize land speculation and undertake firm and sensitive land-use planning<sup>10</sup>.

These examples of possible actions are only a few of the measures city governments can take to enhance the lives of the poor and establish in the broader public mind their right to a fair share of assets, services, information, and dignity. In keeping with the concept of participatory governance, government officials should recognize that every community has a different mix of preferences, and that specific groups within the community may have countervailing priorities. The only way to respond meaningfully is to dialogue with specific communities in their own settings and enable them to work out differences into compromises or consensus.

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<sup>10</sup> Gilbert, Alan. 1992. The Housing of the Urban Poor. In *Cities, Poverty and Development; Urbanization in the Third World*, second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.114-154.

### *Planning with people*

One urban specialist recommends that urban governments start with a *local poverty profile* to fill in information gaps and define the main issues in preparation for neighborhood and city-wide consultations. This calls for research to assess the ways in which the poor are identified in the city, how they perceive their own lives there, and their attempts to overcome undesirable elements. Municipal or state policies that create and sustain poverty are also highlighted. National poverty indicators may not always be easily adapted to local conditions, however, nor does their broad framework usually distinguish adequately between urban and rural poverty.

Next comes the convening of *consultative workshops* with stakeholders to review the research results and link them to specific local conditions in the process of developing a program of action. Funds and a local support team to implement the follow-up activities emerging from the consultation are then sought.

Built into the process is a *monitoring system* focusing on the urban poor, city authorities, and the city itself. Indicators of benefits to the poor include their perceptions of services, poverty reduction and improvement, and their increased self-esteem. Indicators for city authorities entail their degree of knowledge of the urban poor, ability to design instruments to assess the poverty situation, and capacity to mobilize funds within the city for poverty reduction, including from the private sector, NGOs, and government. The third area of assessing the city itself looks at the integration of the poor into the city, the ability of urban poor organizations to influence public action, the existence of a social pro-poor consensus among nonpoor stakeholders,

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and the perception and behavior of better-off city residents toward the urban poor<sup>11</sup>.

*Electoral accountability to marginalized constituents*

The growing sophistication of marginalized urban dwellers and the higher educational levels of second- and third-generation urban poor groups offer fruitful potential for effective consultations and negotiations with government and other stakeholders. City officials who recognize this will find that they have everything to gain by forging genuine partnerships of trust and respect. Once people have been involved in the process of crafting solutions, they readily take up the cudgels for implementing and sustaining them.

But city officials who resist going even halfway to consult with or listen to their people, who refuse to recognize that Asia's bustling cities benefit enormously from the energy and vitality of people in the informal sector, and who deny poorer constituents their just share of resources and dignity will be judged part of the problem, not the solution. At the very least, because the urban poor sector plays a pivotal role in electing local officials, no mayor in a democratic system can disagree with Mandala Parishan Mayor Sreenivasulu's caution, "If you forget the people, they will forget you!" At the polling places of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, poor voters will remember the candidate who worked to bring them and their families lives of quality and dignity.

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<sup>11</sup> Wegelin, Emiel A. 1999. Urban Poverty and Local Actions towards Its Reduction. *Regional Development Dialogue (RDD)*. Nagoya, Japan: United Nations Centre for Regional Development 20(1): 20-34.