Solutions can come from the slums

Urban planning that involves the people and alternative service providers gives far better results than top-down efforts from the government, finds an IIT-M study

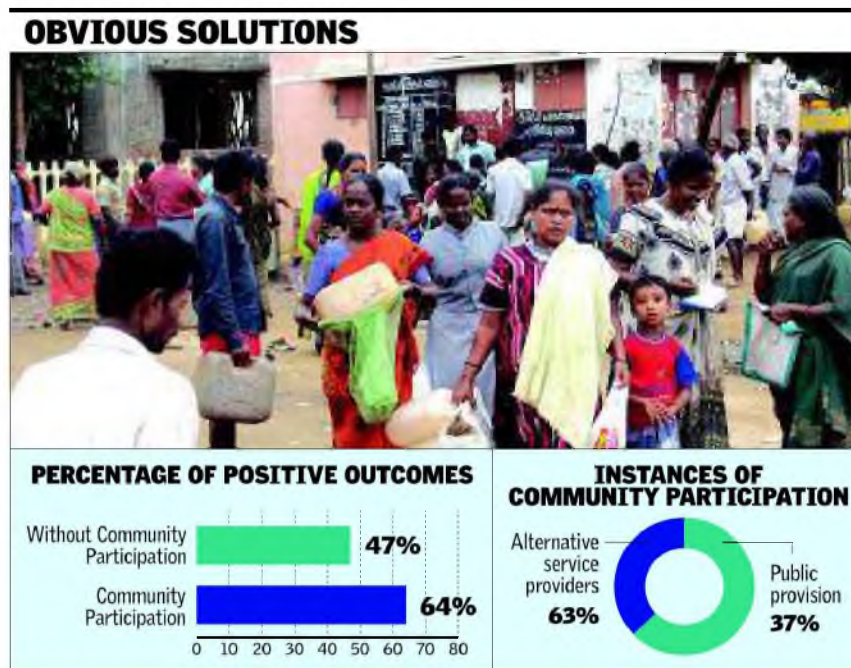Thillai Rajan A. and
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In Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, the responsibility of managing and maintaining a set of more than 160 community toilets was handed over by the Tiruchirapalli City Corporation to a federation of women self-help groups. A post-programme field survey of 803 households revealed that the community participation had resulted in the public toilets being far better maintained, with improved community hygiene, reduced open defecation and an increased number of toilet users than has been the case with similar public toilets elsewhere. The same results are seen with NGOs working in Chennai slums in Kalyanapuram, Sivarajapuram, Semmanchery, Thuraipakkam, and Kodungaiyur, where the community has been involved in water and sanitation programmes.

Clearly, wherever slum development programmes have involved the community at various levels, it has generated a sense of ownership over the project, and has helped ensure its success.

As the government tries to promote the concept of Swachh Bharat, the road ahead might be to use less government interventions and more community participation. And one of the places where the work has to begin is in the rapidly mushrooming number of slums. With unprecedented urbanisation, city slums are growing at an alarming rate. According to Census 2011, the slum population in India makes up 18.3 per cent of the total urban population. In absolute terms, the slum population is projected to increase from 93.1 million in 2001 to 104.7 million in 2017.

One of the characteristic features of a slum is the lack of access to basic services as compared to non-slum areas. The glaring inequality between slums and other city settlements can have serious repercussions on the societal fabric. Robert McNamara, World Bank President from 1968 to 1981, said, "If cities do not begin to deal more constructively with poverty, poverty may begin to deal more destructively with cities." Unfortunately, providing access to basic services in slums is progressively becoming a political agenda rather than a social one. The dramatic victory of the Aam Aadmi Party in the Delhi Assembly elections this year is proof of that.

While everyone agrees that living conditions in slums need drastic improvement, the big question is how to achieve this. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) demand fresh approaches that can ensure universal access to basic ser-

OBVIOUS SOLUTIONS

PERCENTAGE OF POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Without Community Participation — 47%
Community Participation — 64%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

INSTANCES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Alternative service providers 63%
Public provision 37%

vices. A recent study conducted by Indian Institute of Technology-Madras (IIT-M) has used 248 instances collected from various slum development initiatives to analyse just what works in urban planning and what does not. The results were interesting and insightful.

Easing access

Traditionally, all urban planning has adopted a top-down approach, attempting to solve the problem of access to basic services by simply providing the services and the connections to them. While this method serves the needs of political book-keeping, a more holistic approach is needed for long-term results. Access is not just about providing connections, but also about the services being affordable, adequate and durable. Further, the residents of slums should not be expected to spend laborious time and effort to access basic services. The IIT-M study showed that the involvement of alternative service providers such as non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations (CBOs) in service delivery showed far better results than the traditional route.

Why is this so? The findings from the study provided several explanations. In the traditional public provision model, the planning and positioning of infrastructure is quite ad hoc. This results in overuse of infrastructure, which leads to disrepair or abandonment of the infrastructure itself. In contrast, NGOs and CBOs use a bottom-up approach to plan-

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ning, construction and maintenance of infrastructure. This model vastly improves access. By paying adequate attention to the needs to the community, alternative service providers have adopted innovative and cost-effective designs to provide better access to service. And, most important, there has been an effort to maintain the facility to ensure that infrastructure is always available. For instance, Mahila Milan, the National Slum Dwellers Federation, and the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres have joined hands in Mumbai to adopt cost-effective designs and materials to create well-ventilated toilets with sufficient running water and lighting.

All projects by alternative service providers have not been equally successful. Why do some projects have better outcomes than others? The analysis shows that wherever there has been greater community participation, the results have been positive. Second, such projects have simultaneously trained the commu-

nity members in planning, design and maintenance of the infrastructure, so that they may take over the running of the projects over time.

Rights of the informal

Without security of tenure and legal status, slum residents cannot demand the provision of basic services from the government. And, according to the 2011 Census, 36 per cent of all slums are "informal" or "unrecognised", denying their occupants the most basic government infrastructure. What goes unrecognised is the fact that these people might be illegal settlers but they are rightful citizens of the country. Government agencies hesitate to provide any form of infrastructural access to such slums since it could lead them to claim de facto tenure security. Slum residents, for their part, cannot and do not invest their own resources in building infrastructure because there is always the impending threat of displacement. They opt instead for illegal connections that are expensive and unreliable.

This is where alternative service providers play a big role. They can work in informal slums and low-income groups, since their involvement does not affect or confer legal status on the slums. In some cases, they have in fact leveraged their position to negotiate with the government authorities to seek legal connections that could eventually change the status of the slums.

The government has an ambitious target of making India slum-free by 2020. Under the Rajiv Awas Yojana, which comes under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, and some other programmes, more than $20 billion dollars was planned as investment to realise this goal. The World Bank, for one, doesn't seem to think this is possible — it estimates that long after 2020, nearly 200 million Indians could be living in slums, up from the current 90 million. This prognosis makes it all the more urgent that instead of relying on tried and tested methods, we try new approaches. While the top-down approach to urban planning may be necessary, it is not sufficient in itself. It needs to additionally take advantage of the complementary strengths of NGOs and the wider community to get better results. Such a partnership approach may not give speedy results, but it can create lasting facilities. And that's what finally matters.

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