Amplify voices of home-based workers in city-level urban planning and governance processes

CONTEXT

40% of city residents in India reside in slums and continue to face rampant deprivation of basic rights and hygienic living environments because of their status as "informal" citizens. A significant proportion of these residents are women home-based workers who bear the dual burden of economic production and care giving and are the most affected by these deprivations. Home-based workers are also most adversely impacted by large city-level infrastructure projects that often leave them displaced, disrupting their social and economic networks. To enable a transformation towards just and equitable cities, it is important that all urban residents have a voice in shaping development policies that impact their daily lives. Local government is the closest to citizens, and is in the best position to involve people in decisions concerning their lives. Empowering the poor, particularly women, to participate in local governance is therefore a necessary condition to enable them to move out of the vicious cycle of poverty and realize their right to live with dignity.

The Government of India mandates participatory local governance through the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (74th CAA). It empowers the local government bodies to function as independent democratic units of government. In 2005, the Government of India launched the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), that required State Governments to enact the Community Participation Law (CPL) that called for a more decentralized and people centric approach to governance through the constitution of *Area Sabhas* (Neighborhood level committees).

Even though the national mandates aim for increased transparency and accountability, participatory governance in urban India remains lacking in practice. For example, budgets for development works are created and managed in a centralized manner. These budgets are often not accessible to citizens and are difficult to decipher. Similarly, statutory urban planning processes like "Development Plans", "Master Plans" and "Zoning Regulations" are also difficult for common people to access and understand because of the complex and technical language used. Moreover these plans are often imposed upon communities without communicating their larger goals and benefits to the affected communities and rarely follow a participatory/ deliberative process to find negotiated solutions to difficult planning challenges facing our cities. Participation in planning process is limited to inviting objections, suggestions from citizens once the plan is published.

With this lack of awareness, citizens, particularly the disenfranchised groups, are unable to approach the local governments and lay claim on the city for their demands, and hence are systematically excluded from the formal planning processes. In the absence of formal "invited spaces" for participation, it is necessary to mobilize communities and provide them with the knowledge and skills to "claim" opportunities to engage in decision-making and negotiate sustainable gains in urban policies and practices.

MHT'S APPROACH

Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) mobilizes women and girls from urban poor communities to help form collectives that function as units of governance at neighborhood level to identify, raise and address pressing concerns of the community. MHT has demonstrated significant success in bringing tangible changes in slum communities by developing local leadership through these collectives. MHT further invests in building capacities of these women leaders to come together as a pressure group of informed and articulate citizens, to "claim" opportunities to make their voices heard, and to collaborate with the State in the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of public services and infrastructure.

Building social capital by creating and strengthening women's collectives

MHT's model of building people's institutions starts with enlisting and organizing households in a community into a membership-based group called Community Based Organization (CBO). The presence of CBOs makes it possible for residents to directly get involved in the slum improvement processes that require monetary and non-monetary support from the whole community. A group of 10–12 women representing all households are then elected and trained as the Community Action Group (CAG). CAG's role is to build consensus around community needs, and to work with government and other service providers to secure access to basic services and other welfare programmes in health, education, and social security.

In the last 20 years, MHT has established and nurtured this leadership in more than 200 slums in Ahmedabad. Many CAGs are now working independently with governments and elected councilllors on self-initiated improvement projects like paving of roads, getting water supply lines, tree plantation, instituting door-to-door waste collection systems, and establishing *anganwadis* (child-care centre). The women-led approach towards slum improvement has resulted in not only physical habitat improvements, but has also had a significant impact on social, economic, and organizational improvements in the lives of women. With investments in CAGs and the capacity-building of women leaders, there are rising aspirations among them to move beyond serving their communities.

Towards this, MHT has encouraged CAGs from individual slums to coalesce at ward and city level as part of a *Vikasini* Manch. "*Vikasini*" is a local feminine connotation meaning "Carriers of development". The Vikasini Manch meets once a month to share experiences, resolve common concerns, and identify development issues and needs in their areas. The women leaders who are members of the Vikasini help form new CAGs and mentor and groom new leaders to take charge of the improvement process in their own communities. The Vikasini Manch also acts as a network of women leaders from slums with an independent voice. It has represented the needs and concerns of poor women in multi-stakeholder dialogues and policy-making processes including the formulation of the City Sanitation Plan (2012), Zero Waste Strategy (2013), and the Heat Action Plan (2017).

Training grassroots women on urban governance and planning processes

Access to public infrastructure and services in informal settlements is often constrained by larger urban planning

Box 1

Demystifying Statutory Urban Development Plans

New Delhi and Ahmedabad, Gujarat

The City Development Plan/Master Plan in the context of an Indian city is a statutory document that guides land development. It delineates new growth areas based on where the city is expected to expand, identifies the location of major roads, trunk infrastructure and public amenities and puts in place a land use zoning framework and development regulations to regulate nuisances and safeguard public health and safety. It is not just a communication tool but also a legal document whose usefulness hinges on clear communication, non-ambiguity, objectivity in the representation of reality and also on the ability and skills of citizens and community groups to read and understand it. Ability to read and decipher the Master Plan hence is fundamental to engaging with planning and development processes.

Between 2019 to 2021 MHT conducted a series of awareness trainings and workshops in Ahmedabad on statutory master plans. Technical maps and drawings along with policy frameworks produced as a part of the planning process can be very inaccessible, especially for women from low-income communities. The trainings broke down the various steps of statutory planning and complex jargon into simple concepts supported with visually appealing and easy-to-read maps. Women learned to differentiate public land from private land, analyze the different uses of the public land, identify their own communities on the map, and articulate how the Master Plan impacts them, and where and how they can advocate for their needs and demands .

and policy frameworks that do not pay heed to the needs of the poor. MHT believes it is imperative to equip women leaders with a fundamental knowledge about city planning and governance to strengthen their influence on shaping the policies at the city level. MHT has developed a six-part training program with sector experts, professionals, and grassroots women themselves to stimulate participation in local governance and planning. The training includes knowledge and skills focused modules covering topics like governance and electoral processes in India, reading and understanding plans and the plan-making process, current and proposed projects in the city, understanding budgets, functioning of local government and planning agencies, communication and persuasion, problem-solving and teamwork. Between 2019 to 2021 MHT conducted a series of awareness trainings and workshops in Ahmedabad and Delhi ahead of the release of the statutory Master Plans for these cities (Box 1)

Advancing advocacy and public discourse on responsible urban development

Learning from its 25 years of practice and listening to the voices of the poor women, MHT has developed deep insights into the urban informal sector and their issues, challenges and needs with respect to the physical environment of their homes and communities. Empowered with this evidence from ground, it advocates with governments for more inclusive, socially and ecologically responsible urban development. In Ahmedabad, MHT has worked with the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) to influence town planning schemes that ensure that low-income communities benefit from the proposals and their immediate needs for crucial amenities are met. MHT has also influenced development regulations to make housing more affordable. MHT has also been successful instituting a city wide cool roof program in Ahmedabad bringing attention to the issue of climate change and climate justice. In cities like Ranchi and Amalner, MHT is working with government to preserve, conserve and revive available natural resources.

More recently, MHT collaborated with other grassroots actors and research and academic partners under the “Main Bhi Dilli” campaign to include urban residents of Delhi especially the marginalized in its master planning process. The campaign aimed at starting a public discussion on what kind of city the people of Delhi want and how to make it more equitable, just and sustainable. MHT facilitated workshops in poor communities to help them read the plans, analyze the proposals, and advocate for their welfare. They guided communities to form a framework for their demands and suggestions and submit them to the government authorities.

"For the first time, we were given a chance to voice our needs for the city's master plan. MHT helped us understand the requirements, after which we put forward our suggestions. We highlighted the extension of our license to stay, lack of mobility connection to the city, and a place for all of us home-based workers to work together."

LEARNING AND DIRECTION OF FUTURE ADVOCACY

1) Collectivizing home-based workers, especially women, is the key to achieving improved housing and living and working environments in cities. Collectively women can voice their demands to governments, fight for their rights and negotiate sustainable gains in urban policies. MHT has delivered tangible improvements in cities "at scale", impacting the lives of close to half a million urban poor residents with the collectives of grassroots women at the forefront. However, sustaining these collectives in the long run requires systemic and sustained efforts. Since 2019 MHT has been focusing on creating, reviving and strengthening its CAG network across program cities. They provide a platform to CAGs to regularly meet and discuss their issues and reflections with each other, organize frequent trainings and educate CAGs on critical urban programs, schemes and policies and have developed frameworks to record, monitor and assess the impact of these women's collectives.

2) MHT's work at the grassroots and their bottom-up approach to developing solutions and facilitating their execution has emerged as a successful model of working collaboratively with the government to improve habitat conditions in low-income communities. MHT aims to now influence city-level policies which will require the organization to add new skills and capacities. MHT will need to strengthen knowledge management systems and continually synthesize data and findings from ground into evidence and meaningful insights to inform and scale their advocacy efforts.

3) To pivot India's participatory governance from mere tokenistic gestures to implementable measures, important documents like city master plans and town planning schemes should be made simple, easy to understand, and translated to local languages. For instance, through the Main Bhi Dilli Campaign, the draft plan of Delhi Master Plan 2041 was opened for comments from the public. The campaign also conducted workshops across the city specifically for communities that are left out of planning processes. Measures such as these break down the top-down planning processes and open it up for people to engage, critique, and provide suggestions.

4) Indian ULBs have limited effective devolution of revenue and with very little capacity to raise resources through their own sources of revenue, they often have to depend on state and national grants (PRS Legislative Research, 2020). State Governments thus also have a greater control on urban planning and land development processes, even though they are far detached from city residents and their issues. There is a need to strengthen the power, accountability, and financial autonomy of the ULBs as they are closest to the citizens and are better capable of acting on the citizens' demands and needs.

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