

Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC)

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Highlight

Creating critical mass to legitimize India's urban poor

Who is SPARC?

The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC) is an urban activist movement, rooted in 60 Indian slums in 70 Indian cities, and globally interconnected with slum residents in nine countries.

SPARC was founded in 1984 by a group of social workers who were fighting for the housing rights of urban poor and against the evictions of slum and pavement dwellers. In 1986 SPARC joined forces with Jockin Arputham and National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), which had been active since the late 1970s in mobilizing slum dwellers. Mahila Milan, a women's organization centered on micro-credit for female pavement dwellers, also joined SPARC and NSDF in 1986 to form what is now known as the Alliance. The Alliance operates to reclaim housing and fight for the dignity and citizenship of urban poor in India.

The core structure of SPARC is 19 people, including Patel (the director), administrators, accountants, and program coordinators. SPARC's main task is to facilitate the discussions and negotiations between the different layers of society. SPARC does not operate on a project-based

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NGO model. SPARC intervenes in contexts where slum dwellers would be unable to access decision makers and gets them access. One of SPARC's main accomplishments is getting slum dwellers to sit at the negotiating table themselves, as empowered citizens with equal dignity and confidence.

The direct beneficiaries are the urban poor: pavement and slum dwellers mainly in the city of Bombay and increasingly in large cities across India. The Schwab Foundation estimated that in 2008 SPARC's direct beneficiaries numbered 750,000.

Project Background

According to a 2013 UN-Habitat report, the number of slum dwellers continues to grow apace with urbanization. In 2006, a statistical study released by the World Bank showed that nearly 54 percent of Bombay's inhabitants live in shanties, with another 25 to 30 percent living in chawls (densely populated residential buildings of 4 to 5 stories with about 10 to 20 tenements) and on sidewalks. Slum and pavement dwellers live in dire conditions with limited or no access to services and amenities: informal settlements have inadequate sanitation, daylighting, electricity, and water. Settlements often spring up in the vicinity of large-scale urban infrastructure—such as railway tracks, high-voltage pylons, and airports—thus further congesting resources that, in a city like Bombay, are already stretched to the limits.

Because of the social and economic complexity of this issue, municipal and political responses to urban informal settlements have swung between two extremes: forcible eviction and neglect. Both approaches exacerbate the existing social tensions. It is in this context that SPARC began operating. On their website, they recall their early activities: “We began in 1984, with an Area Resource Center in Byculla, Mumbai, where women from the pavement settlements came together to discuss their problems and find solutions. They formed Mahila Milan, and along with NSDF, they launched a census of themselves in order to collect data from people living in temporary or permanent slums. The urban poor who were once invisible to the government and institutions are now visible and can no longer be ignored.”

SPARC works with the urban poor to restore dignity and citizenship rights. Its activities are based

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on the principle that the urban poor are not to be considered at the receiving end of either abuses or charity: they can become the makers of their own destiny if given the right structural support. When the urban poor mobilize and coordinate, numbers give them strength and leverage to demand access to housing, services, and amenities.

Completed projects

The Alliance is an extremely complex and multifaceted organization. Below are the main areas of intervention.

Savings and Credits

At the core of the Alliance's activities is a daily savings plan, managed by women. According to Jockin Arputham (the NSDF leader), with savings there is discipline and organization; with discipline and organization, there is the possibility of aggregating a critical mass; and critical mass triggers legitimacy and the possibility to be heard and thus become active stakeholders in negotiations. Sheela Patel says that this process is foundational, as it is what builds the confidence and the capacity for the urban poor to represent themselves, to be "their own agents and their own voice."

Coordinated by Mahila Milan, this is entirely managed by women and is based on microloans that conventional banks would never grant. The women in charge of a specific area visit families daily and get a tiny repayment of the loan: this is the only condition required and implemented in order to encourage the poor out of a debt mentality and towards an asset-building perspective. As the responsibility is entirely in the hands of women, a side effect is their greater presence in the public sphere and a more profound participation in the community's decision-making process.

Area Resource Centers

These are the tiniest and most localized nodes in the Alliance's network. They are meeting places for women, and "[t]hey are neutral ground where records and savings can be stored, and are accessible 24 hours a day if emergency loans are needed." They function as coordination hubs for community action.

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Enumeration and Surveys

One of the most substantial contributions of SPARC is to “produce identity” for the slum dwellers done via self organized census. The enumerations produce the data that are necessary for the slum dwellers to acquire identity cards, ration cards, and all the necessary proof to open a bank account, enroll children in school, or receive medical care. Census also allows for a just assessment of needs and resources in the case of rehabilitations or relocations schemes. SPARC’s website states: “[The] lack of information often becomes the basis upon which slums and informal settlements are refused services. Self-conducted enumerations and surveys allow communities to speak from a position of knowledge, and give the poor ownership over information that is critical for understanding collective conditions, legitimizing claims to land and benefits, identifying real solutions, and negotiating with authorities.”

The gathering and analysis ends up being a collective effort that strengthens the bonds within the communities. Enumerations gather information about housing, services, and infrastructure, but the communities themselves are directly involved in addressing the problems that emerge from these surveys.

Exhibitions on Affordable Housing

“Housing and toilet exhibitions give communities a platform to come up with and showcase affordable designs that accommodate their needs, and to discuss these with professionals, government officials, and each other. They act as forums for information exchange and the dissemination of innovative ideas about housing, secure land tenure, and essential services.”

[Source: SPARC] According to Appadurai, using the bourgeois format of housing fairs, these serious yet playful events contribute to the legitimization of the struggle for the housing rights.

Housing

Housing is one SPARC’s main priorities in SPARC's agenda. SPARC works toward equitable forms of tenure, at the level of policy-making to promote laws and regulations that protect the poor from eviction. SPARC and the partnered communities act as proactive stakeholders negotiating,

designing, managing construction and maintenance of the houses. Savings are an integral part of the Alliance's housing strategy: they are in fact the ground on which local communities can poise themselves as partners in the endeavor rather than as passive recipients of government support. This is a precedent-setting model that turns communities in collective contractors that are financially and professionally capable of implementing their own housing schemes. To this day, the Alliance has worked with 750,000 households across India, and has built or is building housing for over 8,500 families.

SPARC Samudaya Nirman Sahayak (SSNS) Construction Company

Established in 1998, SSNS is SPARC's nonprofit construction company set up to partner with construction projects in partnership with communities of urban poor in project development and implementation. SSNS offers the financial, technical, and professional expertise. Together they build new tenements, of incremental or structural upgrading, and construct collective toilets, and SSNS provides maintenance management.

Sanitation

Access to proper sanitation is one of the biggest challenges for those who live in informal settlements. SPARC has developed community toilet facilities over the years. These toilets are designed, conceived, built, and maintained in collaboration with the local community members; they are connected to the main sewage system; and they have proper access to water and electricity. SPARC engages in building toilet blocks only in those communities that, following extensive consultation, agree to take on the costs and labor of maintenance. The Alliance developed a detailed payment system that is affordable for families (with weekly or monthly family cards, rather than payment per use), guarantees the payment of a caretaker, hence strengthening the sense of ownership and extending the lifespan of the project.

Resettlement and Rehab

SPARC is involved in in-situ rehabilitation projects, and also resettlement projects (when directly requested by the communities). These resettlements mainly involve slums and encroachments that are located around the large infrastructure like port facilities, train tracks, and the Bombay airport.

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The Alliance works as the middleman and facilitator of the process, managing the relation between slum and pavement dwellers and the government—making sure that there is transparency, and that all the families are aware of the relocation and properly counted and accounted for.

The Alliance believes that community-driven relocations are the only way to guarantee a peaceful and successful transition during what would otherwise be a traumatic process.

Level of Development

The advocacy work that SPARC has done over the years has also produced tangible results at the government level. Their lobbying was fundamental in passing the Slum Rehabilitation Act (1995) that protected from eviction all those who could produce a document to prove that they lived in Bombay before January 1995. SPARC was involved in the task force that drafted the guidelines for the Universal Sanitation policy of the Government of India. Their nonprofit construction company—SPARC Samudaya Nirman Sahayak (SSNS)—has built 3,879 in-situ houses, rehabbed 3,900 units, built 878 community toilets, and granted 1,324 loans to homeowners to make incremental upgrades.

Previous Recognitions

In 2000, SPARC was awarded the United Nations Human Settlement Award.

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2006: Ms. Patel lectures at the SKOLL World Forum

2009: Ms. Patel receives the UN-HABITAT Scroll of Honour Award

2009: Ms. Patel receives David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award

2011: Ms. Patel receives the Padma Shri Award, one of highest civilian awards in India

Additional Resources

♣ SPARC website

<http://www.sparcindia.org>

♣ NIRMAN website

<http://sparcnirman.org/>

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^ City Watch India

<http://sparccitywatch.blogspot.in/>

^ SPARC YouTube Channel

www.youtube.com/user/sparcindia