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PALM in slum improvement projects: a training experience from India

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• Background

Slum Improvement Projects (SIPs) are integrated urban development projects which incorporate physical improvements in water and sanitation, drainage, access, garbage collection and electricity, primary health care and community development programmes such as pre-school, non-formal education, adult literacy and economic development. The Overseas Development Administration (ODA) is currently funding SIPs in five Indian cities - Hyderabad, Vishakhapatnam, Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), Indore (Madhya Pradesh) and Calcutta. A further two projects are planned in Cuttack (Orissa) and Cochin (Kerala). These projects are implemented either by government municipal corporations or development authorities.

SIPs promote community participation as a key to encouraging community self-reliance, usually through the formation of neighbourhood committees for the management of community assets and programmes. However, in practice community participation has been limited, and in common with other large scale government urban development projects of the 1980s, SIPs have had limited success in achieving this self reliance objective. Although with popular programmes such as the *balwadi* (pre-school) programme, parents take an active role, supporting teachers, raising financial resources for teachers' salaries and learning materials and generally managing the *balwadi* with little outside support, in other areas such as the maintenance of infrastructure improvements, it has been more difficult to sustain community interest. Some of the main reasons for this can be identified as follows:

- Failing to involve slum residents in programme planning and design;
- The existence of a government culture with a very different interpretation of participatory development to that of NGOs;
- Attitudes towards government as a provider of free services which have hindered the promotion of individual and community self reliance;
- Project scale: for example Hyderabad SIP covers 300 slums with a population of 450 000. This has made it difficult to establish close or intensive relationships with slum communities;
- Compartmentalisation of the project into community development, health and engineering works against the concept of integrated development from project planning to implementation;
- A tendency to focus on meeting targets which results in quantitative rather than qualitative achievements; and,
- Inadequate consideration of the diversity of interests and needs amongst the urban poor.

In view of this limited community participation in slum improvement projects I was approached by ODA early in 1993 to conduct a series of trainings in PALM for community development, health and engineering project staff. The objective was to introduce project staff to the concept of participatory learning and to the range of PALM methods available.

• Useful methods for slum improvement projects

The methods which I have found useful in Indian urban slums, and which I felt could be used by SIP staff are described below.

Resource mapping

Resource maps can help to depict the relationships between households of different socio-economic groups and resources; facilitate community identification of problems and solutions on the basis of this visual presentation; and illustrate access to and control of resources within the community.

Approach

Firstly, the slum is mapped onto the ground, a wall or a chart. This is done separately with men's, women's and/or mixed groups in order to achieve different perspectives. Secondly, community resources are identified together with their access, management and control. Such resources may include *balwadis* (pre-schools), community centres, pipes, drainage, electricity, paved roads and health services. The location of other common resources is also highlighted as well as the residence of neighbourhood committee members.

Mapping can also be used to learn many other things about the community such as:

- The range of caste, religious and language groups within the settlement;
- Occupations of men and women, girls and boys;
- Links with villages ('umbilical cord not yet
- Income levels;
- Education levels;
- Employment and skills;
- Health issues such as the use of permanent and temporary contraception;
- Women-headed households, widowed women, deserted wives;
- Violence against women; and,
- Access to income, resources and services.

In one area we even attempted to identify prostitutes, but found this too sensitive an issue

to pursue. However, liquor brewing and selling emerged as important informal sector activities among women -a very good example of an activity normally invisible to community development staff but which can be identified using PALM techniques.

The resource map can lead to discussions on the lack of services, drainage, overcrowding, cramped living conditions, disposal of solid and liquid waste, or lack of safe and adequate water supply. Similarly it is an extremely useful tool for identifying and discussing issues which specifically affect women, such as pressures on women-headed households, women's enterprises, access to income resources, credit and services, and economic, social and cultural pressures on girls and women.

Seasonal calendars and activity schedules

These can help to identify seasonally occurring events and constraints (e.g. drinking water availability, drainage blocks, labour availability, income, food intake, illness etc.). They are also useful for learning about men and women's workloads in different seasons and relationships to factors such as income, food intake and sickness. The seasonal calendar can also be used to work out possible engineering, health and community development solutions.

Approach

The months of the year are marked on the ground using stones or other counters. Events are marked by using locally available seeds, stones, sticks, flowers and leaves. This can be done with single-sex, mixed or interest-specific groups.

A similar tool is the daily activity schedule which identifies household responsibilities on an hourly basis and can highlight gender divisions of labour. The seasonal calendar and daily activity schedule exercise can also reveal specific problems such as the provision of appropriately timed childcare facilities. However, as with all PALM techniques, much depends on the facilitator's ability to build on the information arising out of discussions.

BOX 1

THE USE OF SEASONAL CALENDARS: SOME EXAMPLES

The health wing in Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority now uses these calendars to facilitate health discussions with mothers about the link between sickness and seasonally occurring events.

In one settlement in Vishakhapatnam, seasonal calendars helped the *dhobi* (laundryers) community to identify the age and gender divisions of labour in different seasons.

Focus group discussions

Small group discussions held with a facilitator can explore issues in further depth. Keeping groups small helps to ensure that everybody participates in the discussion. For example, meetings could be held with occupational groups such as potters, *dhobis*, *beedi* (tobacco) workers and rag pickers in order to provide each with the opportunity to express their specific occupational concerns in relation to particular issues such as space requirements, water supply and rubbish disposal. Similar group meetings can be arranged by gender, age group and language group.

Wealth and well-being ranking

Wealth ranking identifies the different socio-economic characteristics of households in a given slum area. There are a number of approaches. Using the resource map, household names can be listed on cards and community representatives encouraged to decide their own criteria for ranking households by wealth and well-being into four or five groups. Alternatively, all households in a given slum are ranked from first to last according to their relative wealth. Different colours could also be used on the resource map itself to mark different levels of well-being.

Criteria for assessing well-being may include the presence of able-bodied adult men (without 'vices'); presence of women providing supplementary household income; school attendance; debt; health problems.

Trend analyses

Trend analyses highlight changes in a community over time. By talking to old people in the slum, changes in factors such as

education, employment, income, access to credit, drinking water, drainage, infrastructure, housing, population, health practices and social customs can be marked on the ground using locally available materials. The period over which factors are discussed is normally 20–40 years depending on the age of the informants. We have found this very useful in many slum areas as a way of learning about pressure for space and resources.

Venn diagrams

The aims of Venn diagramming techniques are to learn about the relationship between the community and government departments, or relationships between individuals within the community; to raise awareness amongst different informants about their access to resources and the presence of social restrictions and to illustrate the differing perceptions of different informants.

Circles of various sizes are cut out and given to participants, who first choose a circle to represent their community and then other circles to indicate the significance or scope of other important people and institutions. The size of the circles and the distance between circles show the perceived relationship between the community and the individuals/institutions.

The use of this technique has been particularly helpful for understanding how access to resources and preferences for services differ between informants. Venn diagramming also helps to identify the existing relationship between community development staff and various informants.

Matrix ranking

Matrices have a wide variety of applications, but one use is to help evaluate various development programmes in terms of their success in addressing the practical and strategic needs of men and women.

The matrix is drawn on the ground using locally available materials. Two factors, for example disease and health practice, can be related together. The matrix can be used for discussion and planning purposes - for example in designing an appropriate income generation programme, discussing healthy food practices, ecologically sound fuel usage or sustainable health practices.

• Using PALM in urban areas: some observations

PALM has proved to be an effective tool in urban areas, and I have experienced a similar sense of achievement in both my urban and rural experience. Some observations which apply specifically to urban areas are as follows:

- If the community is relatively 'new', say five to six years old, the 'we' feeling or sense of common identity or community will be lacking. The same is true where large numbers of tenants live in the area. If residents have migrated from the same village/*panchayat/taluka* or even district the 'we' feeling is greater. Occupational or caste groups also exhibit cohesiveness.
- Political influence is often greater than in rural communities. These loyalties are often apparent from Venn diagramming. A facilitator has to be extra sensitive to this issue in an urban settlement.
- The timing of the process is very important in an urban area. Many people are outside the slum for much of the day.
- Women seem to be less subordinate and more economically independent in urban areas.
- Although education levels tend to be higher than in rural areas the tools still helped significantly in involving all people in the community.

From training to practice: some insights

The PALM training conducted with SIP project staff was generally very popular. Trainees responded well to having practical tools at their disposal for use in their work. However, a number of difficulties were encountered:

- Although project staff found PALM training useful, many questioned its potential for their programme given the constraint of working within a bureaucratic government framework. The concept of participation and equality is fundamentally at odds with the hierarchical structures of government bureaucracies.
- A second constraint to the effective use of PALM is the compartmentalisation of SIPs into engineering, health and community development programmes. Problems and solutions raised through use of PALM are cross-cutting and project staff need to be able to respond in a coordinated way. Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, is the need to recognise that compartmentalisation tends to perpetuate a service provision approach rather than to encourage a demand-driven response, which is at odds with the basic premise of participatory approaches.
- A third constraint has been that although as trainees, staff did not find it difficult to accept the basic PALM concept, once applied to their field of operation they found it difficult to acknowledge and value the knowledge of slum dwellers. In particular staff found it difficult to adopt a role change: from that of implementer to that of facilitator, from that of a prescriber to that of a partner and promoter of people's participation in the management of their own development. This demands an attitudinal and value change among government workers which is a radical expectation.
- Changing top-down approaches requires some fundamental changes amongst recipient governments and funding agencies alike. This also requires government agencies to adopt a new role of facilitator/partner in development, less prescriptive approaches, greater accountability to people and a firm

commitment to people's participation in managing their own development.

- **Discussion**

Over the last year we have seen PALM beginning to be used in a limited way in different SIP cities. More motivated project staff has found it a practical and rewarding tool for putting the rhetoric of community participation into practice. From this limited but important success we are convinced that this is the way forward, that attitudes towards the urban poor can only be changed through practical experience. PALM can therefore help to enhance the process of people's participation, but must be accompanied by attitudinal and organisational change to be really effective. The real challenge is to find practical and realistic ways of bringing about this change.

Without the support of senior management staff, project staff has little possibility of putting their newly acquired skills into practice. This we plan to do through senior management workshops.

Since the initiative for participatory approaches comes primarily from the ODA there is a need for clarity about what is really meant by community participation and a commitment to put policy into practice. With this in mind new projects are being developed in Cuttack and Cochin where PALM is being promoted by ODA right from the project planning stage. This new experience will help us to see how far PALM can help bring about participatory approaches to development within the context of government implemented programmes.

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NOTE

Through our experience with PRA in urban areas, we have decided to adopt the term 'PALM' (Participatory Learning Method) rather than PRA as a more accurate description of our use of the technique.