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Progressive Patronage? Municipalities, NGOs, CBOs and the Limits to Slum Dwellers' Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Efforts aimed at urban poverty reduction and service delivery improvement depend critically on slum dwellers' collective agency. Adding to a long history of community participation approaches, there is a now growing incidence of so-called 'partnerships' between municipal agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and slum organizations. Such approaches require a fair representation of a majority of the poor by local community-based organizations (CBOs), the potential and interest of both poor men and women to organize pro-actively in collective action, and a CBO leadership that works for the common good. This article puts some key assumptions underlying grassroots-based strategies under scrutiny. That relations amongst the urban poor are unequal and that they are divided in terms of income, gender and ethnicity has been well documented, but there has been less attention for the fact that the poor, facing conditions of scarcity and competition, rely on vertical relations of patronage and brokerage which may hinder or prevent horizontal mobilization. Rather than being vehicles of empowerment and change, CBOs and their leadership often block progress, controlling or capturing benefits aimed at the poor and misusing them for private (political) interests. Presenting evidence from community-based projects in the slums of three large Indian cities, the article argues that municipal agencies, donors and NGOs cannot easily escape the logic of patronage and often themselves become part of a system of vertical dependency relations.

INTRODUCTION

Initiatives for urban poverty reduction are held to critically depend on the collective agency of slum dwellers. Faced with numerous livelihood problems including shortcomings of income, shelter and social services, it is arguably only through the power of organized numbers that the urban poor stand any chance of a *structural* and broad-based improvement of their living conditions. Non-governmental organization (NGOs) working with and for the urban poor consider community-based organizations (CBOs) their natural

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partners. Increasingly, states, municipalities and donors also recognize the potential of communities to (help) implement policies or provide services, for example in so-called public–community partnerships. This process is related to a reduced role of the state and a related proliferation of 'multi-stakeholder governance' approaches in the context of neoliberalism (Baud and de Wit, 2008; Harriss et al., 2004; Swyngedouw, 2005). For practical reasons alone, not all slum residents can and will actively engage in such activities or partnerships; hence the search for CBOs. Ideally, the latter act as representatives of slum or squatter communities, articulate needs and priorities *vis-à-vis* intervening agencies, organize contributions in kind and/or labour, and monitor implementation and outcomes. In some cases CBOs play a crucial role in strategies for empowering the urban poor. They may be united into citywide, national and even international federations (Batliwala, 2002; Patel et al., 2001), and join NGOs in (or at least provide credibility for) lobbying and advocacy campaigns for shelter, livelihoods and political representation. Grassroots-led urban development is seen as having much potential, starting from the notion of 'community capacity' with a view to slum upgrading and service delivery (see, for example, the contributions in Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004). Numerous policies and projects are designed on the basis of these assumptions, ostensibly providing a win–win situation for all 'stakeholders' concerned, including the urban poor.

However, in the complex and opaque conditions in which the urban poor have to survive, things may not be that easy. The idea of mobilizing and organizing people collectively on the basis of horizontal ties and common interests does not appear to work well in most places, and, even more fatal, it appears to work less well the poorer and more dependent people are. One issue concerns the actual representativeness of the CBO in giving a voice and/or facilitating the participation of poor people, especially the poorest and most excluded. Attention to the nature of CBOs is critical here — who are actually the members and do they include all ethnic, gender, political and religious groups in a community? The CBO leadership should also be examined to see if it is more self-interested than community welfare oriented. Of course leaders come in many forms and styles, but we need to make a distinction between genuine grassroots leaders, who are actively involved in organizing the urban poor locally, and those leaders who are patrons or brokers providing vertical links to actors and institutions beyond the limits of a slum.

There is evidence indicating that the urban poor are not 'naturally' inclined to engage in horizontal organizations or get involved in collective actions. Often they prefer to rely on vertical patronage, such as relatives or intermediaries, to safeguard livelihoods and obtain (individual) access to persons and institutions of value to them: the municipality, the police, employers, credit institutions and even schools and hospitals. This *logic of patronage* is based on the experience that investing in collective action is problematic, time-consuming and fraught with free rider problems. In contrast, using an

intermediary or broker is perceived to increase the chance of obtaining a service or gaining protection against a threat. This calculation is obviously valid in the case of private needs and services such as shelter, jobs, credit, etc. But even in the case of 'public goods' and collective services (paved alleys, piped water, public toilets, street lights) the poor usually have more faith in contacting intermediaries and politicians than in organizing rallies to voice their demands or collective projects to meet their needs themselves. There may also be an element of tradition or culture — to contact a chief, leader, trusted person or authority may just be the common thing to do.

The scepticism of the urban poor with regard to collective action is confirmed by the glaring mismatch between the supply and demand of services critical to them, which in many cities is exacerbated by new demands created by rural–urban migration. NGOs are attempting to augment the supply side, but the impact of their efforts remains limited at least in quantitative terms. The poor are very much aware that urban authorities and NGOs could never meet all their needs any time soon. For every slum that is upgraded and provided with services, there are dozens in which the situation remains unchanged (and several that are cleared and demolished). Severe scarcity inevitably creates a situation of competition between (and inside) urban poor communities, a critical stumbling block for attempts to organize collective action on a supra-community level. Positioning for patronage then becomes the main strategy to be successful under conditions of such desperate competition.

An important issue here is that brokers or patrons are more effective if they are linked to higher political levels such as local councillors or, through them, to members of parliament. This again links to the fact that many relatively established electoral democracies in the south are perceived as 'patronage democracies' (Chandra, 2007; Kitscheld and Wilkinson, 2007). Chandra (2007) defines a patronage democracy as a system 'in which the state has a relative monopoly on jobs and services, and in which elected officials enjoy significant discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state'. Rather than ideology or the popularity of a leader, it is concrete benefits that are dispended to people either as private or as club goods, with a view to influence voting behaviour. Obviously, in such systems political channels are more effective in obtaining access to critical services than administrative ones (Lavalle et al., 2005; de Wit, 1996). Nair (2005) confirms that it is the poorest in the cities who consider politics as critical to their survival, 'as politics is often the only resource in a system which may deny the benefits of policy decisions or legal remedies to the poor' (quoted in Harriss, 2005b: 27). It also should be emphasized that the poor have a much greater need for the state than the urban middle classes or the rich, who may consume state services if it suits them, while (increasingly) relying on private services (see Landy and Ruby, 2005: 2).

In contrast to Benjamin (2000: 56) who urges moving away from a conceptualization of poverty focused only on 'a patron–client perspective of local politics', we postulate that the urban poor — and especially the very

poor — are indeed still dependent predominantly on patronage-like relations. This has severe implications for their interest and capacity to organize and make demands collectively. The system benefits the political and city elites in two ways: they are able to influence the poor with a view to obtaining their votes, while the poor are constrained from organizing as a group or movement as they focus on individualized and fragmenting vertical strategies. We are certainly not saying that collective action in CBOs never happens, or that alliances of different groupings inside or beyond slums never occur. Comparative studies have shown that local communities are often characterized by dense networks of personal, social and economics relations, including reciprocal support and risk sharing (Beall, 2001; Nelson, 1979). These networks may become the basis of trust and social cohesion and, under certain conditions, of organization building and collective action (Berner, 1997: 182ff.). Moreover, the urban poor are careful managers of their limited assets and opportunities, and if they see scope for advancement by joining a CBO, NGO-driven organization or alliance they will do so, if only not to miss some benefit that may accrue to them. More generally, the urban poor live in a context of 'plurality'; they do have choices and gamble on any chance available.

That said, however, we do contend that collective action and slum-wide organizations inevitably reflect local divisions and inequalities and tend to be controlled by local elites. We need to be sceptical about 'grassroots-led urban development', slum federations or CBO alliances if the benchmark is the actual participation by and benefit to all or a significant majority of slum residents. We will show that in many cases the CBO label is used by a clique of a few shrewd entrepreneurs to obtain benefits which are not widely shared, be it in terms of money or information.

All this becomes relevant when we consider the dynamics of relations between the urban poor, their CBOs, and the municipalities and NGOs that work with them. If it is true that CBOs often organize or represent only part of a community, and that relations between CBO members and the outside world may be mediated by brokers or patrons, what does that mean for the relations between CBOs and NGOs/municipalities? Can we truly speak of 'partnerships' — such a popular notion these days — and are municipal and NGO relations with CBOs truly balanced and symmetrical in terms of power, money and accountability? Are municipalities and NGOs interested and able to stimulate CBOs to be more effective, and to be more representative of slum communities at large? Or do they, wittingly or unwittingly, accept the informal and more vertically organized realities, and sooner or later work through patronage-like relations themselves; in other words, is there such a thing as 'progressive patronage'? Of course, we need to keep in mind here that the demand for support from the urban poor far exceeds local governments' and NGOs' capacities in any city, so that they can and have to select beneficiary communities, creating dependency that compounds obvious differences in expertise and access.

Based on cases from India, we will problematize the relation between municipalities, NGOs and CBOs on the one hand, and CBO–community relationship on the other. We postulate that such partnerships are asymmetrical, uneasy and often unsustainable, as they are based on personalized, vertical and informal relations that are frequently politicized, rather than on horizontal, collective relations rooted broadly in communities. We warn against the risk that notions of community capacity, community participation and community empowerment are taken too optimistically, and suggest that they may start from romantic misconceptions and poor understanding of the dynamics of diverse strategies applied by poor men and women to survive or to improve their positions. While it is beyond the scope of this article to cover the debates on the problems of community development, or 'the tyranny of participation' (Berner and Phillips, 2005; Botes and van Rensburg, 2000; Cleaver, 2001; Cooke and Kothari, 2001), we are obviously addressing these issues, while focusing on the role and implications of patronage and brokerage.

ACCESS, PATRONAGE AND POLITICAL CLIENTELISM

Horizontal and vertical personalized relations are critical for the daily survival of the poor but, at the same time, constrain their chances of breaking out of poverty. They operate in an environment characterized by unreliable institutions, negligent or even predatory government agents, and multiple but volatile sources of household income — in Geof Wood's (2003: 468) term, by 'destructive uncertainty'. As they have to cope not just with short-term shocks but also predictable hazards, avoiding unnecessary risks is absolutely imperative. At the same time, relations of patronage and reciprocity that offer some security have to be maintained regardless of their long-term costs. To cut off links with exploitative patrons and intermediaries would imply foregoing all claims to emergency assistance. According to Wood, the consequence is a 'Faustian bargain', a discounting of the future in favour of survival in the present, that contributes to chronic poverty: 'The dangers of not being a client, of not being protected, of losing "membership" of the local commander led community are immense. Better to be with the devil you know' (ibid.).

The current focus on 'local communities' in many writings on urban livelihoods and social capital runs the risk of ignoring the diverse linkages of households to the wider city context, especially political relations, or 'political capital' as one of the critical assets of the urban poor. We refer to the classic relationship of patronage — the informal, personal and face-to-face relationships between actors of unequal status and power that persist over time and involve the exchange of valued resources. Patronage is a good example of a very important, widely prevalent and informal indigenous relationship — an institution pre-dating industrialization and democracy. It is

culturally rooted, endogenously enforced and upheld by mutual agreement among the social actors involved, even though the relationship can be exploitative. It is fundamentally based on — and also sustains — a difference of power, as it is governed by norms and actions which lead to the widespread construction and maintenance of social inequality.

One way to explain the prevalence of patronage is that the poor face severe problems in getting access to government agencies and establishing institutional links when in need of employment, a housing plot, a loan or emergency support. Since demand for most of these benefits at any given time is much greater than supply, there will be shortages, leading to bureaucratic management and control of distribution through targeting, waiting lists, queues, lotteries, etc. There are three possibilities: direct access by the poor to relevant agencies, which is problematic due to illiteracy, lack of information and confidence (de Wit, 1996); access mediated by intermediaries, brokers, leaders (either political or non-political); and access mediated by others such as CBOs and NGOs. Despite increasing efforts of the latter to bridge institutional gaps between government and the poor, there is no indication that the power and influence of informal intermediaries is on the decline.

However, not all poor people have access to patronage as a resource (see Gill, 2007). As the relation should be one of reciprocity, even the client has to offer something, and this may not be possible for the very poor. Patrons may be becoming scarce, but it can be assumed that at lower levels of government and administration, and in peripheral areas of poorer countries, such ‘vintage’ relations still remain important (see Gay, 1998). However, it also seems certain that such long-term linkages are no longer the dominant relationship. For example, it was shown that in urban India, relations between patrons and clients have become more fluid and flexible, giving way to an army of brokers and intermediaries who cater to the needs of anyone who contacts them for a fee (de Wit, 1996, 2001; see also Krishna, 2007 for rural India).

Mediating can be done on an incidental basis, but more often regular patterns develop, depending on locality, price, loyalty and perceived efficacy, which is often related to political affiliation. Permanence in brokerage may exist or develop, depending on trust, on ‘trusted’ or ‘known’ people who hold the promise of being reliable even while they may be exploitative. The broker is normally a well-connected local leader or strongman (in India, we have not encountered women in this role) who helps to meet multiple needs: he may facilitate entrance to a slum for newcomers, sell building materials, lend money, organize a permit or obtain information on a possibly imminent eviction. So dependency of the poor on brokers is evident, especially in conditions of insecurity, need and crisis. Institutionalized mediation is very important for the poor in patronage relationships (Devas, 2005: 357; Ghafur, 2000; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Rakodi, 2004: 260). The scope for patronage and brokerage is a function of a lack of resources or services; access problems to agencies and institutions; and finally a lack of enforced impersonal rules

for the allocation of resources. This perception is confirmed by Landy and Ruby, writing about Hyderabad, India:

> if one is poor and one is fortunate enough to know someone with power, there is no choice: for any public service, water supply or PDS [public distribution system] or whatever, this powerful one will be approached since he is the only one who can be used as a broker. The poor hardly visit the various specific line department offices, they go to meet the same broker each time. (2005: 25)

Brokers are more effective if they are part of the political machinery; indeed, a broker outside a party is probably highly ineffective as he will not have access to decision making regarding public services (housing, land, the police, etc.). There is much evidence from Indian cities that councillors, once they lose an election, will find it very hard to still provide support and services to their party followers, as the political machinery is now controlled by another party (de Wit, 1996). It happens frequently that councillors who lose an election will join the new ruling party in due time, especially in the case of independents and members of small parties. Manor (2004: 65, 67, 81) creates the wrong impression that what he calls 'political fixers' can operate outside the party machinery. He has an almost romantic notion of rural intermediaries who supposedly genuinely seek to serve the people and support the democratic process. We postulate that they are rather local political entrepreneurs, balancing the need to make money with the need to remain popular, reliable and well-connected. They are best seen to have a Janus face: they take the old and handicapped to the polling booth but expect them to vote for their party; they organize a temple festival but also extract (high) rent payments from poor slum households (de Wit, 1996). Contrary to Manor's (2004: 68) belief, the fixers' role is critical precisely in conditions where people are extremely poor and inequalities severe. Brokers or fixers play a crucial bridging role from the perspective of the poor, but there is plenty of scope for them to misuse their position — although this may occur more frequently in the more anonymous urban context than in rural areas.

Patronage and clientelism relate to the concept of the 'political machine', where political parties apply institutionalized approaches to attract and bind voters through the large-scale dispensing of material inducements (Kitscheld and Wilkinson, 2007; Scott, 1978). Scott indicates that machine politics involves a three-cornered relationship, in which machine politicians can be seen as brokers. In exchange for payment by business elites, they promote the latters' political interests while passing on a part of the gain to the voters from whom they 'rent' their authority. A good example of the shifts from patronage relations to machine politics can be found in Rocamora's account of the Philippines: 'What they [local politicians] do for their constituents is required for political survival and the social demands of patron–client relationships. In recent times, as these relationships got eroded by the commercialization of agriculture and urbanization, politician-patrons paid less

attention to social obligations and more to organizational needs of political machines that gradually replaced patron–client ties' (1998: 20).

Electoral clientelism is a cornerstone of many emerging or fledgling democracies, and there are plenty of examples where politicians to a greater or lesser degree unduly influence or even coerce voters, or 'buy' votes with a dazzling variety of 'incentives' and 'presents'. In Mexico these are reported to include: money, caps, t-shirts, pencils, lighters, dictionaries, basic foodstuffs, breakfasts, beer, fruits, vegetables, hoses, seeds, chicken, cows and sheep (Schedler, 2002: 13). Kitscheld and Wilkinson (2007: 19) indicate that in many countries with high levels of poverty (including Thailand, India, Pakistan and Zambia), 'patrons directly purchase clients' votes in exchange for money, liquor, clothes, food or other immediately consumable goods . . . . Much more frequent than single-shot transactions of this nature, however, are webs of exchange, obligation, and reciprocity sustained over a longer period, in which patrons provide *private goods* or *club goods* to their clients' (original emphasis).

In India the common list of items to be distributed before elections include cash, liquor, buckets, men's and women's clothes, and cheap jewellery. Sastry notes:

> The importance of money has also skyrocketed, and it is widely accepted that at least Rs. 1 *crore* [Rs. 10 million or US$ 250,000] if not more is required per [MLA] candidate in an urban constituency and perhaps half that in a rural one. Officers on election duty routinely say that money and liquor are distributed during the nights in large quantities in working class areas. The problem with extravagant spending is that the winner spends all his or her time recovering the money spent and in returning favours to those who funded him or her, rather than focusing on real issues of governance. (2004: 1391–2)

The concept of a 'vote bank' is often used, referring to a group of voters with common characteristics (caste, language and ethnicity):

> Clientelism, which has taken new forms after the introduction of modern democracy, needs to be discussed in this context. Political leaders today desire to keep what may be called 'vote banks'. Favours are granted to those within that vote bank and clientage becomes the most important relationship. . . . The patrons then use their political influence to extend favours, bypassing or even violating laws, rules and norms and even resorting to extra-constitutional means. For many, beginning with the submission of their nomination papers as candidates in the elections, democracy is a convenient instrument for sustaining and perpetuating clientelism. (Mathew and Mathew, 2003: 22)

That democracy is eroded by clientelism is demonstrated by Benjamin (2000: 51) who claims that 25–30 per cent of publicly commissioned construction funds are routinely diverted through the party system, greatly enhancing the party's hegemony. Gupta (2004: 154) agrees that there is pervasive political corruption and the claim that India is a vibrant and functioning democracy rings hollow. The reason for the massive corruption is 'because we, in India, do not elect representatives but patrons'. Hence, patronage

and clientelism may have positive functions for the poor as they provide some access opportunities (as recognized by Benjamin, 2000: 44), but they also sustain dependency, exploitation and inequality and slowly undermine democracy.

It is also critical to note that patronage becomes politicized especially for the working classes and the urban poor who are seen as vote banks by the political parties. This works like an incentive to keep relying on patrons and politicians, as the urban poor know from experience that the presents and services provided before elections are often the only benefits they will get from politicians. As Varshney (2004: 217) correctly notes, it is not surprising that the poor prefer direct transfers over indirect or long-term poverty alleviation measures and vote on the basis of identity, not class: 'multiple selves drive a wedge between the poor as a class and the poor as a political collectivity, significantly reducing, if not eliminating, pressure on the government to act on behalf of the poor'.

While vertical patronage relations undermine prospects for collective action or struggle, there are of course other divisions that characterize urban poor communities in India, including income, caste, religion, gender, political affiliation and home owners versus tenants. Hence, many question the very existence of 'communities', as the focus of identity and suggest that joint activity may lie elsewhere. There are also conceptual issues, highlighted by Landy and Ruby (2005: 3–4):

> Contrary to NGOs which often are exogenous, CBOs were born inside the local population. It is a paradox that in India (as elsewhere), the general narrative showers praise upon the CBOs which are usually considered as key possible actors for a decentralized and participatory development, while on the other hand 'community' is often used as a euphemism for 'religion' or 'caste'. On one hand, CBO means democracy and equity; on the other, it may mean communalism and segmentation.

In their study area, they found:

> The representative is elected by a community rather than a constituency, and will openly favour this community. The voters are divided into religious and caste communities which organize themselves into associations in order to reach power. That there is no resident welfare association, only community-based organizations, seems to prove that people are unable to think of organizations based on locality. Above the level of the neighbourhood, spatial identity gives place to communal identity.

Three points can be made in summary. First, the incidence of brokerage and patronage appears to be ubiquitous in India — but not only there, as plenty of sources from other countries indicate (on African states, for example, see Blundo, 2006; Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Devas, 2005). Secondly, they reinforce vertical divisions within what may be seen as 'communities' that are already heterogeneous and divided by multiple identities which again relate to representation, mediation and politics. Thirdly, relations between the urban poor and the world beyond their households and slums are inherently politicized. We will now assess the validity of these general perspectives

for a few cases which bring out the role of municipalities, NGOs and CBOs *vis-à-vis* the urban poor.

PARTNERSHIPS, PARTICIPATION AND PATRONAGE IN A BANGALORE SLUM PROJECT[1]

Between 1993 and 1999 the Bangalore Urban Poverty Alleviation Programme (BUPP) was implemented in the south Indian metropolis of Bangalore. The Dutch-funded pilot programme aimed at poverty reduction by empowering slum inhabitants and creating an enabling institutional framework to facilitate participation and co-operation between government agencies, NGOs and community organizations. The vehicle for participation and empowerment at the local slum level was the 'Slum Development Team' (SDT), consisting of elected representatives (equal numbers of men and women) of each of the programme slums. Each SDT was expected to consult the slum community and subsequently draft a Slum Development Plan (SDP), reflecting the prioritized needs of the community. Guidance and support in drafting and implementing the plan was provided by an NGO working in the slum in question. Most of these NGOs were single-theme organizations, focusing either on housing, income generation or solid waste management.

One of the key issues in BUPP was that members of the newly established SDTs were often the leaders of pre-existing organizations (or their wives) who managed to capture the new positions or get elected to them through quiet lobbying. Some leaders of slums taken up under BUPP turned out to be an obstacle to the functioning of SDTs as they were striving to serve their personal interests; one example was provided by powerful moneylenders who obstructed the setting up of savings groups in their slums; another was an autocratic slum leader who did not want an SDT to be formed as it would undermine his own dominant position. He was the only male person to participate in a women's awareness programme, but due to his overpowering presence the women present were generally too shy to participate actively.

However, the picture was not that gloomy everywhere. In some BUPP slums, such established leaders proved to be effective, well-connected, respected by their communities and reliable. The fact is that if leaders oppose a project or initiative, there is a serious problem; if, in contrast, they support it, a potentially formidable ally has been secured (the same applies to politicians, albeit at another level). It must also be noted that apart from the slum leaders, several enterprising men and women who had never been very active in any organization were elected to an SDT and played very useful roles. SDTs then could and did also function as springboards for leadership positions, in which process aspiring individuals were supported and guided by the project and the NGOs.

1. This section is based on de Wit (2001).

Overall, BUPP was unable to effectively deal with the dilemma of being expected to form new SDTs whilst some form of community organization already existed in all the slums; but it is probably safe to say that no slum-focused programme has been able to present the ultimate solution. The dilemma is based on the nature of existing organizations: even though rooted in and, in principle, owned by the people, they are not at all egalitarian, democratic and gender-sensitive and cannot be (fully) trusted to play the developmental role that governments, NGOs and donors expect. Another problem was a general unwillingness of the NGOs associated with BUPP to co-operate and join forces in the slums where they were active. Many NGOs considered the slum where they had worked for many years as 'theirs' and were reluctant to let others in.

The organizational innovations and participatory approaches introduced by BUPP were chiefly seen by the people and SDTs alike as venues to gain access to resources in terms of funds, and to assistance from BUPP to get access to government services and more secure land tenure. Seen this way, the implementing staff (the Programme Support Unit or PSU) gradually became more like a useful patron, handing out favours and helping people to link with government agencies (as was noted by an independent evaluation mission). This means that BUPP could not achieve its – admittedly over-ambitious — objective of addressing the root causes of urban poverty, and empowering people to tackle these themselves. BUPP, like many programmes before it, was important and fairly effective in terms of alleviating poverty and assisting people, but only in a limited way. It did not succeed in providing an effective and sustainable model of government–NGO–CBO partnership for dealing with urban poverty and its underlying causes and dynamics.

THE ROLE OF CBOS IN THE SLUM ADOPTION PROGRAMME IN MUMBAI[2]

Faced with a steadily increasing volume of solid waste, restrictions on hiring additional collection staff, and long-existing problems regarding cleaning the numerous slums of the city, the City Corporation of Mumbai (MCGM) initiated the so-called Slum Adoption Programme (SAP). SAP was envisioned as a community-led programme. All the tasks related to solid waste management in a slum would be handled by a CBO representing the slum community

2. This section is based on a field study of the SAP programme in six selected Mumbai slums, where a detailed and thorough investigation was carried out on aspects such as: the nature and size of the slum area; systems in place for SAP implementation; actors that were involved in various stages; implementation processes and their impact on the programme. Data were collected via informal discussions and open ended interviews with key informants such as local political leaders, slum leaders, CBO founders, health workers, officials at the ward office and residents of slums (Desai et al., 2007).

without too much dependence on the city administration. It was hoped that slum dwellers could be 'sensitized to become responsible citizens so that they take a lead in handling their day to day garbage in co-ordination with their local Community Based Organization (CBO) and MCGM' (MCGM, n.d.). Based on the rationale that the slum residents had a direct stake in keeping their surroundings clean, SAP attempted to 'organize, motivate and involve the slum population to arrest the garbage at the generation stage' (ibid.). The SAP was to be implemented by the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Department of the MCGM through its twenty-four ward offices in a decentralized implementation structure. Ward office tasks included: identifying slums/CBOs ready to become involved in SAP; helping them draft sanitation plans, estimate total expenditures and guide CBOs on procedural requirements; and finally sensitizing and motivating slum dwellers to participate in SAP.

In terms of finance, the MCGM was to extend monthly financial assistance to selected CBOs in the form of a subsidy of Rs. 1,500 per 1,000 persons covered by one CBO. This financial support was to taper off by the third year, by which time SAP was expected to be working smoothly in the locality and the CBO to be fully self-sufficient. CBOs were expected to raise a matching monthly contribution of Rs. 10 per household and Rs. 20 per shop/commercial establishment in their slum. Apart from leading SAP activities in the programme slums, the expected responsibilities of CBOs included: organizing street meetings, with the participation of city officials and local representatives; mobilizing local support and creating awareness of cleanliness and health; and involving community volunteers and paying their wages.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide details of the six case studies of CBOs which were or had been implementing SAP in their slums (for which, see Desai et al. 2007), we can say in summary that while the SAP programme was considered a success by the Mumbai City Corporation in terms of coverage, number of CBOs involved and increased slum cleanliness, we would judge it a failure in terms of participation and representation. There was some improvement in all slums — however limited and temporary — in terms of cleanliness and more effective local SWM. Yet the level of cleanliness of slums reached under SAP was clearly related to their respective socioeconomic status, i.e. the programme performed much better in the more established, incrementally improved slums where people were more literate and demanding. Participation was restricted to those households which actually paid Rs. 10 monthly and put their household garbage outside the house/hut ready for the waste collectors employed by the CBO. In almost half the cases, these collectors and the slum sweepers were not from the slum itself, another indication that the CBO saw the collection work as a technical job that provided officers with some extra income. In none of our six study areas had the SAP-appointed CBO become

active in organizing the proposed slum meetings, awareness programmes or beautification and tree planting.

One core finding of our study was the unbridgeable divide between the CBO leadership on the one hand, and the slum community at large in terms of participation or even mutual interest. In all cases the key SAP relationship was that between the CBO leader, the City Corporation ward officials and the ward councillor (the local political representative elected to the City Corporation by the residents of each of the 227 Mumbai electoral wards). That the councillors are even mentioned here may be surprising, as they had no formal role to play, but they nevertheless became the most vital link between the CBO leaders and the ward officials. Access to other important 'contacts' in the ward office, as well as to information, depended entirely on the councillors. It was through them that the ward office apparatus could be activated and decisions swung in favour of the CBO. The programme was therefore considerably politicized and was based on a close and closed network of powerful individuals. The councillor performed as the initiator, mediator and patron. The resulting informal interference of political parties via their councillors had, according to some officials, turned SAP into a 'money making programme'. We note here that the financial gain for a CBO could be Rs. 30,000 to Rs. 70,000 per month depending on the slum population, and that ward officials normally received 10 per cent of the funds that were passed on to the CBO as bribes.

In all cases studied, the lead taken by the CBO leaders was noteworthy. Well established in their slums, they were versed with community dynamics as well as slum problems, and had acquired the necessary skills to handle internal and external demands. For instance, they had intervened in community squabbles; helped residents get basic services; initiated welfare schemes in the locality; and started self-help groups (SHGs). In almost all cases, CBO leaders were or had been implementing local government programmes. This implied repeated interaction with the ward officials that had created a foundation for future interactions — or in other words, the development of personal, time-tested relationships of trust and mutual acceptance, such as having proven not to cheat (too much).

There is no doubt that the councillor–CBO leader linkage characterized by mutual dependence was one of the most critical ones in SAP. Councillors viewed SAP as a means to benefit from their political capital and therefore helped those CBOs upon whose allegiance they could rely. Often, the CBO leaders were local political functionaries belonging to the same party as the councillor. However, if a councillor was opposed to a CBO leader, the latter's slum was excluded from SAP implementation. Bhide (2006: 10) confirms the central role of the municipal councillor in the SAP: 'In the K. slum, which has a SAP scheme, the CBO is engaged in service delivery but residents do not see this as a change as it is operated in the leadership of the councillor and his political party workers. The dependence on political representatives,

particularly corporators (councillors) remains untouched but there is a new awareness'.

The slum communities for whose benefit SAP was created were silent spectators to the wheeling and dealing of the three dominating stakeholder groups: CBO leaders, councillors and ward officials. They did modestly benefit as in most slums some improvement in SWM was noticeable, and participation cost them Rs. 10 per month at most (if they paid). The bad news is the misuse of public funds which are appropriated by cleverly operating and well-connected slum entrepreneurs and brokers masquerading as CBOs, by ward officers who receive bribes and by local councillors, who benefit both financially and in terms of building political capital. All this happens in the name of the poor, in the name of participation and empowerment, but it underlines and actually enforces existing inequalities in and around the slums.

SELF-HELP GROUPS IN CHENNAI[3]

A survey done in Chennai (de Wit and Padmavathy, 2007) covered twenty-five self-help groups (SHGs) of poor women, mostly saving groups, supported by two NGOs. The savings were deposited at a formal bank and collective businesses and employment schemes were started (small shops, food stall, rice trade, *sari* (dress) business, telephone booths, etc.). Another, smaller NGO that had also been active in organizing SHGs was listed in the survey, but it was mistrusted by the local people as it was primarily functioning as a money-lending organization charging a high interest rate. With few exceptions, the SHGs were all-women groups, and by and large they managed without the support or interference of the men/husbands, even when, in some cases, husbands had laid a claim on their wives' SHG savings. In the case of one SHG, the very strong and enterprising woman leader indicated that her group got support neither from the municipal corporation nor, any longer, from the NGO which helped start the SHG, but that the men were supporting them. Some groups have a mixed membership, but the men are less active. One reason may be that they spend less time inside the community; as one man said: 'We only have one day off in the week, how can we come to the SHG meetings?' (ibid.: 15).

Of the twenty-five groups studied, seven had been dissolved for various reasons, including machinations by a SHG leader who was also a moneylender. Some of the groups had only been formed just before local elections as vote banks for electoral purposes, and collapsed after elections (and after

3. This section is based on a survey amongst twenty-five Self Help Groups carried out by S. Padmavathy in slums of north and central Chennai, as well as on interviews held by her and J. de Wit with officials of the Chennai City Corporation, NGOs, councillors and local informants in the slums visited (see de Wit and Padmavathy, 2007).

a local politician had distributed 700 sewing machines as well as sewing training amongst SHG group members, probably financed from Tsunami aid funds). One group fell apart when some women members received pre-election gifts (*saris* and money) from one party and other women did not, creating jealousies and confusion in the group. It may be noted that politics often become part of the interview statements, indicating the politicization of the SHG approach in Tamil Nadu. The former Chief Minister Jayalalitha had actively promoted the formation of SHGs, some say in a sincere effort to empower the women of the state amongst whom she is very popular; others, in contrast, see the party-supported SHGs as vehicles to tie women voters to Jayalalitha's party. Now that the DMK party has replaced Jayalalitha's ADMK-led government, it is also actively supporting and courting the state's many SHGs (de Wit and Padmavathy, 2007).

Some SHG groups have a mixed membership in terms of caste, but there is a pattern that the *Dalit* (former untouchable/scheduled caste) women SHGs found it harder to be successful financially and in terms of creating employment. This can be partially explained by the lower literacy levels and the absence of a tradition of self-employment. Yet even such less financially effective groups were perceived to be very important for the women, and there is definitely a sense of empowerment in members of those SHGs that have persisted over two years. Indicators include a sense of solidarity amongst women, a sense that they are not alone and that other women can be relied upon in case of crisis or emergency. Most often mentioned was domestic violence where SHG members intervened in marital quarrels, mostly wife-beating by husbands (often drunk). SHGs also engaged in common social issues such as support during floods, preventing child labour and motivating illiterate children to go to school. SHG members may contact the City Corporation in cases of emergency and check on the quality of drinking water. Most groups reported an increased sense of awareness, of having more self-confidence and skills: 'Before, when we went with complaints individually we were not taken seriously, but now that is no longer the case . . . . The local people approach us for any of their problems and that is the kind of respect we have' (ibid.: 22).

This a case where women — often initially supported only by an NGO — succeed in organizing with common and shared benefits for all members. Moreover, several SHGs have taken over responsibility for communal affairs, in sharp contrast to the other case studies in which CBOs essentially (but to different degrees) became instruments for the privatization of public resources. Two reasons can be cited: the groups were formed based on close personal relations and only gradually extended their outreach to (parts of) the communities at large; and the resources at stake were too small to attract hijacking by powerful groups within or outside the slums. Gender is important, as women share much of their everyday lives which may become the basis of mutual trust: 'Neighbourhood is basically a relationship between women as most of the activities and interactions that constitute it are carried

out by the female residents' (Berner, 1997: 89). Our survey is by no means sufficient to assess the performance of the SHGs in Chennai but we cannot agree with Harriss (2005b: 28) who sees them as an effort 'to buy women off with very modest resources'. There is no denial that the well performing ones are important for women, also in their struggle to become citizens rather than 'denizens' (ibid.).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on evidence from several cases from large Indian cities we have shown that the importance of personalized relations and networks is very high in the day-to-day life of the urban poor. In many cases there are dense webs of mutual support and risk-sharing, organized along lines of kinship, common origin and/or religion, or neighbourhood, and predominantly carried by women. Social cohesion and trust accumulated in these networks may become the basis of collective action at communal level, as in the case of self-help groups in Chennai. Supported by NGOs, but quite independently and successfully, small groups of women manage to get together in spite of dissimilar incomes and backgrounds. Some of the groups may collapse, and it was clear that they suffer from efforts by outsiders to use them, as in the case of politicians who consider them a useful and easily accessible vote bank. But they fulfil an important need, and some of them have assumed a fairly strong and respected social role, also mediating in cases of domestic violence and promoting education.

The other cases indicate that such genuine, bottom-up CBOs may be less widespread than the proponents of community-driven development assume them to be, especially where these are supported, promoted or become an operational need in the context of donor, municipal and NGO interventions. In both Bangalore and Mumbai, the actual interaction was mostly with established local leaders who were perceived as 'representatives'. In the donor-funded Bangalore urban poverty project, the newly formed slum organizations were dominated by the existing leaders (and their wives) and gradually came to form a new layer of power- and gate-keeping between project staff and the poor. Only after the formation of Grameen-style savings and credit groups did the project regain a direct link with the poor (de Wit, 2001). Things were even more problematic in the case of the Slum Adoption Programme in Mumbai, where there is a brazen capture of funds and power by a tripartite nexus formed by local municipal officials, councillors and local slum leaders who are considered CBOs in local rhetoric (Desai et al., 2007).

The grassroots image of CBOs as expressions of horizontal ties and instruments of collective action does, in these and many other cases, not withstand critical scrutiny. Initiated and sustained from above by governments and NGOs in order to give credibility to 'participatory development',

they remain under the firm control of established local leaders and serve as a disguise for political entrepreneurs eager to appropriate public funds. Hence, this article argues that prudence is to be exercised when starting or implementing 'community-based' or 'community-driven' programmes relying on CBOs. The very concept of CBO needs to be applied with caution: in many cases it is more accurate to speak of leader-centred networks, where a leader heads a close and reliable network of (party) workers and supporters and, in a looser and wider circle, is linked to hangers-on, clients and possibly voters at election time.

Unsurprisingly, the concept of community itself is once again shown to be problematic, with heterogeneous groups of people living together (accidentally and often temporarily) on a given land area (Botes and van Rensburg, 2000). There are divisions, in India and elsewhere, of incomes and assets, ethnicity, religion and gender, between employers and workers and between tenants and owners. Identities, loyalties and solidarity cannot be taken for granted and reciprocal relations and collective action in a slum occur within subgroups more often than at the level of the 'community'. Hence, those who start working in a slum should check the actual density of social relations and the presence of (sub-)groups and divisions before getting involved in organization, mobilization or — most critically — channelling benefits and funds to urban poor communities. This is particularly important as social cohesion can hardly be 'constructed' or just enhanced by outside intervention (Beall, 2001: 371).

Many programmes are 'participatory' and even 'empowering' in name, but only serve the interests of slum leaders and slum elites, municipal officials, politicians and in some cases also NGOs (as in one case of the Chennai SHGs). Such interventions become vehicles of profit and status for others than the urban poor. And if the formation of inclusive and representative local slum organizations is rather difficult, the endeavour to link several slum CBOs into larger federations is even less likely to yield effective and sustainable results: 'Supra-local alliances are exclusively initiated and largely maintained by the NGOs to legitimize their claim to represent the poor. For the local leaders, they serve mainly as a source of prestige and a forum for grandstanding' (Berner, 1997: 194; see also Harriss, 2005b: 19). This links to Mohanty's critique of the fashionable concepts 'empowerment', 'civil society' and 'democratization', which he perceives as part of a new package of liberalization discourse: 'Civil society is defined narrowly to include only established, organized groups, with which the state and dominant western forces are willing to co-operate, to the neglect of the poor and powerless' (Mohanty, 1995: 1435). To further this argument, one could argue that the poorest are least able to organize or join collective action, being divided socially in heterogeneous slums as well as by being dependent on vertical relationships: 'The social resources of the poor constitute more private than public goods, as social networks exclude as much as they include' (Beall, 2001: 371). Just as patronage is often inaccessible for the poorest, they are

also likely to be excluded from horizontal networks — in both cases because they cannot fulfil their part in reciprocal relationships.

In spite of their noble intentions, NGOs, municipalities and donor agencies working in India and elsewhere cannot easily escape the logic of patronage. From the perspective of the poor, the benefits that they offer are as particularistic (to be competed for) and temporary as those provided by politicians, administrators and brokers. Moreover, and critically, they can rarely bypass or structurally change the CBOs on whom they depend for effectiveness and legitimacy of their interventions. These latter organizations inevitably reflect and reinforce local divisions, inequalities and power differentials, and elite capture of benefits is not the exception but the rule. Where NGOs go, they can at best strive to become better and more reliable (but not necessarily 'progressive') patrons. Their niche may be broadened by the increasing scarcity of traditional patronage as a resource, and the commercialization of brokerage making it inaccessible for large numbers of poor people.

More research is certainly needed on the dynamics and evolution of the propensity of the poor to engage either in collective or, in contrast, individual actions to solve problems and safeguard livelihoods. This includes the incidence of patronage and brokerage and differences along various parameters such as gender, scarcity, heterogeneity, inequality among the poor and vulnerable, regimes (types of democracy), as well as differences between rural or urban areas.

For the future, we expect that the importance of vertical relations like patronage and brokerage for the poor is not likely to diminish. Although the middle classes and urban rich also use vertical and personal relations to get things done, their dependence on patrons and brokers for basic needs is far less critical. Studies have shown that the poor operate differently than the rich or the middle classes, the latter being more able to directly access offices, to make phone calls, to put pressure on officials through upper-strata networks, or to participate in effective — if undemocratic — resident welfare associations (Baud and de Wit, 2008; Harriss, 2005a; Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2007). Such differences will further accentuate the polarization between the poor and the well-off in cities. The net result is that the rich–poor gap is widening, not only in terms of wealth, but also in terms of access to services and control over the local state. Seen this way, the urban poor have to survive in an increasingly competitive context where they have to fend for themselves under complex social, political and habitat constraints and where the state is increasingly remote.

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