

**Removing Unfreedoms  
July 7<sup>th</sup> Colloquium  
London School of Economics  
Case Study: Project Design**

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The Removing Unfreedoms research project has been periodically carried out over the last 6 months and focused on a workshop in Mumbai, India with the Federation of slum Dwellers, the Mahila Milan women together savings group and the NGO Sparc who supports their concerns. This location was suggested to us by DFID who has an ongoing programme with Sparc. Sparc welcomed us and were willing to work with us to consider the potentials of the freedom approach to their work with the slums dwellers. Anticipating the Mumbai workshop, our inquiry was guided by discussions with Rick Davies, a professional evaluator with a great deal of experience who is with us here today.

During the course of this project we have recorded the discussions between all the participants. The transcriptions of these discussions will be edited and made available in some form of printed document to include the substance of our discussions here today including Amartya Sen's response. The extent of our interaction with the Slum Dwellers Federation of India as well as Sparc was limited by time. We were not there to carry out any sort of measured evaluation. We simply intended to hold intense discussions with the NGO to try and determine whether, in their work, they could find any relevance to the freedom approach.

Since Sparc has designed how the project is presented to donors, Rick Davies had previously advised us to interact primarily with Sparc. He suggested that in order to determine to what extent the individual was the agent of change it would be necessary to identify if individual social decision-making was monitored and recorded by the Sparc and evaluated by donors.

One thing we established at the start – we were going to have problems explaining the term “freedoms”. Freedom is associated with India’s “Freedom Struggle” led by Gandhi. In our discussions, the process of gaining freedoms was therefore explained as a process of removing obstructions or constraints in the lives of the slum dwellers.

We have linked our observations, to the four stages of the Slum Dwellers Federation project cycle. So that, if a project has to be designed with the objectives of the freedom approach, one could take these observations into consideration at the design stage.

### **When considering the Context of the project**

Clearly the slum dwellers federation do not think in terms of dividing all their obstructions into the five categories of Amartya Sen’s Freedoms. But it is certainly true that the obstructions that Sen mentions in his five categories, ***Political freedoms, Economic Facilities, Social Opportunities, Transparency Guarantees, and Protective Security*** are experienced by the slum dwellers as their major obstructions. For example finance, housing, health care and education, emergency floods and fires, access to information to name a few. However the context defined by the Slum Dwellers Federation emphasises the primary constraint to be overcome as security of dwellings rather than an equally weighted list of obstructions spread across the Freedom Spectrum.

### **When considering the Project Design**

the activities that were carried out to realise the objectives of the project were extremely complex and provided us with an extraordinary and innovative way to initiate community participation in developmental work. Indeed it was apparent to us that any project design that addressed the issues of freedom as its goals, would have to take on board almost all the activities that were being carried out by the Federation. Some of these activities will be seen by you in the film that follows.

The project is designed around two components. First the formation of a series of women's savings circles that cover a wide range of households in the slum. These are run entirely by women. The slum is divided into units of 50 households per collector and each household has a savings book that the collector maintains. Collections are made from the women of the house every day. Each evening the collectors meet and review the savings pulse of the whole community and identify obstructions that may need collective attention.

The second component is the formation of the collective. This collective is the instrument for interaction with the authorities. The presence of a collective ensures serious consideration from the authorities. The collective exerts a pressure that is not so much for removing general macro obstructions but more specifically for securing land and building rights and transit housing facilities for families who have been forced out from slum locations.

### **When considering the Implementation of the project**

It was brought to our attention that the majority of those participating in the Manila Milan savings group are illiterate and their daily savings collections are accompanied by a dialogue with the collector that places a higher value on verbal communications and memory than on written documents. The only written documentation made during the collections are the amount of saved money collected from each household. Therefore dealing with the social concerns of each individual and family, by the daily savings collector at the time of collection, are acknowledged by immediate oral communication. Constraints to their day-to-day living were often made apparent to her if the daily savings rate became irregular in any way. With unbearable obstructions Informal arrangements were made after the information was passed on again solely in the oral domain of communication to the collective Savings Group and Federation for consideration.

The collective would consider decisions as a group agreeing to the best method to remove the obstruction. During our workshops it was explained to us, again through the oral tradition—as no written documentation exists, that *individual concerns* and obstructions are addressed daily in this manner. Many times the examples were given by recounting individual stories of those concerned.

What became clear was that the process of social decision-making, at this individual level, was taking place but was not observable as a recorded process. It was a daily event, contained within intimate dialogues between the savings collector and the mother of the household. Individual Cultural identities, in their opinion, have little developmental relevance to the objectives of the collective. When questioned about the character and potential of individuals and the need to accommodate their varying aspirations. Apparently these differences were not given significance by Sparc or the slum dwellers federation. In deed Data had been acquired that identified that in the slum areas, where the women's saving circle and federations were strong, cultural clashes were less frequent.

Therefore collective aspirations were considered to be more important than individual aspirations.

Therefore if we review the two components of the implementation of the project the savings circle seems to address individual obstructions while the federation as a collective addresses the obstruction that has been given priority.

### **When considering the monitoring and evaluation of the project**

it became clear the first evaluation and monitoring of individual social concerns is done by Mahila Malan within the Woman's Saving Group. This evaluation takes place within the oral domain daily during the collection of payments Sparc as the supporting NGO is at present protecting the oral domain of the slum dwellers federations from intrusions of external evaluations. They feel community led evaluations are the only way social decision arrangements could address the inductive multi-layered analysis of the oral domain which

dominate their entire methodology. Indeed there are many expressions in the oral tradition that Sparc goes to great lengths to highlight.

Many times during the workshop Sparc identified the energy and spirit of the women of Mahila Malan to share their hardships and success stories personally. The sharing of personal stories is key to how knowledge is transferred when replicating the process to women in other cities. There is a generosity of time and experience offered by these women that has no obvious economic returns.

Sparc highlighted that Women have a natural facility to talk and share experiences and concerns. This could also account for the personal attention they are able to give to households when collecting savings. There are elements in this process that have to do with the nature of women and intuition. Sparc and slum dwellers federation may not go so far as to use the word *intuition* as an explanation however if this is so how can one evaluate it or indeed is there a need to evaluate it.

We thought it was remarkable that it became clear during the discussions, that even if these women are still pavement dwellers, and have not yet acquired a home after many years, their patience and perseverance inspire a savings group methodology replicated and working in 50 cities across India and in 11 countries. In their role as a supporting organisation Sparc is aware of the possible unfavourable or inaccurate conclusions and consequences of objective external evaluations. Sparc takes on the responsibility to access the inductive self-evaluations of the community, into data for the external evaluations of other NGO's, donors and government agencies.

However, as Mahila Malan Women's Saving Group operates solely in the oral inductive domain, the successes of removing individual obstructions through their innovative method of development, although protected by Sparc, is at present not recorded, made observable, nor evaluated to a wider shared audience. So it is not possible to understand

individual obstructions in terms of the Freedom spectrum unless the community themselves find a way to make it observable. I have only been able to cover a few aspects of these slum dwellers project in Mumbai. Fortunately representative of both the slum dwellers federation and Sparc are here with us and will be speaking to you and you will have an opportunity to clarify any questions you may have about the nature of their work. We will now begin with a short film made for today's presentation by Janet Boston who is also with us here today.