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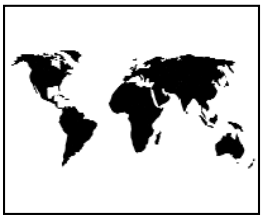

Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) – foundations to treetops

Sheela Patel, Sundar Burra and Celine D'Cruz

Sheela Patel is the founder-Director of SPARC, Sundar Burra is an advisor to SPARC and Celine D'Cruz is the Associate Director of SPARC and also one of the two coordinators of Slum/Shack Dwellers International based in India. SPARC is the NGO in the Indian alliance of SPARC, Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation. This alliance is now over 15 years old and works in India in six states in about 40 cities.

Address: The authors can be contacted at SPARC, PO Box 9389, Mumbai, 400 026, India; e-mail: sparc1@vsnl.com or sparc@sparcindia.org

SUMMARY: *This paper describes the formation and development of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), an international people's organization which represents member federations of urban poor and homeless groups from 11 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It also describes the evolution of these national federations and how they grew to challenge conventional development thinking and to develop new, community-directed precedents for poverty reduction. These federations and the NGOs with whom they work formed SDI to support the many ways in which the federations (and their member groups) learn from and help each other, and to ensure that global institutions and events became more useful and relevant to the urban poor. The paper also describes SDI's experiences with international agencies, including its involvement in the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure and the measures taken to ensure that its work and experience of the global provides benefit to and strengthens the local, adding value to the plans of the urban poor.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER TRACES the history and evolution of an international people's organization known as Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) that has member federations of urban poor groups across 11 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. (Whilst the term "slum" is more commonly used in Asia, the term "shack" is in more common use in Africa, hence the name of the organization changes depending on which the user prefers.) The paper examines why and how the organization has been created, through the lens of "governance". It also considers the internal evolution of SDI's institutionalization as it seeks to fulfill the needs and aspirations of its membership. At the same time, it examines SDI's impact on local, national and international development processes (and considers the opportunities for a grassroots network with a local base to influence global agencies) and explores how this, in turn, is impacting on SDI's governance process from the outside. The discussion here looks at the impact of such opportunities on the membership and examines what learning, advocacy potential and stress management need to be in place for local actors to be able to operate on the global stage to secure benefits for local communities.

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II. THE LARGER BACKDROP

A FEATURE OF the post-World War II period has been the dominance of the Bretton Woods institutions (especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group) and their impact upon development initiatives across the world. The pro-state attitude dominated thinking during the 1950s and 1960s which, in turn, created conditions for civil society to seek entitlements from the state. This was then followed by the promotion of market liberalization and a stress on the significance for development of the private sector. Throughout most of this period, in what was then the USSR and Eastern Europe, communism also placed the state at the centre of governance structures. In post-colonial countries, nationalist movements invested newly formed independent governments with considerable powers and prestige. Hence, for much of the post-war period, there has been a widely held belief that the state can successfully tackle the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. As a result of this, many movements of the poor in both rural and urban areas sought to mobilize in order to press for adequate and effective investment by the state in the sectors that affect them. In turn, this has had a profound impact on how communities have sought to be organized, on what they saw as their goals for mobilization, and who was the focus of their attention for advocacy – it was the central government of the nation state.

Experience has shown that the neo-liberal theories of economic development adhered to by the World Bank and the IMF have done little for the vast majority of the poor. Elsewhere, the excesses of communist dictatorships robbed these régimes of any moral standing, and poverty remained widespread in the countries of the South as revolutionary nationalist fervour faded with the presence of élitism, widespread political corruption and, in some cases, military rule. What is common in all these cases is the absence of the voice of the poor in decision-making – sometimes by design, at other times by the capture of the developmental process by dominant economic and social forces in the polity. In addition to discrimination against the poor, various groups have remained excluded from decision-making on account of caste, class, gender, language, ethnicity or religion.

It has often been remarked that three movements that have had a significant international impact are those concerned with women, peace and ecology. It is a common feature of all three that they did not emerge through party political processes (although they have certainly affected the processes and structures of governance). Recent interest in civil society within the developmental discourse has, in part, been influenced by the significance of movements such as these in the processes of social and political change. Such an interest has various ideological roots. For example, for advocates of the free market, civil society is seen as a counter to the centrality and bureaucracy of the state. However, for people's movements that seek to place the welfare of the poor and excluded at the centre of the developmental process, civil society seeks to remind the state of its obligations with respect to equity. In this case, civil society organizations may define their objectives in terms of the realization of rights that, in many countries, are constitutionally guaranteed. There are also many tentative explorations that consider the role and responsibility of the state in instigating policies and in securing resources to address issues of equity, through a re-examination of traditional delivery strategies. Such explorations question the validity of the state as a delivery agent and seek new

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possibilities in which the groups affected have a major say in this activity as well. SDI falls into this final category.

Many commentators have pointed to the fact that one of the consequences of globalization has been a weakening of the nation-state. The scale of international capital flows, the formation of associations of countries such as the European Union and the power of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the IMF and other multilateral and bilateral agencies are all contributory factors to the weakening of national sovereignty. Technical changes in communications such as the Internet, the spread of television and the lower cost of travel have meant that all sorts of organizations – and not just multinational corporations – can benefit from better information. These technological developments have led to the proliferation of international NGO networks in sectors such as education and health. What is the relevance of these developments to SDI? Choices as to how investments are made in development are increasingly influenced by a wider spectrum of actors than they were decades ago. While decentralization has moved decision-making and resource utilization from the national to the local level, paradoxically, many of the organizations that influence these resource flows are located beyond national institutions in the global development arena. However, decentralization has offered benefits to local groups when they are organized and ready to take up the opportunities. And there can be benefits to interacting with a range of international institutions as the proliferation of NGO networks has shown. The sections that follow describe some of the ways in which SDI has sought to take advantage of an increasing range of opportunities at the international level in order to add value to the work of its member organizations.

III. THE BEGINNING

BETWEEN 1988 AND 1991, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), a network of grassroots organizations and NGOs in the region, began linking groups with each other. Teams of NGOs and grassroots leaders began to visit and learn from one another. The focus of these activities was urban poverty reduction. The overt strategies that were employed included the formation of savings and credit groups of low-income women in order to promote income generation, reduce daily risks such as illness and obtain loans for housing improvements. Intrinsically, these strategies were designed to build networks of grassroots communities with financial transactions (savings and loans), creating the basis for federation-building. Other strategies were also shared, such as community-driven enumeration of local residents, survey and mapping of slums, model houses as a means of creating norms and standards that the poor themselves recommend to city decision makers, and negotiations with municipalities and local governments for secure land tenure, housing and infrastructure. These activities were designed to build community-based organizations of the urban poor. One common objective of community groups was to develop leadership amongst the urban poor so that they themselves could lead the negotiations with the state and its agencies to extend and obtain entitlements. Over time, local grassroots organizations strengthened to become networks or federations in their own countries. These exchange visits led to a pooling of knowledge and experience and to the strengthening of links between federations of the poor in different countries. Local groups became skilled in the cross-fertilization of skills and legitimacy that

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allowed one federation to use the experience of another to back up its claims for resources in negotiations with local authorities.

A part of the emerging network of community-based organizations and NGOs that spanned the Asian region was resolute in its insistence that local capabilities had to be built within the leadership of the urban poor. What was unconventional about the strategy was that the aim was to make community-based organizations the leading force in the struggle against poverty, with NGOs playing a supportive role, helping link people's organizations with mainstream governmental or private institutions, and acting as researchers and fundraisers. Typically, NGOs have been established by middle-class people whose vision of the world reflects their own social and economic backgrounds; as such, they are poorly placed to determine priorities for a movement of the urban poor. Within this network, NGOs were in the "backseat" however, their skills and opinions continued to inform the process. Moreover, there was a recognition that the multiplication of NGO personnel was necessarily expensive and outreach would have to be limited if the process was to be financially viable and also dependent on NGO personnel.

At the same time, the involvement of people's organizations meant that the analysis of problems and emerging solutions reflected the needs and aspirations of the urban poor. Unlike professional staff whose careers moved them away from specific organizational entities, the community leadership pool and the capacity of communities to reproduce leadership ensured these processes would be robust and dynamic. The mass character of people's organizations would help make the social movements accountable to the poor. The organizational choice of a community based organization and NGO configuration reflected the belief that the voices of the poor should be heard directly rather than through intermediary institutions such as NGOs. Who was better qualified and equipped to speak for the poor than the poor themselves?

More generally, the question of who could speak on behalf of the poor was and continues to be problematic. Liberal political theory does not recognize the barriers that exist in society for groups disadvantaged on grounds of race, gender and poverty, nor does it recognize serious conflicts and divisions that exist in society. Communist practice, if not Marxist theory, appears to result in a strong identification of the leader with the people (as does its fascist counterpart). In India, during the Emergency (when all constitutional rights were suspended), an acolyte of the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, went so far as to say "*Indira is India* and *India is Indira*", making the identification of the leader with the nation complete. In many dictatorships, there is little democratic space for the articulation of the interests of most of society. The problem is further compounded by the fact that even where democratic dialogue and discussion is possible, much of the print and electronic media focus upon the sensational, the fashionable and the glamorous and, in Noam Chomsky's resounding phrase, "*manufactures consent*" over issues such as American foreign policy in Vietnam and South-East Asia by selective and skillful manipulation of the truth. Fashionable academic theories such as postmodernism – borne out of disenchantment with the grand narrative of progress embodied both in capitalism and Marxism – encourage retreat from the public arena of politics, leaving existing inequities in place.

Other than the Bretton Woods institutions and multilateral and bilateral agencies, another group with some influence upon the patterns of development is that of the technocrats, bureaucrats and professionals. One

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immediate consequence of this is the mystification of knowledge resting upon the claim that only "experts" can provide solutions because development problems are technical. Unfortunately, this "technical expertise" is often embedded in socioeconomic perspectives that are anti-poor. Consider, for example, a proposal to build flyovers in one of Asia's largest cities (Mumbai, India), which would benefit mainly car owners while 83 per cent of the commuters use the suburban rail system. The provincial government has spent over Rs 9,000 million on over 50 flyovers (now almost complete) whilst for 14 years it has delayed upgrading mass rail transport at broadly similar cost.

In South Asia, history heavily influences present outcomes. India, for example, inherited laws, institutions and policies that served colonial interests. Firmly entrenched and centralized bureaucracies aligned with the nascent political leadership to build dams, industries, power stations and the like, all inspired by Soviet-style planning processes and Fabian socialism. Although formal democratic institutions are in place in India and fundamental rights are guaranteed by the constitution, the participation of people has been largely restricted to voting at elections every so many years. The inherited structures of the colonial legacy and the belief in planning together ensured a top-down approach. Even though Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of India for a decade and a half after independence, had a genuine respect for democracy and its institutions, the pattern of development was skewed. For example, world class research institutions in the sciences and mathematics were set up and nurtured while primary education was neglected. The constitutional directive of state policy to ensure universal primary education within ten years of the framing of the constitution remains on paper 40 years later.

It is within this background that the emerging role of SDI can be understood. As an international people's organization, its member federations stress grassroots democracy even as they challenge existing paradigms of development. The foundations of SDI were laid during the late 1980s (and following years) and the exploration of community exchange methodologies within the work of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. These foundations were strengthened by the community exchanges between India and South Africa that began in 1991 and by subsequent inter Africa exchanges undertaken since 1991 by the South African Homeless People's Federation. In the Asian region, fledgling national federations working with NGOs associated with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights became part of the SDI network, linking this coalition itself into a regional support system for SDI.

IV. FORMALIZING THE NETWORK

IN 1996, A number of federations of the urban poor and the NGOs working with them came together in South Africa. The federations had been in existence for periods varying from a couple of years to more than a decade. They had all been deeply involved in urban informal settlements – defending them against evictions and attempting to secure basic amenities for them. Over a period of time, confidence had grown and many of the federations had begun to take on a more proactive role, negotiating with municipalities and governments to solve the crisis of land security and lack of infrastructure. During this meeting in 1996, it was agreed to create an international network, Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), with repre-

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sentatives from six Asian countries, four African countries and one country from Latin America.

The India-South Africa exchange can be seen, in retrospect, as an important milestone in the development of SDI. When South Africa became free of the apartheid state, the new government decided to give subsidies for housing and infrastructure to the poor. The Indian federation attended a workshop in which this was first discussed by grassroots organizations and raised the possibility of the state allowing communities themselves to choose how the subsidies were to be used. The Indian experience had been that subsidies routed through state agencies did not reach the poor very effectively. In South Africa, the government's plan at that stage was to channel the subsidies through housing developers and contractors. The grassroots organizations in South Africa liked the message of the Indian federation. They went on to form local housing savings schemes that networked to create the South African Homeless People's Federation.

In the following years, the South African Homeless People's Federation demanded a pilot initiative with the state so that they could have direct access to housing subsidies and build their own houses. A series of exchanges began between the shack dwellers from South Africa and slum and pavement dwellers from India. The ministers for land and for housing from South Africa visited India and spent time with the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC). The South African government agreed to a pilot initiative which would enable the South African federation to access subsidies for improved housing for their members.

The South African Homeless People's Federation found that communities could build their core houses entirely with the subsidy money and at a cost that was 40 per cent lower than that of private developers. The pilot initiative has since expanded and the South African Homeless People's Federation now runs a major programme in collaboration with the state. This is an example of how an international network of locally based activities can support emerging groups, strengthening their negotiating position and sharing experiences of learning.

A second example, in the city of Phnom Penh, demonstrates how such a network and its partners can influence local activities resulting, within a few years, in a city-based federation and a substantial loan fund. Through the support of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, SDI members initiated savings schemes, supported the formation of the local slum federations and assisted in a dialogue with city and state authorities on issues of sanitation, water and relocation. Working with local community-based organizations, the SDI network supported an important experiment in the city. An urban poor development fund was set up to provide loans for housing, housing repair and income generation for the poor of the city. What is notable about the fund is that it emerged from, and is embedded within, a partnership between the municipality of Phnom Penh and the communities themselves. Negotiations with the state created possibilities for a wide range of initiatives, including the resettlement and rehabilitation of the urban poor. The fund is jointly administered through the community and municipal representatives. The governor of Phnom Penh and the prime minister of Cambodia supported the setting up of this fund and the associated partnerships. Endorsement for the fund was, in part, secured following a series of exchange visits between Cambodia and other countries in the SDI network. Municipal officials and community representatives travelled together, exploring potential development interven-

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tions and strengthening their working relationships.[1]

In the last ten years, grassroots federations in a number of countries have worked together to assist other groups of the urban poor. Inevitably, these groups have chosen some of the same principles, strategies and methods as those that have inspired them. The result is a family of affiliates who have many similarities and yet many differences. The major commonalities are: supporting a critical mass among the urban poor; creating local knowledge and understanding through community exchanges; maintaining a culture of daily saving to strengthen grassroots organizations and community loan funds; supporting women to collectively take charge of the development process; building capacities to dialogue with local officials through exchanges; and exploring precedent-setting activities to demonstrate what the poor can do. (Precedent-setting activities are those that demonstrate better development alternatives for the poor, perhaps on a small scale in the initial phases.) Many small and some larger-scale funds to provide loan capital to communities are now managed by these federations. It is the strength of these commonalities that has resulted in the creation of the international network, SDI.

SDI members had observed that development funds for urban poverty, housing and development were generally routed through national (or state) governments and municipalities. Emphasis in these projects was laid upon improving municipal performance and on enhancing municipal capacity. No doubt these are important areas of concern, but why was it that poor people had no say in decisions regarding urban development, for example in how city plans are prepared? Who writes the plans? Who is consulted in the finalization of the plans? It was found that, usually, the poor were completely left out of discussions. Hence, SDI groups believed it was necessary to begin a people's process that would equip them to participate in these discussions and, at the same time, city planners and bureaucrats had to be sensitized to allow new players into the arena. Exchange visits which included government and municipal officials were undertaken and these have helped create space and alliances. During this process, SDI members came to realize that the development agencies themselves needed to change.

The ways in which this process has grown, the speed with which knowledge has been transferred across federations, the capacity to scale up local activities through city-level and programme-level partnerships and the growing impact of these strategies has started to be noticed by many national governments, bilateral and multilateral organizations, Northern funding agencies and various United Nations agencies. In spite of SDI's increasing visibility and credibility, for many years local organizations have struggled to secure the funding they need. For example, difficulties persist in raising resources for horizontal networking (community-to-community exchanges) especially with Northern NGOs. The culture of technical assistance promotes international travel by state officials, mayors, professionals and NGOs, including exchange visits between these groups. The idea that poor people can learn from each other and that exchange visits between them strengthens local capacities and international networks often meets with scepticism within funding agencies. Moreover, in officially organized exchange visits, the emphasis is upon projects and "best practices" rather than upon the processes and evolving strategies that excite the imagination of grassroots workers. SDI believes that the monopoly over information and knowledge exercised by officials, technocrats and professionals needs to be broken and poor people themselves

1. See the paper in this issue on 'Building an urban poor people's movement in Phnom Penh, Cambodia' by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights.

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need to gain control over knowledge in order to deal more effectively with their situation.

In dealing with Northern funding agencies, SDI has found that the administrative division of work within these agencies is generally based upon geography. Hence, those dealing with one continent are rarely aware of what is happening in another. This compartmentalization has meant that while some organizations in the SDI family deal with the African division, others deal with the Asian division. Therefore, intercontinental linkages may remain invisible within the funding agency and SDI has taken it upon itself to link different divisions and different project managers so that the agencies can improve upon their own learning curve. The country-specific administrative arrangements to be found in many bilateral and multilateral agencies and private foundations also militate against a transnational understanding of poor people's processes. Creating space for such observations and exploring possible changes in these processes are both a means and an end. They are a means to begin to change the vertical and hierarchical structure within which most NGOs and CBOs are trapped at present when dealing with developmental assistance; and they are an end because this exploration has begun to create partnerships at the local and national levels to support internal advocacy for change in these organizations.

V. STEPPING UP

INTEREST FROM INTERNATIONAL agencies in SDI and its affiliates grew rapidly at the end of the 1990s and is best illustrated through the recent approach of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) in Nairobi. Respecting the power of grassroots mobilization and the significance of partnerships, UNCHS invited SDI to be partners in the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure. Individually and organizationally, working with UNCHS in the past had not been a good experience. However, there was a consensus that no other issue touches the heart of the federation more than secure tenure, and many local federations were already either engaged with governments and local authorities in addressing secure tenure and preventing evictions or were in the process of exploring this relationship. Hence, the general perspective was that SDI had much to gain and very little to lose if the network engaged in this campaign, and that it would be undertaken as an exploration of whether (and in what form) a relationship between a multilateral institution and a group of community and NGO activists would honour principles of partnership and deliver benefits to the urban poor. There was also an agreement that, since the strongest and most advanced position in SDI was the Indian alliance of SPARC, Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation, that the first of the events would be in India at a place to be jointly agreed by the government of India and the urban communities.

On July 16, 2000, UNCHS launched the campaign with the National Slum Dwellers Federation in Mumbai, India. A public meeting was held with 6,000 pavement and slum dwellers from all over India, representatives of SDI's membership organizations, the minister for urban development of the government of India, the chief minister and the housing minister of the government of Maharashtra (the state in which Mumbai is located), diplomats from New Delhi and representatives of various bilateral and multilateral organizations. For the Indian federation, Mahila

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Milan and SPARC, this event celebrated and confirmed a very recent agreement with the municipality and the government of Maharashtra to develop a three-year plan to relocate pavement dwellers, one of the priority groups for the Indian alliance. Three or four thousand shacks along the railway tracks had already started to be relocated as part of their work. The government of Maharashtra's interest in exploring how the gains that had been achieved in Mumbai could be scaled up to the rest of state made the ritual of the global campaign launch something that was both symbolic and strategic. The launch inspired the chief minister to announce that a land tenure policy for the urban poor would soon be put in place.

After the launch, there was a workshop to reflect on SDI strategies for creating a bottom-up approach. SDI members from the seven countries represented planned their own launches for the next two years, and the representatives from bilateral and multilateral donors who were present began a dialogue with SDI members to explore new ways of working together to address the challenge of urban poverty.

The second launch of the global campaign took place in Durban (South Africa). The city is one in which the South African Homeless People's Federation faces huge challenges because of both the troubled nature of past relationships with Durban Metro and the very large number of townships in need of upgrading. The launch took place in one of the huge sports stadia in Durban with the housing minister for South Africa, mayors, city hall members, UN representation and the South African Homeless People's Federation present. As in India, the first day was an exposure to all the various activities of the Durban federation. The second day consisted of a massive rally, a colourful South African celebration of what poor people could do and where many of the visitors made a commitment to supporting this process. The third day was a review of how the process would lead to other issues. This meeting, in the presence of the Filipino secretary of housing, offered a platform to prepare for the third launch, which was then planned for the Philippines in November. Preliminary discussions had taken place in the Philippines in September 2000, centred around Payatas (a community adjacent to a city garbage dump) where several hundred slum dwellers had been killed a few months earlier when a mountain of garbage collapsed upon them after heavy rain. Guests from the federations in India and other countries in Asia were also present. The Filipino Homeless People's Federation provided support and assistance to local groups so that they could give their dead an honourable burial and a commitment that no more would die like this; they already had plans to purchase new land at a distance from the garbage site. Because of the tragedy, the Filipino government was ready to explore a partnership with the federation to secure a substantive solution to this recurring problem. The president of the Philippines and his top officials visited Payatas and promised substantial funds for resettlement. The Payatas tragedy opened up opportunities for a more general discussion with the state on improving safety in settlements in dangerous locations.

The Philippine launch had been well planned, to address the difficulties and opportunities arising from the tragedy in Payatas. However, although the activities took place as planned, the launch of the campaign did not. By November, the country was divided over the impeachment of its president, with the larger mainstream NGOs and many other civil society organizations campaigning for impeachment. In this context, the United Nations decided to abstain from participation. However, at the request of the local community organizations, SDI participation in the

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events went ahead. As a result of the activities, savings schemes from Payatas and representatives from similar schemes federated in other Filipino cities met and then had a meeting with the president of the Philippines. He awarded them 15 million pesos as start-up capital for a bridging fund for housing development.[2]

If the SDI network had not participated in this process, the Filipino federation would have had no alternative source of assistance or support. Although the communities wanted the meeting to go ahead, almost all other groups were hostile to the process, wanting to abandon it in favour of pro-impeachment activities. NGOs and other people's organizations argued that the Filipino federation should not be hosting a meeting with the president at a time like this. The Filipino federation leaders argued that they had established their own process and simply had invited the head of government of their country to participate. They were tired and cynical about the manner in which they were constantly brought into party political processes to elect (or in this case impeach) electoral figures.

The events mentioned above have encouraged representatives of SDI to attend workshops and meetings of the Cities Alliance, a new organization launched by the UNCHS and the World Bank with several bilateral agencies in 1999. There is now intense and ongoing discussion as to how Cities Alliance can help and support SDI. Cities Alliance members are able to explore the investments made by SDI members in building a critical mass of federated community groups able to address their own needs. SDI recognizes Cities Alliance as a network of development resource providers interested in identified effective strategies to address urban poverty. The partnership is one of mutual use and learning – at the very least, it offers SDI members an opportunity for dialogue with senior urban programme managers from over ten bilateral and multilateral agencies that make up Cities Alliance.

2. See the photo-essay in this issue on the the Philippines Homeless People's Federation by Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Incorporated (VMSDFI).

VI. LOOKING BACK AND REFLECTING

FROM ABOUT 1999 onwards, the SDI network began to look at ways to dialogue collectively with resource providers and global institutions concerned with poverty, housing and urban management. Until early 2000, all resources for exchanges were obtained from a few Northern NGOs – Selavip, Misereor, CordAid and Homeless International. At a number of meetings with donor agencies, one hosted by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) in London in January 2000 and others with the Cities Alliance in Montreal and Rome, SDI was given the opportunity to present the network on its own terms. SDI now participates in Voices of the Poor, a network of global grassroots organizations anchored by the World Bank. Experiences with community exchanges have been documented with support from Pilotlight, and there is an ongoing documentation process with WaterAid, looking at community-managed water and sanitation. The Ford Foundation has given a grant to strengthen organizational structures and document and disseminate experiences. These activities all contribute to creating space at global fora for the urban poor.

As of now, SDI is a network of both NGOs and community-based organizations. There is widespread recognition that until the time when the urban poor themselves are ready to be in the forefront, NGOs will assist in all the negotiations. The NGO activists have seen how, over a period of

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time, community-based organizations have become more confident and have obtained recognition in their own right. This is a process that unfolds itself and, as it does, so NGO partners recede into the background and people's organizations take over responsibility. In India, it took some years for the National Slum Dwellers Federation to be recognized in its own right, culminating in the UNCHS-National Slum Dwellers Federation partnership to launch the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure. In similar fashion, the South African Homeless People's Federation has been emerging as a strong representative of the homeless and landless. NGOs can themselves become barriers to the growth of autonomous people's organizations and there is a commitment not to allow this to happen.

There has been a clear growth in the transnational processes in which SDI is involved. Until 1999, international activity was mainly concerned with the capacity-building of federations, to better obtain local resources through local and national negotiations assisted by the SDI networks. Now this has extended to a dialogue with national and international agencies in global fora in order to increase the ability of grassroots groups to obtain resources and control local development. This requires new forms of collaboration between various groups. In particular, it requires time from the NGO and community-based organization leadership to design and manage participation in global events away from the local and national arena that is, at present, better understood by local federation groups. As the external relationships of SDI grow, there is also pressure to explore governance structures by the outside world. The internal organization and decision-making processes also have their own challenges.

Within SDI's affiliates, there is a culture of low-level intervention in networks and federations, a consensus approach to decision-making and a commitment to supporting, strengthening and assisting others, especially in the case of the younger federations. SDI's international activities have concentrated on enabling victories and critical precedents set in one city or country to be used during planning and negotiation for improvements elsewhere. Increasingly, this now has to be balanced with groups of representatives from NGO/CBO networks participating in global events that remain new and unfamiliar to most of the membership. This creates a challenge for SDI – how to convert yet another milestone of exploration into experiences that are both educational and progressive in ensuring greater recognition for the poor, thereby enabling them to make choices in determining their own development? Here, the experience within SDI is very uneven and the major challenge is to retain balance between global advocacy and local capacity-building activities. Whilst both are considered necessary, there are difficult choices with respect to how to allocate scarce resources between the two activities and the outcomes that can be expected from such resource allocations.

Until 2001, the coordination structure of SDI consisted of two NGO coordinators, Celine D'Cruz and Joel Bolnick. Jockin Arputham (India) was and still remains as president of SDI and Rose Molokoane (South Africa) is the lead person in Africa. In 2001, a new board was established with representation from Zimbabwe, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa and India (five federation representatives) and two NGOs (India and Kenya). Meetings take place regularly, almost always around federation events in Asia or Africa. Over the last 18 months, the network has fallen into a rhythm of work that involves international exchanges (mostly between countries within the regions of Africa and Asia rather than between the continents), occasional bigger intercontinental events with a

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high public profile, and international presentations to the donor community. SDI is aware that it does not want to follow the path of many international networks in defining membership, writing rules of business and freezing organizational protocols. The members believe that they have to learn from each other, teach each other and, in the process, evolve an organizational form and process that is sustainable, viable and creative.

Undoubtedly, the many initial breakthroughs that SDI has achieved are due to the collective involvement of many individuals and groups whose presence the external world could call "charismatic". Many events and strategies used by SDI are also milestones that could be called "charismatic moments". The challenge is to institutionalize this charisma in such a way that its benefits remain after the individual or the moment. SDI's internal and external quest is how to make sure that such institutionalization ensures the unique character of local activism, creating a global presence that is also relevant to local processes, adding value to the plans of the urban poor. This is a difficult process. Institutionalization that comes either too early or too late could lead to a high degree of formality and the establishment of routines which, in themselves, could inhibit creativity and spontaneity and deter mid-course adjustments and spontaneous management in response to a changing external environment. Not creating rituals and routines, on the other hand, could lead to a loss of resources, a loss of ownership of innovative practices and time wasted in reinventing ideas. Gradually but increasingly over the last ten years, many innovative and charismatic activities associated with a specific event have been adapted by other groups and replicated and institutionalized as a strategy. This has happened, for example, with respect to managing savings groups, managing house model exhibitions, undertaking data management of community knowledge and holding public events managed by communities where the state is invited for dialogue.

To illustrate some of the benefits of rituals, a decade ago housing exhibitions in different cities or countries used to take up to a year to plan and organize. This practice started in India in 1987 and is now used by many other federations. Today, protocols have been standardized, the ingredients and processes converted into a "recipe" so that they can be enacted at short notice and with relatively little preparation. However, too much institutionalization may also inhibit risk-taking and reduce the inclination to learn from local processes. For example, SPARC and the National Slum Dwellers Federation became involved in a major toilet-building programme in the city of Pune, where the outcomes carried some degree of uncertainty and associated financial risks. Local communities had to live with this uncertainty as there was no "tried and tested" formula to guide them. By entering into the project with the municipal corporation, community capabilities have been vastly enhanced and this has led to an even larger programme in Mumbai. The task is to reconcile the tensions between continuity and change, formality and spontaneity, charisma and bureaucracy, the short and long terms of development initiatives.

At present, there is an ongoing process of reflection within SDI about collaboration with UNCHS in the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure. In the past, almost all international activities have been based around horizontal exchanges to build each others' capacities, to seek community funds so that communities can begin to take charge of their processes, and to help design engagements with local and national governments. By and large, SDI stayed away from engaging in the global stage. But the year 2000 changed that.

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Involvement by SDI in the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure and with the Cities Alliance has forced it to examine the rhetoric of bilateral and multilateral institutions when they talk about partnerships with communities. Just as national federations have proactively sought relationships with municipalities and governments, SDI has begun to explore international partnerships. In these negotiations, it brings to the table strong assets in the shape of grassroots federations with empowered memberships. There is a continuing commitment to balance these global processes with support for strong local networks and relationships.

This process, more than any other in which SDI is currently engaged, demonstrates the stress involved in new activities. SDI and its members are in new territory, dealing with new rituals, new practices, new planning frameworks and new political arrangements within which they have to locate their membership. It is often hard to understand how to maintain and increase the effectiveness of local action within this process. This is difficult because SDI strongly believes that activists and locally active leadership should also participate in global processes. However, these difficulties will be addressed through intense and ongoing learning experiences. Collective involvement helps to create conditions whereby SDI members can participate from a position of strength. Although individual affiliated organizations may face some discomfort and pressure during global events, the network offers the confidence and security of working together and assisting each other. SDI creates space for leaders from one or two countries to gain more confidence for leading the global process and then exploring new possibilities, and to be accompanied by others for whom it is a learning opportunity. This is a major resource as geographical boundaries tend to restrict the adaptation of innovation and the right of one local group to assist another.

There are tensions within SDI concerning involvement in global activities that reflect the breadth of its membership and the principle of supporting local groups to determine their own agendas based on existing capacities and their analysis of the most strategic routes to follow. Inevitably, some national federations have more to gain from global activities, in immediate terms, than others. In part, this is related to the scale of activities and the opportunities for securing funding. Those with the most to gain from global events are those with a capacity to use the larger amounts of funding offered by bilateral aid agencies but who have no alternative sources of funding. In a few cases, such as present-day Zimbabwe, there may be other reasons for caution, such as the political sensitivities of having an international profile.

Another source of tension lies in the balance of resources. In a context where resources (both in terms of money and people) are limited, how does SDI balance its focus on global work with its focus on the local context? Inevitably, those who see the fewest gains from global processes are concerned that these activities will take a disproportionate share of resources, resulting in fewer international exchanges and their more immediate benefits for emerging groups. At the same time, the new emerging nature of the interaction with multilateral agencies means that there will be some "dead ends", with little to show for the efforts.

Tension also exists between those who are more comfortable with the formality of meetings and those who are not. One of the challenges is the design of many federation processes that make sense in a familiar local environment. Indeed, the nature of the process is to nurture close correspondence with local practices. Although the first launch of the Global

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Campaign for Secure Tenure was successful in bringing some of the informality of federation processes into professional engagements, the jump into operating in formal environments can be a big one that local communities struggle to make successfully.

Finally, perhaps inevitably, global exposure gives SDI a global image. A continuing challenge for the network is to match that image with a strong local focus on autonomy and self reliance. In countries where there are strong local activities, there is little problem in managing these two activities side by side. Perhaps this tension is greatest in the countries that have just joined the network. In these cases, there may be no advantage in having a high international profile because it increases expectations and encourages those with experience of traditional donor assistance to associate themselves with the process, potentially making it difficult to encourage the development of an approach that is led by the poor.

Despite these issues, the federations, by engaging in these activities and hosting these processes, own those events. The experiences belong to SDI as much as to the other institutions and the network benefits from additional credibility as a result of the achievements that have been secured. This is, in itself, a global precedent-setting activity. Experience in other contexts has shown that it is the process of learning that is rooted in the organizations of the poor that is most important rather than the immediate benefits that are achieved. The experience of SDI, the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure and Cities Alliance represents the first steps of SDI and the member organizations in global policy-making. In this way, they can be seen as symbolic "first steps", enabling other local groups to explore similar processes in other countries and other regions.

SDI's current challenge is to maintain the momentum of ensuring land tenure in the three countries in which the launches have already taken place and to launch the campaign in other countries. But more than any other event in 2000, the meetings in the Philippines provide a basis for reflection. One of the most disempowering and negative experiences of the poor is to be used by political parties. Too often the poor find themselves drawn into political rallies for both sides although neither side tries to address their agenda. The federation in the Philippines found that when they invited the government and other institutions to attend their events, it was suggested that they should subsume these activities when other political processes (in this case the impeachment of the president) began to take centre stage. The poor felt that they were being asked to put their agenda into second place.

As a network, SDI is clear that it will explore a dialogue with the elected government. There is no question that the events that have occurred recently in the Philippines have had a profound impact on the ongoing negotiations of the federation with the government. SDI participation and support seeks to validate the courage of the communities in finding a solution to their development needs whilst deeply mourning the loss of its members in the landslide. The commitment of the SDI network and UNCHS seeks to support and strengthen the engagement between the community and the state. However, it is also a time when relationships and partnerships will be tested for their commitment to the needs and aspirations of the poor. For SDI, the Philippines remains both a challenge and an educational process, as the network searches for a way to find processes that assist the poor through such difficult moments.

In spite of SDI being a transnational network and in spite of current global explorations, the focus of the network will continue to be upon the

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local. When lessons are taken from the local to the global, this is to ensure that the experience of the global provides benefit to and strengthens the local. The most essential task is the creation of capacities in the many local groups to work together to further their own activities and ensure that global fora are increasingly relevant to the poor. By strengthening the capacity of local activists from community groups and NGOs to address global debates with their own priorities, the SDI network seeks to ensure that standardization and the setting of norms does not ignore local issues and concerns and neither does it forget the negotiations needed to accommodate this. In so doing, SDI is committed to expanding the reach of discussions on urban poverty so that people's organizations can take part in them and, hopefully, influence reigning paradigms of development.

Box 1: SDI – a tapestry of local threads

Four and a half years ago, Lunghi Nzama was part of the group from South Africa who flew to Bombay. It was the first time she had ever left the country and the first time she had been in an aeroplane. Lunghi is a community leader from a squatter settlement in Piesang River, outside Durban. In Bombay, she was welcomed enthusiastically by women who live in similarly impoverished, but quite different, conditions in pavement dwellings – accomplished women who have much to say about saving, about negotiating with city authorities for land and entitlements, about designing and building affordable houses and about many other things. Several of these women had been to South Africa and knew a lot about Lunghi's situation.

Until a few years ago, these kinds of exchanges between poor people were rare. There are now increasing numbers of poor community groups moving around, visiting each other in their own cities and countries and in other countries. In some circles, eyebrows rise at this penetration of privileges that have traditionally been the preserve of professionals. But more and more development activists are welcoming this newly expanding and increasingly systematic horizontal exchange process as a development tool – a poor people's pedagogy.

One of the persistent myths in developing countries is that the poor are not improving their lot because they lack the skills to do so, and that if they were trained they would stop suffering and start prospering. As if the poor alone were responsible for the complex field of economic and political causes and effects which land them in under-serviced squatter settlements! In fact, the issues that inhibit the poor from participating in the economy and gaining access to resources go way beyond managerial and technical skills and right back to the same old exclusion. The poor do have skills, they do have ideas, they have the seeds of the best solutions of all – what they don't have is the space and support to explore and refine them.

This is where exchange learning comes in – as the development tool which helps people like Lunghi build the capacities to deal with the root issues of poverty and homelessness and to work out their own means of participating in the decision-making that affects their lives. In exchange, people are not being trained to "do things". They decide for themselves what to pick up and what to discard by visiting others in similar situations. It is learning without an agenda, on-site and vital learning, direct from the source, unfiltered. No-one is telling who what or when to learn.

SOURCE: ACHR (1999), *Face to Face*, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Bangkok.

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