

Moving with the times: Rethinking resettlement in Mumbai



Must municipalities use force to relocate people living in the path of urban infrastructure projects? Does eviction always result in poverty? How can people who are evicted be protected from the demoralisation and poverty often suffered by those whose homes are judged to lie in the way of progress?

Research from the Indian housing rights organisation SPARC describes an unusual resettlement programme in Mumbai in which 60 000 people moved, without being forced, to make way for improvements to the city's railway system. Analysing the approach taken by civil and state agencies involved in the resettlement, the paper draws out relevant lessons for cities struggling to manage population displacements taking place in response to globalisation.

Land shortages in India's commercial and financial capital are the result not only of market and population pressures but also of the city's location on a peninsula. The railway system has helped shaped the creation of a long, linear city. The land immediately next to the tracks was illegally occupied by low-income households who were attracted by the proximity to a source of income. Their presence led to frequent accidents and speed restrictions that made it hard for the system to serve commuters.

The Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP) was designed to get the trains moving by laying new lines, enlarging platforms to allow longer trains and removing the 19 000 households living on platforms or within 10 metres of the tracks. Project funding from the World Bank was given on the condition that civil society took part in their resettlement. SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan (a union of women pavement and slum dwellers) took the lead in helping affected communities gain decent alternative accommodation.

There have been some initial problems such as restricted employment opportunities in resettlement sites, transport costs to get back to former jobs, schools unable to cope with increased student numbers and difficulties in accessing subsidised goods in ration shops. However, most people are happy to be in secure better quality accommodation with piped water, sanitation and electricity.

Key elements behind the success include:

flexibility from the World Bank, which awarded socio-economic survey contracts to those most qualified, instead of putting them out to tender.

the willingness of Mumbai planners to give community organisations the power to make eligibility and allocation decisions.

a two-phase resettlement strategy which gave the railways authorities quick access to the land while assuring those who were given transit accommodation the guarantee that they would eventually be adequately rehoused.

The report suggests that the success of the MUTP might bring citizenship one step nearer for the urban poor. It urges policy-makers to:

reconsider resettlement as part of development, rather than a result of under-funded, top-down, poorly organised management of the 'cost' of development

gain commitments from governments, donors and lenders to minimise the need for resettling populations

fully involve those who have to be moved in the design, implementation and management of the resettlement

give women a central role: with their experience of running households on a tiny budget, poor women quickly take to project management when given the training and opportunity.

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