SPARC: developing new NGO lines

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In recent years, SPARC (the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres) has become one of the best known Third World NGOs working on housing issues - perhaps most especially for its work with women pavement dwellers in Bombay in India. But many aspects of its work have received little attention: its work on drug abuse and on biases against women in government sponsored income generation projects; its emphasis in its work on what it calls “process” rather than projects; the measure of its own effectiveness in the extent to which it can mobilize other people and groups rather than its own growth as an organization; the alliances it has forged with other groups, especially the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India, Mahila Milan (a federation of women’s collectives) and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights; and its conscious policy to avoid hierarchy in its own organization. The name SPARC derives from one of its central aims: to establish area resource centres which serve the needs and priorities of local inhabitants (especially the poorest) and whose programmes and activities are shaped by these people. Such Centres also generate detailed information about the life, livelihoods and living conditions of local residents and of their needs and priorities; all of which can serve as an alternative to official statistics and attitudes in regard to “development policy”.

The first two sections of this profile outline SPARC’s current work programme and how the organization developed. Sections three and four describe the way it organizes research and its staff and structure. Section five discusses financing. Section six describes in detail its work with the urban poor, and a final section discusses future directions. This profile developed from an interview with Sheila Patel from SPARC by Diana Mitlin (co-editor of Environment and Urbanization) in November 1989, with additional material supplied by SPARC or drawn from SPARC documentation.

Environment and Urbanization will be publishing other NGO profiles as detailed as this - where innovative Third World NGOs not only describe their work and achievements but also how they developed, their funding base (and their relationship with funders), the difficulties they face and how they seek to resolve such difficulties. We are grateful to SPARC for helping us develop this new kind of NGO profile.

SPARC: developing new NGO lines

I. INTRODUCTION - WHAT IS SPARC?

SPARC STANDS FOR the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres. Area resource centre (or ARC) is the term used to define a space or place where people who are poor, who have common problems and issues, come together to share their problems, to analyze why they face these problems and to seek ways to change their present situation.

In its work, SPARC has chosen:

i) to support the efforts of community groups wherever they already exist, creating area resource centres where there is a need, and to assist isolated communities to join together through such processes;

ii) to strengthen communities’ own efforts with whatever resources (information, training, networking, advocacy) SPARC can generate;

iii) to ensure that, within these organizations of the poor, there is a clear and defined space for women to participate as partners in the process of change; and

iv) to create an information base, through participatory research, on the poor and their problems, so that this information base (created by the poor themselves) can become the basis for dialogue, planning and action for change.

All of SPARC’s activities are directly linked to working for a just resource allocation and free access to resources for the poor; and, within the communities of the poor, working to ensure women have rights and access to resources.

In 1990, SPARC’s work programme has three distinct sections:

i) working with issues of urban poverty;

ii) dealing with drug abuse; and

iii) networking with and between women’s organizations formed within low-income rural and urban communities.

Each of these work areas has developed from SPARC’s work either with the poor or with other NGOs. Each operates as a separate division with different offices and coordinators. All share the same basic goals although each section has developed its own strategy in different ways.

This NGO profile briefly introduces each work area and then looks in more detail at the development of SPARC’s work with the urban poor. If any readers would like more detailed information about its work with drug abuse or the network of women’s organizations, they...
should contact SPARC at the address given at the end of this article.

a. Urban Poverty

This section of SPARC started work with the pavement dwellers in Bombay. These are people, usually families, whose incomes are derived from work in central city locations but whose earnings are insufficient to allow them either to rent a room or to find accommodation in a cheap part of Bombay, and hence to travel to and from work. They are called pavement dwellers because their home is literally the pavement; this is where they sleep and where many have erected small, temporary shelters (see Box 1).

Since starting work with the pavement dwellers, this section of SPARC has expanded considerably. It now seeks to:

i) support organizations of the poor both by creating and strengthening community based organisations of the poor and by advocacy and lobbying for their rights, both with and for them;

ii) undertake research and training to strengthen the collective leadership capabilities of organizations of the urban poor; and

iii) ensure that women have equal rights to participate in decision-making.

Since 1984, the work has expanded from its initial concentration with pavement dwellers to working with other groups in Bombay and other cities:

Box 1: The Pavement Dwellers of Bombay

"Pavement dwelling is probably as old as cities themselves. Every city has its share of the homeless and Bombay more than most. In fact an English women, who lived in Bombay in the 1920s, wrote of her shock and distress at the numbers of people for whom the pavements were the only home. The only real change since then has been in the magnitude of the problem and in the nature of official reaction to it.

"Pavement slums are a phenomenon peculiar to the largest Indian metropolises (especially Calcutta and Bombay). They are radically different from what people generally understand slums to be. They are not the juggi-jhopardis or bastis which spring up on vacant lots or stretches of land, but hutsments actually built on the footpaths/pavements of city streets, utilising the walls or fences which separate building compounds from the pavement and street outside.

"...these people are mainly self-supporting with almost half being gainfully employed and supporting the other half. Virtually none are beggars. Far from being a burden to the city's economy, they are supplying it with a vast pool of cheap labour for the unpleasant jobs which organised labour does not like to do. They clean our homes and garbage dumps, lift loads, move goods from one place to the other and bring a myriad daily consumption items to our street corners and doorsteps at a low price which is the result of their own undervalued labour.

"They can afford to do this and yet survive themselves because they are living on pavements, and incur no overheads on either shelter or transportation. This point cannot be over emphasised. Unlike any other segment of Bombay's working population, they are the only ones who do not even step on to the city's already overloaded transport system.

"...It needs to be stressed that people invariably take to pavement dwelling initially as a temporary measure, until they can locate and afford better housing. Unfortunately, most are never able to acquire better housing and live out their lives on the footpath. In over half the pavement clusters in 'E' Ward (around 1500 households) where SPARC has been working, almost all the families have been living on the pavement ever since their arrival in Bombay - which could be as much as 30 years ago.

"To look into the pavement dwellers' past is to see a history of hunger, impoverishment and marginalisation... The fact that an overwhelming majority (over three quarters) of census pavement households owned no assets in their place of origin and that the major pre-migration occupation was agricultural labour, is testimony to the validity of the above analysis."

Source: "We the Invisible" a census of pavement dwellers undertaken by SPARC.
1984: pavement dwellers.
1986: resettlement "colonies"
1987: older settlements of the urban poor
1988: settlements of the poor in other cities in India
1989: linking with the urban poor in cities of Asia
1990: beginning to link with groups in Latin America

The problems experienced by the inhabitants of these different groups in different cities are all linked to similar causal factors; a focus on the issues involved has formed the basis for networking and information exchanges between the groups SPARC is working with.

SPARC has two partner organizations in its work with the urban poor: Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation.

Mahila Milan was initially an organization of women who lived on pavements and who trained themselves to lobby for their rights to secure shelter. The organization is unique in that its members have developed strategies to ensure that they are supported by the entire communities of which they are a part and, through this process, the women are empowered themselves. Mahila Milan’s efforts have been such a powerful source of inspiration to other groups of the poor, that they have expanded the organization to include women’s collectives from all sections of the poor. What Mahila Milan has demonstrated beyond doubt is that it is not possible to plan without women. Unless solutions work for women, they are not valid for the community. In reality, women are the household planners and have to find workable solutions to the problems of day to day survival. They suffer most from deficiencies in basic service provision and from insecure homes. When communities interact with "formal" institutions like the State, women get excluded from that process. Amongst many reasons, one is their lack of exposure and training to formal negotiating processes. Mahila Milan ensures women’s collectives get this training and supports their participation in community leadership and decision making.

The National Slum Dwellers Federation has been in existence for several years and has member federations in various cities in India. The Federation began a loose association with SPARC in 1986. This partnership has since strengthened and has become an essential ingredient of all SPARC’s work. In this partnership, more and more of the direct organizational work is left to the National Federation while research, training and back-up are SPARC’s responsibility. No formal contract or links are maintained between the two groups. However, an informal agreement now exists between SPARC, the Federation and Mahila Milan; SPARC will assist the two partners with training and development and will promote the equality of women in decision-making.

In any given situation, when a community identifies its problems or if this network anticipates that a community may face a crisis, there is a process by which the collective leadership of men and women in the community are directly and indirectly supported by SPARC, Mahila Milan and the National Federation.

SPARC expects number of urban poor to increase this decade as India (and most other Asian nations) continues to urbanize. It is essential that the poor understand the context within which their problems are created and are ready to deal with increasing urbanization. They need to work together and not compete for whatever meagre resources and limited opportunities can be found in the city.

b. Drug Abuse and Its Management

In 1985, concern by some educational institutions about the increasing incidence of “brown sugar” (uncut heroin) in Bombay led to one of SPARC’s founding members undertaking research in this area. The seriousness of the problem soon became apparent and, since this area has many implications for the urban poor, the decision was made to seek government assistance to undertake a two-year study in eight Indian cities.

This study laid the foundations for a network of NGOs working together in the area of drug abuse and also for SPARC’s increased involvement in policy planning for the management of drug abuse, training of personnel and further research.

In 1990, as a result of five years work, SPARC is working with the government to develop a drug abuse control management plan for metropolitan cities. SPARC is also assisting NGOs from all regions of the country to participate in the debate on drug abuse, and developing facilities (for research, training and management) for both NGOs and government departments. SPARC also undertakes research into areas believed to be crucial for the deeper understanding of drug abuse in the Asian subcontinent.

The drug abuse section operates with a core team based in Bombay and team members in
other Indian cities. This team provides support for training, research and counselling. Their network partners are other NGOs in Bombay and other cities in India. SPARC also interacts with government departments, and helps improve collaboration between government and NGOs. In all this work the Area Resource Centre approach operates. SPARC is not interested in undertaking all these tasks and expanding itself, instead it identifies other organizations who have a local base and who can, with support, do the task.

c. Network of Small Urban and Rural Organizations Working with Poor Women

This is the newest section of SPARC and the one whose work programme is still evolving. It was set up to explore the possibility of NGOs networking to share experiences, to learn from each other and to work together to advocate change. It is still not clear how this section will develop. SPARC’s strategy towards this work is to entrust its development to a senior staff member. The focus is to locate small NGOs working with women who have been forced to take up or consider government projects on “income-generating activities”. These activities emerge from a government policy to link local assistance to income-generating activity schemes. Both poverty in village settlements, and women’s demand for direct cash incomes, have forced such NGOs to take up this work.

However, this involves many dilemmas for the groups who have to deal with the class and gender biases of such schemes. On the one hand, NGOs should fight and reject such schemes because they further increase gender and class inequality but, on the other hand, because there are no other options, they are forced to take on such schemes.

SPARC believes the strategy used in other areas of its work can also be utilized in this area. Furthermore, this work provides an organic link between urban and rural women, and has the potential for peoples groups and NGOs to demand very basic policy changes.

SPARC’s present work in this area is to:

i) locate organizations working with poor women and dealing with income-generating activities that wish to interact with other NGOs;

ii) document the experiences of groups taking part in this kind of government project and their struggle to deal with this problem; this enables NGOs to share their knowledge with each other and identify the causal factors in a larger context; and

iii) share with this network SPARC’s experience in lobbying for change with the government, in undertaking research, and in demanding changes in those policies which affect women.

The first stage of this work is a research project which attempts to explore the issues. Since this has sought to involve a wide range of groups, this can and should trigger a reaction. Much of what SPARC will do next will depend on the outcome.

II. SETTING UP SPARC

SPARC WAS SET up as a registered society in 1984 in Bombay, India’s second largest city (according to the last census figures in 1980) and the nation’s largest concentration of industrial production. SPARC’s founders are people from various professions, who have worked in areas of social work, social sciences and others forms of research. They felt the need to establish an organization to support the efforts of grassroot organizations as a partner rather than as a patron.

Previous experience had shown that a centralized institutional structure is dysfunctional to working with poor people and that is even more true when working with women. Several other lessons were also evident. First, it is not possible to have a single organization based in one part of city which reaches out to everyone; the more isolated people are, the closer the location of any organization or centre serving their needs has to be. Second, to be effective in reaching groups with the flexibility needed to respond to their wishes the organization must be “in a position to give up organization.” Third, an organization which helps design and implement projects (which is what most NGOs do) is very different from one which seeks to mobilize people and build networks. The two different activities require different resources, skills and organizational structures. It is difficult for one organization to be effective in both activities unless it operates in two separate parts. SPARC decided that it would be an organization to support people setting up their own organizations and doing things for themselves.

During the early 1980s, there was a mushrooming of new resource centres for activists in Bombay (and other cities) but such centres were needed for each community in order to
allow people to interact with each other. This need was even greater among the pavement dwellers as most were first-generation migrants with little experience of city life. Their lack of knowledge meant they faced one tremendous inequality: a lack of information on how resources could be obtained. People must first know a resource exists, then know how to use it. To SPARC there seemed to be little point in securing new resources when existing resources were not used.

SPARC wanted to set up resource centres geographically accessible to the groups that needed them. In such centres, people could find information, interact with their neighbours, develop themselves, and learn to make their own representations. SPARC decided it would set up such resource centres but that, once set up, they should be controlled by the groups who used them.

In 1984, SPARC began to develop its first proposal. SPARC staff decided not to become preoccupied with administrative procedures but to focus on the people they wanted to work with, the pavement dwellers, and these people’s concerns. The staff were aware of their lack of knowledge and understanding of the pavement dwellers. SPARC’s first proposal was simply a request for funding for four people to spend time sitting on pavements and chatting to the people about their needs and preferences.

III. SPARC’S METHODOLOGY

OVER THE LAST five years most of the documentation SPARC has produced has used the same basic methodology. First, listen to people, then use what they say as an information base, offering a legitimacy to the people’s statements. It is increasingly evident to SPARC that if there is space in the social structure for change, a good information base is needed to exploit these possibilities. This methodology is important for the process of mobilization - it is not possible to mobilize people in a vacuum. Talking to people is a way of identifying issues which can then be used as a basis for analysis and action. As other groups and individuals become involved they have seen the value of research and no longer question the way SPARC is working. More and more people are actively seeking to follow its methods.

A central feature of SPARC’s work is to create structures which reflect what people want. SPARC sees its functioning as a means towards achieving this, and all activities which it takes up must link directly back to this. The organization has attempted to develop internal mechanisms which reflect this philosophy and allow for its realization.

IV. THE STRUCTURE AND STAFF OF THE ORGANIZATION

SPARC HAS A governing body of people who were amongst its founding members and who

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**Box 2: SPARC’S Methodology and Organizational Philosophy**

**Methodology**

1. Locate the central features of the crisis as identified by the community facing it.
2. Understand how the state perceives that crisis.
3. Share this insight with the community and debate the formulations of elements necessary for a solution.
4. Create an information base from participatory research.
5. Initiate professionals to take part in formulating alternatives with the communities.
6. Initiate a campaign for change: mass demonstrations, publication of information, workshops, negotiate meetings with government.

**Organizational Philosophy**

1. Central participation of women/small slum communities. Those who face the problem are best equipped to identify the elements of a workable solution.
2. Processes not products create movements for change. Provision of shelter, or lack of it, is due to political reasons first. Unless that is addressed, technical solutions cannot work.
3. Informed participation is crucial for movements to be sustained and survive. Every group participating must know why and have the knowledge needed to make an informed choice of options.

Source: Teaching material prepared by SPARC.
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are considered capable of providing the organization with the kind of support it needs. None of these members work full-time in the organization. They participate in activities, undertaking tasks which are within their area of expertise, and are well informed about what happens within the organization. They provide SPARC with an informed, involved but impartial in-house sounding board that is so essential for organizations such as SPARC, whose work programme evolves in response to social, economic and political changes i.e. it develops as processes move rather than through a preconceived blueprint for action.

The director of SPARC is appointed by the governing body. The director and a supporting administrative team link together all sections of SPARC. This linkage is to provide a flow of information between sections, to co-ordinate the allocation of resources and to assist in the processes which each section takes on.

The drug abuse section and the network of small urban and rural organizations working with poor women have always had their own coordinators; the section dealing with urban poverty did not have a very distinct coordinator until recently. For a long time this process was fluid because SPARC wanted its work and structure to evolve in response to its relationships with the people's organizations with whom it worked. Now, there are two coordinators in this section: one dealing with people's organizations and their activities, and the other with the research and documentation needed by the network.

For many years SPARC operated from the home of one of the workers but recently it has been able to find an office (two small corridors). In addition, it has five or six rooms in different ARC's. Staff meetings take place every Monday for the whole day. Everyone in SPARC gets together and explains/decides what to do in the coming week. At this time, the accounts for the previous week are completed, administrative work is done and a lot of training can take place.

Every six months there is mid-term evaluation, with a full evaluation at the end of the year. These evaluation meetings last three days and the annual reports are one of the outcomes. Evaluation occurs at three different levels. First, for SPARC staff members as individuals. An institution must provide space for individuals to grow, it is important for everyone to know what others want to learn. Many young staff members are still studying and everyone needs to know this in order to understand the pressures on them. Second, the evaluation considers the organization, what needs to change to accommodate what is happening outside and what are the points of stress. Third, the evaluation identifies the kind of issues SPARC is working on, what are the different groups that SPARC is working with and who are the interacting organizations. Processes are analyzed and methodologies re-examined.

Evaluation meetings are also used for planning. As everything is process oriented it is important that these processes are connected with activities. For example, a Mahila Milan workshop's ultimate objective is to give exposure to people's ideas, to stimulate them to think and to develop clear aims. However, the workshop must focus on a more tangible activity, especially with new partners. Thus while some skills may be developed the more essential objective is also achieved.

In SPARC, authority is by consensus. In many ways the organization works like a collective but there are perhaps two differences: i) individuals are allowed to take decisions and make commitments for the group as needed (but have to defend them afterwards); and ii) the director of organization, with the consensus of the group, acts to resolve conflict within the organization, and decides on behalf of the group. Every individual is accountable to the group, e.g. taking time off has to be planned so that everyone who is affected by it can cope with that member's absence. This structure places a lot of responsibility on each individual staff member.

Within the organization, discussion and debate usually precede decisions which affect the organization. However, a great degree of trust is given informally to individuals to allow them to use their discretion in making decisions for the group. Where debate is not possible beforehand, it occurs afterwards. In this case, the persons who took decision on behalf of the group have to defend the choices they have made. Decisions which affect partner organizations are made collectively.

At present, between 15 and 18 people work in each of the drug abuse and urban poverty sections. The third section has a small number of staff, as the programme is still in its initial stages. Most of the people who joined SPARC in its early years continue to work there today and this has ensured a solid and continued strengthening of the organization. Each year there is a small turnover but most of those who leave remain friends and supporters of SPARC. Their leaving is seen as inevitable, their personal
commitments may demand more income (SPARC’s salary structure is sensitive to the income levels of the people with whom it works) or there may be a personal need to change to areas of work which cannot always be accommodated within the organization.

As SPARC has evolved and grown to suit the needs of the people’s organizations with which it has worked, it has tried to provide support and training to its staff to enable them to grow and evolve as their work has become more complex. This support is especially relevant for women working in SPARC. As their personal lives develop, the organization has attempted to ensure that any pressures are supportively dealt with by other staff members and by the organization as a whole. This is because SPARC believes that it must provide internally for women what it demands people’s organizations do for women in their communities. This, and possibly other allied reasons, accounts for the majority of SPARC’s staff members being women.

V. FINANCES

SPARC RAISES FUNDS to cover the costs of all its activities. Its funds are generally in the form of grants from either Indian or international sources. Since local, state and national governments are crucial in the debate on resource distribution, every attempt is made to raise funds from them. Just as SPARC trains communities to use resources, it sees national government finance as an essential resource to use. National governments must contribute to the work of NGOs, especially when they fulfill important functions for national development. In the context of India, such funding provides increased credibility for those actively seeking changes in government policies in their interaction with the public administration. But raising such money is time consuming and requires constant monitoring of changing government policies for funding NGOs.

Government funds are balanced with funds from international agencies. These cover those expenses which SPARC cannot raise from local sources and links SPARC to organizations and groups outside India. SPARC has many donors and prefers this to a single donor agency, this dilutes any control which any one funder may attempt to exercise over the organization’s priorities. Most of SPARC’S donors have a long-term interest in SPARC, have interacted with the organization over a long period of time, and have a commitment to the work they are supporting. Since a lot of SPARC’s work is “process” oriented, this immediately cuts out funders who want “task” oriented projects. To date, SPARC has had no problems in obtaining funds.

SPARC has gradually increased its planning horizons. For the first two years it planned for one year. In the third year it began to plan for two and now it plans for three years. During the first year, the staff wanted no demands on the organization to continue a particular area of work which they no longer felt to be relevant. But later, it became clear that activities would continue although, in addition, there would be growth areas. At present, SPARC plans formally for the next three years. Soon, SPARC would like to be able to have a picture of what the organization will be doing over a five year period.

SPARC expects all current work to continue for the next five years but recognizes that there will also be many new areas. Every year the workload doubles and the budget doubles. The original budget was 132,000 rupees (approximately £4,900); now this has grown to between 3.5 and 4 million rupees (around £130,000-148,000). Despite this, SPARC still operates like a household budget with money being withdrawn weekly and paid to the workers to cover expenses. With the help of a computer, it is possible to continue working like this.

VI. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPARC’S WORK WITH THE URBAN POOR

a. Pavement Dwellers

SPARC BEGAN ITS work in the inner city of Bombay, working with pavement dwellers. For the first six months of 1985, four workers sat and mapped out E ward (the area where they wanted to establish the first area resource centre). They sat with women on the pavement and chatted about where they came from, how many dwellings were there, where they obtained water, in short, all the information needed to build a picture of their lives.

This work continued until July when a crisis hit the pavement dwellers. In 1981, the government of Maharashtra (the state to which Bombay belongs) and the Municipal Corporation of Bombay decided that the pavement dwellers’ houses were a hazard to the city, the safety of the pedestrians, and unhygienic; they declared
that they were illegal, and adopted a policy of picking up people residing in settlements, packing them in vans and trucks, and driving them outside the city limits. Since this was done in the midst of terrible rains and in an inhuman way, several civil liberties groups in the city took the matter to the High Court.

The outcome was that the case went to the Supreme Court and a stay was granted to the pavement dwellers. It was under these circumstances that SPARC began to interact with women who lived on the pavements. The discussions were meant to elicit from the women information on their problems and what they wanted to do. While these meetings were taking place, in July 1985, the news arrived that the Supreme Court had withdrawn the stay order and that from November 1st the state had the right to demolish the houses of people who resided on pavements.

From its previous research, SPARC knew what women pavement dwellers wanted. Many groups wanted to fight the evictions but most of the women were too scared to confront the police. However, they knew that they had no future back in the village. On the other side, the government had no clear policy towards pavement dwellers and had very little idea of what was feasible.

SPARC decided to build an information base which could also serve as a basis for mobilization. It already had a good picture of the pavement dwellers and in two months a study was completed. In October, a press conference launched We the Invisible (following several days of mad chaos in order to get the document out). The press conference met with a good response and many copies of the document were circulated to different groups.

On 1st November 1985, there was no mass action against pavement dwellers and none has taken place since. But pavement dwellings are still demolished by the administration as a means of maintaining power, through making the lives of the pavement dwellers insecure. Such demolitions are less likely to happen to communities with a history of violence, to groups with strong political backing, and to those who live in the back streets. They are more likely if middle class people make complaints or when the police feel under pressure to show they have completed the required number of demolitions. Such demolitions bring about little significant change; houses are destroyed and their inhabitants beaten up but afterwards the people return. However, the process erodes what little the poor have. Every year, the pavement dwellers spend one third to one quarter of their income on refurbishing their homes and this is money they cannot afford.

During the last five years there has been much activity. First, pavement dwellers have come together and identified the essential home and work-related ingredients of a permanent housing solution. They developed the settlement design and the plan for its development themselves. They have then sought to convince the government of the need to support this solution and to provide them with land to allow such housing to be built. While negotiations continue, the pavement dwellers have strengthened their own morale and sought support from other groups of the urban poor, sharing with them the insights they have.

b. Resettlement Colonies and “Housing Training”

On 4th March 1986, SPARC received news about pavement dwellers being transported to a resettlement area some 25-30 kilometres from where they presently lived. This was the start of SPARC’s involvement in what are termed “resettlement colonies”. In the previous year,
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there had been discussions on what SPARC would do if the government decided to evict and relocate some pavement dwellers. The organization decided to go with the pavement dwellers and continue the work with them. This led to the second area resource centre in Dindoshi, Goregaon.

In the first few days of this resettlement almost everyone from the Byculla resource centre went to Goregaon. About 300 families from E Moses Road in Bombay were moved to a hilly, uneven location where chalk marks, staggered across rocky areas, located the land plots allocated to each family. Despite this being a "model resettlement" of the municipal corporation's, there were only two water taps and no latrines. People were brought with their uprooted belongings, clutching small pieces of paper on which a number was written. This was their allotment slip.

In the next six months, SPARC, together with the people, received a rude and painful training in government resettlement for the poor; of how such moves depleted families of all their resources, forcing them to "sell" these allotments to richer slum dwellers or to "agents" who then resold them. Both SPARC and those resettled learnt of the impact on women and children, and on household economies which perished as a result of the resettlement destroying the delicate survival system established in the city. Every amenity - street lighting, bus transportation, post office, health care, and ration shops (which allow poorer groups access to cheap basic foodstuffs and fuel) had to be fought for.

Over the next four years, there have been many times when the frustration of fighting for these resources has been such that SPARC has felt guilty for not seeking international aid to reconstruct the settlement. Indeed, other NGOs in the same area have sought such welfare oriented measures. But SPARC continues to believe that no meaningful change can be achieved in this way. The local leadership and the resident Mahila Milan in Dindoshi has faced very tough criticism from people who want leaders to "get" things for them. What this group is fighting for is not tangible and easy to see but finally, on paper at least, it has been achieved. The Bombay Municipal Corporation has now agreed to invest funds in the settlement in accordance with the people's demands but it is not clear when this will happen.

Meanwhile, interaction with other groups of the poor has led to very meaningful changes. These collectives, having experienced and analyzed their own resettlement, are the best teachers for others who await resettlement or who are negotiating resettlement. They show the reality of how much resettlement costs the poor household, a fact conveniently set aside by the government in its publicity of how much it spends on the poor. It has also given the people time to learn, to plan and, most importantly, to save for the changes they want in the future.

Energized by all the activities which surrounded the threat of widespread demolition of pavement dwellers' homes, SPARC started "housing training". This looks at shelter from the pavement dweller's viewpoint. In the first instance, women from six or seven different communities came together and viewed their housing history; where did they come from; how many houses there are; how do they live; how do they build; and other associated questions. They then asked themselves "where do we want to go?" The group considered the type of houses they wanted, the ideal criteria for house location, and how the overall settlement should be designed.

The women's underlying priority was a better life for their children; this was the root cause of migration. The women had struggled hard, and were now able to feed their children twice a day but they asked "Is my grandchild also to live on the streets?"

In 1987, women pavement dwellers who had undergone training held an exhibition where they invited everyone to look at four models they had designed for their resettlement. People could examine the houses and talk to the women who had designed them. SPARC invited government officials, journalists and other voluntary organizations to visit the exhibition. The exhibition laid the basis of several new relationships which SPARC was to develop.

Most significantly, SPARC and the National Slum Dwellers Federation formed up their working relationship in this year. This interaction has never been, and never will be, formally developed. The federation has the right to withdraw from this arrangement whenever it feels that it is unsuitable for its members. Such trust is essential in this relationship as SPARC, with its professional staff and financial security, might unwittingly or otherwise project its designs onto the federation. To date, this collaboration has been very effective. It allows two sets of groups with complementary skills to work together. The federation's members have participated in the organized struggles of the urban poor for several years. Their skill, capac-
ity and experience in the mobilization of communities is tremendous. Co-operation with the federation leaves SPARC free to undertake those aspects of work that are necessary to facilitate effective community work. If, for instance, a government programme is felt to be ineffective and the community believes this to be so, then, through participatory research, information is collected and processed, a report prepared, and community leaders helped to present it and lobby for the changes they wish.

Mahila Milan will, as it develops and strengthens, gradually take over the role SPARC plays in ensuring women can participate.

c. Existing Settlements of the Poor - the Case of Dharavi

It was through the National Slum Dwellers Federation that SPARC became associated with the issues of Dharavi in late 1986-87. The federation decided they wanted to work extensively in Dharavi, one of the largest slums in Asia, covering 400 acres (160 hectares) and containing 120,000 families. In 1985, the (then) prime minister Mr Rajeev Ghandhi declared a gift of Rs 1000 million (roughly £37 million) to the city of Bombay of which Rs 370 million was for Dharavi. This is known as the prime minister's grant project. A redevelopment plan for Dharavi was proposed but many people in Dharavi felt that this plan was anti-poor: for the redevelopment of the land not for the people. The federation believed that it was especially important to work in Dharavi because it was so conspicuous and what happened in Dharavi was likely to become a blueprint for the rest of the country. Many organizations already existed within the slum but no one group was able to represent all of Dharavi. Neither SPARC nor the other two partners wanted to undertake direct project work in Dharavi so they decided to support these organizations in forming a common front.

The events of the last three to four years in Dharavi merit a separate document. Briefly, when the redevelopment plan was made available to the public, several very basic flaws were evident:

- there was a gross underestimation of how many families lived in Dharavi;
- Dharavi, which has a large, dynamic and diverse concentration of economic activities, was being treated as a residential settlement. The plans both ignored the presence of work related activities and proceeded to plan for parks and gardens while there was a more urgent need for sustained employment;
- planned structures for resettlement were multi-storey (ground floors plus up to five additional floors). The plan chose to ignore the fact that accommodation with 150 square feet on the third floor is quite different from the same space on the ground;
- the cost of the units designed and built by the prime minister's grant project would immediately exclude the bottom 30 per cent of the population. This group should be beneficiaries of any government subsidized project.

There is presently a list of some 20 demands which the people of Dharavi have made to prime minister's grant project.

The National Slum Dwellers Federation made a strategic decision to become involved in Dharavi. They believed that what was happening to the urban poor in Dharavi was symbolic of the

Box 4: A Brief History of Dharavi

1930-40: the first 130 families come to Bombay and choose to live in the marshes just outside the city;
1940-47: many more families, fleeing famine and communal riots, join them;
1947-60: from 1952 onwards the city evicted many settlements to allow the "beautification" of the city and more families come to Dharavi;
1960-80: Dharavi becomes a centre for the brewing of illicit liquor; either the residents participate or choose to live there because police do not enter the area;
1984: massive police raids - all the breweries destroyed;
1985: congress centenary celebrations in Bombay. The prime minister grant project;
1987: prime minister proposes the redevelopment of Dharavi. Plans are published and these state that 15,000 families will have to be evicted in order to allow another 35,000 to live comfortably. All industries are to be moved and high rise structures for 70,000 residents to be built.

The people of Dharavi questioned "Development For Whom By Whom?" and SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan began to work in the area.

Source: Teaching aids prepared by SPARC.
plight of the urban poor elsewhere. If ever any resources were allocated to their needs, the poor had no say in how these would be utilized. It was government who decided for the people, and their efforts never benefited the poorest 50 per cent of the inhabitants of any settlement, those who should be the true focus of these schemes.

The federation persuaded SPARC to participate in this process. After some initial exploration, the outline of the strategy was planned:

i) to conduct a slum enumeration of Dharavi which ensured that all settlements within Dharavi participated. This information became the basis for people learning what the prime minister’s grant project was planning, and how to counter this plan with their own information base. The people also learnt how to participate in their settlement process;

ii) to create, after debate and discussion, a local forum of which all existing local organizations could become members, and to which all outside organizations could relate. Such a structure would bring together all the people of Dharavi, and would also provide a forum for debate on what exactly the settlement desired and how this could be transferred into a plan of action, or a series of demands on the state. Finally, this body could negotiate with government to ensure that the demands of people formed the basis of the redevelopment project. This led to the formation of the Dharavi Vikas Samiti (DVS) and the Dharavi Vyavasaya Ekta Samiti (DVES). The first is the main organization which all groups were invited to join. The second is a committee sponsored by the DVS to represent the interests of all commercial organizations in Dharavi;

iii) to assist in the support, training and action of the DVS, using all energies and facilities available to the NSDF-MM-SPARC network.

Dharavi provides a powerful example of how groups of urban poor can network together. The experience has taught every support group a great deal which they can use in their own local community work. The multi-lingual character of Dharavi has added to the learning potential as all linguistic regions are represented, and barriers in the form of different languages and experiences melt away.

Dharavi has also provided a very good base for professionals to work with the people. At present, one such group is working with the Dharavi Vikas Samiti to write an "alternate development plan for Dharavi".

d. Settlements of the Poor in Other Cities in India

Work in Dharavi provided the springboard for SPARC's next growth phase. Members of the National Slum Dwellers Federation from other cities were invited to Delhi to participate in workshops. The members suggested that the communities in their cities could also benefit from such training and interaction, and in late 1987, this same process was initiated in several cities.

By 1988, the network of SPARC, Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation was running workshops in eight cities in south India. The purpose was to examine the actual situation in the different cities and to look at the official government position. It is estimated that, in the next 10 years, the number of metropolitan districts will increase greatly and the government has recently set up a Commission on Urban Development. These new cities will have the same problems as present cities. How can those who have been struggling for 30 years in these cities effectively transfer their knowledge to those who are starting to struggle now. The basic problems are the same: people face the same kind of municipal laws, the same strategies for development planning, the same town and country planning acts. SPARC is attempting to create networks which can cope with the challenge of developing cities for the poor and ensuring a voice for the people. The people's needs remain the same: basic security, shelter and services, and the right to access to all things the city provides. And, as importantly, good homes for individuals is not the end of the struggle. The battle is not for individual houses but rather for a recognition of everyone's rights.

The workshops gave women from Mahila Milan, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and SPARC an opportunity to share their experiences. Each group which saw potential for action or learning was invited to come and share this process with their local communities. This led to several workshops in different cities, and various activities which were triggered by these workshops. Thus, the learning circle increased even further.

The Madras Metropolitan Development Authority asked SPARC to participate in the model house project developed for the United Nations International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. Women from Mahila Milan went to Madras and built their model there, using this as an opportunity to train local groups and to highlight issues
which affect women. This was followed by a series of workshops with government officials and the people in Madras. The Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers Federation was registered as an organization, and began its negotiations with the Madras Metropolitan Development Authority. As a result, the network now has many joint ventures with the development authority in Madras and with other smaller cities and towns of Tamil Nadu.

Similar activities are being initiated in other states of India. At some point, the groups involved will identify what they want to do and how they propose to do it; until they do, they share experiences with other groups who have already taken this initiative.

This work has escalated rapidly and there is now a plan to set up a MM-NSDF-SPARC team which will work to initiate the inclusion of people’s organizations from at least 24 cities in India over the next three years. The rationale is that, as urbanization increases, the pressure on the urban poor will also increase. How they will deal with this pressure will ultimately define the resources available to them. This process presumes that bringing together the poor will help them:

i) to share and learn from each other’s experiences;

ii) to participate at a macro, national level where allocation of resources is determined, rather than at a micro, community level where the allocation has already been decided upon; and

iii) to initiate an internal debate amongst themselves as to what they want, and why. (Unless such a debate exists openly, it can shake this network and break it).

SPARC sees a very limited role for itself in this process. Real change will be brought about by these people’s organizations who, at some point, will decide where to locate themselves in the political milieu of the country. It is vital that this choice be made by them. It is anticipated that, at some point in the future, SPARC too will have to make such a choice. Until that point is reached, SPARC retains its NGO and non-political identity as an organization.

Shelter issues have been at the forefront of SPARC’s work with the urban poor. This choice was the result of interaction with the people, it has meant that staff within SPARC have had to learn about this area of work as they went along with their developing experiences. (No staff member had worked in shelter prior to this.) It has lead to SPARC interacting with groups of

NGOs from other parts of the world and especially other Asian cities.

**Box 5: SPARC’s Role as Facilitator**

1. Increasing people’s access to resources: information, credit, welfare and legal aid education.

2. Promoting active participation of women at all levels. This includes forming area women’s collectives, identifying new roles in shelter and planning for the poor in city development processes.

3. Undertaking extensive enumerations which generate basic data on the life and livelihood of the urban poor. This has become a powerful basis for establishing new priorities in shelter planning by local government.

4. Creating effective mechanisms for representation by the urban poor to outsiders - governments, NGOs, professionals and people themselves. Some of the mechanisms are housing model exhibitions, street children festivals and direct encounter workshops between government and people’s organizations.

5. Building strong communication links between urban poor organizations in cities in India and other Asian cities.


**e. Linking with the Urban Poor in Cities of Asia**

The question of SPARC’S involvement in regional and international networks has caused considerable debate within SPARC. While such involvement can strengthen local efforts through solidarity and long-term policy changes, there are particular problems for those small NGOs which work directly with people (such as SPARC). For example, participation requires being able to allocate time to attend meetings and requires members to take on duties which the wider international network needs to undertake. And, most importantly, it requires the development of capabilities to deal with the work of such
networks. For a long time SPARC could not decide how it would relate to this kind of association, despite recognizing the value of such networks. SPARC does not know if it has resolved this difficulty completely, but it has now worked out its own guidelines for participation which it hopes are useful to the organizations and networks to which it belongs.

Since networks have to relate to formal structures such as governments, there is often the danger that strategies drawn up to deal with such structures lead to the network becoming over-institutionalized, thus distorting the free-flowing energy which small groups and individuals bring to them.

SPARC represents a growing organizational network itself and, within this network, groups are strongly encouraged to participate and test out its value to their work. SPARC does this because it believes that local leadership is under tremendous pressure to sustain their local mobilization processes and unless networking can be supportive to this, community leaders cannot "legitimately" participate. SPARC itself examines the learning experience which this exposure offers. It is the most powerful form of education and, in the absence of worked-out solutions, it is vital that this type of learning is promoted so that each person or group can assimilate knowledge and move closer to the ingredients of a solution.

Different members, at different points in time, can contribute differently to a network. In this variation and differences lies the strength of the network. It is the task of the coordinators of this process to understand and channel these differences. Non-participation in any activity is not a sign of non-involvement. Instead, it indicates preoccupations which the network may not be in a position to support, but which need to be acknowledged and emotionally supported through solidarity.

These are the values SPARC brings to any network to which it belongs. The organization assumes that the principles of networking remain the same even when the size and complexity of the network increases.

In June 1988, after participating in a meeting in Bangkok, SPARC joined the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. In this network, SPARC specifically undertook the task of creating a network of Asian community based organizations with a view to supporting participation of women's collectives in decision making. As a result, in March 1989, when Mahila Milan was planning a workshop for Indian city partners, it was decided that some Asian groups should also be invited.

Participating in the Korea campaign of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights was very useful for members of the National Slum Dwellers Federation. It launched a campaign to gather signatures from people in India to support the end of the large-scale eviction programmes taking place in Seoul, South Korea and this generated tremendous local support. The groups used the occasion to demonstrate how international events can skew development against the poor. Several representatives went to Seoul in June 1989 to take part in "the Asian peoples dialogue" organized by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights and South Korean NGOs. This brought together representatives of NGOs and community based organizations from many different Asian nations to discuss the problems they faced and to see the impacts of the eviction programmes in Seoul (see Book Notes for a description of the report of this meeting). The representatives also visited Bangladesh and Thailand. These interactions have proved very useful to community leaders, and have initiated demands for more contacts through joint studies and workshops.

VII. THE FUTURE

SPARC COMPLETED ITS first five years in 1989. Much of what has occurred in this time is a direct result of interactions with people's organizations, and not what was planned. While specific actions were not anticipated, the pattern which they followed was. This reflects SPARC's preoccupation with processes. When these processes move to some form of fruition, SPARC will entrust responsibilities to its partners, Mahila Milan, and specific community groups. The National Slum Dwellers Federation will, like SPARC, remain process directed. This is not to say that neither will participate or take responsibility for any project work but both groups see their responsibility as assisting the group which will finally take on the project tasks. SPARC does this in the belief that organizational structures needed to undertake "projects" differ from those needed to carry out processes. They attract different kinds of talents and accommodate different kinds of stresses. One is dysfunctional to the other and to do both successfully is very difficult.

SPARC's range of involvements will surely grow. Yet, the organization does not anticipate that it will grow in direct proportion to these involvements. Instead, much of the work will
be undertaken by its growing network.

While all this continues on the outside, various problems and difficulties continue to be dealt with inside the organization. Despite being very fortunate with staff so far, it is very hard to recruit and train young people to become productive members of the team. To many young people, SPARC is a good experience from which they can and will move to other areas of work. This is understandable, because staying at SPARC requires individuals to enjoy non-competitive group experiences and to interact with community groups as partners (a value easier to know intellectually than to carry out in practice).

It is also difficult to balance the commitment which SPARC feels towards women's participation, and general community action. This difficulty exists more in relating to groups which want only one or other side of SPARC, when in fact both are integral to each other. In a decade which has encouraged groups to work in "women's" issues, this integration in SPARC's work has led to confusion. It is difficult to deal with responses which locate SPARC as an NGO working with women in shelter, when SPARC sees itself as dealing with issues of urban poverty in which women are centrally located. Hopefully, the 1990s will change that.

SPARC's focus will continue to be on the urban poor and the centrality of women in urban issues. Much of what is being planned on the national level depends on what happens in the country in the next five years. For example, how will the results of the Indian general election in November 1989 influence policy-making. The national development policy directly relates to what happens in the urban situation. SPARC see tremendous challenges in developing the organizational capabilities of the urban poor in different cities. Urbanization is here to stay and is increasing in India. As more people migrate from villages there must be some channel through which the past experiences of the urban poor can help those who flee to the cities.

SPARC PUBLICATIONS

SPARC has a series of publications which were not intended for sale to foreign orders. A limited number of the publications listed below are available from SPARC; to obtain one, send an international money order for £4 or US$6 to cover postage and packing.

"We the Invisible", a census of pavement dwellers, 1985. 41 pages.


(See Book Notes in Environment and Urbanization Vol. 1, No. 2 for more details of the last two publications)