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Community Engagement in Chennai Slums
A Reflection from the Field

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Introduction

Slums are characterised by high levels of disadvantage. The city of Chennai contains numerous such areas of disadvantage, with more than 2,000 notified slums and several hundred 'objectionable' slums facing the acute threat of eviction. When compared to other Indian cities, the disadvantages in Chennai are less intense, but the fact is that socio-economic differences are highly localized, and even street by street in some inner city and suburban neighbourhoods (Chandramouli 2003a; 2003b).

Urban social space exists in a very just society (Kumaran & Negi 2006). Growth and economic development of Chennai and the growth of slums have totally ignored the need for urban social spaces of good and adequate quality within the urban fabric. The right to space – built and open, good environment, quality air, safety and security – are the fundamental provisions for a people, including people who live in slums. Why would we call people in slums 'objectionable people' when they are people like us, people deprived of social justice?

There is a total neglect of the public realm in Chennai, so much so that healthy social groupings and development are not promoted: Chennai slums are indeed a manifestation of such neglect by the planners, policy makers and the local government.

This paper presents some reflections on our engagement with a slum community in the course of an action research project. The project spans

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a period of eight years in three distinct phases, starting with the York/ Madras collaborative research on a participatory, adaptive ecosystem approach to community development and governance in slum settlements in Chennai (2002-04) and the first follow-up study on initiating community based self-organizing for environment and health in two Chennai slums (2004-06). The project finally ended with the second follow-up of the same study on an adaptive ecosystem approach to managing urban environments for human health (2007-09). The project involved a broad range of actors from the academic field (Department of Geography, University of Madras, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University), civil society (e.g. EXNORA International) as well as the public sector (Corporation of Chennai).

The project aimed at helping the community to self-organize to resolve its own problems and to assess the outcomes of the community self-organizing to resolve their own problems. We have taken a participatory pathway and public-private partnership as promising pathways in development and governance of the city slums.

Background on Chennai and its slums

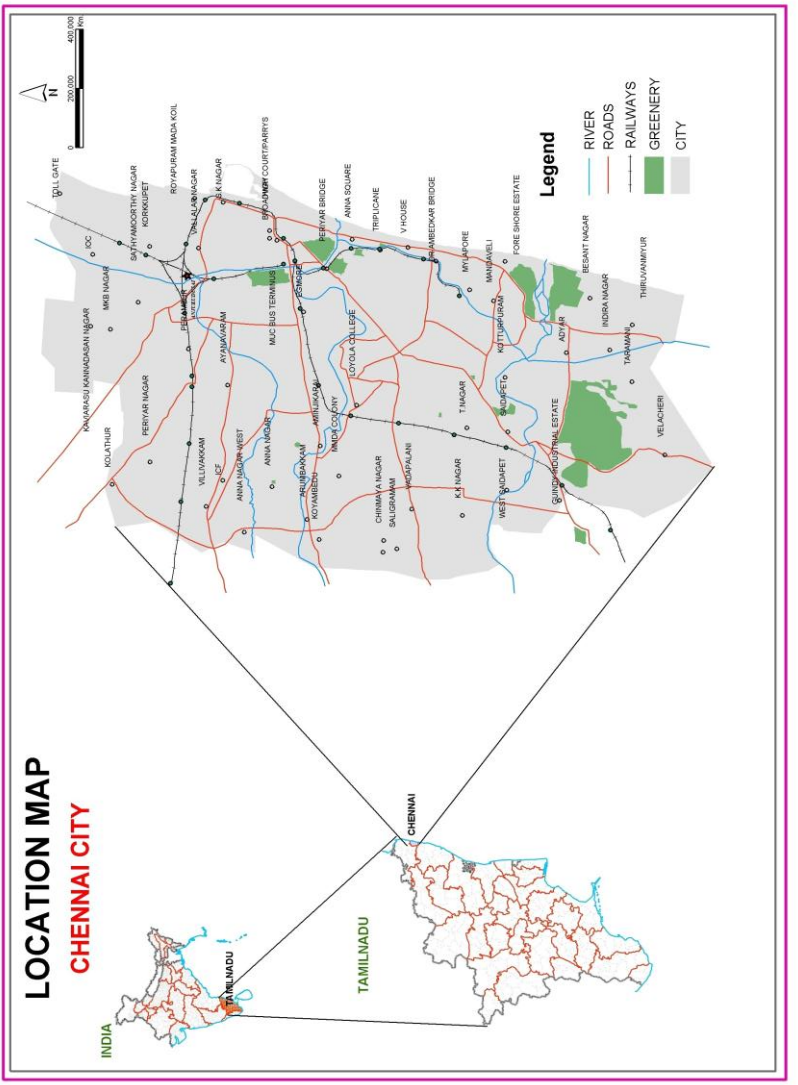
Chennai is an Indian city (Map 1) and is one of the most rapidly growing urban centres in India. Chennai is the fourth biggest city and a port in this country. The urban area forms a major transportation hub for roads, railways, air lanes and naval transportation for both inside and outside of India. The city was, and is, a target destination for middle-income workers from other surrounding Indian states. The reasons for this include its intensive commercial and industrial growth over the past 20 years and the accelerated expansion of outsourced information technology (IT) and IT enabled services in the region. Chennai, in terms of investment, was the top destination for domestic migrants in 2007. According to information from an internal report of the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB), the population of Chennai Metropolitan Area (CMA) was 7.04 million inhabitants in 2001 and the projection for 2011 was 8.42 million (TNSCB 2009). A majority of the population of CMA lives in Chennai city which had 4.3 million people in 2001 (CMDA 2008). The current estimation is that the city has around 5.4 million people. Chennai city plays a dominant and central role in the region.

In 2001, the slum residents of Chennai accounted for 26 percent of the city's population (Chandramouli 2003b: 83). In comparison to 1932,

when there were 181 slums in the city, in 1986, the number had increased to 1,413 where more than 170,000 families lived (TNSCB 2009). Rising land prices, higher demands on infrastructure and housing have affected the slums in a negative way. For example, many poor households have to live in informal settlements. According to Chandramouli's profile of Chennai slums (Chandramouli 2003a), 67 percent of slum households lived in one-room houses in 2003. The provision of appropriate shelters presents one of the most crucial demands of the slum dwellers. Apart from the lack of space, they suffer from inadequate water supplies and toilet facilities and the absence of drinking water. Living conditions of the slum dwellers put them in a vulnerable situation and cause several health hazards. Diseases such as malaria, cholera, pneumonia and diarrhoea are common. Furthermore, slums are located on the city waterways such as Adyar and Cooum and therefore cause rampant water and land pollution within the city. Open defecation areas, lack of drainage, lack of garbage collection and widespread ignorance of environmental problems are the common features of slums in Chennai.

Illegal access to electricity for many households frequently results in fire accidents, sometimes fatal to the majority of people and their shelters in the slums. Primary education and public healthcare are free. Unfortunately, many public schools are in very poor condition and the quality of teaching is questionable. Moreover, government hospitals do not guarantee professional medical treatment. They are also crowded and the poorest sometimes have to wait for long hours to receive medical care.

MAP 1: Chennai City



Source: Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority 2011.
Cartographed by Dr. S. Ramesh.

The most vulnerable group of the 'people from slums' constitutes a substantial third of the Chennai city corporation. The Tamil Nadu government and local government bodies do, however, recognize this fact. Before 1971, there was no proper slum policy (De Wit 1996: 112). In 1971, the state government enacted the Tamil Nadu Slum Areas (Improvement & Clearance) Act. Since then, there have been concerted efforts to improve and clear the slums, which have also resulted in different phases of urban development, externally funded, especially by the World Bank. Tsunami rehabilitation and resettlement during 2004–06 resulted in newer settlements and rehabilitation of several thousands of slum families (Kumaran & Negi 2006).

As De Wit (1996: 113) argues, the Act of 1971 allows space for the misinterpretation of possible interventions. In theory, the Act of 1971 gave government the power to protect slum dwellers living in notified settlements against eviction or relocation. The eviction could be justified in specific cases when government ensures an alternative site for them or 'if the eviction is in the interest of improvement and clearance of the slum area.' In the last 30 years, the TNSCB has been balancing, rather delicately, resettlement policies and upgrading in recognized slums (also see De Wit 2009). Demolitions and the simple evictions of many objectionable slums occupying government or private lands were carried out. Slum dwellers mostly came back either to occupy the land again, or better still, to join the already recognized slum. The recognized slums, with certain security of tenure, have started to attract more poor migrants or evicted/relocated slum residents. Recognized and upgraded slums have become the destination for newly arriving migrant urban poor, who build their shelters wherever the slums allow them. Life goes on, in a cycle of change and continuity, with uncertainty and vulnerability ever increasing, often unabated, people in the objectionable slums are allowed to be evicted or relocated to alternative sites. Unobjectionable slums on public land are tolerated, or better yet, officially recognized.

Chennai slum case study: a narrative

Anjukudusai is a small slum located on the banks of the most polluted waterway, Cooum at Chintadripet, Chennai. It is an objectionable slum according to the categorization of the corporation. Its inhabitants are daily wage workers who work in the fish market. Women are mostly maid servants in the local middle class households. It has 250 mortar houses

and 100 thatched huts. Hygiene levels are very low and the homes (they cannot be considered residences) are used for all purposes, from cooking, washing, eating to sleeping. With minimal vents, it is a haven for breeding pathogens and viruses. Garbage is dumped right next to the Cooum and clogs the drains. There is always an unpleasant odour in the air and it is also a natural habitat for worms and insects. Mosquitoes are a menace. At the beginning of the project, people were reluctant, indifferent and arrogant. Outsiders were, and to some extent, still are unwelcome.

Narrative of events

When we first went to Anjukudusai slum, no men really came to ask us why we were there. Only women came to us, with questioning looks on their faces, the wrinkles on their foreheads making curious patterns. Children came, but were hiding behind women's colourful clothes and wore shy smiles on their faces. When asked, we said our piece and told them we were there to talk to them about their health and how the polluted waters of the Cooum caused problems for them and their children.

We went again, this time with quite a few of our project team members, some women as well as two men and a woman from Canada. They seemed even more curious. This time they listened to us and some were even helpful, giving some answers. No man was in sight, except for a few older people, minding their own business. We asked several questions and got good answers. We told them that we wanted to meet with some men that lived in the slum and we were told that they would not meet with us. We insisted that we would really like to meet with these men. They took us to some men who lived there, but they were not interested in answering our questions or talking with us.

It was getting close to 5.00 pm and the men were starting to go out for drinks. Some got back to their homes while we were still there. However, they were not keen on talking with us. Instead, they left it up to the women and children to talk with us. In all of our visits, there was always a pattern with the people we spoke with. It dawned on the team that the best way to self-organize people living in slums was to approach women, youth and children, for they could be motivated, stimulated and made to listen to reason.

We went a few days later, looking for youth and adolescents. We found some huddled together smoking and playing cards. Some distance

away, a few were playing marbles and betting. They were gambling for money and using abusive language all the time while playing. Tamil slang is a rough language which is often used by the people of Chennai in what seems like, at times, an overly harsh manner. (Tamil is the language spoken in Tamil Nadu, in Chennai a slang is spoken that almost sounds bad to the ear). One of the team members – a youth himself – found out that these youths have a love for sports, in particular, cricket and caroms. After several meetings, and cajoling, they showed real yearnings to leave vices, such as gambling and alcohol, alone and return to normal life. It took a lot of cajoling and advice from their mothers, sisters and friends to wean them away from these vices. We had to work within the available and accessible space for compassion, and the resulting youth behaviour was indeed affable and affordable.

We did have moments of anxiety, not knowing which way the youth would turn: hostile or friendly, or in-between – abusive, but friendly. Women and children were a different matter. They became friendly, finding our ideas and compassion for their well-being worth listening to. They listened to us, but only after a long while, tossed in the meantime by the words afloat about what we could do and how we might destroy their social fabric. We were also cautious about getting too close and initiating everything ourselves. We realized early on that we had limited space for manoeuvre and even more limited space for compassion. We wanted the manoeuvring and compassion to flow out of the people we were working with. But, we found that more and more 'outsiders' – NGO activists (EXNORA International was part of the team, primary stakeholders working with us), strategic partners, college students, social workers, personnel of the Corporate Hospitals, even individuals with an avid interest in social work, churches and denominations were getting involved in our work and contributing their time and energy for the people of the slums.

With collective effort, cooperation and sincerity, we were able to get the slum people to learn how to organize (self-organize) themselves and amidst the negativity (lack of enthusiasm, lack of constructiveness, unhelpfulness, pessimism and disapproval) to think positively of spaces, places and people. Working with them, with commitment, involvement, compassion and genuineness, we found ourselves in the midst of an emerging alternative: we have reconsidered local action planning to endure pain and to end the pain of our own people. The lesson learned is that urban governance is better left to the local people.

Slums as margins and life there

Put yourself in a situation where the place you live in is, administratively, 'objectionable', according to the dictates of the local government. It is objectionable that the city government, the corporation, would deny the people access to basic services such as cleaning the streets of garbage and installing street lighting. It (the city government) continues to threaten the community, saying it would sooner destroy their huts and raze the place, leaving them without a home. They keep telling them that they would devastate the people and the place as well as keep them guessing as to when they would relocate them, somewhere, indeed anywhere. The people are ever on the edge of one day losing their very livelihoods and being moved far away from the place and milieu they are familiar with and the people they are comfortable to live and work with because of the social networks they have so assiduously developed. In sum, in their own place they are already an objectionable people, and they have any number of things happening around them, making it impossible for them to forget the fact that 'they have indeed no place to go except here, that this place is not somehow theirs. The local government or some officials of that government machinery are constantly nagging them and the community they live in saying this is no place to 'move on' from, for this is not their permanent home' (as told by a woman of Anjukusai, in her personal comments).

In addition, they are poor and marginalized. They have families, with many children, but no regular salaried employment. They make money, in good measure, but lose it on vices: gambling and alcohol. They live for today, for they do not know what tomorrow has in store for them and they are not even sure where they will be tomorrow – here or some-place else that is not their own and not their choice. Yet, they have always lived here from birth, and some of them have lived here as long as 60 or 70 years. In the years of their living here, the place has grown more congested (too many people for their own liking) and crowded (at the washrooms, water taps, ration shops, almost everywhere), accommodating people with their own rural and urban roots – the places they still go to because they have friends and relatives there (Kumaran & Negi 2006).

But some of them have lost roots since the government moved them to other dwellings from the original place they were born or led their lives – they know they have people there, but they do not have contact with them, and have lost them forever. Their roots have already become a 'thing of the past' of which they remember so little. They are losing their

memories so much so that they have just a 'blur' of an idea about their roots. Their problem is that they stopped going to their native place so long ago that they do not feel they belong there. Their roots are here in Chennai now, but they cannot hold it as their very own. It is their place and here is their milieu but they are definitely not the holders. Someone from the government keeps telling them, wherever they go, that they do not belong there and they must someday vacate.

Engaging with community

The following section will reflect on the multi-faceted engagement of the project team with the community. Community-based organization formation, awareness programmes, health camps, youth sports, children's club and skill training – all have introduced opportunities for the community's to self-organize. In fact, the activities supported by the community were impressive throughout the project years. It took, however, a lot of patience to sustain some of them beyond the introductory stages. The emergence of active leaders among the youth and women was commendable.

Local actions became acceptable to the community with the summer camp for children in May 2002. We took them out with some of their mothers and showed them what the outside world looks like. We showed them a thing or two in table manners, in public etiquette, and in toilet behaviour. We took them to the planetarium and showed them what the stars looked like from inside the giant, moveable dome. The children were wonderstruck. They were given a glimpse of what outside life looks like. We walked with them across the road to the Children's Park and showed them lovely animals in the park.

Children became friendly and realized the value of cleanliness. Not only were they clean after than, but they also created awareness about the need for cleanliness in their homes and amidst men, women, boys and girls. The people were now prepared to involve themselves in community development and income generation activities. The youth organized floodlight cricket tournaments, successfully becoming runner-up in one of the intensely fought competitions between the local cricket clubs of Chennai. Women on the other hand, had training in embroidery and were able to make an impressive impact on the lifestyle of women of the slum. The community acquired an increased belief and confidence in its capacity to influence a future in which they had growing trust in each other.

Cricket tournaments and embroidery training were the two best examples with which youth and women could share their experiences on sustainable self-management. Children were not left behind, either. We carried them along with us, showed them that we cared and they caught on with why they should care for others as well. We helped begin a tuition centre, for which the money came from abroad. The NGO EXNORA International, Chennai organized teachers and paid their salaries. Children began to learn the ways of the world. Mothers saw a faint light in the tunnel for their children. They walked with the children to the tuition centre and some stayed at the door until the classes ended. They brought the children home, listening as they constantly chatted.

Several months passed. We were able to show that each life had its own propensity for illumination and no two were the same. Illumination arrived by way of tenderness and eagerness for self and community development. For us, this illumination became a consolation of being recognized and needed and embraced for being what one suddenly was. Other moments were illuminated by the intuition, despite everything, that the individuals of the community – youth, women, children and even some men – served for something and learnt something from us.

Some drunken men made trouble for us when we had a street play depicting alcoholism as bad. They came drunk and shouted at women, children and at us. Despite this, we brought more of the same, music to the streets and movies to their hearts. Street-smart kids became book-smart kids. Men, who had never acknowledged our presence, began looking us in the eye. We saw for the first time that they had gleaming eyes. Things were beginning to grow easy on our conscience and theirs as well. Some had broad smiles and shook hands with us when we came into the narrow streets. Children also joined in.

Health and sanitation

In the last year of the project, health and awareness worked very well. The slum community warmly accepted the incorporation of the action theatre and other activities that provided non-traditional teaching. We worked so efficiently that several things started happening all at once. A washroom became possible by a munificent grant from an individual. Although in the beginning there were problems of ‘who would use the washroom’ and ‘who would maintain it’, the problem was later solved by the women of the community. There were demands for two more washrooms, and the

women set about looking for private funds to build them. All women of the slums got together one fine morning, after breakfast, and decided on the locations for them. They had also decided on cleaning and building a roof over the bathroom on the road. The local councillor later got corporation people to clean the bathroom and the toilets for the women and children.

Women were trained to repair the hand pumps if they failed. Women took turns to safeguard the handle from being burgled or sold by insolent men for alcohol. Women took the handle away to their homes for safe keeping once the community collected the water for the day. They also took turns in repairing the hand pumps when required. Women took to cleaning the streets and maintaining order of a sort for the whole community. We took it upon ourselves to take the youth group as well as the active community participants from the slum to another slum where cleanliness had made a difference to the lives of its people. This way the people could visually appreciate that there was a possibility of change for the better. We showed them that there were few areas in Chennai that could be called 'clean slums' and that those places that are can be models for them.

The community's behaviour changed drastically. We helped them develop ideas for cleaning. We saw that the garbage that used to be thrown in the Cooum was now dumped in the bins that were given out. We also taught them how to separate trash and not to throw it by the river so as to have better hygiene and an all-round cleaner space to live. However, there is always more to do and we are always within arm's reach to give people help and advice. It was our effort (July 2007) that brought the consensus that the community should take responsibility for the bathrooms and that the men and women promised to take turns to clean them. A crucial decision was also taken by them to contribute ten rupees from each family of users for the upkeep of the bathrooms and toilets.

Education

The Soroptimist International paid the teachers of the tuition centre. On the inauguration day of the tuition classes, 43 children enrolled. In a week's time, 24 children were attending the tuition classes regularly. Many children, who up to then had been sitting at home, getting wage labour, babysitting for their mothers, housekeeping, loading fish onto carts, began going to school. When difficulty arose with the tuition centre,

a woman offered her house for the classes, but it was too small and could only accommodate 15–20 children. Later, the information board in the slum became a training site for the children in tuition classes.

Community development

We made sure to meet once in a while to discuss the problems of the community and to arrive at sufficient solutions to these problems. We made sure people came to the meetings as well. Of course, there were women who helped immensely by going around and telling people just before the meeting started. Some members of the community would not come to the meetings so some women, one in particular, would go looking for them to bring them to the table. We then put up an information board for people to write important information for others to see and abide by. At first, it was in an inconvenient location where the majority of the youth die not pass through. So, we had it moved to an accessible location so that the majority of youth and community members would use it. And they did: everybody did, in time.

There was a time when the two segments of the slum would not walk into each other's living areas. There was an unseen dividing line. The east would not cross to the west, and vice versa. That has now changed, with children and youth walking to each other and often singing and playing together. One day, we walked over to the invisible line and called out to a child to sing. He sang for us and for all the men. Women and other children came along as well. They all began to sing together and then one by one. Someone in the gathering crowd began to laugh, first to himself and then to others. It caught on. And many laughs later, we went away only to return to the song they sang that day.

One evening, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) people came. They gathered 30 children around them and asked the children to come forward and sing songs of their choice. Children came forward and sang songs. Older people joined in and these people made everyone happy. There was a puppet show with moppets on child education and labour as well as a street play on the issues associated with alcoholism. At the end of it all, they discussed training for women and young girls and for self-reliance and economic independence. The volunteers from a city college promised to chip in with the YWCA to further help the community.

There was a man from the slum who heard the song the children were singing and came to help. He set up a small community centre with funds from a Christian organization so that we could all go to this new centre. We could use it as a *crèche*, and it doubled as a tuition centre. The elders of the slum could also go to mingle and pray during the day.

There is now a street lamp just outside the new community centre. It is the end of the lane where Karpagam, a good soul who dreams for her community and works to translate that dream for others, lives. The slum now has a total of 9 street lamps, an impending issue brought to a close. The motive was an upcoming election, somebody from the slum running for office once again. Furthermore, six youths were employed on a permanent basis (February 2007) for construction work at the airport. The community was happy about their employment.

Conclusions

In sum, and in our understanding of the narrative, we[1] have, in keeping with the understanding of the perceptions of the community about their most pressing needs, not to forget their own meaningful contribution to their own development and governance through capacity building and using external resources in the best way they could, moving towards sustainable and adaptive management of the community. From what we gather, we have achieved a qualitative, quantitative and participatory process of community development that has subjective meanings for us and the slum community: men, women and children.

The people have decentralized local development and poverty reduction efforts, reconsidered local action planning for good slum governance using participatory planning and management tools, begun to provide impetus for participatory management from their neighbourhood to the city and facilitated pro-poor urban governance. Of course, as Jawaharlal Nehru would say, 'you have miles to go' before fully developing, enjoy and cherish the fruits of community development. They have a dream and they want it nourished with the work of their own people with support from outsiders who will always remain outsiders, but catalyse and stimulate, motivate and achieve for others what they want for themselves and their community.

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[1] Our success is in retelling the story of a simple and brave people, braving this very minute the life in their lived, social worlds, enduring the face of walls, the unconcerned, the politicians, the bureaucrats and the not-so-benevolent amongst us.

The relationship between local communities, NGOs and local leaders is not always smooth. There are often overlaps in tasks. Conflicts and tensions are common and there are problems of representation of some groups. However, social representation is vital for democratization. The representation issue is much more complex nowadays because of the diverse groups and individuals that have conflicting interests.

Furthermore, the social fabric is even more complex and dense, which makes it more difficult to focus on certain issues. People have realized that access to information is important for governance, but they are lacking in opportunities for information. Our slum profiling (focusing on the environment, safety and poverty) provided a chance to bring actors together to validate our information. Our people are sometimes afraid of participating with institutions that they do not know.

There is, therefore, a need to sit together, to encourage mutual knowledge and to build confidence. After all, the process of participation is for a common vision, reinforcing our social fabric.

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