

Curious Case of Urban Slums: The Way Forward

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Abstract

The binge of urbanism, seen as a by-product of industrialization has led to the modern problem of urban slum settlements. With 863 million people in 2012 living under its suffocating ruse, tackling and controlling its spread remains a vital political and administrative issue. Governments have tried to combat this in multiple ways –broadly falling under the two categories of in situ slum development and resettlement. This paper tries to critically analyse the debate between these two modes of rehabilitation of slum dwellers using two distinct case studies. It tries to argue that stakeholders being a part of the rehabilitation project give in situ development an edge over the alternatives, and largely determine the success of the project. The paper specifically deals with the resettlement project of Kannagi Nagar located on the outskirts of Chennai and rehabilitation project in Kathputli Colony of Delhi. It is important to tackle the issue of slum-dwellers in tactical manner lest they create problems for the city in any big way. Resettlement of slum dwellers should be carried out in way which is not only reassuring for them in terms of their livelihood and income security but also basic amenities such as sanitation, water supply and electricity.

Keywords: Urban Slums, Rehabilitation of Slum-dwellers, Chennai, Delhi, India

Introduction

A slum is defined as a ‘heavily populated urban informal settlement characterized by substandard housing and squalor’.¹ According to UN-HABITAT, around 33% of the urban population in the developing world in 2012, or about 863 million people, lived in slums.² Davis (2006) sees the ‘slum’ as the global prototype of a warehousing of the rural-urban poor, marginalized by structural adjustment and deindustrialization.³ Slums while largely believed to be a product of 20th century urbanization, have been present in USA and Europe before the early 20th century. In fact, the evolution of New York into a large urban settlement in 1825 led to the world’s first slum –Five Points.

The creation of slums can be attributed to multiple factors, which are rapid rural-to-urban migration, economic stagnation and depression, high unemployment, poverty, informal economy, poor planning, politics, natural disasters and social conflicts. There have been various measures taken around the world, with varying degree of success like public housing planning, in situ slum development, and a combination of slum removal and relocation to stem the growth of slums. Urbanization is prominently linked to the formation of slums today, especially in the developing world, with the UN Habitat report estimating that 43% of urban population in developing countries and 78% of those in the least developed countries are slum dwellers. Inadequate planning, lack of experience and insufficient funds can be attributed for inability to manage the side-effects of urbanization.⁴ Two of these, namely in situ slum development and resettlement of slum dwellers will be taken up for a comparative study in this paper.

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Resettlement

One of the ways governments around the world have tried to deal with the problem of urban slums is by resettlement of the slum-dwellers to free semi-rural peripheries of cities, sometimes in free housing. I will be using the example of Kannagi Nagar in Chennai, built as a housing society meant for the resettlement of slum dwellers in various parts of Chennai by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) in the early 2000s, as a part of the Chennai Metropolitan Area Development Plan. According to PUCL-TN (2010), it currently comprises of 15,656 tenements with around 8,048 under construction. In 2004, 15,000 families affected by the Tsunami were shifted here, along with other such housing colonies in various parts of the city.

Situated a little off Rajiv Gandhi Salai (formerly known as OMR), Kannagi Nagar is further away from all the main occupational sources in the city. Fortuitously, the region is now home to the IT corridor, which has given the urban planners and people in power a convenient guise to shift the slum dwellers under the pretence of increased employment opportunities, even though the construction of the colony predates the IT corridor. Another interesting fact also pointed out by Coelho et al. (2012) is that the corridor in fact, offers low employment opportunities to the residents of the colony partly due to their lack of local networks in a labour market that rely heavily on recommendations and contacts, and partly due to the strong stigma associated with their residential addresses'.⁵

The social stigma attached is strong enough to necessitate the residents to take up jobs below their skill level, as it affects their self-esteem. A sample survey by Coelho et al. (2012) showed that most residents of Kannagi Nagar take up jobs at the lower end of the occupational spectrum. The white collar jobs are insufficiently available in the area, and even then a very small percentage of the population in the colony, mostly those under the age of 25 are willing to take those up. Furthermore, jobs in the IT corridor require skilled labour which is lacking in Kannagi Nagar. Blue collar jobs are in fact being preferred over white collar ones, Coelho et al. points out, in spite of them being considered qualitatively inferior over them. This is probably an impact of the segmentation effect, as the settlement itself is being characterized as home to low-skill and low-wage workers.

Analysis

According to newspapers reports over the past 5 years, Kannagi Nagar is in a deplorable condition. It is in fact just a spatial reproduction of an urban slum, albeit financed by the government. The sample survey results (Coelho et al., 2012) indicate clearly that not much has changed in employment opportunities, but unemployment rates were as high as 17%. While domestic constraints were the major reason for this number, the social stigma attached to the nature and location of Kannagi Nagar also hindered opportunities in the market. Also, jobs in the formal sector (mostly those located within the inner confines of the city) were given up, and there was an added increase in employment in the informal sector, characterized by zero job security or benefits. I am not conclusively saying that jobs in the informal sector are regressive because they aren't supervised by the government.

In fact, I agree with (Roy, 2009) that the informal sector should be seen as deregulated instead of unregulated and something which fosters innovation and entrepreneurship amongst the poor. However, I don't think this is happening in Kannagi Nagar, as the average income of a resident is still lesser than Rs 6000 per month, in spite of the increase in employment in the informal sector. In the case of Kannagi Nagar, even jobs in the formal sector, like those in the factories, are qualitatively poor and incomparable to formal sector jobs elsewhere in the city. Companies did their best to side-step labour laws and routinely fired people so that they couldn't avail the benefits of being a permanent employee. It can be conclusively stated that moving to Kannagi Nagar, or any slum resettlement society doesn't offer any added employment benefits or opportunities. In fact, as we see here, it just acts a deterrent for the same. Social conditions of Kannagi Nagar aren't exemplary either.

Law and order being a pivotal issue, as unemployment and other regressive factors have led to the formation of gangs, and around 5-10 petty cases are reported every day.⁶ Garbage disposal is another problem which has to be combated, as dumping sites have emerged in multiple places near the tenements, and are just a disaster in making, pathologically speaking. Multiple NGOs are working in

the area teaching the residents skills which could be useful in employment generation. One such NGO, Asha Nivas helps find women jobs in housekeeping and men in security. Vocational training is the need of the hour to ensure that the percentage of unemployment in Kannagi Nagar is brought down. Frankly speaking, Kannagi Nagar has the elements of a socio-economic disaster waiting to happen.

In Situ Slum Development

The other way forward, adopted by some governments is to provide the slum with basic services and tenure security –that is, the slum will not be destroyed and slum residents will not be evicted, then the residents will rebuild their own housing, engage their slum community to live better, and over time attract investment from government organizations and businesses. It is here that we can consider the case of Kathputli Colony, Delhi's first slum redevelopment project undertaken by the Delhi Development Authority.⁷

The Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY) was launched in the eleventh five-year plan to achieve the idea of a slum-free India. The mandatory requirements under RAY include granting full property rights to slum dwellers and enacting state legislations in this regard, except in regions with control and ownership of land by the community. Displacement hence happens only in the case of 'untenable' slums. However, a big city bias, poor planning, and the failure to standardize criteria for implementation have hampered the programme's efficacy and reach (Kundu, 2007).

Delhi's slum policy until the arrival of RAY was to follow large scale relocation in resettlement colonies developed in the urban peripheries of the city equipped with basic civic amenities. However, the drawbacks of this included a large physical distance between the colonies and the city's resources and consequently its networks, leading to lesser utility for the residents. This isn't too different from the case study of Kannagi Nagar viewed earlier. The case study of the colony of Kathputli –home to migrant workers and artists from the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Haryana and Gujarat, encompassing a total population of 15000 can be taken up here. This settlement has expanded both horizontally and vertically with the influx of new residents leading to a high density. This combined with poor sanitation outlets, lack of adequate water connections and other amenities ensured that the DDA had to step in, and initiate some sort of a change.

The slum rehabilitation process was a private-public partnership one, and the contract was granted to Raheja Developers, who ironically announced their plans to build the capital's largest tower- Raheja Tower on the land meant for the urban poor (Banda et al, 2014). The slum residents would be moved to a transit spot, decided to be Anand Parbat equipped with housing and basic amenities, and employment opportunities till the work of the developers gets finished. The slum redevelopment project is expected to finish by 2016, after which the residents will be given tenure over the land.

The very advantage of in situ slum development projects is that it involves people's participation directly and they don't have to shift their lives completely. Yes, there is a transit period, but there doesn't seem to be any way to avoid that, especially when you bring in private players. Private developers will try to make up for the low productivity value of their work on the slums by coupling it with commercial buildings which have high value, as seen in the case of the planned Raheja Tower. However, in the case of Kathputli Colony, people's participation was circumvented in most parts of the plan and only the local leaders were heard. According to RAY, people's consent is pivotal in the slum rehabilitation process but private-public partnerships leave a lot of room for corruption and mismanagement. It was only after the local leaders were held accountable for the entire program, and threatened that they couldn't avail of their houses till everyone else got theirs, did the entire program regain some semblance of order (Gowda et al., 2014).

This case study shows us the negative sides of the in situ slum development process. Corruption is rampant especially since it is a government controlled process majorly, and execution is filled with delays. It cannot be made completely private either, as exploitation of authority and resources for the sake of profit will be inevitable then. Conflicting politics also has a role to play in this, especially

when the number of communities increase. A skirmish was caused in the Kathputli community because the Rajasthani community thought that only they would reap the benefits of the development (Dupont et al, 2014). This method by no way takes care of poverty, low paying jobs from informal economy, and other characteristics of slums.

Conclusion

As we have seen, both the measures of dealing with the issue of urban slums are riddled with numerous problems, and in some cases do more harm than good. However, if I had to pick, I would choose in situ slum development over resettlement, primarily because it depends on people's participation to be successful. People have a choice to decide, even if it means that they will not take care of their newly acquired facilities, as has happened in the case of Philippines and Brazil. Resettlement comes across as convenient measure for the government and private players to make good use of the commercial urban land, but is a raw deal for the slum residents, who are suddenly deprived of livelihood and now have to face an uneven access to urban resources.

The greater question here is how to prevent the expansion of slums. Better urban planning certainly is the primary solution for this. Urban planners have to estimate the influx into the city and provide an alternative to slums for these people. This seems plausible to me, though (Roy, 2009) doesn't seem to agree. This might seem like a long shot, especially in a rapidly developing country like India, but a more planned industrialization/urbanization approach, in the long run, is bound to help stem the growth of slums. If enough livelihood opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sector are awarded to rural areas, people will be less inclined to seek their luck in the city, and the country's growth will be far more equitable.

Endnotes

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