

## **An offer of partnership or a promise of conflict**

Slum dwellers' views on development plans for Dharavi and for Mumbai international airport

An open letter by Jockin Arputham, National Slum Dwellers Federation, INDIA.

The homes and livelihoods of a million slum dwellers are threatened by development plans in Mumbai. These include the current development plans for Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, and for Mumbai's international airport (around which close to half a million people live in informal settlements). But these slum dwellers do not oppose redevelopment. Everyone in Dharavi wants improvements. They have invested in improvements which they could afford and manage and they have high expectations that the state should also make similar investments. Those who live closest to the airport runways recognize that they will have to move. But they want to be consulted and involved in the design and implementation of the redevelopment and resettlement plans. The airport settlements have around 100,000 households and thousands of local businesses.

This is not asking much. Official plans for developing Dharavi and the international airport acknowledge that they must rehouse or resettle the slum dwellers. So the issue is how this rehousing is organized – and for those that have to be resettled, the location chosen. Slum-dweller organizations have shown how they can be good partners in the design and management of such redevelopments. The federation of slum-dwellers living along the railway tracks in Mumbai worked with the Railway Authorities and state government of Maharashtra to move 20,000 households to allow improvements in the railway. Without conflicts. The households who moved did not have to be forced off their land; they packed up their belongings and moved on the designated day. The key here was that they had been involved in all aspects of the redevelopment – in deciding who was entitled to be included, how the process would be designed, helping to choose the site to where they were moved, when they were moved and with whom they moved. Their own community organizations – especially women's savings groups – helped manage the settlements to which they moved. The savings groups formed by pavement dwellers are also working in partnership with the government to move to allow road and traffic improvements. So the community leadership at the airport and Dharavi ask a question: how does the same government that worked so closely with the communities and NGOs to produce this highly effective partnership in relocating households for improving railway cannot use the same strategy for the airport and for Dharavi?

The slum dwellers in Dharavi and on the airport lands are not being involved in the redevelopment plans. But they offer both the private companies and the government agencies involved in these plans a real partnership. The involvement is not just agreeing with what the government wants but a real partnership to produce what works for communities and gives the government solutions that are sustainable and viable. The government and private companies may see the participation by communities as delaying the development, as adding costs. But our experiences to date show that it can reduce costs and speed up implementation. But if this offer of partnership is ignored, this often forces slum communities to fall back to the usual and easier options of protest. The slum dwellers have some easy ways to make their opposition felt. Two of Mumbai's main railway lines run along Dharavi's borders. These can easily be blocked – and this would bring chaos to Mumbai, as such a high proportion of the workforce rely on these railways to get to and from work. The airport runways can also be blocked – and the slum dweller federations will inform all the airlines that operate there as to when and where this will happen. We do not want to resort to this; we want a partnership in making both these development plans and other plans in Mumbai a success.

## **The redevelopment of Dharavi**

Today the government of Maharashtra is looking to redevelop Dharavi without a clear and detailed idea of how many people live and work there and how its large and diverse economy functions. No-one knows how many people live and work in Dharavi; estimates vary from 350,000 to 600,000. But within its 223 hectares are concentrated an extraordinary range of industries and other enterprises – producing embroidered garments, export quality leather goods, pottery, soap, cutlery, food and a great range of recycling enterprises. It certainly has an annual turnover work several hundred million dollars. It

probably contributes far more to the Indian economy than most special economic zones. It also provides incomes and livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of Mumbai citizens who would otherwise have no employment. It also provides cheap accommodation. Conditions may be poor and most housing very over-crowded but Dharavi is one of the few central locations in Mumbai with cheap accommodation – even if this is renting a bed in a room shared with many others.

Dharavi is not a new ‘squatter settlement’ formed by recent migrants (as it is sometimes portrayed). It has a long history. Many of its residents were borne here. Dharavi was already listed on maps of Mumbai over 100 years ago. Originally a fishing village on the edge of Mumbai, as the city grew so new trades developed here – potters, tanners, garment workers. Walking through Dharavi, it is also possible to see the kinds of redevelopments that can work – careful in-situ developments that expand living and working areas - for instance moving from one to three storey buildings with piped water and toilets installed. There are also grassroots organizations in each of the 85 neighbourhoods within Dharavi which can help design and manage such redevelopments.

There is a very ambitious US\$2 billion official plan for Dharavi’s redevelopment. It claims that it will rehouse all residents, transform the quality of life in Dharavi (with good quality provision for water, sanitation, drainage, health care and schools) at no cost to the government. Indeed, the proposed scheme suggests that government will receive hundreds of millions of dollars from this redevelopment. This redevelopment will be done by international companies who win a competitive bidding process for the right to redevelop different parts of Dharavi. The incentive for them is that they are allowed to build many residential and commercial units for sale in Dharavi; Dharavi is so close to Bandra Kurla, the new financial district, which is what makes its redevelopment so attractive. But the residents and entrepreneurs of Dharavi have not been involved in the redevelopment plans.

But the residents of Dharavi have not been consulted about this plan. It is not clear that everyone who lives in Dharavi will get rehoused. Any commercial developer will want to restrict the number of people they have to rehouse – which is easily done only rehousing those who have ‘proof of residency’ that many Dharavi dwellers cannot produce. Even if they do rehouse everyone, they are not likely to allow the residents much say in what kind of housing and where it is. It is very unlikely that the housing they get will make provision for their livelihoods. It is also difficult to see how the residents’ needs will be accommodated in what is already one of the world’s most dense settlements when the redevelopment plans will greatly increasing the number of residential units. Every company redeveloping Dharavi will try to maximize the space for units they can sell to outsiders and minimize the space and cost of accommodating Dharavi residents and enterprises. At best, they will try to cram as many poor households as possible into multi-storey tenements which ill-suit their needs and whose maintenance costs they cannot afford.

There is another way. This can include many new commercial developments to help pay for the redevelopment – for instance for office buildings and for high-rise apartments for middle and upper income groups. The residents of Dharavi recognize the need for this. But they demand that the planning and its implementation must involve them. There needs to be a detailed enumeration of all households and enterprises in Dharavi – something that the grassroots organizations in Dharavi and the National Slum Dwellers Federation and many professionals supporting this process, can do with government agencies. Then it needs careful plans developed with the residents of each of Dharavi’s 85 neighbourhoods. New housing will have to be developed – but to rehouse the current population, most of this will have to be in three or four storey buildings – with provisions also made to accommodate enterprises. This must also be done in-situ and incrementally, with careful provision for housing close by for those who have to move to allow this redevelopment. Again, grassroots organizations can manage this. We have also worked with architects from the Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architecture and students from the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (Ahmedabad) to show how this can be done. How high-density redevelopment for residents can be achieved without high rises.

### **The airport settlements**

Around half a million people live in informal settlements on land around Mumbai's international airport – some of them very close to some of the runways. The private company that now manages the airport wants to expand the runways and this will require many households to move. This company is also obliged by law to provide alternative accommodation for those who are moved. Again, the residents of these settlements and their own organizations, including the Mumbai Airport Slum Dwellers Federation, offer this company and the government a partnership. They recognize that many households will have to move. But just like the residents of Dharavi, they want to be involved in what is planned and how it is implemented. So they have some simple requests:

- 1: Please make public your plan for the airport expansion and requirements
- 2: Explain what land you need cleared and how this land will be used – so as to minimize the number of people that have to be relocated
- 3: Tell us your plans for resettlement – for instance how many households will have to move, to where they will be moved (for instance will this be close to the nearby railway station), what support they will receive, what kinds of homes they will get, when this is planned – and what provisions will be made for infrastructure and services (resettlement programmes in India are notorious for dumping poorer groups in very poor quality locations with very inadequate provision for services such as public transport, health care and schools)
- 4: What plans do you have for in-situ redevelopment for those who do not have to be relocated – which is obviously the residents' preferred option.

### **Include slum dwellers in development plans**

Every city needs its cheap labour force. City planners and administrators look at Dharavi and the airport settlements as 'slums', as problems, as eyesores. Even as housing people that should not be in Mumbai. Although government regulations on 'rehabilitation' seem progressive, requiring all 'project-affected' persons to be rehoused, every government agency tries to limit the number of people that get rehoused, to push the resettlement to the cheapest peripheral location and to minimize costs. But Mumbai needs its slum dwellers – these are the labour force that keeps Mumbai prosperous, that provides higher-income groups with their drivers, gardeners, guards and maids and that provides enterprises with their workforce and with sub-contractors and services. Dharavi is a central part of Mumbai's economy.

Why is it that 'city development' plans almost always impoverish slum dwellers. India has the world's largest slum population. It needs to modernize its cities, to keep its economic success going. This can be done with or against its slum dwellers. To date, it has mostly been done against slum dwellers. We, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* (the federation of savings groups formed by women slum and pavement dwellers) offer governments and private companies in all Indian cities another way – a partnership. We have shown what is possible - in the many housing projects and community-toilet projects that we have already done in partnership with governments. We recognize the need for such developments to include new commercial and residential developments that help cover the costs. We do not want to oppose official plans – but we will do so, if you ignore our needs and priorities. We have the right to benefit from city development plans too.

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*Jockin Arputham became a community-organizer in the 1960s when the slum where he lived, Janata colony, was threatened with demolition. When Janata was bulldozed, despite official assurances that this would not happen, he realized that slum-dwellers would never be able to stop forced evictions and influence government policies unless they were organized. He founded India's National Slum Dwellers Federation and, working with Mahila Milan (a federation of savings groups formed by women slum- and pavement dwellers) and SPARC (a Mumbai-based NGO), has offered city and state governments all over India partnerships for slum redevelopment. Many successful partnerships are underway. He also helped found Slum Dwellers International through which federations of slum and shack dwellers in more than 20 countries support each other and learn from each other. In 2001, he was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay award.*