Community toilets in Pune and other Indian cities

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Introduction
In Pune, a partnership between the municipal government, NGOs and community-based organisations has built more than 400 community toilet blocks. These have greatly improved sanitation for more than half a million people. They have also demonstrated the potential of municipal community partnerships to improve conditions for low-income groups. This paper reflects on the experience of one of these NGOs, working with the municipality and with community organisations.

Pune has 2.8 million inhabitants, two-fifths of whom live in over 500 ‘slums’. Various local government bodies such as slum boards, housing authorities, development authorities and municipal corporations are meant to provide and maintain public toilets in these settlements. But provision is far below what is needed; indeed, for much of the 1990s, the city of Pune failed to use much of the budget allocated for public toilets. In addition, in those settlements for which toilet blocks were built, there was no consultation with the inhabitants regarding the location, design and construction, and the agencies responsible for construction and maintenance had little accountability to the communities in which they were located. There was no sense of ownership by local communities. The quality of toilet construction (undertaken by contractors) was often poor and the design often inappropriate – for instance with limited water supplies and no access to drainage. The municipal staff, whose job was to clean the toilets, did not do so – or communities had to pay them extra to do the job for which they were already being paid. The toilet blocks often fell into disrepair and disuse and the space around them became used for open defecation and garbage dumping. In Pune, as in most other Indian cities, large sections of the population have no alternative to open defecation since they have no toilets in their home and no public toilets they can use (or afford). Widespread open defecation in turn produces a very large health burden and contributes to high infant and child death rates. Although ensuring provision for toilets in each house might seem preferable, this would be far more expensive; it is also particularly difficult in many settlements because they are so densely populated with so many people living in each small shelter and with only small and winding alleyways between houses where pipes could be installed. There are also the uncertainties regarding who owns each unit: public toilets have the advantage of serving both tenants and owners.

Community participation towards better sanitation
Charitable trusts and other Indian NGOs have built better quality, better maintained public toilets, and while these work well in public places such as railway stations and bus stops,
“The city government recognised the capacity of community organisations to develop their own solutions, supported by local NGOs”

In the beginning, we did not know what a drawing or a plinth was. We did not understand what a foundation was or how to do the plastering. But as we went along, we learnt more and more and now we can build toilets with our eyes closed.

Over time, these women’s groups gained confidence and as they learnt how to deal with the local government bureaucracy, they became active in dealing with other government officials. They also kept a close watch on costs. But there were many prejudices against community management that had to be overcome. For instance, when a group of women began to negotiate with shopkeepers for materials to build the toilets, seeking the lowest price, they found that they were not taken seriously and had to take their husbands along. Some government staff did not want to work with organised women’s groups because they felt unable to ask women’s groups for the bribes they usually received from contractors. Government staff often demanded extra payments for tasks that they were meant to do. In the first phase of the programme, about half the toilet blocks were built by slum communities; in the second phase this rose to three quarters.

The design of the toilet blocks introduced several innovations. Unlike the previous models, they were bright and well ventilated, with better quality construction (which also made cleaning and maintenance easier). They had large storage tanks to ensure there was enough water for users to wash after defecation and to keep the toilets clean. Each toilet block had separate entrances and facilities for men and women. A block of children’s toilets was included, in part because children always lose out to adults when there are queues for a toilet, in part because many young children are frightened to use conventional latrines. The children’s toilets were specially designed for children’s use – including smaller squat plates, handles (to prevent overbalancing when squatting) and no large pit openings. In many toilet blocks, there were also toilets designed for easier use by the elderly and the disabled. Toilet blocks also included a room where the caretaker and their family could live – which meant lower wages could be paid for maintenance, thus reducing the running costs. In some toilet blocks, where there was sufficient space, a community hall was built; small fees charged for its use could also help cover maintenance costs, and having a community hall right on top of the toilets also brings pressure on the caretaker to keep the complex clean. Despite these innovations, the actual cost of the toilet blocks was 5% less than the municipal corporation’s costing. The whole toilet block programme was also celebrated in a toilet festival at
which the contribution of all those who had helped in the programme could be acknowledged – including people from government agencies and from communities.

There has been considerable debate about how best to fund the maintenance of these toilets. The Alliance of SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan promoted a system whereby each family pays for a pass costing 20 rupees a month. This is much cheaper than the one rupee per use charge used by other public toilets (which for a family of five would cost 150 rupees a month even if each household member only used the toilet once a day). However, some elected municipal council members have been demanding that there be no payments and this has depressed collection rates in some toilet blocks. Many municipal councillors actively opposed the community toilets, in part because these provided councillors with no ‘cut’, in part as they represented a contractors’ lobby objecting to the loss of contracts. Community management went against the long and dishonourable tradition of contractors, engineers and councillors getting a cut from each project, often through inflating the cost estimates. However, some councillors were supporters from the outset while many others became supporters, when they saw the results and the popularity of the community toilets.

The community toilets in Pune encouraged visits from officials and community representatives from other cities, and similar kinds of community-managed toilets are now being developed in Mumbai and Bangalore. This includes a programme to build 320 toilet blocks in Mumbai that SPARC is undertaking with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan.

**Conclusion**

This programme brought about a reconfiguration of the relationship between the city government, NGOs and communities. The city government recognised the capacity of community organisations to develop their own solutions, supported by local NGOs. The city authorities changed their role from being a toilet provider to setting standards, funding the capital cost of construction and providing water and electricity. This programme was also unusual for India in its transparency and accountability. There was constant communication between senior government officials and community leaders. Weekly meetings brought all stakeholders together to review progress and identify problems that needed to be addressed. All aspects of costing and of financing were publicly available. And the access that community organisers had to senior officials, also kept in check the petty corruption that characterises so many communities’ relationships with local government agencies.

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**Notes**

Sheela Patel is the founder-Director of SPARC, and Sundar Burra is an advisor to SPARC. SPARC is the NGO in the Indian Alliance of SPARC, Mahila Milan and the National Slum Dwellers Federation.

This article draws from Burra, S. (2001), Slum Sanitation in Pune, SPARC, Patel, S. and Burra, S. (NBA), A Note on Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, SPARC, and from the SPARC video on Pune Toilets.