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An offer of partnership or a promise of conflict in Dharavi, Mumbai?

SHEELA PATEL AND JOCKIN ARPUTHAM

Sheela Patel was one of the founders of SPARC, the Indian NGO set up in 1984 to explore innovative ways of working in partnerships with the urban poor, and began to work with the women pavement dwellers in Mumbai. From 1986 onwards, she has worked in partnership with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and with Mahila Milan. She also works with Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), which is formed of federations of slum and shack dwellers from 22 nations and their support NGOs. She was a member of the Millennium Project taskforce on improving the lives of slum dwellers and is an advisor to the United Nations Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor.

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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

ABSTRACT The first part of this paper, by Sheela Patel, provides a backdrop to Jockin's letter about the current government plans to redevelop Dharavi, a large inner-city township within Mumbai with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants and tens of thousands of enterprises. The second part is the text of an open letter by Jockin Arputham from the National Slum Dwellers Federation to the government and private developers that was released to the press in June 2007 and that received widespread coverage in newspapers and other media around the world. This open letter is an offer of partnership in such redevelopments from the organizations and federations of slum dwellers in Mumbai and elsewhere to government agencies and developers. But it is also a warning of the disruptions that the slum dwellers will bring if they are not involved in the planning and implementation of such redevelopments.

KEYWORDS city redevelopment / evictions / grassroots / resettlement / social movements

DHARAVI'S REDEVELOPMENT – SHEELA PATEL

Dharavi in Mumbai, often said to be one of Asia's largest slums, is to be redeveloped once more. This is the second time that the state government of Maharashtra has sought to redevelop Dharavi in the last 25 years. The last time, in 1985, the then prime minister of India, Rajeev Gandhi, gave the city of Mumbai 1 billion rupees to improve its infrastructure as part of the centenary celebrations of the Indian National Congress; 350 million rupees of this were given to Dharavi⁽¹⁾ and, between 1986 and 1996, a separate unit called the Prime Minister's Grant Project (PMGP) was set up within the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA) with special planning authority to undertake this process. During this period, the leather industry, including the majority of the leather curing done in Dharavi, was relocated. While some improvements were made and some housing construction did take place, the process failed to change the nature and overall character of Dharavi.

The current redevelopment plan is much the most ambitious – it divides Dharavi into sectors and is to be implemented by international companies who will bid for the right to develop each sector. For those who live and work in Mumbai, the manner in which this redevelopment is organized has great significance because it is likely to set a precedent for future redevelopment of other major slums in Mumbai and is also being

projected as the “Dharavi model” for redevelopment of large settlements in other major Indian cities.

Past struggles by those whose homes and settlements were bulldozed to make way for new city developments or highways have established that the government has to ensure some provision for those who have to move – what are termed in India “project-affected persons”. But being classified as a project-affected person does not mean that they are automatically consulted in any way on what provisions are made for them and about where they are to be relocated – or on when they have to leave their homes. There are also many ways in which the government or the developer can reduce the number of project-affected persons to cheapen the costs – for instance, by only providing this entitlement to those who have lived there for a number of years, or demanding proof of residence, which many residents cannot produce. It is only when communities of those affected by such developments get organized and develop a capacity to negotiate what they want that some critical elements to ensure participation emerge in the process. Unfortunately, such organized communities and those who can support them are few, while the kind of sustained organizational processes that need to be in place have not yet become common practice in cities.

Will Dharavi’s redevelopment be done in partnership with its hundreds of thousands of inhabitants and tens of thousands of enterprises? Or will it be imposed on them, without their involvement, without consultation? Will the needs of the resident homes and businesses be the basis for redevelopment? This is not a fight “for or against” Dharavi’s development – as shown in the open letter below by Jockin Arputham from the National Slum Dwellers Federation. Jockin’s letter to the government and to the developers interested in redeveloping Dharavi makes clear that the people who live and work in Dharavi accept the need for redevelopment. They recognize that this must include new residential buildings with units for sale to outsiders and some commercial developments as a way of helping finance Dharavi’s redevelopment – all they are asking is to be fully involved in its design and implementation.

Dharavi is part of the approximately 6 million other inhabitants of Mumbai who also live in informal settlements or areas characterized as “slums”. They too are watching, because if Dharavi’s redevelopment can be designed and implemented without their inhabitants’ involvement or consent, their own settlements will be more at risk. Already, as Jockin’s letter makes clear, around half a million people living on land close to Mumbai’s international airport are as much at risk from redevelopment plans as the inhabitants of Dharavi. They are also demanding that they be consulted. Again, the inhabitants of these settlements recognize the need for airport development, but they want to be consulted and engaged in the decision-making process of when and how this is to be done and to where those who have to move will be moved.

The future of hundreds of millions of “slum” dwellers in India’s other urban centres is also likely to be influenced by the form that Dharavi’s redevelopment takes. The city government, the state government of Maharashtra and the developers have the possibility to show how city redevelopment should take place in collaboration with the inhabitants and their representative organizations. They can produce new strategies for creating redevelopment plans and implementation schedules together. Our collective challenge is to produce a framework that recognizes the

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 – and many successful partnerships are underway. He also helped found Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), 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.

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1. The exchange rate at the time was around US\$ 1: Rs 12.

aspirations and entitlements of the wide spectrum of work and residential arrangements that currently exist in Dharavi and to create a process for its formalization that enhances this for the neighbourhood and the city. Can the state and the residents co-create a mechanism that respects the present small neighbourhoods in Dharavi, working through how redevelopment can accommodate local businesses and not disrupt livelihoods? Can they explore transparently how to build homes that serve and suit the low-income inhabitants? . . . How to work with the 400 or more cooperative societies within Dharavi? . . . How to improve infrastructure and all services – including schools, health centres and provision for children's play and all inhabitants' recreation? . . . And how to help the residents manage their lives during the 5–10 years of the redevelopment process? This can help set precedents that can inform other city redevelopments – not only in India but also in other nations.

Indian politicians are fond of trying to copy other cities in their envisioning of how they want cities in India to be transformed. Chicago, Singapore and now Shanghai are touted as role models, but all of them fail to be proud of the one thing that makes Mumbai special . . . it still has the character of a resilient city, where rich and poor co-exist, where women are by and large safe, and its pride is that it is a people's city. If any city in the world can produce a new way forward to demonstrate a people-centred redevelopment in the face of some of the world's highest real estate prices, this city can . . . because it has nascent social movements that will work in collaboration with the state and with the private sector to make this happen. But to do that, the state has to develop a framework that arbitrates between the interests of the private developers and the residents. This is a deeply political process and needs mature political leadership that the city can invoke if the state moves in that direction.

At present, there is little sign of such a process. The state government hired an architect to prepare Dharavi for redevelopment by international companies. Dharavi covers around 2.4 square kilometres, of which 1.44 square kilometres are divided into sectors for which international companies are bidding for the right to develop. In theory, all the residents will be re-housed within Dharavi – but state and city governments in India have a very poor record in actually meeting their promises for serving project-affected persons. Furthermore, before starting the project, no surveys were undertaken to record who lives and works in Dharavi to ensure that all those who reside there at present will get the entitlements currently being provided. This is all left for the developers to do later. And Dharavi is so well located within Mumbai that every developer will be seeking to minimize the space allocated to “the residents” and their enterprises, and maximizing the space that can be commercially developed or sold. The government has also said that as Dharavi is on state land, no consultation with its residents is needed. Yet Dharavi is not some recently formed squatter settlement but a lively and very diverse township with a long history. Almost every industry in Mumbai has some linkage with enterprises in Dharavi or the people who live there. It is also one of the very few central locations where accommodation can be found that is relatively cheap – even if it is very overcrowded and of poor quality.

Both the local and the international media have been covering the plans for Dharavi's redevelopment for the last year or so, and when reviewing each article or report an interesting trend becomes evident. When the reporter/journalist comes to visit Dharavi and interviews those of us who

support the process or are directly involved in it, they leave convinced of the logic of what we are seeking to advocate. Many of them send us their draft texts to check that they have accurately reported our statements. Yet when the article actually appears in the newspaper, journal or magazine, the write-up is very different. It is as though the journalist just stated our position but had no opinion about it. It is almost as if there was “due diligence” to report the opposition but that no opinion or perspective was needed, while the “need to redevelop and involve private sector in what the state does” is stated as a need or a given. Initially, we thought this was because the mainstream media had a problem with slum dwellers and their aspirations. But increasingly, we see this as editorial intervention, watering down articles and reports. We hope this is not the case, because the creation of stable and robust institutional frameworks requires a strong and independent press that has the capacity and maturity to have opinions and take a stand.

This struggle over how Dharavi will be developed provides the context for Jockin's letter, the text of which is reproduced below.

**AN OFFER OF PARTNERSHIP OR A PROMISE OF CONFLICT.⁽²⁾
SLUM DWELLERS' VIEWS ON DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR
DHARAVI AND FOR MUMBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT –
JOCKIN ARPUTHAM, NATIONAL SLUM DWELLERS FEDERATION**

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 (close to which nearly to half a million people live in informal settlements). But these slum dwellers do not oppose redevelopment. Everyone in Dharavi wants improvements. They themselves have invested in improvements that 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 re-house or re-settle the slum dwellers. So the issue is how this re-housing is organized – and for those who have to be resettled, the chosen location. 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 alongside the railway tracks in Mumbai worked with the Railway Authorities and the state government of Maharashtra to move 20,000 households in order to allow improvements in the railway – without any conflict. 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

2. This letter was released to the international press and more than 100 newspapers in India and internationally ran articles on it.

3. Patel, Sheela, Celine d’Cruz and Sundar Burra (2002), “Beyond evictions in a global city; people-managed resettlement in Mumbai”, *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 14, No 1, April, pages 159–172.

savings groups – helped manage the settlements to which they moved.⁽³⁾ The savings groups formed by pavement dwellers are also working in partnership with the government towards moving, in order to allow road and traffic improvements. So the community leadership at the airport and in Dharavi ask a question: how can the same government that worked so closely with the communities and NGOs to produce this highly effective partnership in relocating households for improving the railway not 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 participation by communities as delaying the development, as adding costs, but our experience to date shows that it can reduce costs and speed up implementation. If this offer of partnership is ignored, it often forces slum communities to resort to the usual and easier option 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 relies 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.

a. 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. Estimates for its population 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 worth 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 overcrowded 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 born there. Dharavi was already listed on maps of Mumbai more than 100 years ago. Originally a fishing village on the edge of Mumbai, as the city grew so new trades developed there – potters, tanners and 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 re-house all residents, transform the quality of life in Dharavi (with good quality provision for water, sanitation, drainage, health care and schools) and at no cost to the government. Indeed, the proposed scheme suggests that government will receive hundreds of millions of dollars from this redevelopment, which will be undertaken 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 will be allowed to build many residential and commercial units for sale. Dharavi is very close to Bandra Kurla, the new financial district, which is what makes its redevelopment so attractive.

However, the residents and entrepreneurs of Dharavi have not been involved in the redevelopment plans. It is not clear that everyone who lives in Dharavi will be re-housed. Any commercial developer will want to restrict the number of people they have to re-house – which is easily done by only re-housing those who have “proof of residency”, which many Dharavi dwellers cannot produce. Even if they do re-house everyone, they are not likely to allow the residents much say in what kind of housing it will be and where. 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 increase 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 that 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, office buildings and 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 there along with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and many professionals supporting this process can do with government agencies. Then careful plans need to be developed with the residents of each of Dharavi's 85 neighbourhoods. New housing will have to be developed – but to re-house the current population, most of this will have to be in three- or four-storey buildings – with provision 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.

b. 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 organizations, including the Mumbai Airport Slum Dwellers Federation, are offering 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:

- please make public your plan for the airport expansion and requirements;
- explain what land you need cleared and how this land will be used – so as to minimize the number of people who have to be relocated;
- tell us your plans for resettlement – for example, how many households will have to move; to where (for instance, will this be close to the nearby railway station); what support will they receive; what kinds of homes will they get; when is this 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);
- 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; and
- include slum dwellers in the development plans.

Every city needs its cheap labour force. City planners and administrators look upon Dharavi and the airport settlements as “slums”, as problems, as eyesores – even, as housing people who should not be in Mumbai. Although government regulations on “rehabilitation” seem progressive and require all “project-affected” persons to be re-housed, every government agency tries to limit the number of people who get re-housed, push the resettlement to the cheapest peripheral location and 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 undertaken 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.

REFERENCE

- Patel, Sheela, Celine d’Cruz and Sundar Burra (2002), “Beyond evictions in a global city; people-managed resettlement in Mumbai”, *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 14, No 1, April, pages 159–172.