

## A SPARC of Inspiration: Collaborative commitment on the streets of Mumbai

Despite the country having a predominantly rural population many Indian cities are densely populated. Often the poorest people live in makeshift housing - shanties alongside railway tracks and on the city pavements. Being close to low-paid work without paying for travel or housing is vital.

SPARC (the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres) is an NGO based in Mumbai, who have since 1984 been working with communities to improve their neighbourhoods, homes and employment opportunities. They work in partnership with the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and a women's organisation, Mahila Milan, both self-advocacy and campaigning groups for the people living in Mumbai's poorest districts.

The work of SPARC is based on the belief that people learn most effectively from peers and through their own experiences - teaching refines and sharpens self-learning and aids articulation.

Residents living in informal housing have no security in their unsafe locations and lack the permission to upgrade their housing so they are keen to find better living conditions elsewhere and to avoid forcible or violent eviction.

Community struggles co-ordinated by the SPARC over many years have demonstrated the most effective community-led strategy for planned relocation. As a result of one successful project 18,000 families affected by the expansion of the Mumbai Urban Transport railway network have been moved into permanent homes.

A recent SPARC project with a community settled alongside the railway has demonstrated the impact of collaborative commitment. When the railways began talking of expanding the lines SPARC proposed a strategy based on the state government and Railway Company working directly with the people affected. But nobody believed it would succeed

### Community Led Re-location

The first step in the strategy is for communities to undertake their own survey to determine accurate numbers and conditions in the shanties.

They confirm that everyone is included and form groups of 50 households with an appointed co-ordinator. Savings groups are formed and discussions held about relocation options. Co-ordinators ensure that each household has their correct ID and accurate information is shared with the land owners. Communities review available sites and consider the amenities and services nearby. When the time comes to move, households shift in groups arranging collective transport.

### Collaborative Solutions

SPARC worked with a community who were living along a stretch of the Central tracks to pioneer this process. And found a collaborative solution - the government provided the land, the railways provided the infrastructure, and the communities demolished their own homes, built transit houses themselves and organised their shifting. No police force was used.

They demonstrated that a win-win solution can be devised when people are involved in making decisions about their own lives. The city gets better transport facilities. Unsafe and unhealthy shanties are cleared and living conditions improved. Based on the success of the Mumbai Urban Transport Project, the city is now working with the SPARC alliance to plan the resettlement and relocation of all pavement dwellers and of slums affected by road widening schemes.

### Contact

SPARC 2nd floor, Khetwadi Municipal School Building,  
1st Lane, Khetwadi, Near Alankar Cinema,  
Girgaum, Mumbai – 400004 India

e: [sparc@vsnl.in](mailto:sparc@vsnl.in)

w: [www.sparcindia.org/](http://www.sparcindia.org/)