Catalysing effective Social Accountability Systems through Community Participation

Jukur S[1,2], Wiltgen Georgi N[2], Tolhurst R[2], Lana Whittaker[2*],Ozano K[3] , Rao V[1]*

[1] Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres, India

[2] Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom

[3] The SCL Agency, United Kingdom

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Ethics Information

The study has received ethical approval from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine Research Ethics Board and the George Institute for Global Health Research Ethics Committee.

Author Contribution

The piece is a collective effort. All authors have contributed to the conceptualisation of this output. Author 1, 3 and 6 have designed the study. Authors 6 and 2 have done the initial writing and co-editing. Author 2 has also coded and analysed transcripts from the reflexivity sessions. Author 1 has engaged with communities and reviewed the document.

Abstract

Worldwide, infrastructure expansion and visions of 'slum-free cities' displace people living in informal settlements. Without community participation in these processes and accountability mechanisms in place' such displacement can adversely impact people's health and well-being. This piece outlines SPARC's (Society For Promotion of Area Resource Centres, SPARC is an NGO based in India promoting action of organised communities of urban poor to negotiate with the state on accessing tenure security, housing, sanitation and civic services) experience promoting community participation among residents of a relocation site in Ahmedabad, fostering coalescence, and rebuilding the dismantled community organisation to foster social accountability systems. The experience has reinforced learnings from previous work that poorly planned relocation increases the risk of impoverishment and negatively impacts residents' social relations, which severely affects their ability to come together to demand social accountability. As such, we had to innovate our engagement strategies to rebuild trust and confidence and strengthen community participation and organisation, which we share here.

Introduction

Globally, rapid urban development that demands infrastructure expansion and visions of 'slum-free cities' displace many people living in informal settlements to state-provided housing. Per the 2011 Census, India, with an informal settlement population of 65.5 million, 7.2 million are expected to be housed in state-provided housing (The Indian Express, 2019). The evident gap in Social Accountability by Governance actors towards people affected by development is well documented (Bhan, 2009; Mahadevia, 2011). Following others, we define *social accountability* as "the broad range of actions and mechanisms beyond voting that citizens can use to hold the state to account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts." (McNeil and Malena, 2010, p. 1). However, without investments in promoting Community Participation in the Relocation and Resettlement process, the gap will widen and eventually lead to further impoverishment of the relocated urban poor.

This piece draws on the first and last author's everyday experience and reflections over four years around promoting Community Participation among the Surya Nagar[1] (henceforth Surya) residents, a relocation site in Ahmedabad, to rebuild the community's organisation to make social accountability demands around the issues. This work is conducted as part of the ARISE consortium (Accountability in informal settlements for equity), aiming to understand and increase accountability around health and well-being of people living in informal urban spaces and relocation sites and based on collaboration with researchers from the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (henceforth LSTM), who co-authored this reflectivity piece. Twelve years post-relocation, the feeling of being physically, socially, and politically disempowered among the residents is stronger than ever. Hence, jointly with residents, we need to reflect on and develop actions around the ability of Surya residents to demand social accountability from the actors they feel were responsible for their relocation.

Context

Surya is the residence of 1200 households originally living along the banks of the Sabarmati River, who were displaced to make way for the Sabarmati Riverfront Development and were compensated with housing under the Basic Services for the Urban Poor scheme (see Patel et al., 2015; Mathur, 2012; Desai, 2012), ten kilometres away (Mahadevia et al., 2014; Mathur, 2012). Prior to their relocation, some residents belonged to the Sabarmati Nagrik Adhikar Manch, a civil society collective that sought

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[1] Names of location and community members mentioned here are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

to ensure the displaced people got their fair compensation. Though once a strong collective, a series of events eroded this trust. Their current state is marked by tenure insecurity, poor access to services, unemployment and many other markers of impoverishment that are well-documented as an outcome of displacement (Sholihah & Shaojun, 2018; Patel et al., 2015; Kotadiya et al., 2018; Cernea (1997). A lack of a network of support though the process of formalisation and social capital has led to the fragmentation of social groups, coupled with deep distrust and feelings of betrayal towards the government and within the leadership, disrupting bargaining power (Kotadiya et al., 2018).

In this reflection, we have repeatedly drawn out connections with the community networks promoted and supported by the Society For Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), an NGO based in India promoting action of organised communities of urban poor to negotiate with the state on accessing tenure security, housing, sanitation and civic services, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and the women's collective called Mahila Milan, together calling themselves the Indian Alliance (henceforth Alliance) The Alliance is part of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), a global network of urban low-income housing dwellers aiming to collect data for advocacy and action, engage in learning exhangesand drive a bottom-up agenda for inclusive urban development (see SDI, 2023). The Alliance's particular experience in community-led relocation in the context of Mumbai by developing tools for bringing community coalescence and negotiating with state institutions (see Patel et al., 2002; Patel et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2017) forms both the background of their action and the resources they use to organise communities in Surya.

Methodological Statement

The ARISE consortium adopts a participatory research paradigm which refers to research that involves collective, reflective, and systematic inquiry where researchers and community members interact as equal partners across the whole research process to share learnings, ameliorate research practice and catalyse social change (Tremblay et al., 2018). Reflexivity is an iterative and collective process in participatory research involving reflection within a team to continually construct and challenge our knowledge and social realities (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006). Rigorous reflexivity is essential to participatory research as it allows for critically exploring research partners' positionality and comprehending its impact on the research process and associated actions (Barrett et al., 2020).

The second author conducted reflexivity sessions with the first author over two years to document the research and action process, with author two asking questions to author one around themes of accountability, health and well-being, housing and community engagement. All five authors collectively analysed the material from the reflexivity sessions, discussed and contributed to the conceptualisation

and writing of this reflection piece. Regular sessions were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams between February 2021 and January 2023. All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and then thematically coded using NVivo 12 software with codes validated amongst authors. Additionally, the first author took extensive observation notes during their site visits.

Reflections and Discussions

The beginning

With plans to work on health and well-being, our relationship with Surya residents started in 2019 as we had chosen to work in relocation sites as part of the ARISE consortium. The Alliance had its community network in Ahmedabad, whose leading member, Velumani (name changed), knew some families from the riverfront. On our visits to various relocation sites, a few residents at Surya recognised Velumani, and we thus began using this acquaintance to explore working there. Though intended differently at first, we quickly learned that the communities were in a state of disarray, having limited capacity to demand accountability from the state and were living in buildings and environments that needed proper operations and maintenance. We began comparing this directly with the orderly fashion in which the community members of the Alliance's network in Mumbai function, are able to carry out good maintenance and have the capacity to demand accountability from the state. We observed that we need to leverage what we know, use the strong network of the Alliance and invest in strengthening community participation at Surya. Furthermore, it became clear that improving health and well-being was neither a community priority nor did we feel right about starting there.

Based on these experiences, there were two clear long-term actions that we knew we had to launch. One; strengthen the formal framework of the Cooperative Housing Societies, which is a marker of good local governance post-relocation, and two; increase community participation so that a larger and more organised community feels empowered to push for accountability from the duty bearers. Consequently, we have been incrementally designing and implementing activities since 2019 to strengthen the weak relationships between the residents and in the process, motivate, support, and invest in strengthening their housing societies through participatory action.

Knowing who's who

Based on the Alliance's involvement in other relocation sites across India including Mumbai (see SPARC, n.d.) we know it is essential to engage the residents to know who plays what role in the community. These form the primary pathways to understanding the community history and what can enhance participation in their local context. We knew the troubled history of those relocated under the

project. Once having organised to negotiate a fair deal with their relocation, and feeling betrayed post relocation due to the poor living conditions they are living in now, we knew they would not trust us. Their low trust in NGOs became evident when one of the residents exclaimed, "NGOs just come and go, nothing changes for us" (Surya residents in 2019), pointing to possible misuse of processes that are called 'participatory', which neither get full participation of people, nor leave sustainable systems behind, echoing Madhevia et al., 2016. We were determined that in everything we do here, we will involve people who best represent the residents, and our actions must leave sustainable systems behind that self-function towards the objectives we started with.

Learning from Seeing

For strengthening participation and housing societies, the residents had to see a practical example where this exists and from which they could learn and emulate within their local contexts. We at SPARC take immense pride in the process of community exchange that helps communities see and learn from each other. We felt that the residents would benefit if they met the Alliance's community network, saw their work, particularly around relocation, and developed activities for their own contexts. Over the four years between 2019 and 2023, a total of eight community exchanges took place. A total of twelve persons from Surya visited Mumbai's relocation colonies over time, and ten persons from the Alliance's network in Mumbai visited Surya. While the Mumbai communities have travelled extensively to see, learn and teach, the experience of "travelling to learn from other communities that have had similar lives as ours" (Surya Resident in 2019) was new to the Surya residents. We also knew that the exchanges must be frequent, repeated and staggered for them to be effective. While it took multiple visits to show evidence of what was learned and exchanged, we observed that each visit produced micro action around one community issue and strengthened the residents' commitment to forming a functional housing society there.

One such micro action was aimed towards increasing the participation of women in the process. The number of people we interacted with steadily increased since 2019, as did the number of people that engaged with us regularly to work on their challenges. Yet until 2022, women were missing from these groups. Their absence meant they were not participating in the decision-making process around the challenge action we were pursuing with the few Surya leaders. On initial inquiry, the male participants claimed that women in their community were culturally less inclined to participate. We acknowledge that the lack of participation of women and engagement was a significant barrier and that we needed to think about strategies to engage more with female residents.From experience of working in other resettlement locations we know that , the Alliance's women-led organisation, Mahila Milan, frequently participated and demanded accountability from duty bearers because the Alliance consciously and in collaboration with women created a space and opportunity for women to meaningfully participate. We

believe the same would work in Surya, and cultural barriers can be breached if investments and efforts are made for that. We knew an exchange where women's participation is the focus, had to happen. In May 2022, six Mahila Milan members visited Surya, went to each house, cajoling women to come and talk to them, and made dramatic and articulate speeches about their work as a collective in Mumbai and elsewhere. In the same month, tired of not receiving water for several weeks due to a faulty pump, women residents rallied to their elected representative and demanded that he immediately resolve it. By the evening, the pumps were fixed. Their participation in our meetings has now improved. Whilst we acknowledge that women attending meetings is not an absolute indicator of them being able to participate or lead processes meaningfully, this experience reinforced our belief that women participate because they want to be privy to changes around them. We are aware that the differences on lines of caste and the distrust deeply embedded in their conscience will continue to be a barrier, and we are far from achieving their full participation. Nevertheless, women seeing value in spending time in meetings after strenuous hours of work at home and outside indicates to us that they no longer want to remain passive, and creating spaces for them is essential to seek their participation.

How do we strengthen the Housing Society?

Our actions neither have a defined chronology nor can they be separated by which of the two long-term actions they fall under. We acknowledge the under-structured and overlapping nature of our activities and believe each action is a step towards achieving both goals, but perhaps one more than the other. Cooperative Housing societies are formal bodies, which do bookkeeping, maintain records, and take full ownership of operations and maintenance. We felt the existing societies needed strengthening to carry out this official work and invested in three small actions to achieve that.

Firstly, there were no name boards in any of the buildings in Surya, a characteristic of buildings in India, displayed at the entrance of any building that lists out flat numbers and names of its owners. This helps identify who lives where and promotes a sense of identity among the residents. It affirms formal ownership of the specific flat and is, therefore, important to persons residing there and for the housing society to administer efficiently. In 2019, together with the residents, we put a list of occupants and financially contributed to putting up the board in one building.

Secondly, we supported residents with building repairs. Due to poor construction quality, though only ten years old, Surya buildings were dilapidated. Corroded water pipes, overhead water tanks at the risk of collapsing, and plasters peeling off of exterior walls exposing the reinforcement displayed poor construction and poor maintenance. The cost of repairs was beyond what people could contribute, and with no proper process in place, residents had no trust in contributing either. We saw this as another opportunity to experiment with 'learning by doing'. We contributed financially, but on the condition

that each resident contributes and declares their commitment, the leaders do the entire action in a transparent manner with proper record keeping of all transactions and following transparent procurement procedures.

Thirdly, a Cooperative Housing Society being a formal body needs a 'formal office space' to function. They needed an office where the elected members could meet and work, and records and proper books of accounts could be maintained physically and on computers. While symbolic, physical office spaces with formal procedures give a sense of trust and help people believe that the space is reserved for official transactions. This is a characteristic of all relocation buildings in Mumbai, and in our experience, this was a must-have at Surya as well to offer more legitimacy to the housing society, particularly in the eyes of its residents. We therefore sought funds from ARISE to help develop office spaces replete with furniture, storage for documents, computers and engaged in developing transparent collection systems of funds from residents towards building operations and maintenance.

Each of the three activities is ongoing and at different stages of progression, and it may be too early for us to definitively reflect on the macro changes that they would bring. However, we learned that such activities are bringing in a steady increase in the number of people who are participating in the meetings and discussions which reflect the micro changes that the interventions are bringing in. For example, in March 2023, a group of four people from Surya as well as from four other riverfront relocation sites, came together and visited relocation colonies in Mumbai, interacting with housing society members there to understand what else they will need to do, to strengthen their own housing societies.

Key Learnings and Conclusions

We have presented our learning engagement with Surya residents which re-establishes knowledge around community capacities and factors that promote or impede the ability of communities to demand social accountability from Governance actors. Over the four years of engagement, we have come a long way from being rejected to seeing a relationship of trust being established with both women and men living in Surya, which we think is central to developing their abilities to re-negotiate accountability from the governance actors. We acknowledge that we have not yet built strong community cohesion and are far from achieving a fully functional social accountability system, but the response of Surya residents and now the residents from other relocation sites indicates we have an opportunity to pursue it.

From the Alliance's experience of working in the relocation and resettlement space such as Mumbai for over two decades (see Patel et al., 2002; Patel et al., 2016; Patel et al., 2017) as well as engaging in learning on organising communities for social accountability with other grassroots organisations in

other contexts through the SDI network, we have witnessed that people living in informal settlements are constantly in a state of insecurity, particularly regarding their tenure status. Poorly planned relocation, such as the experience of Surya residents can push people back several years, and can make people feel insecure even after getting access to housing. Our experience here has reinforced our previous learning whilst we acknowledge that deeply rooted contextual challenges influence our trajectory. The distrust that this can build in people's minds and their everyday struggles can severely challenge their ability to see value in coming together to demand social accountability. In such a context, we naturally see that lead participants are largely made of the better-educated and financially better-off residents, and their ability to negotiate brings them more benefits over others, which can become the root of mistrust between them and the rest of the community. This also brings in what we now call 'negotiation fatigue' among the leaders who, as prime negotiators between the state and other residents, face the ire of both when processes do not bring the intended outcomes. Surya is a classic example of this situation, and the leaders currently engaging actively, having undergone the 'negotiation fatigue' in demanding accountability, see little value in pursuing it again. On this basis, we had to innovate our engagement strategy to rebuild trust, confidence and use tools such as strengthening housing societies to further them.

We reiterate that our engagement with the residents is focused on rebuilding community participation, fostering coalescence, and rebuilding the dismantled community organisation as a way to foster social accountability systems, which we hope will ultimately empower residents to seek a fair deal once again from the state. As we learned it from the Alliance's long standing work and the ARISE experience, community participation is imperative to generate inclusive knowledge and action with communities, which draw on community, support organisation's and academic knowledge, around health and wellbeing issues and promote health equity. We aim to write a sequel to this reflection piece that highlights how our efforts to strengthen participation indeed build accountability systems and the actions that they generate for the residents of Surya and other relocated colonies in Ahmedabad and beyond.

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