

Imprint

gate 4/99 Dezember 1999

Publisher:

gate in Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Technische Zusammenarbeit
(GTZ), GmbH
Post Box 5180
D-65726 Eschborn
Federal Republic of Germany
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Print, distribution, advertising
Societäts-Druck
Frankenallee 71-81
D-60327 Frankfurt
Federal Republic of Germany

Layout:

Jürgen Platt

Cover Photo:

epd

Focus in this issue:

Carsten Hellpap

"gate" appears quarterly. A single
copy costs DM 6.00 and a year's
subscription DM 24.00.

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by Roland Seifert

Several hundred million people world-wide live in inner-city slums and informal settlements on the periphery, often in very demeaning conditions. Inadequate sanitation, contaminated and scarce drinking-water, wretched and overcrowded housing - these are the features of everyday life for the people on the city's margins. In this article, Roland Seifert describes how women from two continents teamed up in a bid to boost self-help in poor communities.



Children in a township outside Port Elisabeth.

(Photo: Franek Osterloh)

It began back in 1991. That is when women from India and South Africa met for the first time. Africans like Thandi Bosman and Mercy Nqakula, and Indians like Sona, Scheinaz and Safira. They had never seen or heard of each other before, yet they came together to share experience across continents. "We're so different, but we face the same problems and can learn from each other," says Celine D'Cruz of the women's collective Mahila Milan. They all share a common background. These women are not ministers or development experts.

They are slum dwellers from Bombay and Cape Town: the Mahila Milan women from Bombay and the South African women who have since formed an organisation known as the People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter.

This unusual visiting programme was made possible not least by financial support from the German Catholic donor organisation MISEREOR, which is based in Aachen. The person at MISEREOR responsible for overseeing the programme, Gregor Meer-

pohl, recalls the early discussions: "Nobody says anything against bankers and industrialists flying round the world to make their arrangements. But when we first started helping ordinary poor people to do so, all sorts of objections were raised." Today, eight years on, this form of South-South dialogue still represents, he believes, one of the "most exciting development projects ever." The results speak for themselves. In the course of this programme of learning and exchange, a network of contacts has been built up that includes many other countries, such as Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Cambodia, Brazil, Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Laxmi Naidu, one of women who founded Mahila Milan, describes the humiliation of repeated evictions suffered by her community: "They used to come at eleven, sometimes almost every other day. The police had orders to demolish the slums. It went on for years." That was before the "Mahila Milan" signs went up, protecting her community from violent eviction. The women managed to negotiate with the authorities and establish an entitlement to stay.

Government assistance programmes are rare in these countries, and where they do exist, they hardly have any impact due to the sheer scale of the problem. Looking for ways out of an intolerable situation, the poorest communities began to organise themselves. Don't wait to see what government might do before acting, but go on the offensive, develop your own constructive ideas and demand your rights - , this is the active approach recommended by the Indian women on their first visits to South Africa. And, they said, start by getting the facts: find out the exact number of residents, gather data on the existing infrastructure, such as the number of public water taps, toilets, showers, or the distance to the nearest school and the nearest health centre. Finding out facts and figures for yourself makes it much easier to organise self-help and community action. The dwellers then have their own statistics and are in a better position to demand essential infrastructure measures from the authorities.

The concept seems to work. Having formed local groups of settlers and squatters and established a network for intensive dialogue, these communities

succeeded in setting up a number of housing savings and loans schemes. The Indian women began putting aside small amounts of money from the outset. They pay into two funds - one for coping with emergencies, like a tragedy in the household, and one for the house building cooperative, which they created themselves. The model was then followed in South Africa and proved popular. Today, there are well over 10,000 savings groups in more than ten countries. The schemes bring together several hundred thousand members.

In South Africa alone, there are now more than 2,000 building savings groups or NtsukoZonkes. They are spread across the whole country and have already helped over 15,000 families to acquire land titles. Moreover, the movement has set up Building, Information and Technology Centres (BIT Centres), where members can learn how to produce their own bricks and roof tiles. This cuts building costs dramatically. For instance, a home that would cost about 24,000 rand from a commercial builder can be had for 9,100 rand through the members own efforts.

In the early days, the Indians had most of the good ideas and passed on their expertise to their African counterparts. But the People's Dialogue process soon spawned a broad-based savings and welfare movement at grassroots level throughout Southern Africa. The South African Homeless People's Federation now has over 1,200 savings groups with in excess of 70,000 members. This organisation has taken a lead in promoting developments elsewhere. For instance, visits to Zimbabwe led to the launch of a successful savings and loans group in Victoria Falls, and groups were invited from Namibia to acquire know-how on housing construction schemes.

Nor has time stood still in India since the initial visits in the early nineties. The Indian movements have united around the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and the Mahila Milan and can now count their members in the hundreds of thousand. The Indians have also been successful in gaining access to land and credit for home building. Moreover, with so many homeless people living on streets, the groups have helped local authorities in a number



Mahila Milan's Celine D'Cruz and Thami Maquerela of People's Dialogue at an exchange programme in Zimbabwe, 1999.

(Photo: Gregor Meerpohl)

of cities to plan and construct public toilets. The principle is simple: communities plan, construct and maintain toilets in their own settlements. While the state brings sewers and water supply to the site and pays for the materials.

All these examples show how this unusual development programme can make a difference. These initiatives have not only succeeded in developing democratic structures in local communities but they have raised the awareness and confidence of those

involved. Even the poorest people in the slums and squatter settlements are able to initiate their own processes of change. A lesson of the Indian model is that, by joining together and organising autonomously, slum dwellers can overcome the fear within and make real improvements to their lives.

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gate co-ordinator.



Résumé

A l'échelon mondiale des centaines de millions de peuple vivent dans les bidonvilles des villes et dans des lotissements informelles à l'environnement des villes – et leurs conditions de vie sont souvent très pauvres. Des installations sanitaires insuffisantes, l'absence d'eau potable qui est souvent pollué, des habitations pauvres et combles – ce sont les caractéristiques de la vie quotidienne des gens dans les banlieues. Des femmes de deux continents travaillent ensemble pour encourager l'entraide chez la population pauvre. Elles mêmes sont des habitantes des bidonvilles de Bombay à l'Inde et de Cape Town à l'Afrique du Sud, et leur organisation s'appelle "People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter".

Extracto

En todo el mundo viven muchos miles millones de seres humanos en las áreas marginales de las ciudades y en aglomeraciones informales alrededor de las mismas. Esto a menudo bajo condiciones miserables. Instalaciones sanitarias insuficientes, agua escasa y contaminada, viviendas pobres y abarrotadas, éstos son los rasgos característicos de la vida cotidiana para las personas en las barriadas de las ciudades. Mujeres de dos continentes se han encontrado para fomentar la autoayuda de las poblaciones afectadas por la pobreza. Ellas mismas son habitantes de barriadas de ciudades en Bombay en La India y Capa Town en Sud África y su organización se llama "People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter".