



## SPARC-NSDF-Mahila Milan Alliance: Lessons learned from Building Successful Communal Toilets in India\*

**SUMMARY:** This national sanitation project underscores the success that community-driven programs can have when given the power and resources to succeed. With additional funding from the state government, alliances of community groups scaled up their projects and were able to address their sanitation problems faster, cheaper and more sustainably than traditional state-led projects.

### Background

The past 50 years have witnessed the extraordinary growth of India's cities. Although still a predominantly rural country, India now has an urban population that exceeds 360 million (30 percent of the total population), and projections are for it to reach almost 600 million by 2030. It is estimated that at least 65 million people (18 percent of the urban population) now live in urban slums, and despite the serious efforts of the national, state and local governments over the past 20 years to improve conditions, life is a daily struggle for slum residents. One of the most pressing problems is a lack of adequate sanitation. In many of the country's cities, between one-quarter and one-half of the population has inadequate or no access to sanitation, with higher percentages in the slums. Many municipal authorities have built a few public toilet blocks, but these fall far short of meeting the need. Most also are poorly designed; they lack privacy and are difficult to clean, inconveniently located, shoddily constructed, inadequately maintained and in serious disrepair. This drives many slum dwellers to practice open defecation. The problem is most acute for women and girls, who must often wait until darkness to defecate, thus endangering their health and safety.

### The SPARC-NSDF-Mahila Milan Alliance

In 1984, the National Slum Dwellers Federation, or NSDF, a national organization formed in the mid-1970s of community groups representing slum residents, came together into an Alliance with the new Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers, or SPARC, and Mahila Milan ('women together'). SPARC was formed in 1984 as a nongovernmental organization focusing on housing and

infrastructure issues for the urban poor. The sister organization, Mahila Milan, was formed in 1984 by the NSDF, with the assistance of SPARC, as a collective of women slum and pavement dwellers to encourage greater participation of women in community development. The alliance pools human and financial resources to take direct measures to improve the lives of India's slum and pavement dwellers, particularly women. The alliance engages in slum upgrading, rehabilitation, resettlement and housing improvement programs, including microlending for housing upgrades.

## Early efforts to construct community toilet blocks, 1985-95

One of the first issues the alliance addressed after its formation in 1984 was the problem of inadequate water and sanitation facilities in the slums. The public toilets in the slums of many cities had become decrepit, unsanitary, used almost entirely by men and totally unsuitable for children and women. In 1985, after unsuccessful efforts to pressure municipal authorities in Mumbai, Bangalore, Kanpur, Hyderabad, Lucknow and other large cities to improve the public toilets, alliance members, with the financial and technical assistance of the NGO Homeless International and several other donors, took matters into their own hands and began what became a 10-year effort to build community toilets with the participation of groups in the communities.

The alliance used community labor and negotiated with local contractors to produce “pilot” toilet blocks with between 10 and 20 seats that were of better quality and cheaper than the public toilets of the municipalities. The alliance introduced many innovations in design, including improved ventilation, large water storage tanks for personal washing and cleaning of the facilities, separate entrances for men and women, two-way swinging doors for easier cleaning, lighting for night use, blocks of small seats for children, special toilets for the elderly and the disabled, and a room where the caretaker could live. Where there was space, a community hall was sometimes built on top, further incentivizing the caretaker to keep the premises clean. Once completed, control and management of the toilets was assumed by community-based organizations, usually run by women. The positive results of these early efforts gradually convinced municipal authorities in these cities of the effectiveness of the community-led approach.

## Results

### City of Pune

In 1999, the city of Pune had built just 22 public toilet blocks since 1992 for about 3 million residents, 40 percent of whom lived in 500 different slums. Consequently, they decided to undertake a large-scale effort to provide sanitation to the city's poor by engaging community-based organizations. Based on its earlier successes, the SPARC-NSDF-Mahila Milan Alliance was one of the principal groups selected to build the toilet blocks. The alliance designed and estimated the cost of the facilities, the city provided the funding for construction, and communities assumed the management and maintenance. Between 1999 and 2001, the alliance constructed 114 toilet blocks with more than 2,000 adult and 500 children's seats. Other NGOs constructed 300 more facilities with 8,000 seats. In all, more seats were added in two years than had been constructed over the previous 30 years.

Community-based organizations and residents were often involved in the design and construction, and in some cases women managed the entire construction process. The alliance kept improving on the earlier design innovations as the member groups learned from experience. The number of facilities built directly by the communities rose from more than half at the beginning of the program to three-fourths at the end. The process was often not easy, as the women had to overcome various prejudices — municipal staff were not used to dealing with women who would not take bribes, and shopkeepers and materials suppliers would at first not take them seriously.

### City of Mumbai

In Mumbai, despite the city's overall wealth and economic power, more than 6 million people — more than half the city's population — live in 2,000 slums cramped in about 8 percent of the city's land area.



In 2000, the Mumbai Municipal Corp., after seeing the successful results of the alliance program in nearby Pune and its own largely unsuccessful efforts to build and maintain public toilets in the slums, decided to undertake a large-scale, community-based toilet block program as part of a World Bank Slum Sanitation Program, or SSP, a component of a larger Sewage Disposal Project approved in 1995. The SSP targeted about 1 million slum dwellers.

The alliance was one of three contractor/NGO consortia selected by the Municipal Corp. to construct the community toilets. For the alliance to become eligible to bid on the project, the World Bank had to waive a requirement that Indian NGOs could not undertake projects costing more than \$10,000. Although construction proceeded more slowly than anticipated, in part because NGOs' unfamiliarity with working with municipal authorities resulted in delays in permitting, billing and payments, by 2005 the SSP had constructed more than 328 toilet blocks and 5,100 seats, nearly two-thirds of which were provided by the alliance.

## Keys to success/lessons learned

The public toilet blocks constructed by Indian municipalities failed largely because they were done without any community involvement and were poorly located, shoddily constructed and poorly maintained. By contrast, the community toilet blocks designed, built and managed by the SPARC-NSDA-Mahila Milan Alliance (and others) were designed with the participation of local community-based organizations, most often women's groups, which had a stake in their success. As a consequence, the alliance toilet blocks were better-located, built of superior materials and much better-designed, with better lighting and ventilation, sufficient water for cleaning, and better privacy for women and children.

In addition, community-based management has resulted in much better maintenance. Community managers charge user fees either on a monthly basis from "member families" or on a per-use basis. The user fees help to defray the expenses of operating and managing the facilities, including water and electricity charges. The municipalities generally cover the cost of major repairs.

In sum, the SPARC-NSDA-Mahila Milan Alliance has demonstrated a better and cheaper way of meeting the sanitation needs of slum residents than the top-down public sector approach that Indian municipal governments had traditionally used.

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*\*References: This case study is based on "Community-Designed, Built and Managed Toilet Blocks in Indian Cities," by Sundar Burra, Sheila Patel and Thomas Kerr in Environment and Urbanization, 2003, 15:11, pp. 11-32 and on "The Mumbai Slum Sanitation Program" by the World Bank and Cities Alliance, 2006.*



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