

# TOWARDS DECENTRALISED URBAN GOVERNANCE

THE CASE OF BHUJ CITY, KACHCHH, INDIA



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*Meeting of corporators and HIC workers with authors, Bhuj* by Ashish Kothari

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## Summary

This case study describes and analyses the decentralisation process by five civil society organisations along with citizens of Bhuj city in Kachchh in the state of Gujarat. It is set to the backdrop of the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that sought to empower urban local bodies (ULBs) to enable them to function as “institutions of self-government”. Though, after more than 25 years of passing of the act, the institutions and powers mandated under it are yet to take their full shape in most cities in India. Urban governance is marked by centralised, highly bureaucratic and exclusionary planning that eventually fails to provide for basic amenities like food, shelter, clothing, and safe/clean environment for a large number of people. The poor, minorities, women, children and other marginalised sections of population are usually found in the fringes of such urban planning and governance. India is one of the fastest urbanising countries in the world with plans of expanding cities exponentially (both in numbers and investments) in the next decade. In this scenario, there is a little hope that Indian cities will be able to provide for its most vulnerable sections of the population.

This study examines a transformative process unfolding in the city of Bhuj that aims to challenge the mainstream model of urban planning and governance. Under the Homes in the City (HIC) program initiated by five civil society organisations (Hunnarshala, Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, Arid Communities and Technologies, Sahjeevan, and SETU Abhiyan), along with issue-based collectives and citizens, a decentralised ward level planning and decision making process, along with strengthening of Municipalities and a holistic and integrated approach is being attempted. The study details the work of these actors, describes the decentralised governance being attempted, and indicates the strengths and weaknesses in integrating varied aspects into the planning. Based on an analysis of four crucial aspects of a successful democracy – rights, capacity, forums, and maturity – as relevant to the Bhuj decentralisation process, this study concludes with some suggestions and indications of steps that could help in strengthening the process.



*Bhuj Setu office for citizens' information and support (2012)*



## Main Report

### 1. Background: Alternative Transformations and Democracy

#### 1.1 Alternative transformations

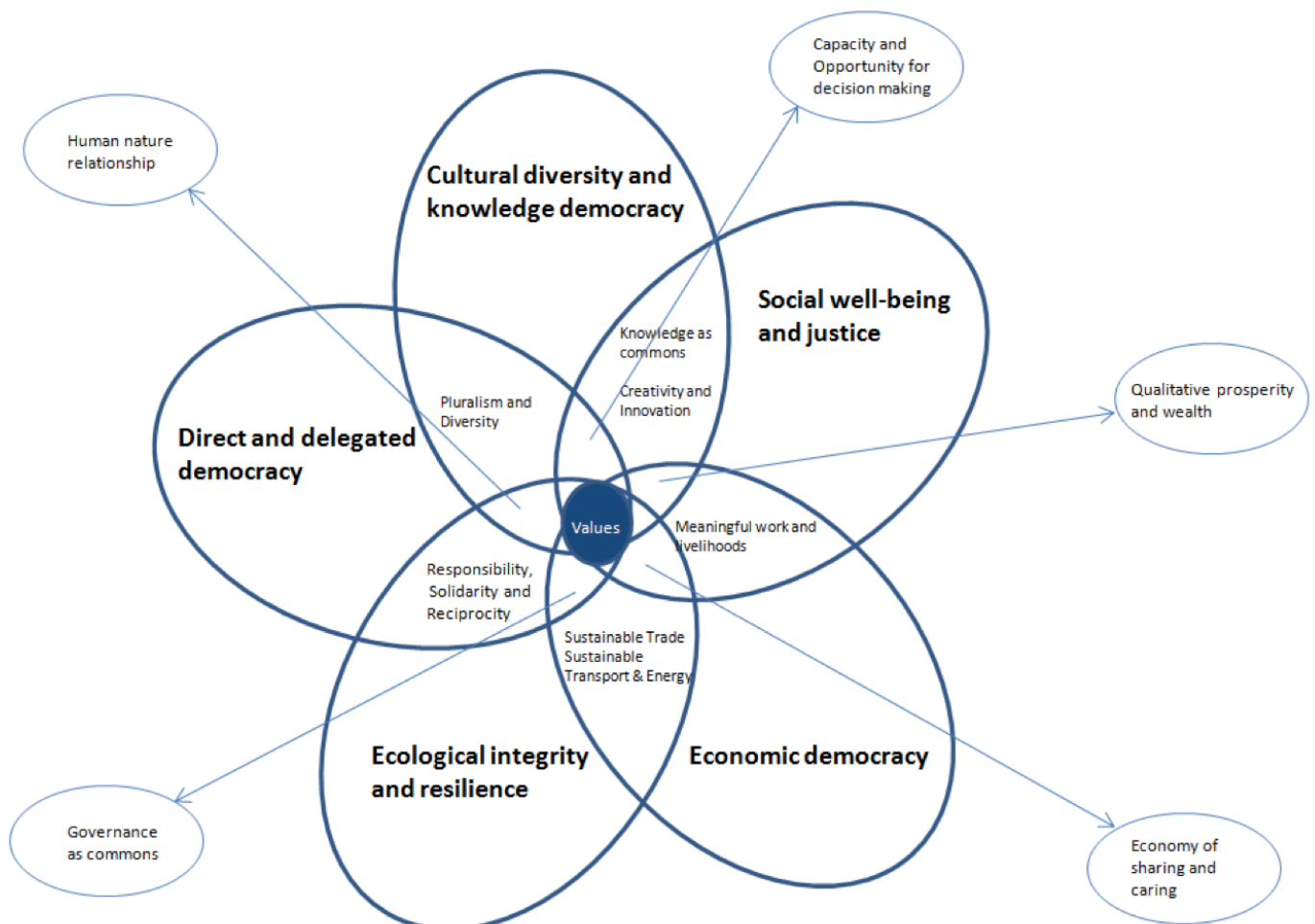
Across the world there are a number of processes by communities, organisations, government bodies, movements, and business that are trying to tackle various dimensions of unsustainability, inequity, and injustice. Many of these processes are challenging structural forces such as capitalism, statism, patriarchy, racism, casteism, and anthropocentrism. In this sense they can be seen as *alternatives* to the currently dominant system.

Alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks that lead us to equity, justice, sustainability. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the

term does not imply these are always ‘marginal’ or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system.

It is proposed that alternatives are built on the following spheres (or overlapping spheres) seen as an integrated whole; in this or other forms these have been expressed by many in the past, but are re-emerging in the new contexts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: radical and delegated democracy, social well-being and justice, economic democracy, cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, and ecological integrity and resilience (these are explained further in the note referred to below).

The above approach is part of (and detailed further in), an evolving note ‘In Search of Radical Alternatives’, laying out a framework to imagine pathways and visions that are fundamental alternatives to today’s dominant economic and political system, taking us towards equity, justice, and ecological sustainability.<sup>1</sup> This document has emerged from an ongoing process called the Vikalp Sangam<sup>2</sup> that aims at bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms



**Figure 1:** Spheres of alternatives transformation

(Note: the topics mentioned in the overlapping areas are only indicative, not exhaustive)

of economic development and political governance. It aims to create a cross-sectoral platform on alternatives (or constructive work) to share, learn, and build hope, collaboration and to dream and deliberate towards an alternative future.

One of the issues faced by movements working towards radical transformation, is that many actions being claimed as alternatives are actually dealing only with the symptoms (e.g. recycling waste rather than challenging its generation and the economic forces that create it), rather than bringing in radical or transformative changes. In addition, they might be fundamentally challenging one dimension of transformation but might be negatively impacting other dimensions of transformations. In order to understand these and other complex issues, a tool called the Alternatives Transformation Format (ATF)<sup>3</sup> has been developed as part of ACKnowl-EJ,<sup>4</sup> the Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice Project.<sup>5</sup> This lists multiple elements of alternative transformations in the above mentioned five spheres. As the ATF notes: “across the world there are initiatives by communities, civil society organisations, government agencies, and businesses to tackle the challenges of unsustainability, inequity, and injustice. Many of them confront the basic structural reasons for these challenges, such as capitalism, patriarchy, state-centrism, or other inequities in power resulting from caste, ethnic, racial, and other social characteristics; we call these transformative or radical alternatives.” The ATF helps to get an understanding of whether changes are taking place towards alternative transformations i.e. greater direct or radical democracy (where people on the ground are core part of decision-making), more control over the economy by the public (not the state or corporations) and the revival of relations of caring and sharing, sustaining or reviving cultural and knowledge diversity and the commons, and greater equality and justice on gender, class, caste, ethnic, ‘race’, and other aspects, all of this on a base of ecological resilience and sustainability and on fundamental ethics of co-existence amongst humans and between humans and nature.

The alternatives framework and the ATF together set the background for analysis of various initiatives at transformation in India that Kalpavriksh is undertaking case studies on. This is part of an ongoing process in Kalpavriksh to understand myriad attempts at generating and practicing alternatives that not only challenge the dominant

‘development’ paradigm, but provide viable pathways for human wellbeing that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable.

Some of these case studies attempt to dig deeper into one of the above-mentioned five spheres of alternatives, i.e. direct and delegated democracy. The attempt is to document processes, initiatives and pathways towards more democratic functioning (which we explain below). In addition, the idea is to analyse how the attempts to establish radical forms of democracy establish or enhance links to the other spheres of Alternatives Transformation Format, explained above, which we do briefly or in detail, depending on the specific case.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Democracy

Democracy (demos=people + cracy=rule) is supposed to mean the rule of, by, and for people. In its original meaning this would imply that all of us, wherever we are, have the power to govern our lives. However, across the world its dominant meaning has been constrained by the form of ‘liberal’ governance in which representatives elected by people have power at varying degrees of centralisation. It is necessary to understand this crucial difference between direct or radical democracy and representative democracy. In the former, ‘ordinary’ citizens self-govern for various essential aspects of life, expressing power where they are, recognising that such power is inherent to them rather than ‘given’ down by the state or someone else. In the latter, power is concentrated in representatives (elected or delegated), and typically the institutions where these representatives exercise their power, forming the state, are far removed from those who have voted or selected them. These two forms of democracy are not necessarily antithetical to each other, and conceivably one can formulate systems of subsidiarity where all decisions that can be taken at the level of local, face-to-face units of direct democracy are taken there, and only those requiring larger-scale coordination are taken by units comprising representatives or delegates. In such a system, or even in those where direct democracy does not exist or is very weak, there can be various processes to ensure that representatives are accountable, transparent, and participatory in their decision-making, and that there are methods such as the right to recall, periodic rotation, and so on, that reduce unaccountable concentration of power.

## 2. Introduction to the Case

This specific study focuses on an urban level direct democracy process in the context of the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment passed in 1992<sup>7</sup> by the Indian Parliament. This sought to empower urban local bodies (ULBs) to enable them to function as “institutions of self-government”. The 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act lays out the “constitution of Ward Committees in cities with a population of more than 3 lakhs or 0.3 million (300,000); the participation of Ward Committees in planning, financial and administrative functions; reservation of seats for women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; power and authorities of ULBs; appointment of state elections and finance commission.” The Act allows the nomination of members to the Ward Committees, who have experience in municipal administration, or are from NGOs and citizen groups.

A ‘Model Nagara Raj Bill,’<sup>8</sup> was later introduced by the Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) under the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) in 2006. The model aimed at institutionalising citizen participation and further dividing the Ward into Area Sabhas (or Area Committees) each consisting of about 2000-3000 voters with powers to be involved in municipal planning and functions. State governments were required to pass this bill as per the modifications they wanted, if they wanted to avail of funds under JNNURM programme.<sup>9</sup>

However, more than 25 years after the passing of the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment, we find that the institutions and powers mandated under it are yet to take their full shape in most cities in India. No state except Kerala and Andhra Pradesh (then undivided) had implemented policies inspired by the Model Nagara Raj Bill. In most States in India, the process of direct citizen’s participation and decision making is still not in place. According to a study on citizens’ participation in Area Sabhas (TERI 2010) published in 2010, only 19 states had by then enacted the legislation to enable the constitution of Ward Committees and only 12 states had constituted them.<sup>10</sup> And even in the states where Ward Committees were constituted, the interaction and collaboration needed among the citizens and government were neglected. In most cases, the Ward Committees are merely advisory bodies with no or limited financial powers unlike

what the Act mandates. Hence, the planning and decision making in most cities still continues to be excessively bureaucratic; most political, financial and administrative decisions are State-controlled; and they are often devoid of people’s needs and disconnected from institutions of public engagement.

On the other hand, India is one of the rapidly urbanising countries with the second-largest population of urban dwellers in the world, around 377.16 million living in 7,933 cities as per the 2011 census (India Habitat Report, 2016). This is about 34% of India’s total population. The net addition of population in the urban areas over the decade 2001-2011 has been 91.0 million; between 2015 and 2030, another 164 million are expected to be added.<sup>11</sup> Though these cities have exploded exponentially, their ability to provide for basic amenities like shelter, food, sewage, and infrastructure is poor. Around 38 million homes need to be provided by 2030, 3 million buses are needed for transport (while the personal transport share of total transport is going to rise to 50% adding to already unbearable congestion and air pollution), nearly 30-35% of households are not connected to a sewer system coupled with excessive untreated waste generation that is harming rivers and local environment, and there are multiple health hazards caused by these environmental issues.<sup>12</sup> Drinking water crises are common to all cities and according to the Central Pollution Control Board’s (CPCB) report, around 302 river stretches are excessively polluted due to discharge of sewage and partially treated waste water.<sup>13</sup> Most cities are marred by land mismanagement and misuse and have outdated zoning systems.

Most Indian cities lack safe spaces for women, secure workspaces for marginalised communities like street vendors, beggars etc, and basic amenities such as safe drinking water, clean air, housing, decent public transport, few proper pavements, and access to health services for huge sections of the population. For millions of these people, there is no effective ‘right to the city’ while minority elites live in western standard luxury. Yet, the only way the government approaches these issues is by infusing more investments and by creating new models of Public-Private Participation (PPP).<sup>14</sup> There are few efforts at strengthening the local governance bodies. There is no flicker of doubt that there is an urgent need of re-framing and re-designing the planning and governance of Indian cities. Importantly, there is a need to explore new frameworks for



urban governance that have the spirit of the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. The Municipalities need to be empowered as politically and legally autonomous units of governance and decision making and within these, neighbourhoods or Area institutions for local self-governance.

In the backdrop of the above, this study examines the decentralised, ward level planning initiated in Bhuj city in the State of Gujarat by citizens with support from five local civil society organisations (Hunnarshala,<sup>15</sup> Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan,<sup>16</sup> Arid Communities and Technologies,<sup>17</sup> Sahjeevan,<sup>18</sup> and SETU Abhiyan<sup>19</sup>), along with issue-based collectives in the city. The study attempts to understand this process from the framework of Direct Democracy that this study defines as: - *“where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance by delegates that are downwardly accountable to the units of direct democracy; and where decision-making is not simply on a ‘one-person one-vote’ basis but rather consensual, while being respectful and supportive of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised, e.g., some minorities<sup>20</sup>”*. The study also examines, briefly, how the processes of establishing localised decision making are linked with ecology that signifies harmony with nature, equitable means of economic sharing and control over means of production, cultural diversity and with social wellbeing and justice. To do so, the study briefly refers to the Alternative Transformation Format (ATF), mentioned above.

### 3. Objectives, Methodology, and Limitations

#### 3.1 Objectives

1. To understand the decentralisation process emerging in Bhuj in relation to the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment.
2. To bring out the learnings emerging from the grassroots direct democracy process in Bhuj, relevant for urban areas in general.

#### 3.2 Methodology

This case study is part of the project ‘Alternative Practice and Visions in India: Documentation,

Networking and Advocacy’, which is supported by HBF and carried out by Kalpavriksh. As part of this case study, the authors visited Bhuj in July 2019 and conducted semi-structured interviews with all the five local NGOs and, met Ward no. 2 committee members, community-level activists, a few Municipality officers, and a few active citizens (listed in Annexure 1). The work is also built on existing literature documented by the Homes in the City (HIC) programme. The analytical tool that has been used to understand the Bhuj decentralisation process is the Alternatives Transformation Format, explained above. This was used in a limited way, as ATF as a whole requires much more time and intensive engagement.

A draft version of this report was sent back to the respondents, and comments received were considered for the final version. A brief meeting with the CSOs was held by one of the authors, in late December 2019, and additional points from that were also incorporated.

### 3.3 Limitations

The report is based on a five-day visit and limited to interviewing a few key people in civil society organisations and in some of the city’s colonies. No direct observations were made of democracy at work, such as meetings of the Ward and Area committees, Councillor interactions with the public, and so on. We also had limited interaction with government representatives.

### 4. Bhuj, Kachchh, Gujarat

The city of Bhuj is a municipality and district headquarters of Kachchh district in the State of Gujarat bordering the neighbouring country of Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> The Kachchh district, spanning across 45,652 km<sup>2</sup>, is the largest district of Gujarat and the second largest in the country.<sup>22</sup> Kachchh, often surrounded by seawater, was also known as the Kachchhdweep or Kachchhbet, both names bearing resemblance to its present name. Kachchh remained an independent princely state under the British rule in India; however, after Independence in 1947, the area came under the dominion of India.<sup>23</sup> It was initially merged with Bombay state which was later in 1960 divided into the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, and Kachchh became part of Gujarat.<sup>24</sup> Bhuj city is at a height of about 100m and at the centre of Kachchh. It is one of the important cities in Kachchh,

founded by Rao Hamir in 1510,<sup>25</sup> and gets its name from a hill named Bhujiyo Dungar.<sup>26</sup> Bhuj has borderline hot desert climate and witnesses very little rainfall throughout the year.<sup>27</sup>

In 2001, Kachchh witnessed a massive earthquake of 7.7 magnitudes which killed about 12,300 people in Kachchh and around 7000 in the city of Bhuj.<sup>28</sup> A larger number of old structures, new homes and buildings were destroyed. This also led to a massive influx of population in the city from neighbouring villages in search of livelihoods, food and shelter. In 2001, the city's population was around 99,000, and now it is close to 200,000. This population now comes under the Bhuj Area Development Authority (BHADA)<sup>29,30</sup>. Bhuj municipality is divided into 11 Wards and has witnessed massive investments in buildings and constructions post the earthquake.<sup>31</sup> BHADA has prepared a Bhuj Development Plan for 2025<sup>32</sup> after the city came under the formal planning process. The city post the earthquake also witnessed a large number of migrant labourers who came from other States, further adding to the population. This also led to the sprawling of slum settlements in Bhuj. There are around 77 slum settlements covering 31% of the city's population (Virmani et al 2017). A large proportion of slum settlements house Muslims, Dalits and other minorities. Like most cities in India, Bhuj is also facing severe crises of lack of access to basic services, poor housing, waste generation, water scarcity and contamination, and resultant health hazards. The populations at the margins of the city are most vulnerable to these crises. To work towards mitigating these crises, including one of the most fundamental issue i.e. local governance, five civil society organisations came together in 2008 under an umbrella programme called Homes in the City (HIC).

## 5. Homes in the City Programme

The Homes in the City (HIC) programme was initiated after years of working on the issues of governance, women's empowerment, environment, infrastructure and housing by five civil society organisations in villages around Kachchh. The organisations had no past experience on working at the city level governance and planning. However, all the organisations working in their respective areas realised that they need a consolidated effort to ensure decentralised decision making and rightful access of citizens to civic amenities and dignified life in Bhuj city. Kutch Mahila Vikas

Sangathan and SETU Abhiyan focused on the mobilisation of communities; Hunnarshala focused on technical inputs for construction and water; Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT) worked on ensuring water self-reliance among communities; and Sahjeevan focused on the environment and biodiversity related issues. SETU Abhiyan, a civil society organisation in Bhuj that works towards strengthening the local governance processes in rural and urban areas, initiated a pilot process to establish Area Committees in two wards of the Bhuj city (Ward no.2 and Ward no.3) (Mishra, 2018). The organisations in the initial years focussed on understanding the city issues, issues of access to basic services, the issues of rights and entitlements, community dynamics, and other social and political dynamics that significantly influence all these aspects. They conducted a number of democratic dialogues to initiate discussions on the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. They soon realised that for basic issues like sanitation, water supply, and street lights, people don't go to the Municipality and sometimes even if they do corporators don't listen to them. There were serious issues of accessibility and accountability at the local level. Most of the decisions were centralised with no citizens' engagement or city-wide planning. A handful of developers were controlling the prices of land. The elected corporators had limited or no control over the financial allocations as the funds were tied to predetermined activities allocated based on state and national governments' interest. On the other hand, Kachchh, post-earthquake, witnessed the emergence of Kachchh Nav Nirman Abhiyan, a collective of CSOs in Kachchh that worked towards rehabilitation, strengthening peoples' processes, and collaborating on generating, sharing, synthesising knowledge and resources to empower local communities. The communities had already shown the ability of collective work, re-designing their welfare, making arrangements for their basic services by collaboration and seeking accountability from the State. The CSOs focussed on strengthening this discourse by creating space for democratic dialogue, awareness of powers, rights and duties under the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. The HIC programme with the above vision is facilitated by a steering committee constituted of two eminent citizens, two CSO leaders and two members from community-based organisations.

The formal programme laid out three principles central to the process (Virmani et al 2017):

1. “To push for democratic decentralisation to allow citizens to build communities and have better control over their development; and promote engagement with their immediate neighbours to govern their services, assets, facilities and future;
2. To ensure that the interventions are environmentally conducive;
3. To work towards building equity, and therefore prioritise empowering the disadvantaged and marginalised, such as the poor, migrants, women, socially stigmatised and also the animals.”

The programme was initiated in partnership with Misereor, a German organisation that provided financial support for this process, and other funding agencies also joined in later. The programme has five focus points:<sup>34</sup>

- Engaging citizens in active citizenship by creating awareness about their rights and responsibilities;
- Empowering and organizing specific citizen groups (such as Area Committees, slum committees, water and sanitation committees, vendor collectives, migrant collectives, and women’s federations);
- Improving basic services: housing, drinking water, sanitation and solid waste management, and linking the poor with social security schemes;
- Strengthening the livelihoods of marginalized families;
- Supporting owner-driven and dignified housing construction.

The idea of the programme is that the Ward Committees and the five organisations will sign the service contracts for various services and wards can get the support from either the government or from these five organisations to deliver on such services. These organisations have also offered to train the local community members to ensure that in the future there is no such dependence on the NGOs or governments.

## 6. Moving Towards Direct Democracy

Section 243S of the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment provides for setting up Ward Committees to have active citizen participation and form units of ‘self-governance’. HIC’s work began with focusing on formation of such units and then further dividing a ward into smaller units of areas. A ward consists of a population of around 10,000 or more. Each area that

forms the part of Ward Committee forms its own Area Committee first which has 6-7 representatives. The area is chosen on the basis of the proximity of the households and the social cohesiveness of the group so that it is easier for people to gather for meetings. Around 300-450 households close to each other form one Area Committee. One man and one woman from each Area Committee are nominated to represent the area in a Ward Committee which comprises of 10-12 members. The Ward Committee is chaired by the elected Corporator of the respective ward. The Ward Committee members meet once every month to update on issues and their status.

Each civil society organisation under the HIC programme provided fellowships to change-makers who demonstrated the potential and need for decentralised decision making. These fellows or change-makers in the initial phase of the project organised several meetings in each area. It took a few months to develop people’s engagement in the process as people took time to build trust. For this, the volunteers also organised some waste picking drives, solved some local access issues like electricity or water, organised clean-up drives and mending of potholes, and called up Corporators on behalf of people. Such interventions helped the organisations to build people’s trust in them as the decisions around these concerns were taken democratically.

The first Ward Committee was established in 2015-2016 with the help of CSOs. By mid-2019, there were five Ward Committees (2,3,4, 8 and 11) out of eleven wards in Bhuj city. Ward no. 3 with the highest slum population and also home to marginalised communities like Muslims and city-based pastoralists was the first ward selected under the HIC programme. This Ward has 5 Area Committees (the ward consists of 37 areas/clusters). It witnessed active participation of people, particularly, a lot of women participated in the meetings held by the volunteers. This was because the already existing Self-Help Group (SHG)<sup>35</sup> members became the Area Committee members and hence participated in the Ward Committee meetings. Also, because of an already existing process of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (detailed in the next section) of working with women, a lot of women who joined were already empowered to speak and actively participate. Now almost all Ward Committees have 50% women representation. In terms of inclusion of other marginalised sections, Ward Committees have been able to include different caste groups, religious





Muhammad Lakha, Urban SETU, showing how developmental works are made public in each ward

groups and occupational groups.

The Ward Committees are supposed to prepare a Ward Plan which has to go through the Area Committees first. The Area Committees discuss several of their issues and then inform the Ward Committee about the prioritised ones. The organisation volunteers go to each Area Committee meeting, ask for their demands, list them out, and seek their priorities; then collate all of these, speak to the relevant Corporator, then these are discussed at the Ward Committee meeting to see if ward-level priorities can emerge, especially the most serious problems of deprivation. Some ward plans have some indicative budgets, but nothing detailed; many only have a list of what is urgently needed. These are public meetings and anyone can attend them. The Ward Committees have meetings every two months and discussions at the ward offices for planning, citizen's grievance redressal, and information sharing on government schemes.

In 2017, a two-day workshop was organised in Bhuj to work out the overall vision for the city for 2022, emerging from the first set of planning processes. The workshop was attended by citizens, elected representatives, government departments and voluntary organisations.<sup>36</sup> Some of the elements

emerging from the workshop feeding to the vision document were: a slum free city, shelter and other service for migrants, strengthening local water sources for decentralised water supply, a zero-waste city, animal protection and shelter, women's empowerment and safety, formalising vendors, traffic management, revival of lakes, and biodiversity governance, all of these supported through decentralising urban governance.

This process of visioning, planning and listing of issues has also enabled people to collectivise, raise their issues of concerns and seek accountability from the elected representatives. Muhammad Lakha, who is a resident of Ward no.2 and works with Urban SETU narrated one such incident of his ward. In Azad Nagar, a small two-room government school had 240 children studying in it. The Area Committee raised the issue of lack of space and got together to write a letter to the government saying that they won't allow the school to re-open unless the issue was resolved. The next day there was a state wide *Shala Pravesh Utsav* (School Admission Celebration) a scheme by the government promoting school attendance. The local administration was under a lot of pressure as it would have been a major embarrassment for them. Hence, on Sunday morning itself, the government sent a letter to the

head of the school, who called Muhammadbhai, who then coordinated with the Ward Committee and Corporator. They were told that if they promised to reconstruct the building only then the people would take back the protest and open the school. A lot of officials came, gave in writing that within two days they will start the process of constructing a new school and indeed this happened; now it is a 4 room, 2 storey school. Similarly, a water pipeline was not available for many years in Devipujakavas (slum area inhabited by a particular Schedule Caste community), but was installed after the repeated pressure from the Ward Committees. Similar processes have been undertaken in 5 other wards. The problem of not getting access to or response from Corporator was resolved by directly meeting with the concerned people and creating pressure on them to be responsive. It was brought to our notice that Corporators representing the poorer wards usually feel disempowered. The process of Ward Committees has especially helped them; they say that when they take peoples' issues to the Municipality now, they are better heard, as they have the backing of a democratic decision making process. This has also helped the wards where the elected representatives are from the opposition party.

Under the HIC programme with the support of the government, a few ward offices have also been opened to ensure accessibility for people and information sharing. This has further convinced Corporators and they have been responsive to people's urgent needs without elections being around the corner. This has happened because the Corporators have realised that the process of setting up Ward Committees does not only make them accountable but helps them connect, serve and represent their public systematically and more efficiently. According to Aishuben Sama who was elected as the Corporator for Ward no.2, "the benefit of the formation of Ward Committees is that they have helped bring the issues of urgent concerns as the priority. If the Municipality ignores peoples' concern, there is a Ward Committee that can put pressure on them". To enable information and accessibility, all the ward offices now have boards right outside the office stating ongoing projects, expenditure, the contact information of Corporators and officers in the Municipality. A lot of Corporators opposed this especially the display of funds as it would possibly create quarrels in public about why some wards are funded well and some not, but the proposal to keep such information public is still on.

However, the responsiveness of Corporators varies. Since they are elected representatives belonging to local or state or national level political parties, this often has its implications. Muhammad Lakha points out that at least 5-7 Corporators are still not responsive; they don't care about people because either they are not standing again for elections, or are sure of winning due to national level party support which is not incumbent upon the local performance.

Under the HIC programme, Urban SETU has also set up *Mahiti Mitras* (Information and Service centres) to provide information to people about their rights, and to link the legitimate beneficiaries with relevant government schemes and support them in paperwork. The municipality utilised their services and these centres were used by people to access information, process basic identity information, and avail schemes like pension, ration cards, Aadhar cards etc. The *Mahiti Mitras* were funded by Avantha Foundation but they have now withdrawn the funding and these centres are operating in Urban SETU's office and in some wards. A 'City Fellow' has taken up this work.

When the Ward Committee meetings are organised once in 2-3 months (though if required they meet 2-3 times a month and the intention is to hold the meetings on a monthly basis), Municipality decisions are reported on, budget amounts and what has been approved are told. Also, what is not approved, and why not; there could be technical issues, local opposition, and other reasons. There is no process of providing full accounts back to the Ward Committees though. The Municipality gets a lump sum and decides on the allocation. Since the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act doesn't mandate this, it is difficult to seek accountability on this aspect.

Urban SETU has also conducted training programmes for Corporators on urban planning and accountability issues (though apparently, participation is rather limited). Around 35-40 Corporators have undergone these training programmes, and women have actively participated in them. "Yet most Corporators have expressed their inability to take back the learnings from these trainings to the Municipality as they are compelled to follow the agendas set up by their respective political parties," says Aseem Mishra, who coordinates the network of CSOs and CBOs working under HIC. Apart from trainings, there have been programmes organised to create awareness regarding the pressing/



current issues like GST, demonetization, budgets, and economic/fiscal policies. SETU has also prepared guidelines on how wards can be set up, about their committees, offices, annual plans, and how citizens can actively engage in these committees. In conversation, Aseembhai informed us that for 2020, the attempt is to send ward plans to Municipality by March so allocations for them can come into next year's budget. Plans have been made after a consultative process in four Wards namely 2, 3, 8 and 11. Ward no.2 and 3 are mostly inhabited by poor and marginalised, whereas Ward no. 8 and 11 is a more upper/middle class. The Corporator of Ward no.11 has been very responsive to the plan submitted.

An additional context that is relevant here is the continued centralisation of Gujarat state's political power in Gandhinagar. As pointed by Arun Vachharajani, a lawyer by profession and part of HIC programme's steering committee, the elected representatives are still obliged to report and follow the planning mandated by the state or by the elected political party that they belong to instead of what people's need are. The Municipality has very limited powers, and officials appointed to Bhuj from Gandhinagar are in charge of many decisions, often not listening to Corporators. For instance, after the alleged 'success' of the Ahmedabad river front beautification programme, now all areas are supposed to have such programmes, and crores are spent, much of it wasted. The Hamirsar lake (the wetland Bhuj residents are most proud of), for example, has quite a bit of infrastructure built in the name of its conservation, but (in summer of 2019) no water in it; reportedly a lot of bore wells on its periphery including for commercial and hotel use have taken the groundwater level to an abysmal low depth of 300 ft)! The celebrated and controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam that was supposed to provide Narmada's water to dry Kachchh for irrigation and drinking water is apparently hardly able to provide for drinking purposes, and now experts tell Bhuj residents not to depend on it, but rather focus on local harvesting.

## 7. A More Holistic Democracy: Transformation in Other Spheres

Kachchh has an active civil society that often collaborates and exchanges learnings amongst each other. These various collaborations and on ground work have further strengthened the decentralisation process unfolding in Bhuj city.

The Bhuj example brings out that transformative processes at the ground are supported by a multi-dimensional approach. In this, the work of the five CSOs listed earlier, as also others like Sakhi Sangini (a collective of poor women), Shahri Seri Pheriya Sangathan (of street vendors), Bhuj Shahar Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan (of pastoralists), and Jal Strot Sneh Samvardhan Samiti (of water conservation activists) are of crucial significance. The section below describes how these various organisations through their respective focus areas are contributing to the Ward Committee planning process. And importantly, though the struggle has been to establish more localised governance, it has significantly been impacted by and has impacted nearly all other spheres of life, including economic, social, political, and ecological.

### 7.1 Gender

*Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan*<sup>37</sup> commonly known as KMVS was started in the year 1989 to empower rural women by fostering leadership in economic, political, social and cultural spheres in Kachchh. KMVS worked towards collectivising and mobilising women to break the shackles of patriarchy and injustice. Through their 22 years of working with women, KMVS realised that post-earthquake due to rapid urbanisation, new challenges were emerging for women in urban areas. The urban cell of KMVS organised urban poor women under the umbrella of 'Sakhi Sangini' (SS, a female friends' collective) that work towards mobilising women through SHGs. The organising is not just financial but focuses on legal, social and political issues. SS works on providing affordable loans, making safer spaces for women, providing localised livelihoods to women, dealing with caste issues, organising female sex workers and working with adolescent girls, engaging them in decisions making and facilitating women to dream for their futures. There are around 3000 women SS members. These members, through mobilisation, have also become an active part of their respective Ward Committees. Around 50% women members in Wards 1, 2 and 3 are SS members or leaders. Sakeena Juneja of SS told us about the future envisioning process that SS has been initiating with women, primarily on the question of 'what kind of *mohallas* (areas) they would want to live in?' From one of those processes, it came out that women need safer, cleaner and open spaces with more trees and greenery, priority to water, sewage and environment over roads and flyovers. Jigna Sunil Gor who works





*Dignified housing at Ramdevnagar (once a 'slum'), Bhuj*

on land issues and SHGs with SS, pointed out that “the planning process is masculine as it still focuses on infrastructure, roads, and buildings etc. and there is a need of gender sensitivity in the urban planning process which SS will be focusing on in the future”. They are now working towards including safer spaces, health care, water access and environment issues in the ward planning process.

## 7.2 Housing

A group that has been working on housing issues and is further strengthened by SS and KMVS's work is **Hunnarshala Foundation**<sup>38</sup> which was established post-earthquake to enable the reconstruction of community habitats and focussed on traditional techniques of building and earth constructions that are ecologically tuned. Hunnarshala works towards organising traditional artisans and scientifically validating their ecologically sound practices of building with materials like earth, stone, bamboo etc. Post the earthquake; the Bhuj city witnessed massive destruction. Hunnarshala with the Government of Gujarat developed the 'Owner Driven Reconstruction' policy to empower communities to build for themselves, as against contractor driven rehabilitation followed after disasters. The Gujarat Building Bylaws<sup>39</sup> for cities were adopted for the reconstruction that were not conducive for cluster housing yet 450 homes were designed and built for the poor renters of Bhuj, in clusters, interpreting

a clause in the bylaws. People were not happy with these settlements. Making use of one of the progressive schemes by central government launched in 2006, the Rajiv Gandhi Awas Yojna, Hunnarshala Foundation along with KMVS members who were leading the movement of decent housing for slum dwellers, and ACT which was looking at the water and sewage-related technologies, built 314 houses in three slums. Hunnarshala along with other CBOs won the contract to be the project designers and managers for the Municipality. The government's role was to transfer the funds and the NGOs coordinated the ground level work. Each individual family received 65 square metres (sq. mts.) of land to build on; this is amongst the first instances in India of slumdwellers being given rights to land under occupation and the owners receiving the house titles. The houses included many innovative features including segregation of vehicular traffic and services, cluster housing, water management including recharge, sewerage recycling, ATW (Any Time Water) common RO waste-water treatment, use of recycled water for sewage etc. Some of them were built from construction waste. However, in 2014, the central government launched Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna (PMYA<sup>40</sup>) that replaced RAY and introduced private sector developer driven programme which has been a setback (Mishra, 2018). Hunnarshala Foundation along with KMVS and ACT is currently coordinating housing and design under the Housing for All Plan of Action

(HFAPoA) for Bhuj and seven other cities contracted by the Gujarat state government. Hunnarshala with SETU and K-link<sup>41</sup> have also developed slum-free city plans for eight cities. The plan for Bhuj is focusing on providing adequate housing for slum dwellers and Hunnarshala is helping the Municipality submit slum housing plans for 1091 dwelling unities that cover six slums under a vertical of PMAY that will allow owner driven and cluster housing. A Slum Federation for Housing Rights has been formed by KMVS, Hunnarshala Foundation and SETU, to foster the process of dignified housing in the city, and to demand for land for housing as officially provided for in the state of Odisha. Hunnarshala is also working with SETU on vending plans and migrant hostels and animal hostels.

### 7.3 Water

*Arid Communities and Technologies*<sup>42</sup> is an organisation that aims to strengthen livelihoods in arid and semi-arid regions by improving access to technological and institutional solutions to resolve ecological constraints, in collaboration with communities. ACT has been working in Bhuj for a long time to ensure the city is water self-reliant. They get communities to use water related technical information and technologies to find solutions and manage water efficiently. They have formed water committees in six areas of Bhuj - Sanjay Nagari, Dataniawas, Valmikiwas, Shivram Mandap, Koliwas, and Vira Falia. We met Dayaram N. Parmar, Manisha Jadeja and Meghna Jha from ACT, who described to us their work in collaboration with Ward Committees involving the surveying of local water resources in many parts of Bhuj and working towards how they can be sustained and revived. For example, they focused on Koliwas where Municipality pipeline was not reaching inside as it had a very narrow passage. The community had

been collecting water from the railway station at risk of police harassment or even being beaten up sometimes. ACT with the help of Ward Committees introduced ground water access options to them and provided hand pump which is now managed by the community. Similarly, in other areas they focussed on recharging existing sources of groundwater. For example, Sanjay Nagari in Ward no.3 had serious water crises as the pipelines were laid but no water was made available. ACT helped in finding local wetland (*talav*) which was half destroyed by garbage and dump. They advised the colony to constitute a Neer Samiti (Water Committee) and discuss what possible solutions there could be to resolve such a situation. A local leader from the area suggested ways to harvest, manage, and transmit water to residents. ACT believes that people have the ability to find their own solutions and they just need technical support and facilitation from outside. Also, sometimes bureaucratic hurdles can come in the way; the Sanjay Nagari *talav* has only been half-rescued from encroachment, the other half is awaiting action by the Municipality. In Shaikh Faliya, local leader Fatmaben Husain Jat told us they mobilised residents to clear the area's *talav* from encroachments, and planted trees on the banks, but the Municipality is not helping to clean the serious amounts of garbage, or to stop inflow of sewage. Local residents too are not all acting responsibly. On top of all of this, 'nature' can also play truant; very poor rain in the last few years has meant it is nearly empty. Shaikh Faliya also became well-known in Bhuj for leading an agitation against a proposed road, forcing the Municipality to accept that a waterline and drainage were higher priorities (subsequent to which the colony established the Ashadeep Vikas Samiti to take up such issues, and collect funds from the local public when necessary, e.g. to maintain the waterline).



Water taps at Sanjay Nagari, Bhuj



Amongst earliest water connections for a slum (2012), Bhuteshwar Kumbarvas, Bhuj





*Former corporator Fatmaben Jat and Vishrambhai Vaghela of Urban SETU, at Shaikh Faliya, Bhuj*

The membership of the water committees changes every 3 years so that all residents get a chance or a taste of what it means to govern and manage a common resource. Water users have a general meeting, to select the members (not an election). ACT's role is to see if there are enough women representatives and marginalised communities as part of these committees. Some of the water committees (e.g. Sanjay Nagari) have bank accounts and they collect regular water fees; in other areas (e.g. Shaikh Faliya), money is collected only when there is a problem needing expenditure. These water committees have been in consultation with

the respective Ward Committees and in some areas their members are also members of the Ward Committees. When the issue of water comes up in a Ward, Dayarambhai consults with Ward Committees, so that there is knowledge of the work and the water committee members can participate in Ward committee or Area committee meetings to raise issues if any. So far the experience is that Corporator and Ward Committee members have helped, including for work not necessarily in their own ward.

ACT has prepared 'Decentralised Water Management Plans' which would be integrated and incorporated into the Ward Plans of Ward no.2. and 11. They were made in consultation with Ward Committee, and the entire local community in relevant areas. It was presented back to them for comments, and then also with Municipality engineers & Corporators; they were updated recently to go into an integrated plan for each ward that all 5 organisations will collate. Ward no.2 was selected because of the dense population, poor water access especially in slums, presence of all the HIC organisations, good rapport with local Corporator, and presence of active committees. On the other hand, Ward no. 11 was selected because it is a middle class area, which until now the HIC programme had not been able to focus on. ACT undertook work like water source and quality mapping, collating the information on water including groundwater levels, quality and sources from the local people, the potential for



*Wetland at Shaikh Faliya, Bhuj*





*Amnaben Sad, Azad Nagar, Bhuj*

developing water sources to increase supply, existing infrastructure (pumps and pipelines), and demand projections in relation to supply. It conducted surveys based on group meetings, household-level visits, and meetings with women. There is also increased participation of women in these meetings. Earlier they did not speak in front of men, or would not come to meetings (or could not participate, as they had no time with half a day taken up just to collect water, or having to be at home when husbands came home), but now they do speak out and come to meetings.

There are various reasons that have resulted in a transformation of women engagement in these processes. As Manisha Jadeja from ACT observes, water availability at or near homes has increased the amount of time available to women to come for the meetings, but importantly women's engagement with KMVS and SS that initiated the SHG process has especially impacted the women's role in community decision making. Rakhiben and Ashianaben, *adhyaksha* (president) and treasurer respectively of the Neer Samiti (water committee) established in November 2018 in Sanjay Nagari, told us that they hold monthly meetings of members (each of whom pays a monthly fee) to discuss issues, give accounts, and plan new works if necessary. They did not, however, seem to be active in the Ward Committee

or any Area Committee they fall under. In contrast, in Azad Nagar, Amnaben Sad was empowered through the Sakhi Sangini SHG and involvement in SETU, and does use the Area and Ward Committees when issues crop up. She was active when the water crisis loomed in Azad Nagar, mobilising local residents to collect Rs. 2000 each from 23 households, which was given to the Municipality as a collection charge, persuading it to allocate the digging costs for a main waterline to the colony.

## 7.4 Environment

*Sahjeevan*<sup>43</sup> over the last 25 years has been working with local and traditional communities to revive their traditional ecological systems and strengthen livelihoods based on their knowledge and sustainable practices with their ecologies. It has been working on a partnership with local communities on urban issues in Bhuj city as well. Pankaj Joshi, executive director, told us that "Sahjeevan has been mapping areas of biodiversity, wetlands, flora-fauna, including birds in Ward no.2 in Bhuj". They have been conducting meetings with people to begin conversations on how they relate to biodiversity in their city and how people were/are dependent for every day needs on the biodiversity around them. Sahjeevan has conducted a meeting in Ward no. 2 on initiating a plantation drive in the area. The



process involves first the mapping of biodiversity, second is species selection which is usually native varieties unless pressured by the local people to plant exotics, and after that seeds are broadcasted (about 17 kg so far). People help identify potential areas for plantations. For most of the plantations, the responsibility to water and protect the trees lies with the community; however, some of the Sahjeevan volunteers monitor the protection work as well. Sahjeevan has mapped big or old trees and dominant species across Bhuj, and are now engaging with the local citizens to help protect them; it has also collected data on biodiversity (flora and fauna and biodiversity hotspots) across the city and these will be added to ward plans as and when they are prepared. Citizens are also encouraged to not use plastic, and informal forums and training are organised to create awareness on waste segregation, recycling and minimising waste generation. Sahjeevan also recently organised a 'biodiversity awareness programme' for school kids from Ward no. 8, and prepared a Biodiversity Management Plan for this Ward.<sup>44</sup> It is undertaking the same exercise for Ward no. 2 & 11. They are now working towards making Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs)<sup>45</sup> or equivalent institutions at ward level.

## 8. Other Collectives Supporting the Process

Along with the above, the HIC programme has also been focussing on working on the issues of communities who are usually found in the fringes of any planning process, for example the street vendors. An association called the *Shahri Seri Pheriya Sangathan (Street Vendors Association)*

was formed in 2017 to create a forum for discussion on issues that street vendors face, organising them to demand their rights and to create a space for their perspectives in the city planning process to start with. There are around 2000 vendors in Bhuj city of which 30-40% are women. Rajesh Valji Davda, who runs a fast-food cart, told us that "there are around 1500 vendors who are part of the association which has focused on resolving day to day issues and has even taken up some police harassment issues". The association has recently formed an executive committee that would now begin to collaborate with respective Area and Ward Committees. Some enthusiastic local activists, like Dattesh Bhavsha, who we spoke to, told us that they are now working with this association to put pressure on the Municipality to reserve land parcels for vendors and hand over the already reserved plots (3 of them in the city) to them. "We have filed multiple RTIs that have revealed that the Municipality has given away the allotted land to builders, we are now working to reserve this and ensure dignified life to vendors," added Datteshbhai when we asked on how they are pressuring the municipality. They have also filed a case in the High Court to ensure the official Town Vending Committee is activated and vending zones are created as per The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014.<sup>46</sup> With Hunnarshala they have made model vending zones in three locations and are pressurising the Municipality to implement it. The association would like to engage with respective Ward Committees to ensure that the former happens.

Another collective that is formed recently in 2016 is



*Maldhari camp in Ward 2 of Bhuj*





Maldharis at their camp in Ward 2 of Bhuj, with Neetu Khubchandani of KMVS

**Bhuj Shahar Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan (Bhuj based Maldhari pastoralists collective)** that emerged post the discussion on waste management issues. Like in most cities with unplanned urbanisation comes the issue of unregulated waste generation, so it is for Bhuj. Through one of Sahjeevan's programmes, it came to light that 67% of waste generated in the city is wet, much more than the solid waste generated. On the other hand, it was revealed that many cattle-owners collected wet waste from restaurants to feed the cattle. This happened in contrast to the traditional system where people would keep waste outside their homes in kundis, that cows would eat up. Hence, it was proposed to have a systematic collection from kundis that gets delivered to pastoralists. This triggered a full study of city pastoralists and focussed group discussions with them especially on how pastoralism is different in urban areas, their pressing issues and how there is hardly any grazing land available in Bhuj.

Through the discussions Maldharis (the traditional pastoralist community of Kachchh) realised that they need a collective mobilisation and dialogue on their issues. The Sangathan was then formed. The collective has 145 members, both cow and buffalo owners (of total 350-400 livestock-owners, who own about 12000 cows/buffalo, and 4500 goat/sheep), and 10% are women. Some Maldharis have settled

in and around Bhuj for the last 40-50 years and their conventional customs are still strong. According to Neeta Khubchandani, a city fellow of HIC, the two big issues that pastoralists are facing are of encroachment of grazing lands in and around Bhuj, and lack of drinking water for cattle. The Sangathan mapped/measured the lands based on oral records of Maldhari elders. They also worked on creating water trough systems by undertaking Dhunnara Lake (one of important Bhuj city lakes) deepening project. They took up both the issues with Municipality and the Collector for the resolution, but did not get a positive response, perhaps due to vested interests of the land mafia and political leaders, as also lack of support for the Maldharis amongst the ruling party. In spite of the above, according to Sulemann Rahatmulla Sumra, a Maldhari whom we met at his temporary settlement in Ward no.2 "the making of Sangathan has helped a lot in advocacy, in thinking long term, in access to officials, but we still need to push for our needs in Municipality planning and engaging with Ward Committees in future". The sangathan has proposed 11 Locations in the city for setting up official Animal Shelters. They are also preparing to go to court to reinstate the official status of the *gauchar* (pasture land) that existed before the earthquake.

Similarly, a collective of retired people and other volunteers concerned about the lakes in the city



called the *Jalstrot Sneh Samvardhan Samiti (JSSS)* was established in 2006 to revive the important Hamirsar Lake in Bhuj city. JSSS worked on cleaning and desilting the Hamirsar Lake, and on systematic identification of all water bodies and creating a public forum for support to the lake revival process in the city. JSSS members also restricted the municipality from constructing illegal recreational activities around Hamirsar. They advocated for recognising the full extent of lakes (around 42 of them) as in the official records a much smaller extent is mentioned than the actual spread. Through their advocacy they got the full extent inserted in the Development Planning mapping process. However, as pointed out by Kantibhai Harjibhai Patel, a representative of JSSS in conversation with us “though the Ward Committees are including water issues in their planning, the major issue is that they are still focussed on immediate problems but in long-term, they will have to think about regenerating the water sources as well”. There are two reasons for this: one, lack of engagement between JSSS and Ward Committee members, partly because JSSS has avoided being at the forefront of political issues, and secondly, that Ward Committees have still not prioritised water source issues in their planning.

## 9. Analysis: Dimensions of Democracy

The decentralisation process coordinated by the five CSOs along with active citizens in the city is an inspiring example of bottom-up democracy. It

also brings out the role of progressive legislations in enabling such transformations.

For democracy in its full sense of the term to work well, there are at least four crucial features (Kothari, in press):

- Participants in it have the *right to participate* in decision-making in all matters that affect their lives. These are reflected in appropriate powers recognized formally through statutory law and policy, and/or informally through customary law and practices.
- Participants have the *capacity to participate* meaningfully. This includes access to relevant information and knowledge, and the skills needed to be effective in making one's voice heard, use one's powers effectively and responsibly, make others in power accountable, be able to make full use of collective processes, and so on.
- There are *accessible forums* of decision-making. At local levels, these could be gram sabhas and panchayats, urban wards and neighbourhood assemblies, committees and other bodies set up for various functions, and at wider levels, district panchayats and committees, state assemblies and relevant bodies at that level, and national institutions including the parliament. At all these institutions, there could be formal and informal means by which participants are able to equally



Dayaram N. Parmar, ACT, at Sanjay Nagari, Bhuj

access decision-making processes. Outside of the formal decision-making structures, there could be non-party processes that influence formal decisions or participate in them, including civil society organisations, mass movements, etc.

- There is *maturity, or wisdom* in the decision-making, that grounds it in crucial issues of justice, fairness and equity. For instance, the prioritization of meaningful consensus-based processes, or a sense of responsibility amongst the majority towards the minority so that decisions do not get reduced to the politics of majoritarianism, or the ability to rise above party or other narrow considerations to think of the collective good, or the inculcation of an ecological ethic that influences decisions to be environmentally responsible.

The above can exist in various combinations and permutations in any given situation of democracy. They are also evolving processes, taking time especially in conditions where historical factors have weakened capacities, damaged confidence levels, undermined institutional structures that had democratic potential, created conflicts within participants and between humans and the rest of nature, and engendered other such hurdles. In particular the fourth feature, of maturity or wisdom, could take a long time, even generations, if the participants have either not had it prominently in their traditional structures, or enmities within the collective are a hurdle. It is with these nuances in mind that we look at the Bhuj direct democracy process.

*Right to participate:* The Bhuj decentralisation process initiated by the civil society organisations involving citizens centrally has definitely made them aware about the fact that they hold the right to participate and engage in a dialogue about city's planning. The active implementation of the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the formation of Ward Committees and Area Committees, creating forums of discussions and civic engagement, training of Corporators and committee members is reflective of that. Also enabling the pro-active participation of women in these processes is indicative of challenging the traditional discriminatory systems and working towards making the societies more inclusive. However, there is yet a long way to cover to be able to include other marginalised communities like Maldharis, street vendors, Dalits and others more actively in the Ward Committee planning meetings.

*Capacity to participate:* Again, this element of direct democracy can be seen unfolding in Bhuj at initial stages, and not yet to its fullest potential. Through this process, people have not only actively participated in the planning for their area, prioritising their needs, but have also actively protested and agitated in the case of unresponsive administration or what they feel are wrong decisions. They take part in the Ward Committee and Area Committee meetings. The accessibility to the Municipality and the Corporators have also increased considerably as citizens now often directly call up the Municipality in the case of issues needing urgent attention. As Muhammad Lakha told us, now people don't even call the NGO change makers rather straight away call the Municipality and assert for getting things done. However, this is not the case for all the sections of the society, especially the marginalised who don't possess such access to the Municipality or are ignored because they don't count in the respective Corporator's vote bank politics.

*Accessible forums of decision-making:* The Bhuj process is trying to create accessible forums of decision making and further strengthening them. The formation of Ward Committees, Area Committees further strengthened by women Self-Help Groups, Water Committees, and various collectives on other issues is enabling the creation of an environment that keeps the citizens at the core of the planning process. The HIC program has focused on a two-step process: i) to organise interest groups and get them to understand their rights and acquaint them with laws and schemes available to further their cause and ii) develop Ward Plans and link the interest groups work to the ward planning. The opportunity to participate in democratic forums is available through Ward Committees and Sabhas but also available when there is an available scheme for an interest group. The group can engage directly with the concerned department of the administration. The ward process allows for cooperation and validation of an interest group's issue by the larger community of a specific ward. The Bhuj process has a strong element of making the decision making forums equally accessible and informed by the citizens. Though there is still no legal recognition of Ward Committees (and thereby also of Area Committees) by the Municipality, the informal process by the CSOs is enabling forums on the ground to further pressure the Municipality to engage in these forums and be accountable as well. Again, though there has till recently not been adequate pro-active attempt to



make these forums accessible to some marginalised sections like Maldharis and street vendors; this is now under active consideration by the relevant CSOs.

There is *maturity, or wisdom* in the decision-making, that grounds it in crucial issues of justice, fairness and equity. This is definitely reflected in the HIC programme, though there are gaps. From the focus on the ward planning process in poorer wards to working towards inclusion of marginalised sections like women, Dalits, Muslims, street vendors in the process, to including environmental and biological diversity as one of the important elements of the transformative process brings out the maturity and wisdom of the programme. The process also highlights the need for holistic transformations. A move towards democracy would inevitably involve asserting for a society that is inclusive of women, minorities, marginalised communities and environment. The process reflects that for the transformative process at the grassroots there is need to have collective efforts at the ground by citizens and organisations, collectives and activists working on varied issues. However, at the level of Area Committee and Ward Committee planning, there are gaps, such as a predominant focus on infrastructure and not enough on 'soft' issues like women's safety, or on some marginalised communities like Maldharis and street vendors.

## 10. Conclusion: Overcoming Weaknesses in the Future

There are a number of aspects that we think the HIC programme can focus on for the future, to further consolidate the process towards direct, accountable and holistic democracy.

- a. **Greater focus on Area Sabhas or Committees needed:** the Area Sabhas in Bhuj city don't meet regularly in comparison to the Ward Committees which meet at least once in every two month. The Area Sabhas meet only at the time of planning for next year when the volunteers along with Ward Committee members organise meetings in every area to get a list of priorities. Each area contributes by collating the list of all demands that could possibly become part of ward planning. The final ward plan is also discussed with all Area Sabhas. However, there is no mechanism of ensuring that these Area Sabhas meet regularly, monitor the council's

or Ward Committee's performance, seek accountability etc. The Area Sabhas are the most accessible, direct collective decision-making unit of the urban settlement, and it is commendable that the HIC programme has made them visible. But there is a need for much greater focus on strengthening them, holding more frequent meetings, and ensuring their regular participation in city level planning. Along with this, while the interest groups have undergone a lot of training and have had the experience of handling issues, the Ward Committees, especially the new ones, have not gone through perspective training. Their understanding of decentralisation, environment and equity needs strengthening.

- b. **Participatory budgeting could be attempted:** A number of cities in India have experimented with participatory budgeting, with a percentage of the city budget being decided or recommended through ward-level processes of consultation and deliberation. This could be attempted in Bhuj also, for which policy advocacy at the level of the Gujarat government will be needed.
- c. **Overall visioning could help:** the ward level planning did not suggest that there is any overall vision emerging for any of the wards or whether the ward plans are in some way connected to Bhuj Vision Document (mentioned earlier) or feeding into making it better. Questions such as the following appear not to have been asked: what would you like your ward or your area to look like, say 10-20 years from now? Though some bit of this was initiated by KMVS women groups but nothing of that is feeding into the planning process. Also, how would the all-round well-being with all its values (livelihoods, safety, empowerment, environment, basic needs, self-reliance, justice, etc.) be ensured? This of course would also be relevant, in a somewhat different way, in the 'richer' wards. A relevant question here would be: what envisioning can be done for more sustainable living beyond the basic needs? And how would 'better off' areas interact more responsibly with the 'slum' areas?
- d. **Imbalance between focus on infrastructure and 'soft' issues needs to be addressed:** A crucial weakness appears to be that ward planning is mostly focused on infrastructure issues. This is understandable as things like water and sanitation and roads and power are clear and urgent needs. But how do these relate to, or how can the plan process integrate, 'softer' issues like



livelihoods, security/safety, pollution, mobility (other than roads), plastics, etc?

- e. **Greater focus on the most marginalised needed:** During the discussion with KMVS women (mentioned in the section 7.1), an important point made was that the planning process needs to be feminised and there is a need to focus on issues of women, children, elderly and other marginalised sections within marginalised groups. There is internal hierarchy and discrimination within marginalised sections also, such that interventions by CSOs or the government may not reach the most vulnerable or voiceless, unless special attention is paid to them.
- f. **Youth power could be mobilised:** There is no focused process to excite, engage, and mobilise youth to be agents of change. As KMVS and SS have mobilised girls and women, a similar attempt to generate youth leadership on the various issues facing Bhuj, and to take a greater role in governance, could yield positive results.
- g. **Need for better coordination by five CSOs:** The vision of the HIC programme was to create empowered wards who will draw upon the CSOs for expertise. The integration will be done by them at the ward level. However, on the ground it is not clear how much coordination there is between the organisations, especially to see their work in an integrated way with that of others. For instance, there are specific community level institutions set up for sectoral work, like the Maldhari's Association, KMVS established women's groups, or street vendor's association but their links to the governance mechanisms like Ward and Area Committees are as yet tenuous.<sup>47</sup>
- h. **Issues of electoral politics and centralised rule have to be confronted:** The centralisation of political power in Gandhinagar, mentioned above, also affects Bhuj's attempts at decentralised governance. The process of democratic decision making is hardly followed even in the Municipal body; for example the Budget for 2019 was reportedly passed without any debate. Also, Corporators still operate based on 'vote bank politics' which is reflected in ignoring the needs of some sections, e.g. in the current scenario, the Maldharis, who are Muslims and don't count in the BJP's vote bank. As previously mentioned, it is also alleged that some Corporators are unaccountable, as they think they can get elected on the BJP ticket without doing any work (one

assumes that there were similar issues when Congress was in power). This possibly might also build up the frustration among the people as some temporary solutions will provide relief, but if the systemic issues remain unchanged then people would be hesitant to cooperate on local initiatives. These issues have to be taken up through advocacy at various levels of the state, if necessary through civil society collaborations that are Gujarat-wide.

- i. **Dilution of progressive schemes has to be challenged:** Sandeep Virmani pointed out that the grassroots work gets significantly affected due to the dilution of progressive schemes or laws. For example, Rajiv Awas Yojna was very far-sighted in financial devolution and management, could have included exemption of taxes of wards which managed local services like sewerage treatment but then was displaced by PMAY which aims to build homes in collaboration with private developers. Advocacy at the state government level and perhaps with other CSOs is needed to challenge and change this.
- j. **Greater communications outreach could help generate more public engagement:** While there are a number of media and outreach channels that the programme is using (notably the innovative online Bhuj Bole Chhe, [www.bhujbolechhe.org](http://www.bhujbolechhe.org)), much greater outreach could be achieved by a dedicated multi-media communications strategy. This need not wait for major events to take place, but could also be spontaneous and frequent, especially if participants are encouraged to use instant media avenues to tell about their activities, positive results, and so on. Short audio-visual outputs would be particularly useful.

In sum, the HIC programme is extremely innovative, has achieved some impressive results in the direction of urban local governance, and shows much promise for implementing the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment in its full spirit (and beyond its letter). But a number of internal shortcomings and external challenges are stumbling blocks, and will need more cohesive, comprehensive, and determined approaches to overcome. From our interactions with the involved CSOs and several citizens of Bhuj, there seems to be a strong willingness to at least give this a sustained try!

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## Annexure 1: Respondents in the Case Study

(Note: a draft version of the report was sent back to Aseem Mishra as the facilitator of this study, with a request to circulate to respondents. Comments were received back from Aseem, Sandeep Virmani,. Comments were also received at a short meeting organised in Bhuj with the CSOs, on 23 December 2019).

### *Civil society organisations*

HIC programme: Aseem Mishra

Urban SETU: Muhammad Lakha, Vishram Waghela

Hunnarshala: Sandeep Virmani, Dinesh Charan and Karan Thakar

Sahjeevan: Pankaj Joshi, Sandeep Kanojia

Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan: Alka Jani

Sakhi Sangini: Sakeena Juneja, Jigna Sunil Gor, Sabana Pathan, Nanbai Maheshwari, Meenakshi Chouhan, Shantaben Waghela

Arid Communities and Technologies: Dayaram N. Parmar, Manisha Jadeja, Meghna Jha

Shahri Seri Pheriya Sangathan: Rajesh Valji Davda

Bhuj Shahar Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan: Sulemann Rahatmulla Sumra and Neeta Khubchandani  
Ahmad Tubari Sama, Jumma Osman Sama, Osman Haji, Nole Kasim Jakab Suma (and other Maldharis as part of a group discussion)

Jal Strot Sneh Samvardhan Samiti: Kantibhai Harjibhai Patel

### *Corporators (current or former)*

Aishuben Sama, Gandhinagri

Fatmaben Husain Jat, Shaikh Faliya

### *Other citizens*

Arun Vachharajani, advisor to the HIC program

Amnaben Sad, Azad Nagar

Rakhiben and Ashianaben, Sanjay Nagari

*Officials*

Nitin N. Bodat, CO, Bhuj Municipality

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives\\_transformation\\_framework\\_revised\\_20.2.2017.pdf](http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> ([www.acknowledgej.org](http://www.acknowledgej.org))

<sup>5</sup> ACKnowl-EJ is a network of scholars and activists engaged in action and collaborative research that aims to analyse the transformative potential of community responses to extractivism and alternatives born from resistance. The project involved case studies, dialogues, and analysis on transformation towards greater justice, equity, and sustainability in several countries.

<sup>6</sup> The case studies carried out in 2019, of which this is one, include an analysis of decentralised urban governance in Bhuj (Kachchh, Gujarat), and the degree and kind of autonomy and democratic processes in Ladakh (formerly part of Jammu and Kashmir state, now a Union Territory).

<sup>7</sup> [https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/upload\\_document/74amend.pdf](https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/74amend.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/India%20Nagar%20Raj%20Bill\\_2010\\_en\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/India%20Nagar%20Raj%20Bill_2010_en_final_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://ccs.in/sites/default/files/Misc/NagaraRajBILL.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> There appears to be no more recently consolidated information on this.

<sup>11</sup> <http://mohua.gov.in/cms/urban-infrastructure.php>; UN 2014.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/urbanisation/rewind-2018-urbanisation-creates-chaos-in-india-62618>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/businessline-25/maximum-cities-are-being-pushed-to-the-limits/article26105074.ece>

<sup>14</sup> Such models, in which private businesses or institutions and the government are supposed to collaborate on an equal basis, have become quite popular in the liberalization phase of the Indian economy. Usually, 'public' in this usage does not mean local communities or civil society organisations, though the arrangements may involve them in some capacity.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.hunnarshala.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://kmvs.org.in/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://act-india.org/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.sahjeevan.org/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://setuabhiyan.org/> ; <http://bhujbolechhe.org/en/partners/urban-setu-initiative-kutch-nav-nirmav-abhiyan>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives\\_transformation\\_framework\\_revised\\_20.2.2017.pdf](http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kutch\\_district](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kutch_district)

<sup>22</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kutch\\_district](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kutch_district)

<sup>23</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Kutch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Kutch)

<sup>24</sup> <https://kachchh.nic.in/history/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhuj>

<sup>26</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhujia\\_Hill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhujia_Hill)

<sup>27</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhuj>

<sup>28</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001\\_Gujarat\\_earthquake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_Gujarat_earthquake)

<sup>29</sup> <http://bhujada.com/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://indikosh.com/city/533126/bhuj>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.bhujnagarpalika.org/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B99yBKRMpi9zai03WDBTYzhzazg/view>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.hunnarshala.org/kutch-nav-nirman-abhiyan.html>



<sup>34</sup> <https://www.bhujbolechhe.org/en/hic>

<sup>35</sup> These SHGs were set up by Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, explained later in the chapter. SHGs or self help groups are informal associations of people, usually women, aimed at promoting self-reliance. They could be saving groups and/or issue based support groups.

<sup>36</sup> <http://homesinthecity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/english%20city%20calls.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> <https://kmvs.org.in/genesis/>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.hunnarshala.org/>

<sup>39</sup> The Gujarat Building Bylaws were prepared under Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority for Reconstruction & New Construction of Houses in Kachchh Earthquake Affected Areas of Gujarat, <http://gsdma.org/uploads/Assets/iec/earthquakerr06172017024901390.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> <https://pmaymis.gov.in/>

<sup>41</sup> “The technical arm of Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan working to bridge the Digital Divide by mainstreaming ICT into Development sector” (<http://www.klink.co.in>)

<sup>42</sup> <http://act-india.org/>

<sup>43</sup> [https://www.sahjeevan.org/pages/about\\_us.html](https://www.sahjeevan.org/pages/about_us.html)

<sup>44</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zG734K-RTutHXTiwmpLgTIXj2fBF4DXZ/view>

<sup>45</sup> Under the Biodiversity Act, 2002, it is mandated to constitute a Biodiversity Management Committee for the purpose of promoting conservation, sustainable use and documentation of biological diversity including preservation of habitats, conservation of land races, folk varieties and cultivars, domesticated stocks and breeds of animals and microorganisms and chronicling of knowledge relating to biological diversity. For more info: <http://nbaindia.org/uploaded/Biodiversityindia/Legal/31.%20Biological%20Diversity%20%20Act,%202002.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> <http://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A2014-7.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> A brief note midway through this case study process, with observations like this, was provided to the relevant CSOs, and we were told that corrective processes for better coordination and for bringing on board previously neglected or excluded groups had been initiated (Sandeep Virmani, Vishram Waghela and Muhammad Lakha, personal communication, late 2019).