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Towards urban direct democracy in Bhuj, India

The Bhuj Homes in the City process is an inspiring example of bottom-up, socially and ecologically sensitive democracy, focusing on the right to participate and engage in a dialogue.

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In the year 2001, the region of Kachchh witnessed a massive 7.7 magnitude of an earthquake, one of the deadliest in India's history. Already in 1998 it had been shaken by a powerful cyclone. After these twin disasters, the city of Bhuj, one of the important trade centres of the region, witnessed a massive influx of people from nearby villages desperately looking for food, shelter, clothing and livelihoods. The city witnessed a dramatic 100% rise in its population, from 99,000 in 2001 to close to 200,000 in 2019.

This led to the sprawling of slum settlements inhabited by 31% of the city's population, consisting primarily of Muslims, Dalits and other minorities or marginalised communities. However, the increase in the population was not accompanied by a proportional increase in access to basic services. Rather the city was faced with poor housing, excessive un-treated waste generation, water scarcity and contamination, and resultant health hazards among many others. This reflects the reality of most Indian cities, which have exploded exponentially with around 377.16 million living in 7,933 cities as per the 2011 census (according to India Habitat Report, 2016), yet their ability to provide for basic amenities like shelter, food, sewage, and infrastructure is abysmal.

Homes in the City

However, soon after the quake, something started brewing in Bhuj to challenge the general trend of poor urban planning. After some small initiatives here and there, in 2008, several civil society organizations began a systematic process of responding to the crises, by using the progressive provisions of the 74th Constitutional Amendment. The amendment aims to empower urban local bodies (ULBs) to enable them to function as "institutions of self-government"; it mandates the constitution of Ward Committees in cities with a population of over 3 lakhs (300,000), to be involved in planning, financial and administrative functions. Unfortunately these provisions have hardly been implemented in India, so it was significant that in Bhuj a process of decentralising planning and governance was initiated under a program called Homes in the City (HIC).

Towards decentralised governance

The HIC program was an organic outcome of years of work on governance, women's empowerment, environment, infrastructure and housing by civil society organisations (CSOs) that had emerged as a collective under Kachchh Nav Nirman Abhiyan (Building a New Kachchh Campaign) after the devastating cyclone in 1998. These CSOs worked towards relief and rehabilitation in the immediate aftermath of the twin disasters, but with a long-term perspective of strengthening decision-making processes, and collaborating on generating, sharing, synthesising knowledge and resources to empower local communities.

Garnering experiences from this work, five CSOs initiated work towards a common vision of direct democracy and dignified lives for citizens in Bhuj. Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan and SETU Abhiyan focused on the mobilisation and empowerment of communities; Hunnarshala focused on technical inputs for construction of houses, canals and other infrastructure; Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT) worked on ensuring water self-reliance in a highly drought-prone region; and Sahjeevan focused on environment and biodiversity-related issues. The CSOs focused on strengthening forgotten skills of collective work, re-designing welfare, making arrangements for basic services by creating space for democratic dialogue, collaboration, and seeking accountability from the state.

The HIC programme laid stress, from the start, on creating accessible forums of decision making. Over the next few years, they helped initiate Ward and Area Committees, slum committees, water and sanitation committees, vendor collectives, migrant and pastoralist collectives, and women's federations.

How HIC works

The smallest unit of 300-450 households in a colony or a neighbourhood forms an Area Committee (AC), with 6-7 members. Representatives from each AC form the Ward Committee (WC, 10-12 members), which represents a population of 10,000 or more. The WC, chaired by the elected Corporator of the respective ward, meets once a month for updates and planning. To make sure that these committees are inclusive and representative of marginalised sections, they have 50% women representation, and reservation for different caste groups, religious groups and occupational groups.

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“The Ward Committees prepare a ward plan which goes through the Area Committees first, which lists and prioritises their demands based on the area’s needs. The Ward Committee collates all the demands to see if ward-level priorities can emerge, especially regarding the most serious problems of deprivation” says Aseem Mishra, coordinator of the HIC program.

These plans are then sent to the Municipality for consideration in the making of the city level budget. The Municipality has also supported the HIC program by establishing new ward offices, for easier access of residents to WC members. To enable information accessibility, all ward offices have boards making public ongoing projects, expenditure, and contact information for corporators and officers. “The benefit of the formation of Ward Committees is that they have helped bring the issues of urgent concern forward as a priority. If the Municipality ignores peoples’ concerns, there is a Ward Committee that can put pressure on them” says Aishuben Sama, Corporator for Ward no. 2.

Dignified housing

One of the earliest interventions of the HIC programme was related to the designing of dignified housing by Hunnarshala Foundation. The foundation along with KMVS and Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT) is currently coordinating housing and designing under the Housing for All Plan of Action (HFAPoA) for Bhuj and seven other cities, contracted by the Gujarat state government. In addition, a Slum Federation for Housing Rights has been formed by KMVS, Hunnarshala Foundation and Urban SETU, to foster the process of dignified housing in the city, and to demand land for housing (as officially provided for in the state of Odisha). Recognition of such land rights has been achieved in one colony so far.

ACT also helps to resolve water issues, including stable connections, and reviving the city’s many lakes. “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 a local wetland (*talav*) which was half destroyed by garbage. We advised the colony to constitute a Neer Samiti (water committee) and discuss what possible solutions there could be to resolve such a situation” says Dayaram Parmar, an ACT city fellow. Water committees in several localities provide residents with a taste of

what it means to govern and manage common resources. ACT's role is to see if there are enough women representatives and marginalised communities as part of these committees. As part of the effort, Decentralised Water Management Plans have been prepared in consultation with Ward Committees and local residents, for integration into the plans of Ward nos. 2. and 11.

Sahjeevan is helping in mapping areas of biodiversity, wetlands, and flora-fauna. It has mapped big or old trees and common species across Bhuj, and creates awareness amongst local citizens to protect them. It has also collected data on flora and fauna and biodiversity hotspots, to incorporate into ward plans. Sahjeevan also recently organised a 'biodiversity awareness programme' for school kids from Ward no. 8, 2 and 11 and is preparing Biodiversity Management Plans. It is now working towards setting up Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs), mandated under the Biological Diversity Act 2002 for conservation at local levels, or equivalent institutions, at ward level.

Including the marginalised

Due to grassroots mobilisation, Bhuj's politics and management are revolving more around the needs of people, including those who are marginalised. A number of collectives working on specific issues like gender equity, environmental protection, dignified housing, rights of street vendors and pastoralists (who use Bhuj's peripheral areas and sell their milk in the city), are further strengthening the decentralisation process.

The continuous work and learning emerging from these collectives gets fed into decision-making in WCs and ACs. For example, Sakhi Sangini (SS), the urban cell of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, focuses on bringing women's visions of a city and the needs of women in poor communities, into urban planning. "The urban planning process is masculine as it focuses primarily on infrastructure, roads, and buildings." says Jigna Sunil Gor of SS. She adds "we do regular future envisioning exercises with women on the question of 'what kind of *mohallas*' (neighbourhood) they would want to live in?"

From one of these, it came out that women need safer, cleaner and more open, green spaces, and that they demand a higher priority for water, sewage and

environment than roads and flyovers". SS is now working towards including such issues in the ward planning process.

An association called the *Shahri Seri Pheriya Sangathan* (City Street Vendors Association), formed in 2017, enables street vendors to collectively demand their rights and to create a space for their perspectives in city planning. Rajesh Valji Davda, who runs a fast-food cart, told us that "there are around 1500 vendors out of the total of 2000 who are part of the association, focused on resolving day to day issues of access to space, including police harassment issues". So far vendors have not been core parts of WCs and ACs, but the Association is now determined to be active in them..

Another collective formed in 2016, the *Bhuj Shahar Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan* (Bhuj City Pastoralists Organisation), emerged out of the need to voice the issues of city-based Maldharis (the traditional pastoralist community of Kachchh). Some Maldharis have settled in and around Bhuj for the last 40-50 years, and their conventional customs are still strong. According to Sulemann Rahatmulla Sumra, whom we met at his temporary settlement in Ward no.2, "the making of the 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".

Still a distance to go

The Bhuj HIC process is an inspiring example of bottom-up, socially and ecologically sensitive democracy, focusing on the right to participate and engage in a dialogue about the city's planning. Enabling the pro-active participation of women, Dalits, migrants, city pastoralists and other marginalised sections, and recognising their own agency, challenges discrimination in both traditional and modern systems, and works towards making society more inclusive.

Of course, any such process that attempts to transform traditional inequities and also modern 'developmental' paradigms based on the exploitation of both nature and people, cannot succeed overnight. The HIC process has still to evolve a coherent overall vision of all-round wellbeing in which livelihoods, social safety,

empowerment, environment, basic needs, self-reliance, justice, and dignity are ensured.

This kind of envisioning is not yet part of the ward planning process. Moreover, a concerted effort is needed from all the collectives to work together and interweave their efforts for mutual strengthening. Meanwhile, the centralisation of political power in Gandhinagar (the state capital) also affects Bhuj's attempts at decentralised governance, and has to be politically challenged. Lastly, the right-wing politics that undermines progressive legislation, attacks activists, and creates religious and ethnic divisions, is significantly affecting grassroots work. Concerted advocacy at the government level, and solidarity networking with other CSOs, could be crucial to tackling these challenges.

Despite these limitations, the HIC program reflects the transformative potential of a grassroots process, by prioritising people's needs, enabling self-provisioning, and actively holding the urban administration to account. By creating accessible forums of decision making, bringing the experience of democracy into people's everyday life, the Bhuj HIC process points towards the possibilities of a radical ecological democracy.

Importantly, it questions certain fundamentals that mainstream urbanisation is dependent upon. As David Harvey says, "*the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire*".

The Bhuj governance process has actively opened up this horizon.

Shrishtee and Ashish work with Kalpavriksh and Vikalp Sangam.

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