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# Against the odds: Slum rehabilitation in neoliberal Mumbai

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**In urban India, slum policies have become increasingly reliant on the market and on local ‘self-help’ agencies, a trend in step with the neoliberal turn across the developing world. The emphasis on local solutions is particularly interesting because the challenge of urban slums is now widely acknowledged to be one of global proportions. This paper examines the impact of this changing institutional environment on slum rehabilitation efforts in Mumbai. It provides an overview of Mumbai’s slums and slum policies and it presents a case study of a rehabilitation project in Ganesh Nagar D, a small community in the southern part of the city. While the case of Ganesh Nagar D appears a striking success, it is shown that it was only in part based in new policy schemes and that it in fact violated some of the main tenets of neoliberal policies. It is concluded that some new opportunities for rehabilitation strategies have arisen but that the fundamental conditions of neoliberalism in urban India are unlikely to be conducive to large-scale successes.**

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## Introduction

An estimated one billion people worldwide live in urban slums, the majority of them in the less-developed world. In the path-breaking *UN-Habitat Report Challenge of the Slums* (2003), Secretary General of the UN Kofi Annan warned that:

“Without concerted action on the part of municipal authorities, national governments, civil society actors and the international community, the number of slum dwellers is likely to increase in most developing countries. And if no serious action is taken, the number of slum dwellers worldwide is projected to rise over the next 30 years to about 2 billion”.

The UN-Habitat report is one of numerous publications in the past few years that alert us to the gravity of the situation (e.g., Davis, 2006; Neuwirth, 2004). With rapid and continued urbanization in the less-developed world and in the absence of effective policies, precarious living condi-

tions in cities may well become the main challenge to human development in future decades (also see UN-Habitat, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

The growing recognition of the global problems of slums in recent years coincides with neoliberal public policy shifts among national governments, major supranational institutions such as the World Bank, and many smaller non-governmental, private organizations. Development policy agendas (rural or urban) have been reshaped in ways that de-emphasize central state control and that shift responsibilities to local (urban) government, NGOs, and the market. These changes are in part intended to democratize development through the involvement of local agencies and communities. “Empowerment” and “self-help”

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘slum’ is sometimes contested. This article underscores the importance of awareness of the contextual meanings of the term and the ways in which they figure in political debates. It also explicates that there is enormous variety in living conditions in most cities – certainly in Mumbai – and that empirical definition of what is a slum and what is not, is arbitrary and debatable.

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are some of the main concepts that have emerged in this reformed development vocabulary. Thus, while the challenge of the slums has assumed global proportions, the remedies are increasingly sought at the local level.

This article focuses on the implications of a neoliberal environment on urban slum rehabilitation efforts. What new opportunities for rehabilitation are offered under neoliberal conditions? What are the constraints imposed by these conditions? How does neoliberalization affect local agencies, communities, and processes in specific slum rehabilitation projects? What can we say about the odds of success for various projects under conditions of neoliberalization?

The article is inspired by a case study of one particular Mumbai slum, Ganesh Nagar D. Ever since Mumbai (Bombay, prior to its renaming in 1995) became a major city in the second part of the 19th century, it has been beset by shortages and poor quality of the housing stock. Over time, the slum population has grown to exceed 50% of the entire population of (now) well over 12 million. The problem of housing has become ever more pressing and today even many lower-middle income families are condemned to living in slums (Patel, 2005). Ganesh Nagar D, because of its particular nature, provides an intriguing and illuminating case study of rehabilitation in the context of new neoliberal policies. Interestingly, it has been an exceptionally successful project but it appears to have been successful against the odds. Combining this case study with a more general examination of conditions in Mumbai, it is possible to generate some useful insights in the prospects for rehabilitation in Mumbai and urban India at large.

Most of the research for this paper was done from 2005 to 2007. It involved several visits to Ganesh Nagar D and the Mahalaxmi area within which it is located, interviews with local stakeholders, and analysis of pertinent documents. The case-study was combined with a broader literature study of slums and slum policies in Mumbai, Maharashtra, and India. The empirical study was conducted in the context of the theoretical literature on neoliberalism and recent general writings on urban slums.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. It begins with a brief discussion of the current literature on slums and slum rehabilitation and of the more theoretical literature on neoliberalism in terms of its relevance to slums. The subsequent empirical part of the paper starts with an overview of the history and geography of Mumbai's slums and the changing policy environment in the city. Next, the paper provides a detailed account of Ganesh Nagar D and its rehabilitation strategy. The final section contains the main conclusions.

## **Urban slums in global neoliberal context**

There is a considerable literature on slums in cities of the less-developed world but much of it predates recent theoretical debates in the social sciences on neoliberalism (e.g., Abrams, 1964; Clinard, 1966; Juppenlatz, 1970; Turner and Fichter, 1972; Van der Linden, 1987). For the sake of brevity, we will focus our discussion here on

the significance of neoliberalism debates for slum rehabilitation. To be sure, neoliberalism has been a pervasive force in many less-developed countries in recent decades and it has altered development strategies in fundamental ways (for a more general discussion on neoliberalism, see Hall and Biersteker, 2002; Harvey, 2005). The relevance of neoliberalism to slum rehabilitation is threefold: first, the shift from government intervention to reliance on the free market; second, the shift of responsibility from government to civil society; and, third, the rescaling of government from central to local levels.

The first and perhaps most salient characteristic of neoliberalism is a shift of emphasis from state planning to a reliance on market forces. Partly on the basis of the alleged failures of past state-led development strategies, it is argued that the free market is more likely to deliver desired results. The so-called 'micro-credit revolution' of recent years, with the involvement of major banks across the globe, is a common reflection of this transformation. The creation and development of urban land and real estate markets and of private banking all play an important part in present-day slum strategies around the world. Nowadays, slum rehabilitation strategies tend to involve private developers, builders, and financial institutions (Mukhija, 2003).

In India, from the mid-1980s, national economic policies were revised, sometimes gradually, sometimes more radically, to facilitate a shift from a quasi-socialist (or: mixed) and highly regulated economy towards a free-market regime (Grant and Nijman, 2002, 2004). In a country like India, and in a place like Mumbai, it means that if markets did not yet exist, they had to be created. This, often volatile, process of creation has been described in some detail for Mumbai's land and real estate market (Nijman, 2000) – and as we will see this newly formed land market now plays a major role in slum rehabilitation.

The second shift is from government planning to the involvement of non-governmental organizations or, more abstractly, from state to civil society. This shift is based on two premises. First, successful development strategies demand the active participation of local communities and will otherwise fail for lack of local knowledge – a matter of efficiency. In addition, democratic ideals demand empowerment and control of development at the local level and this, in turn, requires a greater role for civil society. A recent *Cities Alliance* report (2003, p. 21) states what by now has become common wisdom: "Slum communities should have decision-making roles because they know their community and issues; have to live with the results; can, want, and have a right to participate...".

The result has been explosive growth of community organizations, neighborhood associations, the so-called 'shadow-state' agencies, and other types of NGOs. While NGOs stepped in a vacuum left by the state and as such contributed to the assertion of civil society, their role in urban governance is not unproblematic. A general critique of NGOs is that by their very presence they hasten the further retreat of the state. In this manner, Wallace (2003) referred to NGOs as the "Trojan horses for global neoliberalism". NGOs lack the comprehensive responsibility of states. Their services are often geographically

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