An Information-Based Model of NGO Mediation for the Empowerment of Slum Dwellers in Bangalore

S. Madon
Information Systems Department, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

S. Sahay
Department of Informatics, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

With the rapid increase in population coupled with the seemingly irreversible flow of people from rural to urban areas, cities in the developing world are acquiring unplanned and uncontrolled squatter settlements at their peripheries. The provision of urban services and infrastructure in these cities is hampered by the failure of formal bureaucratic government institutions to collect appropriate information for planning, especially in areas that fall outside the remit of the formal networks. A growing number of grass-roots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have sought to rectify the situation by acting as intermediaries between urban slum dwellers and the government. In this article, we review the literature on forms of intermediation by NGOs and other organizations working for citizen groups. We then present a case study of Jana Sahayog, an NGO operating in the slums of Bangalore, which employs an information-based model of NGO-mediated intervention. The article describes the various information-based initiatives that Jana Sahayog has undertaken to open up channels of communication between citizens and the government. Jana Sahayog’s experience offers valuable lessons for NGOs operating in other parts of the world.

Keywords Bangalore, NGO mediation, NGOs and information, slum dwellers

The sociopolitical effects of globalization have not been uniform, particularly in cities in the developing world.

Often the same cities that are racing to enhance their competitiveness in the global and national markets are simultaneously faced with the challenge of widespread poverty and deprivation (Potter & Lloyd-Evans, 1998). According to one estimate, between one-fourth and one-third of the urban population of developing countries is poor and their numbers are increasing (National Institute of Urban Affairs [NIUA], 1990).

The inability of governments to cope with the pressures of urbanization has led to the emergence of grass-roots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as alternatives to formal bureaucratic government agencies (Held, 1995; Borja & Castells, 1997). The NGOs are often effective because they operate outside of the framework of the bureaucratic state apparatus and they are not aligned with commercial interests or political parties (Kooiman, 1993; Held, 1995). Typically, they work to strengthen the voice of the disadvantaged in decision making, influencing the media, building public opinion, and lobbying policymakers (Haynes, 1997). Whether opposing environmental degradation or fighting for the rights of slum dwellers, these groups serve as important intermediaries between the citizens and the government.

A newer model of NGO intermediation relies explicitly on information and communication as strategic resources for empowerment of the downtrodden (Grimwood-Jones & Simmons, 1998). This model is based on the belief that in any system of participative democracy the voices of marginalized groups should reach the ears of the policymakers (Brown, 1991; Edwards, 1994; Coston, 1998; Powell, 1999). It therefore seeks to ensure that information about government services and infrastructure, which is needed by the urban poor to become aware of their status and entitlements, is available in a way that can be understood by them.
This article investigates the information-based NGO mediation model employed by an organization called Jana Sahayog (literally translated as “peoples’ cooperation”), which works to uplift slum dwellers in the city of Bangalore in the south Indian state of Karnataka. Poverty, as is characteristic of rapidly urbanizing cities in the developing world, is rampant in Bangalore. At least 27% (i.e., more than one-fourth) of the city’s population falls under the poverty line, defined in 1998 as having an income of Rs.10,000 ($215) or less per annum (Jana Sahayog, 1998). It is projected that the population of the slum dwellers will continue to increase for the foreseeable future (STEM, 1992). Our case study of Jana Sahayog shows how slum dwellers in Bangalore use information to ensure that they understand government legislation and programs and that the government agencies and the general populace hear them.

Since 1998, we have been engaged in a study of information flows related to local governance in Bangalore. We seek to understand how information flows between the providers and consumers of basic services facilitate the development of a network of stakeholders involved in city governance. Our study is being carried out in an action-research mode wherein the objective is not only to describe what is happening, but also to actively participate in suggesting implementation strategies for improved information flows within the local governance network. This approach entails a continuous process of study–analysis–feedback–corrective action and follow-up and necessitates a longitudinal research design of several years in order to explore and influence change. In the process of our field research, we have conducted over 100 interviews over a period of 2 years with various stakeholders. They include Jana Sahayog members, slum dwellers, and officials of a number of government agencies. In addition, we have drawn secondary data from government reports, media briefings, and informal sources such as wall posters and audiotapes.

In the next section, we review recent literature on forms of intermediation by NGOs and other organizations. Thereafter we present our case study of Jana Sahayog. In the final section, we discuss the effectiveness of the Jana Sahayog model in empowering slum dwellers.

MODELS OF NGO MEDIATION

Despite their growing visibility around the world, NGOs’ contribution to development remains limited. While many small-scale successes have been secured, there has been little impact on the systems and structures that determine the distribution of power and resources within and between societies (Edwards & Hulme, 1992). As a result, the impact of NGOs on the lives of poor people remains highly localized and often short-lived. This shortfall is largely the result of the failure of NGOs to make the right linkages between their work at micro level and the wider systems and structures of which they form a part. There are many different ways in which these linkages can be forged. This section describes various models that have been applied and assesses their effectiveness.

Partnership With Government

There is now a growing literature on partnerships between NGOs and the state both in the north and the south (Bebbington & Farrington, 1992; Klinmahorn & Ireland, 1992). Bebbington and Farrington (1992) studied the potential for closer links between NGOs and government agencies for agricultural technology development and management in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. NGOs’ experience in the development and dissemination of agriculture-related technologies and management practices for the rural poor is highly diverse and exhibits both successes and failures. Their actions are limited by the size of their organizations and the unreliability and short-term nature of their funding. NGOs have often been successful because of their locally adapted participatory and empowering approaches. Their successes can have more widespread impact if governments incorporate into their own programs lessons learned from NGO experience. In order to facilitate this process, we need better channels of communication between the NGOs and the government.

Partnership With Commercial Organizations

NGOs have also used partnerships with businesses to create links between governmental institutions and ordinary citizens. Lewis (1998) describes how partnerships have emerged in recent years between commercial organizations and NGOs seeking to promote fair trade. These partnerships seek to open up international markets to cottage industries, explore ways to break existing patterns of resource dependency that make progress in reducing poverty vulnerable to foreign aid, and educate consumers to select products produced and marketed along ethnic lines. Lewis’s case studies on the Body Shop and its NGO partners in Nepal and Bangladesh highlight the need for diversifying the consumer base and developing an understanding of the challenges of organizing at the grass-roots level. Lewis argues that in order to succeed, attempts at fair trade need to be characterized by a high level of formal and informal communication activities, joint problem solving, and frequent crisis management and troubleshooting visits.

Acting as Service Providers

Another way in which NGOs mediate is by becoming service providers themselves. Lewis (1996) explains how increased professionalism, greater formalization of
procedures, and other institutional changes in the public sector have led to the introduction of contracts between NGOs and government where they are regarded as service providers. Her empirical research shows that in some government agencies, voluntary-sector representatives are increasingly playing a part in the production of community care plans, as opposed to just being consulted. In the context of developing countries, the sheer scale of poverty and the size of gaps in access to basic services mean that NGOs continue to play a significant role in service provision and welfare. However, the introduction of contracts has not necessarily led to increased benefits to citizens. Deakin (1996) finds no increase in citizen control or involvement in local governance. For example, health and social services contracts have often been dominated by large providers, and the resulting absence of competition has minimized the benefit to consumers. Hashemi (1995) cites the switch to service delivery by BRAC in Bangladesh as evidence of NGOs’ tendency to avoid confronting structural problems that create poverty and injustice. According to Deakin (1996), in such cases, NGOs fall back on their traditional claims that they embody community-oriented values (trust, collaboration and commitment to common goals, and informal channels of communication) that are not found among their competitors.

Advocacy

There has been an increasing involvement of NGOs in advocacy work. Such strategies range from lobbying key individuals in bilateral and multilateral agencies through staff exchanges and fieldwork, to publications and participation in joint committees (Edwards & Hulme, 1992; Meyer, 1997). There have been numerous examples of success with this approach. The baby milk campaign culminated in an international code of conduct governing the marketing activities of baby milk companies (Clark, 1992). The Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), a consortium of European and Canadian NGOs for long-term development in Africa, has been successfully pushing for local community initiatives (Roche, 1992). In this approach, deliberate networking strategies and information exchange with other NGOs and intended beneficiaries at the grass-roots level are considered crucial (Edwards & Hulme, 1995; Meyer, 1997).

Accountability

The right-to-information movement around the world has sought to check the corrupt and arbitrary exercise of state power (Worrall, 1995; Chand, 1999). In India, although the right to information is implicit in the constitution, the dominant culture of the bureaucracy has been one of secrecy and denial of access to information. One major champion of the right to information has been community-based Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which literally means organization for the empowerment of workers and peasants. MKSS seeks to combat rampant corruption in famine relief works in the state of Rajasthan. The reverberations of this struggle have led to a nationwide demand for a law to guarantee the right to information to every citizen (Mander & Joshi, 1999). The actions of MKSS and the mass media that picked up the story forced changes at the state government level. However, the impact on the entrenched political culture was minimal as there is still little accountability on the part of public servants (Heeks, 1998). The MKSS case shows that in addition to information on government policies, citizens also need knowledge on how to interpret that information to hold public servants accountable.

The NGO mediation models already described capture different aspects of information flows between citizens and government agencies. Efforts have been made to synthesize the different models into an integrated framework for understanding the impact of community-based initiatives in developing countries (Brown, 1991; Powell, 1999). For example, Brown (1991) identifies three indicators of the degree of social development or empowerment of citizen groups. The first indicator focuses on the presence of diverse information sources in a community. Here it is important to note that the focus of many NGOs is moving toward a greater respect for locally generated informal information such as folk media, drama, storytelling, and audiovisual cassettes (Edwards, 1994; Mundy & Compton, 1995). These NGOs are increasingly resorting to informal channels of information exchange to facilitate local interpretation of government policies and motivate local action. The second indicator focuses on the linkages that exist in terms of networking, feedback mechanisms, and channels for information exchange. This networking capability is considered essential for effective debate and discussion to take place. The third indicator focuses on the degree to which greater information availability enables citizens to participate in decision making.

Castells (1997) has argued that networks are powerful tools for transfer of information and knowledge. He presents the case of the Zapatistas movement as an example of how networks can promote debate, discussion, and eventual change (Castells, 1997). The movement started off as a peasant revolt in Mexico’s southern state of Chiapas, a region in which huge cattle ranches and coffee plantations and small peasant farmers coexist. On New Year’s Day 1994, hundreds of impoverished peasants rose up against what they perceived to be the Mexican state’s continued violation of indigenous rights. The government responded to the rebellion by promising more monies by way of government schemes. But the Zapatistas rejected
this offer and outlined an integrated plan for land restoration, abolition of peasant debts, and reparations to be paid to the peasants by those who have exploited their human and natural resources. Extensive use of the Internet allowed the Zapatistas to create a network of support groups across the world, making it almost impossible for the Mexican government to use large-scale repression (Castells, 1997). The Zapatistas case shows how a grass-roots movement can engage in a prolonged debate and eventually effectuate social change.

In the next section, we present a case study of Jana Sahayog, an NGO that has employed an information-based mediation model in Bangalore. The Jana Sahayog model incorporates many aspects of the mediation models reviewed in this section.

CASE STUDY OF JANA SAHAYOG

Jana Sahayog is an urban resource center of Samuha, a development agency based in Karnataka. It works in 20 slums of Bangalore and in 7 other cities within the state. Jana Sahayog organizes slum dwellers around issues that affect them—land titles, basic amenities, and other community issues. In terms of access to government information and services, several studies have indicated that Bangalore’s slum poor remain ignorant of or uninformed about the poverty alleviation programs of the government (Paul, 1995; Sekhar, 1999). The average literacy rate in Bangalore’s slums was estimated to be 72.4% for males and 57% for females (Jana Sahayog, 1998).

The Bangalore center of Jana Sahayog consists of just two members who facilitate all the information-based initiatives described in this section. Many of those working on Jana Sahayog initiatives are from the slum community itself. The director of the NGO had previously worked on social welfare projects for the government and had become skeptical about their effectiveness.

Jana Sahayog has a strong focus on information provision. The NGO aims to stimulate information gathering and circulation by and for slum dwellers with the goal of building up their capacity to bring about change for themselves through informed self-help groups. In keeping with this objective, Jana Sahayog essentially acts as an information link between the slum dwellers and the government agencies and facilitates purposeful negotiation between the two. It achieves this through many different channels, as described next.

The Slum Dani (Voice from the Slum)

This project uses audiotapes to present the world of slum dwellers as seen by them. In these audiotapes, the slum dwellers narrate in their colloquial language stories of corruption in folk songs, musical dramas, and narratives. The heart-touching musical dramas bring out the deepest emotions and frustrations of the slum dwellers, as illustrated in the following two verses:

Why should we live like dogs and pigs, in this garbage bin? Why should we live near gutters and cemeteries? Below high tension current, why should we stay? In cement pipes why should we live? To earn a livelihood we migrate to cities from different villages, we stay on outskirts and sweep streets, clean gutters, erect fences, build walls, wash clothes, wash utensils, pick rags, clean the dirt. You call us dirty people and keep us away. Why should we ever live like dogs and pigs?

Education, wind, shelter, light—these are basic rights. Every individual living in this country should get. We are also children of this mother earth like you. We also have a right over the natural heritage. We are hard workers living in slums and we will come forward to snatch our rights—we will come forward. (Tape recorded in 1998 at Madhu Studio, Bangalore; produced by Jana Sahayog)

Chunavane Banthu Chunavane (meaning election is approaching campaign) uses audiotapes to increase awareness among slum dwellers about the value of their votes and the importance of casting them. These tapes combine humor, song, drama, and commentary to educate slum dwellers. One of the tapes provides a folklore-based narration, vocalized by slum dwellers themselves, of the provisions of the People’s Representation Act. The Election Commission of India has adopted this audiotape for use in voter education programs.

Informal means of enhancing voter awareness such as Slum Dani and Chunavane Banthu Chunavane have encouraged slum dwellers to voice their demands and exercise pressure on concerned authorities. Sensitized and inspired by such voter awareness campaigns during 1999 state elections, slum dwellers recognized the value of their much-sought-after votes and put forward their own manifestoes demanding written assurances from potential candidates who came to seek their support. They used slogans such as:

“Before giving you vote, I am your brother, after giving you vote, I am garbage.”

“Listen to us before asking for our vote. What have you done for us when you won the last time? You promised us heaven and gave us mud!”

“Before winning the elections, you said you would be with us. After winning, you left us and with a bulldozer you crushed our huts.”

“Listen to us. The car given by the contractor is your share. The site given by the engineer is your percentage. The building given by the builder is the dust of our broken homes. The gold in your home is the food of corrupt people. This is politics.”
“Give us written assurances or you won’t get our votes!”
“Want our votes? Get lost!” (Tape recorded in 1998 at Madhu Studio, Bangalore; produced by Jana Sahayog)

Slogans such as these have instigated slum dwellers to use their votes as weapons against corrupt, indifferent politicians.

**Slum Suddi (Slum Information)**

This vernacular monthly newspaper covers issues of concern to slum dwellers. It is written, edited, and published by the slum dwellers themselves, with Jana Sahayog merely playing a facilitator’s role. Coverage of slum-related issues in prominent dailies is included in Slum Suddi, enabling slum dwellers to not only keep abreast with them but also to react to them through informed public debate and follow-up action. Guided by the philosophy that if the poor work as a group, they can cope by themselves, Jana Sahayog aims to build and strengthen slum sanghas (unions). Although not many of the slums in the city have these sanghas at present, the impact of such debate gets carried over to all squatter settlements, fostering a sense of identity. Slum Suddi provides information about government schemes and civic services, sometimes obtaining official information through informal means. It also alerts slum dwellers to human rights violations, police atrocities, corruption of middlemen, and other common forms of exploitation.

In addition to the monthly, wall newspapers are used to pictorially convey news to the large number of illiterates living in the squatter areas. For example, Votina Kathe (the story of voting) describes the experience of slum dwellers vis-à-vis the election, and Yarige Banthu Adhikara analyzes the potential impact of the government’s recent decentralization efforts on slum dwellers.

The nine members of the Slum Suddi editorial board, eight of whom are slum dwellers, meet every month to conduct a post mortem of the previous issue and discuss the next edition in terms of topics to be covered, budget, and follow-up campaigns. At present, there is talk of making Slum Suddi a weekly and perhaps bringing out another language edition. Slum Suddi currently maintains itself on donations and subscriptions from individuals including some slum dwellers, public agencies, and other institutions. It distributes 1500 complementary copies among local government officials to promote the flow of information from slum dwellers to the authorities.

The impact of Slum Suddi can be gauged from the fear the newspaper evokes among government officials. It has also instilled fear in the city police department after a case of harassment was published against police personnel, thereby mobilizing slum youth to file a case against a subinspector in his own police station. Another technique used by Jana Sahayog to pressure government to take action is to publicize factual information on the monies spent by different agencies and their performance in terms of actual provision of services. This information is used to nudge government agencies toward corrective action, and if this approach does not work they are coerced into action via public-interest litigation. For example, funds earmarked for improvements in a particular slum category were diverted to others. Slum activists brought this to the attention of people through Slum Suddi and asked the authorities for an explanation. As a result, ongoing works were stopped and the allocated funds were redirected to the appropriate slum.

**The Slum Profile**

Jana Sahayog argues that the Comprehensive Development Plan of the state government does not recognize the extent of slum proliferation in the city and issues of concern to slum dwellers. According to one of the Jana Sahayog members, “the Plan is all bogus—no information is given on slums. This type of planning is capitalist planning which is biased against the poor.”

As a counter-strategy, in 1999 Jana Sahayog facilitated the preparation of a slum profile document covering around 20 slums in Bangalore. Each profile details basic information on the slum, including its name, contact persons, the electoral constituency, the representative in the legislative assembly, councilor, and NGOs working in the slum. It records information on the demographic characteristics of slum dwellers, including their income, number of family members, type of house, and access to basic amenities. The profile then compares existing basic amenities in the slum with the required government norms in terms of drinking water, drainage, community latrines, and other essential services. This information acts as a resource for slum dwellers to fight for their dues and rights. It is envisaged that the profile document will shortly be brought out in the form of a resource booklet, which can be easily used by slum dwellers.

**Web Site**

At the global level, Jana Sahayog (through Samuha) maintains a web site in order to enlist the interest and support of the international community of activists, researchers, and other groups. This web site has triggered the formation of a substantial network of researchers interested in the issue of urban governance and poverty in Bangalore.

The initiatives just described illustrate how Jana Sahayog serves as a “missing link” between the state government and slum dwellers. Its collection and dissemination of formal and informal information and accompanying intervention strategies have forced the pace of reform. As one Jana Sahayog member reported, “At Jana Sahayog, we feel that mere dissemination of information is not
CONCLUSION

The case study of Jana Sahayog presents a particular model of NGO mediation that is heavily reliant on networking and information exchange. There are many elements of the model that beg closer attention. For example, Jana Sahayog acts as a hub for information flows between slum dwellers and the government. This hub metaphor corresponds to Castells’s network metaphor and linkage indicators in Brown’s (1991) framework. In addition to forging links with government agencies, Jana Sahayog also networks with other NGOs and the media and facilitates lateral transfer of information among groups who can form broader coalitions.

Jana Sahayog uses a variety of formal and informal sources to generate discussions among slum dwellers. It uses formal sources of information such as official documents and legal tracts to identify the rights of marginalized sections of the population. It utilizes informal channels such as wall newspapers and audio tapes to generate awareness among slum dwellers about their rights. This combination of formal and informal information ensures greater inclusion and participation of slum dwellers in negotiations with government agencies. Jana Sahayog’s use of diverse information sources to build awareness and generate debate corresponds with Brown’s first indicator of social development.

Another type of mediating role undertaken by Jana Sahayog is to form partnerships with government agencies. The relationship between Jana Sahayog and the government is of course very delicate. Jana Sahayog perceives government as an adversary representing the capitalist interests. It sees the government officials as having vested interests in exploiting, marginalizing, and harassing the poor slum dwellers. However, it does not seek to make personal attacks on government officials, many of whom acknowledge and accept the work and contribution of Jana Sahayog. According to one official, this demonstrates “a capacity to deliver and extract beautiful work from state agencies, where state delivery mechanisms fail to do so.”

Jana Sahayog has been equally instrumental in forming partnerships with slum dwellers, creating an environment for debate among slum dwellers themselves. Jana Sahayog’s initiatives to form partnerships with the government and with slum dwellers are based on the recognition that political processes need long periods of deliberation, both between NGOs and the government and within the slum community itself. This approach corresponds to Brown’s second indicator, which focuses on the opportunity for prolonged debate and deliberation between key stakeholders involved in governance.

A third type of mediating role undertaken by Jana Sahayog is to act as the advocate or defender of the slum community. The NGO makes political statements on behalf of local communities in order to pressurize the government to take action. This strategy is in keeping with Brown’s third observation, that prolonged debate and deliberation will result in action to the benefit of citizens. Jana Sahayog fervently believes that the dissemination of information has value only when it generates debates that pressure government to take stock of the situation and to carry out requisite action. Its strategy ranges from direct lobbying of key individuals within government agencies, to publications, conferences, and participation in joint committees.

We can relate the Jana Sahayog model of intermediation to our earlier theoretical discussions on networking and information flows. Castells (1997) uses the network metaphor to describe dominant forms of social structure in contemporary society. He argues that the guiding principle for the restructuring of social processes is the network logic. This networking logic substantially alters existing processes of production, experience, power, and culture. Prior to the establishment of Jana Sahayog, basic information about slums was produced by the government and was neither shared with other organizations nor made available to slum dwellers in a way that they could understand or respond to. In this way, power rested with the authorities and the slum dwellers had no say in formulation of policies and programs that impacted them. Since Jana Sahayog came into existence, information flow has gradually increased in the direction of slum dwellers, and vice versa, from slum dwellers to government agencies. This two-way information flow has altered the power equation in favor of the slum dwellers.

According to Castells, the ability of the network to transfer information and knowledge to its nodes has shifted power away from the center to the periphery. In this way, the networking logic induces structural change that transcends the agendas of specific interest groups. This concept of a higher order logic is encapsulated in Castells’s idea that “the power of flows” inherent in the network takes precedence over “the flow of powers.”

To conclude, the Jana Sahayog initiatives we have described are still in an early stage, and we will continue to monitor how they develop in our ongoing research on urban governance in Bangalore. As a group of researchers engaged in frequent dialogue with public authorities, NGOs, and citizen groups, we ourselves are beginning to find a place in the network of interactions that are taking place. Throughout our research, we continue to regard the mapping of information flows to be a crucial exercise in understanding issues related to equity and participation in local governance. At the same time, we acknowledge that our understanding of how such
an information-based model can empower slum dwellers needs to be built on further empirical work grounded in the reality of the urban poor and their struggle for social change.

NOTES

1. Interview conducted with a Jana Sahayog member in January 2000.
2. Interview conducted with a Jana Sahayog member in January 2000.
3. Interview conducted with a Bangalore City Corporation official in January 2000.

REFERENCES


