

The Power of Citizen Participation

Sim, Jina

Masters in Development Practice, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, simj@tcd.ie

What struck me most powerfully on my arrival to India in April 2017 was the constant noise. As I gazed at the bustling crowds in the busy streets, I was overwhelmed by many questions. The question that stuck at the forefront of my mind was: 'How is it possible to hear the voice of a marginalised person in the midst of so much noise?' The answer, I learned, is both complicated...and surprisingly simple.

For those smaller voices, organisations like PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia) serve as a microphone, providing education and training opportunities, helping to build the capacities of citizens, communities and institutions, and enabling the establishment of vibrant, gender-equal societies.

One of their main missions is in building the capacities of communities through the establishment of SIC networks. So, what is an SIC? In a nutshell, an SIC (Settlement/Slum Improvement Committee) is a collective group for improving basic services in informal settlements by helping to strengthen civil society voices. Through meetings and community participation, slum dwellers have been organized into SICs. The capacities of SICs have been built through training and orientation about different central as well as state government schemes available for the urban poor.

SIC members have been encouraged to develop a rapport and good relations with each other to enable them to share their knowledge and find solutions to their problems together. Joint meetings are held for this purpose. Through sustained discussions, members of the SICs can identify and articulate their demands and share them with other stakeholders in the city planning process. The idea is simple. Empowered citizens are those who are aware of their rights, responsibilities and the services and public resources they have access to, and are committed to taking action when these are withheld from them.

Meeting people in various informal settlements, I realised that this initiative, titled 'Engaged Citizens, Responsive City', has contributed to building healthy and conscious communities by encouraging self-esteem and solidarity and promoting the value of local identity. Programmes for capacity building have created conditions for citizens to participate voluntarily and to develop the ability to solve community problems together. I found the SICs to be good examples of how mature civic awareness can be promoted and embraced. The SIC members were shifting from listening to the information provided by organisations like PRIA to productive meetings that required no external facilitators, premised on the belief that while a lay individual may have less knowledge than experts, when citizens gather to think about what they need for the community they live in, they can pour out brilliant ideas that no expert has ever thought of.

This research was conducted with the support of PRIA in the framework of their ECRC project (Engaged Citizens - Responsive City) which is an initiative of PRIA, currently supported by the

European Union. It aims to develop capacities of the urban poor to participate in planning, implementation and monitoring of sanitation services. In this paper, we will see the people living in informal settlements develop a strong thirst for knowledge as they are encouraged to seek out opportunities to make positive changes and improvements to their quality of life. Through this study, I hope that the SICs, which have been 'educated' (through trainings and discussions), will continue to contribute to the betterment of their settlements and the on-going renewal of hope.