Community-based Organizations (CBOs) are emerging as key players in urban policy. The Approach Paper to the 9th Five Year Plan of the Government of India envisages involvement of CBOs in most urban programs. The Country’s Economic Memorandum of the World Bank mentions a renewed role for CBOs in urban poverty removal. The Government of Gujarat is seeking to develop an active role for CBOs in urban management, while the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) plans to build partnerships with Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and CBOs in a range of projects including Parivartan.

However, there is little or no consolidation of experiences working with CBOs in urban sector projects. Parivartan provided an opportunity for NGOs to review their own work with CBOs in Ahmedabad. The Foundation for Public Interest (a locally-based NGO) took the initiative to conduct a workshop on ‘Working with Urban CBOs: Ahmedabad Experience’ in an attempt to capture this unique and
valuable experience. The workshop brought together the Government of Gujarat, the AMC, and six Non-governmental Organizations.

**Working With Community Groups**

Some of the following organizations are working directly with CBOs, while some are working through other NGOs to support CBOs:

**Self Employed Women’s Association** is a membership-based community organization which has been working for the economic development of poor women over the last 25 years. Work is focused on local income and employment generation needs. SEWA identifies local women leaders and links up poor women by promoting people’s organizations. This enhances the access of poor women to urban resources, policies and programs. SEWA also builds capacity of CBOs through training, organizing support services, savings, credit, and policy development.

**Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT)** evolved as a subsidiary organization of SEWA in order to build further capacity to meet the increasing need for housing-related services. The main objectives of MHT are to improve the housing and infrastructure conditions of SEWA members, create improved access to housing finance, legal and technical assistance and to influence housing policies so that they may be more effective in reaching the poor, informal sector community. MHT has developed a special tool called ‘Housing Clinics’, held for the community, which facilitate easier access to housing finance and social security schemes, raise awareness about housing-related schemes and initiate participatory capacity-building within the community.

MHT is currently working in 12 of the 18 slums currently being upgraded within the Parivartan program. Besides motivating the members of each slum community to participate in the program through their one-third cash contribution, MHT also facilitates linkages between all the partners and coordinates the overall upgradation process. It also helps form Community Associations within each slum and helps the community to organize the
Associations into electing a Working Committee, which carries out day-to-day functions, including the operation and maintenance of the services being upgraded by the Parivartan program.

**VIKAS** has 20 years of experience working with CBOs in Ahmedabad. VIKAS responds to the CBOs’ own expressed needs and promotes decision-making through democratic structures. VIKAS motivates CBOs to work for basic urban needs through the LINK project. It has a directory of 304 CBOs in Ahmedabad slums and is also involved in establishing the Urban Resource Center for CBOs.

**Foundation for Public Interest** (FPI) has dual experience in small towns such as Idar and large cities such as Ahmedabad. Linking up of CBOs with the state and city governments is FPI’s main focus along with the joint CBO-NGO-government policy formulation.

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**UNDERSTANDING CBOs**

Working with CBOs can be complex and requires a high degree of flexibility on the part of the partner involved. Based on their practical experiences, the partners felt that a successful CBO partnership can only be built in Ahmedabad when the following issues are understood:

**CBOs**
- CBOs focus on very local settlement needs, and urban sector work should reflect this.
- It is difficult to link CBOs with other CBOs; at local level, there is rarely internal coordination between CBOs working in the same locality. Conflicts are rarely acknowledged by the CBOs themselves.
- Rural and urban CBOs are very different and cannot be treated similarly; CBO formation due to caste, religion or occupation is more common in rural areas, while in urban areas CBOs are more often formed on the basis of minority, ethnicity and locality of migrants.
- Many seemingly defunct CBOs revive themselves at times of crisis (riots, floods, etc).

**Leadership and Capacity Building**
- There is a clear need for capacity building of the CBO leadership and among members.
- It is difficult to organize women as active members of CBOs.
- Male leadership is common in CBOs while women make most of the operational decisions.

**Economics and Money**
- Mismanagement of funds is common when amounts handled become larger (the exception is savings and credit groups); conflicts may arise when CBO funds go beyond an immediate event.
- CBOs are good at marketing and building marketing links for income-generating activities.
- Partners must invest time to gain the trust of the CBO members, especially when dealing with savings, credit, finance, etc.
- Partners must accept ‘seasonality’ of flow of finance at the community level.

**Politics and Policies**
- Complicated city government policies hamper CBOs; government rules and regulations should be simplified and made accessible to urban CBOs.
- Feedback from the community-level to city government policies is very limited and similarly, there is lack of information about government’s plans and policies and the availability of basic services among CBOs.
- Political events like elections cause ‘seasonal orientation changes’.
- There is a mismatch of CBO, NGO and government activities in most urban projects.

**Information**
- There is lack of coherence in policies, programs and resources at state and city levels.
- The city lacks mechanisms for dissemination of information at the grassroot level.
- Even within city governments, there is no ‘coordinated information’.
FPI also trains CBOs and develops planning and monitoring tools.

**CHETNA** imparts training and develops training materials for CBOs for health and education activities. It focuses on coordination between CBOs and the government and sensitizes CBOs to local urban issues, particularly health, education and women. CHETNA also advocates simplification of policies which affect women and their economic status.

**Sanchetana** promotes local groups and CBOs of women and minorities. It imparts training to CBOs on health, savings and credit and aims to create awareness amongst CBOs of social issues such as alcoholism, corruption and social injustice. Dissemination of official information to local CBOs is an expanding activity.

**SAATH** has formed CBOs in several Ahmedabad slums. It concentrates on youth development and focuses on the creation of social awareness. SAATH supports activities for savings and credit, and disseminates information to communities.

Despite the above, the AMC has been successfully working with the CBOs involved in Parivartan and is planning to involve more CBOs in future urban management programs.

**Where Now?**

It is becoming clear that both NGOs and the government have to focus more on community-based groups for urban development projects. Considering the situation in Ahmedabad, NGOs should motivate the AMC and the state government to provide basic capacity-building to CBOs. The lack of coordinated information and sharing of experience appears to be a major constraint to CBO effectiveness. Efforts should be made to disseminate information on government policies to the communities. Ahmedabad has a rich resource in terms of manpower, skills and resources amongst its CBOs. With a small effort to improve information flow and coordination, and provided the more formal organizations can be sufficiently flexible, the effectiveness of urban development efforts could be increased through partnership with community-based groups.

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