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A bridge not too far

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Grassroots activism.

Special Arrangement

In remote Kutch, social workers and activists are working hard to make government schemes accessible to the poor.

Do we ever pause to think how a city really works? How easy or difficult is it to understand and access government schemes, especially for the poor? How can spaces be created for dialogue between the government and marginalised sections of urban society, such as slum dwellers?

A team of social workers and activists in a usually forgotten part of India, Kutch, is showing how the chasm between the “governed” and the “governors” can be filled. Urban Setu, a civil society initiative in Bhuj town, has attempted a simple yet bold answer.

Setu translates to “bridge”. And that is exactly what the initiative does: bridge the gaps of communication and coordination among communities, government and NGOs. The ultimate objective is to institutionalise grassroots urban governance and planning. Urban Setu, initiated three years back, has prepared an information booklet on major government schemes applicable to Bhuj, and created a computerised database covering the slums of 14 wards (over 11,000 households with 46,000 persons).

There is an information resource centre (called Mahiti Mitra) where people’s requests for information, or for assistance related to procedures for availing government schemes, are dealt with by full-time resource persons.

Setu’s work has also created visibility for the poor by filling information gaps in Government offices. Based on its own surveys, Setu provided the Collector with a list of people without electoral cards, which helped add these people on the electoral rolls. It has also done a detailed mapping of slum areas, upping the number of slums to 74 from the official figure of 42. It highlighted the fact that more than a third of Bhuj lives in slums, and suffer from an absence of basic services and facilities. It has also organised meetings of communities with the municipality, helped set up 18 slum committees and six area committees, and facilitated the coordination of existing self-help groups, *pani samitis* (water committees), and *sakhi sanginis* (women’s committees). These committees are put in touch with lawyers, GIS professionals, and governance experts. Health and education camps are also organised to link residents with relevant authorities; this has especially helped in persuading reluctant parents to send their children to school. Training is also given in using the Right to Information and Right to Education laws. Municipal councillors are regularly approached for involvement, and sessions are organised to orient them regarding their own powers.

Recently, an online platform called Bhuj Bole Chhe (“Bhuj speaks”, <http://bhujbolechhe.org/>) was created by Setu and four other organisations under the umbrella programme of “Homes in the City”.

Through Setu, as of early 2013, about 3,500 individuals have been able to avail of government schemes, 900 individuals have benefited through health check-ups and referrals for chronic diseases, 107 have gained awareness regarding disability schemes, 1,300 have made ration card applications, 500 electoral card applications, and 1,100 Aadhaar card applications. Meenaben Marwadi, a widow with four children, has been able to avail of the widow's pension and also monetary and other support for building her house through the Mahiti Mitra centre.

While Urban Setu is the first attempt at urban level, its rural counterparts are well established. The 11 rural Setus currently functional have enabled gram panchayats to formulate village-level budgets and persuade the district administration to spend accordingly. Urban Setu is also trying to work towards a decentralised budgeting process, through creation and empowerment of area *sabhas*. It is advocating municipal recognition of area *sabhas* in some slums.

One major challenge is that the Bhuj municipality does not recognise slums, all of which are “encroaching” on government land. Bhavesh Bhatt of Urban Setu points out: “According to the TDP, 10 per cent of government land is supposed to be set aside for the economically weaker sections of the community. If these are followed, and a more organised infrastructure is developed, then all the slum areas could be accommodated within this 10 per cent.”

One of the founders of Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan, Sandeep Virmani, explains the importance of Urban Setu: “What you can or cannot do in a city is known by very few people. It is important for city dwellers to understand how the city works. There is enthusiasm for participation, but not that much of information. Setu is an attempt to empower people through information dissemination.”

There is, however, still a long path to traverse in achieving the ultimate objective of decentralised urban governance and planning. Empowering with information is a crucial first step, but turning the conceptual strength of area *sabhas* into an on-ground reality will be a legal, institutional, and attitudinal challenge.

There will also be hurdles when decentralised decision-making begins to threaten the dominant paradigm of ecologically unsustainable growth and existing power structures. Urban Setu is paving way for a society where residents, especially the poor, do not continue to remain invisible and unheard parts of an Indian city.

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