Strengthening the Knowledge and Information Systems of the Urban Poor

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In making the most effective use of limited assets, access to knowledge and information by the poor can be crucial. There has been growing concern that urban research and development efforts have failed to achieve their full potential because they have overlooked the need to work with and strengthen the knowledge and information systems (KIS) of the urban poor. As a result, the experience developed has often not been widely disseminated and taken up by the poor.

Most studies have considered this issue from the supply side, focusing on the dissemination of information. This research project instead considered primarily the demand side, focusing on the information needs of the urban poor, and the sources they use in accessing that information. Fieldwork was carried out in low-income settlements in the capital city and at least one secondary town in three countries in the developing world: Peru, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe; this was complemented by case studies elsewhere, a review of the literature and an electronic conference. This paper summarises the findings of that research, and suggests six ways in which development agencies could improve the methods they use to share their knowledge and information with the urban poor.

Rationale

Knowledge is critical for development (World Bank, 1998). In the current thinking on sustainable urban livelihoods, the importance of knowledge and information as a livelihood asset is perhaps insufficiently recognised. The urban poor require this asset to mitigate risk and to make the most of their overall asset portfolio, but they sometimes find it hard to access. How do residents of urban informal settlements obtain the information and develop the knowledge they need to survive and improve their livelihoods? Do they know where to look for information? Do they get what they require, and is it appropriate? And how could development agencies fill the gaps and help to strengthen the knowledge and information systems of the urban poor? These were key questions addressed in an action research project implemented by the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG, now Practical Action) with funding by the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

In this context, knowledge was defined as information which has been internalised by individuals, a community or a society; frequently, this knowledge is developed by themselves. Information is different in that it can be shared or transmitted through communication; people can consider it in the light of what they know already, and either add it to their knowledge base, or reject it. Knowledge is seldom developed from a single source of information: people tend to compare different sources, which could include the radio, papers, education, friends, colleagues etc. The best way of representing that complexity is through knowledge and information systems (KIS), rather than single flows.

A major reason for starting to look into the KIS of the urban poor was a concern shared by both DFID and ITDG about what seemed to be a lack of impact at the grassroots of urban research and development. Two independent surveys (Max Lock Centre, 1998 & 2000; and Saywell and Cotton, 1999) and a range of project evaluations seemed to confirm that the experience developed in many projects did not get widely disseminated and taken up by the urban poor. There appeared to be various reasons for that, the key ones being that projects are not spending enough attention to exploring the information needs and resources of the urban poor; and that dissemination is too often top-down and uses inappropriate information resources.

Most surveys of access to knowledge and information by the urban poor, including the two mentioned above, have focused mainly on the supply side, that is the dissemination of information by a range of development agencies and information suppliers, and how effective that has been. This research project aimed to complement that picture by looking at demand for information on 8 key livelihood components, and what the urban poor do to satisfy it. It explored this through fieldwork in low-income settlements in the capital city and at least one secondary town of three Third World countries: Peru, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe. Local teams of researchers interviewed residents, their key informants and information suppliers, alone or in focus groups. Relevant literature was reviewed in those countries and beyond, and 600 subscribers participated in a world wide electronic conference on the issues researched. The international team also compiled data on more than 40 projects in which development agencies had attempted to strengthen the KIS of the urban poor, of which 11 were developed into detailed case studies, and important lessons were drawn. The overall results were discussed in a final report (Schilderman, 2002), on which this paper draws.

Summary findings

Life in urban areas is complex and urban residents therefore have a range of information needs. It is difficult to summarise those, except in rather general terms such as income or housing. The specific needs vary from location to location and even within locations, and for development agencies to address those adequately, a certain amount of investigation is generally required. Factors which contributed to variations in information needs in the research locations included e.g. politics and the local policy context; the age or degree of consolidation of a settlement; the size of settlements; urban-rural linkages; and target group characteristics. As to the latter, the research concludes that women are often disadvantaged when it comes to accessing information, compared to men; the needs of other marginalised groups, such as the disabled or homeless, are not well served either.

Social networks are the foremost source of information of the urban poor. To some extent, this is by default. Yet, it is also a recognition of the fact that the poor themselves are a source of knowledge which development agencies should not ignore, but in practice sometimes do. The most important networks are based on kinship, proximity or friendship; more distant ones are based in the workplace or on association. Individuals who belong to several such networks may be well informed, although there often also is evidence of the information circulating being incomplete, unreliable or otherwise of poor quality. The poor are not always able to check this, but even where they do, they sometimes tend to believe people they trust (close friend or relatives, religious leaders, teachers, etc.) rather than perhaps better informed contacts who are more distant to them.

Many networks function on the basis of reciprocity, and those residents who have little to offer in return do risk rejection. Social exclusion is a real problem, also in terms of accessing information.

Whilst the internal rules of the game of networking may stimulate exclusion, this can be made worse by external rules or circumstances, e.g. the non-provision of information by the authorities to residents of informal settlements in some countries, or an increase in urban violence creating distrust and preventing people to meet. The development of community social capital can help to overcome this by generating conditions which make it easier for individuals to access information and for a community as a whole to develop its knowledge capital.

Key informants are an important further source. The research team defined key informants as people inside, or sometimes outside, a community who are knowledgeable in particular livelihood aspects, and are willing to share their knowledge. Many key informants are respected and trusted, but not always by everyone; some are known to act as gatekeepers and provide information selectively. It is important to notice that key informants do not have all the answers and that the information provided by them can at times be unreliable. This can become a problem when they are blindly trusted, or when the urban poor have no means of checking the information received.

Whereas the urban poor do actively approach members of their social networks or key informants to seek information, they are also occasionally supplied with information by institutions that do so out of duty or desire; we called these infomediaries. There is not always a clear distinction between key informants and infomediaries; whereas most infomediaries would actively disseminate information they produced themselves, some may also provide specific information at the request of individuals or their organisations, and thus their staff become more comparable to key informants. The performance of infomediaries in our research locations proved to be variable. The public sector is often criticised by the urban poor for refusing them access to information or treating them badly; smaller authorities appear to do better than larger ones in this respect. On the whole, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) perform better, but in several locations some can also be singled out for gatekeeping, pushing their own agenda, or circulating inappropriate information. Some suggest that NGOs have an important role in improving information flows between communities and authorities, in strengthening the KIS of the urban poor in general, and in helping to address social exclusion (Shadrach, 2001). The private sector does provide information too, but is not perceived to be a key player. This is in line with research by the World Bank which found that amongst the institutions considered important by the poor, only 8% are private enterprises (Narayan et al., 2001:199). The information disseminated by the private sector is often related to the marketing of a product, but sometimes that product is information itself. In our research locations, the private sector rarely specifically focused on the poor, nor addressed their specific needs. However, a few commercial information providers made useful information available, e.g. on legal issues.

So far, modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) have not played a major role in getting livelihood information to the urban poor. They rarely have direct access to ICTs, a factor which some think does increase their exclusion. Whilst most key informants are not connected either, most infomediaries do have access to ICTs and global knowledge, but many of them do not make the most of this in transferring information to urban communities. ICTs have worked well in a number of pilot projects, including telecentres, community databases, community videos, radio and television, but many of these were subsidised. The establishment of ICTs that are sustainable remains a real challenge; with the exception of cellular phones, this is likely to take time and considerable effort (Schilderman, 2001).

The investigation of attempts by various development agencies to strengthen the KIS of the urban poor allowed the research team to identify a number of factors which contributed to success. Most

prominent amongst those were: the involvement of the poor themselves as equal partners; building on local knowledge; the use of community based communication methods such as theatre or audiovisual media as well as exchange visits; and building the capacity of CBOs and key individuals within them (Ruskulis, 2001).

The assessment of the impact of information dissemination remains difficult, amongst others because information chains can be long, and its is often difficult to attribute impact to a single intervention, within a systems context. Development agencies should pay more attention to this issue, and keep learning from each other. In assessing one of its dissemination activities, ITDG found that following information trails and interviewing beneficiaries did produce useful qualitative data on impact, but it is a rather expensive method. The cost of impact assessment is a concern, particularly for agencies in the Third World, and they may have to select more affordable methods, e.g. using proxy indicators. The involvement of the urban poor was generally seen as an important contributing factor in achieving impact, partly because it empowers them, but also because it targets development efforts and makes them more effective.

A way forward

Development agencies can undertake a number of activities that would help in making the knowledge and information they hold more suitable and accessible to the urban poor. These do not always have to be designed as stand-alone activities; some can be incorporated in existing or future urban development projects. It would also be beneficial for several agencies to collaborate e.g. on some of the bigger issues, such as establishing sustainable ICTs which do not exclude the poor, or on pooling the information they hold to better address the range of needs. Above all, it is important to secure long term commitment in order to achieve some real impact.

1. Agencies need to rethink their dissemination strategies

- An obvious starting point is that the urban poor should have equal access to knowledge and information; at the moment, the vast majority of them is denied that. The rights of residents of informal settlements in particular are often not recognised. This issue could be incorporated in campaigns or projects addressing good governance.
- Agencies should see the urban poor as equal partners. They are an important source of indigenous knowledge, which they share through their networks and which is essential to achieve urban development; but it remains a source that is not optimally exploited by external agencies who are often too inclined to introduce exogenous knowledge.
- Following on from there, dissemination and communication should not just be seen as a one-way flow from external agencies to poor communities, but as a two-way process. Agencies should seek active participation by the urban poor, take their views seriously, and act on their priority needs. What agencies disseminate at the moment is too often what they think the poor need, but it is not based on any participatory needs assessment. There is still much that development workers can learn about participatory methodologies, and it would be useful to share the ones that have worked well, develop others and produce capacity building materials e.g. toolkits.
- Once efficient two-way channels of communication have been established, it becomes possible for agencies to use the feedback from low-income communities to reflect on the knowledge and

research strategies, and perhaps tailor these more to the specific needs of poor urban men and women.

- Because urban poverty is complex, and the urban poor have many information needs which vary over time, with location, circumstances, etc., single sector approaches may not be the most effective. Whilst certain information campaigns, e.g. in the area of public health, may have some positive impacts, they rarely address all the questions the poor have on the particular issue, let alone on many other livelihoods issues. It is also difficult for poor people to seek different bits of information from a whole range of sectorally specialised sources. What they need perhaps is access, e.g. via intermediaries, to a more comprehensive information management system, drawing on a multitude of sources.

2. Agencies should aim to reduce exclusion

- It remains important to further explore the existence of social exclusion; this may require developing a more in-depth knowledge of social networks and how they function and looking at exclusion in that context. Agencies should avoid communicating solely with the more active members of urban communities, leaving others behind who may remain poorly informed, thus perhaps increasing their exclusion. It may become necessary to target groups that have difficulties accessing information or have specific information needs, such as female heads of households, the young, the disabled or the homeless.
- There are a number of external factors that can cause social networks to break down or enhance exclusion; urban violence, politics and illegality are amongst those identified by this research, but there could be others in different locations. These need to be investigated and where possible tackled.
- Agencies should aim to reduce urban violence, because it generates mistrust and prevents social and knowledge capital building. Security forces are often more of a threat to the urban poor than a source of security. These problems may have to be tackled in different projects, but they can generate the conditions for better information systems.
- Local politics can contribute to violence, and cause mistrust, a disruption of information systems, and ultimately exclusion. Key informants are often particularly at risk in such situations. This remains a more difficult issue for external agencies to address, but it cannot be neglected.
- It is also important to aim for the regularisation of informal settlements in countries such as Zimbabwe where this is a real barrier to access information.

3. Agencies should support urban communities to build their knowledge and information capital

- It is important to take stock of existing knowledge and information resources at community level and identify gaps and ways of strengthening these; NGOs could play a key role in that. Communities can also be supported to develop their own knowledge capital, e.g. through enumeration or mapping, as SPARC has shown in India. Agencies should avoid establishing parallel information systems, and explore ways and methods whereby indigenous knowledge is combined with exogenous knowledge to improve livelihoods.
- The key informants that communities have can play an prominent role in urban development. They ought to be identified early on and where necessary receive further capacity building and perhaps other support, such as access to ICTs, to enhance their roles.
- It is equally important to empower communities and their organisations, e.g. through promoting dialogue, training of key individuals and leaders, improving literacy and communication skills, e.g.

using ICTs such as videos. Activities which involve a majority of a community, such as enumeration, do help people to get to know each other better, to build trust, and plan further activities. The results of those can be used in communicating with other communities, but also to demand change. Including CBOs in action-oriented networks and coalitions can be an effective means to both increase their access to information and their voice.

- Where possible, projects should include the upgrading or establishment of community meeting places, where residents can chat and share information. These could eventually become community resource centres, libraries, training centres, telecentres, etc.
- In a world where word of mouth is the prime method to communicate information, exchange visits such as those organised by Slum/Shack Dwellers International have proven to be a particularly effective method to share experience and lessons learned and therefore deserve support.

4. Agencies should aim to improve the attitudes and impact of infomediaries

- The knowledge and information held by development agencies often ends up in the first place with a range of infomediaries; some agencies play an infomediary role themselves. Many infomediaries are not well connected to the urban poor, hand out information selectively, or simply lack capacity, and in the case of the public sector may treat them badly. This is a key factor in knowledge resulting from research and development programmes having less impact than expected at the grassroots. Development agencies should sensitise the public sector towards more efficient and courteous information provision and, where resources are a real constraint in this, provide additional support. Within this context, the urban poor would probably benefit from a decentralisation of authorities.
- Agencies can help infomediaries through the production of appropriate information resources which they could use either directly or with little extra effort; this would include internet based resources, referred to in more detail under 6. Some infomediaries also will need support or capacity building to repackage existing information resources into formats that are easier to understand by the urban poor.
- There is furthermore a need to recognise, document and share good practice in communicating with the urban poor. Whereas many infomediaries are not seen to function optimally, there are also some that do well, or have some exemplary projects, but often these are not known about. It would be useful to establish and disseminate a database of what constitutes good communication practice, or perhaps make this a specific part of an existing best practice database, such as the one run by UN-Habitat.
- Successful examples of strengthening the KIS of the urban poor are rarely based on a single communication method. A combination of visual and oral methods seem to be particularly effective in reaching the urban poor.
- Agencies should consider the use of traditional media perhaps alongside more modern ones, to stimulate two-way communication and overcome constraints such as illiteracy or a lack of certain skills. Methods such as theatre, music and dance, for instance, have proven to be effective in disseminating information and generating dialogue.

5. Agencies should invest in developing sustainable ICTs for the poor

- More research is needed, particularly into more sustainable technologies which the poor can actually access. This would include looking at the issue of exclusion, e.g. because of the privatisation and commercialisation of ICTs, and perhaps further marginalisation of the poor as a result of that. It could also usefully look at how key informants and infomediaries could become

more effective by getting access to ICTs or using them differently. And in the light of 5 above, it would be worthwhile to explore how ICTs could add value to traditional media; so far, the use of video, radio and television at community level has often been quite powerful.

- Urban development projects in general should include the provision of ICT equipment and training, in order to help expand these media. Projects could also focus on how ICTs can generate additional employment, particularly for the young in informal settlements.
- There is a huge challenge in turning some of the many existing information resources into appropriate information for use on ICTs such as the internet. At the moment, the poor often complain that ICTs have little to offer, and are hard to use. Agencies can do something about this, but given the scale of the challenge, will have to pool their resources.

6. Agencies should continue to look at the impact of their information dissemination on the urban poor

- There is a need to further develop and test appropriate impact assessment methods, for instance including the development of other indicators, some of which could be developed with the urban poor and actually verified by them. And where we have argues that two-way communication methods are important, the impact of the bottom-up flow on policy and practice should now also become part of the assessment.
- It is also important to develop a greater knowledge of the cost-efficiency of alternative communication methods: which ones work best, reach more people, have greater impact, and at what cost? Most case studies provide insufficient details on this, and thus it becomes harder to make decisions of future investments in this line of work.
- The lessons of urban development work, and particularly of its information components, should be documented better and shared widely.

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