

■ URBAN POVERTY

# Govt fails to learn from past mistakes

For a programme that commits such large amounts of money, it is unspecific on the best strategies to achieve this goal

Nithya V Raman

FOR the first time in India's history, the central government has committed serious resources to the problems of urban poverty. Since 2005, the National Urban Renewal Mission has allocated more than Rs 16,350 crore of central government money to be given to 65 cities over seven years under the 'Basic Services for the Urban Poor' (BSUP), administered by National Urban Renewal Mission. The programme specifically targets slums and slum-dwellers: it funds slum development projects that aim to provide secure tenure, better housing, access to water supply and sanitation, and better delivery of health, education, and social security services to residents.

But for a programme that commits such large amounts of money to the knotty problem of improving services for slums, the mission is surprisingly unspecific on the best strategies to achieve this goal.

As a result, there has been a great deal of variation in projects from city to city. In Guwahati, for example, half the money has been allocated for providing basic services to existing slums and half for building new housing, while in Raipur, almost all the money has gone towards providing basic ser-

vices to existing slums.

Such city level variation would be good if the variation was based on assessments of local needs or on lessons from past programmes, but it is not clear from individual city experiences that this is what is happening. But without such analysis before allocating project money, we risk wasting the country's first opportunity to make wise investments in reducing urban poverty and improving conditions for slum-dwellers.

In Chennai, 78 per cent of BSUP money, a total of Rs 1,072 crore, has been allotted to building two large-scale tenement clusters with 30,000 homes on the outskirts of the city. But is large-scale tenement construction the best way to improve conditions for slum-dwellers in this city? Strangely, nobody has stopped to ask this question, even though the evidence to answer it is already available. Over the last decade, Chennai has built over 20,000 housing units for slum-dwellers in two tenement clusters very similar to the ones they have planned under the BSUP.

These two clusters, in Semmencheri and Kannagi Nagar, are about 25 km south of the city. They are enormous; Semmencheri has about 6,000 homes and Kannagi Nagar more than 15,000.

Residents were moved here in phases, some after the tsunami, and others after floods or fires, evictions or voluntary relocation schemes. Together, when they reach their full capacity, these settlements will house more than one lakh people.

With broad paved roads, and row after row of buildings of four or more units, each with an attached bathroom, these settlements *look* impressively — unlike slums. But after their move, many residents actually had access to fewer basic services here than they did before in their informal settlements. In the first months in Semmencheri, there was not enough drinking water, no electricity, and not enough buses to and from the city. Fights broke out over water and at the ration shop, and women were afraid to walk outside after dark. In Kannagi Nagar, by some accounts, local *dadas* profit from distributing scarce resources.

Some of these basic services have gotten better over time, but other problems, like that of schooling and healthcare, are less tractable. Local schools in this area were quickly overwhelmed by new students. Some children return daily to their old schools, but other families simply took their girls out of schools because the commute was just too long. Although there is a Primary

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Health Centre (PHC), there is no government hospital nearby, and residents have had to pay high fees at private clinics for emergencies, driving them to moneylenders.

Unfortunately, these are problems that are structurally built into relocation programmes: Large sites suitable for large-scale resettlement projects are only available on the city's peripheries, where the local bodies responsible for providing basic services simply do not have the capacity to adapt to such a sudden and massive increase in population. Because of their distance from the city, these places also do not have any work for the urban poor, who, for the most part, depend on flexibility, negligible transport costs, and proximity for the viability of their work. Indeed, even after allotments have been made, many units in Semmencheri continue to lie vacant, because residents prefer to stay in the city, close to their work.

None of this information is new to the authorities in Chennai: the problems in the resettlement colonies have been well documented by local newspapers, and articulated by slum-dwellers themselves in protests. What is surprising is that more money has been allocated to building such colo-

nies, without asking more questions about the impact of resettlement on households that have already moved. Has access to basic services actually increased among the residents? What has been the impact on children's education, particularly on girls? Have people been forced to pay more for healthcare? Most importantly, what has been the impact of resettlement on poverty? Has income and unemployment levels increased or decreased over the long term? Can any of these impacts be reduced with better programme design?

None of these questions have been asked in Chennai, and, unfortunately, the BSUP does not require cities to ask such questions before creating projects for central government funding.

The Basic Services for the Urban Poor presents a real opportunity to address an important and growing problem. But without the central government working with cities to help them to clarify their goals and prioritise projects systematically, we risk repeating the same mistakes of the past. Unfortunately, the daily indignities suffered by the growing numbers of the urban poor mean that we do not have time or money to waste.

*(The author works at the Centre for Development Finance, Chennai)*

A ARAVINDAN

## A WOODEN GLOBE ON THE HM'S TABLE

IT was half a century ago that Syed Kaka's bullock cart ferried through the muddy road leading to the hamlet called Kanayam, a small village in Ottapalam taluk with no electricity, no motorable roads, no post office, the biggest excitement of which was the Shornur-Nilambur passenger train. This bullock cart begins its untiring journey when the high sounding siren from the far away tile factory at Shornur announces dawn. The cart was a bridge between the rustic countryside and the changing world outside.

The cart carries a variety of farm produce grown by the villagers to the nearby market. At times there is a sick person to be carried to the government hospital. Syed Kaka would find a place for him among the baggage. On it's return journey the load is sacks containing jaggery, salt, chilly and many other things meant for two small grocery shops. The cart also played messenger. Kanayam would come to know of a Tamil film being screened at a cinema talkie in town by seeing a poster pasted on the cart.

This was Kanayam in the Fifties. It is indeed difficult to comprehend that 50 years still backwards, in 1904, this hamlet could have sported a Bhadrakali temple, one or two small shops and a few houses, with no post office, no signs of modernity, progress. But it had a primary school. That itself is a small wonder.

During my school days in Fifties, this school remained like a faded old photograph hung on a dilapidated old wall. A wooden globe adorning the

Head Master's table was the only curious article around, which however failed to arouse any one's interest. Many children went without a noon meal. Many children came to school without a shirt and to the surprise of many — this was not just the case with boys. Girls also followed this pattern. Save the teachers, none had an umbrella.

Kanayam vaguely remembers a headmaster the school had in the '20s. He used to come to school daily walking about seven km. A strict disciplinarian as he was, the sight of his umbrella on the uphill was enough to transform the noisy school compound to silence. The deafening noise of the school bell in the morning would engulf the entire village in silence.

The school celebrated its centenary, in 2004. Indeed, there were many schools in different parts of the country a hundred years ago but a good number of them could not stand the test of time. In the old days caste was a predominant factor for admissions to schools. Mixed schools were a rarity.

In this social background a school like Kulappully L P School, Kanayam survived imparting knowledge to the poorest of poor in a small village and that too for a century, never once failing in their mission. As Kanayam had linked itself to the outside world of commerce and trade through Syed Kaka's bullock cart for many years, this little shy village looked up to the wonderful world of knowledge. We did not know what the globe on the headmaster's table meant. But for us, it was a peak into the world around.

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● HOMEMADE BOOZE

## The dangerous life of wine-lovers in Gaza

Mai Yaghi

HERE in his secret hideaway, Abu Mohammed carefully turns grapes into home-made vintages he savours only in the privacy of his own home, far away from the disapproving eyes of Hamas police and Gaza's conservative society. "I started making my own wine after Hamas took power," says the 40-something civil servant who, like all the other Gaza bootleggers interviewed by AFP, declined to give their real names for fear of being arrested. "I asked friends how to do it and I did some research on the Internet," he says.

Abu Mohammed risks much to indulge his palate. Gaza has always adhered to traditional Islam and alcohol has never been widely available in the coastal strip.

Before Hamas swept the January 2006 parliamentary election, anyone could bring alcohol in from Israel and Egypt and a handful of restaurants and bars served spirits.

But that stopped when Hamas — the Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement — routed loyalists of the rival secular Fatah faction from the territory in June 2007 after a week of deadly street clashes.

Since then, the sale of alcohol in Gaza has been banned altogether under a de facto law imposed by Hamas. "No liquor is authorised", warns a sign to visitors at the Erez border crossing checkpoint with Israel in the north, saying any alcohol found will be destroyed on the spot.

Meanwhile the smugglers doing a brisk trade in everything from cars to diapers through tunnels between southern Gaza and Egypt refuse to whisk alcohol into the territory for fear of running foul of Hamas.

Abu Mohammed goes to great lengths to enjoy his wine in Gaza. Risking the wrath of the enclave's Islamist Hamas rulers, he sneaks to the rooftop of an abandoned house to make his own nectar of the gods

So people like Abu Mohammed must resort to their own devices. "First I wash the grapes well, then I take off the stems, then I press them with my bare hands," he says, demonstrating the procedure. "The seeds stay at the bottom. I filter the juice and then add a small bit of yeast to speed up the fermentation, which takes at least 40 days." The result, he admits, is "not as good as 'real wine'" but under the present circumstances it is all he can get.

He knows that by indulging his palate he's playing with fire. "I am terrified by the idea of being discovered by Hamas police," he says. "That's why I make sure to do it all alone and in secret and above all not to sell it."

Hussein knows the feeling. The 56-year-old who has been making his wine in small wooden barrels 'to add flavour' is not only 'afraid of being discovered by the Hamas police, who will have no mercy', but also of losing face in a socially conservative society that does not look kindly on imbibers.

Hamas spokesman Taher al-Nunu says Gaza's Islamist rulers "act on a

case by case basis in line with Palestinian law". "We act against commercial quantities. In cases of personal use production, we respect the law."

There are no figures on how many people in Gaza make their own booze, but anecdotal evidence suggests they are either very few people or are very good at hiding it.

Jamal Dahshane, who heads the Hamas police anti-drug unit and considers confiscating alcohol a 'social duty', admits he's never run across such a case.

"Even if we discover that a person makes his own alcohol, we don't have the means to arrest him because Palestinian law does not prohibit alcohol consumption," he says. "Only the selling of alcohol can be considered as a criminal offence."

But Gaza's daring bootleggers aren't taking any chances. All drink the fruit of their labours in very limited circles — at home, at night and either alone or with only wives and a few close friends present.

Ziad, 30, says he drinks alone to minimise any chances of getting caught and says he has never got drunk. Abu Mohammed allows himself to get tipsy, but never tipsles more than four glasses.

Hussein does get drunk, and it once led to dangerous consequences — his neighbours saw him behaving strangely and confronted him. He denied he had been drinking and has tried to be more discreet since.

But despite all the risks and the fears, no one has any intention of giving up their dangerous hobby. "I know that I live in a traditionalist society, but I consider that drinking alcohol is a matter of individual liberty," Abu Mohammed says.

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● SOCIAL NETWORKING

## How to tackle the F word

For better or worse, social media is the rock 'n' roll of the 21st century

Andrew Keen

IT'S the F word question that all parents now dread. "Can I go on Facebook?" your 11-year-old bullies you over dinner, declaring that absolutely everybody else in her class is not only on Facebook, but also on Twitter as well as Bebo and Orkut and other peculiarly named social networks.

So how should parents in today's social media age deal with the F word question? Is social networking bad for children's brains?

It's not an easy question, especially for parents who love their kids but fear the perils of the Internet. I had the good fortune to spend some time discussing this thorny issue of children and social networking with a group of technology mavens, many of whom are also parents of young children. I found myself on a panel with three other dads. My group comprised Stanley Kirk Burrell, otherwise known as MC Hammer, the pop rap artist who has sold more than 30 million records; Chris Kelly, Facebook's chief privacy officer and John Salley, a four-time winner of the NBA championship and host of *The Best Sports Show*. The only thing Hammer, Kelly, Salley and myself had in common was that we were all parents. About the Internet, especially on the F word question, we couldn't have disagreed more.

The biggest contrast was between the Hammer and Salley. Social networks, the 47 year-old Hammer — who has six children — argued, represented the best way for kids to learn about the world. Salley had an entirely different pedagogical take. Salley argued that social networks failed to educate kids about the real world, substituting the trivia of video games for books.

Like any Harvard University educated lawyer running for public office, Chris Kelly was harder to ideologically nail down than either Salley or Hammer. Kelly cleverly circumvented the F word question by arguing that since social media websites like Facebook aggressively distinguishes between real world and online community, the impact of these networks is actually minimal on children.

I borrowed some ideas from Baroness Susan Greenfield, the technological Oxford professor of neuroscience and the director of the Royal Institute. It's the controversial Greenfield who argues that electronic media, especially social networking sites, are replacing children's deep cognitive skills with short-term sensory ones, thereby trivialising their notion of real friendship and community. Like Salley, my answer to the F question was a no.

On the one hand, these networks are the hottest in-things now for kids and completely banning them from social media is unnecessarily cruel and reactive; on the other

hand, it's hard to dispute at least some of Baroness Greenfield's observations about the impact of electronic media on the brain and the way in which social networking can dumb down a real friendship and community.

The most problematic issue of all is the way in which social networks undermine the privacy of our children. While Chris Kelly would argue that we all have the power to calibrating the privacy settings within Facebook, he forgets that most kids and parents aren't skilled in customising the interface of their social network. And so the truth about today's digital generation is that they are increasingly leading de facto public existences in which often the most intimate details of their lives are being broadcasted throughout the world on relatively open networks.

Even more troublingly, with the increasing prevalence of mobile phones which double as always-on social networking tools, even the most scrupulous parents can't electronically police their kids.

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And so we have to hope that the rapper Hammer is, at least, partially right about the intellectual benefits of Facebook and Twitter on the mental life of our kids. Social media is the rock 'n' roll of the early 21st century. For better or worse, our children are now living their lives on the electronic network, posting their photos, revealing their desires, making their friends, defining their identities.

The F word question, then, should be the beginning rather than the end of parents' conversations with their kids. No, social networks probably shouldn't be banned. But yes, parents do have a responsibility to at least try to educate their kids about the perils of self-revelation and over-reliance on social media. The most sensible position for parents is half-way between the permissive Hammer and the extremely cautious Salley. The truth about social networks is that there is no truth. The technology is neither intrinsically good nor evil. It all depends on how our kids use it.

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