



Participation of marginalized citizens in the public sphere.

How power-relations reshape the concept of
empowerment in Patna, India

Hugo Ribadeau Dumas

Aga Khan Foundation (New Delhi),
hugo.ribadeaudumas@gmail.com

Working papers du Programme
Cities are Back in Town

wppoleville@gmail.com
<http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-villes/>



Slum Improvement Committee members attending a training workshop in Patna, Bihar

Abstract:

Slum Improvement Committees are neighborhood associations created by the organization PRIA in the slums of Patna, India, in order to empower marginalized citizens through their participation in the public sphere. This paper argues that local communities and social workers do not necessarily share the same conceptions of development, and that their contradictory interests alter the very objective of empowerment. In the case of slum populations, while displaying in public a certain docility, a minority of inhabitants have nevertheless in parallel diverted Slum Improvement Committees from their original collective purpose in order to serve more individualistic interests – by doing so, they have managed to generate in their own profit new forms of empowerment. At the same time, the social workers hired by PRIA to supervise slum-dwellers have also transformed the *raison-d'être* of Slum Improvement Committees, using them more as professional instruments of career management rather than tools of development. Hence, bottom-up structures like Slum Improvement Committees might indeed offer opportunities for marginalized citizens, but they are also likely to generate new top-down dynamics of domination coming from both within and outside the community.

Hugo Ribadeau Dumas holds a Master's Degree in Urban Governance from Sciences Po Paris (programme "Governing the Large Metropolis"). He is currently working with the Aga Khan Foundation on a project of urban renewal in New Delhi.

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1. Introduction¹

The Slum Improvement Committees of Patna constitute a typical example of a participatory project aiming at “empowering” supposedly disfavoured populations. These neighbourhood associations, composed of slum-dwellers elected within their communities, were built up in 2012 by the Indian non-governmental organization PRIA (the *Society for Participatory Research in Asia*). Experimented in sixty-six slums all across Bihar, a State of North-India known for its governance failures and its endemic poverty, the project was based upon two central rationales. PRIA primarily believed that the direct involvement of citizens could enhance the management of Indian cities by bridging up the gap between the State and its citizens. Secondly, and more importantly, PRIA envisioned that raising the voice of slum-dwellers could stimulate their self-confidence and eventually strengthen their position in the society. Slum Improvement Committees were thus carved out of the rather wide-spread assumption that participation can bring about “empowerment” by helping destitute individuals to defend their interests more efficiently.

1.1. Apathetic slum-dwellers?

From PRIA's point of view, the most challenging aspect of Slum Improvement Committees was that, according to their initial observations, the participatory nature of the project did not necessarily fit the idiosyncrasy of the targeted population. PRIA forged its project upon the postulate that speaking up in the public sphere was not an activity slum-dwellers could naturally and spontaneously do. The NGO had diagnosed in these localities a sort of “culture of silence” (according to their own words), that is to say a tendency among slum communities to internalize their lower hierarchical position in the society and submissively endure their fate. This presumably rampant determinism was considered as a major barrier for the urban poor to make their claims heard. “*We are working against the odds*”, summed up a representative from PRIA to underline the contrast between the apparent docility of slum communities and the NGO's ambition to turn them into active participants.

Six months after the project was launched, the first observations on the field could in appearance confirm this diagnosis of docility: inhabitants often follow instructions without necessarily comprehending them, when they disagree with PRIA's approach they tend to hide their grievances, and they usually prefer to remain silent during public meetings. A pessimistic and superficial interpretation of this behaviour could lead us to argue that the slum communities of Patna are indeed characterized by a certain form of passivity and that PRIA has still a long way to go before actually “empowering” them.

¹ This paper is based on a Master's professional dissertation submitted in June 2013. The research was conducted while the author was interning with the organization PRIA, in Patna, as he was still a student at Sciences Po Paris.

1.2. “Hidden” strategies of empowerment

Yet, can the capabilities of individuals be effectively revealed by their posture in the public sphere? The present paper proposes a different perspective and argues instead that Patna’s slum-dwellers in fact camouflage behind an apparent passivity perfectly rationale strategies of self-development. Scott (1990) observed that the interactions between dominated and dominating social groups are often characterized by a “hidden resistance” of the latter. To theorize this phenomenon, he distinguished the “public transcript”, which corresponds to the attitude that dominated individuals wish to display to the dominants, and the “hidden transcript”, which corresponds to the practices which take place behind the dominants’ back. In other words, domination does not necessarily come with alienation.

Following the same framework of analysis, this paper shows that inhabitants participating in Slum Improvement Committees do expose a submissive attitude vis-à-vis PRIA and other social workers, but in parallel also develop their own strategies of life-improvement. We will indeed show that, far from the ideal of “collective empowerment” initially envisioned by PRIA, the inhabitants have “reinvented” their own routes towards empowerment, based on a much more material and individualistic perspective. In the slums of Patna, individualistic enrichment, political prestige or caste-based logics seem to constitute much more natural emancipative channels than the participatory model brought to them by PRIA. The example of Slum Improvement Committees therefore shows that passive collaboration and active resistance are not necessarily antinomic.

1.3. Power-relations between PRIA, PRIA’s local partners, and the inhabitants

Talking about “dominated” and “dominating” groups in the case of Slum Improvement Committees could appear surprising. After all, all the stakeholders of the project seem to share the same goal: improving the life-conditions in slums. However, we will in fact demonstrate that slum-dwellers, PRIA and the six local NGOs contracted by PRIA to supervise the project on the field in fact all defend very distinct values, logics and interests. The social workers for instance often prioritize their personal professional success over the objective of popular participation. The slum-dwellers frequently overcome the collective dimension of the project in order to fulfill individualistic needs. And even within PRIA, the views on how to reach the objective of empowerment diverge significantly.

If the interests, views and objectives of the different protagonist differ, then how are they regulated: do they cohabitate, compete or meld? In other words, how the power-relations between the different participants are structured, and how do they potentially affect the outcomes of the project, especially in terms of empowerment?

The central finding of this research is that the governance model of Slum Improvement Committees offers a certain freedom for each of the actors to conduct their own agenda, including for some inhabitants to access a certain form of empowerment. Yet, this loose bottom-up framework also leaves a scope for new top-down dynamics to emerge, which might potentially create new forms of domination from outside as well as from inside slum communities.

The first part of the paper will present the rationales and the concrete functioning of Slum Improvement Committees. We will then offer a brief literature review to put PRIA's project in perspective with the on-going intellectual debates related to participatory governance and empowerment. The last part of the paper will present the findings of the field research conducted in five slums of Patna from January to April 2013. To do so, we will successively analyze the posture of the inhabitants, PRIA's local partners, and PRIA itself.

2. Slum Improvement Committees: the rationales of the project

The central objective of this paper is to compare how the different actors linked to Slum Improvement Committees - namely PRIA, PRIA's local partners and slum communities – have interpreted the objectives of the project according to their own set of values and interests. To understand this competition of interpretations, it is necessary to keep in mind what was the original ideological essence of the project as initially crafted by PRIA. Let us therefore have a look at the context in which emerged the concept of Slum Improvement Committees.

2.1. A tool for the urban poor in a context of mal-governance

2.1.1. The Society for Participatory Research In Asia (PRIA) and the question of urban poverty

Operating in slums has not always been an evidence for PRIA: created in 1982, the organization had until then built up its reputation as a leading advocate of democratic practices in India principally through its activities lead in rural areas. It is only in 2011 that PRIA decided to expand its efforts in cities. PRIA then reckoned that a vacuum had to be filled up: indeed, while local democracy is quite widespread in rural India – especially through the institutionalized *panchayats* - Indian cities are in contrast deprived of such inclusive bodies. Leveraging on this observation, PRIA launched in 2011 the programme “*Strengthening Civil Society Voices on Urban Poverty*”. It is in within this framework that popped up, one year later, in 2012, the idea of Slum Improvement Committee.

2.1.2. The peculiar context of Bihar

It is not a coincidence if the concept of Slum Improvement Committee did not emerge directly from PRIA's head office in Delhi, but was initially suggested by PRIA's regional office in Patna. Patna is the capital of Bihar, a State which stands out from the map of India for various reasons. Described by the World Bank as the poorest region of India (World Bank, 2011), Bihar gained in the end of the 1990s a reputation of a “failed State” (Kumar, 2012). At the turn of the century, the open criminalization of politics had entangled the State in a condition portrayed by the media as near to chaos (New York Times, 2005). Even though the situation of Bihar has drastically improved in the last decade, up to the point to be labelled as “miraculous”(The Economist, 2010), the endemic flaws of the State of Bihar in terms of governance remain exceptional at the national level.

In the urban sector particularly, the capacities of implementation of the administration of Bihar appear extremely feeble. Even when the State has access to substantive financial power and is given a clear mandate to tackle urban poverty, the efficiency of its initiatives is largely limited. Between 2005 and 2012, for example, the State used only 15% of the funds allocated within the national Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission, and built effectively only 544 affordable dwellings out of the 19,000 that had been originally planned (The Indian Express, 24/02/2011). Similarly, in 2013, the implementation of the ambitious Rajiv Awas Yojana Programme – aiming at “eradicating” all the slums of India – had not even started in Bihar, while constructions had already begun in many other States. More generally speaking, many of the policies/programmes/pensions designed for slum-dwellers eventually never reach their target. According to a survey conducted by PRIA in 2012 in the city of Bihar-Sharif, 70% of the slums legally eligible to drinking-water facilities were deprived of such infrastructures.

Whatever might be the political or administrative roots of these poor results, what is certain is that the State of Bihar does not fully exploit the large array of instruments it theoretically holds for addressing urban poverty. It is precisely in this context that bloomed out the concept of Slum Improvement Committees. PRIA's idea was to give birth to a new sort of pressure groups through which slum communities could get informed of about their rights, pressure the authorities and eventually defend their entitlements, so that in the end the State could fulfil its legal and political commitments.

2.2. A blend of pragmatic goals and normative objectives

Later in the paper, we will show how the different protagonists of Slum Improvement Committees have altered, and even denatured, the original purpose of Slum Improvement Committees in order to follow their own agenda. Let us before briefly present the central objectives of the project as initially framed by PRIA. While the first intention of PRIA was to use committees to stimulate concrete material development in slums, the NGO was at the same targeting much more abstract ideals.

2.2.1. Improving the life of slum-dwellers

The prior *raison-d'être* of Slum Improvement Committees was, as mentioned above, to provide slum-dwellers a weapon to protect their rights and narrow down the gap between them and the State. Sixty-six committees were created in four cities of Bihar, including Patna. Each committee is composed of five members directly elected by the rest of the community. The function of committee members is to identify the most burning issues of their localities and lead campaigns to solve them. For instance, in a neighbourhood where some inhabitants are deprived of the ration card they are entitled to, the committee will collect the name of the individuals concerned, and then request the authorities to deliver the cards.

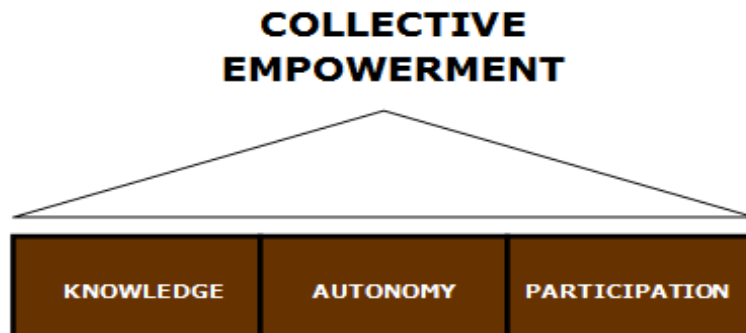
2.2.2. The three pillars of empowerment according to PRIA: knowledge, autonomization, participation

The potential material benefits of the project are in reality secondary in the hierarchy of PRIA's objectives. What matters the most for PRIA are not the results obtained by Slum Improvement Committees at such, but rather the process leading to them. The normative ambition of the project is to believe that the participation of the urban poor in the committees will lead to a form development which is not only physical

but also social and intellectual. In other words, the ultimate objective of Slum Improvement Committees is to “empower” slum-dwellers.

It is essential to understand PRIA’s ideological conception of “empowerment”, as it is this very conception which is contested by the different participants of the project, and especially by the inhabitants and PRIA’s local partners. PRIA’s vision of “empowerment” is built upon three pillars: knowledge, autonomization and participation. The NGO does not provide any financial assistance to slum-dwellers, and argue instead that the resource they most urgently require is knowledge – especially about their rights and about the manner to defend them. PRIA consider Slum Improvement Committees as platforms through which they can inject the information relevant to the local needs. It is then expected that once committee members are intellectually equipped, they will be able to take initiatives on behalf of their community. It is here an important point: PRIA believes that slum-dwellers will be truly “empowered” when they have the capacity to fight their struggles by themselves; it is for this reason that PRIA leaves each committee the freedom to set up its own priorities of actions (land issue, sanitation, welfare...). Ultimately, according to PRIA’s logic, Slum Improvement Committees are likely to generate enlightened and pro-active citizens equipped with the necessary skills to participate efficiently in the public sphere and defend the interests of their peers.

Figure 1: The three pillars of empowerment according to PRIA



2.3. How do Slum Improvement Committees concretely work?

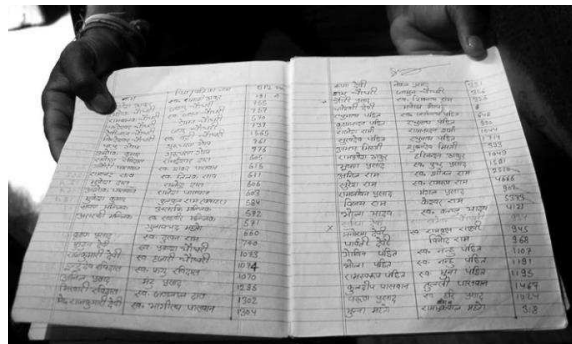
Now that we have described the ideological essence of Slum Improvement Committees, it appears necessary to give some insights about the practical functioning of the committees. As we will next analyze the power-relations between the different actors of the project, let us here describe the nature of their respective tasks and of their interactions.

Photo 1 - in Mastipur, Bodhgaya



Slum-dwellers are evidently at the core of the project: they are supposed to be both its main beneficiaries and its most influential participants. PRIA expects them to take initiatives and forge themselves their agenda. The committee meets formally at least once a month, at the level of the slum (See photo 1). During such meetings they decide what issues should be tackled in priority and make plans to address them. Committee members then have the responsibility to find answers to the problems of their community. Their tasks can be as various as collecting data (see photo 2), meeting local representatives, or even assisting families stricken by a natural disaster.

Photo 2: Illustrating a list of individuals deprived of ration card in Meena Bazar, Patna



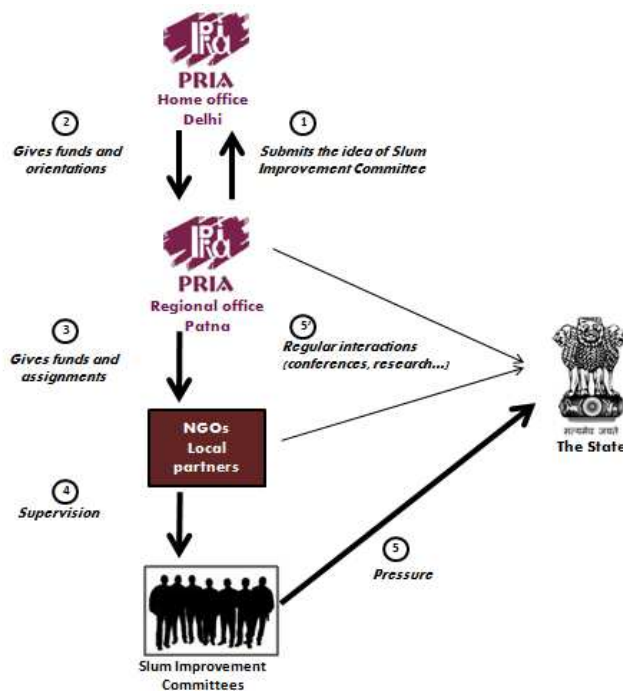
Yet, despite the fundamentally citizen-centric approach of the project, inhabitants are – at least for in the initial phase – largely assisted. PRIA itself has externalized the task of supervising Slum Improvement Committees to six smaller local NGOs that were already familiar with the field. In this paper we will call them “PRIA’s local partners”. These NGOs have the responsibility to provide committee members regular methodological and logistical assistance. They attend every single committee meeting (in the photo 1, PRIA’s local partner sits on a chair at the centre), and they organize frequently training workshops (see photo 3) during which they share with committee members information related to specific issues: social security schemes, upcoming urban renewal schemes, etc...The role of PRIA’s partners in the project is paramount: they are supposed to train committee members and generate a participatory dynamic.

Photo 3: in Bihar Sharif



Finally, PRIA also regularly organizes “interface conferences” where committee members are given the opportunity to meet State representatives (see photo n°4).

Photo 3: with the vice-mayor of Patna holding the microphone



3. Theoretical framework of the study: how power relations are structured within Slum Improvement Committees?

We have just described, that PRIA's conception of empowerment is to emancipate collectively marginalized citizens through their participation in the public sphere. This theoretical optimistic horizon should nevertheless not keep our mind away from two determinant political realities. First, local communities are not absolutely autonomous in this project: they are in permanent interaction with other actors who might not share the same interests. Second, even within slum populations, unity does not necessarily prevail and this might eventually blurs the ultimate goals of Slum Improvement Committees. This study precisely aims at taking into account these elements and questioning how power-relations and political dynamics can potentially affect the objective of collective empowerment. Following this logic, we will in this part draw a quick literature review to highlight the ambiguous links between the notions of "power" and of "participatory governance".

3.1. "Participatory governance": a depoliticized concept?

The idea of involving citizens in the public sphere is far from being new: Tocqueville, among others, had since long considered associative life and daily grass-root participation as the ingredients for a successful democracy. However, what is relatively new is that the idea of "participatory governance" is no more restricted to philosophers, activists or marginalized decision makers: it has nowadays become almost a fashionable trend, celebrated by a very wide range of scholars and decision-makers. Marxist activists or neo-liberal thinkers, humanitarian NGOs (Appadurai, 2002) or global corporate (Sharma & Bhide, 2005), anti-establishment movements or the State (Weinstein, 2009): a considerable constellation of different actors have embraced in their own manner participatory mechanisms.

We can distinguish broadly two schools of thought promoting a greater participation of citizens. On the one hand, the "normative approach" has framed the participation of citizens, and especially of marginalized citizens, as a question of "social justice" (Desai, 1995) and as an indispensable pre-requisite for a balanced democracy (Mitlin 2004, Bardhan & Mookherjee 2006). On the other hand, the "pragmatic approach" has instead considered inclusive mechanisms as tools of efficiency (Moser, 1983), as they might allow for a better understanding of the local needs (Colfer, 2005) and for a deeper popular acceptability of projects (Tounée & Van Esch, 2002). Nevertheless, the clear-cut distinction between the "pragmatic" and the "normative" approaches seems to have lost of its relevance – isn't PRIA for instance targeting both the challenges of administrative efficiency and of social empowerment? It has become today difficult to categorize participatory approaches according to ideological norms. Nevertheless, the adoption of participatory principals by the mainstream did not lead to the depoliticization of the concept (Miraftab, 2004; Mohanty, 1995). Far from being mere neutral technical instruments, participatory mechanisms are in fact highly ideological.

3.2. The anti-liberal and anti-normative criticisms of participatory governance

The literature suggests that the participation of citizens in the public sphere cannot be abstracted from the power relations related to it. Different sorts of invisible political dynamics are indeed likely to erode the official inclusive objectives of participatory projects.

The first set of criticisms, which we could label as “anti-capitalistic”, frames the so-called “people-based mechanisms” as potential Trojan horses facilitating the penetration of neoliberal practices in the management of cities (Miraftap, 2004). For example, if local communities are given the opportunity to manage autonomously and democratically public services such as waste collection, it gives the State the occasion to get rid of its social responsibilities and introduces among citizens a faith in entrepreneurial practices and market mechanisms (Jaglin, 2005). Some, like Henkel & Stirrat (2001), even consider discourses on empowerment as “imperialistic” as they impose upon local populations ideas that are considered as “modern” (participation within formal institutions, self-management, collaboration with private companies, etc...) as compared to the “backward” traditional community’s norms.

The second wave of criticisms, which we could call “anti-normative”, targets the naivety of those who automatically associate participation with emancipation and democratic values. De Wit and Berner (2002) underline that the norm within marginalized populations is not horizontality but verticality: contrary to the romanticized image portraying poor communities as viscerally united in hardship, individualism and hierarchic networks are in fact most of the time favoured by the urban poor to obtain immediate benefits. The horizontality promoted by some participatory models can be potentially distorted to fit a more vertical configuration, and might in the end benefit only a few (Zérah, 2009; Mansuri & Rao, 2004). There is thus a risk that that “potentially bottom-up concepts [such as the idea of participation] perpetuate and disguise continued top-down attitudes and approaches” (Rowlands, 1997).

3.3. Slum Improvement Committees: perverted by a clash of interests?

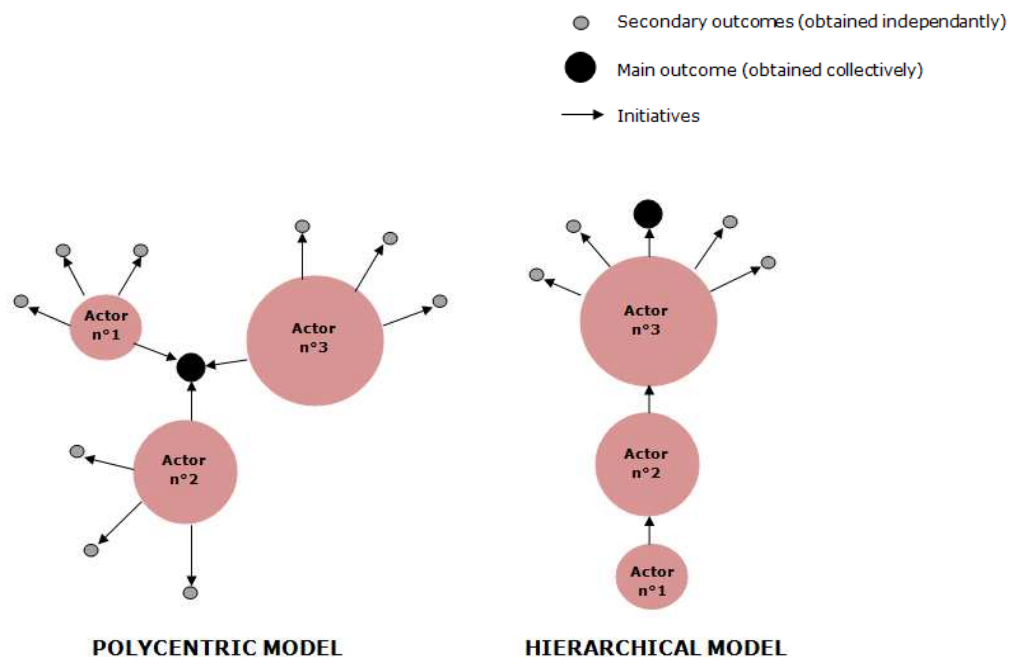
Do logics of power also constitute a risk for PRIA’s ideal of empowerment, as suggested by the literature? Being its promoters (PRIA), its implementers (PRIA’s local partners) or its targets (the inhabitants), all the actors of the project of Slum Improvement Committees supposedly share a common goal: improving the life in the slums. This paper will attempt to pierce this depoliticized veil and demonstrate that their participation in the project is in fact guided by very divergent logics. Why should we indeed assume that inhabitants will automatically agree to “participate” in the same fashion than PRIA invites them to do? Similarly, why would the local partners, who belong to small NGOs operating at the city-level, necessarily share the same horizon than PRIA, a much larger NGO recognized at the international scale? And even within PRIA, how can we affirm with certainty that the experience from the field in Patna fits the vision from the head office in Delhi? Given these doubts, it appears necessary to analyze how the different stakeholders apprehend, comprehend and appropriate the project of Slum Improvement Committees, and in the process possibly alter the ultimate objective of empowerment.

3.4. A polycentric or a hierarchic model of governance?

In this paper, we will use the concept of “multilevel governance” to reflect upon dynamics of power. Our goal will be to determine whether the interests of the different actors of Slum Improvement Committees cohabit in pluralist manner or if they are instead embedded in a competitive system where hierarchies prevail.

In the literature, two principal theoretical models have emerged to schematize governance structures constituted by different layers of stakeholders. The first model, known under the name of “polycentric governance”, frames multilevel relationships as an assemblage of different scales of decision: various “deliberative spaces” (McGinnis, 1999) cohabit at different levels, to form in the end a sort of constellation of autonomous centres of decision (Ostrom, 2010). This polycentric model of governance implies a strong pluralism, a large flexibility in terms of cohabitation of interests, and a relative independence of the different stakeholders.

In the second model of multilevel governance, some actors manage to singularize themselves from the others and impose their views and interests (Jessop, 2004). This approach, alternatively called “hierarchic governance” and “competitive governance”, is based on the central assumption that intrinsic inequality of power between the different actors lead to competition rather than cooperation (Horak, 2008), which hampers the capacity of the smaller actors to attain their own objectives.



Leveraging on these theoretical models, we will try to determine what sort of “micro-governance” structures the relationships between the different stakeholders of Slum Improvement Committees. Do they manage to work in a polycentric manner, with each of them being able to follow their own logic and interests? Or is there instead a competitive dynamic driving their interaction, with certain actors imposing their views upon others? Is the strategy of each actor relatively autonomous, or is it interlocked in a

hierarchical configuration? At a period of time when participatory and so-called empowering processes have become a depoliticized and fashionable concept among a wide range of decision makers, it seems important to comprehend what really implies the involvement of marginalized populations in terms of power relations.

4. Material and methods of research

The present study is based on first-hand data collected between January 2013 and April 2013. I was hired as a non-paid intern with PRIA, which gave me the opportunity to observe Slum Improvement Committees from within and on a daily basis. PRIA gave me a total freedom, especially in terms of time, to carry out my research as they were interested in having an external assessment of their activities. At the same time, I was also given concrete assignments related to Slum Improvement Committees, like for instance organizing training sessions for committee members.

The research focused on five slums all located in Patna and selected for their diversity in terms of size, material development, and social structure. I also paid regular visits to slums of other cities of Bihar, and frequently attended events and conferences hosting Slum Improvement Committee members.

	Unique visit	Repeated visits (at least twice)	Regular visits (more than 10 times)	Total
Slums visited	8	4	5	17
	Slum-level Committee meetings	Orientation meetings (training sessions)	Interfaces "slum dwellers – local authorities"	Total
Meetings/Conferences	23	6	5	34
	Slum-dwellers	Local partners	Visit of PRIA's Delhi office	Total
Formal Interviews	14	6	3	23

The largest chunk of the research material was composed of observatory notes collected during slum-level meetings, city-scale conferences organized by PRIA, and – more typically - during the numerous unprepared interactions with the different stakeholders. In addition to these spontaneous observations, formal interviews were also conducted with fourteen committee members. The interviews, which usually

lasted for about an hour, were conducted in Hindi and in a semi-structured manner, following an interview guide. Semi-structured interviews were also performed with representatives from PRIA and with PRIA's local partners.

My institutional linkage with PRIA was both an advantage and a liability. It initially offered me a unique access door to the field and gave me the possibility to be in permanent touch with all the actors of the project. However, it quickly appeared obvious that inhabitants and PRIA's local partners were not addressing me as an external researcher, but were in fact considering me in priority as a member from PRIA. This constituted a major bias as my interlocutors often tended to alter their discourse to express what they believed PRIA wanted to hear. The major challenge of this research was therefore to detach myself from my status of a PRIA intern. My knowledge of Hindi was here determinant as I did not need intermediaries to interact with slum-dwellers. Similarly, forging relationships outside the professional sphere – for occasions as varied as religious festivals, meals or even games – helped in gaining the confidence of some inhabitants. While these attempts were not always successful, it nevertheless at times gave me access to discourses more intimate and significantly different from those normally shared with PRIA.

For a matter of transparency, it should be as well underlined that I am not fully fluent in Hindi. I know enough to communicate, read, write and lead interviews, but it is evident that my linguistic limitations prevented me from digging into more complex issues, especially given the fact that some slum-dwellers in Patna speak a heavily dialectical Hindi (Bhojpuri, among others) more difficultly understandable. This issue of communication inevitably slowed down the process of research, and also biased the focus of the study, as I had to stick in priority to the individuals whose Hindi was as standard as possible, which is to say usually the most educated ones.

5. Slum-dwellers and empowerment: between passivity and personal appropriations of the project

To understand the power-relations within Slum Improvement Committees, it is crucial to primarily analyse the posture of its main protagonist: the inhabitants. The present part will describe *how* slum-dwellers take part in the project, which is to say apparently passively and without adopting PRIA's values. Yet, we will then explain *why* slum-dwellers agree to cooperate, and we will show that they in fact actively follow hidden agendas that do not necessarily match PRIA's expectations. We will argue that slum-dwellers have by themselves shaped new roads towards empowerment.

5.1. The apparent posture of slum-dwellers: resigned passivity?

We had earlier explained that PRIA's conception of empowerment was based on three pillars: knowledge, autonomy and participation. Interviews and field observations revealed that, on the whole, local communities have not instinctively internalized these ideals. Yet, instead of opposing PRIA's endeavor, they tend to comply with it without apparent resistance.

Firstly, the fact that PRIA does not directly pour money but merely inject knowledge in Slum Improvement Committees generates high perplexity among local populations. The long-term perspective of the project, according to which the process is more important than the results, often appears confusing for inhabitants for whom the burden of emergency requires immediate change. In only one locality, the inhabitants expressed in private their harsh dissatisfaction with the presence of PRIA due to the meagreness of benefits they had obtained so far. A committee member argued that *“[If they can’t give us a home or money] then just forget about it, they won’t help us”* (*“[agar makan ya paisa nahin de sake to] chod dijie hamari madad nahin kar paenge”*). In the eyes of many slum-dwellers, the absence of financial support hampers the credibility of PRIA’s project.

Secondly, the objective of “autonomization” of slum communities as targeted by PRIA is not always welcomed at the local level. Various inhabitants shared their doubts regarding their own capacity to bring about change, as illustrated by this quote from a committee member: *“if the NGO does not back us up, nobody will listen to poor people like us”* (*“agar NGO wale hamare saath nahin rahein to koi ham garib logon ki baat nahin sunega”*). PRIA representatives consider that slum communities too often rely on solutions likely to emerge from outside and not from inside. One of PRIA’s local partners went even further and argued that *“people in these slums are waiting for a hero to come and save them”* (*“ye log ek hero ka intezaar kiya karte hain jo unki jaan bacha sake”*).

Thirdly, and most importantly, inhabitants do not seem to have adopted the participatory nature of the project. It is striking that during so-called “participatory events” (slum-level meetings, workshops, interfaces with the State...) committee members remain in great majority silent. Even we inhabitants shared in private their skepticism or even their irritation regarding PRIA’s presence in their slums, they never share their doubts with the NGO. Committee members often follow instructions given to them without comprehending them, like in the case of this woman who had been told to map her neighborhood: *“I don’t really know what is the point of doing that, but ask Sir [PRIA’s partner], he might know”* (*“pata nahin is se fayda kya hoga, lekin sir se puchie unko maloom hoga”*).

5.2. Reinvented forms of empowerment?

Yet, we should be careful not to extrapolate the apparent tendency of slum-dwellers to accept the project without questioning it. Indeed, their total cooperation with PRIA seem in reality to be less an expression of docility than a strategy to develop in parallel their own reinterpretations of the project. We should be here careful to distinguish the public posture of slum-dwellers, especially vis-à-vis PRIA, and their private intentions. Most of committee members claim they participate in the project because they wish to *“to serve the community”* (*“samaj ka seva karna”*). However, these depoliticized discourses praising the so-called unity of slum communities should be in fact taken with high precaution. Behind apparently – and sometimes sincerely - charitable intentions are often hidden much more individualistic agendas.

5.2.1. Individual material benefits?

The perspective of potential material gains is an important source of motivation for committee members. They often expect that their participation in the committee might give them access to concrete personal advantages, such as a financial remuneration by PRIA, a job in the NGO for their children, or a priority access to the future schemes targeting the neighbourhood. These personal concerns seem sometimes to shadow the interests of the community as a whole. In one locality, for instance, it had been decided during a public meeting that the committee should tackle in priority the question of BPL (*Below Poverty Line*) cards, as many inhabitants were deprived of this document indispensable to access multiple public services. Yet, after a few weeks, the local committee finally gave up the problem and started addressing other issues. Three influential committee members later revealed that they were themselves already in possession of a BPL card and that they considered the questions of electricity and unemployment as much more pressing. Committee members are generally speaking reluctant to take measures if they do not directly benefit from them. And since these individuals are usually better-off as compared to other inhabitants – they are usually more or less literate and they have higher regular incomes – we could logically fear that the interests of the most destitute within the slum might be put aside.

5.2.2. “Political empowerment”?

Apart from material benefits, some committee members also seem attracted by another form of personal gain: political prestige. At least three committee members view their participation in the committee as a potential instrument to strengthen their influence in the neighbourhood. These individuals are all affiliated to various political parties; and due to their professional occupation or their natural charisma they are highly respected in their slum. They spontaneously present themselves as “boss” (“sardar”) or “head” (“mukhya”) of their community. Interestingly, while the three of them have been elected as committee chairmen, they in fact remain quite distant from the activities of the committee. In reality, their influence is more symbolical than operational. More than actual political power, it is visibility and legitimacy that these individuals seem to be seeking. One of them stated that, since he became committee chairman, he felt “people respect [him] even more” (“aaj yahan ke log meri izzat zyada karte hain”). They thus expect that their participation in Slum Improvement Committees could “stage” the informal role of community leader they had been forging since long.

5.2.3. Gender and caste empowerment?

Even though the three committee chairmen targeting “political empowerment” are all male, Slum Improvement Committees are in fact characterized by a strong feminine colour. Despite the fact that women are in these localities traditionally confined to the household, they are in this project the ones who actually control the operations. It is women, not men, who conduct surveys, who attend training sessions or who go meet State officials. In contrast, their husbands are either not interested in the project or too busy in activities taking place outside the slum. Hence, in parallel to the “political empowerment” targeted by some few males, we could argue that women also have accessed somehow to their own form of empowerment: a sort of “gender empowerment” offering them a new public role.

Similarly, some trends could give the impression that Slum Improvement Committees are a vehicle of emancipation for the lower-castes. The social fabric of Patna’s slums is highly heterogeneous: even though

lower-castes (the so-called “untouchables”) represent an overwhelming majority, there exist various hierarchical layers even within these relegated groups. It is often the most socially marginalized castes, such as the *Dusadh* or the *Mehtar*, that are the most active in the committees. One of PRIA’s partners explained that these groups tend to commit themselves in the project more than relatively higher castes “because they are in dire need of social recognition” (“*pahachan*”). This trend could be optimistically interpreted as a form of “caste empowerment”.

However, while the participation of women seems to be relatively well accepted, the visibility of the lowest castes appears more controversial. In one slum, individuals from an upper-caste (the *Banya* caste) expressed to PRIA six months after the creation of the committee their strong discontentment. They were resenting the fact that “illiterate” people were representing the neighbourhood, and that the lower-castes were trying to channel for themselves all the benefits of a State-funded sanitation program that was at that time run in the locality. In the end, after negotiations with PRIA, they finally rejected the idea of organizing once again committee elections and stated that they had no time for such “useless project”. Even though the study of inter-caste rivalries would require much more data to be elaborated, this anecdote reveals that there exists a possibility of community split linked to the actions of Slum Improvement Committees. And indeed, other evidences collected in the course of this research suggest that some groups – not only based on caste identity, but also on kinship ties, or simply on spatial localization in the slum – might be tempted to monopolize, voluntarily or not, the intellectual resources and the material benefits generated by the committees. This form of “group-based empowerment” could logically lead to the marginalization of some groups less well-connected.

5.2.4. The reinterpretation of Slum Improvement Committees

To sum up, while appearing in public as docile and insensitive to PRIA’s ideals of empowerment, even though slum-dwellers have not yet fully internalized empowerment as promoted by PRIA, they have in the process remodelled the use of Slum Improvement Committees and shaped new roads towards “empowerment”. Some of these reinvented forms of empowerment seem to match PRIA’s values and could be framed as by-product successes – it is particularly the case of “gender empowerment” and the possible case of “caste empowerment”. By contrast, others of these renewed forms of empowerment seem to subvert the initial goals of the project. Being the individualistic strategies of material development, the attempts of gaining political influence, or the tendency to favour its own peers, these reinterpretations of Slum Improvement Committees all challenge PRIA’s original collective approach. They do constitute potential forms of empowerment, as they offer the promise of fulfilling the inhabitants’ needs, but they do not represent an encompassing form of community empowerment.

6. PRIA’s local partners: between pragmatic control and symbolic domination of the inhabitants?

The previous part described how inhabitants, or at least some committee members, hide behind an apparent apathy a perfectly rationale agenda. Their multiple reinterpretations of Slum Improvement

Committees –largely meant to satisfy individualist interests - have to a certain extent corrupted the collectivist approach of empowerment as initially envisioned by PRIA.

What we should now try to look at is why slum communities have not spontaneously adopted PRIA's values. Is it only a question of time? We could indeed argue that this research was conducted only six months after the creation of the communities, and that committee members have not yet achieved their learning process. Or is it because the cultural norms and the social background of slum-dwellers are not compatible with concepts such as public participation, autonomization and collectivization?

In this part we will defend a different hypothesis by highlighting that the posture of slum-dwellers is in fact principally the result of their interaction with the other stakeholders of the project, and particularly with PRIA's local partners. The influence of these small local NGOs, to whom PRIA has externalized the supervision of Slum Improvement Committees, is tremendous as they have the responsibility to trigger an “empowering dynamic” in slums. We will now show that due to their professional insecurity and their social biases towards slum communities, they in fact have the greatest difficulties to effectively promote PRIA's vision of empowerment.

6.1. The practical reinterpretation of the project by the local partners

6.1.1. Professional insecurity

The six local NGOs contracted by PRIA in this project are all characterized by professional instability. Given that their limited financial capacities prevent them from conducting their own projects, these organizations rely almost exclusively on partnerships with bigger institutions like PRIA, the State or international agencies, for whom they perform tasks such as undertaking surveys, mobilizing communities or organizing events. The situation of these small NGOs is highly precarious: they are usually enrolled for short-term projects and have to find regularly new ways to secure their existence.

When Slum Improvement Committees were created, the six local partners which had been hired by PRIA had still one remaining year of contract. For three of these organizations, the project represented their sole source of revenue (60€ monthly per worker plus logistic expenses covered). During the research, the local partners frequently expressed a great anxiety regarding their immediate future once their contract with PRIA is over. Some expected to keep on their collaboration with PRIA, while others were planning to apply for bigger contracts, especially with international agencies. Whatever were their plans, they all considered it to be vital to maintain a good reputation in the development sector so as to increase their chances to be hired in future projects.

6.1.2. The need to display “results”: Slum Improvement Committees as a showcase of the local partners' professional skills

This insecurity seems to affect significantly the attitude of PRIA's local partners. In their public discourse, the local partners defend with great zeal PRIA's objectives of empowerment. Yet, their dire need to provide PRIA evidences of their professional aptitudes often contradicts these very objectives. The local partners seem obsessed with “results”, which is to say concrete outcomes highlighting the so-called

success of the Slum Improvement Committees they supervise. Eventually, they tend to prioritize cosmetic results upon the slow internalization by local communities of the participative process.

Various strategies are employed to give the impression that communities are adequately “empowered”. Typically, it is common for the local partners to romanticize the so-called “successes” of their committees, framing them as perfectly spontaneous, collective and invariably successful. One case study illustrates well this tendency. In one locality, a private contractor which was planning to destroy ten houses in order to build a water-tank had been apparently forced by the local committee to move the construction twenty meters away. The local partner in charge of the slum trumpeted that “*committee members have united to stop with their own hands bulldozers*” (“*committee logon ne milkar apne hathon se bulldozer ko hata diya*”). PRIA itself seemed impressed by this success and wrote an enthusiastic article in its blog stating that “*knowledge has knocked-out bulldozers*” (Terra Urban, 08/12/2012). However, a closer examination of this case revealed that the local partner was himself living in the slum and that his very own house was directly threatened by the eviction plan! He was in fact the one who had led the protestation movement and taken all the initiatives. Framing the victory of the community over the private contractor as a spontaneous collective mobilization conducted by the local Slum Improvement Committee was thus largely fantasised.

Generally speaking, the local partners are often tempted to force “outcomes” to happen. While in theory the role is limited to “guiding” Slum Improvement Committees, in practice they manage them more than they assist them. During committee meetings, it is usually the local partner which decides the agenda. Similarly, the initiatives undertaken by committee members are in fact most of the time nothing more than assignments given to them by the local partner – like for instance listing the names of the individuals deprived of one given pension or meeting a local representative. Moreover, in their hurry to obtain outcomes, the local partners rarely make the pedagogical efforts necessary for the inhabitants to appropriate the process. It is quite revealing that when asked about the current endeavours of their committee, inhabitants often seemed puzzled, as illustrated by this answer: “*Why are you asking us? Ask Sir, he will tell you*”. Therefore, the visible outcomes generated by Slum Improvement Committees are not necessarily the expression of the degree of empowerment of local communities, but more commonly the evidence of the local partners’ ability to “manage” committees.

6.2. The potential social bias of the local partners towards slum populations

We have just seen that PRIA’s local partners use Slum Improvement Committees not necessarily as tools of empowerment, but more as instruments of personal success. Yet, this distortion of the original goals of the project should not be framed only in rationale terms. Beyond the pragmatic constraints of professional insecurity, much more unconscious dynamics also hamper the local partners’ inclination to promote the participation of slum communities. Indeed, as we will now expose, the interactions between the social workers and the inhabitants appear significantly biased by social prejudices.

6.2.1. A difference of social status

The social differentiation between slum-dwellers and PRIA's local partners is evident. In terms of caste and material prosperity, of course, but not only: one local partner, who lives himself in a slum and who is no richer in any way with the people he is supposed to "empower", is for instance highly respected in all the localities where he operates. It is in fact the status of "knowledge provider" of the social workers which seems to be the most influential vector of social distinction.

A great variety of behavioural details illustrate the symbolical social gap between the "empowerers" and the "to-be-empowered". During routinely committee meetings, for example, inhabitants habitually sit on the ground, sometimes directly on the pavement, while local partners settle on a chair in the middle of the other participants. Similarly, in the conference halls, chairs and tables are constantly set in such a manner which cuts a clear division between slum-dwellers and the rest of the guests, being PRIA officials or State representatives. As for snacks, when they are distributed at the end of such events, social workers and inhabitants usually eat it separately.

6.2.2. A social barrier preventing the voice of the inhabitants to be heard?

Officially, slum-dwellers are warmly invited to participate and to take initiatives. Conferences are organized especially for this purpose, and committee meetings are meant precisely to make slum-dwellers raise their voice. In reality though, slum-dwellers are symbolically reminded that they are not at the same level than the other stakeholders. During conferences – like training workshops or interfaces with the local authorities – the microphone is usually handed to committee members one or two hours after the beginning of the event, while they are ironically officially announced as the main guests. During committee meetings, always "supervised" by a local partner, social workers are often reluctant to let slum-dwellers take a full control of the discussions. It is them who lead the talks, who propose ideas, who launch initiatives. The idiomatic Hindi expression "*hai ki nahin?*" ("*isn't it?*"), heavily used by PRIA's local partners, is well representative of their attitude: they usually act as if they were providing both questions and answers to the inhabitants.

What is striking to observe is that the local partners do not deny but actually justify their posture. To do so, they principally use in a paternalistic arguments. A social partner for instance explained that "*slum-dwellers have nothing to say*", and another remarked that "*for the moment [inhabitants] know nothing, so how could they speak?*"

These observations do not imply that PRIA's local partners are fallacious or unprofessional. Most of them revealed in reality highly dedicated to the communities they work for. Yet, it is undeniable that their modus-operandi – impacted by both professional difficulties and social biases – seems prejudicial to the objective of empowerment. If inhabitants are not treated as equal participants, can we really expect them to free their voice and feel emancipated? In this respect, the reaction of slum-dwellers is worth to be mentioned.

6.2.3. The inhabitants' reaction to the local partners' posture

In appearance, slum-dwellers do not oppose the implicit hierarchy ruling their relationships with the social workers. Most of them seemed to find absolutely normal to sit on the floor while social workers are settled on a chair. They even consider desirable not to be given the central position in discussions. One could interpret such posture as a mark of determinism and submission. Yet, when put in perspective with the inhabitants' hidden agendas that we have presented in the previous part, couldn't we in fact consider this public acceptance of their social inferiority as a strategy to lower down their visibility in order to gain more freedom to fulfil their own goals? The impact of the local partners' social biases should therefore not be exaggerated: if inhabitants comply with the social hierarchies imposed to them, it does not necessarily imply that they are also getting rid of their capacities of actions.

7. Within PRIA: one vision of empowerment but divergent roads to reach it?

We have argued in the two previous parts that the actors associated to PRIA in the project - which is to say the inhabitants and the local partners - have remolded the objectives of Slum Improvement Committees according to their own mindset and interests. Between slum-dwellers and the local partners, PRIA seems now hesitant about what strategies of empowerment to adopt: should the inhabitants be given time to appropriate the idea of participatory empowerment, or should the NGO be on the contrary more proactive in imposing its values?

It is important here to distinguish PRIA Patna, the regional office, and PRIA Delhi, the headquarter of the organization. PRIA Patna is in direct touch with the local partners and its representatives frequently go on the field to assess the initiatives of Slum Improvement Committees. As for PRIA Delhi, despite being spatially remote from the field, its influence on Slum Improvement Committees is important as it is from there that the main directions are given to the project.

At a theoretical level, PRIA Delhi and PRIA Patna seem to share a similar moral and ideological comprehension of Slum Improvement Committees. Yet, their interpretations of the achievements of the project diverge significantly. On the one hand, some representatives from PRIA believe that the limited effective participation of the inhabitants goes against the goal of bottom-up empowerment. On the other hand, others argue that for slum-dwellers to participate, it is primordial to first generate a dynamic of development within slum communities, even though it might require a top-down approach.

7.1. “A priori empowerment” vs. “a posteriori empowerment”

PRIA appears divided between two schools of thought. Some officials (especially found in Patna) believe empowerment goes with pure autonomy of local populations, and that social workers should constantly fight symptoms of dependence and encourage them to lead their own fights. We could label it as “a priori empowerment”, as inhabitants are supposed to be empowered even *before* bearing the fruit of their initiatives: it is the very process of participation which is supposed to emancipate them.

Others within PRIA (particularly in Delhi) argue that social workers should be pro-active and not hesitate to take initiatives in lieu of the inhabitants in order to trigger a change of mentalities. We could call it “*a posteriori* empowerment”, as inhabitants are supposed to get empowered *after* being shown what sorts of benefits could bring their participation: by providing inspiring examples of successes to local populations, it is believed that a dynamic of participation will be then generated.

In fact, the “*a posteriori*” vision of empowerment corresponds to the pragmatic evolution of the initial “*a priori*” approach that PRIA had initially theorized. It is the reality of the ground which has altered the perspective of some individuals within the NGO. The reluctance of inhabitants to rise up their voice in public, and the difficulties of the local partners to implement PRIA’s values might have given a new direction to the project.

7.2. A case-study: the project of participatory mapping

An example illustrates well the divergence of views within PRIA. During the course of the research, PRIA experimented with one Slum Improvement Committee a project of participatory mapping. The idea was to train committee members to use GPS devices and to create autonomously the map of their locality, in order to enhance the identity of local communities and to strengthen the symbolical existence of slum. After two weeks of work, a map was published on Google Map. PRIA Delhi cheered PRIA Patna for its “*wonderful achievement*”, “*very much participative*” – “*you have beautifully involved [the inhabitants]*”, congratulated one representative from Delhi. PRIA Delhi subsequently published in various publications enthusiastic articles (Terra Nova, 05/03/2013) describing how the three pillars of empowerment – autonomy, knowledge and participation – had been attained.

PRIA Patna was however very surprised by such optimism. “*We managed to entertain the people, but we failed in empowering them*” explained one representative, underlining that while the inhabitants accepted to collect GPS data, very few actually understood the logic of it. Even worse, many inhabitants even expressed their irritation after the map was published: “*what will we do with such useless piece of paper*” and “*what if you use these data to destroy our house?*” constituted typical complains.

From PRIA Patna’s perspective, the fact that PRIA Delhi decided to overlook these limitations and highlighted in priority the material outcomes of the initiative was felt as a lack of support. But PRIA Delhi explained that the priority was to display tangible results in order to stimulate slum populations. Even though inhabitants passively follow at first, they might eventually appropriate the process “*a posteriori*”. And indeed, a few days later, after presenting the published Google Map to other committees, some inhabitants expressed their interest in conducting such participatory mapping in their own locality. Is this a sign that PRIA is about to definitely transform its approach towards empowerment?

8. Conclusion

Despite walking towards the theoretical common horizon of improving life-conditions in slums, the different stakeholders involved in the project in fact draw Slum Improvement Committees in very contradictory directions. Earlier in this paper we wondered how their divergent interests could potentially fusion, coexist, or compete. In other words, we wanted to understand how the power relations intrinsic to the project are structurally organized.

8.1. Slum-dwellers locked into a rigid framework of domination?

At first sight, the power dynamics structuring the project seem to be organized in a hierarchical way. The pragmatic and social control of the inhabitants by the local partners illustrates the disequilibrium between the different actors. The fact that slum-dwellers follow instructions without internalizing them, that local patterns often take advantage of this situation to conduct their own agenda, and that the “participatory” dimension of the project is more rhetorical than actual – all these elements suggest that Slum Improvement Committees have not erased social hierarchies, but actually institutionalized them, and so in the name of empowerment. Hence, the relative submissiveness of local communities could almost lead us to label Slum Improvement Committees as oppressive more than emancipative platforms.

8.2. Free slum-dwellers within a loose emancipative framework?

Yet, such “hierarchical” framing of Slum Improvement Committees appears in fact irrelevant. While divergence of interests and unbalanced power-relations do constitute important features of the project, they do not imply a situation of absolute domination of one actor upon the others. Instead, our observations reveal that the different stakeholders in fact enjoy a relative autonomy in conducting their own agenda. It is particularly striking in the case of slum-dwellers; even though they are not at the centre of the project as PRIA had initially planned, and even though they are at times manipulated by the local partners, some of them have nevertheless managed to re-interpret the concept of Slum Improvement Committee for their own profit and, behind an apparent naïve passivity, actually carry on initiative to fulfil their own objectives. It is for instance the case of the individuals who expect to gain political influence through their role of committee members, of the inhabitants who have in mind personal material benefits, or of the committee members likely to channel benefits in priority towards their peers, being their caste group or their relatives. It signifies that slum-dwellers are not completely asphyxiated by the project, but can in fact develop their own agenda. Local partners and inhabitants follow their own logics and do not necessary compete. In that sense, the micro-governance of Slum Improvement Committees appears much more polycentric than hierarchic.

8.3. Imperfect forms of empowerment

The “polycentric” and emancipative portrait of Slum Improvement Committees should be nevertheless strongly nuanced. First of all, the so-called “reinvented” forms of empowerment (political, individualist, caste-based...) are in fact merely theoretical; committee members *expect* that the project will provide them opportunities, but it is too early to affirm that these expectations of empowerment will

materialize. Will the material benefits generated by the activities of the committees be significant enough to sustain the involvement of the inhabitants in the project? Will their need be actually met? Will the potential prestige stemming from the participation in a committee effectively offer political opportunities? The realization of these potential forms of empowerment still remains very uncertain.

Secondly, these “renewed” forms of empowerment concern only a few inhabitants, usually two or three members by committee, or a small group within the neighbourhood. While we have tried in this paper to study the power-relations between the different actors of the project, it would now be also interesting to consider more in depth the power-relations *within* slum communities. As we showed, the natural tendency of the inhabitants is not to aim at the prosperity of the community as a whole, but rather to target their own personal interests in priority. If only a happy-few individuals manage to get empowered through the project, and if the other inhabitants remain unchanged in terms of capabilities, is not it in the end a corrupted form of empowerment?

8.4. The ambiguity of promoting empowerment

What seems clear is that PRIA's vision of empowerment has not managed to impose itself. The idea of a community participating autonomously in the public sphere, and by doing so empowering itself as a group, is not yet to be observed on the field. Ironically, we could argue that it is PRIA itself which has created this situation by promoting a polycentric model for its Slum Improvement Committees. Autonomy, as we underlined all along the paper, was a central value of PRIA's approach: the NGO offered its local partners a great freedom to implement their own techniques, and left a large space for inhabitants to develop their own understandings of the project. But it is precisely this loose framework which eventually led to the distortion of PRIA's ideas, given that local partners went further than their mere role of “orienting” committees, and given that inhabitants adopted individualistic postures very distinct from collective ideals. As PRIA remained in the background, its values did not naturally assert themselves.

There is thus here a serious paradox: by creating a bottom-up structure, PRIA in fact engendered top-down mechanisms at different levels. Which leads us to ask the following question: if PRIA had implemented its project in a more hierarchical manner, if it had monitored more strictly its local partners, if it had given more instructions to inhabitants, in a word if it had controlled more closely the other stakeholders, could the project have been, paradoxically, more participatory? This interrogation echoes the debate currently dividing PRIA: should the organization leave inhabitants adopting by themselves the committees (in a polycentric fashion) or should the organization itself drive change and bring about results (in a more hierarchical manner)? This appears like a serious moral dilemma for organizations like PRIA wishing to combine pragmatism and idealism: could it be that a top-down approach in fact helps to implement bottom-up values?

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