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Success when we deemed it failure? Revisiting sites and services projects in Mumbai and Chennai 20 years later

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ABSTRACT

Twenty years after the sites and services approach was largely abandoned by the World Bank, new evidence from India demonstrates that the projects were largely successful and achieved many sought after urban planning goals.

Drawing on field visits, semi-structured interviews with residents and project officials, archival research and spatial analysis, we found that sites and service projects in Chennai and Mumbai had transformed into bustling and thriving communities over the last two decades. Contrary to past critiques, the incremental housing approach – where small serviced plots are developed and sold to low income households – had worked. This unique land product is not typically available in the formal sector and helped to broaden access to the housing market. However, the bigger success to emerge from these projects, is the creation of well-planned and well-serviced neighborhoods that are both livable and inclusive. This occurred because the incremental development process was coupled with neighborhood planning and the integration of mixed income households. Key design innovations included incorporating a range of plot sizes to reach different income groups, increasing density, developing a hierarchy of road and open space layouts, incorporating mixed use by allocating space for commerce and social services, and strategically selecting sites for connectivity to transport and economic activity. Lessons from these projects offer valuable tools and insights for planners as they guide growth to create more inclusive and livable cities.

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1. Introduction

Starting in the early 1970s, the ‘sites and services’ model propagated globally, widely viewed by governments and donors alike as an antidote to rapid slum expansion and failure of past affordable housing programs (Payne, 1984; Peattie, 1982; van der Linden, 1986). Between the early 1970s and 1998 the World Bank alone invested in 100 sites and service projects across 53 countries with a total investment of \$14.6 billion. The objective of these programs was delivery of incremental housing for the poor through the provision of small serviced plots, sometimes with a core unit. But despite the initial enthusiasm, sites and services projects suffered from mixed implementation experience and were ultimately abandoned in the mid 1990s. Critics argued that these projects took too long, were too complicated, ‘leaked’ to the non-poor, and suffered

low occupancy because the sites were too remote and far from jobs and income opportunities (Keare & Parris, 1982; Laquian, 1983; Peattie, 1982; Mayo & Gross, 1985). At the time, evaluators measured project success based on narrowly defined rates of completion, cost recovery, and achievement of stated project objectives within project duration. Many of these projects failed to deliver against these metrics within the limited project lifespans.

For this study, we visited two cities in India—Chennai and Mumbai¹—where about \$200 million were invested in developing 28 sites with approximately 143,000 plots over the period 1977 to 1994. Revisiting these sites several decades later offered us a unique opportunity to test the durability of some of the original ideas, claims, and critiques, and to assess their validity on the ground. Specifically, we asked: What, if any, were the positive outcomes? What worked and what did not? What insights do these old projects

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¹ The official names of both cities were changed in 1996 from Madras to Chennai and from Bombay to Mumbai. We will refer to both using the new official names except in reference to projects.

offer for new programs being designed to accommodate the next generation of urban residents?

Our findings in Chennai and Mumbai differ sharply from the negative assessments in the sites and services literature and evaluations. Over the 20–30 years since completion, these projects appear to have achieved remarkable success in delivering not only housing but also neighborhoods that are livable and inclusive. Specifically, these projects succeeded in three ways. First, the idea of “incremental” housing—where people would invest slowly, over time, at a pace that fitted each individual family’s circumstances—has worked. Second, the site planning and infrastructure design innovations introduced in these projects directly contributed to enhanced affordability and succeeded in delivering well served, mixed use and physically livable neighborhoods. Third, these sites now offer a range of housing types and sizes and appear to be home to households across several employment and income groups suggesting these projects have delivered mixed-income neighborhoods.

What aspects have contributed to the creation of physically livable neighborhoods? Theory suggests that four factors determine the physical quality of living conditions—the housing unit, infrastructure, tenure, and the neighborhood (Gulyani & Bassett, 2010; Gulyani & Talukdar, 2008). We find that these projects have delivered on all four dimensions. First, with investments by plot owners, the housing units have steadily improved in size and quality. Second, residents have access to good and well-maintained infrastructure – water, electricity, paved streets, drains, sewerage, street lighting – throughout these neighborhoods. Third, these neighborhoods offer secure tenure and have a mix of owner-occupied and rental housing, partially because owners have built additional floors with independent rental units. Fourth, the neighborhoods are physically well-planned, well-connected to the city, and have social and economic amenities (schools, clinics, shops, offices and, at times, industrial areas). In addition, in a departure from many housing programs that strive to narrowly target only low-income families, these projects aimed for and appear to have succeeded in attracting families from different economic classes. Although this decision was driven primarily by pragmatic cost-recovery concerns rather than normative goals, our observations suggest that it has resulted in more socio-economically diverse neighborhoods.

The package of design decisions in these projects created, somewhat inadvertently, neighborhoods that are inclusive, livable, and thriving. This case study has implications for both theory and practice. Importantly, it demonstrates how two normatively desirable but elusive urban planning goals – mixed-income and mixed-use neighborhoods – can be achieved while also offering possible tools for creating affordable housing and better managing urban expansion.

1.1. Structure of the paper

The paper is structured as follows. In the rest of this section we discuss the methodology. In Section 2, we start with an outline of the history of sites and services projects, including an overview of the World Bank’s investments in these projects globally. We also review the commentary – positive and negative – emerging from assessments of sites and services projects, with a special emphasis on some of the major critiques, in the 1980s and early 1990s that contributed to their demise. In Section 3, we focus on the case studies and discuss how the long-term results compare to the original performance expectations. Section 4 highlights the key design, planning, and infrastructure features that contributed to long-term success. It also examines neighborhood location and land values. Section 5 discusses findings and policy implications.

1.2. Methodology

Our research draws on a mixed-methods case study analysis of sites and services projects in the cities of Chennai and Mumbai in India. We trace the trajectory of select project sites from inception design through to project closure, and compare this to the situation on the ground 20–30 years later.

We started our analysis by compiling relevant academic and “grey” literature on sites and services schemes, as well project documents from the World Bank project archives. The documents included site maps, background studies, implementation reports, correspondence, official project agreements as well as midterm and final project reviews. In late 2015, we visited 15 of the 28 project sites in the two cities (Table 1), selected to represent a variety of locations, sizes and designs. Fig. 1 shows the location of the sites within the built-up area of both cities in 2010 with sizes ranging from 7 to 180 hectares. The sites we visited ranged from the closest to the farthest from the city center, as well as the largest to the smallest. Staff or managers from the government’s original project implementation teams joined us on site visits in both cities, providing rare insight into the history as well as evolution of these projects. At each project site, we documented the general condition of services, housing typologies, construction quality, current market value, and occupancy. We also conducted short open-ended interviews with households at different sites and had detailed discussions with former World Bank staff who had worked on these projects.

Following field work, we conducted a spatial analysis using satellite imagery of project sites in both cities to compare basic land use attributes and the nature of physical development. The boundaries of project sites, types of services provided at each site, as well as suitable comparative areas of private development were identified and verified with project managers and staff. This information was georeferenced using QGIS to create a layer of project investments. Then we used Open Street Map’s building layer along with Google Earth satellite imagery to capture the current building rooftops on a four-hectare sample site within each investment and control site. We verified and updated the rooftops within our project and control sites to accurately reflect land use and average rooftop size. Using the additional layers obtained from Open Street Map and the World Bank, we used QGIS to analyze the imagery. This allowed a comparison of site layout, road density, and location within the urban built up areas. Results were triangulated with field observations and qualitative information from project staff to ensure the results reflected on the ground realities. This was supplemented with data and insights from an independent follow-on study by a NYU team that conducted in-depth interviews with 60 households in Charkop, Mumbai in early 2017 (Adefarasin, Spiegel, Villasenor, & Weniger, 2017). Finally, we used information about market values and location to assess long term financial return of each site.

2. Sites and services: a brief overview

2.1. The sites and services model and its intent

The sites and services model that emerged in the early 1970s represented a dramatic departure from traditional approaches to public housing provision. The model was broadly applied by development agencies and governments alike, and was based on an emerging understanding of ‘informal housing delivery systems’ (van der Linden, 1986), built on a premise of self-help. Proponents of this model argued that homeowners know what housing they need and are capable of providing it (Abrams, 1964; Mangin, 1967; Turner, 1978, 1983). Under the sites and services approach

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