



Knocks on the Doors of a Slum

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'Globalization insights' is a series of feature stories told by journalists from Africa, Asia and Latin America – stories that give an insight into the perceptions and experiences of people as globalization unfolds in their environs. This project is jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and IPS EUROPA.

If Mukesh Mehta can have his way, most diamonds bought around the world could soon pass through what is at present the biggest slum in Asia.

But that would only be the more glittering part of a new deal to rebuild Dharavi, the infamous slum in Mumbai that is home to an estimated 600,000 people.

The Dharavi project seeks to bring together many strands that tie into globalization. It will seek to combine national resources with international technology, and mix private enterprise with government support to rebuild Dharavi along the lines of that other buzzword, sustainable development.

"We are not just developing Dharavi," says Mehta, who has returned to Mumbai after ten years in the United States as consultant to the 1.5 billion dollar redevelopment challenge. "We believe this can be a model for cities right across the developing world."

Dharavi does not look that way at the moment. And there are people here who say it never will.

The miles of shacks that shelter half a million people and more must be about the most decrepit spectacle in Asia. It is fortunate perhaps that the assembly of tin sheets, rags and sticks, held together occasionally by brick and cement are challenged only during the monsoons. It helps that what torrents of water take away can be put together quickly again.

Many shacks here are also little factories.

Three women squat on a squalid street outside their tin home to pack savouries into polythene bags at speed that could shame a machine. Some yards down, another two women stir hot dye in huge buckets. These little businesses add up to a turnover of more than a billion dollars, by local estimates. Many of these products from savouries and textiles to handicrafts and watch straps are exported.

Mehta plans to turn this slum into a smart new business and residential district. "Private developers would build high-rise buildings for the residents here, and they would get freehold accommodation here for free," Mehta says. "The developers would recover their money through other property they build here to hold businesses and factories.

It will be a self-financing project."

Each family would get 225 square feet of built up living area for free. A developer would get 1,33 square feet of built up area for sale for every square foot built to house its residents.

Dharavi's big asset is that it is a slum that sits around some of Mumbai's smart neighbourhoods and business districts like the Bandra-Kurla complex. "The slum dwellers are living on very valuable real estate," Mehta says. "This way developers can build in a valuable area and the people here can live better without paying for the property they get."

The project aims to engage residents in new business activities. The present businesses would continue in better premises, and more businesses could be attracted to Dharavi, Mehta believes.

A major breakthrough, Mehta says is that the Gems and Jewellery Export Corporation has agreed to house 300 export companies in the new business district proposed for Dharavi. "These businesses would have a turnover of more than a billion dollars a year, and employ around 50,000 people," Mehta said.

7 out of 10 diamonds sold worldwide are cut and polished in India

It is a business that has connected India to the world for long. On average seven out of ten diamonds sold around the world are cut and polished in India, mostly in Mumbai and in Surat in the neighbouring state Gujarat. Few women would suspect this is where their best friends take shape.

The diamonds business located in scattered factories has been looking for an area with better infrastructure. Proposed new sites are being offered also to about 100 factories for high quality leather goods exports, to be made with what organisers say will be "international design and manufacturing technology."

A 2.5 million square feet site is being prepared for "state of the art medical facilities, to promote medical tourism." What the world would shun today is being prepared to draw the world tomorrow.

The new construction is being planned with use of Dutch tunnel shuttering technology that enables rapid construction through use of hot concrete. Mehta plans to use

some of the best the world can offer, and return to it some of the best it seeks.

Dutch technology, a global market in diamonds, brought together by a glob-trotting Indian seems like the globalised way to development that so many would want to embrace. But the doubters are as active as the builders.

"We have seen many promises before," said the woman with the dyeing buckets. "You think anyone will give us a free house in a big building, just like that? We will believe it when it happens."

Dharavi seems to have more doubters than believers. "It is impossible to think like what Mukesh Mehta is thinking," says Joackin Arputham, a leading campaigner in Dharavi. "The new developers do not know Dharavi, they have no experience of living here. You cannot have a top down model of development that does not involve the community."

Such attempts have been made before and have failed, Arputham says. "Ten years back a government official wanted to develop the area. He failed. Then somebody came up with one building. It has been lying vacant for two years."

Arputham says the people of Dharavi might not want to live in the smart new buildings even if they came up and were on offer.

"If you give me a fantastic palace, can I sustain that?" he said. "Why give me a beautiful white elephant? I will have to calculate my outgoings, on the electricity there, water charges. Just for use of a lift people may have to pay 100 rupees (2.50 dollars) a month. Who wants to do that?"

People given free houses are likely to sell them and go back to squatting and living in another place, he says. "People need to be consulted in what they want to do."

Along the filthy lanes within Dharavi, people seem at home. Transferring them all into high-rise buildings seems a fantastic idea, perhaps too fantastic an idea. But Mehta who has the strong backing of the authorities is determined to move the project from the drawing boards to the ground.

The question now is whether the people here will accept the development that many say is being thrust upon them.

At stake is not just the fate of more than half a million people here, or the appearance of 427 acres of land.

About 55 percent of Mumbai's 14 million live in slums not much better than this one. If infamous Dharavi can, they could.

The arguments for status quo are strong, inevitably. But many here may not want filth, rats, cockroaches and mosquitos as neighbours for ever. Residents are being told they will gain a great deal more than they would lose, and developers are counting on them to recognise that.

Given its location between the airport and a business district, this is prime estate, if only potentially so at the moment. Dharavi is not attractive, but it is attractively

located. Whether this kind of development model would work in other places is not certain. Globalization is an uncertain visitor in Dharavi, and it may never touch slums that have nothing to offer to the world.

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