

**Hazards Centre
Working with Alliances
An assessment
December 2006**

The Hazards Centre has been providing professional support, along with research, training, and campaign inputs to several organisations and groups over the last eight years. In the process, the Centre has also been able to interact with, and strengthen alliances of different kinds. This brief note is an attempt to put down some lessons that have been learnt and issues that remain to be understood in the process of alliance building in terms of the role of institutions like the Hazards Centre.

Some lessons were drawn from a review that took place in August 2004 in which a panel of eleven persons participated. Three of these were from funding agencies, three were from mass organisations, three were from community groups, and two were from the resource group of the Hazards Centre. All of them were well acquainted with the work of the Centre. There have also been several discussions within the Hazards Centre, and with community groups and organisations, regarding the role of the Centre in facilitating alliances, the conclusions of which have been recorded in the minutes of the weekly meetings and internal evaluations of the Hazards Centre.

To begin with it should be recognised that the Centre is an integral part of the following alliances:

- a. ***Sajha Manch (SM)*** – a federation of community groups, resident associations, occupational groups, labour associations, and voluntary groups that has no formal membership but recognises its strength from the annual Conventions it organises (at the last Convention in October 2006, over 120 organisations recorded their attendance). The federation came into being in 1998 and its binding element has been the opposition to the Master Plan that has been used to has been used by the establishment to victimise each member group or association. This is the only alliance for which the Centre acts as the secretariat.
- b. ***Delhi Suraksha Samiti (DSS)*** – a loose alliance of five voluntary groups that came together on the issue of hazardous waste management in industrial areas, being driven by the Supreme Court appointed Monitoring Committee (SCMC). This later coalesced into another group set up by the SCMC called the Local Area Environment Group (LAEG). Still later it developed links with other groups working on occupational safety issues and, subsequently, with the Federation of Associations of Registered Medical Practitioners.
- c. ***Citizens Campaign for Preserving Democracy (CCPD)*** – a campaign on citizenship rights initiated by two groups working with wastepickers who were continually harassed by the police on charges of being Bangaldeshis. Later on this was joined by other groups and individuals working with Nepali migrants, legal aid, women's rights, vulnerable occupational groups, media exposure, and enlarged to encompass the central issue of democratic rights.
- d. ***Jan Swasthya Abhiyan-Delhi (JSA-D)*** – a campaign launched by groups working with health issues in Delhi, particularly with women and children, to influence policy regarding state-sponsored health services and enabling the access of under-privileged communities to these services. The campaign has also been able to link up with other issues such as food security, potable water provision, and shelter.
- e. ***Visthapan Virodhi Abhiyan (VVA)*** – an alliance that emerged when it was announced that the Yamuna Pushta settlements were to be demolished and the inhabitants removed to the periphery of the city. The Abhiyan carried out a short-term campaign to mobilise the settlements and resist the eviction but failed to do so in the face of a determined onslaught by the state.
- f. ***Stop Evictions Campaign (SEC)*** – a network of several groups and individuals that came into being after the combined evictions of settlements from four different locations in Delhi, and the growing perception that the courts were playing a major role in the distortion of justice and the persecution of the poor. This issue is now evolving into a larger Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reform.

- g. **Strategy for Urban Livelihoods (SUL)** – a network of 20 voluntary groups who have been sponsored by a Gol-UNDP project to develop a strategy for Livelihoods for the Urban Poor. The Sajha Manch has been chosen as one of the participating groups and the Centre regularly represents the Manch in the project. This also merges well with the activities of the Sajha Manch on the issue of a Right to Work campaign.
- h. **Campaign on urban renewal (CUL)** (not yet formalised) – this emerged from a series of meetings initially organised by Oxfam in Uttar Pradesh, later by the Hazards Centre in Delhi and Mumbai, and now by Action Aid India in Bangalore, Patna, Kolkata and other cities, that is still coagulating into a national network of urban groups concerned with the unfolding of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission and what it implies for the growth of cities that are not favourable to the labouring poor.

In addition, the Hazards Centre has been providing assistance, as and when required, to national and local alliances such as:

- Campaign on Right to Information
- Campaign on Right to Food
- Campaign Committee for Construction Labour
- Campaign for Social Security in the Informal Sector
- Association of Street Vendors
- Campaign on Right to Shelter
- WTO Virodhi Abhiyan

The following **lessons and issues** have emerged from all these activities and their periodic and regular monitoring:

1. The provision of research and training inputs to a large number of organisations by a supportive centre (like HazCen) can initiate and encourage the growth of an alliance (SM, CCPD, CUL) of groups with varied but common interests.
2. If the alliance has a fixed and regular place and frequency of meetings, then it enables the participation of more organisations as and when they require the support of the alliance (typically SM and JSA-D, as compared to CCPD).
3. One creative manner of democratic functioning that needs further experimentation is where the agenda is set, all decisions taken, and responsibilities allotted, and schedules agreed upon at regular general body meetings, instead of in executive groups (SM and DSS, as compared to JSA-D and SUL).
4. If the alliance leaves its doors open to a large range of issues that affect the urban poor, then it also facilitates the greater participation of trade unions, mass organisations, and special interest groups (women, children, handicapped etc) (SM and SUL, as compared to DSS).
5. The key to sustainability appears to lie in a number of groups who maintain consistent presence in decision-making and implementation and a secretariat that provides support in carrying out the decisions of the general body (JSA-D as compared to VVA or SEC).
6. Successful advocacy with government by the alliance leading to policy changes can give a significant boost to the strength and appeal of the alliance. At the same time it also opens the alliance and its theme to manipulation by the establishment (as has happened both with the Right to Information and Social Security campaigns).
7. There can also be a crisis of identity between the alliance and the secretariat (SM and HC), and this may have had much to do with problems regarding perceived transparency in decision-making and implementation, particularly with respect to finances.
8. Another crisis of confidence can emerge if the support group engages with multiple alliances pursuing the same ostensible goal (as in the case of HC support to both SM as well SEC).
9. A more serious crisis emerges when different alliances begin to assert their right to a particular terrain and broadly appeal to the same constituency (as has happened in the case of the Right to Shelter, Right to Information, Right to Social Security, and Urban Renewal campaigns).

10. Hence a support group that wishes to facilitate a process of alliance building has to be aware of these complexities and build its goodwill on the basis of the principles of:
 - Consistent non-sectarian (and non-financial) professional support
 - Transparent functioning
 - Accountability for responsibilities undertaken and deliverables
 - Patient dialogue with all concerned parties
 - An open forum for continuous public discussion
 - Independence from funding agency pressures