Sanitation in informal settlements - from technocratic failure to successful participatory design of public space

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Estimated over 2 billion people worldwide live without access to proper sanitation, with all its consequences on hygiene, health, gender discrimination and environmental pollution. In India alone, 800.000 people die each year (most of them under 5 years old) of diarrhoea, so easy to prevent and to cure when having the right means. This is a humanitarian scandal.

In Dharavi / Mumbai, an estimated 700.000 people live and work on less than 250 hectares in a hybrid mix of formal and informal settlement. According to an UN report, in 2006 one toilet seat existed for 1440 dwellers while there was an improvement till 2014 to one toilet seat for approximately 800 people. This is still a proportion which is neither feasible nor acceptable and it does not eliminate open defecation with all its risks and undignified aspects. Due to the extreme spatial density and the economic limits, the fact that 12-15 m2 of floor area serves as average living space for 6 people, a 'conventional' and 'engineered' sewage system is out of reach as well as from an environmental perspective not the ultimate solution.

The case study is based on three extensive study trips documenting and illustrating in detail very different sanitation facilities and interviewing stakeholders including Jockin Arputham, the founder of the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and president of Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). The paper illustrates and compares the failures of technocratic design which turned into unused and dangerous public toilets with the creative outcome of participatory design: there the results are not only clean and hygienic toilets for the communities with innovative spatial organisations but also public spaces for meeting and exchange of information. They are examples of empowerment for political action and humanitarian progress.





