Wanted: Space in the City Vendors Gain Ground in Munger, Bihar, India

Impact: A group of impoverished waste pickers in Munger, Bihar, India organized to protest the demolition of their traditional homes to make way for a railroad overpass. Their lives and livelihoods were disrupted, and no suitable land offered. With the support of SEWA, the residents have taken their case to government officials for a year-and-a-half while living in plastic makeshift housing. On August 18, 2011, having exhausted all democratic avenues, dozens of members of this community began a hunger strike.

Munger is a small town in Bihar, one of the least developed states of India. A branch of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) was formed here in 2000. SEWA Munger works on several issues related to microfinance, livelihood, and health linked to urban informal sector workers.

In 2007, Bihar became the first state to constitute a commission to undertake focused work toward improving life for Mahadalits in the state. Mahadalit is a term used for an extremely vulnerable category of dalits, the oppressed class in the Indian Varna’s caste division system.

Around the same time that the Mahadalit Commission was formed, another less positive event affecting vulnerable people took place in Munger: construction of an ambitious railway overpass was planned. In late 2009, the Ministry of Railways sent an order to approximately 70 Mahadalit waste picker families to vacate the land on which they had resided for 70 years.

The order was in English and the families did not understand its repercussions until the bulldozers came and demolished their homes in the winter of 2009. Then they approached their ward councillor, but no help was extended.

SEWA Munger intervened. Members were organized, and they approached the District Magistrate, the Commissioner, and the Nagar Parishad (urban local body). While the affected families continued to stay in temporary shelters on the site where they had always lived, sustained advocacy was undertaken with local bodies and administration. However, the urban local body decided that if these families wanted assistance, they would have to move to a hilltop outside the town—a place that has been ravaged by bandits for past many years. As Umesh Manjhi explained, “It’s better to die here where we lived than shift to Murli Pahar, where without work and [with] bandits around there is no security to our lives.”

Inclusive Cities project: Inclusive Cities focuses on support and capacity building for membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the urban informal economy. Through organizing, advocacy, and policy analysis, informal workers are making their needs heard within urban planning processes. Partners in the Inclusive Cities project include MBOs of the working poor and technical support organizations committed to improving the situation of the working poor. For more information, and to access research and publications on inclusive urban planning and capacity building tools for MBOs, visit: www.InclusiveCities.org