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India Blog Series: Commonalities and Complexities ^[1]

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“India is a complex nation.” I heard these words many times during my short two-week visit to India. After much reflection, I believe I may have finally gained a speck of clarity about what this statement means, and why it became a recurring quote in conversations regarding where India is today and where its future lies. I set out to examine India’s urban issues to determine whether the strength of the nation stems from its mega-cities, urban populations, and/or local s and weaknesses is a complex



In New Delhi, our team met with Harsh Mander, a founding member of the Center for Equity Studies (CES). CES conducts research and advocacy for social and economic justice. Under their umbrella, the Dil Se campaign was established in efforts to provide services to street children in Delhi.



After visiting a school for boys that was created as a result of the Dil Se campaign, and hearing about the vast needs of urban children in Delhi and throughout India, it was obvious that great measures were being taken to correct a growing problem that has left many children without proper education, health, and other basic needs and opportunities.

Our conversation with Mr. Mander revealed several things: collaboration with government on urban social issues is a necessity; societies must reclaim responsibility for their citizens; and populations must understand the issues that are common to us all in order to find solutions to the problems that unite us.

In the case of India, small NGOs seem to be taking on two monstrous tasks. First, they must address the needs of the poor. Second, they must stress to local, national, and international communities that social issues, such as lack of education or health services, poor nutrition, and homelessness are not solely problems within India, but are rather issues that concern much of the developing and even developed world alike.

Creating this common understanding amongst communities across the world could be the key to developing more unified and effective strategies to tackle poverty. As Mr. Mander suggested, many developed nations are steering away from socialized states and abandoning responsibility of their citizens. Perhaps recognizing this approach as a problem for sustainable development will allow India to become a step ahead of the rest of the world. It is also possible that India will be able to establish itself as a nation with a sense of responsibility to its citizens and set an example for other nations.

The paradox of this concept as both an opportunity and weakness became apparent to me when one day in Mumbai, our group drove down a street and saw the 27-floor home of a billionaire, and the next day drove down a street and saw the overcrowded slum dwellings constructed of plastic sheeting and scrap wood. It's true that a long road lies ahead to create a socially inclusive and fiscally balanced. Addressing the diverse needs of the growing urban population has put strains on the government, non-profit organizations and citizens who inhabit these areas. However, starting out with a proper foundation is a step in the right direction and a step that India may be able to embrace with the help of its ambitious NGOs and citizens. The work of CES and other organizations such as Sesame Workshop, which works to improve educational opportunities for children and helps ensure that they develop into adults who respect diversity and the needs of other, may provide the first step toward harnessing the immense power of a mega-city in an international arena. Building strong communities within a country strengthens the nation and raising globally aware citizens in the

process helps ensure that the commonality of many social issues is recognized from city to city, across the world.

The undertakings in urban India to improve equality are similar to that of cities I have worked; they continue working to educate the marginalized, address the needs of the homeless and impoverished, empower women and, improve quality of life. It is an ongoing and common effort. In some ways, I felt that the cities we visited were not so different from my own home and not so 'complex' at all. The real complexity, perhaps, is communicating to those abroad that India is its own nation, and determined to resolve any problems in its own way. In New Delhi and Mumbai, what little I saw of an expansive country, it was obvious that strategic action by the government and non-profit organizations was underway to improve the lives of many. What remains to be seen is whether the world will recognize India's accomplishments so far, despite its complexities.

Jessica Castillo is a longtime municipal civil servant in the Los Angeles area and second year Master of Public Diplomacy student. Her research interests include urban issues, tourism, public diplomacy of non-state actors, and the Latin American region. She will be participating in India: Inside Out, a student-led research project in India this December. For more on the project, please visit www.indiapublicdiplomacy.com.
