

The Real Lessons of Dharavi Sustainability

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Prince Charles recently stirred up headlines in India and the United Kingdom with his controversial praise for Dharavi, the huge mega-slum in the heart of Mumbai where we work, as a “model” of sustainability for towns and cities in England and the rest of the world. He was certain that despite his “call for a revolution” in his upcoming book, he would be accused of “naivety” for holding up our slum as a model for much of anything.

Prince Charles in our view – and experience – is actually onto something, perhaps even more profound than he realizes.

ACORN's Dharavi Project, which has organized a union of hundreds of recyclers in Dharavi who use our sorting center to process tons of gathered products and plastics from the surrounding slums, housing colonies, and more than 30 schools and assorted corporations which are our partners, is a perfect example of exactly the kind of “green” sustainability project that the Prince trumpets. Our recyclers, following our four “R” program of “Reduce, Recycle, Reuse, and Respect,” have seen their efforts to survive and make a living in the wake of *Slumdog Millionaire* suddenly less an object of scorn than a source of admiration. Specials on our work by the *National Geographic* and news and magazine articles in India and abroad have called us “green heroes,” “green workers,” and “invisible heroes.” It is hard to express how proud we are of the praise, we just wish it paid better.

And, that is perhaps the hidden message of sustainability that the Prince and many others might be missing, especially since the very future and existence of Dharavi is at risk to the billion dollar plans of a queue of developers for what is now our valuable acreage in the center of Mumbai. Dharavi works because it is not only the home of our recyclers and more than a million others, but especially because this is also where they work. The heart of sustainability is not simply full utilization of what we produce in a constructive way, but it is also livelihood. Dharavi works because so many of us are able to make a productive livelihood where we live.

The lesson lost on so many planners, urbanists, and developers both for the poor and other people, is that the farther livelihood is separated from living, the more unsustainable a community becomes. The resettlement plans in Delhi that have moved recyclers and others 30 to 40 kilometers from their former slums have forced constant contradictions as recyclers move back to even worse conditions, because they cannot create a livelihood two hours away from their work. In Bombay, the new housing schemes that eradicate slums and provide 200 meter housing units are bleak places, quickly abandoned by many who need the space to work where they live, and find there is no longer room for the their work where they are forced to reside.

This problem is not unique to Dharavi or India. The abandoned housing tracts filled with

foreclosures outside of Phoenix in the United States or the bleak acres of council housing that the Prince decries do not work partially because they are so removed from employment that they simply fester and rot, stranded by lack of transportation, and stifled by a paucity of opportunity. The bustle of small industry physically located in Dharavi, is at the heart of why Dharavi is a model for many communities.

Sustainability is about living in harmony with the land, but living is not simply a matter of residence as the people of Dharavi prove every day, but a matter of livelihood. It is past time for planners and politicians to understand that the real lessons embedded in why Dharavi works are found in the balance of home and work. ACORN has found over and over again in Dharavi and the other countries where we support community organization that the more work, and the better it is paid, then the more people will come and sustain the community. Separate these things and life in the community shrivels and shrinks.

The Prince has a point here. We hope he takes it the rest of the way and reminds his audience and the world that Dharavi works because of the work itself, not just because of how green we seem.