

Community engagement is at the centre of this spatial data platform



Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy
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Through the SPOORTHI platform, an urban poor community in Bengaluru is being trained to track basic services and access them

Merlin Francis, Communication Officer

“When we were first brought to Baiyappanahalli from Domlur about 30 years back, we were given 10x13 sq ft land holdings, but barely anything else,” recalls Annaiyappa, a community leader at an urban poor community in G Baiyappanahalli. “We did not have water connection and were not even aware about whom to approach for basic facilities,” he adds.



Women and children of an urban poor settlement in G Baiyappanahalli queue up to collect water

And then, NGOs such as Ramanujan Trust and Association for Voluntary Action and Service (AVAS) dug borewells to provide water to the community. They also educated

them about the various municipality schemes and benefits and shared details about the departments and officials to get in touch with, to get specific issues in their area fixed. Over the years, makeshift huts have given way to concrete, multi-storied structures; water pipes are available on most street corners; community toilets have made way for private toilets within homes.

Thirty years on, from 600 families, the community has grown to nearly 1,000 families. However, they continue to face challenges similar to what it faced earlier.

Can we harness the power of technology and community to resolve these challenges? How would such a system shape up? These are the questions at the heart of the Spatial Data System for the Inclusive Cities Agenda in India project, being implemented by Information Technology for Change (ITfC), AVAS and the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP).

The pilot project puts the community at the centre of its activities. Twenty-four youngsters in the community are being trained to use the SPOORTHI platform, a community-led spatial data platform developed by CSTEP, to identify, track and monitor access to basic services in the water, sanitation and health (WSH) sectors.

It aims to enhance governance responsiveness to urban poor communities, increase their access to public services, while reducing their political and economic exclusion. The project has two specific objectives:

- **Strengthen and ease the existing grievance redressal mechanisms** in the community by building a single portal to log grievances with respect to WSH sectors. The platform acts as a database for evidence. The project aims to link the platform with service provider agencies for better claims making and problem redressal.
- Facilitate claims making and monitor community development goals and public infrastructure by **systematically mapping critical urban issues and infrastructure problems**.

As part of the project, young community leaders were trained to collect household data on WSH sectors. This data was then fed into the SPOORTHI platform, which visualises the status of WSH indicators to identify trends and challenges. The platform will eventually be routing grievances to the departments concerned, and will track the status of the redressal process. “Unlike other service agency platforms, which allow only one-way communication (lodging a complaint and tracking the status),

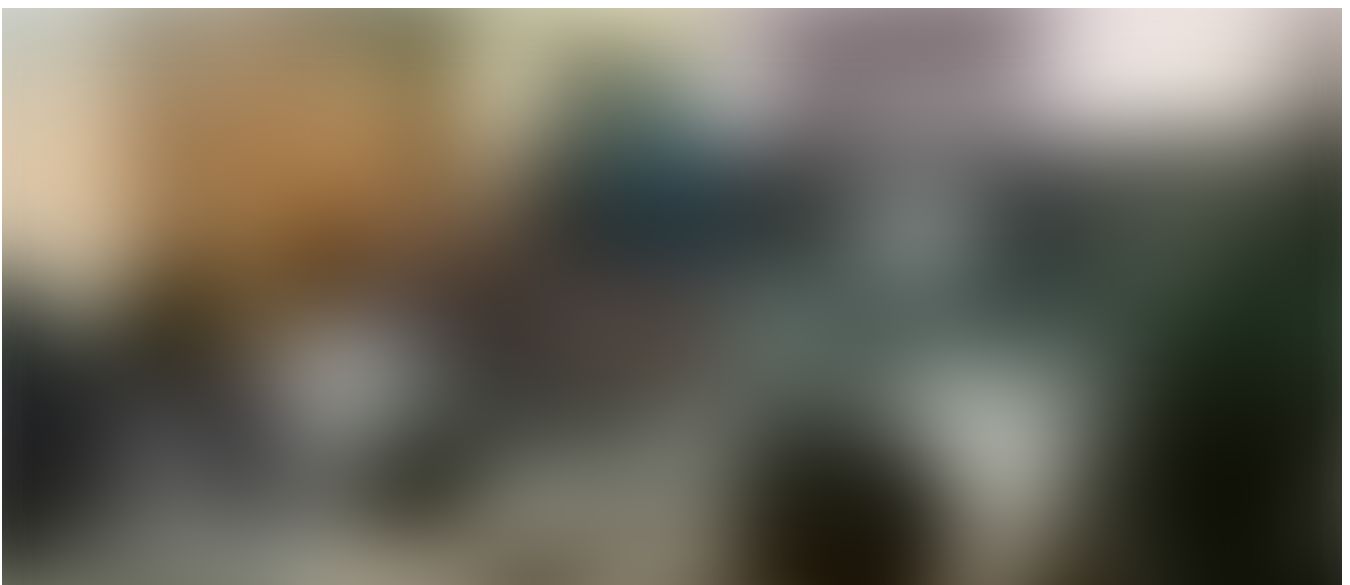
SPOORTHI allows the community to provide feedback to service providers by rating the services and reissuing complaints if dissatisfied with them,” says Noelene Marisa, project member, CSTEP.

Incidentally, 22 year-old Goutham V, a trained digital steward, realised the extent of the water problem in the community during the household survey that he and other digital stewards concluded recently. “Some houses still do not have water connection; the duration of water supply is less, with families being unable to collect enough water for their needs. In addition, when there is a problem such as a malfunctioning motor, members are not sure about whom to approach to get it fixed. Often, community members themselves crowdsource and fix the issue,” he shared, on the sidelines of the release of the beta version of the platform.

Does he think the platform can help address these issues?

“Yes. By tracking and monitoring the problems on a visual platform, we have evidence for both problems and their status — how long the problem has existed, how many times the authorities were alerted, etc. It is more than oral complaints to civic authorities; not only does it force authorities to act on the evidence, but also offers a lot more possibilities for solutions,” he observed. Goutham added that an important component of the project was the process of building awareness amongst community members.

As for Ragini G N, a 26 year-old data steward, the training has helped her in a more personal manner. “I feel less helpless in the face of these problems the community has been facing — sometimes for decades. I know that solutions exist and I’ve been taught how to access them. Now that we have identified the problems, we are keen to solve them,” she chips in enthusiastically.





Digital stewards being trained to use the beta version of SPOORTHY

With the completion of household surveys, the project consortium, including IT for Change, AVAS and CSTEP, is working on incorporating data into the platform. At the same time, key linkages with civic authorities need to be established to ensure that the platform serves its purpose of increasing the engagement of community members with urban governance mechanisms.

“SPOORTHY is an effort towards filling knowledge gaps on the quality of living in such urban poor communities, and helps in localised implementation of the 2030 agenda of the SDGs (specifically SDGs 3, 6, 11, and 5). Linking the SPOORTHY platform to a formal online grievance redressal system will not only help the community in improved access to water, sanitation and health services, but also ensure that the challenges faced by such communities are recorded in formal data systems,” says Gayathri Muraleedharan, project member, CSTEP.



Digital stewards, post the training at CSTEP

At the beginning of every training session, our digital stewards sing a song remembering the struggles of their community; listen to them sing on the occasion of Mother's day.

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