

## **Working of the BATF**

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In response to the number of issues raised by Samuel Paul (December 31, 2005), regarding my article 'Public-Private or a Private Public? Promised Partnership of the Bangalore Agenda Task Force' (*EPW*, November 19, 2005), I would like to clarify my objectives in the paper and I do hope this will prompt further discussion more broadly regarding the political implications of different forms of public-private-partnerships.

First, I would like to describe my research methodology. I worked with the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) as an urban planner for eight months in 2003 and as part of my assignment I interviewed and interacted with government agencies partnering the task force. While the paper largely included quotes of two members of the BATF, the analysis relied on my working relationship with four of the five active members and the government officials of the seven municipal agencies partnering the project, as well as attending workshops and meetings with the BATF. Secondary data included papers written by BATF members and other scholars regarding the initiatives, in addition to the reports and data compiled by the BATF. Samuel Paul notes that the members I quoted were "non-official"; however they were in fact, four of five "active" members, as described to me by the members with whom I worked. Under a government order (GO), the chief minister mandated BATF to submit a report providing recommendations to improve Bangalore. The GO nominated 10 members to the BATF, including five corporate heads, one NGO leader, one retired academic, two bureaucrats and one member of Parliament. Subsequently, three more members were nominated. The partnering urban service providers were not members of the task force, as per the GO, rather they were enlisted by the BATF to engage in a partnership platform, which was backed by the chief minister.

### **Misrepresentations**

Second, I would like to clarify a few misrepresentations. Paul construed that amongst my findings I concluded that the BATF was a "vehicle for corporate intervention". I did not reflect this in the paper, rather I observed that particular activities of the BATF opened up opportunities for private corporations to access land and infrastructure more efficiently, while other sectors of the city find it increasingly difficult. The difference is significant because I am not of the view that the BATF intended to bias development opportunities towards the private sector, but that these were consequences of the initiatives, and it is essential to take these into account in an analysis of particular programmes or policies.

Similarly, I raise particular issues regarding the fund-based accounting system and implications for access to the municipal budget by the poor. Paul concludes that my analysis indicates that, "In other words, increased transparency in the budget process and allocations is not desirable!" I certainly would not subscribe to that statement. There is no doubt that increased transparency is desirable, I only argue that the implications of new budgeting systems must be understood and that local politicians must be included in the design and implementation of the new processes. In fact, this oversight led to an outrage amongst the councillors who campaigned against "parallel governance" processes in the wake of activities carried out by BATF and Janaagraha. With the introduction of a new budgeting process, power relationships also shift. This may open opportunities for pressure groups to play a greater role, and since municipalities increasingly rely on private finance, further consequences must be taken into account. The modifications to the accounting systems institutionalise a partial solution. A more holistic response would include strengthening the political system, addressing issues regarding the allocation of resources and ensuring that local democracy is not compromised.

More importantly, the aim of the paper was not to dissect the various projects of the BATF or "assess its worth and adequacy", but rather to consider the structure of the BATF within the urban government and the relationship of such a task force to the public. In other words, I did not evaluate each of the activities of the BATF in detail and the specific impacts of these projects on the city. The BATF engaged in numerous projects ranging from introducing new urban design elements, to piloting urban services projects, to proposing urban

policy reforms. An independent assessment of the merits of the range of initiatives certainly will provide valuable insights into the working of the city government. For example, to what extent did the construction of public toilets and bus shelters improve conditions for certain segments of the population, how has the road signage sponsored by BATF had an impact on driving in the city, or what were the limitations on replicating the Swaccha Bangalore campaign throughout the city, etc. Other researchers have undertaken more thorough analyses of the particular projects and the findings are available. However, my interest in assessing the experience of the BATF was to understand the task force as an intervention in urban policy-making and the implications of the particular design of this partnership in terms of holding the government and the task force accountable for their initiatives. If there is any consideration of replicating such a model, then it seems imperative to understand the context.

It is in this vein that I introduced other organisations that worked in partnership with the BATF to propose “Common Urban Reform Elements” to the national government, which has now been integrated into the National Urban Renewal Mission. The BATF members have discussed in public their relationship with these other civil society groups and the significance of their combined experiences that led to the proposals for national urban policies. Though the national government has been pursuing urban reform programmes since the early 1990s, we continue to lack detailed investigations of how these programmes and policies impact the structures of our cities. In other words, how the shifting development agendas and priorities are reflected in the municipal budgets, local ward works and political realignment.

Paul asks, “Is the implication that committees and task forces should not be set up because of the potential danger of members engaging in policy advocacy at higher levels?” Obviously committees and task forces will be set up and these are inevitably agents for policy advocacy, thus with any such task force it remains crucial to understand who operates or controls it, what are the outcomes of their particular policy proposals and who benefits. Most importantly, we must engage in more thorough and broader analysis of urban policies and programmes, including the unintended and cumulatively reinforcing consequences of these, particularly on the poor. My conclusion was that the experience of the BATF opened up new opportunities for interventions in national urban policy-making and that the background of the new policies must be better understood.

### **Accountability**

In terms of accountability, I agree with Paul that, “Any task force or committee set up by a government has a collective responsibility and is accountable to whoever creates it”. The BATF was clearly accountable to the state government, and primarily to the chief minister. Unfortunately, this is a limited analysis of accountability. Within any political system, however well it functions, power relationships still continue to drive the public agenda. Although the scope of the BATF’s activities was limited to Bangalore city, the BATF was accountable to the state government and the highest political leader, thus municipal agencies and local politicians in Bangalore had little scope to contradict their initiatives. Accountability must mean that there is an opportunity for a larger public to have an official and institutionalised stake. I raise this concern largely because I am interested in the possibility of replicability. Paul concludes that “The individual tasks done by BATF are what consulting firms do all the time...What is important is to ask whether the totality of consulting support and other interventions provided by BATF to multiple agencies in Bangalore can be replicated elsewhere.” I would argue that the public must claim a stake in the design and implementation of this model of public-private- partnership, simply because its position in the political system will allow it to make significant contributions. Whether the BATF is viewed as an NGO, an extra-governmental organisation, or as a consulting firm, the point remains that there was no mandate for a public evaluation of the impacts or their projects. I do not believe that relying on the state government alone addresses this concern, since the democratic system, as it functions in Bangalore today, is simply not sufficiently flawless.

In my article I described some of the unanticipated consequences of selected BATF projects and raised issues regarding the positioning of the task force between the state and the city governments and the implications on accountability to a larger public. These issues must be discussed further and the associated politics must be analysed more thoroughly, if we aspire for urban development patterns that serves the needs of a wider population with greater public involvement.