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# Strategies and Tactics in NGO–Government Relations Insights from Slum Housing in Mumbai

*Ramya Ramanath, Alnoor Ebrahim*

*Relationships between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies have been variously described in the nonprofit literature as cooperative, complementary, adversarial, confrontational, or even co-optive. But how do NGO–government relationships emerge in practice, and is it possible for NGOs to manage multiple strategies of interaction at once? This article examines the experience of three leading NGOs in Mumbai, India, involved in slum and squatter housing. We investigate how they began relating with government agencies during their formative years and the factors that shaped their interactions. We find that NGOs with similar goals end up using very different strategies and tactics to advance their housing agendas. More significant, we observe that NGOs are likely to employ multiple strategies and tactics in their interactions with government. Finally, we find that an analysis of strategies and tactics can be a helpful vehicle for clarifying an organization's theory of change.*

**T**HIS ARTICLE EXAMINES THE RELATIONSHIPS between government organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on issues of urban housing. In particular, it examines how NGOs build and adapt their relationships with the state to fulfill their goals. Drawing on concepts and classifications from the literature on social movements, nonprofit management, and institutional theory, we add two layers of complexity to existing characterizations of NGO–government interactions: (1) NGOs with similar goals of defending the housing rights of the poor may rely on different strategies and tactics to advance their housing agendas with the state,

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and (2) in their efforts to gain and retain legitimacy and relevance, NGOs are likely to employ multiple strategies simultaneously while also shifting strategies in succession.

To understand NGO–government interactions in slum and squatter housing, we focus on three influential NGOs working in the city of Mumbai, India: Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti (NHSS), Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), and Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC). For each NGO, we examine one critical housing intervention in the organization's formative years, between 1981 and 1990, particularly as it relates to interactions with city and state government housing agencies. Fieldwork conducted by the primary author between August 2002 and August 2003 involved examination of organizational archives and multiple conversations and interviews with NGO leaders and staff, slum and squatter dwellers, and key government officials. Triangulation in these conversations was crucial to identifying a critical housing intervention around which to center the analysis.

We begin by reviewing key concepts and typologies of NGO–government interactions. We follow with a brief overview of the social and political upheavals in the city of Mumbai (then called Bombay, but we will use the current name) during the 1950s and into the 1980s, which set the stage for creation of the three advocacy NGOs discussed here. The core of the article focuses on a formative event in the life of each NGO: its first key housing intervention. We treat each intervention as a window through which to view negotiations with government actors. In detailing these negotiations, we find that although the majority of housing NGOs used confrontation as a defining strategy during their formative years, they also cooperated, complemented, and co-opted the state in efforts to establish new legitimacy with slum and squatter communities. In addition, by specifying the strategies and tactics that these NGOs used, we aim to shed light on each organization's implicit theory of change at the time—that is, its framing of the housing problem and how it sought to address that problem. We conclude by identifying the implications of these findings for understanding NGO–government relations.

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## Strategies and Tactics in NGO–Government Interactions

The complexity of interactions between NGOs and governmental organizations has inspired the creation of numerous typologies (Clark, 1991; Gidron, Kramer, and Salamon, 1992; Coston, 1998; Commuri, 1995; Fisher, 1998; Najam, 2000; Young, 2000), which can be grouped into two clusters. One cluster comprises those that classify relations based on the political and policy space available to nongovernmental actors. For instance, Clark (1991) argues that NGO–government interactions are largely shaped by the social and political context of the country and, as such, NGOs may oppose,

complement, or seek to reform the state. Gidron, Kramer, and Salamon (1992) differentiate NGO–government relationships on the basis of whether they are dominated by the government or the third sector, with dual or collaborative relationships falling in between the two extremes. Commuri (1995) similarly organizes relations along a continuum of government attitudes toward NGOs ranging from supportive and facilitative to regulative and repressive. Coston (1998) differentiates relationships on the basis of government attitudes to institutional pluralism: repressive, rival, and competitive styles dominate when government resists institutional pluralism; and cooperative, complementary, and collaborative forms emerge when government embraces institutional pluralism. What each of these typologies has in common is an emphasis on political space and its control by government.

A second cluster of typologies frames relationships as being the outcome of strategies that both government organizations and NGOs use. Fisher (1998, p. 106) notes that “an NGO’s political strategy may be proactive, reactive, or somewhere in between.” NGOs may isolate themselves from the state or engage the state through advocacy or parallel or collaborative arrangements. Like Fisher, Najam (2000) forwards a “theory of strategic institutional interests” in which he organizes relationships in terms of “four Cs”: cooperative, complementary, confrontational, or co-optive. Young (1999, 2000) adopts a historical perspective and organizes NPO–government relations into supplementary, complementary, and adversarial types. He points out that such relationships are multilayered and “best understood as a composite of the views obtained through each lens” (Young, 2000, p. 168).

The variety in typologies highlights the multiple, complex ways in which NGOs might relate to the state. We draw, in particular, from the second cluster of typologies, for they not only underscore the larger sociopolitical context in which NGOs operate but also explicitly recognize that both governmental and NGO actors exercise agency in their relationships. The implication of this framing for our research methodology is twofold: (1) we can observe the “temporal cycles in which government and the nonprofit sector successively react to each other’s actions” (Young, 2000, p. 170) by focusing on key interventions, and (2) we can expect that “the final shape of NGO–government relations is a function of decisions made by government as well as NGOs” (Najam, 2000, p. 382). A key aim of this article is to build on the categories that Fisher, Young, and Najam developed by probing the strategies and tactics NGOs used over the course of an intervention. We define *strategy* as the NGO’s “principal method to achieve the mission” (Kelleher, McLaren, and Bisson, 1996, p. 63) and *tactics* as a set of actions that collectively help define and identify that strategy (Oliver, 1991). Following this convention, tactics are actual interventions (action forms) that fall within the broad category of a strategy.

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Furthermore, we find it useful to think collectively of NGO tactics and strategies as comprising a repertoire. Our use of this term draws from the work of Tilly (1995, p. 42), who describes it as “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice. Repertoires are learned cultural creations.” Contentious repertoires, for instance, are “the established ways in which pairs of actors make and receive claims bearing on each other’s interests” (Tilly, 1995, p. 43). The accepted term in the social movement literature is *repertoires of action*. We use the term *repertoire of tactics* to imply the same thing and extend it to all kinds of tactics employed between NGOs and government organizations.

Although we focus on organization-level tactics, we recognize the role of the global political economy of development in shaping the political space in which NGOs have emerged to address urban marginalization (Sanyal and Mukhija, 2001; MirafTAB, 1997; Davis, 2006). NGO–government relations are made up of complex and interdependent struggles, with NGOs being both agents and effects of this political economy (Kamat, 2003). Our narrower aim is to highlight how each NGO made sense of this context in its formative years. We believe this perspective is important for understanding how NGO leaders interpret their context and choose to act on it. To do so, we analyze NGO–government relations in a selected housing intervention (the nested unit of analysis of this study).

We find it problematic to view NGO–government interactions as singularly cooperative or conflictual; they may instead be better characterized by “uneasiness” (Kudva, 2008). For example, in efforts to respond to client exigencies and under pressure to establish and maintain legitimacy and relevance, even predominantly confrontational NGOs deploy manifold strategies. Before detailing these strategies and tactics in Mumbai during the 1980s, however, we provide a brief historical context. The drama that unfolded during this time set the stage for three NGOs, all of which were born with the common agenda of protecting the rights of the poor to live in the city.

## Political Economy of Slum Housing: 1950s–1980s

Over several decades starting in about the mid-nineteenth century, Mumbai attracted a large number of refugees—mainly victims of a series of famines in the rural hinterlands and from neighboring states (Masselos, 1995). Treated at first with suspicion and fear by the British Indian government, many of these new settlers were eventually employed in public works programs. In the late nineteenth century, textile manufacturing took hold as a major driving factor for Mumbai’s growth. Several thousand new workers poured into the city and were initially housed in hostels. Eventually *chawls*, typically

three- to four-story buildings with one-room tenements, were built by the city's Improvement Trust or by mill owners or private builders. However, provision of housing for mill workers and the maintenance of *chawls* were a low priority (D'Monte, 2002).

Following India's independence from British rule in 1947, the textile backbone of Mumbai began to decline. This decline hastened in the 1970s when newer industries such as pharmaceuticals and chemicals inherited the position of primacy as the city's largest formal sector employers. The postindependence period also saw a transfer of millwork into the unorganized, informal sector and the growth of dense slum and squatter settlements. By 1981, slums were home to an estimated 4.3 million people, sheltering roughly 57 percent of the city's population (Mukhija, 2000, p. 47). The postindependence period of 1947 to 1981 saw state-led efforts in slum clearance and improvement programs, few of which achieved any large-scale success. Despite some state-led programs with humane policies toward slum and squatter settlements, a massive spate of demolitions began in Mumbai in July 1981.

This period of growth in slum and squatter settlements was particularly marked by the absence of NGOs interested in addressing the grave housing concerns of Mumbai. From the time of India's independence until the late 1950s, NGOs were well accepted in government circles as quintessential delivery channels for the state's rural modernization projects. However, starting in the 1970s, India saw the rise of many awareness-oriented NGOs alongside new social movements that positioned themselves in an oppositional role to the state, demanding citizen involvement and participation as a necessary precondition for any developmental effort (Omvedt, 1993; Sen, 1999; Kudva, 2005).

It was against this general backdrop that the state government's call for demolitions in July 1981 captured the interest of several urban middle-class professionals. The chief minister of the State of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital, initiated a massive program to clear the city of 100,000 pavement (sidewalk) dwellers and deport them to their places of origin. A group of urban professionals decided to take action. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) was one such group that approached the city's High Court requesting an injunction restraining the state government and the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) from conducting further deportations. The order was barely passed when a journalist, Olga Tellis, filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India. She argued that slum and pavement dwellers enjoy a fundamental right to housing. The PUCL also filed a separate petition in the Supreme Court. Nearly four years later, the court determined that the eviction of pavement dwellers would indeed lead to the deprivation of their livelihoods and ultimately their lives. However, the court offered little by way of relief to the petitioners and stopped short of ordering any definitive government action (Environmental Law Alliance, 1985). For many,

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according to an advocate for PUCL and member of Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti, an NGO, the judgment effectively meant that the “municipality now had powers reinforced by the highest court in the country that sanctioned it to proceed with demolishing pavement dwellings and slums on public lands.”

The 1981 demolition of pavement homes, and the subsequent lack of support to slum dwellers from the legislature and courts, motivated the emergence of a handful of nonstate actors to organize and take action on behalf of these groups. We introduce three such NGOs below.

### **Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti**

The first among these nonstate actors to rise in public prominence was Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti (NHSS; literally, Committee for the Protection of Housing Rights). Often described as an organization that struggles for the rights of the poor, NHSS was formed as an ad hoc group in 1981 and by 1985 boasted a high-profile core of leading enthusiasts that included a journalist, a human rights lawyer, a well-known filmmaker, and a social worker with connections to the city’s social elite.

NHSS’s first major housing intervention involved a slum located in the heart of Mumbai’s elite residential and business district. Since its formation in the 1970s, the slum had been a target of several notices of demolition. In 1985, after yet another notice of demolition and a fire that destroyed large parts of the slum, NHSS began its long-term association with the residents. As a first course of action, it led a protest march demanding relief measures for fire victims and requested that the state, in accordance with the 1985 Supreme Court ruling, work on a plan to resettle slum dwellers. The effort yielded no results. In November 1986, the slum was summarily demolished.

Following demolition, the area was fenced and a single barbed-wire gate installed to allow entry to a preschool center located within the slum’s precincts. With families now on the adjoining pavement, NHSS led the slum dwellers in a protest march to get assurance from the state that their pavement homes would not be demolished until completion of the students’ final examinations on April 1, 1987. The government agreed. On April 1, NHSS decided to forcefully enter the fenced land and construct a makeshift dwelling as a symbol of what it wanted from the government. For the event, NHSS invited a popular film actor. The actor’s decision to join NHSS was a critical turning point in the organization’s history, one that gave the group a remarkable new public face. A founding NHSS member recalled, “We were all a little skeptical. What would her entry do to our plans and to our broader struggle? We did not know and, in the heat of the moment, did not care!” Government perception at the time did not favor participation from nonstate actors in slum housing.

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The vice president and chief executive officer of the state-level housing authority commented:

Groups like the NHSS were unhappy with the government—they disagreed with virtually everything that the government proposed. It is true that the government did not have the machinery, and still does not, to work with the poor entirely on its own. We do not know what their problems are, what their issues are, and they know better because they are with them all the time. But the problem is mounted by the fact that no one in government saw these activists in good light. The government perceived them as engaging in these bizarre protests merely as a means to gain political mileage among slum dwellers.

All those who trespassed on cleared government property, including the actor, were arrested. At the police station they demanded a face-to-face meeting with the housing minister, but nothing came of it.

A new sense of urgency arose on May 1 when the twelve-year-old son of a slum resident collided with a speeding car and died near his pavement home. After the boy's funeral the following day, an angry mob of slum dwellers entered the collector's office. The office was responsible for issuing identity cards to slum dwellers, collecting service charges from them, granting entitlements to government lands, and removing unauthorized structures on public land. The only concession that followed was that all those who could verify residence prior to 1980 would be suitably accommodated.

At this juncture, NHSS decided to hold an indefinite fast. The movement's lead convener decided to call the actor to join him and three slum dwellers. The fast, a well-known Gandhian tactic (M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, 2004), received considerable media coverage. The housing minister and housing secretary personally visited the site of the fast and invited NHSS members to a meeting to discuss plans for rehabilitation. Despite NHSS's original position that the government must resettle evicted residents on a site close to their original residence, it accepted the government's offer of a land parcel in a distant city suburb. The selected site was an exhausted stone quarry with a pit as deep as twenty feet and a hostile neighborhood that made laying boundaries and constructing homes a difficult task that was delayed a full year. An NHSS member recalled the conundrum: "As they awaited resettlement, the slum dwellers were on the pavements for over a year. Even their temporary shacks on the pavements were demolished and their belongings stolen. . . . What were we to do? Let them stay there forever suffering? A distant site was preferred to the regular harassment from government authorities who really wanted to see them out."

In sum, in its formative years, NHSS employed various tactics to engage the state: street protest, fasting, media attention, and film,

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among others. Most of the tactics were part of a confrontational strategy that aimed to exert moral and public pressure on state and city actors, while also mobilizing and educating not only the slum dwellers but also the city's elite. Faced with a government unwilling to concede to its demands (expressed primarily through confrontational means), NHSS reconsidered its strategic position and chose the next best option of compromise. This is not to say that one choice clearly followed the other, but instead implies NHSS's willingness to change its course of action in the face of failed strategies, even if this amounted to compromising its own steadfast ideals of resettling and rehabilitating the poor near their original place of residence. This shift set the stage for emerging strategies of co-optation and complementarity that would become increasingly common at NHSS in the years ahead (Ramanath, 2009).

### Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action

Emerging at about the same time as the NHSS, Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) was the product of a youth placement project at Mumbai's College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan. A fresh graduate of that project founded YUVA with a broad mandate "that we will intervene in any issue of social justice." The organization adopted a rights-based approach to societal transformation.

YUVA registered as a voluntary development organization in 1984 and began its work with slum youth in the areas of leadership training, gradually also working with women. Its work with pavement communities began with educational and recreational activities with children and then extended to a variety of basic-needs concerns of pavement communities. The announcement of the Supreme Court judgment made intervention in housing a necessity. YUVA's founder and executive director recalled, "In six months during 1989 their [pavement dwellers'] homes were demolished ninety times! Clearly, what we were doing was not enough. We felt the need to extend work to a broader, more meaningful level. Ours was not a totally confrontational position—in fact, we were looking for alternatives with the government. . . . We wanted rehabilitation to be seriously thought about before resorting to demolition. Government should be held responsible."

YUVA led the formation of a network of NGOs, the Committee for the Right to Housing (CRH), not only to resist and monitor demolition but also to suggest alternatives. YUVA called the first meeting of the CRH and served as a coordinating organization for five years. CRH used a host of tactics that ranged from raising public awareness through demonstration, street plays, slide shows, and an educational film, to the publication of leaflets and a quarterly journal devoted to housing rights. It also organized meetings with state and municipal officials to work out feasible alternatives to

demolitions, including amending prevailing legislations. YUVA worked with NHSS and many other groups to sensitize communities to their rights and to lead protest marches as a show of collective identity and discontent.

The collective strength displayed in protest marches lasted only as long as demolitions were high on governmental agendas. Much of CRH's activity, particularly the use of protest movements, eventually came to a halt and was replaced by postdemolition intervention (YUVA, 1990). In 1986, CRH provided legal aid to demolished settlements and helped with rehabilitation of many pavement dwellers forcibly relocated from Mumbai's business district to resettlement colonies in the suburbs (YUVA, 1990). CRH activity received a sudden boost in 1987, the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, when it affiliated with the National Campaign for Housing Rights, which was campaigning for a People's Bill of Housing Rights. Although passage of a constitutional amendment was not achieved, the momentum it created across the country made housing a part of national public and political discourse. Most notably, it effected the introduction of housing rights in political manifestos and state policies in the 1990s.

YUVA's primary strategy for engaging the state, like NHSS's, was primarily confrontational and included tactics such as campaigning, litigation, protest, and awareness raising through film and print. But very early on, YUVA also employed a complementary strategy that emphasized collective action, operationalized through coalition building with other NGOs and national campaigns and also by engaging state and municipal actors on alternative solutions to housing problems.

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### **Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres**

The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) was created in December 1984 by two individuals motivated by a philosophy “that unless solutions work for women, they are not valid for the community” (Mitlin, 1990, p. 93). The organization's work thus emphasized the “central participation of women/small slum communities” (Mitlin, 1990, p. 95) when it entered slum and pavement dwelling communities shortly after the 1985 Supreme Court judgment. However, unlike NHSS and YUVA, SPARC rejected mass protests on the grounds that direct confrontation would yield little by way of solutions to the problems of the poor. Moreover, from its interactions with pavement dwellers, SPARC claimed that these inhabitants were afraid to confront the police during demolitions. Instead, the organization's leadership was “keen on making peace with the devil and begin[ning] a dialogue with the city to accommodate them,” according to SPARC's associate director.

Despite the presence of a host of studies sponsored by the government, SPARC decided to conduct its own survey on the lives of

pavement dwellers.<sup>1</sup> It justified the exercise on several grounds: that none of the previous surveys had covered a significantly large sample size; that previous surveys had directed their results to officials, planners, and the media but ignored sharing results with the community; and, finally, that a comprehensive survey would prove that it is possible for a small NGO with limited resources to conduct such a census.

SPARC used the results of the census to negotiate on behalf of pavement dwellers: it knocked on government doors and, instead of attacking or accusing government officials, sought to pave the way toward future negotiations by saying, reported SPARC's associate director, "Here is a report that gives you all the facts you need. Now, tell us what we should do so they get a secure tenure." The organization thus sought to influence government not only through a negotiated and possibly collaborative relationship, but also by using its research (that is, the census) as a basis for shaping that interaction.

At about the same time, SPARC engaged in two major institution-building efforts. The first was facilitating the formation of Mahila Milan (literally, A Collective of Women), whose primary activities centered on savings and credit for women living in the slums and on the pavements. The second effort focused on gaining the trust of and building working relationships with several pavement communities in Mumbai and other cities across a large part of urban India. Doing so involved building close ties to the National Slum Dwellers Federation, which included a savvy pool of community leaders from the slums, a good number of whom were affiliated with political parties. SPARC, Mahila Milan, and the foundation soon began collectively labeling themselves the "Alliance," with issues of housing emerging high on their collective agenda. SPARC's director explained the organization's approach in a formal statement:

Rather than waiting for the governments to do something about the poor, the communities of the poor in these countries have got together and formed national federations and begun to save money, collect information about themselves, and create solutions to their problems. They have begun seeking solutions for housing and infrastructure, the two most vital requirements for survival in the city. Cities are going to face huge immigration as more and more people migrate to the city. Since many of the migrants will be poor, the usual responses of evictions, demolitions, denying communities the right to live in cities will become a very dysfunctional response [Patel, 2001].

SPARC thus began concerted work in housing with training programs that involved several activities: community-level discussion on existing public housing schemes for the poor, inviting officials from the state housing authority to make presentations before groups

Table 1. NGOs' Primary Strategies and Tactics in Formative Years

NGO	Primary Strategy	Primary Tactics	Key Distinctions
NHSS	Confrontation	Collective protest	Pressure on government; crisis intervention
YUVA	Confrontation	Organizing campaigns; training communities	Collective, city-level response to a problem situation; search for alternatives to demolitions
SPARC	Complementarity	Challenging government statistics; building alliances with government and community-based organizations	Use of data and creation of alliances to develop joint solutions and legitimacy

of women; visits to public housing projects in Mumbai and other cities, and preparation of pamphlets about various housing schemes that were translated and distributed among slum and pavement dwellers (Bapat and Patel, 1992). These efforts were highlighted in an exhibition in 1987 that was attended by pavement and slum dwellers and by high-ranking state bureaucrats who discussed options for alternate housing. The event was a critical milestone and served as a model that was later replicated internationally through exchange programs funded by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights and the Homeless International of the UK.<sup>2</sup>

SPARC's primary strategy for interacting with government was thus a complementary one, where it sought to find common cause with state actors. It employed multiple tactics toward this strategy, including the use of census data for identifying housing problems, supported by networking with local and national federations. This repertoire of tactics stood in contrast to the more confrontational approaches of NHSS and YUVA.

### Summing Up NGO Strategies and Tactics

The different strategies and tactics employed by all three NGOs are summarized in Table 1 and are elaborated elsewhere (see Ramanath, 2005). The table raises two key points. First, each NGO adopted a primary strategy in its formative years that was crucial in shaping its interactions with governmental organizations: confrontation in the cases of NHSS and YUVA, and complementarity in the case of SPARC. Second, although all three organizations sought somewhat similar ends—housing and housing rights for the urban poor—their understandings of how to achieve this were markedly different. By linking their means and ends, we begin to uncover their implicit “theories of change.”

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## Building a Theory of Change: Origins of Strategies and Tactics

In the discussion of the cases thus far, we have seen that all three NGOs challenged the state practice of slum clearance and all began their work on platforms to defend the housing rights of the poor. Each sought to advocate for change in an oppressive policy environment that was brought to a head by the Supreme Court judgment of 1985 that reinforced the power of the state to demolish pavement dwellings and slums on public lands.

Yet these three NGOs in Mumbai were not isolated in their opposition to state practices in urban housing; they were part of a slowly changing global discourse on urban poverty and housing tenure. The notion of providing secure tenure to the urban poor was initially popularized by Turner (1972), Abrams (1964), Mangin and Turner (1969), and Turner and Fichter (1972). John Turner drew his ideas from extensive research in the urban squatter settlements (*barriadas*) of Peru, and Abrams wrote from his experiences in New York and later as a housing expert on United Nations missions to several countries across the world. Government's primary role, within the Turner–Abrams school, was that of providing security of tenure. This, it was believed, would gradually but surely cause an increase in housing investment and in due course would pull the poor out of their poverty. Given that developing countries across the world had been more successful in clearing slums than they had been in the creation of alternate housing (Mukhija, 2003), their recommendations challenged conventional state practices and authority over housing issues.

Through their prescriptions, Turner and Abrams, among others, called for recognizing slum dwellers as individuals with rights to reside in the city. Control over housing decisions by the poor could thus provide a way of empowering communities.<sup>3</sup> Their recommendations informed the direction of housing policy schemes funded by international development funding agencies, including the World Bank (1993) and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (1991), in what came to be known as the “enabling strategy to housing.” This approach focused on decentralization of state-controlled housing services, with NGOs and the private for-profit sector assuming critical roles in reducing “institutional monopoly of government over the lives of the urban poor” (Sanyal and Mukhija, 2001, p. 2043).

Given that the three NGOs examined here emerged under similar formative conditions—in Mumbai and as part of a broader global discontent with state-controlled housing policies—and shared similar goals of defending housing and housing rights of the poor, one might expect similarity in their strategies and purpose in their early years. Yet as Table 1 shows, the three NGOs differed significantly in their strategies and tactics. NHSS was best identified with collective

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protest, YUVA with community conscientization and national and city-level campaigns, and SPARC with seeking alliances with select bodies of the government. These differences were informed by core values and beliefs that shaped the organizations' philosophies of how to intervene (Ramanath, 2005). We refer to this logic of intervention as their theory of change—a framing of the root problem to be addressed and the pathway or steps required to ameliorate that problem. (For summary explanations of theory of change, see Keystone, 2008, and the Web site [www.theoryofchange.org](http://www.theoryofchange.org) developed by the organization ActKnowledge.)

At its core, NHSS sought to preserve and defend the rights of the poor. Its leader idealized the power of tactics of street protest, films, street plays, and songs in stirring public participation and awareness. The activities shared a common characteristic in that they were all directed toward mobilizing support by creating awareness of the injustices perpetrated on the poor by the actions of the state. NHSS's implicit theory of change might thus be captured as the following if-then statement: *If we campaign for the rights of slum dwellers and exert moral pressure on the state, then the state will take responsibility for housing the poor.*

YUVA also adopted a rights-based approach, but many of its early interventions reflected a Freirian ideology of attention to education, awareness building, and conscientization as tools for social transformation (Freire, 1972, 1995). YUVA wanted to create new relevance for social work practice among communities of the poor. Its implied theory of change might thus be described: *If we campaign for the rights of slum dwellers, while also building the leadership capacities of youth and of coalitions, then we will be able to influence the state in finding housing solutions.*

Arguably, both NHSS and YUVA continued to see the provision of safe, secure, and affordable housing as the prerogative of the state, with NGOs taking up roles of educators, community organizers, and watchdogs in the housing process. For NHSS and YUVA, the crisis created by the Supreme Court judgment restricted organizational attention to the formation of collectives among the poor and the need to advocate for change in policy; delivery or a search for concrete housing solutions was a small part of their programmatic agenda.

SPARC had a fundamentally different diagnosis of how to solve the problem of housing. According to its analysis, the women on the pavements were fearful of participating in mass demonstrations and protest marches or in other acts of resistance to the state's policy of forced evictions. Moreover, it did not see confrontational activities as offering any promise of tangible solutions to the problem of insecure and unsafe housing for slums and pavement settlements. SPARC thus pursued what it called "win-win solutions that work for the city and for its different populations" (D'Cruz, n.d.) and through which it sought to share an equal footing with the state.

To establish its legitimacy, SPARC developed its own data on the urban poor and worked with urban communities to develop community-led solutions that it could propose to state actors. Although by doing so it challenged the government's technical abilities to enumerate the poor and develop housing solutions, SPARC also offered its novice expertise to gain entry into government programs. By 1988–1989, less than four years after its formation, SPARC was seriously considering engaging in actual housing construction. SPARC's implicit theory of change might thus be captured as: *If we develop data-driven and community-led solutions to housing the poor, then we will be able to get the government to work with us to implement those solutions.*

These theories of change stem from our analysis of the strategies and tactics the three NGOs used. They show clear distinctions among the cases. Yet despite these differences, it would be unfair to characterize NHSS and YUVA as being only confrontational or to characterize SPARC as being entirely complementary. All three organizations, in fact, developed more nuanced strategies of engagement with the state in their early years. It is possible, for instance, to view NHSS-organized street protests and marches as singular acts of big confrontations. They were indeed designed to be dramatic shows of discontent. But a closer look at conditions surrounding the protests shows that during an organization's formative years, protests were important as a means of attracting volunteers, demonstrating legitimacy among slum dwellers, and gaining access to the state apparatus. Protests followed prolonged and frustrated negotiations with government officials. The intention was to create room for negotiation by exerting pressure through a show of numbers. Continuing the course of one-to-one negotiations with no tangible results in sight is a tactic that risks losing legitimacy among slum dwellers who await quick, remedial measures. Moreover, public expression of discontent was a natural and exemplary act, one that gained popularity in the 1970s, a decade that saw rapid and widespread upsurge in agitations for change and regional autonomy. Unlike the strong and the direct action flavor of NHSS's contentious tactics, confrontation in YUVA took the form of city-level and national advocacy campaigns. Participation in such campaigns was pursued alongside efforts to complement the state in resettlement and rehabilitation works.

SPARC's more guarded tactics of "challenging" and "balancing" its interests against those of government housing agencies were more akin to cooperation and compromise than to confrontation (Oliver, 1991, p. 152). But while SPARC's formative strategy was complementarity, the organization was also modestly confrontational through its challenge to and disapproval of state data on the urban poor. Such confrontation, however, was subordinate to a strategy of complementarity: it was used as a lever to open doors to working with the state to rehabilitate slum and squatter dwellers. In other

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words, while each NGO developed a primary strategy during its formative years, it also used other substrategies simultaneously and at other times in succession. By “succession,” we do not mean that the strategies built sequentially on one another following a planned logic, simply that the failure of one strategy to achieve the intended goals led NGOs to seek an alternate approach or set of activities. The process was more of uneasy trial-and-error than systematic sequencing or coordination.

All three NGOs (NHSS and YUVA and, to an extent, even SPARC) employed confrontational tactics with the state; this was not uncommon among urban social movements and radical action groups of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> However, their experimentation with other tactics—cooperation, co-optation, and compromise—alongside confrontation may be indicative of their ultimate dependence on the state. This tempering of confrontation has been described by Kamat (2004) as the “NGO-ization of grassroots politics” or in the broader literature as the bureaucratization and deradicalization of urban social movements (Davis, 2006; Kamat, 2002; Alvarez, 1998; Hammami, 1995; Miraftab, 1997; Schilds, 1998; Das, 1995). In a globalized political economy, NGOs find that “their capacity to sustain themselves and determine their own projects and strategy—is greatly circumscribed by their increased dependence on the interests of international capital and the state” (Kamat, 2002, p. 165).

One might view these broader contextual dynamics as structuring and confining NGO–government relations. Our interest, however, lies in understanding organization-level factors that point to new opportunities for agency. For example, SPARC’s philosophy of working with the state, and shaming it by collecting better-quality data and offering plausible solutions to housing, was itself a radical reframing of NGO–government relations. More generally, SPARC’s approach, and those of NHSS and YUVA, were shaped by their interpretations of client needs, the experiences of their members, their core values and beliefs, and their emergent housing philosophies. It is through these organization-specific lenses that opportunities for agency and change arise, despite the constraints of the political economy.

Table 2 offers a more nuanced summary of the organizational strategies and tactics that all three NGOs used than outlined in Table 1. It shows, for example, that while NHSS primarily engaged the state in confrontational terms, it also sought to co-opt and complement governmental actors. This complex repertoire of strategies and tactics is given some coherence and direction by the organization’s implicit theory of change (listed in the table’s final column).

## Conclusion

We began this article with a discussion of numerous typologies of NGO–government interactions. A typology is a useful analytical tool

**Table 2. Repertoires of Strategies and Tactics in NGOs' Formative Years**

NGO	NGO-Government Strategy	Tactics	Strategic Aim	Theory of Change
NHSS	Confrontation (primary strategy)	Street protest; fasting; gate crashing; film; street plays; media	Exert moral pressure; mobilize; educate; safeguard community interests; demand government commitment	If we campaign for the rights of slum dwellers and exert moral pressure on the state, then the state will take responsibility for housing the poor.
	Co-optation (substrategy)	Badgering government officials; pulling in influential constituents	Exert pressure; create new negotiating power	
	Complementarity (substrategy)	Obeying government terms	Appease community; new legitimacy	
YUVA	Confrontation (primary strategy)	Campaigns and coalitions; protest; film; leadership training; litigation	Collective strength; awareness; safeguard community interests	If we campaign for the rights of slum dwellers while also building the leadership capacities of youth and of coalitions, then we will be able to influence the state in finding housing solutions.
	Complementarity (substrategy)	Assisting government-led resettlement	Find housing solutions	
SPARC	Complementarity (primary strategy)	Displaying alternatives; gathering new data; linking with community federations	Gain credibility; create a niche; create new negotiating power; create critical mass	If we develop data-driven and community-led solutions to housing the poor, then we will be able to get the government to work with us to implement those solutions.
	Co-optation (substrategy)	Befriending government officials	Gain government legitimacy	

for categorizing the evolving nature of interorganizational relations. We selected three such typologies as a starting point for building a more nuanced description of NGO–government relations in housing; the three typologies suggested that NGOs do not simply respond to the state but are able to exercise some agency or influence in shaping their interactions. The cases described here offer three insights that add complexity to the ideal-type characterizations of NGO–government interaction.

First, NGOs with similar goals (in this case, defending the housing rights of the poor) may rely on different strategies and tactics to advance their agendas with the state. This finding is neither new nor surprising, but it is empirically demonstrated in some depth by the cases discussed here. By probing a key intervention in the early years of each NGO (the nested unit of analysis), our aim was to demonstrate the complex and fluid nature of NGO–government relations and thus to add some thick description to the simplifications necessitated by taxonomies (Geertz, 1973).

Second, while an NGO may adopt a primary strategy such as confrontation or complementarity, it is unlikely to limit itself to a single strategy. In practice, NGOs employ a more complex and nuanced repertoire of strategies and tactics. As a result, any analysis of NGO–government relations would benefit from probing the multiple layers of such relationships and how, and if, the repertoire of tactics helps support an NGO’s intended goal and its theory of change. The cases presented demonstrate that NGOs espouse a dominant strategy in trying to influence the state and in implementing the changes they wish to see for their clientele. However, such initial strategies are circumscribed and tested by the realities on the ground. NGOs may be compelled to make moves in real time in response to changing interests—what some scholars have called a “strategic conversation” with other actors (Argyris and Schön, 1996, p. 257).<sup>5</sup> In other words, they can be simultaneously confrontational and cooperative, or they might make use of various strategies in succession (as depicted in Tables 1 and 2). The use of seemingly contradictory strategies by NGOs indicate not merely the “schizophrenic” (Fisher, 1998) nature of NGO–government interactions but, more important, the institutional pressures on NGOs to realign their strategies to respond to client exigencies and their own needs to gain legitimacy.

Finally, an analysis of an organization’s strategies and tactics can provide a vehicle through which to understand its theory of change. While many NGOs do not explicitly articulate such a theory, our aim is to demonstrate that doing so offers at least a couple of practical benefits: it can help crystallize how an organization frames a problem and seeks to solve it, and it can provide some coherence to seemingly disparate strategies and tactics. We hypothesize that it is also possible for the converse to be true: that organizations without a theory of change—explicit or implicit—run the risk of developing

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incoherent strategies and tactics. Arguably, if NGOs are to have an impact on problems such as housing the urban poor and if they are to exercise effective agency on governments in order to achieve their goals, then it would seem necessary to drive their interventions on the basis of some theory of change.

## Notes

1. The first major study was undertaken in 1959 at the behest of the BMC. Other studies included one conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences on behalf of the BMC and Bombay Civil Trust in 1969 and another conducted by the Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work from November 1981 to January 1982.

2. The first community exchange supported by Homeless International in 1990 was an exchange trip between slum dwellers from Bogota, Colombia, and pavement and slum dwellers from four cities in India. The exchange took place over an eighteen-month period with teams from India and Bogota visiting each other. Starting with this first association, Homeless International became a steady partner supporting SPARC through many of its crucial housing interventions in the years ahead.

3. The notion of self-help housing was challenged by those of the Marxist tradition (Burgess, 1978, 1982; Doebele, 1975). They argued that Turner's portrayal of self-help housing was as an optimistic, clever veil beneath which lay forces that perpetuated the growth of capitalistic interests. They further argued against Turner's conception of the use value of housing and instead argued that housing was "petty commodity production" and primarily driven by market values.

4. This phase was also marked by the rise of several Gandhian NGOs. All of these nongovernmental actors had one thing in common: they were disillusioned by the state. While some chose to openly challenge state power by participation in social movements, trade unions, and radical left initiatives, still others were part of nonviolent struggles and aligned themselves with empowerment and livelihood-oriented NGOs (Kudva, 2005).

5. With reference to the question of how a practicing manager of a firm should think about a process of strategy making that encompasses realization as well as intent, Argyris and Schön (1996, pp. 256–257) identify seven answers. One of the seven is "strategic conversation," which is defined as follows: "It makes sense to think of a firm as engaging in a reciprocal transaction with its environment through which it takes stock of a new environmental situation, 'speaks' to that situation through the design and implementation of new strategic moves, and receives (at times) surprising 'back talk' from the environment, in response to which it is led to rethink its appreciation of the environment and to restructure its strategy."

*RAMYA RAMANATH is assistant professor of nonprofit management at the School of Public, Nonprofit, and Health Administration, Grand Valley State University.*

*ALNOOR EBRAHIM is associate professor in the General Management Unit and the Social Enterprise Initiative at Harvard Business School.*

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