



Back to basics

A project to help Bangalore's poorest slum dwellers targets what they say are their most pressing concerns, reports **James Crabtree**
Photographs by **Ayush Ranka**

Elaine Ghosh spent much of her life worrying about the poorest families in Bangalore's most deprived slums. But towards the end of her life – she died in November – she had concerns about wealthier groups too: the funders of the urban “ultra-poor” programme (UUPP) she ran with her foundation, Parinaam.

The UUPP was Ghosh's passion – an intensive combination of social projects established in 2009 that has helped about 750 severely deprived families in eight of the southern Indian city's grimmest slums. Financial support for the programme had been difficult to come by, however, with an initial grant

provided by the Michael and Susan Dell foundation due to run out in November.

“We were a bit panicked,” she said in an interview in October. “We knew the programme worked, but we couldn't find a way to convince people to give us money.”

The problem stemmed from the UUPP's approach. Big international donors often warm to anti-poverty programmes that are cheap to operate and quick to scale up. These tend to focus on single issues, such as health-care, or on so-called “livelihood” projects, which can involve teaching basic skills such as sewing to help people find jobs.

Ghosh had different ideas, however, having become disil-

Stuck in the sprawl: the UUPP accepts poverty will persist, so it addresses everyday needs such as health or finding work

lusioned with the results of an earlier Parinaam venture. This ran temporary health camps in some of the same Bangalore slums, bringing in doctors to provide basic check-ups and employing health workers to persuade poorer residents to seek medical help, especially for their children.

“The whole programme had little long-term impact, and I realised that however much I might think these people needed healthcare, clearly they didn't agree,” she said, recalling that the camp effort typically failed to change entrenched habits – in child nutrition, for instance.

“It changed my whole vision of how we look at the poor,” she explained. “We stopped the

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The result is an intensive and relatively expensive programme that works in particular with groups of women in each slum, providing a host of different services in areas ranging from children's education to basic financial literacy.

Having struggled for much of this year to convince numerous potential donors of the merits of her approach this summer, Ghosh secured new funding from a private benefactor, with more funds likely to follow from an international bank.

The extra income will not only secure the UUPP's future, she said, but also allow the programme to expand, potentially nearly doubling the 500 or so families it helps at any one time over the next few years.

Where once Ghosh thought about expanding the effort to some of India's other sprawling metropolises, including Calcutta and New Delhi, she revised the plans to stick closer to home in Bangalore. "Why go into another city when there are so many poor

"You have to step into the shoes of the poor and ask them what they think they need"

Despite its new funding and wider ambitions, the UUPP's approach will not change, beginning in new project areas by first listening, and then attempting to

understand the problems faced by local residents. Ghosh illustrated this approach with work the UUPP was undertaking in a slum predominantly inhabited by Muslims.

"In that area, the women told us their husbands wouldn't let them go out and find work," she said, explaining that this restricts their ability to earn and provide for their families. In response Ghosh and her team focused on helping the women learn basic skills they can use at home, such as candle making or sewing quilts.

Elsewhere, she hoped to build up Parinaam's other programmes, including a much larger operation that focuses on teaching basic financial literacy, and a smaller scheme based around the same slums in Bangalore, in which she finds donors to fund the education of young children whose mothers are helped by the UUPP.

"We have to admit that the adults in these slums are never going to be lifted entirely out of poverty," Ghosh said, although the programmes help the very poorest move upwards to the point where they are no longer destitute.

"It is only the children who will truly lift their parents, so we need to focus on them too."

In the last months of her life, Ghosh was preparing her foundation to take on the challenge. "That is the most important thing about any project like this," she said. "If you start something you have to finish it." ■

health camps. It was a waste of money. It became like a mantra for us: you have to step into the shoes of the poor; you have to talk to them and ask them what they think they need."

This approach became the focus of the UUPP, which begins its work in each slum by surveying residents – many of whom live in awful conditions, in tumbledown shacks with tarpaulin roofs – to ask what help they feel they need.

In some areas, the surveys reveal childcare or particular health worries as dominant concerns. In others, it is finding work. Whatever the outcome, the programme begins by trying to provide a service that will help.



people here who still need our help?" she said.

The programme remains a family affair: Ghosh ran it alongside her daughter Mallika, while the wider Parinaam foundation has close links to a large microfinance business, Ujjivan, founded by her husband Samit.