why foresight?

Futures tools are gaining importance in planning for the urban poor. Claudia Juech and Evan Michelson from the Rockefeller Foundation write about the importance of pro-poor foresight.

The effects of events such as the American subprime mortgage crisis leading to a widespread and deep economic recession or the Japanese tsunami disrupting global supply chains tell us that it is becoming more and more difficult to forecast what the future may look like in 10 or 15 years. In our increasingly complex and interdependent world, the high pace of change, trends and discontinuities in demography, lifestyles, technology and economy can rapidly create new opportunities as well as threats.

Corporations and governments have been using forward-looking approaches for decades to inform their strategic decision-making. Given the high stakes and importance of considering the future of issues related to poverty and development, it is necessary to adopt those approaches - that illuminate alternative futures, identify potential solutions, and take advantage of new opportunities - for improving people’s lives. Developing such a long-term perspective requires the utilization of a wide range of future-oriented tools, techniques and methodologies – such as scenario planning exercises, simulations and roadmaps – that can expand the mindset of key stakeholders, examine different strategies in a “safe space” and discover unexpected pathways upfront.

New and more participatory approaches that involve the explicit engagement of poor and marginalized populations are needed in considering how their future might evolve. The Rockefeller Foundation has supported the operationalization of this concept, termed “pro-poor foresight,” in practice through the creation of a pioneering network of organizations. Collectively known as the Searchlight function, this diverse group of institutions, based in countries such as India, Tanzania, Thailand and Peru, provides an on-the-ground, regionally focused view of the world with a particular emphasis on monitoring the economic, societal and political trends and scanning the horizon for both challenges and innovations that might come to impact the lives of the poor on a daily basis.

As part of a recent meeting of representatives from the Searchlight function in Mumbai, participants undertook a series of field visits to social enterprises based throughout the city, site explorations to projects underway in Dharavi and discussions with local, national and regional experts and thought leaders. It quickly became apparent that, for instance, matters related to urban relocation policy or infrastructure development will not succeed if decision-makers do not take into account long-term transportation needs, the existing close connection between work and home life and changing social dynamics that constitute the cultural fabric of the city. Similarly, envisioning potential shocks and their implications is a first step in building the resiliency of the urban poor to withstand such events.

In conclusion, the capacity to think ahead and plan for the future will be a necessity for organizations aiming to achieve real social change over the coming decades of the 21st century.

Claudia Juech is Managing Director and Evan Michelson is Associate Director at the Rockefeller Foundation.