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Of all the bars in the world…

This story starts in a bar. But not just any old bar. It's a rooftop open-air number, straddling an uber-modern glass and steel business conglomeration. It's a bar with a boxing ring, where two teenage Thai boxers are knocking seven bells out of one another, cheered on by boozed up customers to a soundtrack of throbbing rap music. There's a super-charged party atmosphere that says…its FRIDAY night! It's a bar in Delhi, India.

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And that's why, only ten minutes after leaving this Wolf of Wall Street scene, we find ourselves in a taxi en route to the airport, lost in a labyrinth of dusty unlit village streets. No signs, animals straying in front of the vehicle, with a taxi-driver who looks like he's twelve years old and who clearly has no idea where he is. India revels in contradictions.

Smart Cities ?

Later this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch India's first Smart Cities competition. Supported by the Bloomberg Foundation, this will invite regions to bid for national government funds to improve the nation's urban infrastructure. In a country facing spiraling levels of urban migration, Modi's initiative places cities at the heart of tackling the country's most chronic and long standing problems – amongst them housing, sanitation and employment.

Our week long visit, as part of plans for the Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) Summer School involved meetings, visits and discussions in Bombay and Delhi. Central to these was the recurring question: What do we mean by Smart Cities in the context of India?

"Numbers are never a problem in India"

India's challenges and contradictions are spelled out in its numbers. This is a country with 13% of the world's mobile technology users. With 930 million connections and growing, it is the world's largest market for digital devices. Yet the number of tech connected people dwarfs those that have access to clean toilets – 600 million – which represents just 36% of the population. Only 5% of the country is sewered.

Basic education also remain a huge challenge. The most recent OECD figures show that India invests only 3.5% of its GDP in education, the lowest amongst those featured in the OECD report. After significant pressure, in 2009 India submitted two regions to participate in the OECD's PISA global education benchmarking exercise. Both regions came at or one up from the lowest rating in all three categories (Reading, Mathematics and Science). Subsequently, India withdrew from the process and has not participated in the OECD exercise since. Amongst the country's lower middle classes there is huge reliance on private education, and the state system remains under resourced, with significant challenges around the curriculum, teacher quality and supply.

Yet, at the same time, this is a country with a long-standing space programme and Indian cities are hubs of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. In Bombay there are 300 plus creative companies operating within a five-mile radius of one another, and the growing list of billion-dollar start-ups (Housing.com, Flipkart, Zomato amongst them) are evidence of the strong entrepreneurial spirit at large. Further south, Bangalore is now a byword for tech entrepreneurialism and its business stars – such as Azim Premji, Vijay Mallya and Narayana Murthy – are household names in a country that loves glitz and celebrity. India revels in contradictions.

"Everything is true in India"

All of this means that making sense of India is a challenge for outsiders. Part of our job preparing the SIX Summer School is to help with this, and to shine a light on some of the hot topics relating to cities and to social innovation. I'll be coming back to this later in the year, but in the meantime, here are some of my key take aways from last week – issues and putative solutions.

It's hard to spend any time in Indian cities without coming face to face with the huge issue of informal housing. The scale of these mass semi-temporary settlements is beyond anything we see in Europe – or elsewhere on the planet. Mumbai hosts the most notorious of these, the Dharavi slum, a sprawling shanty city with an official population of 300,000 squashed onto 212 hectares of land.

Dharavi has been there for decades, and despite its rudimentary facilities – particularly relating to sanitation – it is home to a huge number of Bombay's working class. It's also an organically developed example of a balanced neighbourhood, combining a thriving micro-local economy (annual turnover US$650 million) with strong social cohesion. Of course, Dharavi also challenges any stereotypes we might want to make about such settlements. This year it hosted its first biennale event #dharavibiennale showcasing the artistic and economic contribution its residents make to the city. Home grown talent includes the renowned Slumgods which is possibly the only organisation on the planet combining hip-hop dance with an organised slum-tours business. Now, that's enterprising.

As it sits on top of astronomically expensive real estate land, the future of Dharavi is under threat. A government led process will offer long-term residents a 28 square metre house, and (controversially) proposes building upwards on the site. Alongside this, the winning entry in an international competition called Reinventing Dharavi has called for the entire slum area to be demolished and the land sale proceeds to be put into a community land trust which would then redevelop in dialogue with the 156 nagars (neighbourhoods) on site.

Final messages

Along the way we heard about the innovative developments designed to make life safer for women in India's cities. These include Safetipin an app that tracks and plots your location, and the use of What's App groups to provide collective security for sex workers, amongst India's most vulnerable groups.

We heard about the creative approach that Bombay designers are taking in their collaboration with the Indian Railways. There was also a chance to hear about the Vihari Innovation Network's Design Public events, brokering creative dialogues across sectoral silos.

And at the highest level, we discovered the Delhi Dialogue Commission, instigated by the city administration. This explores 20 key policy areas, engaging stakeholders on behalf of government and convening a wider dialogue than Indians normally see from government.

These processes are new in the context of India. Their emergence reflects growing frustration around the slow progress on long standing urban challenges. It also reflects the growing global connections which make it easier to share practice and effective methodologies. In the coming months, we will see the extent to which the government's Smart Cities programme builds on this momentum.

Header Image: Dharavi Pipe Walk IV, by Meena Khadri on Flickr