



The fire at Vasant Kunj

A massive fire engulfed a cluster of slums in South Delhi's Vasant Kunj area on the morning of Friday 25th April. The fire was reported at 8.30 am and fire tenders were immediately rushed to the spot. Approximately half (500) of the 1000 huts or jhuggis were destroyed. The loss of property was so intense that residents were initially unable to identify the location of their houses.

The exact cause of the fire is as yet unconfirmed; but plastic and wood kept in an open yard and leaking gas cylinders are major fire hazards in this slum area. The houses themselves are built of bamboo and tin sheets, which combined with the material stored in the area are highly flammable.

The maximum number of fire accidents in Delhi happen in the hot and dry summer months of April and May. The housing materials, conditions of electrical networks, sub-standard gas cylinders, stored inflammable material, inaccessible narrow lanes and poor emergency preparedness make low income areas highly vulnerable.

3 imperative steps

1 Make rebuilt and existing houses fire resistant

- Do this with minimal cost options like wattle and daub (mud plaster on bamboo walls)
- Improve durability by stabilising mud with 5-7% cement or lime
- Improve external protection from rainwater by using cement plaster on the bottom one foot of the outside surface of walls
- Demonstrate, educate, inspire and train local construction workers and families to adopt safe construction methods

2 Establish and train local emergency response teams

- Train existing groups such as self help groups, youth groups and volunteers
- Create local fire posts and infrastructure to reach areas where fire tenders cannot reach
- Establish protocols linking local fire teams with local fire stations for training and improved coordination during emergency response

3 Relocate or upgrade slums using urban planning principles

- Build two storeyed structures, releasing common land for better roads as fire breakers and community facilities including education, health and sanitation
- Address policy gaps so as to provide housing (whether through ownership or rent) rather than providing land for upgrading and relocation



Plastering bamboo mat walls with stabilised mud will keep houses safer from fires, and comfortable in heat and cold



The community fire post set up by SEEDS in a Yamuna Pushta slum in 2000



DAY 1: FIRE



DAY 2: Relief material arrives



DAY 3: Bamboo frames already erected



DAY 4: Rebuilding in an unsafe manner

**WAITING FOR
THE NEXT DISASTER
TO HAPPEN**