

Community Participation as a Tool of Sustainable Development for Low Income Housing



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Keywords

Community Participation, Low-Income Housing Projects, Community Involving, Participatory Planning, Sustainable Development.

1 Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design

Shelter is a a vital human need. People have need of protection, somewhere to feel secure and comfortable to live with their families, a place to consider home and to call their own. But the housing deficit constantly becomes higher and more serious.

The increased speed of the population growth and urbanization have created a numerous informal settlements, many of them in the outskirts of the cities without access to basic infrastructure, public services or acceptable housing. Poor families in developing countries are forced to improvise with their housing, because of the cost of the materials or the land, and as a consequence of this families decide to stay in vulnerable areas, living inside an unsafe construction and with an unhealthy living environment.

In all developing countries, the need for sustainable housing solutions is urgent. In Ecuador, as an example of a developing country in Latin America, 64% of the population lives in urban areas and 46% of the urban population is considered poor. Such conditions are not dignified to live in and bring health hazards, insecurity, criminality and violence as negative side effects. (Sigbo 2005)

According to Tao-Pilipinas, a philipino NGO working with low income communities, there is no easy solution to urban poverty. Still, their experience in shelter and infrastructure development is an example that the commitment to working together with communities and showing to governments and authorities how their decisions impact on the lives of the poorest people have positive results and help to increase the life quality of families in this situation.

Community participation in rural settlements is not new. Historically, human communities have set up their own shelter in accordance with their physical, economic and social needs. This practice is still alive today, specially in the rural areas, and it is also reflected in the of poor urban communities in semi-legal slums. (UNCHS, 1987)

One of the main problems is that many of the social housing projects on the market are directed to the lower and middle classes, and are not accessible for the poorest groups in society. Community participation should be consider as an

instrument, that correctly used, democratise the society, increase the potentials for a housing project to be successful and satisfy the target group needs. (Sigbo 2005)

“The long history of projects failure where the goals and methods did not fit the needs and capacities of the supposed beneficiaries is convincing evidence of the need for a radical change of attitude in programme implementation”
(UNCHS, 1987)

2 Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

The most important parts of the process is to identify the priorities in the needs of the community and the future conditions for the area, involving the different actors in the process to work towards the same goal because the community itself know best what their needs and main concerns are. (Sigbo 2005)

The poor do not have to be seen as a homogeneous group, the way to work and develop a strategy for the housing project is different according to the actual situation, background and necessities of the community in focus, and also depending on the type of project that is going to be developed.

2.1 Benefits of community participation

Involving the community is mostly important when the householders are interested and are expected to play an active role in the planning, implementation process, in operations and maintenance. As a result it ensures that community issues and concerns are taken into account, generates feeling of ownership and creates a better understanding of the development process. (Sustainable Community Planning Guide, 2007)

According to Sigbo (2005), community participation can also bring positive effects such as: improve the quality of the housing and encourage the maintenance of the area, an initiative between the inhabitants to look for possibilities to participate and influence in other areas with similar needs, try to minimize illegal transfer of land and houses, an increased sense of responsibility in the community and a gaining of knowledge, experiences and skills that can improve the results of future projects.

2.2 Communication Strategy

According to the Sustainable Community Planning Report (2007), the Communication Strategy will involve different methods depending on the target group and at which stage of the process the activity will occur, including:

Diffusion of Information, Consultation, Participation and Mobilisation.

Diffusion of Information

The involvement of the people that is going to be directly affected by the planning proposal is essential for a successful process. It is important to give the participants significant information to understand the objectives and benefits of the planning programme. The information can be given as written documents, articles, newspapers or oral presentations. The arrangement and presentation have to consider the background experience of the target group. This can be used in the initial or at the end of the planning process and it should involve more participatory activities.

Consultation

The consultation leads the community or householders to submit opinions and complaints, in order to influence the decision-making in a formalized way. This tool can be used for open dialogues. Consultation may be general or focus on specific problems, and it should be based and have a relationship with the preliminary diffusion of the information.

Participation

Participation indicates active involvement of both: planners and householders. The objective is that communities become partners in the process of planning their own development.

According to Arnstein (1969), partnership is necessary to redistribute the power through negotiation between citizens and powerholders. It can work most effectively when there is “leader” in the community that is the responsible and identified by the community as such, when the citizens group has the financial resources to pay to this person for the time and efforts that this carry, and when the community has the resources to hire and work with different other human resources such as technicians, lawyers, and community organizers.

Community leaders are usually “skilled” in a lot of ways, including the capacity to organize a group of people , to understand people’s needs or priorities and to negotiate with different institutions. Many of these skills may be acquired through experience , such as involvement in other development and community - related activities. (UNCHS, 1988)



Fig1. Kalayaan community Leader. Metro Manila, The Philippines.



Fig2. St. Hannibal Empowerment Centre (SHEC) community leader. Metro Manila, The Philippines.

Mobilisation

This method includes not only the involvement in planning process, but also in the implementation or maintenance of housing. It is important to share responsibilities and have communication and support from the municipality to contribute to the community development.

2.3 Education and training

The participatory planning brings other positive effects to the community that are education and training, such as workshops, written or verbal presentations, all these meeting can be used as a tool for spreading knowledge and learning or developing skills.

One example of this is the education and training program that Tao-Pilipinas provides to the community : “people’s organizations, community organizations, non-governmental organizations and technical professionals in the private and public sectors can learn and apply community-driven and participatory processes

in the following areas: community development planning, estate management, disaster mitigation in planning, and solid waste management.” (<http://www.iao-pilipinas.org>)

Other types of practical workshops that should be introduced to the community are: food production, building materials and shelter, manufacturing, and recycling. Some of these activities that can later be methods of extra income for the families may be introduced not only at the planning phase, but also after at schools or places where the community can meet and produce.



Fig 3- 4. Recycling workshop and manufacturing. Smokey Mountain. Metro Manila, The Phippilines.

3 The Role of Architects

In order to develop a strategy involving the community in a low-income housing project time, economic and human resources are needed. There are different actors with different responsibilities all along the programming, planning and implementation phases, and architects have an important role on each one of them.

As architects, there is the opportunity to propose a housing project that will fulfill the necessities of the households and increase their life qualities. To achieve this, as in every project to be developed, is important to know as much as you can about your client or possible householder in the case of low income housing projects.

To prevent planning and design errors, architects need to be sensitive to the physical and economic situation of the the potential user.

Providing technical support to urban poor organizations, local government and non-government organizations is another way how architects may have a significant role in a sustainable development process, promoting suitable, cost-effective, and environmentally friendly housing solutions and building technologies responsive to the needs of the marginalized sectors of the population.

Conclusions

Is important to know that community participation as a concept is useful to different projects but how is it applied will have a lot of variation because of the different background and conditions of each project.

“Community participation is just not an instrument; it is also a human right for all persons to be able to participate in the decisions that affect their living conditions.” (Sigbo 2005)

The Philippines, Thailand, India and some Latin American countries are clear examples of successful of participatory planning. However, real community participation is not easy to achieve. It is difficult to organize a group of people with different ideas in decision-making. But without the involvement of the future or existing households, a low-income housing project won't be able to fulfill the needs and demands of the community for improvement in an effective and efficient way.

As a result there is a decrease of the costs in the process and a considerable sustainable urban development. Participation guarantees sustainability. “Without local participation there is no local support or ownership and the interventions never live beyond the life of the project.” (Sheng, 1990)

Is not only that with this tool the housing project has more opportunity to be successful, is also about all the positive and practical knowledge that the people involved in the process will acquire and the skills they are going to learn and improve, that will help them to be capable of starting to change their priorities and lifestyle in a better way.

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Pictures

All pictures by the author.

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