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## The million houses programme in Sri Lanka

### • Background

This paper describes the community action planning approach of the Urban Housing Division of Sri Lanka's National Housing Development Authority. The approach was developed in order to implement the urban component of the Million Houses Programme (1984-1989).

The Million Houses Programme (and its successor, the 1.5 Million Houses Programme) aim to assist the process of household construction and improvement through the provision of loan finance to low-income households in both urban and rural areas. Households are able to obtain loans to improve their houses once the community has agreed a programme of development for the settlement. Households receive a householder file which acts as a guide to housing design and construction and they receive further advice from a staff member of the National Housing Development Authority. A variety of loan packages are available depending on the needs of the household and their ability to make repayments.

Faced with the task of implementing the urban housing component on the required scale, the Urban Housing Division set out to develop new procedures and institutional structures. The improvement of low-income settlements in urban areas required more than just the upgrading of individual houses through loan finance. Settlements were often illegal and the regularisation of land holdings was an essential component to a process of household investment in urban areas. Such settlements were generally without infrastructure and services and therefore water, sanitation, drainage and roads needed to be provided. The houses themselves had often developed in contravention of building regulations and

therefore this needed to be addressed if the programme was really to be supportive of people's own efforts to improve their housing.

Earlier experiences had shown the importance of effective community participation in improving human settlements. The community action planning approach developed out of several local activities: a United Nations Centre for Human Settlements/DANIDA Training Programme for Community Participation, a series of micro-planning workshops held by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a Demonstration Project on Training and Information for the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and the field experiences of the Urban Housing Division.

### • Community action planning

The community action planning and management approach sees people as the main resource for development rather than as an object of the development efforts or as mere recipients of benefits. The objective of the approach is to motivate and mobilise the population of an urban low-income settlement to take the lead in the planning and implementation of improvement. The role of the government, i.e., the National Housing Development Authority and the urban local authorities, is to support this process where necessary, but it is expected that the community will eventually be empowered enough to take its further development into its own hands.

Although these ideas seem straightforward and obvious, experience has shown that there was a lot of 'un-learning' and re-learning required on the part of Sri Lankan housing professionals.

The vehicle for community action planning and management is the interaction/partnership workshop. At such workshops, community

members interact as partners with the staff of the National Housing Development Authority, the local authority and the non-governmental organisations. They discuss the problems of the community, identify solutions and formulate plans of action. The community takes responsibility for implementing these action plans in collaboration with the NHDA and other organisations, and for maintaining and managing the built environment after the completion of the project.

### The action planning workshop

The first, and key, step in the process of community action planning and management for an urban low-income settlement is the two-day community action planning workshop. It provides an opportunity for the community to obtain a comprehensive view of its socio-economic situation and to identify its main concerns and priorities. It also exposes the community to the opportunities available for the improvement of its living conditions, as well as the constraints and obstacles that need to be overcome. Participants in the workshop are community leaders and representatives of the various interest groups in the settlement, staff of the National Housing Development Authority, the urban local authority and other organisations concerned. The objectives of the workshop are to:

- Identify all problems of concern to the community;
- Determine the nature, the magnitude and, where relevant, the cause(s) of each of the problems;
- Prioritise the problems;
- Explore possible solutions and determine the resources needed and available to introduce the solutions;
- Prepare a concrete plan of action which spells out who will do what, when and how;
- Develop a system to monitor the implementation of the action plan; and,
- Design ways to ensure that everyone concerned is aware of the plan of action.

These are achieved in six stages: problem identification; strategies; options and trade-offs; planning for implementation; monitoring; and presentation of the community action plan to the community

#### BOX 1 WORKSHOP TOOLS

*Options-and-trade-offs.* An important tool used in the workshop is the 'options-and-trade-off' technique; a problem may be solved in several ways and each solution may call for different trade-offs. The planners have an important role to play by clarifying the trade-offs available for the community, but the choice is left entirely to the community and individual families. The groups are encouraged to resolve issues collectively. For example, they identify problems in three sub-groups, then they identify those which all three groups agree to, those with which two groups agree to and those to which none of the groups agree. Each group is then able to try to convince the other groups to include the issues that they define as important. A handbook proposes a number of other activities that the workshop participants might undertake. For example, once *strategies* are identified, they are divided into those that should be undertaken immediately and those that can be left until later. The *action plan* identifies the WHO, WHAT and HOW for the different plans.

Once the plan of action has been formulated, the community and the external organisations need to discuss more specific problems and issues and to decide on particular actions to be taken. For this purpose, half-day workshops are organised along the same lines as the two-day community action planning workshop. These problem- or issue-centred workshops discuss any problem or issue which the community wants to raise. Examples of issue-specific workshops are planning principles and technical guidelines, community building guidelines and rules orientation to housing information services.

#### • Land regularisation

The conventional approach to squatter settlement regularisation starts with a detailed survey by NHDA planners of all existing structures, amenities, roads, trees and other features of the area. In many cases the community does not fully understand the plan

prepared by the professionals. The process is slow and often results in the need to relocate large numbers of people and considerable frustration among residents. In the community action planning approach, the individuals and community play a central role<sup>1</sup>.

A community workshop determines the broad principles within which the regularisation process should take place, e.g. the width of roads and footpaths. The workshop participants are divided into three groups: a women's team, an officials' team and a team of community members and builders. The groups meet separately to identify the needs for land in the settlement for residential plots, roads and footpaths, amenities, a community centre, a playground, a clinic and any other facilities. Each group presents its findings in a plenary session and the presentations are discussed until consensus is reached. Next, the three groups meet again separately to find locations for the land uses and to allocate land. Issues discussed include plot sizes, the pattern and the width of the roads, and the location of the amenities and the community centre. Again the groups make their presentations in the plenary meeting and a base plan of the settlement is drawn. Finally, the workshop discusses the logistics for the on-site blocking-out exercise. If the community leaders and the staff of the local authority and the NHDA feel the need for a conceptual layout plan, the Urban Housing Division will prepare such a plan before the on-site blocking-out starts. The plan can facilitate the blocking-out process if the settlement is large and complex, but it is only used as a secondary tool to help the action planning team establish a planning framework to guide the regularisation and blocking-out work on the ground.

The decisions of the workshop on the principles and guidelines for re-blocking are distributed to all households in the settlement. Community leaders inform clusters of households of the day the blocking-out exercise will be conducted in their cluster and request the households to be at home on that day. The exercise is preferably conducted during several consecutive weekends to allow for maximum community and family involvement, but if this is not possible it can be organised over a period of several days during

the week. An action planning team is set up consisting of four persons: *team leader* (an official); *measurer* (an official or a trained community member); *anchor person* for the tape measure (a community member); and *pegger* (a community member if wooden pegs are used) or *diggers* (several community members if marker stones are used).

On the appointed day, the action planning team visits the cluster to discuss the plot boundaries in the cluster with each of the households, using the planning principles and technical guidelines. The team meets with the families in each block to discuss the size of the area and whether or not it can accommodate all the households and, if not, how the problem will be dealt with. As soon as there is an agreement, plot markers are placed to allow all involved to see the implications of the decisions. This will often lead to objections and further negotiations by the affected families. The process of negotiation between the families is the most important part of the exercise. In the process, all land disputes are settled on the spot and finally consensus is reached about the re-blocking of the land in the settlement. It is hoped that the community development councils will be able to assist if there is a need for mediation.

This community-based approach to settlement re-blocking can have very diverse results. The population in one block of Siddharthapath, a highly congested shanty settlement with a strong community organisation, decided to conduct the re-blocking exercise on its own after the Urban Housing Division had informed them that their request for regularisation had to be put on a long waiting list. The community resolved that there would be minimum demolition and as a consequence, the area was divided into small and oddly shaped plots. In the Perth Road project, the community organisation was not very strong and it decided to hire a surveyor to do the re-blocking. The community preferred a new settlement layout which would have long-term benefits rather than a re-blocking which would preserve most of the existing structures. The result was a re-blocked settlement with regularly shaped plots of equal sizes, but with a high rate of demolitions.

<sup>1</sup> Although there are certain principles for re-blocking set down by the Urban Housing Division, for example, that there should only be one plot per household.

## • Community building guidelines

Once land tenure has been regularised, the residents of the low-income settlement are usually eager to start the construction or improvement of their houses. The Urban Development Authority has made a provision in its laws concerning planning and building standards to allow reduced standards in those low-income settlements which have been designated as special project areas (i.e. areas developed within the programmes discussed here). For example, the plot on which a house can be built in urban areas is normally 150 square metres but the minimum plot size has been reduced to 50 square metres for special project areas.

In the conventional approach, public health and planning professionals determine the building standards and impose their codes on the community. Such regulations are often totally misplaced in the context of low-income settlements and are therefore evaded. If enforced, they may compel households to construct beyond their means, resulting in large debts or incomplete houses. In the community action planning approach, representatives of the various interest groups in the settlement work together with health and planning professionals to formulate building codes specific to that settlement. Ideally there are some 20-25 participants; 3-5 resource people and 15-20 community members (with at least seven women). The workshop addresses a range of questions about the building regulations and how they should be enforced. Participants are divided into three teams: an all-women's team, an officials team, and a community and builder's team.

## • Community management

From the beginning, all urban low-income settlements involved in the programme have to establish a community organisation called a community development council. These councils have been established in order to increase the self-reliance of residents within the settlement. Community development councils are considered to have a central role in the community action planning approach. They have to act as intermediaries between the population of low-income settlements and the

external agencies, articulating the needs and the problems felt by residents to the external organisations, taking decisions, formulating plans, executing projects and monitoring the implementation of a multitude of undertakings.

As the programme developed, there was a growing feeling among the staff of the Urban Housing Division that many community development councils did not perform their role as the main actors and decision-makers in the community as well as had been hoped. Community activities often depended on individual members of the community, both within and outside the councils, who were prepared to make an effort to motivate residents and channel community requests for improvement activities to the National Housing Development Authority. The Urban Housing Division, therefore, decided to strengthen the role of these persons and to recognise their vital role as community agents. In 1989, the National Housing Development Authority introduced the concept of *praja sahayaka* (literally, community assistants). A *praja sahayaka* is a person from a low-income community who has worked as an activist in shelter improvement programmes in his or her neighbourhood and is now willing to go beyond his or her community to work as an extension agent in other communities.

By involving residents of urban low-income settlements as community organisers, the National Housing Development Authority also hoped to reduce the distance between the community organiser and the population. The *praja sahayaka* were expected to establish initial contact with the population in low-income settlements and to assist the residents of such settlements to set up a community-based organisation. Once such an organisation had been established, they would try to raise the residents' awareness of the problems in their settlements according to the community action planning approach, to search for solutions to the problems and to assist the community in the implementation of the solutions. They were also expected to promote openness in the administration and management of community activities by community-based organisation, and monitor and review community development activities.

The National Housing Development Authority recruited its first three *praja sahayaka* in 1989. Several problems soon emerged. The *praja sahayaka* soon came to the conclusion that the National Housing Development Authority may be good at improving housing conditions in urban low-income settlements, but that it is probably not the most suitable organisation to conduct social work and to implement an economic support programme. Their role also created confusion at the operational level. The field staff of the Urban Housing Division wanted the *praja sahayaka* to operate under the supervision of an NHDA officer. The *praja sahayaka*, on the other hand, demanded a greater measure of freedom and wanted to establish contacts with communities independently and to operate autonomously.

In 1990, some *praja sahayaka* organised themselves into a non-governmental organisation, the *Praja Sahayaka Service* (PSS), directed and managed by the members to ensure a degree of autonomy in their work with communities. The PSS is an attempt to build on the leadership skills of the urban poor which have been developed through Sri Lanka's political and educational system (for further information, see Gamage, 1993).

## • Conclusions

In the community action planning approach, the population in the urban low-income settlements is a major resource for development rather than an object of the development effort or a mere recipient of benefits. The key instrument of the approach is the workshop which is alternately called implementation/training workshop or interaction/partnership workshop.

Professionals from a conventional background may have difficulties conducting such workshops, because the participants from the settlement determine the agenda, lead the discussions and draw the conclusions. Such professionals tend to believe that only they can understand and take decisions on issues like settlement planning, housing loans and infrastructure, because they have acquired the expertise after many years of study. Considerable un-learning is required to turn such conventional professionals into people-oriented planners who can interact with a low-income community as a partner, and

acknowledge the value of its opinions and decisions.

The original intention of the programme had been to improve housing conditions in low-income settlements. With the development of the community action planning approach, the focus became the empowerment of the population in low-income settlements. There was the hope that the improvement of housing conditions would be a means to create awareness among the people in low-income settlements about their own situation. However, a criticism of the programme might be that little attention was given to the need to develop an internal capacity to solve problems and manage their own affairs (IREC 1990; Tilakaratna 1991). While in some cases, the community development councils have acted effectively and have developed into truly representative structures for the settlement, in others they have not lasted for the life of the project.

The Million Houses Programme was succeeded by the 1.5 Million Houses Programme in 1989. Within this new programme, it is now the task of the urban local authorities to find funds for the implementation of low-income housing projects (either from their own budgets and/or from external sources such as the UNICEF-funded Urban Basic Services Programme). The Urban Housing Division's primary task is now to disseminate the approach to a wide range of institutions such as the NHDA provincial and district staff, the staff of urban local authorities and non-governmental organisations.

The Urban Housing Division is now responsible for training using the community action planning approach, while the local authority is responsible for implementation of the community action plan. Implementation and training have again been separated, whereas the community action planning approach stresses the integration of training and implementation. The urban local authorities do not always have the financial or human resources to implement the outcome of community action planning workshops and therefore there was a risk that the training workshops would become isolated events without any follow-up. This made it more imperative that the community action planning workshops dealt not only with the problems of the community and the formulation

of action plans to solve those problems, but also and increasingly improving the community's ability to identify sources of funding, both internally or externally, to implement its action plan.

*Community Participation Component of the Urban Housing Sub-programme: The Final Report. Colombo.*

In order to minimise the separation, urban local authorities have been made responsible for the community action planning and its implementation. They invite the Urban Housing Division to train the communities with whom they are ready to work on improvement programmes. For the last few years, action planning workshops have proliferated among urban local authorities. The training grants from the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements have been transferred to 14 local authorities working in priority areas. Between August 1993 and July 1994, some 166 workshops were held. Questions are often raised by the municipal authorities about financial resources for project implementation and there is an evident need to address the resource mobilisation capacity of local authorities and community organisations. Among other aspects, the community development committees need to be revitalised as a forum for local-level resource mobilisation.

#### NOTE

This paper has been drawn from *The Urban Poor as Agents of Development: Community Action Planning in Sri Lanka*, a publication drafted by Kioe Sheng Yap for the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HS/278/93E, 1993). The text has been updated to take account of recent developments by Mitsuhiro Hosaka, Chief Training Officer of the UNCHS(Habitat)/DANIDA Community Training Programme in Sri Lanka.

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