Housing provision and improvement programmes for low income populations in the developing world. A review of approaches and their significance in the European context

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Abstract. The paper deals with the issue of affordable housing provision for low-income populations in the developing countries and its significance in the European context. My goal is to discuss this topic through the analysis of different approaches to household provision and improvement with special focus on the involvement of communities in various upgrading procedures. Separate sections of the paper refer to the most important approaches developed in the 20th and 21st centuries. These include: site and service, slum upgrading, incremental housing and community-led upgrading which are analysed through the prism of several examples coming from various parts of the world.

The discussion of the strategies formulated in the developing world is linked with the new approaches towards housing provision that are presently promoted or are spontaneously emerging in various cities of Central Europe. These include the issues of container-houses construction in Poland and the creation of informal settlements by Roma populations in Polish and Slovakian cities.

1. Introduction

The discussion of the approaches to housing provision for low-income populations in the developing countries is not only relevant in the 'Southern' context but becomes nowadays important in European countries. First of all, in the last several years, authorities of Polish cities started to experiment with the so-called
container-houses (kontenery mieszkaniowe, konten-ery socjalne) that are used to serve as homes for people who are not able to afford the rents in other locations or who are considered troublesome ten-ants (PAP, 2011). As a consequence ‘houses’ like that have been already constructed in the cities of Bytom, Wilamowice, Sosnowiec (Fig. 1), Poznan, Bydgoszcz (Boruch, 2008; Wybiralaki, 2011) and were to be constructed in Łódź and Białystok (PAP, 2011; Boruch, 2008). The construction typically resembles the buildings that have been already set up in Bytom where 20 ‘houses’ were inhabited in the middle of 2010. Their size usually ranges from 10 to 16 m² and they are equipped with basic amenities like: shower, toilet, kitchen annex with oven. The overall cost of 120 container-houses which were supposed to be constructed was estimated to reach 3.5 million PLN. Two years after the removal of tenants to the men- tioned 20 units, 5 were reported to have entirely deteriorated: one was set on fire, another one also burned in fire, while two other ones were robbed and devastated. Renovation of 5 modules will cost the lo-cal government 78,500 PLN (Nowacka-Goik, 2012; Wiggel, 2010; Nowak, 2012).

The quoted example partially illustrates why the strategy of container-houses construction, perceived by local authorities as a remedy for housing short-age and ‘problematic’ tenants, in fact replicates the mistakes experienced in other locations and leads to social segregation of city’s inhabitants, their social isolation and stigmatisation (even though local au-thorities may claim something else).

In European countries are encountering ‘the problem’ of illegal Roma set-tlements rising on the outskirts of their cities. With the dissolution of their traditional nomadic lifestyle Roma people started to construct small shanty-towns and try to develop new sources of livelihood. Such set-tlements are an almost ideal copy of the neighbour-hoods that are being raised by poor people all over the ‘developing’ world (see Fig. 2 and 3). The similarities can be seen in the design, low social status and poverty of their inhabitants. Unfortunately, the most common reaction of European urban authorities and better-off populations to that problem copies the worst models from the southern countries. Instead of looking at the newest solutions the authorities of Slovakian cities like Ostrozany, Michalovce, Trebisov (Pitezky, 2010) prefer to separate themselves from the unwanted set-tlements by concrete walls, do nothing like the au-thorities of city of Wrocław in Poland (Harłukowicz, 2012) or like the French authorities, throw the Roma people out of the country (BBC, 2010).

Both of the mentioned processes – the delivery of container-houses for poor people and action by local authorities and the creation of illegal settlements – have already happened and have been analysed for decades in the developing countries. That is why it is worth to take a look at their approaches towards the mentioned issues. The experiences and case studies presented in this paper could provide a number of suggestions as to whether the proposed solution of container-houses is feasible in the European context and if it follows any reasonable model. At the same time it can illustrate that there exist ways in which illegal Roma settlements can be upgraded and can become normal parts of cities.

The key argument of the paper is that the crucial element helping the poor to get out of poverty is linked not only to housing conditions but also to their social empowerment. Probably the first and most acknowledged scientific reflection about the central role of communities in housing upgrading processes was formulated by John Turner in the 1970s. In the famous book ‘Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments’ he explains how conven-tional-housing policies are unable to accommodate the growing needs for housing in rapidly urbanising countries. Therefore, as he notices, the construction of shanty towns should not be perceived as a prob-lem but as a solute to the housing shortage (Turner, 1976). Facing the inability of governments to provide shelter, people have no other choice than to construct it by themselves. Those temporary settlements, if not destroyed by governments due to land policies, prop-erty issues and the ‘purely’ perceived need of separation, usually become consolidated parts of the town. As he argues the bureaucratic systems represented by local authorities or large organisations ‘standardise procedures and products in order to operate economically. By necessity this conflicts with the local variety and housing priorities’ (Turner, 1976: 51). In other words conventional housing might be unsuitable for the poorest populations in developing countries due to its high costs and low use value as opposed to self-constructed houses.

The process of consolidation of informal settle-ments was first observed in Latin America where, after decades, authorities started to undertake efforts to upgrade them instead of destroying. Already at that stage we can speak about housing improvement programmes where the people are the main actors of the process (as they are the ones who occupy vacant land and build their houses). Usually government-led im-provement comes at the latest stage (the approach will be described in a further part of the paper).

Except the case of Roma population none of these problems is present in Polish or Slovakian cases. People do not need to build their own houses by themselves as a response to rapid urbanisation pro-cesses. Moreover, nowadays most of them have access to a decent shelter. That is why the strategy of con-tainer-houses construction, proposed by local Polish authorities, aims rather at gaining access to valuable housing in the city center by pushing away tenants who do not pay their rent (Urbanski, 2009). This process may lead to the beautification of inner cities which are transformed from social housing districts into top-end areas. For obvious reasons the discussed policy leads as well to the gentrification of city cen-tres. Simultaneously, the creation of ‘container hous-ing’ provokes another process in the suburban zones of Polish cities. Its basic characteristics and potential social impact echo the problems that were encoun-tered in the site and service projects realised all round the world in the middle of the last century. The crea-tion of this type of housing can be also related to the growing ghettoisation of Polish cities which results in the separation of the populations perceived as a ‘good ones’ from the ‘pathological ones’ (Szczepeński, Słęk-Tuzbir, 2007: 44). Assuming that only in the capital city of Warsaw there is around 50,000 people who owe the city money for the rents, one can imagine that the amount of potential ‘recipients’ of the container type of housing who theoretically might be located in the city suburbs (Szpala, Zubik, 2012). On the other hand, along with the gentrification of large parts of Warsaw, gated communities are becoming more pop-u-lar and the current need of separation of different social groups. In the case of Roma settle-ments the real, physical separation is already taking place (as mentioned in regard to Slovakian examples).

2. Site and service

Prior to the Turner’s revolutionary book and the popularisation of the slum upgrading approach there already existed programmes which, at least in theory, were supposed to provide housing to the people. Site and service is one of the schemes used to achieve that goal. The essential element of site and service programmes is the limitation of cost in contrast to conventional social housing. Even though there does not exist one unified model of site and service pro-jects (as they can vary a lot) one can distinguish some common characteristics. In most of cases the land is divided into equal plots of minimal size and provided with infrastructure access. The incoming population receives some form of secured tenure or the right to use the land. Often the project might be supported with loans or a mortgage system. Sometimes the plots are provided with the walls, roofs, etc. The strategy of site and service was largely supported by the World Bank but not many of the implemented
projects succeeded in financial terms (United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific). There are several reasons why these projects failed to a great degree.

Firstly, site and service projects were usually located outside of the city and automatically the people who were placed out there were also forced to give up their original jobs. In the most cases that meant the inability to continue their professional activities in the new surrounding. As pointed out by Turner, the basic instrument of the poor, essential for their survival, are the personal linkages and informal activities (Turner, 1976). Relocated populations, in most cases, lose all of that. In that context site and service projects could be perceived more as a burden for the people who happen to be allocated a plot. Similarly, resettlement projects which are supposed to provide possibilities for decent housing or emergency relief in most cases have negative impacts (especially in regard to employment issues) (Initial Policy Recommendations on Relocation Framework, Institute for Popular Democracy, IDP). In that context one can recall the cases of various site and service projects implemented in South Africa. They turned out to be instruments of apartheid politics, which lead to conscious segregation of the country’s population (Frescura, 1993). The famous townships are presently the zones of criminality and poverty, years after they were constructed.

The presented characteristic of site & service districts was worsened by the lack of sufficient social facilities which, in any case, increased the initial cost of the project and were often not included in the site development plan. Additionally, site and service projects did not support capacity building and enhancement of communities. At this point one can remember that issues of participation is an essential instrument for improving the capacities of community members. Moreover, the processes of participation and democratisation are critical if the latest generation of poverty reduction initiatives are to have an impact which is both substantive in scale and lasting in time (Fiori et al., 2001: 48). This element, at the early stage of site and service programmes, was mostly neglected. Nevertheless, even if quantitative measures show that site and service projects were financially unsuccessful, there exist examples of projects which turned out to work well both in economic and social terms. One of those is the Aranya project in Indore, India which is still perceived as a successful case study of a low-income housing development project. The mentioned case proves that careful attention given to community development, financial subsidiarity and culturally appropriate design can lead to positive outcomes also in the case of site and service schemes (Minimum Cost Housing Group, 2006).

3. Settlement and slum upgrading

The settlement upgrading approach I have mentioned above is an essential alternative for any displacement and real estate processes. The existing settlements are upgraded through investment in infrastructure. Usually settlers who have constructed a neighbourhood receive a chance to access secure tenure and new amenities. The intervention is usually driven by market and, at the same time, has to face huge pressure to sell and improve the remaining funds were devoted to social development and economic development through a small-scale credit scheme.

The approach has, however, its limitations. Firstly, it might not be feasible in socio-political and economic terms. The problems are usually linked to scarcity of land in modern metropolises of the third world. According to that project, areas which make it extremely difficult to keep and upgrade the settlements without secured tenure as these are often located in the most desired spaces in the city. One can remember the famous case of Mumbai, Dhavari slum or so-called slum city where government (…) allocated less than 1.0 percent of the total government expenditures for the housing sector in recent years, or less than one-tenth of a percent of GDP on the average. This makes Philippine public spending on housing one of the lowest in Asia (Philippine Development Plan for Shelter 2011-2016: Habito, 2009). The government of the Philippines, therefore, does not devote sufficient funds to the upgrading process in the numerous amount of slum settlements and, at the same time, have to face huge pressure to sell the valuable land in the centre of Makati or Manila. In that situation the settlement upgrading approach can become a less favorable strategy (from the government’s point of view) in the wide variety of possible approaches.

In general these problems do not occur in the depopulating cities of Poland. Additionally upgrading or ‘urban renewal’ processes are usually market-driven. Nonetheless, an important conclusion drawn from the variety of presented projects is the focus on social development and accessibility of relevant services. Their presence is perceived as a crucial element helping the poor population to get out of poverty.

In the case of Poland, relocation tends to place people who have problems in social ghettos located far from the most important urban services. This kind of approach resembles the early site and service projects from decades ago rather than the contemporary development programmes.

4. Incremental housing

Another important strategy for the provision of housing for low-income population in the developing countries are incremental housing schemes. The main difference between incremental housing and the site and service approach is related to the order of actions undertaken on the project site. In incremental housing projects people firstly receive access to land (or title if the family has the financial resources). There is no infrastructure provided – only access to water. As Margerita Greene and Eduardo Rojas notice, incremental building has a ‘process-based nature. This is a process that lasts for many years and, in many cases, never ends. Many families work on the improvement and extension of their homes throughout an entire family cycle, first to obtain the minimum standards in size and quality, and later to accommodate changes in family structure or to get income from their investment. Housing projects (Greene, Rojas, 2008: 93) For that reasons incremental housing is cheaper than site and service projects but not necessarily faster – the fully equipped house is developed by the families after approximately 8-10 years (Greene, Rojas, 2008: 93). Nevertheless, many argue that incremental housing responds to people’s needs in a better way than site and service schemes. This solution provides settlers with protection from water, insects and other dangers, which is considered more urgent than sanitation, electricity, etc. After the construction of the basic house nucleus people start to work on infrastructure development. In the case of site and service projects they can get access to the infrastructure right away but the cost of plots is higher – the ones who purchase them might not have afterward the financing capacity necessary for the fast construction of their homes (if they are not provided from the beginning). Apart form that, in the case of site and service projects, quite often the proposed housing units are not extendable.
Another advantage of incremental housing is the fact that, by necessity, it involves people’s participation. Although this element is generally positive, it also generates the risk of forcing community action in a manner that the community might not necessarily exist (e.g. in the case of newcomers to the projected settlement) (United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific). Generally speaking, community action strengthens network works and relations between the settlement inhabitants, increases their resilience and in general diminishes social pathologies. Nevertheless, as it has been mentioned before, people might lack the necessary skills or resources to conduct neighbourhood improvements effectively and efficiently. That is why it is important to remember the incremental housing process can be enhanced by adequate technical and financial support. Such support is a public policy concern, as it can provide significant benefits for low-income communities as a whole, such as improvements in the safety and health of the beneficiary households (Greene, Rojas, 2008: 94). That is why the incremental process can be facilitated through economic, social, and technical intermediation, managed by NGOs.

A good example of a successful initiative is the case of Khuda Ki Basti in Hyderabad Pakistan, commenced by HDBA in 1986 (Van der Linden, 1997: 86). The project was facilitated on various levels, including social, financial and technical. For instance, in regard to the last mentioned element, assistance in building and design was provided for the newcomers – families received help when constructing their houses. Similarly, design assistance was provided for the construction of internal sewers, as well as the entire schema of floor plan was developed by the authorities. What is equally important is the fact that the new inhabitants of the area received assistance in the provision of suitable building materials from the informal construction sector. All of the mentioned elements, as well as the provision of a site plan, which included the designation of 15% of the area for public amenities and public spaces, contributed to the relatively fast consolidation of the area.

Furthermore, the local authorities, thanks to social intermediation, managed to eliminate land speculation in the project area. In order to receive access to the plot, applicants had to present themselves with the whole household and all households’ goods. They were accommodated in a provisional camp, the ‘reception area’, where they had to live for about a fortnight. Secondly, the beneficiaries did not necessarily alter their order for their plots. Instead, after a first, modest down payment, a small monthly amount had to be deposited for infrastructure provision. Only when the full costs of the plot and infrastructure have been paid will a permit to build be issued. In short, any long absence from the plot can be punished by cancelling the application and, with it, the allocated plot (Van der Linden, 1997: 86–87).

In all, as Asad Azfar and Aun Rahman conclude, issues like public safety, provision of education, infrastructure, assistance in building procedures, microfinance schemes, etc. are handled better in Khuda Ki Basti than in a similar project developed on an informal basis (Azfar, Rahman, 2004: 5–11).

These observations do not prove, however, the absolute superiority of the incremental housing process over the site and service one. They rather show that government support and transfer of informal solutions (as the incremental process basically replicates the informal process into formal means) is a prerequisite for its success. In most of the cases site and service processes turned out to be expensive and not sustainable in social terms, but the latter can be rather linked with the lack of sufficient support from the government (Shelter Associates, Slumdwellers/Shackdwellers International, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights and Urban Poor Federation Philippines, which has achieved a considerable success in the field of provision for low-income groups are the projects planned, facilitated and implemented by the communities themselves. In their case the logic of the state as a provider is exchanged for the role as a partner of the empowered community.

One of these alternative approaches was recently developed by the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (which unites poor people associations from Asian countries) into formal means. What sets the field of settlement upgrading is Homeless People’s Federation Philippines, which has achieved a considerable success in the field of provision for poor communities. Their approach resembles the traditional approach of slum upgrading. Nevertheless, the difference lies in the central role of the community in the process. Community members are responsible for gathering their own savings through the communal savings schemes. Communities supported by NGOs use the legislative mechanism in the Philippines to negotiate the right to secure tenure. Except direct negotiations with the government they try to access land through different means both in regard to government and private land (for instance, vacant government land can be acquired through presidential proclamations or private land can be bought through the Community Mortgage Program) (Housing and Urban Development Coordination Council). At the same time, those communities are responsible for surveying the settlements and calculate the area occupied by their structures. The capacity of community members is enhanced by design workshops or exhibits of model housing that aim to improve people’s building skills (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights).

What is perhaps even more important than the ambition of self-governance in community-based projects are the networking activities undertaken by the communities and assisting NGOs. Presently, in various Asian cities, those networks are working on implementing the Asian Coalition for Community Action programme which aims to develop city-wide upgrading by communities themselves. In other words, communities are developing regional, national and city information systems, which provide measures for integrated action on a wide scale. These instruments allow communities to take a leading role in the planning and implementation of interventions on equal terms (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights).

This kind of approach in obvious ways reaches further than any other presented strategy for the provision of housing. As the main advantage one could point to the leading role of communities in the process. This element maximises the advantages of participation that occur more sporadically in other approaches. Community action empowers previously marginalised people. As many argue (Shelter Associates, Slumdwellers/Shackdwellers International, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Habitat International Coalition) slum inhabitants are able to provide the best solutions for upgrading their settlements and (through an incremental process) they gain the skills necessary for managing their projects (especially taking into account exchanges and learning sessions with other members of the networks of the poor). Moreover, the savings generated for the necessities of the incremental process (which, as mentioned before, is in the Philippines case minimal).

On the other hand, this kind of approach can work very well in societies with a long established spirit of collective action and the ability to quickly increase their capacities. The results might be less promising in other cultural surroundings where specialist knowledge could not be transferred in a fast and efficient manner. In these cases there is a risk that settlements could remain, for instance, in the hazardous areas endangered by natural disasters. Nonetheless, the examples of voluntary resettlement in Thailand (facilitated by the Community Organizations Development Institute) show the capacity of communities to reasonably evaluate the risks or wide public interest. All in all, the approach of community-based upgrading programmes spreads around the whole world thanks to the work of such networks as Slum Dwellers International, Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, Urban Poor Federation, Habitat International
All of the discussed approaches are still being implemented with various results around the world. The tendency to move away from the basic site and service project to settlement-upgrading and incremental housing has brought positive effects to the communities. The border between different approaches becomes more and more obscure – even if the sequence of undertaken actions is different in each case, all approaches devote more and more attention to social, economic and cultural issues as crucial elements of community upgrading. The mentioned cases of Aranyaa, Khuda Ki Basti, Favela Bairro, Kampung Improvement Program and the activities linked with the Asian Coalition of Community Action Program, show the significance of an interdisciplinary approach towards housing provision and upgrading. Despite the mentioned achievements, the challenge continues to increase along with the growing poor populations in the world. Probably the most significant conclusion of the analysed approaches is the need to learn from the world experiences, to avoid the old mistakes in the process of housing provision, as presented in the paper. It seems the authorities of several Slovakian cities have already started to reproduce the old mistakes in regard to Roma settlements, the mistakes that had already been made decades ago, in much poorer and less democratic countries of the world.

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References


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