

Shelter for all: innovate approaches and best practices

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Summary

The start of our century marks the historic moment that for the first time more people are living in urban than in rural areas. The trend to move to the cities is unstoppable. People move to urban areas for more economic opportunities or more freedom, but always arriving with the same question: how to find shelter. Shelter for all is the motto of UN-Habitat. An excellent motto of course, but what does it mean and how achieve it. This paper examines some innovate approaches and best practices to provide shelter.



Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro

From exclusion to inclusion

In many developing countries the inability for the government to provide sufficient shelter leads to two societies in one city: the formal and planned city, and the informal and unplanned city. The informal city is often denied by governments; on official maps these parts of the city cannot be found. This is not only inhuman, but also an enormous economic loss for the society as a whole. Development and economic and social equality are not adversaries but partners. It is economically very inefficient to leave the skills and power of a large part of the population unused. Interesting is the example of Brazil where president Lulu has achieved economic growth by including millions of favela dwellers in the development process. The need to include the urban poor in the development process in order to achieve sustainable economic growth applies to every developing mega city in the world. Equally important it is to activate all participants in the development process. The private sector has to take their responsibility in an inclusive urban shelter development, not only as a social responsibility but also in their own interest of sustainable long term economic development. But as a start it is the responsibility of the public sector to provide a frame work for long term development, in the form of a modern style master plan.

From blue print to frame work planning

Master planning remains an important task for the government. Goals which are long term and in the interest of the society as a whole can only be set and controlled by the public sector. But the preparation of physical plans by governments has become a farce in many rapidly urbanizing countries. Plans are often still being prepared while the city is already built; too often green zones in the plan are waiting for approval while in reality they are already completely urbanized. An example are the green zones in Damascus, where the historic oasis with orange groves is destroyed and replaced with settlements while the master plan to protect them is still under preparation.

Still there is a strong need for a long term planning: for comprehensive plans, combining physical development with economical and ecological development is required not as a blue print but as a strategic plan. It can provide a clear view on those areas where investments are made. But maybe even more important it can, in combination with an enforcement strategy, keep clear these areas which are kept for public use or are not fit for building: a green and blue framework.



Damascus, disappearing oasis

Green and blue framework

Most megacities are located on or near the sea. Especially in these delta cities the relation between planning and water management is important. It are the poor people who usually live in the lowest and most flood prone areas and it are the poor people who are suffering most from flooding. Settling in flood prone areas makes it impossible to achieve a long term improvement process. Water should always be used as the basic layer in the planning system. The sea level rise due to climate change makes this approach even more urgent. Coastal protection and river flood protection should be the first priorities in strategic master plans.

Another important issue is the relation between urban planning and food supply. The provision of food for the growing urban population will be an important problem in the next century. Urban agriculture zones may be a solution, combining food production for the city with urban green zones. Interesting experiments are now ongoing in China in Hebei province and the city of Wuhan. Urban agriculture can be developed as a commercially, but also as small scale private initiatives, comparable to the allotment gardens in Europe, like the kleingarten in Germany and volkstuinten in the Netherlands.

A green and blue frame work combines flood protection, water retention zones and zones for urban agriculture, but also provides an ecological framework and recreation space. It defines areas which are fit for development, and which can be urbanized not only with formal but also with informal developments, using people's ability for self help.

Shelter and selfhelp

The proportion of urban dwellers living in slums has decreased from 47 percent to 37 percent in the developing world between 1990 and 2005. But due to rising population, the number of slum dwellers is rising. More than one billion people worldwide live in slums and the figure will grow to over 2 billion by 2030. Especially in the fastest growing cities self help slum development is the most common housing solution. Informal developments were long time seen as a negative phenomena or even denied by the formal institutions but the idea that that self help can be one of the solutions to the shelter problem has now been widely accepted. Key in the whole process is the role of the people. Especially for simple housing people can use their manpower and available finance (even small amounts) to invest in their shelter. In practice investment in housing proves to be an economic engine, both for the inhabitants and for society as a whole. Proper shelter is essential for public health and for the economy. But self help is only possible if certain conditions are met.

Conditions for investment in informal settlements

Security

The most important factor for people to invest in their own housing is security. People will only invest if they know that in over a long period the house is still there. Hence, one of the main aspects is to secure the right to the land.

Safety

Closely connected to security is safety.

Safety comes in numbers, which means that often social groups live together in cities. Sometimes others than the government provide a kind of mock safety. An example is the favelas in Brazil, which are controlled by gangs. Even if they are criminals, for inhabitants they provide a kind of stability which is required to invest in housing. Of course this is a very negative situation.

Access to income

Many surveys show that the access to income is often more important than the actual living conditions. Slums are often found near city centers, where the inhabitants live in a complex economical relation with the formal society. This is often proven when slums are demolished and the inhabitants are rehoused in remote suburbs. This leads to economic problems for the inhabitants themselves but also in the areas where they provided low cost labor and services. Separation of work and living space means that many inhabitants in the new world megacities have to travel everyday for hours; in addition to the time they spend at work to generate some income.

Availability of finance

To build a house at least some finance to buy materials is required. Microcredits can help to provide these, below a good example is described.

Availability of skills

Most often this is not a huge problem, especially for small houses. Only for higher density and more complicated structures more is required. This can be achieved in two ways. Either to provide these skills with programs, good examples are in Jamaica where women of an ngo, the Huairo Foundation, educates the women in building shelter, or the organization of local building societies comparable to the housing corporations in Europe.

Innovate approaches to urban services

The question is always how to finance services and social programs. The best of course is to let the project pay for itself, instead of (often insure) payments from the general budget. An innovate example is the financing of waste management programs in Brazil. On the waste dumps in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo poor families and home less children used to live to earn at least something with the sale of rubbish. When the Brazilian government decided to modernize their outdated waste dumps, the question was how to deal with these inhabitants. The solution was found by using income from the sale of the CO2 rights for finance. The management of the waste dumps was granted to Arcadis Logos, who organized the whole process of carbon rights and social programs, in cooperation with local communities. This example shows how innovation works: physical modernization of services in combination with an innovational process in which the private sector and local communities play a key role.

Shelter and microcredits

The availability of finance, even small amounts, does often block the possibilities for inhabitants to improve living conditions themselves. Microcredit can bridge this gap. An interesting example is the supply of microcredits in Mexico by Cemex, one of the largest cement industries in the world. The microcredits are distributed through local women groups, as women groups proved to be the most reliable partners. By supplying microcredits Cemex is of course not only helping people to provide for their own shelter, but to extend their market to a large sector of the society which upto now was unable to buy their products. This successful program proves that innovate combinations of participants can help to provide shelter.

Private sector and partnerships

A new role is for the private sector. Social responsibility is becoming a much more important factor in business. This has led to the phenomena of partnerships. In partnerships private companies find a partner related to their own key expertise. This partner, a ngo or government, can be supported in several ways. It can be financially or with expertise. An example is UN-Habitat. It is supported financially by BASF chemicals, social projects are selected and money is transferred. Sometimes this is for specific purposes, such as Coca Cola who is supporting drinking water projects for schools in India. But where the link is through key expertise, the pro bono input with expertise may be a better solution. An example is the support of TNT for the World Food Organization. As a logistical expert TNT is a good partner. A recent other good example is Arcadis. As a large global consulting and engineering firm Arcadis is able to provide expertise in environment, infrastructure, urban development and water management. After careful consideration UN-Habitat was chosen as partner. Presently Arcadis is providing input in UN-Habitat projects, such as the development of green building standards for Africa, flood management in Sudan and coastal protection in Senegal. In near future projects will start in Haiti, a result of a fundraising by Arcadis staff. By providing expertise instead of money the input can be more efficient. Of course this is quit change compared to the traditional way of working, and it is understandable that not all ngo's and development organizations like it as some feel it may threaten their power and income. But the UN is now actively pursuing this approach. More involvement of the private sector is one of the key elements in the policy of the UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon. The positive experiences will prove that this is definitely a new way of working and part of the innovate approaches in the process to provide shelter for all.

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