

Organized Self-Help Housing

Aspects to consider for a better community development.



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1 Introduction

One of the problems of governmental and top-down housing projects for low-income people has been the exclusion of community skills. As Turner explains: “Households should be free to choose their own housing, to build or direct its construction if they wish, and to manage it in their own ways”. This freedom to choose will have a noticeable impact in the development of the community (Turner, 1970 quoted in Arroyo, 2013).

Ignoring the reality of poor people will result in a settlement which does not respond to the necessities and daily life of the poor. As Lizarralde (2015) argues “Almost always overlooking that the informal sector facilitates an intimate relationship between house owners and building labours” (Lizarralde 2015 pp. 103). Such a relationship might improve the users’ sense of belonging instead of being passive receivers of a housing unit.

Many resources that poor communities have such as human, material and knowledge resources are being neglected. According to Lizarralde (2015), local materials, local technologies, existing informal enterprises and work force are not taken into account. Some general arguments underlying the exclusion of communities’ resources is that they are not reliable, bad quality construction and people don’t know how to do it.

This paper discusses how the Organized Self-help housing(OSHH) process can help to reduce costs, create a settlement which responds to the necessities of the poor, improve community skills and therefore lead to the development of a more independent community. Furthermore, the discussion is based on the facts mentioned above and how they worked successfully in Saint Hannibal Empowerment Center through a short study visit and interviews.

2 Literature Review

Understanding Organized Self-Help Housing

According to Åstrand, (2016) the word “organized” refers to: “the organization of a group of people with common interests to build their houses, supported by a facilitating organization, where people are given technical advice and are trained by professionals.” So, the technical assistance provided by professionals and people self-build as a group are two features that lack when the poor self-builds spontaneous settlements.

For Arroyo & Åstrad (2013), Organized Self-help Housing “is a process that involves the community’s active participation and decision making in planning, design, self-construction, and post-project activities with technical assistance of a facilitating organization” . This process has been widely discussed as one of the most suitable solutions for low-income housing in informal areas. According Rodriguez and Åstrad (1996), “Organized Self-Help Housing is not only a method to meet housing needs. Just as importantly it promotes the enhancement and organization of the resources of the community and institutions involved, to make community development possible”. Organized Self-Help Housing (OSHH) aims to be a systematic and technical process which includes the input of the users.

The approach of Organized Self-Help Housing implies a wider understanding of the physical aspects. As Habraken (1995) contends, “the involvement of dwellers in housing design is important to improve the efficiency of the design process and to achieve a healthy physical environment for them” (Habraken, 1995 quoted in Arroyo, 2013 pp.30). The latter contributes to reach more integral decisions, where the housing project is not portrayed only as a result but rather as a process in which the community is an agent of change.

Organized Self-Help Housing can counteract against the capitalist system for two substantial reasons. The first one, as Jenkins, et al., (2007) contend that capitalist economic development has shown to be inequitable and exclusionary

regarding income, health, education, living conditions and housing. Following the idea of capitalism, the process of mass production of housing is oriented towards maximizing profit (Burgess, 1978). Burgess contends that the origin of housing problems lies in “the operation of a specific mode of production” in a capitalistic system. The power of private building companies in a capitalist driven country underlie the lack of community development. By contrast, the OSHH process seems to foster community development as discussed above.

The facilitating organizations which provide technical assistance with arising issues have substantial importance within the Organized Self-help process. As Arroyo (2013) contends “the benefits are not achieved by slum dwellers when they self-build informally by themselves without any technical assistance...progressive improvement takes around 30 to 35 years, affecting negatively the quality of life of one or two generations”. The organizations gather all the information and are then responsible for transmitting it to the community in a more understandable way, enhancing community skills on self-construction.

The organization Slum Dwellers International (SDI) follows a four steps system in their OSHH process. The first step is “*implementing suitable monitoring systems* to collect accurate baseline information in communities, to afterwards implement them into the preliminary study of what people really need” (Mitlin & Schermbrucker, 2015). The second step consists in the *study stage*, where most of the influencing aspect for the beneficiaries’ understanding of the project will be reviewed. The third one refers to the *design*, where organizations must ensure that all the components that are going to make the project work are detailed; covering legal, technical and social procedures. The final step is the *implementation* of the project where all the aims of the previous steps are developed (Rodriguez & Åstrad, 1996).

3 Discussion

Aspects to improve community development.

Study trip: Saint Hannibal

In this section, the paper discusses different issues which make Organized Self-help Housing a suitable process to develop low-income housing projects. These issues are involvement of users, cost, technical assistance and community's skills development. Each issue will be related to a study trip to Saint Hannibal Empowerment Center (SHEC II) made in March 2016 (See Box 1). For developing Box 1 the author implemented observations and interviews to some households. The latter has been complemented with information from papers and an interview to a researcher.

Involvement of users

In order to create relationships between and amongst the users during the OSHH process, it is important to encourage future community organizing. An evaluation made by the World Bank of FUNDASAL's (Fundacion Salvadoreña de Desarrollo y Vivienda Minima) project after the mutual-help process was finished showed positive result. The community realized that the process was key for building relationships with other people in order to solve group problems. This inspired the community to continue working in groups (Arroyo, 2013). In Saint Hannibal participation of people in the construction and the livelihood programme implemented, helped to improve the relationships between the users. During the study trip, it was noted that community groups such as Hip-hop dancing groups, mother's associations and people making products with recyclable materials have been created.

The exclusion of the community could affect negatively people's level of satisfaction. As Cohen (1983) explains, the lack of community involvement is an important problem within their own improvement programmes. In sites-and-services it affected negatively, the lack of commitment to the neighbourhood; has negative consequences in the user's satisfaction levels (Cohen, 1983 quoted in Arroyo 2013). It seems that several studies conclude that a higher degree of households control results in higher residential satisfaction.

Having mutual talks with dwellers and sharing information provides better understanding of the needs of the people. According to Arroyo's study of The

Indian Alliance's experiences, "The exhibition of real scale cloth housing was useful to get feedback from the dwellers about the housing designs they would like to have (Arroyo, 2013). SDI's members affirm, "We believe that community involvement in the design, implementation, management, and monitoring of this agenda is essential, and non-negotiable" (Mitlin & Schermbrucker, 2015). The appreciation of the dweller's opinions and critiques seems to be an indispensable fact to reach a design that the community would like to have. Taking SHEC II (Box 1) as example, families also contributed with their sweat equity (own labor), to build houses, including their own unit. As Baybay's experience expresses, "they appreciated the participatory processes because each participant got the chance to express himself/herself and it made the topics interesting" (Baybay, 2008)

As conclusion, Organized Self-Help Housing tries to portray professionals as social actors, which are learning from the community. As Professor Mtafu Muanda from Malaw argues: "planners should be positioned not as "top down" professionals but as co-learners who work with the community to produce tangible results based on community priorities and grounded reality" (Schermbrucker, 2013). The latter fact encourage architects to start thinking in collaborative design instead of top-down design.

Cost issues

The reduction of the cost portrays organized Self- Help Housing as a feasible solution. As Lizarralde (2015) argues, "OSHH approaches presuppose that, by involving the users in production, constructions cost could be reduced to the point that its beneficiaries could become homeowners. (Lizarralde, 2015). The OSHH's approach of reducing costs is evident on the low maintenance provided by the facilitating organizations after the delivery of houses. In SHEC II due to the participation in the OSHH process, the take care of their units is more evident.

Reducing the cost of the project increases the affordability for low-income households. Nevertheless the level of cost reduction depends on how the project is organised, the amount of time that the households can spend on construction, and the capacity and efficiency of the facilitating organization (Rodriguez & Åstrad, 1996)

In SHEC II project, professionals took into account the employment situation of the communities to be relocated (see Figure 1). The housing program was

designed to achieve the lowest project cost. A fact that helped to reduce cost was the participation of people in the production of materials. People fabricated the interlocking blocks (Arroyo, 2016).

Regarding to the amortization, families invested an initial down payment and make affordable monthly mortgage payments to cover the cost of their house. According to Coker (2016) “The families pay small amortization costs through their housing association. Following their occupation of the new units, they have land titles and own their units” (Coker, 2016). The latter argument seems to be a feasible way to finance the cost of a housing project.

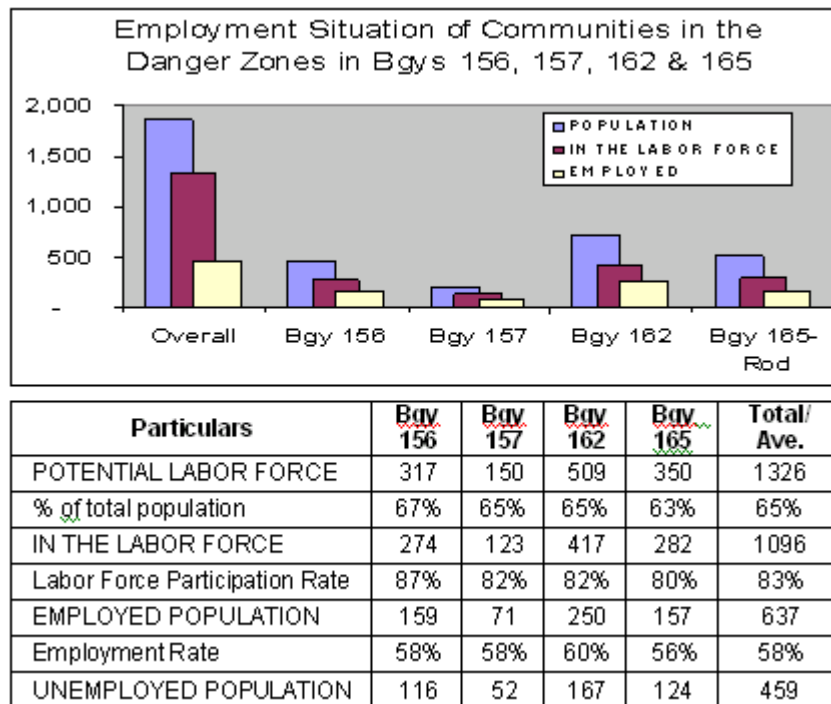


Figure 1 Employment situation of communities in the Dander zones in the Barangays considered. Recovered from SHEC.com .2016

Figure 1 shows the average of employed people in each barangay. This fact was taken into account to know the real affordability of people. Furthermore the table explains the labour force available to be included in the building process.

Technical assistance

Technical assistance is indispensable for the efficient implementation of the Organized Self-Help Housing Process. Arroyo argues that “informal settlements or slums have mainly been built both informally and incrementally trough self-help housing by the people themselves. The poor cannot afford the cost of planners or architects...” (Arroyo, 2013). NGOs and CBOs are the main providers

of technical assistance, as Habitat for Humanity (HFH) and TAO Pilipinas did with Saint Hannibal's project (See Figure 2).

The lack of technical assistance will negatively affect OSHH's outcomes, whose benefits are not achieved when slum-dwellers build informally by themselves. The latter results in low quality buildings due to poor structure.



Figure 2 TAO Pilipina providing technical assistance. Recovered from tao-pilipina.org. 2016

Informally built houses will not reach density in height. Consequently, it will promote urban sprawl. In spontaneous self-help housing, due to the lack of technical assistance during the self-construction process the housing is limited to extend more than 1 storey without structural risks. By contrast the units in SHEC II the units are small and earthquake resilient. The buildings themselves include four floors with one storey + 1 loft for each family as well as all the amenities including water, sanitation, electricity and social areas.

The technical assistance provided positive outcomes for SHEC's users. Arroyo argues that dwellers immediately use the newly acquired knowledge and have therefore been able to save investment cost whilst producing quality housing (Arroyo, 2013). This result helps to enhance the dwellers' skills and promote a more independent community through self-building with technical assistance.

Community skills development

The development of community's skills can be enhanced through the Organized Self-Help Housing process. As Rodriguez and Åstrand highlight "this type of projects built both housing and community; also includes the development of the community as a goal" (Rodriguez & Åstrand, 1996). Arroyo contends: "this process is powerful for resource mobilization and as a learning tool for poverty alleviation because it contributes to enhance capabilities and skills of the community".

According to Lizarralde, (2015), people in “El Eje Cafetero” have improved their skills and increased their self-sufficiency after the reconstruction process developed in the country after the 1999’s earthquake (Lizarralde, 2015).

Having an approach focused on implementing community development using OSHH, results in better outcomes than the governmental top-down housing programs. In a study made by (Zhu, 2006) on Habitat for Humanity Florida, he argued that Habitat neighbourhood supports better the resource built through sweat equity in comparison with scattered Habitat Houses. This result is a fact due to the shared working hours and effort applied by people, the knowledge acquired in the process might be repeated in the future.

The information and experiences that beneficiaries gain through their participations, seem to enhance their abilities and willingness to maintain their houses in good condition; and furthermore, improve them. A situation where they are able to make their own decisions and future upgrades.

Box 1: Organized Self-Help Housing in SHEC II. Source: Prepared by the author based on study trip (2016); Arroyo(2016); (Baybay, 2008).

This box describes how the OSSH process was portrayed in SHECC II.

1. **Summary:** SHEC II is a housing project developed by the Rogationist of the Heart of Jesus in Pasay City-Metro Manila-Philippines, having as proponent Saint Hannibal Empowerment Community Inc (SHEC, 2004). SHEC is a group inspired by the philosophy of integral liberation of the poor (SHEC, 2004). The project started with 2.180 families from seven poor Barangays (Bgy) (Baybay, 2008) located in highly congested risk areas and riversides (Tripa de gallina).
2. **Aim:** SHECC II aims to relocate informal settler families mostly from one squatter community in Pasay that had been notified by the National Housing Authority (NHA) that it would be demolished.
3. **Community involvement:** The community was involved in identifying their needs –new housing, producing materials, self-building walls, painting walls, growing plants, organizing the housing association, maintenance of the neighbourhood. (Arroyo, 2016)

4. **Cost:** In SHEC II, users worked in the building process fabricating bricks, helping the construction workers and painting. All these aspects mentioned above would contribute to reduce the initial investment on low-income housing due to the aid from the future dwellers.
5. **Technical assistance:** Engineering assistance was provided by Vicente Eliezer, engineer from Habitat for Humanity International, with experience in other projects in which community people participated in self-construction activities (Arroyo, 2016), using the interlocking blocks system developed by Habitat for Humanity International, the community was trained to produce these blocks and build the walls. (Baybay, 2008)
6. **Skills development:** In SHEC II project, several training participants have expressed their interest to learn how to recycle their garbage and create new products that can be sold and consumed by their family. Since people were included in the construction process, the knowledge seems to be kept in their minds with the possibility to produce in the future by themselves.

4 Urban Shelter Design

Three strong arguments pro Organized Self-Help Housing have been already explained. How to include the OSHH process in countries which have never applied it? A kind of scepticism and distrust exist in developing countries' communities like Ecuador, in which people have been victims of government's corruption. Trying to apply a "new" process in housing projects could be difficult to trust on, therefore guidelines would be necessary in order to start the discussion and implementation of such ideas which have already worked in other countries.

After the NGO and Governmental organizations have clarified the strategy for implementing the Organized Self-Help Housing project, it is important to explain the households that Organized Self-Help Housing had been successfully applied in other developing countries such as in Costa Rica by FUPROVI (Fundación Promotora de Vivienda), in Tunisia by the Swedish Association for Low-cost Housing (SADEL), Colombia by the Coffee Growing Organization (CGO), etc.

The conviction of the people as a first step enhances the eagerness of the community for the OSHH process. Consequently the explanation of the process should clarify the study, design and implementation stages.

Since the involvement of dwellers is portrayed as one of the strongest points of the process, it is important that users understand the aim of the project. The way in which people will be part of the decision-making, the self-construction process and the post-delivery situation, should be made clear. As an experience in Techo's projects (Un Techo para mi País¹), the moment where people start sharing effort in their future houses creates a sense of belonging between users and houses. Future benefits such as the improvement of construction and self-management skills, with the possibilities to apply this knowledge in future upgrades of their houses should also be highlighted, in order to create real engagement. Especially since good mood and high predispositions for trying something new is essential for success.

5 The Role of Architects

Just as an example, the housing projects in Ecuador are developed without taking into account the participation of the people, or if they do it stays up to the information level. This is a level where people know what the government is working on, but community desires and needs are not a priority of the constructor. Corruption and alteration of funds are common, decreasing the amount of money predisposed for certain items.

Along the years, the lack of results fitting community needs results in low satisfaction from the people. This is caused by insufficient sizing of the houses, bad infrastructure, long distance from facilities and lack of possibility to grow. These kinds of disagreements should be the starting points for architects and professional who work with housing .

Our role lies in: first, changing the participatory level, turning from “informative” to “empowering the people” in the decision-making. Second, encouraging government to apply a different system in order to achieve integral and comprehensive community through housing projects, using foreign experiences where processes such as OSHH have had success.

¹ “Un techo para mi país” is a latinamerican NGO, leaded by young people from different Latin and Caribbean countries. It main aim is to create conscious about how important is the accessibility of housing for poor people .

Third, making conscious decisions about the social and monetary damages that exclusive housing projects have. Fourth, contend that communities are heterogeneous, with thousands of people, which have thousands of particularities. If seen as an homogeneous community, and proposing model houses, it will cause the project to fail for sure. Finally, houses should not be seen as isolated items, or as icons of a city, but as an element, which was part of a process, understanding its context and the way they will benefit the people.

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Report on my experience As exchange student in the Linnaeus-Palme Programme
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This is crazy, probably 8 months ago, coming to Europe was not in my mind, was not even an idea in which I had thought about before, maybe because of the current economic situation that my family was having. I have to admit that after being accepted by the university as part of the Linnaeus Palme – Programme every turn is kind of unreal, just the fact of starting to think that in 2 months I'll be in Sweden. At the beginning I was afraid but at the same time excited; leaving alone, preparing my own food, managing my own money. Those were things I was sure that will make me grow in a good way.

The first weeks were difficult, starting with the hard weather and fast English, nevertheless there was always the willingness of the people to help other people. The teachers will always repeat until you get the idea, they will always lend you a jacket if you are cold, and those kind of things. After maybe two weeks the English started coming up little by little, my body started to get used to the cold mornings and strong winds, that was the point when I could start seeing the beauty of Lund.

Between Lund and Guayaquil there are huge differences, it seems that in each corner is a story to be told, every tree, old buildings and doves match perfectly to create a wonderful scene. In Guayaquil I used to stop in the spots which could

offer me some kind of deep feeling even there are not too many, but it is exciting to find them. In Lund the whole city was one spot, able to grant you the most precious thing it has.

Other point was the sensation in “high speed”, the difference between the bike and the car, one open and connected to the world, the other and enclosed element full of A/C and loud music. I think now I want to try biking in my city.

To summarize and putting out the feelings, I found Lund as a organized and save city, which match perfectly with students way of living. Everything is really easy to follow; bike paths, pedestrian paths, bus stops, etc. The daily life in a corridor was an experience that I never expected to be like that, just another world, and I'm so happy to have chosen a corridor room because we could share and learn things from strangers who later became our friends.

I was used to equal day and night hours, also kind of the same qualities in the environment, but here is a constantly evolution of temperature, shapes of the trees colors, cloths, sunsets and sunrise.. I think that why I consider Lund as one huge beautiful spot from which I will never get bored. I will always remember the colors in the sky coming back to home at 5am after a long day working.

The school was such a different experience, I will like to congratulate to the system about how human it can be. I was really surprised about how much time is deserved to live life, to enjoy and do not get stress, somehow it helped to be more efficient, maybe something that should be applied in Ecuador.

Urban Shelter course was better than I expect. My first good impression was the really huge folder they gave us, where all the things we were gonna do during the course was explained. It made me think that the course will be really organized, was amazing how the established schedule was respected during those five months. The teachers were always in time, with useful material to share, always with the willing to teach us in the best possible way. I have to highlight the way teachers enhance a participatory class, trying to create discussions between students which also help to rethink the informations they were giving to us.

I didn't realized how useful will be the study visit to Philippines until I arrive there. I could easily recognize and compare many features happening in the site as well as in Ecuador. The study visits in housing project, the meetings with authorities and the lectures were things which help to the architectural

background and knowledge which was great, but there is something that calls my attention the most which I think portrays the essence and main goal of the trip, something more spiritual and personal; the kinds, the colors, the smells, the smiles, the creativity, the optimism, the solidarism from which has nothing and all those little things hid behind their dark skeep, amazine things. All these fact made me enjoy developing the proyect.

The lectures during the Theory course were usefull to start having an idea of what to write about, but was the real expereicne in Philipinnes what made me clarify my topic, which was really general at the beginning, but with help from the teachers I could put my feets on the ground and stat developing it in a more specific way.

I have to admit that this kind if experiences are more than necessary to open our eyes and start finding the real need of the world and how we as architects can contribute to solve problems. I feel really lucky, since all this knowledge is really necessary to apply in Ecuador, were many issues where architecture is involved need to be fixed. I will like to say thanks to all the HDM Depatment who made all this awesome experience happen, with organization and willingness to teach young people about the real housing problems. I hope to be back in one experience like that.