

# **SELF-BUILT HOUSING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH VOLUNTEERISM<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

This paper summarizes the literature describing the current and near-term challenges to improving the quality, quantity and social impact of volunteer contributions to self-built housing in cities of developing countries. On the basis of this analysis it then suggests several approaches for providing institutional support to improve the impacts of these volunteer efforts. The paper was prepared for the United Nations Volunteers<sup>2</sup> as support to its project “Support to Intra-City Volunteerism”.

This project ‘is based on the premise that volunteerism is still largely under-utilized in (urban) development ...[and]... is seldom fully recognized, promoted and supported by local authorities and by other urban policy- and decision-makers.’ The terms of reference for the paper also note that:

Equally, the local volunteer sector is seldom organized in a fashion that would make the best of itself. The contribution of volunteerism to urban development could be much broader than what it is at present, if further support was given. The project aims at helping to expand such contribution, by (i) setting-up demonstration activities as well as (ii) an awareness raising campaign and (iii) technical assistance. The development of a knowledge base is crucial to these three objectives.

The paper comprises four sections not including this introduction. The first section describes what is meant by self-built housing in developing countries and the processes it encompassed during the post-War era. The second section assesses the scale of self-building in developing countries and the living conditions it provides for the large majority of residents. The third section reviews different organizational typologies of self-built housing for low-income groups in urban areas of developing countries. This focuses on identifying the roles of different social actors, including volunteers, in a spectrum of approaches to self-building. The fourth section describes the major obstacles to the transformation of much self-built housing into adequate housing for the majority of its builder/residents. The final section has two parts. The first offers general

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Edmundo Werna, Urban Development Specialist, United Nations Volunteers, for guidance in preparing this paper, and for research assistance from Mr. WU Chun, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Sociology at Tsinghua University, Beijing.

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) is the only agency in the United Nations system with a mandate to promote, organize and manage volunteer efforts in support of United Nations development goals.

prescriptions for overcoming the obstacles to transforming self-built housing into adequate housing. The second discusses the idea of UNV's promoting forms of self-building that lead to psycho-social and political transformations of individuals, groups and communities that participate in self-building processes.

The information and opinions offered in this paper are drawn from a selective review of recent journal articles addressing that discuss self-built housing or volunteerism and urban upgrading in developing and developed countries. The research also benefited from a review of case studies of self-built housing in the UNCHS Best Practices Database. I also draw on studies self-built housing I commissioned under the auspices of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), and on my experience as an advisor to an NGO in Buenos Aires, Argentina that promotes income generation and decent housing for low-income groups through micro-enterprise development.<sup>3</sup>

## **Self-Built Urban Housing in the Global South**

For the purposes of this paper, self-built or self-help housing is the product of a range of activities leading to the design, construction, maintenance and management of the physical structure and immediate surroundings of permanent shelter for human beings. Self-help housing also includes renovations, alterations or adaptations of existing buildings, including tenements, industrial spaces or other structures that have not been occupied for lengthy periods and whose new residents or others working with them undertake the improvements. Regardless of the nature of the structure, self-help housing would normally, if not at the moment of first habitation, entail eventual provisioning of clean water, sanitation and energy within the shelter or within convenient reach of the structure. This expansive definition of self-built housing follows from that of "adequate housing" as pursued as a human right established and elaborated over time by the United Nations in the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR). So, while not all self-built housing achieves on premises services such as these, they must be considered as an eventual -- but still pressing -- goal of the process. Without them, particularly in densely inhabited urban settlements, not only are the physical and social well-being of the residents of the self-help structure put at risk by exposure to environmental pathogens or other health endangering conditions, so too are their neighbors and the surrounding community.

**The working definition of the right to adequate housing currently applied by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living is as follows:**

"the right of every woman, man, youth and child to gain and sustain a secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity." In his efforts to promote the realization of this right, the Special Rapporteur has "followed a

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<sup>3</sup> The name of the NGO is Microenergia. Information about its work may be found at [www.microenergia.net](http://www.microenergia.net).

holistic approach, based on the reality that all human rights are interrelated and indivisible. The right to adequate housing cannot be fully realized if separated [from]with other rights such as the rights to food, water, sanitation, electricity, health, work, property, security of the person, security of home, and protection against inhuman and degrading treatment.” (Kothari).

The literature describing modern processes of self-built housing (and communities) in urbanizing areas of developing countries is nearly as old as the process of modern urbanization. This literature will not be reviewed in detail here, only summarized in a way that might accurately describe some of the most typical aspects of the peri-urbanization process.

New arrivals to the city would typically lodge with a friend or relation with connections to the new arrival's home place. After sharing or renting housing for a period in order to save money and make appropriate plans for establishing his/her own home, the new migrant would join with a group of other would-be settlers in a more-or-less organized takeover of vacant/unused property. Takeovers like this could be on public or private property, within the boundaries of the city or well outside it, but usually not on land already undergoing formal development processes. More typically, the land suffered multiple hazards for occupancy: high susceptibility to industrial pollution or natural disaster (flooding, seismic activity, wildfires, etc.) or nearly insurmountable obstacles to provisioning of necessary services (absence of sources of drinking water, location on steep rocky slopes or shifting sands, etc.). Occupation of land took place under cover of night. By morning a series of makeshift huts stood in close proximity, offering a semblance of self-protection and an important degree of solidarity. Large scale land invasions and subsequent settlements could often depend on external assistance in achieving a degree of legitimacy, if not legality, for newly settled communities. Local politicians found them to be useful vote banks, progressive NGOs and church-based organizations found them as viable alternatives to overcrowding in existing urban slums or worse conditions in communities that had managed to grow entirely spontaneously though multiple and uncoordinated invasions.

Modern urbanization in developing countries refers to the post-World War II era during which decolonization and nation-building processes often included industrialization programmes. New industry, typically located in the major cities, encouraged rural workers to migrate to the cities in search of higher wages, better physical amenities and access to health care, education, cultural facilities, etc. In some countries, modernization of agriculture served to push unemployed peasants to the city. With these processes, urban population began growing faster than total population. Although initially migration often led to overcrowding and degradation of existing urban housing stock, housing within the existing city boundaries reached capacity and soon became too expensive for most rural migrants. Increasingly, they were to settle on the periphery of the major cities, in many cases occupying vast tracts of lands more than double the area within the city's formal boundaries. More recently, such areas became known as peri-urban settlements. A sampling of the vernacular names for these include *w puebllos juvenes, colonias, gecekondu, bidonvilles, favelas, shanty towns, squatter settlements, villas de miseria, katchi abadis, chawls, kampungs,*

*etc.* A fuller list of vernacular names for slums by region can be found in UNHSP (2003:10).

Over decades some peri-urban settlements consolidated as both housing and connections to urban infrastructure and services improved. Families with steady incomes gradually replaced the temporary materials of their first structures: walls of brick and mortar for tin or cardboard, paving or tiles for mud floors, glass windows for oiled paper or plastic sheeting and doors with locks for a sheet of hanging canvas. More prosperous settlements and/or those with better political connections got paved roads linking them to metropolitan transportation networks, urban services (water, power, sanitation and refuse collection) and social and cultural facilities (education, health, recreation). Indeed, some of these successful self-upgraded communities are now mature enough that homes built with the original permanent materials are now reaching the stage of becoming dangerous because of aging materials and overbuilding on poorly designed or constructed supports.

Other neighborhoods did not prosper, or did so only selectively. Nor did they become fully integrated into urban transportation and infrastructure networks. These may have grown large enough to be officially recognized as slums. Some were enveloped within the formal<sup>4</sup> city that expanded as the upper and upper middle classes established new neighborhoods, commercial centers and recreation facilities to cater for their needs in the cleaner and greener suburbs. The fact remains, however, that today some 43 per cent of urbanites in developing countries live in slums (UN Habitat 2003:vi).

In many cities, the term 'slum' is an official designation, defined and applied by the local government. In certain instances, the term may be selectively applied depending on some minimum number of households or area covered by substandard housing. This would therefore not necessarily enumerate all substandard living situations in a city, and perhaps would result in higher estimates of the population living in substandard housing if housing in non-designated slum areas were enumerated

Because no consistent records are kept on the number of houses that are 'self-built' or the proportion of the total urban residential building stock that they occupy, a proxy variable is needed to estimate the extent of population living in self-built housing. From this, one may then draw some conclusions about the probable 'quantum' of volunteer effort that must be invested in self-building in order to keep roofs over the heads of families that have no other means of protecting themselves from the elements. Furthermore it would be possible to calculate the monetary value of such effort both in terms of de facto family savings and contribution to GDP. This latter computation is beyond the scope of this study, but may well be taken up by UNV at a later point when seeking to influence government policy toward support for self-help/self built housing.

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<sup>4</sup> The 'formal city' is that part of the urban area that adheres to planning regulations, building codes and is fully serviced with modern transport, sanitation, refuse collection, drinking water, energy, etc.

The proxy variable I have chosen to estimate the importance of volunteer efforts in self-built housing is the number of persons living in slums. We will see that current efforts to define slums in a way that will allow cross-city and cross-national comparisons should yield a reasonable estimate of populations living in self-built housing. Also, because the stock of dilapidated formal housing in the traditional center city is decreasing due to gentrification or clearance for non-residential uses and because of stricter regulation and policing of central-city areas, new slums will increasingly be found in periurban areas. These will be largely constructed by the inhabitants themselves, with or without contributions from informal laborers living nearby.

While not all residences in urban slums house the poor and not all slum residences are poorly constructed and maintained, current research reveals that slums rarely meet minimum standard of 'adequate housing' as defined by the United Nations. Based on a review of definitions used by local governments, statistical offices, institutions dealing with slum issues and public perceptions, UNHSP (United Nations Human Settlements Programme)<sup>5</sup> compiled the following list of characteristics describing slums (UNHSP, 2003, p. 11):

- a) Area lacks basic services (clean water, sanitation, energy)
- b) Housing/building structures substandard or located in illegal sites, structures inadequate
- c) Housing overcrowded (as many as 5 persons in one room unit)
- d) Unhealthy living conditions and hazardous locations (open sewers, uncontrolled dumping of waste, polluted environments, etc. or in areas subject to natural hazards)
- e) Insecure tenure (absence of legal document entitling occupant to use of site)
- f) Irregular or informal settlements (do not follow land-use plans)
- g) High levels of poverty and social exclusion
- h) Minimum settlement size.

UNHSP further notes that conditions such as these "...are physical and statutory manifestations that create barriers to human and social development." Thus, as discussed later in the paper, under certain conditions self-building can be a way of transforming slums into communities where these barriers are significantly dismantled. Finding and supporting these 'certain' conditions should therefore be one of the aims of national and international technical assistance as well as aid programmes, especially with respect to self-help housing.

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<sup>5</sup> UN Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS), UN Habitat and UN Human Settlements Programme (UNHSP) are names for the same United Nations family organization concerned with urban settlements. The change in the name and acronym of the organization over the years reflects subtle changes in the governance arrangements within the UN than in the nature of the institution's mandate.

In an effort to devise a more workable means to estimate the number of persons living in slums, a United Nations Expert Group proposed in October 2002 an operational definition based on a reduced set of indicators reflecting: lack of access to safe water, sanitation and other infrastructure; poor structural quality of housing; overcrowding; and insecure residential status. By this tentative method, UNHSP arrived at an estimate of 31.6 per cent of the world's urban population live in inadequate conditions. For developing countries, the UNHSP's estimate is 43 per cent, or about 870 million people. (UNHSP 2003:12-13) Compared with an estimate of the slum population in developing countries for 1975 (Madavo), the increase during the 26 intervening years was more than 400 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

This suggests that at least four out of every 10 urban residents in developing countries lives in self-built housing that in one aspect or another is inadequate. In other words, four of every 10 are exposed to physical conditions that are known to be harmful to human beings. UNHSP further concludes on the basis urban growth rates and declining rates of public investment in or other supports to low-income housing, that slum populations are likely to be growing rather than remaining stable or shrinking and that overall conditions in many cities are worsening as globalization reduces the supply of formal sector employment and tightens the belt around redistributive mechanisms.

It is because of these dire trends that actions must be taken to support poor people's efforts to house themselves adequately. To do so will require strategic investments by governments, international organizations, local and international NGOs, and the people themselves. The rest of this paper will focus on developing an understanding of self-built/self-help housing that may assist UNV in identifying its strategic, if not unique, contribution to this effort.

## **Approaches to Self-Built Housing**

Today, individuals and families whose incomes are too low to allow them to rent or buy shelter must either borrow accommodations, share it with others, live in the open or construct their own shelter. This last choice can be accomplished in different ways, ranging from stretching a sheet of canvas from an existing structure over a sidewalk space to joining a spontaneous invasion of a piece of open land and in the course of an evening assembling cardboard, tin and wire into rough shack. Others, still, join groups of families in need of housing and organize themselves to occupy a piece of land that they hope to establish tenure on, first by constructing a rudimentary and then inhabiting it for a long period. Increasingly more frequent today, groups such as these align themselves with

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<sup>6</sup> This estimate of change is 'very approximate' as the neither the definitions of slum populations used for these two years (1975 and 2001) nor the data collection systems were the same.

voluntary organizations that belong to the local and/or national housing movement.

The contribution of these organizations to the self-housing process may be simple or complicated. For example, the voluntary organization may simply channel homeless people to an open spot that may be ripe for invasion. Or one or more voluntary organizations may participate in an on going technical assistance process that includes organizing homeless people into a 'social entity' in which some basic aspirations (for housing) and rules about achieving them collectively are agreed upon by all participants as a condition of membership in the group and eventual access to housing. In the more formalized cases, prospective 'occupiers' agree to meet regularly before occupying land to keep abreast of developments in the environment for occupations, to organize crucial on-site tasks prior to the initial occupation of land and to rehearse scenarios that might occur during the early phases of occupation. Members such as these will often pay dues into a common fund and keep track of attendance to group activities as a means of establishing seniority for land and housing assignments or other benefits that may be established for steady participation.

Once self-builders have occupied land, voluntary groups and for-profit organizations may assist such them by helping organize and carry out tasks such as security, fire protection, child care and education, and to acquire skills necessary to participate fully in the construction, management and maintenance of structures and community facilities desired by the 'invaders', etc.

In some cases, most notably in and around the city and State of Sao Paulo beginning in the late 1980s, homeless families organized by and working with voluntary organizations were able to negotiate with municipalities for access to state controlled land for their nascent cooperatives. This happened predominately in cities lead by mayors from left-wing political parties, especially the Worker's Party.<sup>7</sup>

In some cases these residents' organizations formalize themselves as housing cooperatives. In other cases, residents take over empty buildings in built-up zones of cities, where they may or may not 'habilitate' the structure for human occupancy and/or establish forms of internal management and government. This is generally considered to be 'squatting'. Nonetheless, it is a strategy that may lead not only to access to housing, but to improvements and true rehabilitation of the existing structure by the squatters.

Because of technical and financial constraints, urban self-building has generally been limited to structures not taller than three stories. However, there are examples in China, Yemen, Mali and many other developing countries where traditional construction technology and materials have been used successfully in

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<sup>7</sup> The history of these experiences in the City of Sao Paulo is complex and riven with political intrigue. For an excellent case study of one such experience, see Rolnik (1997:2003).

structures of six stories and more for hundreds of years. Modern self-building experiences in urban settings have even begun to achieve these heights.<sup>8</sup>



Fujian, China



Alkwa, Mali



Bab El Yemen

## **Aims of Self-Built Housing: More than Shelter**

As noted at the beginning of this report, self-help housing has the potential to fulfill a range of societal functions. The most important and immediate of these is to provide shelter. But, eventually it must integrate a range of services and environmental characteristics that meets the United Nations criteria of adequate housing. Second, by participating in self-help construction and eventual management of community assets and services, residents of previously marginalized groups may acquire skills, create employment and acquire equity in a home that would be difficult to duplicate under other circumstances. Third, depending upon how the self-help building community organizes and manages itself, the process may promote among participants the capacity for self-reliance, an understanding of socially and environmentally sound living and high

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<sup>8</sup> The problem has not be the absence of building technologies allowing self-builders to go higher, but the willingness of urban administrations who have contributed funds to multi-story projects to allow public resources to be used to hire the equipment and specialized labor needed to build safely above three stories. See Rolnik (1997, 2003).



levels of affection for the physical community because public and private spaces embody evidence of the creativity and pride of the community. Under ideal circumstances, achievement of these broad aims creates a strong political consciousness among residents that reflects itself in an active solidarity with other members of society's marginalized groups.<sup>9</sup> *In effect, for members of society's most marginalized groups the self-building process at its best transforms people whose capacity to take public spirited action has heretofore been limited by the material conditions of their lives (inadequate habitat, employment, income and self-confidence, both individually and collectively).*

It is therefore valuable to establish

- a) what forms of self-building best tend to achieve all these objectives, and
- b) how best to promote such forms of self-help building and the volunteer efforts they comprise.

To do so, it is first necessary to review some of the principal roles that volunteers play in the different self-building process and then to identify the main obstacles to achieving the multiple goals of self-built housing. These are discussed in then next two sections, respectively.

## **Volunteer Contributions to Self-Built Housing**

Volunteer roles have been enumerated in the literature on self-building to reflect the size, procedures and 'in-kind' contributions of persons participating in the process. Typically, in-kind contributions have been motivated either by necessity to secure housing by those in need, or by others not necessarily in need of housing but who wish to act in solidarity with those who do. The motivations and actions of these two sets of volunteers should be understood clearly. Not least among the reasons for doing so is because they mutually influence the effectiveness of the other's efforts. Moreover it may be argued that access to adequate housing is a necessary precondition for some individuals to be able to act on instincts of solidarity. It may be further argued – and there appears to be anecdotal evidence to support this – that the will to undertake public-spirited action may be awakened through a well-conceived and implemented self-building process.

Different approaches to self-building entail different physical, social and political processes, and fulfill different sets of human needs. These range from merely solving temporarily the need for physical shelter to the progressive fulfillment of

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<sup>9</sup> During a review of studies prepared for presentation at Habitat II, researchers of the joint UNRISD-UNV action research project, *Volunteer Action and Local Democracy: Partnership for a Better Urban Future*, agreed that an apt definition of a 'volunteer' must include that s/he as a minimum condition possessed the health, time and mental capacity to decide of her/his free will to undertake an act of solidarity. (Kumburgaz, Turkey 26-29 May 1996).

the right to adequate housing, employment and participation in decisions affecting one's family and community.

The following table lists the principle roles that 'volunteers' play in a range of self-building processes. The schematic consists of five different forms or 'styles' of self-help housing processes: the spontaneous individualistic process, the facilitated individual process, the facilitated collective process, the comprehensively organized and facilitated collective process and comprehensive mutual-assistance cooperative process.<sup>10</sup> The roles listed in the table are those that appeared with some consistency in a selection of self-help housing case studies compiled in the latter half of the 1990s either as part of the UNCHS Best Practices Program or in my own research projects with UNRISD. The List of Best Practice cases reviewed is found in Annex 1.

## Volunteer Roles and Actors in Self-Built Housing

### Forms of Self-building Processes

Activities	Spontaneous Individual	Facilitated Individual (e.g. sites & services)	Facilitated Collective (e.g. sites & services)	Comprehensively Organized & Facilitated Collective	Comprehensively Mutual Assistance Cooperative
Site identification	I	N/S	N/S	N/S/P	N
Site preparation	I	I/S/P	N/S/P	N/S/P	N/S
Materials acquisition/fabrication	I	I	I	N/S/P	N/G
Construction of first shelter	I	I	I	I	N/G
Self-defense/policing	I	I	I/G	I/G	G
Child-care	I	I	I/G	I/G	G
Permitting	I	I	I	I	N/G
Construction training	NA	NA	NA	N	N/G
Design of shelter and common facilities	NA	NA	NA	N/P	N/G/P

<sup>10</sup> Between adjacent pairs of the five self-help housing process listed there are many gradations and variants. The five discussed in this paper form major categories, with at least one major difference between them. This schema reflects the link between increasing complexity of the planned self-help process and the comprehensiveness of the change expected from it. This table limits itself to the construction of shelter rather than to the takeover or "squatting" of an existing structure. The latter, though important in some cities, is far less common in most cities of the developing world.

Organizational development of community groups	NA	NA	NA	N/S	N/G
Management of Construction	NA	NA	NA	N	G
Materials and site management	NA	NA	NA	N	G
Bookkeeping and financial management	NA	NA	NA	N	G
Government relations	NA	NA	NA	G/N/S	G
Community Self-management	NA	NA	NA	G	G

Key:

I Individual or family self-builder

G Self-organized/Grassroots group

N NGO, inc. University or Church affiliated groups, unions

S Government, public authority/agency (any level)

P Private sector

NA Not Applicable                      Need to include finance into mix

In the *spontaneous individual process* the family in need of housing plays almost all the volunteer roles. It identifies a location where building a shelter appears feasible and the risk of not being removed immediately at high material cost to oneself is acceptable. The family then collects and transports building materials to the site, clears it for construction and rapidly assembles a rudimentary structure there. Gaining permission to remain on the site, either from the legal private or public owner or from a de facto local boss remains the sole responsibility of the family. Protecting the family and property, provisioning of water, sanitation and energy, and subsequent structural upgrading then become the daily concern of the newly-housed family. Collective efforts to accomplish any of these objectives can be undertaken only if some form of mutual assistance can be agreed upon among co-settlers. In the absence of an external organizing force, whether mutual assistance among settlers within close proximity or one another will eventually become the basis for community organization and neighborhood decision-making depends greatly upon the personal characteristics of the settlers. Deep poverty and heterogeneity of language and culture among settlers often retards this process.

In the *facilitated individual process*, such as sites and services projects, some of the initial burdens of settlement are lightened by the participation of government authorities and or NGOs. This is particularly beneficial when it reduces the time needed to search for an appropriate site, and when the site has been cleared and provided with minimal essential services. Still mutual assistance for self-protection, structural and service upgrading, and collective decision-making will be left to the will of the settlers.

In the *facilitated collective process*, settlers receive the same benefits as in the *facilitated individual process*. The main difference is that in the latter case, settlers arrive at the site as a member of a group. As such, they may have already received guidance about how to organize mutual assistance for self-defense, day-care services for families needing it, construction and environmental upgrading and relations with representatives of the owner/political bosses concerning. The main benefit, however, may rest with the moral support that can be provided by a sense of belonging to a group, and knowing that in moments of difficulty, there is someone nearby to turn for help.

The degree of cohesiveness of the group and the quality of its leadership may vary widely. In some cases, NGOs or the local authority assemble prospective settlers into an association of sorts with the aim of making it easier to assist a group that can internally provide mutual assistance, a range of skills and economies of scale to the construction process, for example. But a newly formed group is less likely to function harmoniously than one that has been planning its settlement process for a long time.

The *comprehensively assisted and organized collective process* (hereafter, *comprehensive collective*) differs from the simpler forms because public, private and community actors may be involved in working with prospective settlers on all aspects of planning for the self-building process as well as in later phases including construction, site management, and even organizational development, housing finance, upgrading of service access, etc. Compared with the simpler forms of self-building, the *comprehensive collective* form, involves an expanded role for outside actors and reflects a higher degree of commitment on the part of government and/or social organizations to sustaining a process of improvement in the newly settled area. In some of the most formalized processes, the community organization incorporates itself as a not-for-profit entity through which it can receive and disburse resources from the government, sign business contracts and represent community interests before courts and government administrative units.

A special and noteworthy case of the *comprehensive collective* form is the *comprehensive mutual-assistance cooperative*. In some of the most advanced examples of this form of self-building, prospective settlers have worked extensively with NGOs to establish functioning resident committees and a self-governing body from well before the physical settlement process begins. The purpose of the pre-settlement organizational development is to instill in the settlers an understanding of democratic processes that will guide them through the countless number of decisions that will arise regularly during the development of their physical and social community. These close links to NGOs in the housing movements or to trade unions and even municipal authorities may continue long after the construction is complete: experienced personnel from one cooperative project may be called upon to assist in the formation or training of

new cooperatives, or to help draft legislation supportive of cooperative housing development.

According to UNCHS, housing cooperatives have the 'potential to provide low-income households with improved access to adequate housing because they:

- a) facilitate the pooling of resources and lower individual housing costs
- b) foster collective action and self-help
- c) increase creditworthiness
- d) limits or prevents speculation. (UNCHS, 2001, p. 208-209)

UNCHS then attributed this institutional potential to the cooperative's governance principles of collective ownership and democratic management.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the most successful and varied forms of mutual assistance housing cooperatives began appearing in Uruguay in the mid-1960s. Were they not rigorously suppressed by the military government between 1973 and 1985, the mutual-assistance cooperative housing movement might be far more widespread today than it is. Nonetheless, the Uruguayan experience has been successful enough to inspire housing movements throughout Latin America.

This success also owes much to strong partnerships between local authorities, CBOs and NGOs, especially in Montevideo. The NGO FUCVAM, established in 1970, has provided continuous technical assistance to Uruguayan cooperatives by developing innovative construction methods, materials, and material production processes; providing training to grassroots communities, policy advice to government, as well as advocacy with the public and other services. Throughout the decade of the 1990s Montevideo's municipal government has been led by an architect whose earlier professional life involved him in the cooperative housing movement. Because of his confidence in the validity of the mutual assistance cooperative housing model, he has used his influence to establish a municipal 'land bank', the aim of which is to acquire and hold land and buildings within the core city that can be developed by mutual assistance cooperatives of very low-income residents. By doing so, it saves the prospective cooperative from having to search for and buy land on their own – a truly daunting if not impossible task organizationally and financially for the city's low-income residents. Then, when a cooperative is sufficiently mature to begin construction or renovation on the property, the city sells it to the cooperative.

The cooperative purchases the property with the proceeds of a loan equal to the construction costs, minus the 15 percent, which is as calculated as the value of mutual aid labor. Some of the special characteristics of Uruguay's mutual assistance characteristics are described in the following box.

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<sup>11</sup> See detailed case studies demonstrating how these principles have influenced individual housing cooperatives in Montevideo, Uruguay () and in Sao Paulo (Rolnik 1998, 2003) and Fortaleza (2001) Brazil.

### **Mutual Assistance Cooperative Housing in Uruguay: Much more than a house...**

Mutual Assistance Cooperative Housing in Uruguay has demonstrated a range of socially valuable practices and outcomes. Not least among these would be: reducing overall costs by 20 per cent while delivering a better designed and more comfortable home than available for the same price in the private market; managing to reuse or recycle large portions of construction materials, equipment, and architectural finishings when rehabilitating existing structures; maximizing the use of non-specialized labor throughout the construction process; creating public spaces that are better appreciated and cared for than in public and many private housing complexes; sustaining themselves financially even for low income groups, etc. Those intimately involved in assisting these process argue, however, such successes are achieved and sustained and further enhanced over time because of the social processes that take place during the formation of the cooperative and the construction of its physical premises:

“The Uruguayan experience of mutual-aid cooperative housing is inseparably linked to self-organisation and grass-roots participation, as well as to the application of fundamental cooperative principles – in the organizational structure, in the building process and in the proposal of community-oriented social development.

It promotes values such as solidarity, democracy, and mutual respect, which are different and even opposed to those of individualism and competition, currently prevailing in modern societies. Mutual aid, which implies the joint effort of every beneficiary family, not only of those acting as leaders of the group, is a fundamental factor for the consolidation of those values. That is why even if it were possible to omit mutual aid as an economic necessity in order to reduce housing costs, it is important to retain it as a way to strengthen these values.”

“Moreover, the cooperation and self-help capacities achieved in this process are later transferred to different levels to fulfil other family and community needs, through the cooperative itself or by other forms of popular organisations initiated within the cooperative movement. Cooperatives have thus fostered, either through their own actions or by seeking both state and community intervention, solutions to the widest range of problems.”

These include:

“Basic services: urban infrastructure (water, sewage disposal, electricity, home waste collection, transportation), culture (kindergartens and primary schools, day-care centres, public libraries, artistic activities, sports and recreational facilities), health (multipurpose community clinics, preventive medicine, dental and psychological assistance) and food (public meals, consumers' cooperatives) through community-managed programs.”

“Solidarity networks: Community support to families affected by temporary social or economic hardship (unemployment, labour strikes, and – during the past dictatorship period – also political repression). This is related to the so-called "relief fund" (fondo de socorro), constituted in each cooperative with monthly contributions from the members themselves, another token of mutual aid.”

“Non-formal education: Functioning of the cooperative as a social and economic enterprise calls for a permanent effort on the part of its members to attain cooperative education and training, beginning with the constituent stage and extending to the building and community living process. This permanent

requirement for training and integration of knowledge and experience acts as a genuine school of systematic education.”

Quoted from:  
[http://www.rosalux.de/engl/projects/international/Central\\_America/athenaeum.htm](http://www.rosalux.de/engl/projects/international/Central_America/athenaeum.htm)

Original source is FUCVAM Habitat II Presentation.

<http://www.wisc.edu/uwcc/icic/today/housing/Uruguay--Housing--Self-Management--Commul.html> accessed 18 Feb 2004

Uruguay: Housing, Self-Management, Community Empowerment:  
The Coop Experience

The next section reviews selectively the literature on the factors that have prevented self-help housing from becoming a solution to urban housing crisis in the developing world.

## **Obstacles to Successful Self-Help Housing**

For families whose only choice in realizing its right to adequate housing is through self-building, there are many obstacles to success. These may influence the families chances of success directly others indirectly. In rapid succession, if not always simultaneously, the family must cope with challenges to the four attributes of adequate housing: *affordability*, *livability*, *security* and *sustainability*. The following paragraphs identify these challenges.

*Affordability* is principally determined by the cost of accessing land on which to build, acquiring building materials and tools, hiring additional labor/technology if needed, acquiring skills in construction etc. needed to establish a first rudimentary shelter.

With the exception of the most precariously habitable urban land, most self-builders do not immediately purchase the land on which they build their homes. More often than not, “the largest single urban land tenure category in many developing countries is that of extra-legal land developments. These include a wide range of land development practices, from squatting and unauthorized subdivisions, to the construction on registered land of houses that have not been officially sanctioned.” (DPU 2002:128) But central city land that can be accessed by these forms of tenure are ever more rare.<sup>12</sup> The high and rising cost of land in these areas, which are now almost universally scheduled for their ‘highest usage’ because of the reform and privatization of urban land markets, prevent legal use by the neediest groups. As a result, as noted earlier, new self-built

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<sup>12</sup> In 1996 UNCHS (244) pointed out that the commercialization of formal and informal urban land markets was causing an increasing concentration of low-income groups on a small proportion of the land area. Already by 1987, the wealthiest 2 percent of Dhaka’s residents occupied the same amount of the city’s residential area as the poorest 70 per cent. The poorest 2.8 million of Dhaka’s residents lived on seven square kilometers of land (Islam 1992, quoted in UNCHS 1996:242).

settlements tend to be peri-urban, with tenure questions initially left unsettled and thus precarious.

Even rudimentary building materials in metropolitan areas have become relatively more expensive for self-builders in recent decades (Ward:5).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, new materials, production processes and low-cost building designs have been developed. These can reduce overall construction costs while improving the quality of homes for self-builders. However some of these may be better suited for disaster relief than for more usual self-building in peri-urban areas if capital intensive mass production techniques are employed or the design of the structure is not well suited to local cultural practices.

Various studies beginning with early works by Turner assumed that self-builders are resourceful enough to build their own homes or to hire others to do all or part of the job for them. In more recent situations where single mothers or other self-builders with no construction experience have joined self-building processes, NGOs or CBOs have been important in transferring skills to these groups. The existence and quality of the training these groups can give, or their role in arranging the bartering of other services (e.g. childcare, food preparation and serving, grounds keeping, night security, etc.) for construction labor can thus be an important factor. The complete absence of access to such training, on the other hand, is a significant obstacle for builders. This situation has become more apparent in major metropolitan areas where the high costs of land for self-building have necessitated more and more vertical construction, i.e. the construction of apartment blocks of four or more stories in height.

A groundbreaking example of this began in Sao Paulo, Brazil in the early 1990s. In one case, the *Apuaña mutirao* was forced to adopt a design of four stories. Special equipment and highly skilled laborers were needed to carry out certain aspects of construction. After evaluation of the costs and skills that would be required to complete the work, the architectural NGO assisting the community trained residents to build parts of the foundation that would have otherwise required specialized workers at a high cost to the community. But other tasks that that could be carried out by the community, had to be hired in. But first, the NGO, working with residents and the local government had to obtain special permission to use public funds – intended only for the purchase of construction materials -- to hire special equipment and operators. Even more recently, self-builders have begun to press for access to abandoned apartment buildings in city centers. In situations where main structural elements or the electrical, water or sanitation systems have deteriorated seriously, rehabilitation of the buildings

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<sup>13</sup> I have not found references to systematic research on this question. Nonetheless, the high degree of competition that now exists in the formal and informal recycling sector in metropolitan areas of developing countries suggests that scavenging for one's own makeshift materials would not be easy for a non-professional. (For more on this competition, see Rolnik and Cymbalista 2003.) At the same time, many building materials that are fabricated from tradable commodities are likely to have increased as well by virtue of their integration into formal processing and trade channels, many of which imply the influence of international standards and pricing.



requires again more skilled labor than the average first-time self-builder could manage. Similarly, Ward, has suggested that renovation of continuously expanded permanent structures dating from three or four decades ago may also be more complicated than building the original core structure. (Include references to Turner, Rolnik & Cymbalista, UNV cases, Ward.)

Once a rudimentary shelter is established, the struggle for *livability* ensues. This entails elaborating a permanent structure that is both strong enough and designed in a way to permit safe habitation during normal and extreme weather experienced in the locality. This concept also implies sufficient space adequately divided, ventilation, and access to clean water, sanitation and energy; such that young and old, male and female live in conditions that do not jeopardize their physical or psychological development or well-being.

Affordability issues may also affect livability to the extent that they block accession to or evidence of tenure. If legal evidence of secure tenure can be neither purchased nor rented, self-builder households will find it difficult to borrow money to upgrade their homes, such as to cover the large expenditures for one-time capital costs of connecting to city water and sanitation systems. On the other hand, even if tenure were affordable in principle, cumbersome regulations, high fees or illegal charges encountered during efforts to register tenure may raise the costs of this process beyond affordability, or to a level that effectively prevent residents from upgrading their structures in a timely way. Regulations pertaining to urban planning (zoning, land use, etc.) and administration (features of buildings and lots, approval procedures for expansions or additions to structures) also have proven to raise costs and slow processes by which residents legally improve their property.<sup>14</sup>

Gilbert (2000) and others have described the additional problem of finance for self-built housing, particularly from the formal sector. Although governments have not generally been involved massive scale lending to self-help housers, in recent years they have been scaling back on their investments in public or low-income housing. This, along with the impacts of weakening economies in many developing countries in the 1990s will have increased the pressure on existing affordable housing.<sup>15</sup>

Formal private sector institutions have not shown interest in the self-help housing market, usually for several reasons: First, lenders are biased toward

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<sup>14</sup> This paragraph is based on Payne (2002).

<sup>15</sup> An on-going study on the housing situation in Rosario, Argentina shows that middle- and upper-middle class families, having been seriously affected by the economic downturn in their city over the past half-decade, have been moving from solid, central city locations, to in-fill neighborhoods between the 'core' city and its less well-off inner peripheral neighborhoods. Until the late 1990s, the in-fill neighborhoods held little appeal for the middle class but do today because they afford acceptable levels of access to the city center but without the high land and housing costs (Salgado and Woeflin).

completed owner-occupied housing – loans for rental or condominium housing, or for house improvements or unfinished core houses on serviced sites are rare. Second, mortgage lenders find it difficult to verify self-employed incomes of low-income community members. Third, lenders do not trust poor people to repay their loans. Fourth, lenders are put off by the low profitability on small loans. At the same time, significant amounts of micro-credit issued through NGOs have yet to find their way into the self-building market. It seems most of these resources have been directed to working capital loans for enterprises in the form of frequent small amounts. Typically such loans are well below the size of funds needed for housing. (Ferguson, cited in Gilbert 2000:167)

Closely connected in time and necessity to the issue of livability is that of *security*: security of tenure; security against crime, violence, anomie and social exclusion; security against natural and man-made disasters. There now appears to be a general consensus among urban development professionals, whether working in city governments, international agencies or NGOs, that secure tenure extended broadly across a community is the bedrock on which self-building can proceed from shelter to decent housing and long-term community development. Without secure tenure, residents' sense of insecurity prevents them from investing significantly in their own shelter, in consenting to pay the relatively large connection fees for water, sanitation and electricity, and from contributing labor or money to upgrading or maintaining minimally adequate environmental conditions and equipment within the community. Moser (1997) and others have shown that neighborhoods in Kingston Jamaica with the worst housing and community environmental conditions were among the most violent. And, because of prevailing levels of violence, efforts to upgrade these communities were far more difficult than in other low-income neighborhoods. Hence, poor housing and community environmental conditions tend to spawn not only poor health but violence, which helps to maintain high levels of poverty. It also compromises efforts to improve human capital in the community by giving residents a healthy environment.

Insecurity of tenure also serves to make residents more vulnerable to exploitation by criminals, politicians or local bosses. Money that might otherwise be invested in housing or land – a form of savings -- is instead spent on obtaining promises of protection from eviction. Furthermore, with banking facilities largely absent in the poorest communities, savings are held in cash, either on the person or in the home. These resources are more easily lost or robbed than those held in safe storage. Worse yet, in the absence of clear and secure tenure rights, residents are at greater risk in the aftermath of natural disasters, fires, sectarian riots or other activities that result in large scale destruction of property. The confusion and desperation following such events often leads to new sets of negotiations and dependencies for those whose property has been destroyed. Reports from numerous cities in India where communal strife occurred frequently from the 1980s to the present have resulted in large scale reorganization (ghettoization) of neighborhoods along religious

lines. In most of these cases, the weakest sectors of the population have been further marginalized.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, even if self-built communities create decent homes and neighborhoods, other forces challenge their *sustainability*. Affordability, livability and security cannot be maintained indefinitely if the families in these communities cannot find and sustain adequate sources of income. It stands to reason that when income falls to subsistence levels (i.e. covering the cost of a minimum food basket and essential medicines) other household expenditures will be curtailed. If this persists long enough, the consequences of the failure to maintain the quality of shelter or to pay water and electricity bills can become grave. Some of the main reasons leading to income shortfalls in self-built neighborhoods include:

*The large distance between home and paid employment.* Many self-built housing sites are located in the extreme peripheries of metropolitan areas. The dearth of inexpensive and relatively rapid public or private transportation networks serving these neighborhoods forces residents into difficult choices. The cost of commuting may consume a large part of the worker's earned income and his/her non-working waking hours. Commuting times of four hours per day are not uncommon for residents of peripheral communities in some of the largest cities in the developing world.<sup>17</sup> For women commuters, the day often begins and ends in a dangerous walk through darkened allies and paths between home and the nearest transport depot. The absence of both parents from the home for such long periods often necessitates additional costs for child care, or the worse option of leaving children by themselves or with others who may not be able to care for them adequately. Long distance commutes also negatively impact the ability of community members to participate in community management or community improvement activities. This may also negatively influence the security and environmental quality of the neighborhood, as well as the quality of governance that is possible in an already overworked community.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed description of the consequences of insecure tenure for improvements in housing and environmental sanitation and for personal security in Mumbai (Bombay), India, see YUVA. To understand how 'ghettoization' along communal/religious lines occurs in that same city and others in India, see Khotari and Contractor. For a discussion of the links between urban renewal, ghettoization, communal discord and global economic integration in Ahmedabad, India, see DaCosta.

<sup>16</sup> According to a recent World Bank (2001:310) report on Mexico, "the poor suffer the most because they live in peri-urban areas where the available public transport services are often badly organized and inadequate in terms of level of service and area served. A large percentage of the urban poor have to make several transfers and take hours to reach their destinations. Too often these trips cost more than 20 percent of their income and are made in unsafe buses." The groundbreaking study by CEBRAP (1978) documented the emergence of conditions such as these for Sao Paulo's urban poor in the midst of the 'Brazilian Miracle'.

<sup>18</sup> In their analysis of women's changing roles in low-income urban communities for a joint UNV-UNRISD action research project, Lind and Farnelo note that the affects of austerity over the past two decades in Latin America and elsewhere forced women to assume triple burdens, i.e. household reproduction, income generation through employment and maintenance the management of their local environment and community. They ask if these roles are simultaneously sustainable without an active role for the state.

A more general threat for sustaining decent housing and healthy communities is that of declining real household incomes. In developing countries, and especially in cities where the informal sector already provides the majority of employment opportunities, it is difficult to monitor income levels accurately. However, unemployment data provide some insight into the household wellbeing. For those countries reporting data to the ILO in the 1990s, the trends were somber: in 11 of 17 Asian and Pacific economies, unemployment rates increased. In the 37 Latin America and the Caribbean states, unemployment rates increased in 15 and decreased in 7, with the rest remaining relatively stable. Twelve sub-Saharan states showed unemployment rates in the high double digits. Only Nigeria and Zimbabwe reported rates of unemployment less than 7 percent after 1995 (UNHSP, 2003, p.99).

To this point, much of the discussion of self-building or self-help housing has been geared to the construction of shelter for ownership by individuals. There is, however, continuing interest in self-help housing developed by mutual assistance cooperatives, despite their relatively small contribution relieving the housing deficit of the poor. Adherents to the co-operative movement cite long-standing governmental biases encouraging traditional forms of home ownership as the principal reason for eschewing mutual assistance cooperatives. Other reasons may include the more complex governance requirements of cooperative housing, the small amount of public or private resources available to them and the dearth of institutional supports for cooperative housing. Within this last category would be legal and administrative frameworks encouraging urban governments to work with cooperatives, tax advantages similar to home ownership, the existence of training programs for prospective housing-cooperativists, etc.<sup>19</sup>

This cursory review of constraints on self-help building shows that many factors can inhibit the construction of adequate housing and a healthy community. These range, first, from issues of immediate affordability of materials and access to land on which to establish a first shelter; then to the implantation of public amenities and access to them at affordable prices to make the shelter livable and healthy year around; and next, to physical security against theft, violence, natural and man-made disasters; and finally to the capacity of households and communities to maintain the quality of the investments they have made in their homes and communities over a long period of time. The final section of this report seeks to identify those constraints on which UNV may be uniquely suited to work, and to sketch out how UNV might approach these problems.

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<sup>19</sup> In its review of the obstacles to establishing housing cooperatives, UNCHS (2001:209) highlighted: the necessity of having a strong catalytic agent to mobilize low-income households into a group; the paucity of managerial, legal or financial expertise among members; and the opportunity costs to poor people of involvement in collective action and management.

## **What can UNV do to promote the realization of the right to adequate housing through self-building processes?**

It may be reasonably argued that self-built housing, either by individuals acting on their own behalf or collectively, will be one of the largest, if not the largest voluntary activity taking place in urban areas in the developing world over the next several decades. The pace of rural-urban migration and the parallel process of the wholesale urbanization of poverty make this appear inevitable.<sup>20</sup> UNV, as the UN agency responsible for concerted thinking and action in support of volunteer action from the local to global level, may therefore wish to adopt strategies to understand these processes and then to disseminate the knowledge and information that society needs to make the best use of these volunteer impulses and energies. Having improved its analysis of self-building, UNV may then seek to channel this new knowledge to international organizations, national governments and to civil society organizations at all levels. The crucial aspect of this will be less in the technical aspects of self-built/self-help housing: physical design, the development of low-cost materials or even the formulation of appropriate legal/legislative frameworks supportive of these processes. Many organizations are already making good progress in these areas. Rather, I would advise UNV to highlight and promote the ‘social inventions’<sup>21</sup> necessary to bring together these technical innovations into processes that are economically efficient, politically feasible and socially sustainable<sup>22</sup>. Should these characteristics come together, one might even think of the volunteer effort as ‘transforming’ societies as a whole.

In most successful pilot projects of self-built housing, local and higher-level authorities, NGOs, and members of marginalized communities contribute in a concerted fashion the social, economic and legal resources needed to empower individuals and groups to collectively build healthy and sustainable homes and communities. The main obstacle to these processes is the lack of political will on the part of governments to enact and implement legislation that unlocks these resources on a large scale. Powerful vested interests of urban land owners, large construction companies, real estate developers and financial institutions that benefit from the production of ‘formal’ housing influence political process to

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<sup>20</sup> Attention to humanitarian disasters, whether entirely man-made or natural or somewhere in between, will also engage massive voluntary responses, as will traditional forms of charity and more socially progressive forms of voluntary action by the middle classes of both developed and developing countries. But these are likely to pale in comparison with the numbers of hours and monetary value of contributions by people attempting to secure adequate housing in urban areas of the developing world. Never before in history have three billion poor urban dwellers simultaneously engaged in building or repairing homes…… However, ‘women’s work’, such as caring for children, the elderly and the sick – predominantly undertaken by women and girls – taken together may rival the hours and value spent in the production of housing.

<sup>21</sup> A social invention is a new law, organization or procedure that changes the ways in which people relate to themselves or to each other, either individually or collectively. Conger (2-3) provides a brief but fascinating chronology of exemplary laws, organizations and procedures that qualify as ‘social inventions’.

<sup>22</sup> “Socially sustainable” in this context would be the achievement and maintenance of adequate housing for a growing proportion of the global population.

prevent urban decision-makers from acting on what they know to be valid approaches to adequately housing the burgeoning masses of urban poor.

UNV's response could be to act at the global level to promote an understanding of 'flagship' mutual assistance/cooperative/ self-building programs and their eventual limitations. Some of the steps that could be taken would include to:

- commission a blue-ribbon panel comprising representatives (in a voluntary capacity) from international NGOs, UN Agencies (including IFIs), grassroots organizations and domestic development NGOs and independent urban governance specialists to undertake an in-depth, rolling analysis of these experiences.<sup>23</sup> This group should publish an annual report in conjunction with the UN's Special Rapporteur (SR) on the Right to Adequate Housing of progress of specific countries (and possibly cities) in establishing an 'enabling environment' for self-built housing.
- Establish a multi-lingual website for the exchange of experience among organizations participating in self-built housing experiences. The website would highlight, among other things: detailed aspects of collaborations among local authorities, NGOs and community organizations in their efforts to implement holistic urban upgrading through collective self-building processes; examples of the roles and responsibilities of government agencies, NGOs, grassroots organizations and international donor agencies in promoting self-building processes.
- Establish in conjunction with SR and the Blue-Ribbon Panel, indicators for monitoring the progress of national and local governments in supporting self-building processes that demonstrate high promise in improving and maintaining access to decent housing for low and very-low income urban residents. The indicator system would be elaborated in sufficient detail and simplicity of description so that grassroots groups could themselves apply the principles of monitoring in their own community.

These actions will not necessarily make a great difference unless the interest groups who oppose pro-poor self-building processes can be co-opted to support change or forced to give up some of the benefits they derive from the status quo. In democratic societies, this can be done, only with great difficulty, through some combination of the ballot box, independent trade union movements or legal-administrative processes that change the relative balance of power in society to favor the poor. It is unlikely, however, that such forces will come about without the poor participating fully in the political process pursuing such goals. In cities with formally democratic processes and over half the population living in slums, the poor are largely excluded from both self-development and establishing their own political voice. Their organizations are too weak. Their access to education,

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<sup>23</sup> UNV has already taken the commendable step of commissioning an analysis of a range of mutirao (mutual assistance) cooperative housing developments in Brazil.

health care, clean water and sanitation are severely compromised. Their environments and social networks are under maximum stress. Such conditions are far more likely to lead to anomy than concerted well-directed political force.

- UNV may thus wish to give special attention to promoting those self-help processes that empower low-income citizens to do for themselves what they have to do and to forge the alliances that are needed to elicit fair and effective actions on their behalf by governments and the market. UNV's efforts may thus focus on processes that create or further the conditions of active citizenship through self-building processes. The author's untested hypothesis is that self-building processes such as the *mutirao* (mutual assistance housing cooperatives) as practiced in different parts of Brazil and Uruguay are more likely to awaken the citizen's consciousness than more limited self-building experiences that combine in piecemeal fashion grants or loans, low-cost materials and access to land without seeking to put the process of house construction in its larger political economic context of community and nation building.<sup>24</sup> However, cooperatives such as these developed in a particular institutional context that may not be easily replicated in outside the Southern Cone of Latin America. Learning how to adapt these experiences to local conditions, or how to promote achievement of the necessary and sufficient conditions to allow such models to work elsewhere is an important challenge, and perhaps one that UNV should take on by sponsoring exchanges among housing specialists and housing movement activists in different countries.

Although many countries have recently reduced their reliance on forced evictions to clear urban land of informal settlements, there remain, sadly, far too many instances of this inhuman behavior. In some fast growing cities of Asia, forced evictions are becoming more frequent. The causes range from city beautification schemes to mass relocations in the face of mega-infrastructure projects to urban environmental improvements aimed at attracting international sporting events and cultural events. Today, when informal settlements or existing legal housing is destroyed without adequate compensation, many residents are unable to afford new mass-produced low-income housing nor have the skills or knowledge to

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<sup>24</sup> Burgess has argued that self-building of homes by low-income urban residents should not be encouraged because it represents a form of 'double-exploitation'. The urban worker, being unable to earn a salary that allows him/her to rent or purchase adequate housing with the wages of employment, must then exploit himself in his non-working time providing his own means of reproduction. In the present environment where decent housing for low-income populations in developing (& developed) countries is almost non-existent and is believed to be growing scarcer, this argument is moot. Poor people will either house themselves or go without. The key question is whether they will be live in healthy homes and settlements or not. As the eventual majority of society, the urban poor's chances of success will depend to a large extent upon their ability to exert the pressure needed to bring about social change. It is my impression that the long-term political socialization that occurs in some of these mutual assistance housing cooperatives provides one of the more promising avenues for developing the economic strength and political consciousness of the poor. It is from this point that collectively they may transform themselves and society by progressively lessening inegalitarian relationships that they have historically endured.

avail themselves of the self-building option. Nor can they easily find suitable employment or means of accessing the social networks that sustained them in their former location. For these reasons, it is best to avoid evictions and instead help residents improve/renovate their housing incrementally. But this cannot happen unless forced evictions are avoided.

- Establish links with the Habitat International Coalition and COHRE (Committee on Housing Rights and Evictions) to understand how to promote best practices in the preventing evictions from and the destruction of self-built housing under the guise of urban development, when more socially sustainable options are viable.
- Prevent destruction of self-built housing (slum housing) resulting from sectarian violence (Ahmedabad and Mumbai, India, the Balkans, Palestine,), as perhaps with 'White Helmets' during periods of conflict.

Finally, the absence of efficient and affordable public transport necessitates strategies to 'grow' employment with adequate wages in close proximity to the homes of low-income residents, whether in center city slums or peripheral ones. If current trends continue, the jobs that will be created in peri-urban settlements will be in informal sector micro enterprises, which already employ up to half of the workforce in many cities in developing countries. Among the most important industries for such settlements will be shelter construction and improvement. Indeed, Setchell (9-13), drawing his own experience in the field of disaster relief and on work by Tipple (1999) and Kellet and Tipple, estimates that the combined employment creation effect, or *employment multiplier*, of one job created in low-cost labor intensive housing production/upgrading may be as high as six. Setchell calculates multiplier as follows "one direct livelihood opportunity in shelter provision and improvement; two opportunities associated with backward linkage activities; one in non-HBE (home-based enterprise) forward linkage activities; and two in HBE activities."

Many of these shelter oriented activities as well as the gamut of other micro enterprises found in peri-urban and slum settlements locate themselves in the spaces adjacent to or inside the proprietor's home. Without careful planning and execution of the home-working space -- including its connections to essential services, the handling of production waste, and the ingress of inputs and egress of output -- the mixing of economic and social reproduction under one roof can harm the health of family members, other workers and neighbors. The higher the density of mixed use establishments, the greater the threats to the environment and human health. Holistic planning for the high-density mixed-use low-income community is therefore crucial if healthy living and working conditions are to be established and maintained. Planning of this kind by residents has been rare in spontaneous or degraded core neighborhoods.



Nonetheless, precedents do exist of both kinds of communities imposing sounder uses of both public and private space after settlement has occurred.<sup>25</sup>

- UNV's contribution to promoting holistic planning for mixed-use micro-enterprise neighborhoods would be to identify, perhaps in collaboration with UN Habitat, a range of cases of holistic planning experiences in spontaneous settlements and degraded urban centers that have managed to accommodate and promote micro enterprises without sacrificing the health of local families, workers or the environment. UNV could then work with specialists to codify or systematize the processes and lessons of these experiences and to publish them on its website in the UN languages. A longer range goal might then be to establish a distance learning program for holistic grassroots planners, whose 'teachers' would be the leaders and participants of some of the successful cases UNV documents. These 'distance professors' would be, of course, UNVs.

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, cases of 'integral development' in the Northern and Eastern Cones of Lima from the late 1980s to the present (Joseph), the cases of Mutirao 50 and Comunidades in the Brazilian city of Fortaleza in the 1990s (Correa de Oliveira) and ongoing efforts of "Microenergia" in Argentina described in the brief case appended at the end of this paper.

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## **Annex 1. UNCHS Best Practices: Homelessness & Housing:**

- a) [Appropriate Grassroot Level Intervention for Cost-effective Housing](#) - India
- b) [Batikent Project](#) - Turkey
- c) [Build Together: The National Housing Programme](#) - Namibia
- d) [Burgerziekenhuis Hospital, Amsterdam](#) - The Netherlands
- e) [Community Action Planning \(CAP\) Methodology](#) - Sri Lanka
- f) [Co-operative Housing in Canada: A Model for Empowered Communities](#) - Canada
- g) [Cost Effective Environment Friendly \(CEEF\) Shelter Development Strategy](#) - India
- h) [Frauen-Werk-Stadt - A Housing Project by and for Women in Vienna](#) - Austria
- i) [Graduated Plan of the City of Vienna for the Reintegration of Homeless](#) - Austria
- j) [Homeless Families Program](#) - USA
- k) [Housing Program for Rural Areas \(Foundation Costa Rica - Canada\)](#) - Costa Rica
- l) [Housing Settlement Project in Shanghai](#) - China
- m) [Improving Living Environments for the Low-Income Households](#) - Saudi Arabia
- n) [Khuda-Ki-Basti - Innovation and Success in Sheltering the Poor](#) - Pakistan
- o) [Lesotho Urban Upgrading Project \(LUUP\)](#) - Lesotho
- p) [Low-Cost Housing](#) - Malawi
- q) [Project on Sites and Services for Low-Income Family Groups](#) - Argentina
- r) [Rough Sleepers Initiative \(RSI\) in Central London](#) - United Kingdom
- s) [Self Built Affordable Homes to Rent](#) - United Kingdom
- t) [Self-Contained Housing Delivery System](#) - Thailand
- u) [Self-help Housing: Mutirao 50, Fortaleza](#) - Brazil
- v) [Self-Management in Popular Shelter and Habitat Program](#) - Venezuela
- w) [Shelter Upgrading in Agadir](#) - Morocco
- x) [Single Family Housing Project in Timisoara](#) - Romania

y) Settlement Upgrading Project (DUA/GTZ Project) – Senegal

**Source of Best Practice Information:**all of the programme summaries are taken from the Best Practices Database compiled by UN-Habitat and with the support of the UNESCO-MOST Clearing House. The database is extensive and contains 700 examples of good and best practices which were reviewed and judged by independent technical committees and juries for the Habitat II City Summit in Istanbul in 1996, and for the Dubai International Awards for Best Practices in Improving the Living Environment, in 1998. The summaries of selected good and best practices are included in the MOST Database because of their particular relevance to or impact on poverty eradication and on social cohesion. More information on the Best Practices Database, the Best Practices & Local Leadership Programme and the Dubai International Awards can be obtained by contacting:

Best Practices & Local Leadership Programme

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Homepage: <http://www.sustainabledevelopment.org/blp/> ;

Database: <http://www.bestpractices.org/>

## **Annex II. The Microenergia egalitarian development approach: From micro-business neighbourhood networks to decent housing.**

*By Fernando Murillo, Microenergia*

Microenergia is a not-for-profit association from Argentina that believes in egalitarian development built on neighbourhood participation, micro-business networking and decent housing for low income communities. The hypothesis supported is that such communities naturally have the capacities to organize themselves to channel positive neighbourhood synergies of solidarity and enterprise, which are prerequisites for egalitarian development and the defense of human rights. Microenergia seeks out communities with these characteristics in order to provide guidance and support in their efforts to achieve egalitarian development. Microenergia encourages full participation of residents in discussing and planning concrete actions to solve those problems affecting the whole community, with a special focus on developing micro-business networks to alleviate urgent problems of poverty and employment.

In these communities, micro-enterprise is the natural survival response. A broad spectrum of artisan products are normally developed and marketed informally but being the profit very small and the strategy based on individual efforts, results impossible to generate the needed capital to grow and make the business more profitable. Microenergia invites to submit individual micro-business proposals, providing micro-credits, training, marketing information and trade possibilities for neighbours integrating network. Through on job training, focus on micro-business, in parallel to social development projects, the egalitarian development process is encouraged. A moral of social inclusion arise as results of community training and concrete achievements of community improvement. The participation through the best products in regional and international fair trade create a sense of local pride and belonging to the community. This is follow up by decent housing improvements, afforded by the growing micro-business profits, accommodating habitat and micro-business infrastructures, normally become the trade mark of the micro-business neighbourhood networks.

The egalitarian commitment is assumed in terms of cross subsidies from successful micro-business networks to social projects attending the more urgent community problems. In brief, the approach consists of five basic components: Training, micro-credits, community infrastructure, housing and fair trade (figure 1). Each component contributes to building local capacities to create the organizational and logistical infrastructure for build a development framework upon practices of democratic participation.



Figure 1. The Microenergia egalitarian development approach

The approach was applied to very specific conditions of poverty and marginality demonstrating its strength and weakness. In the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (Argentina), the complete vision was implemented in Moreno, creating a “hive” or community centre, seat of micro-business and community development networks. The results were very auspicious: A zero default rate, an important number of dwelling improved, reaching level of decent houses with micro-business shops and workshops, and a flourishing marketing community strategy. In the case of San Martín and the southern area of Buenos Aires, a protected workshop was supported technically and financially. Networks or “hives” were not, possibly because the high level of social fragmentation in the area.

In the case of communities located in the provinces, such as the case of Brea Pozo (Santiago del Estero), Andresito (Misiones), Esquina (Corrientes) and Aluminé (Neuquén) far away from the main markets, the provision of the on-job training scarcely generates any development, except in terms of fair trade. The possibility to sell their products in Buenos Aires, directly without intermediary, was the main interest. But sustaining a fair trade strategy demands much more than a help to certain communities to help their products. It is necessary to build a platform from where products from vulnerable communities be promoted and sold in the big markets, with the support of public institutions. An initiative of this kind, known as the “First sample of egalitarian development” was launched in the historical “Cabildo” of Buenos Aires. Together with the Ministry of Interior, the “Cabildo” invites municipalities throughout the country to exhibit products of vulnerable communities. The response was very positive, attracting a huge number of applications. It is expected that such strategy will encourage a capacity building process for local governments committed with egalitarian development principles.

The experience to the date provides valuable inputs to discuss the approach potential for democratising development opportunities in the age of globalisation.