

Research Article

Housing, COVID & Climate: Urban Social Housing Post-COVID Climate Change Mitigation and Redress

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Abstract

This short paper, draws on 40 years of research and advisory work, rather than a single, short-term, finite research project. It examines recent and current examples of urban housing policies, programmes and projects in a wide range of countries in both the Global North and South in its aim order to meet its aim to stimulate and contribute to the search for strategic approaches to the production, maintenance and management of urban low-income group housing; it examines the historical, geographic, cultural/political and economic contexts within which they are set, laying some emphasis on the prevailing existential threats to humanity caused by: (1) global heating, and (2) the pandemic pervasiveness of viral pathogen transmissions and their social, economic and legislative impact on physical settlement planning and management. Emphasis is given to distinguishing between ‘public housing’, for which all governing decisions are unilaterally made by relevant state agencies and institutions, and ‘social housing’, in which non-governmental beneficiary households and enterprises, communities and organisations are engaged in risk- and benefit-sharing partnership with responsible state agencies at all levels of the governance and management of affordable and accessible urban housing. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the urgency of need to build the capability of the extensive range of actors and stake-holders, worldwide and calling for the initiation and dissemination of successful policy approaches and their administration.

Keywords

Participation, Partnership, Urban Governance, Housing Management, Devolution, Subsidiarity, Global Heating, Land Use Planning

1. Prevailing and Emerging Policy Approaches

The historical development of public sector intervention in urban housing markets in the global North, in the aftermath of the economic depression of the 1930s and world war in the 1940s and the introduction of national welfare policies in the 1950s, preceded and, to some extent, influenced the four-stage

sequence of urban housing policy development in countries in the Global South (many of which were emerging from centuries of colonial rule or going through radical political and economic change) in the second half of the Twentieth Century. This political and legislative process brought new politi-

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cal/administrative concepts, such as: ‘decentralisation’, ‘devolution’ and ‘subsidiarity’ into the principles and practices of the production, maintenance and management of affordable low-income group urban housing, through the sequence of policy approaches, embracing: (1) ‘conventional’ public rental housing procurement; (2) the, short-lived, ‘organised’ (aided) self-help movement, (3) sites-and-services and slum upgrading; also the emergence of non-governmental organisations, concerned with the alleviation and reduction of poverty and environmental sustainability [13]. However, neither the threat of, nor measures to address, climate change and viral pathogen transmission were understood or formulated by state agencies or non-governmental organisations until the dawn of the Twenty first Century.

2. Implementation Strategies

The fourth stage in the chronological progression of public sector policies’ apparent withdrawal of state agencies from the direct procurement and management of urban low-income group housing was the recognition of the participation of non-governmental organisations and enterprises in many functions of hitherto public housing, and the state’s role in ‘enabling’ households and communities to undertake the activities, devolved to them [1]. This shift in policy coincided with, but should not be confused with, the prevailing neo-liberal move to the privatisation of many hitherto public sector responsibilities, in market and mixed economies.

The ‘enabling’ of participatory urban projects contribute more than the material benefits in reducing poverty [2, 3]. They stimulate transformations that paradigms for urban housing that embrace inter-dependent decentralisation, community participation and good local governance [8]. The objectives of urban poverty alleviation and reduction/elimination, and participation, with enabling supports, build local capacity for governance and management in establishing, maintaining and managing development partnerships in the urban low-income group housing sector.

The establishment of efficient and effective democratic partnerships require careful preparation and ‘training’. Maintaining them depends upon the nurturing of mutual understanding and trust, avoiding sub-group dominance by any partial political dogma or bureaucratic authority -such is the nature of local democracy!

3. Land & Location

Urban households and communities will only invest their energy and resources in their dwellings and work places if they have absolute confidence in the security of their rights to the land, which they develop and then occupy. Therefore, absolute security of tenure to land is fundamentally important to any physical, social or financial investment in it. ‘Secure’ tenure may embrace to one or more of many well-understood

forms of title, whether statutory, customary, formal or informal, provide it is legally binding and inalienable [10].

Hitherto, the location of land for low-income group housing by municipal development and planning authorities has been largely determined by the capital costs of its procurement and development. This has often led to the development of low-value land, located far from infrastructure networks with difficult or costly connections to locations of possible employment for typically unskilled occupants of low-income group housing. The location of new low-income group urban housing rests not only on the capital cost of the acquisition and development of land, but also on the social and economic needs and aspirations of their future residents and users [11]; hence the importance of their engagement in decision-making processes, even at a citywide level.

4. Land Use and Landscape Planning and Management

Customarily, land use layout plans for low-income group housing developments, even sites-and-services schemes, have been prepared by government authorities or their sub-contracted private sector consultants, with marginal, or no, recourse to the ultimate household or community beneficiaries [4]. The basic objectives of such plans has been ‘economic efficiency’ in the use of land, minimising the ‘unproductive’ areas, such as roads and access ways, public open spaces for communal social and recreation activities (i.e. land not allocated for privately occupied housing and enterprises). By engaging the ultimate occupants and users in partnership with professional planners and financiers, such utilitarian approaches are likely to be moderated, facilitating more convivial environments that meet ‘asocial distancing’ conditions in order to limit the transfer of viral pathogens and contribute to the capture of carbon dioxide [14]. In summary, conscientious urban design and landscaping, is central to the social need and use of communal open space, in urban low-income housing areas and is of prime importance to both the mitigation of pathogenic transmission and the reduction of ‘greenhouse gas’ emissions.

5. Legislation, Norms and Standards

The procurement and management of urban social housing, based on participatory local government-community partnerships, almost universally require significant and, in many countries, radical reforms to prevailing legislation and operational norms and standards, in order to ensure that government’s ‘enabling’ is equitable and efficient [15].

Such shifts in public policy and practice have to recognise and embrace the many aspects of informal (‘illegal’) urban housing procurement and markets that work well in the interests of their beneficiaries and users, and the municipal housing sector as a whole [5]. In doing so, careful consideration

must be given to the formulation of proscriptive legislation and its application/administration of equitable development control measures, based on the principle of subsidiarity [6].

6. Financial Support and the Way Ahead

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), established in 1992 is monitored by a regular series of meetings of the international 'Conference of the Parties' (COP). Amongst the most influential of which, was COP21 held in Paris in 2015, at which it was agreed that every country should adopt the target of confining global heating to only 1.5-2.0°C above 'pre-industrial levels'. The resulting 'Paris Agreement' also recommended measures to limit the extraction and combustion of CO₂-emitting fossil fuels and to invest in 'green' energy generation. Thus, targets were set and political commitments declared. At COP27, in 2022, it was agreed that 'western, developed countries' would provide grant-aid to the 'least-resourced developing countries' in order to assist them in meeting their commitments. This pledge was taken a step further at COP28 in 2023 at which the establishment of a 'Loss and Damage Fund', subscribed to by the more financially-wealthy governments (initially administered by the World Bank) to support less well-endowed countries to meet climate change challenges and commitments, was agreed.

To these ends, national governments should allocate responsibility for climate change policies at national ministerial level that, *inter alia*, should administer funds to be disbursed to regional or urban authorities, to support organised communities and municipal development agencies, for the implementation of approved works that cover the climate change and pathogenic transfer mitigation aspects of social housing programmes and projects; also, to publicise, promote and build capacity for the understanding the issues of global health and climate change, and the local implications for their development and implementation locally [12].

7. Conclusion

The beginning of the Twenty first Century has seen a 'globalisation' of low-income group CBOs in partnerships with local government, preoccupied with affordable urban housing, health and environmental issues, including the impacts of global climate change and pandemic pathogenic transmission [7, 13]. This progressive international movement is still in need of institutional, organisational and human skills development and, importantly/urgently, the compilation and dissemination of operationally successful examples of participatory partnerships for the procurement, maintenance and management of affordable social housing, incorporating strategies to enhance resilience to, and the redress of, the existential threats of global climate change and pandemic pathogenic transmission [9].

To many, capacity building means only training or human

resource development. Certainly, this is a very major component of it. However, if decision-makers, managers, professionals and technicians are to operate at full capacity, they need more than just their own abilities. They need an institutional and organisational environment conducive to, and supportive of, their efforts, energies and skills. Institutional and organisational constraints present as great an impediment to the effective management of supports to incremental housing processes as the inabilities of professionals, technicians and householders. Therefore, to be effective capacity building must simultaneously embrace all three aspects – human resource development, organisational development, and institutional development.

Capacity needs to be built at every level and across all fields of activity that impinge upon the development and management of cities and settlements. However, in every situation there are priorities that, for reasons of urgency or deficiency, take precedent over others in their need for attention and resources. These vary with the particular circumstances of any specific country or region. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly apparent that the weakest link in the chain is generally at the level of local government and municipal administration [13].

As an underpinning to capacity building processes, throughout the world, there is an urgent need for extensive research of successful initiatives and practices in 'devolved' urban governance and the management of affordable low-income group social housing for the compilation and dissemination of an accessible and transferable international evidence-base.

Author Contributions

Patrick Wakely is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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