

QUICK
GUIDES
FOR
POLICY
MAKERS



housing the **poor** in Asian cities



UN-HABITAT



United Nations
ESCAP

6

**COMMUNITY-BASED
ORGANIZATIONS:** The poor as
agents of development

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The original documents and other materials can be accessed at: www.housing-the-urban-poor.net.

The above contributions have all shaped the Quick Guide series, which we hope will contribute to the daily work of policy makers in Asia in their quest to improve housing for the urban poor.

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"It is vital that in the long run, communities of the poor, as the main group seeking social justice, own and manage their own development process, and become central to its refinement and expansion."

Sheela Patel, SPARC, India



PHOTO: SPARC

Community-based organizations: The poor as agents of development

QUICK GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS NUMBER 6

The emergence of community organizations of the poor in Asia has been a very important development during the past two decades. As structures which allow poor households and poor communities to move from isolation and powerlessness into collective strength, these organizations have become powerful development mechanisms in their countries — and they belong entirely to people.

Besides providing a means of idea-sharing, asset-pooling and mutual support, community organizations create channels for poor people to talk to their local and national governments and to undertake collaborative development projects in housing, upgrading, land tenure, infrastructure and livelihood. Asia's poor communities are increasingly delivering housing and community improvements, in collaboration with other development stakeholders.

Community organizations can be valuable and resourceful partners when it comes to finding viable housing solutions for the poor. Community organizations must play a central role in finding solutions to their own housing problems. Understanding how they develop, how they function and what tools they use is of great value to policy makers, especially in the context of increasing decentralization. This guide introduces these aspects of Asia's community organizations.

This guide is not aimed at specialists, but aims to help build the capacities of national and local government officials and policy makers who need to quickly enhance their understanding of low-income housing issues.



"One thing that we have learned over the years is that neither doom-and-gloom scenarios nor destructive criticism will inspire people and governments to act. What is needed is a positive vision, a clear road map for getting from here to there, and a clear responsibility assigned to each of the many actors in the system."

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan

Poor communities: An untapped resource in Asian cities

The urban poor are the designers, builders and suppliers of the majority of affordable housing in Asia's cities. Their self-help efforts have done what decades of government housing programmes, formal-sector development projects, housing rights campaigns and international development interventions have failed to do: to provide most of the urban poor with shelter and basic services, at prices they can afford and in locations and arrangements which meet their immediate basic needs — right now when they need it, not in the distant future.

These informal systems for supplying housing and services in poor and informal settlements are not ideal, largely "illegal", often inequitable and sub-standard in many ways. But they represent a reasonable response to urgent necessity, where no alternatives exist. In this evidence of human resourcefulness, there is a remarkable independence, and self-generating vitality which is one of the great, untapped sources of energy in Asian cities.

Governments have tended to look at slums and informal settlements as a serious problem to be reckoned with, as blights on the urban landscape, as dens of anti-social elements or as evidence of

civic misbehavior which should be punished. But over the past two decades, many governments and policy makers have taken a second look at informal settlements — and the poor communities who make them — and are recognizing the constructive role these communities (and their organizations) are playing in finding large-scale, lasting solutions to city-wide problems of land, housing and livelihood.

Most Asian cities have a long, grim history of housing project failures: social housing developments that ended up housing the wrong target group, pilot projects that never scaled up, sites-and-services schemes where nobody wants to live and relocation projects abandoned to speculators.

Many governments and housing professionals are realizing that these top-down projects, which were designed without much involvement of the poor they were meant to serve, are never going to solve the growing problems. And they're also realizing that when poor community organizations are at the centre of the planning and implementing of housing and development programmes which affect them, these programmes are more likely to be successful.

A long history of self-reliance

Self-reliance is the basis for most aspects of how urban poor communities are formed, how their residents get land to settle on, how they build, buy or rent houses, how they get access to water supply and electricity, how they pave their swampy walkways, how they get loans in cases of emergency, how they find jobs and how they survive in a city that offers them very little help. A poor settlement which may look chaotic to an outsider, is in reality an extremely complex field of compromise, mutual support, mutual dependence and resourcefulness from all its different residents, who are often dependent on each other.

If an informal community is able to stay in the same place and is not evicted for many years, it's likely that the community will gradually improve and consolidate: housing and living conditions will improve, support structures will deepen and collective systems for resolving needs and problems within the community will get stronger. Many communities develop considerable capacities to organize themselves, collaborate with other organizations and develop pragmatic

relationships with local politicians and government agencies to get the things they need in the settlement. This is how community organization begins, but it is almost never easy.

Most of the community organizations that emerged in Asian cities in the 1960s and 1970s were formed without any intervention or support from local authorities or government agencies. On the contrary, most local authorities were reluctant to negotiate with community organizations, since any official collaboration with "illegal" occupants of land might be seen as bestowing on the slum-dwellers some degree of legitimacy. In those days, not many local or national government agencies were inclined to offer assistance to poor communities or to seek their cooperation in implementing their various social or physical development initiatives.

As a result, the settlements were left more or less on their own, and if improvements in their housing or living environments were made, it was usually by the communities themselves, and usually in isolation from existing programmes or government housing agency agendas.



PHOTO: LUMANIT

For as long as human beings have been around, they have organized themselves into communities in order to survive, and in order to collectively meet needs which they can't meet as individuals: physical, emotional, economic, security and cultural needs. This collective self-reliance is very much alive today in Asia's urban poor communities.

PHOTO: CORDI



The real kind of community participation:

If project organizers can adopt open-ended and flexible design and implementation strategies through all aspects of their development projects, even newly-formed community organizations can grow along with the project, and the outcomes will almost certainly be physically more appropriate and socially more sustainable.

Community organizations: the real and the fake ones

After a few prominent success stories in the 1970s and 80s, involving path-breaking collaborations between community organizations and government housing programmes, "community participation" became the new buzzword. More and more development projects in Asia were designed with the precondition that community organizations had to be partners in the project. In many of these projects, no community organization was yet in place, so new ones had to be hastily formed.

In most instances, these brand-new community organizations turned out to be pretty weak because their only purpose was to comply with project rules,

leading the process had no real interest in understanding or engaging with communities, or building their capacities through the process of project design, planning and implementation. The participation of these new, project-created community organizations was limited to a rubber-stamping of conventional housing delivery programmes which had been all worked out in advance, and were expected to go ahead without any significant modifications to accommodate the resident's priorities, needs or financial capacities. And that is one of the surest ways to ensure that community organizations never mature.

Real community organizations that are

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