

THE HUMAN SETTLEMENTS FINANCING TOOLS
AND BEST PRACTICES SERIES

ASSET-BASED APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

Nairobi, 2008

UN  HABITAT

The Human Settlements Financing Tools and Best Practices Series

An Asset-based Approach to Community Development and Capacity Building

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United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)

P. O. Box 30030, 00100 Nairobi GPO KENYA

Tel: 254-020-7623120 (Central Office)

www.unhabitat.org

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Acknowledgements:

Principal Editor and Manager: Xing Quan Zhang

English Editor: Thierry Naudin

Principal Author: Mahyar Arefi

Design and Layout: Andrew Ondoo

FOREWORD



The global housing crisis, especially in the developing world, is getting worse by the day making the right to adequate shelter a quest that is becoming more and more difficult to meet, despite the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals.

Such is the rate of urbanization – the influx of people into towns and cities, and their natural growth – that the world has now reached a point where for the first time now, half the global population lives in towns and cities.

By the year 2050, six billion people – two-thirds of humanity – will be living in towns and cities. And as urban centres grow, the locus of global poverty is moving into towns and cities, especially into the burgeoning informal settlements and slums, of the developing world. In the developing world, this is happening so fast that slums are mushrooming in what is termed *the urbanization of poverty*.

This makes it imperative that we use every means at our disposal to ensure that we at UN-HABITAT, and our partners, keep applying ourselves to Target 11 of the Goals – *to achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020*.

And for this, we need innovative governance, and local thinking and reporting if we are to bring hope to the urban poor. Equally importantly, we need to support our towns and cities, indeed our countries, to adopt pro-poor policies and strategies that will obviate the need for further slum creation.

It is against this background, that the *Human Settlements Financing Tools and Best Practices series* focuses on the development of know-how, knowledge and tools in human settlements financing, from which Member States can learn in delivering affordable housing to the poor.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads "Anna Tibaijuka". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Anna Tibaijuka,
Executive Director, UN-HABITAT
Under-Secretary-General of
the United Nations

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1 THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

POVERTY AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Governments invest in the welfare of ‘people’ and ‘places’ by redistributing public resources through selective policies (Winnick, 1966; Arefi, 2003). As they conduct these policies they target people’s needs either directly through subsidies, or indirectly through improved physical conditions for the places where they live.

To date, these selective policies have had mixed results. Direct, ‘people’ policies that target needy individuals regardless of where they live are generally more efficient than (indirect) ‘place’ policies. Over time, however, people-oriented policies institutionalize and spread welfare ‘entitlements’ and a culture of dependency (Mead, 1986). On the other hand, place-oriented policies, which target poor places, are less efficient than ‘people’ policies because they often end up displacing the people for whom the policies were developed in the first place. Yet, compared to direct welfare policies, ‘place’ policies have favorable longer-term effects since they tend to reduce dependency on government resources.

Allocating public funds under a so-called need-based approach to community development requires standards to define and assess community needs. Governments have developed various mechanisms and institutions to identify, prioritize and quantify local needs such as housing, healthcare, education or employment.

Criticisms of need-based community development practices include:

- Equity and efficiency issues; and,
- Perpetuating a culture of poverty, dependency, and patience

Regardless of efficiency (i.e., effective improvement in the well-being of needy individuals) or equity (i.e., only targeting those who need assistance most) goals, these policies mainly highlight communities’ deficiencies, i.e., what they lack rather than what they have.

THE NEED-BASED APPROACH

Need-based government policies typically focus on what communities lack as opposed to what they have. For decades, governments—both in developed and developing countries—have used “a standard deficits calculations approach” (Peattie, 1983: 229) to quantify community needs (such as an x number of housing units to be built, or a certain amount of retail space, schools, parks, public spaces, etc.). Urban planners, for example, calculate housing deficit as the difference between the necessary number of dwelling units and the number of units produced. “Calculations of ‘deficit’ based on bad data relating to poor categories may be joined with ‘programs’ constituting at best very partial solutions to the existing problems and at worst exacerbating them via slum clearance” (Peattie, 1983: 227).

Similarly, experts quantify the needs for local services, schools, businesses, etc. Since poor communities are defined by these deficits, experts assess their needs and shortcomings as a first step towards breaking their cycle of poverty, dependency and despair and achieving self-sufficiency. In many countries (including the United States) in the 1960s and 1970s, urban renewal, slum clearance projects and ‘gentrification’ (replacing lower- with middle-income people) exemplified the various paths which declining communities could take toward prosperity. To ensure success, technical assistance is transferred through top-down policies, under the auspices and authority of so-called ‘expert knowledge’. To date, the master planning approach, whereby needs are mapped and quantified, remains a useful method of quantifying the needs of distressed communities.

SHIFTING FROM NEEDS TO ASSETS

Over the last three decades and in a bid to join the bandwagon of innovative solutions to urban problems, policy-makers and residents have explored alternatives to the conventional need-based approaches to community development. Inefficiencies in government policies have been a reflection of continuing debates about ‘people-’ and ‘place-targeting’ on the one hand, and assessing research on

a need-based paradigm) are to be resolved should they arise. As the effectiveness of top-down, need-based procedures was queried and government subsidies reduced against a background of mistrust between people and government, local communities have been forced to find innovative ways of building their own capacities.

This report draws from writings from the two opposing schools of thought about community development; or, to put it in a nutshell, investing in a community’s needs, or assets? Those who criticize need-based policies on efficiency and equity grounds suggest exploring worthier alternatives. Those calling for better policy options also seek policies that focus not so much on needs alone, but on assets as well. Like need-based policies, a growing body of literature represents the diverse roots of asset-based community development initiatives. Much of this diversity draws from two debates:

- The critique of the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1966) and marginality (Perlman, 1976), which aimed to generalize the behavioral-cultural traits of the poor; and
- The virtues of viewing the “ghetto as a resource” (Goldsmith, 1979), empowerment (Friedmann, 1996), capacity building (Glickman and Servon,

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