SUSTAINABLE SELF-HELP HOUSING IN SOUTH AFRICA?

(A paper presented at the Conference of Housing and Urban Development in Sub Saharan Africa, in Accra, Ghana, from 22nd July 2002 to 26th July 2002, by Alfred Omenya[1]).

1. Abstract:

In this paper, I explain the theoretical basis of self-help, as a mode of delivery of housing to the urban poor. I explain the rationale of the multilateral donors' support for self-help in relation to global, neo-liberal macroeconomics. With that background, I look at the space this mode of delivery occupies in the South African context, contrasting it with cases of success and failure elsewhere. I analyse the implication of self-help mode of delivery to the South African urban poor, exploring whether or not it is desirable .I then explore self-help through the lens of sustainability, suggesting that narrow understanding of the concept hinders its benefits to self-help housing. I advance the idea that self-help as a mode of delivery of housing has to be homegrown; is not transferable from one context to the next and cannot be uniformly prescribed. I conclude with recommendations taking into account the unique South African socio-economic and political situation, global macroeconomics and the need for more state involvement in welfare.

2. Theoretical framework for self-help mode of delivery:

Pre-government and rural communities employed self-help as a mode of delivery of housing. The traditional order was such that individuals (people) who already existed in particular geographical contexts (land) marshalled their resources to construct dwelling units for themselves (works) (see Turner, 1986: 8). Practitioners and theoreticians observed that this mode of housing delivery existed even in modern societies and had the potential of delivering cost effective housing to the urban poor. Self-help housing advanced by John F. Turner was based on phenomenological studies, in unique socio-economic, cultural and political settings, mainly in Central America. Turner (1986: 7-25) observed that:

- The poor, with scarce resources, were able to produce good quality dwellings, more cost effectively than the government i.e. they optimised scarce resources;
- Self- help housing, because of its focus on use value, produced better architecture than commodified housing[2];
- The poor can organize themselves and improve their own economic conditions;
- Management issues can be done through collective self-help;
- There is a need for the 'third sector', i.e. Community Based Organisations, Non Governmental Organizations, etc, to act as go-between the government and the community;
- Cost savings can be realised through sweat and management equity.

Turner (1986: 7-25) saw the role of the state as an "enabling" one. The state was meant to create conditions suitable for actualisation of self-help, hence the use of the term "state-assisted self-help". These would include:

- Planning and allocation of land for purposes of housing;
- Support of housing development;
- Generation of alternative finance for low income housing, especially short term unsecured loans instead of long term mortgage schemes;

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[2] *This position has been challenged by many, see Burgess, R., 1995, Kerr, D. and Kwelle, N., 2000, Ward, P. and Macoloo, C., 1992.*