

“The Information Was Hard and Tough”: Low-Cost Housing Information in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

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This article reports on an exploratory study on the provision of information about low-cost housing to the residents of the Tamboville housing project in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These residents were selected because they were the beneficiaries of a government low-cost housing subsidy. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaires from a convenience sample of 53 respondents who were homeowners of low-cost housing. Data was also collected from the Built Environment Support Group (BESG), a non-governmental organization managing the Tamboville project. The purpose of the study was to find out what information on low-cost housing had been provided, how it had been provided and the extent to which the information assisted the homeowners in making housing decisions. It was

found that interpersonal communication, backed by practical demonstrations, was the main method of information dissemination. The findings also indicated that the BESG, through its on-site housing support centre, provided essential low-cost housing information to assist the homeowners in making appropriate housing decisions. It was observed that not all the respondents understood and/or accepted the concept of incremental housing, which underpinned the subsidy scheme. The low levels of education and high unemployment rate among the respondents made it more difficult for some homeowners to consolidate their starter homes. One recommendation is that the subsidy scheme be part of an integrated community development programme with a well-articulated information component.

Introduction

Post-apartheid South Africa is characterized by efforts to correct the imbalances of the past which involves addressing the various issues affecting all aspects of the lives of South Africans, especially those from previously disadvantaged groups. Over the past decade, the government and other relevant stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have worked to improve the quality of life of previously disadvantaged groups in the country. Some of the key areas receiving attention in this drive are housing, health and education. This article thus has a human rights perspective grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 on which the Bill of

Rights in the South African constitution is based (Devenish 1991, 1).

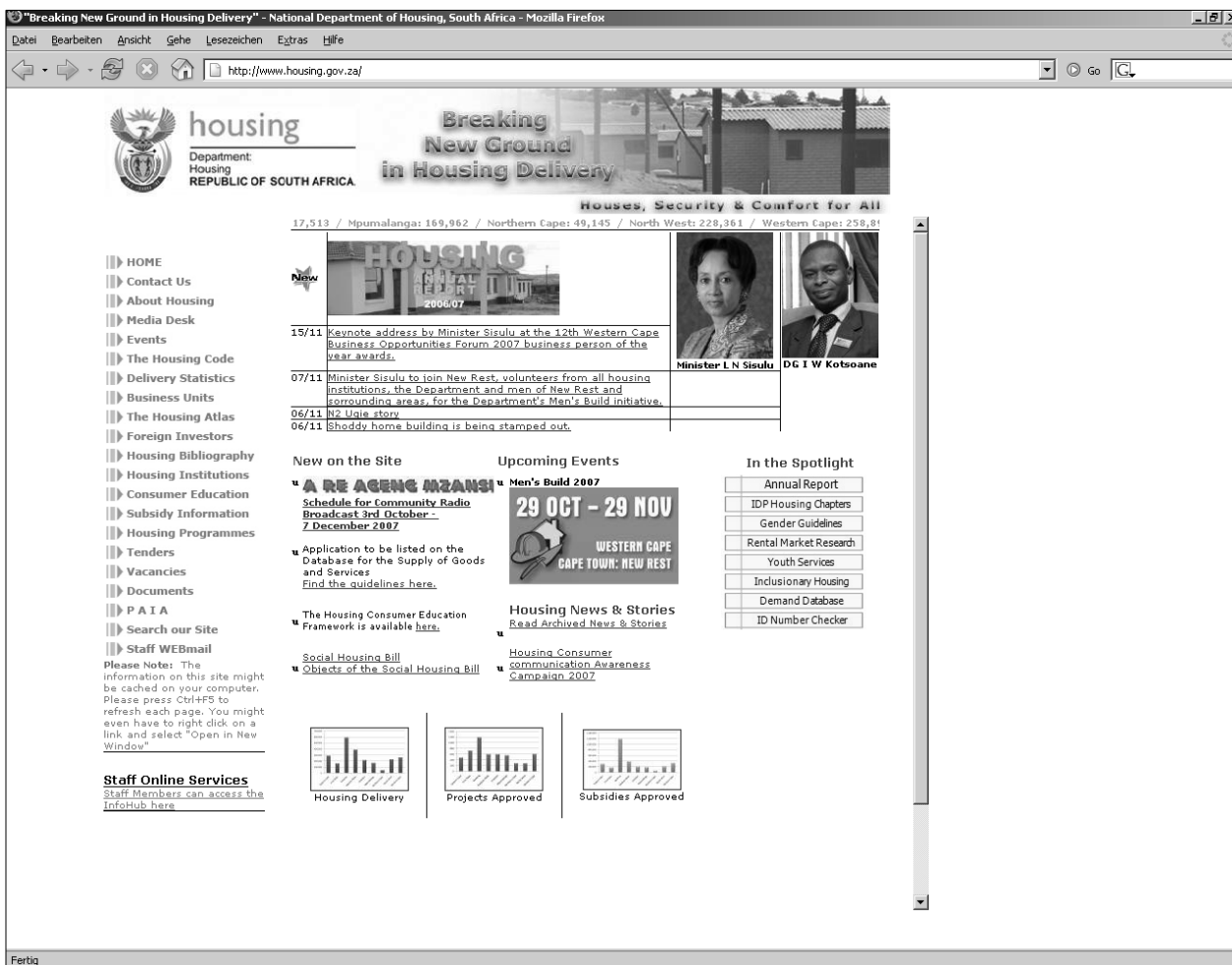
This study focuses on the information provision component of the efforts being made by the government and NGOs to provide houses for South Africans in the low-income group. The enormity of the problem of housing the poor is apparent in the existence of squatter camps and slum areas in almost all urban areas of South Africa. The estimated housing backlog in 1994 was one and a half million units. This figure increases annually due to population growth (National Housing Code 2000, see Figure 1). In 2004, the chief executive of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) acknowledged that in spite of the construction of one and a half million units of low-

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Figure 1. Republic of South Africa, Department of Housing, *The Housing Code* [viewed 9 November 2007]



cost houses, the backlog had increased to just over two million units (Mokwena 2004). Recent violent protests in certain sections of the communities linked to demands for adequate housing are an indication that the problem of housing the poor in South Africa still requires urgent attention.

Consequently the need to explore ways of facilitating low-cost housing (LCH) delivery is crucial. This article reports on a study investigating what information on LCH was being provided. The study also sought to determine how this information was packaged and disseminated to the beneficiaries of the LCH subsidy so that informed housing decisions could be made and in this way delivery could be assisted.

Location of the study

The study was conducted in the Tamboville LCH project, which is located in the urban periphery

of Pietermaritzburg-Msunduzi, in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. The umbrella name given to this cluster of LCH projects is Tamboville. There are three sub-projects namely:

- Q section with 232 housing units,
- Tembalihle with 800 units, and
- Tamboville with 416 units.

The respondents of this study were drawn from the Tamboville sub-project. The provision of sites and services and the construction of the top structure were overseen by an NGO. Some of the houses in the Tamboville sub-project were permanent concrete structures while others were mud and wattle at the time of the study in 2003. The residents of the entire Tamboville project were beneficiaries of the government's low-cost housing subsidy scheme.

The purpose and research questions of the study

The purpose of the study was to find out what LCH information was provided to the residents of the Tamboville LCH project through BESG's on-site Housing Support Centre (HSC) and how this information was provided. Housing information in this study refers to information on how to acquire a low-cost house; how to build it and specifically, the acquisition of funds from the Capital Subsidy Scheme (CSS – described below); and financial, technical and legal information on the house as well as post-occupancy information.

The research questions for the BESG official were to find out the following:

- What LCH information was provided to the residents of the Tamboville LCH project?
- How was this information provided?
- What feedback was received from the residents on the information provided?

The research questions with regard to the residents of Tamboville were to find out the following:

- What LCH information had the residents obtained from the HSC and the housing advisor?
- How was that information obtained?
- What LCH information was obtained from other sources?
- How was this obtained?
- Were there other areas of additional LCH information needs?

Brief overview of the Capital Subsidy Scheme and BESG

The CSS was introduced in 1994 by the first post-apartheid government. It aims at catering for people in the low-income bracket by giving cash grants for housing. In order to qualify for the subsidy, the applicant must either be unemployed, or have a household monthly income that does not exceed R3,500.

In 1994, the value of each grant was R15,000. The value of the subsidy has been progressively increased over the years. The current value of the subsidy is R34,049. According to Tomlinson (1995,

5) the primary aim of the CSS is to provide security of tenure, access to basic services and a rudimentary starter house. The residents of Tamboville were beneficiaries of a type of subsidy referred to as "project-linked subsidies." Proctor *et al.* (1998, 105) explain that "... project-linked subsidies ... are given through a developer to communities which qualify for a specific housing project. These subsidies are paid out when the developer transfers the property into the new owner's name." In a self-help project such as the Tamboville LCH project, after the costs of site and services (roads, water supply, drainage, electricity and sewerage systems) have been covered, the individual homeowners are given the residual amount of the subsidy for building the top structure on the serviced plot. The residual amount varies and obviously when more services are provided on the site, fewer funds will be available from the subsidy to build the top structure.

BESG is linked to the School of Architecture, Planning and Housing of the University of Kwa Zulu-Natal. It was formed in 1982. The main focus of BESG has been to find housing solutions for the urban poor and other marginalized groups. It provides training and organizational support to community based organizations and it also undertakes research into housing policies. BESG has been actively involved in the post apartheid efforts to provide low-cost homes through its emphasis on "... community based housing delivery via innovative approaches such as assisted mutual help and the use of local contractors" (BESG 1996–1997, 3).

In order to assist home seekers to get the most out of the LCH subsidy, a decision was taken by the government to set up Housing Support Centres on the sites of designated LCH projects. Consequently, a HSC was set up at the Tamboville LCH project site. This LCH was managed by BESG and it was intended to provide support to the LCH subsidy beneficiaries. According to Proctor *et al.* (1998, 113–114) the HSCs provide help in the form of knowledge, skills, training and cheaper building materials. Some of the functions of the HSCs are the following:

- Home ownership education;
- Project specific information;
- Technical advice and support;

- Financial advice and facilitating the establishment of savings' clubs;
- Legal advice and consumer protection;
- Participant skills training;
- Plan drawing services;
- Quantity surveying services;
- Small builders' support;
- Building-supply centre.

Research approach and methodology

As it is often stated in research literature, "... the research problem determines the research approach and the methods employed" (Westbrook 1994, 242). The case-study method was considered suitable for the study in that it is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context" (Yin 1994, 13). The approach to information-seeking behaviour was informed by Belkin's (1980) anomalous state of knowledge (ASK) theory and Dervin's (1992) concept of the knowledge gap or situation of uncertainty, also cited by Kaniki (2001) with reference to a development context in South Africa.

As stated earlier, there were two main sources of data to answer the research questions. The first was the HSC official at the Tamboville LCH project site and the second was a sample of the Tamboville residents. Other sources of data used to support or corroborate the data collected were – indirect observation in the field and informal conversations with some residents of Tamboville. In addition, conversations were conducted with the HSC and BESG officials in Pietermaritzburg and officials from the Housing section of the Msunduzi Municipality, also in Pietermaritzburg. The researcher was unable to access further documentary evidence from BESG during the study due to tensions which arose in the field (Tamboville) at the time of the data collection process.

The researcher chose the semi-structured interview [1] as this was an exploratory study and this method would allow for some flexibility during the data collection process (Westbrook 1994, 244). He was aware of the advantages as well as the disadvantages of collecting data through interviews. During an interview, it is easier to probe, clarify and gain more insight into matters which relate to attitudes, perceptions and other subjective issues. Some questions asked during the data collection

process demanded subjective responses. Two problems associated with interviews are the possibility of poor recall and bias in responses. The researcher took steps to minimize any effects these might have on the validity of the data collected.

There were closed and open-ended questions in the interview schedule. Closed questions were used to collect all demographic data, as the possible answer categories were predictable. The closed questions were analyzed using quantitative methods. In order to collect the remaining LCH information from respondents, both closed and open-ended questions were used. Open-ended questions allowed the researcher to collect data, which did not have predictable answer categories. For example, respondents were asked to give reasons why they found the LCH information provided by the HSC either useful or not useful.

The researcher did a content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions. The various categories were coded and fed into the SPSS software for analysis. The headings and various subheadings in the interview schedules were used as guidelines in determining the categories that were used to code and analyze the data.

Sample selection and size

At the time this study was done, there were 416 low-cost housing units in Tamboville. To obtain a random sample of respondents, the researcher decided that homeowners from alternate houses would be interviewed until the required sample size of 100 had been obtained.

To gain entry into the community the researcher relied on the officials at the HSC at Tamboville. He was given an opportunity to address the residents of Tamboville during a mass meeting on a weekend. Having explained the objectives of the study, he made it clear that a possible benefit of the study could be the ability of the government to improve its LCH information dissemination strategy. It was also unambiguously stated that the researcher was a student at the then University of Natal and not a government official.

The BESG official in charge of the HSC provided data on the LCH information disseminated to the residents of Tamboville and assisted in the collection of data from the residents of Tamboville. Therefore after the BESG official had been interviewed in English by the researcher, he was

trained by the researcher on how to conduct the interviews.

During the training emphasis was placed on the following: the need for consistency in reading out the questions; how to record the answers accurately in writing; and how to avoid biased responses.

Different interview schedules were used to collect data from the two main sources. After pre-testing, both interview schedules were revised. Questions which were ambiguous, redundant or difficult to understand were reworded or removed.

The data collection process and conflict around the study

The researcher initially interviewed the BESG official. This official in turn was meant to interview the sample of 100 Tamboville residents. Unfortunately this BESG official was able to interview only 27 residents. In order to increase the sample size the researcher met the residents at a mass meeting, which had been organized by the Tamboville residents to discuss community-related matters. Speaking through an interpreter, the researcher explained to the residents the aim and purpose of the study once again. Subsequently, 100 copies of the interview schedule which had been translated into Zulu were given to those who were at the meeting. Thus the interview schedule was distributed as a questionnaire. The recipients of the interview schedule were requested to answer the questions in writing. The researcher was meant to go back to the field and collect the completed questionnaires a week later.

Three days after distributing the questionnaires, the attention of the researcher was drawn to the fact that the study was creating tensions in the Tamboville community. In spite of the explanations, which had been given at the mass meeting, the questionnaires had been misconstrued as official documents aimed at investigating the provision of LCH by BESG. This misunderstanding fuelled already existing tensions in the community over housing delivery models. Consequently, the researcher was advised to discontinue the data collection process in the interests of community safety. At this time, the researcher had collected 26 out of the 100 questionnaires given out earlier. These responses were added to the responses from

the 27 residents interviewed earlier by the housing advisor. In the end, the responses collected to answer the research questions were from a convenience sample of 53 respondents.

Evaluation of the research methodology

The following points should be noted in connection with the research methodology of the study. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher did not know what to expect in the field. The respondents, for understandable reasons, seemed to be more interested in how to obtain funds to complete their starter houses than in answering questions about the LCH information provided by BESG. This problem could explain the high number of non-responses to some questions, especially those eliciting data relating to feedback on the disseminated LCH information.

The use of the BESG official to conduct the interview could have introduced an element of bias in the responses. However the use of this official was a trade-off between gaining access to Tamboville and the co-operation of the respondents on one hand and eliminating bias on the other. The researcher saw gaining access into the community as being more important.

The sample from which data was collected can be considered a non-probability sample. Consequently, the implications of all this for the generalization (or lack thereof) of the findings of this study must be borne in mind. Poor recall also could have contributed to the high rate of non-response to some questions, as the Tamboville project had been initiated in 1997 and was still ongoing at the time the interviews were conducted in 2003.

The conflict around the study contributed to the inability of the researcher to access further documentary evidence which could have strengthened the validity of the findings. Two lessons can be learnt from this incident. A researcher should be acutely aware of the community dynamics when collecting empirical data from a community. Secondly, a researcher should not be overly reliant on "key informers" (Prat and Loizos 1992, 39).

Results and discussion

There are two parts to this section. The first focuses on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second part covers the LCH in-

formation collected from the respondents. The LCH information was divided into the following sections:

- Preparing to build;
- The building process;
- Legal information and assisting respondents in obtaining additional funds for housing consolidation.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The housing advisor was found to be most suitable for his job because he was multilingual, speaking Zulu, Xhosa and English. He had lived within the community of Tamboville for the past five years and had worked for BESE for three years.

Of the 53 respondents in the study, 26 (49%) were female and 26 (49%) were male. One respondent did not answer the question on gender. Thirty-nine (39) of the 53 respondents were 41 years or older. Fourteen (14) of the 39 were over 60 years old. The respondents were aging and this had implications for the successful improvement of the starter house into a complete house. The older respondents were unlikely to be able to earn sufficient money to effect the incremental improvement on the starter house as envisaged by the CSS. An aggravating factor was the high unemployment level for the majority of respondents (33, or 62%, unemployed). The level of education of the respondents was generally low. Thirty-four (34) respondents (64%) had only primary school education or had never been to school.

A close study of the demographic data indicated that the women in the sample had received less formal education than the men. Two men had never been to school compared to eight women in that category. Thirteen men had received primary education compared to eleven women. The same trend is seen in the secondary education category where there were eleven men and only seven women. A possible reason for the level of education of the women being lower than that of the men is the subservient position of women in a number of African communities. This trend is reported in the literature where women face more problems than men in terms of access to and use of information (Kiondo 1999; Wang 1999; Rathapo 2000). Therefore there is a need to give special attention to the housing information needs of women, especially those who are heads of households.

Some of the characteristics of people with low incomes, highlighted in the National Housing Code of South Africa (2000), could be seen among the respondents from Tamboville. These include high levels of unemployment, poverty and inexperience in home ownership.

The use of the HSC by the Tamboville residents

As stated earlier, the HSC was established to assist the beneficiaries of the CSS to make appropriate housing decisions and also to give people the necessary skills needed to build houses. Only 29 respondents (54%) had gone to the HSC to obtain housing information. A reason given by some of the respondents who did not use the services of the HSC was:

I live in a mud house so there is no need for me to go there.

The lesson to be learnt from the fact that not all the residents used the HSC is that the mere setting up of an information/resource centre does not guarantee optimal use. Several factors affect the use of an information centre. Kaniki (2001, 193) states that for effective information transfer to occur, the users should be information literate and the information provider should have a high level of needs assessment knowledge and skills. It cannot be said with certainty that both the information provider and information user in this study had these recommended skills. Another possible reason as to why only a little over half of the respondents used the services of the HSC, could be the misunderstanding by the beneficiaries of the concept of incremental housing.

How the LCH information was disseminated

The main method used by the HSC to disseminate information was interpersonal communication. This was supplemented by practical demonstrations, leaflets and newsletters.

The questions which sought to obtain responses on the content and mode of delivery of LCH information were not answered by the majority of respondents, possibly due to poor recall. When respondents were asked whether the information they had received at the HSC had assisted them in decision-making, there were relatively more responses.

Under the section Preparing to Build, 14 of the 29 respondents indicated that the LCH information had assisted their decision-making. Eleven and nine respondents had given the same answer regarding LCH information on the building process and legal issues respectively. Even though the numbers were low in comparison with the sample size of 53, this suggests that the information dissemination strategies of the HSC and the contents thereof were appropriate. Any knowledge or information gaps could be a result of other factors, for instance the lack of organized public education on the CSS.

LCH information on the building process

The majority of the respondents, 37 (70%), built their own houses. BESEG, through the HSC, had encouraged the CSS beneficiaries to use the self-build method given the high level (62%) of unemployment among the respondents.

The Tamboville residents were given theoretical information on building as well as practical guidance during the building process. They were also assisted in purchasing building materials. A recurring answer given by respondents when they were asked what supervision they had received from the HSC during the building process was:

I do not need the services of the HSC because I live in a mud house.

This perceived futility of going to the HSC was prevalent because of the following information related issues:

- A lack of understanding of the principles, which underpin the CSS;
- A consequent misunderstanding of the principle of incremental housing;
- The need for more information on financial support;
- The need for regular and up-to-date information on the way government reviews of the CSS affect old and new beneficiaries.

Legal information

When asked what would happen to their house in the case of the death of the homeowner, 31 respondents (58%) indicated which member of their family would inherit the property despite only four respondents (8%) specifically mentioning hav-

ing made a will. It can be said that only a small majority of the respondents were aware of some of the important legal implications of home ownership.

Sources of information for additional finance for housing consolidation

Multiple formats and methods of information dissemination had been used by BESEG. In addition to interpersonal communication, leaflets, newsletters and specialized external organizations were used where necessary. The *Agishana Credit Company*, which specializes in formal credit, had assisted 11 respondents by providing loans for housing consolidation.

BESEG's decision to encourage the CSS beneficiaries to form informal savings clubs was a step in the right direction. However, only those who had some form of employment could become members of such a club.

A respondent who had unsuccessfully attempted to secure a loan from the credit company had this to say:

I never received any help because I am unemployed.

That the principles on which the CSS are based are not clearly understood by some respondents is indicated by the following statement:

I built my own house yet I owe the municipality.

The need to pay for municipal services has not been fully understood by this respondent. The statement which follows is yet another example:

I am not happy because of the high water account that I receive every month when I don't have money to pay that account because I am unemployed.

Use of sources of information other than the HSC

The study revealed that 13 (25%) of the 53 respondents had used sources other than the HSC to obtain low-cost housing information. The provincial departments, Housing and Land Affairs, and private organizations, Kuphuka (building skills) and Agishana (credit for housing consolidation) were some of the sources used. The use of more than one source of LCH information is an en-

couraging sign, in that having an information literate homeowner could improve the transfer of information, knowledge creation and consequently the ability to make appropriate housing decisions.

Negative perceptions of the HSC and by extension BESH

There were some respondents who did not indicate whether they did or did not use the services of the HSC and may have been of the opinion that the HSC was of no use to them. Respondents' opinions on the HSC do not constitute feedback on information disseminated by the HSC. However by being reported and by removing these negative perceptions, the number of people who go to the HSC could be increased. The perception that the HSC was of no use to them could have been created by unfulfilled housing expectations such as the provision of starter homes rather than complete houses.

One of the respondents complained that there were differences in the quality of the houses in the Tamboville project and two adjacent projects (Glenwood 2 and Cinderella Park). This respondent therefore concluded, totally unfairly, that BESH had embezzled the CSS funds. What these respondents did not know was that as a result of a review of the CSS policy, the more recent low-cost houses had to be at least 30 square metres in area. A second policy change was in the placing of mechanisms to ensure that after the provision of site and services, there were sufficient funds left for the top structure (Maphumulo 2003). Such incorrect comparisons could have been avoided if, as proposed earlier, there had been on-going dissemination of LCH information.

General comments on the study

There are additional comments in this section on the following: the channels of communication used in the dissemination of LCH information, the use of language, indigenous knowledge and social impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Channels of communication

The communication channels between the HSC and the residents of Tamboville seemed to be fair-

ly well structured. The HSC served as an intermediary between the residents of Tamboville on one hand and BESH, the ward councillor and government departments on the other. In dealing with the external environment, the HSC did not limit its activities to LCH related matters only. It adopted a holistic approach. While the researcher was in the field, he observed the housing advisor make contact with the Health Department in order to assist residents who suffer from tuberculosis, and the Post Office to resolve a communication problem, which had resulted in the closure of several letter boxes. This position is in line with the tendency of information providers, in developmental settings, to adopt a holistic approach in meeting the information needs of the communities in which they work (Leach 2001, 164; Uhegbu 1997, 90).

Despite the advantages of both the spoken word and workshops as methods of information dissemination, the use of public meetings to disseminate LCH information had some disadvantages. Not everyone could attend these meetings. A more serious problem according to Burton (2001, 227) is by using participatory methods in a workshop situation, emphasis may be placed on public consensus at the expense of individual needs and unique cases. In spite of these drawbacks, having meetings and workshops on weekends seemed to be the best way of communicating since most of the residents were likely to be out seeking work during the week.

In an environment where the literacy rate is low, word-of-mouth communication can be a very effective method. A drawback is the tendency to forget what has been transmitted orally. This disadvantage should not have affected the use of the LCH information since it was disseminated in a practical hands-on context. It could however, through poor recall, have affected the quality of the data collected from the respondents. Another possible consequence of poor recall was the large number of non-responses to some of the questions.

The preferred language in the communication process

The preferred language for communicating among the respondents was Zulu. When giving feedback on the content of the LCH information under the

section "Preparing to Build," two respondents seem to have found it a little difficult. One said:

It [the information] was hard and tough.

Another said,

The content was clear but it was not easy to do it.

Due to the conflict which arose around the study, it was not possible for the researcher to go back to the field and probe these comments further. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the difficulties encountered by these two respondents could be attributed to language. It goes without saying however, that in the case of the Tamboville residents, the language used in all communication should be Zulu. The language should also be at the level of the intended users. Leach (2001, 172) mentions the need for simplicity and clarity. There should be good use of line and spacing in print communication sources. Where technical language has to be translated into another language, experts should be used to ensure there is no loss of essential information. Where illustrations are used in the dissemination of information, it should not be assumed by the information providers that all the information recipients possess visual literacy skills because that is not always the case (Kularatne 1997, 19).

Indigenous knowledge and the social impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic

The use of indigenous knowledge in building houses was not part of the research objectives of this study. However, the fact that a number of respondents stated that they had built their own mud houses suggests that the people already knew how to build a house using traditional methods.

In the same vein, the low-cost housing information needs of those who have been infected or affected by HIV/AIDS was not part of the focus of this study. However, the increasing social impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic makes it imperative that current initiatives to address the housing information needs of AIDS victims be given the attention that it deserves. At both the national and provincial levels, efforts are being made to meet the housing needs of those affected by HIV/AIDS (Mabandla 2003; KwaZulu-Natal Department of

Housing HIV/AIDS 2003, 3). The need for the information component of these initiatives to be treated as an integral part of each project cannot be over-emphasized.

Concluding remarks by respondents

When respondents were asked whether or not they were happy with their housing situation, a small majority 31 (58%) said they were unhappy. This is not surprising given the fact that the government, through the CSS, wanted to create what it called "housing opportunities" or "starter houses" while the beneficiaries were expecting complete houses. The respondents who were not happy with their housing situation gave several reasons. Below is a summary of these reasons:

- Financial constraints imposed by the CSS made it difficult for the beneficiaries to have a complete top structure.
- There is a lack of understanding on the part of some respondents of the principles underpinning the CSS.
- There is a lack of understanding of how municipalities operate and why municipal services, once rendered, must be paid for.
- There is ignorance on the part of some respondents of how CSS policy changes have affected the size of the houses built after 1997.

When respondents were asked if they had any message for the government as the source of funds for the CSS, 32 of the 53 respondents said yes. The message with the highest frequency, from 21 of the 32 who said yes, was:

Give us houses and not serviced plots only.

Other messages from three respondents and two respondents respectively were:

The house is too small

We need more money for top structure

Whatever socio-economic strategy the government and other interested parties may introduce to address the housing problems of the poor, there should be a strong information dissemination component at each stage of the project cycle. This would ensure that the beneficiaries, even before the project begins, know exactly what is to be done, what type of house to expect, what their responsibilities

will be as homeowners and what they can expect from the government or other external agencies; in short, they need a comprehensive knowledge of the project. The planners and implementers of such a project should adopt a "holistic and consultative approach ... and work with rather than around the beneficiaries" as was done in the successful Bamboo housing project in Costa Rica (Ham and Shroyer 1993, 32–33).

Summary of efforts by government to address some of the criticisms of the CSS

The government acknowledges the importance of information dissemination in LCH. In 2003, a call was made, by the then national Minister of Housing (Mabandla 2003), that appropriately collated housing information should be made available to new homeowners to enable them to make informed housing decisions and choices.

In addition, there have been developments in response to criticism of the CSS, for example:

- The value of the subsidy has been progressively increased.
- Steps have been taken to ensure that after the provision of services, there is some money left for the building of the top structure.
- The National Housing Department's attempt to stipulate the minimum size of the low cost house (30 sq m) ensures that developers do not build very small and substandard houses.
- Attempts are being made to move the LCH projects from "socio-economic deserts" (Housing: cracks in the foundation 2000, 5) to areas where essential social facilities such as schools, clinics, recreational areas, community centres, sports grounds and so on do exist.

The Tamboville project is not fully integrated in that it does not have all the essential social and economic facilities but at the same time it is quite close to the central business district of Pietermaritzburg (approximately 15 kilometres).

In spite of the efforts made since 1994 to address the problem of housing the poor in South Africa, many people are in dire need of adequate housing. The South African state president recently visited shack dwellers in the Nelson Mandela metropole. Commenting on the housing situation of the people in the area, he said, "... obviously, there is a big housing problem" (Mbeki 2006). He then promised to meet the local authorities of the area in

order to discuss the economic situation of the residents and how to address the problem of unemployment in the area. This acknowledgment re-enforces the need for continuous efforts to be made to address the problem.

Recommendations of the study

In the light of the findings made during the study, the following recommendations are presented:

- There is a need for the National Housing Department to lead the way in assembling LCH information in the appropriate format and by putting in place a housing information policy, with human, financial and material resources to back it up.
- There is a need for mass low-cost housing education programs, to be initiated by the government but driven and directed by less bureaucratic organizations such as NGOs and responsible community based organizations. The information component of the programmes should be dictated by the information needs of low-cost homeowners.
- There is the need for an information system (electronic and/or print based) to educate the public on the government's policy on low-cost housing. A system based on a database of the relevant information should be available to all role players in low-cost housing delivery and the CSS beneficiaries.
- BESE should be provided with the necessary assistance in terms of financial and human resources to enable it to provide comprehensive and targeted housing information and education services. It is expected that information would be suitably repackaged before dissemination by organizations which have suitable competencies and skills.
- There is a need to put in place systems to evaluate the impact of the housing information disseminated. This aspect should be treated as very important as the willingness of the government or funding bodies to release additional funds after the start of the project will depend on proof that the resources committed have been well utilized.
- The CSS should be part of an integrated social and economic development package to accommodate the particular problems of unemployed beneficiaries. The focus should be on sustainable income-generating activities, especially for the unemployed. The information component of such an integrated programme should be well articulated and followed through.
- There is a need for basic adult education to ensure that the beneficiaries of the CSS are literate and have the necessary information literacy skills to take advantage of low-cost housing information services or mass housing education.
- In the light of the current initiatives by the National Housing Department and its provincial counterpart in

KZN to address the social problems caused by HIV/AIDS, there is a need to give more attention to the housing information needs of those who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. The housing information needs of those affected by the pandemic should inform any planned housing interventions for this group.

- Even though the study did not directly reveal any problems women may be facing with regard to low-cost housing (the question was not specifically asked in the study), there is evidence in the literature which shows that women face particular problems because of their gender. It was noted in the literature that women needed special attention in the provision of low-cost houses, especially those who were single parents and heads of households. What was revealed in the study was the fact that the level of education of the women in the sample was lower than that of the men. Therefore in the design of information systems to support LCH provision, the particular needs of women must be borne in mind.
- There is a need to explore ways of assisting the residents of Tamboville who live in mud houses on serviced plots to improve their housing situation. The unemployed who are unable to obtain credit for housing consolidation should be given special attention. This could be done through the exposure of the project to voluntary work groups, philanthropic organizations and NGOs, which could in any way assist them to improve their quality of life. The information dimension of this recommendation can be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, there should be suitably packaged information to "market" it to the outside world in order to attract possible sponsors and potential donors. Secondly, when external assistance in whatever form is received, the residents must be informed of the nature of this assistance, its duration and implications. In short the information provision and dissemination process should aim at ensuring that the beneficiaries are at all times aware of what is happening.
- Recommendations for further research emanating from this study can be found in the thesis (Dansoh 2004) on which this article is based.

Conclusion

This article has reported on an exploratory study on the provision of LCH information to assist beneficiaries of a low-cost housing subsidy scheme. The study was located in the Tamboville low-cost housing project in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The objective of the study was to find out what low-cost housing information was provided, how it was provided and also to obtain some feedback from the recipients on how useful the information obtained was in decision-making.

Word-of-mouth communication supported by practical demonstrations was the main method of communicating LCH information to the Tambo-

ville residents. A little over 50% of the respondents used the services of the on-site Housing Support Centre. The majority of the respondents were unemployed and had little formal basic education. The majority also built their own low-cost houses and this made the need to have appropriate low-cost housing information more important. The findings suggest that BESG, as the NGO which managed the project, to a large extent provided LCH information in the appropriate format to the Tamboville residents.

When the respondents were asked if they were happy with their housing situation 58% said they were unhappy. Their main reason was the unfulfilled housing expectations. Residents expected to be provided with complete houses. The government provided them with starter homes or housing opportunities. High unemployment levels and low levels of education aggravated the problem. Owning a starter house on a serviced plot and being unemployed creates a problem for the homeowner because it is not easy to pay for municipal services. In order to avoid a situation where only one of the three basic human needs (food, clean water and shelter) is catered for, the subsidy scheme should be part of an integrated community development programme. The scheme should have a well-structured information component which would include well-articulated, practical and feasible targeting and dissemination strategies.

This study shows the importance of information in developmental settings. The beneficiaries in any development project must have the information they need in order to make appropriate decisions and choices. The ability of the recipient of the information to make optimum use of the information provided is closely linked to the level of education, information literacy skills and, most importantly, the socio-economic environment in which the information is being disseminated. This calls for a holistic approach to information dissemination in developmental settings with different role players working together to improve the quality of life of the poor. Equally important is the need for NGOs involved in development programmes to obtain feedback from the communities within which they operate as this assists them to monitor the impact of their operations. Finally, policy-makers require feedback from those affected for policy review purposes. It is hoped

that in the global effort to improve the quality of life of the poor, the importance of information will be recognized by all role players.

Notes

1. A copy of the schedule is available from the first author.

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