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State involvement in self-help housing: Reflections from the Free State

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Abstract

When John Turner forwarded his theories on self-help housing, he emphasised the concept of dweller control and argued that the state should not be involved in housing construction processes. Although there was worldwide acknowledgement of his ideas, a large number of self-help programmes developed with a fair amount of state-involvement. South Africa's self-help programme, called the People's Housing Process, is no exception in this respect. Although designed to ensure larger degrees of ownership by people, evidence of large-scale government influence is clear. This article assesses the application of self-help housing in the Free State province and argues that a technocratic rather than a people-centred approach (envisaged in policy documents) dominated the People's Housing Process. The levels of influence by local people in project design, project implementation and housing design remain low, and the housing outcomes do not differ much from the normal project subsidy approach.

Keywords: State involvement in housing, self-help housing, people's housing process, housing support centre, support organisation

Abstrak

Toe John Turner sy teorieë oor self-helpbehuising voorgestel het, het hy bewonerbeheer as konsep beklemtoon en aan die hand gedoen dat die staat nie betrokke behoort te wees by prosesse om behuising op te rig nie. Hoewel sy gedagtes wêreldwye erkenning geniet het, het 'n groot hoeveelheid self-helpprogramme nietemin met 'n redelike mate van staatsbetrokkenheid ontwikkel. Suid-Afrika se self-helpprogram, genaamd die Behuisingsproses vir die Mense, is in hierdie verband geen uitsondering nie. Hoewel dit ontwerp is om 'n groter mate van eienaarskap by mense te verseker, is die getuienis van grootskaalse regeringsinvloed duidelik. Hierdie artikel beoordeel die toepassing van self-helpbehuising in die Vrystaat provinsie en argumenteer dat 'n tegnokratiese eerder as mensgesentreerde benadering die Behuisingsproses vir die Mense oorheers het. Die mate waartoe plaaslike mense 'n invloed

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in die projekontwerp, projekimplementering en behuisingontwerp kon uitoefen, bly laag en die behuisingsuitkomste verskil nie veel van die normale projeksubsidiebenadering nie.

Sleutelwoorde: Staatsbetrokkenheid by behuising, self-helpbehuising, behuisings-proses, behuisingondersteuningsentrum, ondersteuningsorganisasie

1.   Introduction

In the South African context, self-help housing is officially called the People's Housing Process (PHP). The policy on PHP was officially adopted in 1998 (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005). One of the key requirements of PHP policy was the establishment of self-help groups called Housing Support Centres (HSCs), a concept similar to the international concept of housing cooperatives. The objective of the South African government in implementing PHP through Housing Support Centres was to ensure that the housing delivery process was both inclusive and community-driven (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2000; South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005). Through Housing Support Centres, beneficiaries were thus supposed to be involved in the full cycle of any PHP project that was undertaken, i.e. from its metaphorical 'cradle' to its 'grave'. Essentially, PHP therefore had to ensure increased levels of local input in the housing process in comparison with the normal project-housing processes. This article questions the assumption that PHP would give beneficiaries a larger degree of input, and further argues that PHP as a form of institutionalised self-help was in fact dominated by government, significantly reducing the role of beneficiaries in housing. Against the background of this argument, the article commences with an overview of self-help housing internationally and in South Africa. Thereafter, the focus is on an analysis of the case studies and the lessons to be learned from these case studies. Essentially our evidence from the implementation of PHP in the Free State province suggests that the concerns in the existing literature about state control as opposed to people-driven approaches are legitimate.

Methodologically, the article draws on a qualitative research approach in the process of which one focus group (comprising an average of 10 to 13 participants) in each of the five chosen projects was conducted. Participants were beneficiaries of PHP subsidies with completed houses. In-depth interviews were also conducted with all the local project managers and trustees in these five projects while one in-depth interview was conducted with a senior provincial administrator of PHP in the Free State province. In this context project managers would usually be any community member, preferably

someone with outstanding and sound background in construction industry, while trustees would usually be community members who are also beneficiaries of PHP project. The five chosen projects included Ikgwantlelleng Housing Support Centre in Bultfontein, Kgotsong Housing Support Centre in Bothaville, Kutlwanong Housing Support Centre in Odendaalsrus, Iketsetseng Housing Support Centre in Virginia, and Retshepeng Housing Support Centre in Parys. For the five chosen projects, there were five project managers and seven trustees (with Kgotsong and Retshepeng Housing Support Centres comprising two instead of one trustee) who were interviewed. While permission to disclose names of the participants in any of my reports is being granted by project managers, trustees and provincial PHP administrator through a signed consent letter, the agreement with beneficiaries was to use their focus group numbers for confidentiality.

2.   Background to self-help

Before the case studies can be assessed, background knowledge of self-help housing is essential. To this end, a brief review of both the international history and the national background are provided.

2.1   International perspective

Two factors contributed to the rise of self-help. First, it should be noted that self-help housing is as old as humankind (Pugh, 2001; Harris, 1999b; Harris, 2003). In fact, self-help was conventional wisdom long before the 'emergence' of the concept in the late 1960s – and long before Turner formulated his ideas in this regard (Harms, 1992; Ward, 1982; Parnell & Hart, 1999). Harris (1998: 185) and Harris (2003: 257) cites the examples of Puerto Rico and India in the late 1930s and 1940s to illustrate the fact that self-help was practised and supported by governments before the Second World War. Secondly, the emphasis on aided self-help cannot be analysed in isolation from the drive for public-sector housing delivery since the Second World War. In an attempt to reconstruct the post-war urban fabric, government involvement in housing became conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, the international literature suggests that very few countries have managed to address their housing shortages by means of the public-sector provision and management of housing (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1997).

Against the backdrop of the failure of government-driven approaches to housing delivery, Turner's work in Latin America became widely known (cf. Turner, 1976). As pointed out earlier,

Harris (1998), Harris (1999a) and Harris (2003) indicated that Turner (an architect by profession) was certainly not the first person to promote self-help. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that Turner is probably the most frequently cited author on self-help (Harris, 2003). Turner based his work on a number of principles in respect of housing (Turner, 1976). First, he viewed housing as a 'verb'. In this way, he emphasised that housing should be regarded as a process; and the other consideration should be, housing evolves over time, with due consideration of the income of the household, the life cycle of the inhabitants and the needs of those who occupy the house. Secondly, he also argued that a house should not be considered in terms of its physical characteristics alone. In his view, the importance of housing lay not in 'what it is', but in 'what it does' (its functionality). The fact that housing is upgraded over time ensures that the physical characteristics of the house are likely to improve, in cases, that is, where people are given the 'freedom to build', rather than being provided with a completed housing unit without any choice. Thirdly, the value of the house to the user is related to dweller control, rather than to its physical characteristics. In this regard, Turner (1976) argued that the main criterion in respect of housing pertained to the question as to whether the owner was in control of the construction process, or in the decision in respect of the planning or purchasing of the house. (The latter refers to the way in which middle- and higher income people ensure dweller control: we buy what we like, within our budget and at a location that suits us). Harris (2003: 248) summarises Turner's contribution as follows:

> By self-help Turner has always meant not only the investment of sweat equity by owners in their homes but also the processes of owner-design and management.

Harris (2003) also points out the irony of the fact that, although dweller control was probably the most novel idea that Turner brought to the housing debate, it is also the very idea that has received the least recognition in the policy development domain. This point is key to the argument regarding housing policy in South Africa as put forward in this article.

In practice, Turner's ideas were operationalised in two ways. The first was through aided self-help (site and services) and the second through what is termed institutionalised self-help (mainly through housing cooperatives). Although aided self-help was commonly associated with neo-liberal trends in Political Economy, institutionalised self-help was practised in capitalist and socialist

countries (for example, Cuba). Institutionalised self-help thus became a way in which government could intervene in the housing process – something Turner did not propose.

2.2   South African perspective

The National Policy for Supporting PHP as a housing-delivery mechanism was approved and implemented in 1998 (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005). However, Huchzermeyer (2001) and Napier (2003) argued that it is not clear whether the justification for implementing PHP is to be found in the international donor's pressure or in internal pressure from community-based organisations such as the Homeless People's Federation. The development of policy was further supported by the establishment of the People's Housing Partnership Trust in 1998. From self-help point of view, with its inception in 1998, the aim of PHP policy was to shift a focus of housing delivery in South African context from that of state-driven (top-down) approach to a more people-driven approach (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2000; South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005). It is argued in the literature (see, for example, South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005; Ntema, 2009) that in order to achieve an inclusive and community-driven housing delivery, the policy advocates a number of concepts which could to a certain extent be tied up with initial principles of self-help housing as advanced by Turner (see, for example, Turner, 1976). For example, from self-help point of view the following concepts as entrenched in the PHP policy guidelines should be considered 'sweat equity', 'people-driven housing process', 'community empowerment', 'partnerships in housing delivery', 'transfer of skills' through housing, 'greater choice' by beneficiaries in how they want to use their subsidies, 'direct involvement' of beneficiaries in the entire housing process, use of 'recycled material', 'increased beneficiary input', 'Housing Support Centres', 'positive housing outcomes', and 'adequate housing' (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005; South Africa. Department of Housing, 2000; Baumann, 2003; LGH Newsletter, 2006). Overall, the PHP programme can be considered an institutional self-help response. Yet, contrary to the primary goal of the PHP policy, the implementation of this programme (PHP) through self-help groups called Housing Support Centres, we wish to argue, has been structured in such a way that (as we do indeed argue in this article) it ensures state control – this despite the fact that PHP was justified through neo-liberal arguments such as sweat equity and acquiring a bigger house for the same amount (see Thurman, 1999; Khan & Pieterse, 2004; BRCS, 2003).

The existing literature portrays at least several contentious issues in relation to PHP. First, literature suggests PHP as a housing delivery mechanism as opposed to an organic social process (People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter, 1999). In this respect Thurman (1999) argues that many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (appointed as Support Organisations occupying these Housing Support Centres) were concerned about the bureaucratic regulatory framework that left limited space for innovation and for community or individual response. At the same time, there also seems to be evidence that government purposefully selected NGOs to become Support Organisations (Manie, 2004). Another consequence in this respect is that the emphasis is on delivery and not the process. In this respect Khan & Pieterse (2004: 19) argue that a government in pursuit of delivery objectives tends to violate PHP principles in limiting beneficiary choice to unpaid labour (sweat equity). The Urban Sector Network and Development Works (2003) argues that this is specifically done to ensure state control as PHP facilitated by communities was considered uncontrollable.

Secondly, there seems to be evidence in existing South African literature (both peer-reviewed journals and policy documents) that the state dominated the norms and standards in this housing approach – similar to the case for contractor-driven housing approaches (Baumann, 2003). This is reflected in the policy document on PHP (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005: 35) which states that:

> when designing the house, attention by the builders and Housing Support Centres must be given to National Minimum Norms and Standards in respect of Permanent Residential Structures as prescribed.

This notion is further supported in policy documents which (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005: 11) states that "Support Organisations would advise beneficiaries about the minimum norms and standards applicable" (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005: 11). To enforce the prescribed norms and standards (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2000), the guidelines on Housing Support Centre stress the ability of these organisations to comply with technical requirements and that they should satisfy the relevant authorities in terms of capacity. The important conclusion from this is that one of the main reasons for the establishment of Housing Support Centres relates to the fact that houses should be technically 'sound' as decided by government and not as decided (or controlled) by dwellers. Baumann (2003) argues that despite the fact that the PHP process was exempted

from registering with the Home Builders Registration Council, other norms and standards did apply (albeit more prominently in some provinces than in others). Baumann (2003: 10) also aptly summarises this emphasis on state control in the following words:

> *Relationships have not changed: the state defines and retains control over the process, and the interface between it and beneficiaries continues to be a layer of state-approved, formal institutions.*

In the process, the state has thus compromised and reduced, among others, the economic autonomy of these institutions (in particular, Housing Support Centres) in two ways. An emphasis by the state on minimum norms and standards seems, despite being in direct conflict with the principles of 'dweller control' and 'freedom to build' (as advocated by Turner), to further reinforce the neo-Marxist idea of housing as a product of 'bureaucratically and technologically top-down heavy system' approach (Ward, 1982).

Thirdly, it does not seem as if the concept of dweller control is used in any significant manner in the PHP policy, or in practice. In fact, the concepts of self-construction and 'sweat equity', quality housing and larger housing units are commonly cited to express the motivation for PHP. For example, the Housing Code motivates the PHP approach as follows:

> *Experience has proved that if beneficiaries are given the chance either to build houses themselves or to organise the building of houses themselves, they can build better houses for less money (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2000).*

Sankie Mthembi-Mahanyele, the Minister of Housing in 1998, stated:

> *Self-building through the PHP [has] proved to be one of the most effective strategies in producing quality housing. Most of the … houses built through this process were of better quality and bigger than those delivered through pure subsidy grants (Gauteng News, 2001).*

It appears that the intention in respect of the PHP lies mainly in self-construction, or the expectation of receiving something better, larger or cheaper (more cost-effective) – in comparison to the product received by means of the contractor-driven approach. The silence on dweller control – in a programme in which it should have been prominent – is deafening.

Fourthly, there appears to be some confusion in respect of the ideological underpinnings of the motivation for the PHP process. In this regard, neoliberal ideas relating to sweat equity and self-construction in order to transfer costs from the state to individuals are used in the same breath as the arguments that are typically put forward by neo-Marxists, who emphasise aspects such as quality housing and bigger housing.

Existing literature in peer-reviewed journals also suggests that PHP processes have seldom led to larger community development processes. The overemphasis on technical aspects, norms and standards and control made PHP a housing process rather than a community development process (Sangonet, 2010).

Contrary to the principles of self-help as advanced by Turner and entrenched in PHP policy document (Turner, 1976; South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005), such emphasis on government control rather than dweller control usually eliminates any possibility for practice of neither 'increased input' nor 'greater choice' by beneficiaries in how they would want to use their subsidies.

3.   Project initiation and project management: Is there a place for dweller control?

Before the assessment of PHP project management is made, the figure showing the institutional structure of this mechanism is required (see Figure 1). The figure intends to demonstrate how in practice the entire PHP process usually unfolds once a group of qualifying beneficiaries is being identified locally. It should be noted that the community structures are located in the centre, with government and other support organisations on the periphery.
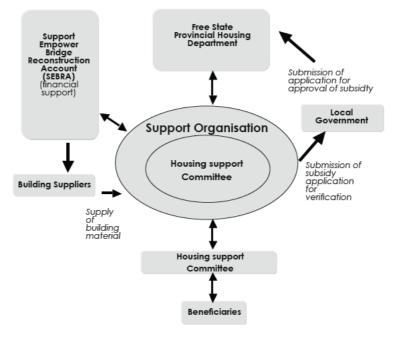
Figure 1:   Institutional structure of the PHP process
Source: Ntema & Hoosen 2008: 5

This section is divided into four sections. It begins with a discussion of the role of the Provincial Department of Local Government and Housing. The focus then shifts to reflections in respect of the role of Housing Support Centres. Subsequently, there is a discussion of the role of state agency called Support Empower Bridge Reconstruction Account (SEBRA). Finally, the role of the beneficiaries in the design and planning of their houses is addressed.

3.1   PHP Project Management and the Provincial Housing Department

It appears that serious problems existed in the process of appointing Housing Support Centres. It should be noted that, according to the PHP Policy Guidelines, the identification and recommendation of Housing Support Centres are the responsibility of the beneficiaries, the final approval being the responsibility of the Provincial Housing Department. The dominance of the Provincial Housing Department was experienced in a number of examples, with very little evidence that Housing Support Centres were established by community

groups. First, in all the five visited projects, beneficiaries mentioned that project managers and trustees simply turned up one day and told them they were going to be helped with applications for subsidies for PHP housing. A beneficiary who was interviewed in one of the focus groups confirmed this:

> We found Mr Maduna and his colleagues already working on another project which was nearing its completion…after that project they grouped us and told us that they were going to help us build Masakhane houses (Focus Group 2, 10/09/2008).

Expressing a similar sentiment, although being from another project, one beneficiary said:

> We just heard that Mr Biko was building houses…with time, he came to us to inform us about his projects and requested that we submit our names for his list of applicants for the Masakhane subsidies (Focus Group 5, 28/10/2008).

Secondly, the dominance of the Provincial Housing Department is reflected in the fact that beneficiaries from all the five projects did not know who had appointed both the project managers and the trustees. The following quotation confirms this conclusion:

> Messrs Chaka and Mangosha came to us at one of the community meetings already appointed and told us about their work…not sure who appointed them (Focus Group 3, 11/09/2008).

Thirdly, the dominance of the Provincial Housing Department is also obvious in that beneficiaries' contributions during the initiation process were, in the five cases, limited to only the personal completion of the housing application forms. One focus group member gave the following response:

> We just saw Mum Winnie and her colleague helping us with filling in forms and later with construction…not sure who appointed them (Focus Group 4, 12/09/2008).

Other than the above statements by the beneficiaries, further confirming the state dominance in the appointment of project managers and trustees in the Free State Province, are some of the remarks made by the project managers and trustees during the interviews. One project manager stated:

> We called the Provincial Office to enquire about the possibility of starting a PHP project, they then send someone to come and advise us…he then urged us to group ourselves and find 50 people to be our beneficiaries – that is how we started (Ngonelo, 2008: personal communication).

Expressing similar sentiments two other project managers said:

> I started working under Thusanong Supporting Centre and later due to the influence and advice by the officials from Provincial Housing Department, I started my own Trust called Kgotsong HSC in 2000 (Maduna, 2008: personal communication).

> Having worked under Dr Van Niekerk, I then begun interaction with some officials from Bloemfontein…they advised me on how to become independent and mobilise qualifying homeless people. I followed their advice then applied for allocation from the Provincial Housing Department…a year later I was called and told that we qualified for 100 units (Biko, 2008b: personal communication).

The implication of the above evidence is that the Support Organisations (comprising project managers and trustees) were approved by the state long before they could even mobilise the communities to buy into the idea of a self-help mechanism. Instead of beneficiaries identifying their preferred Support Organisations, the Support Organisations were found to be the ones identifying and approaching the qualifying homeless members of their communities. While policy guidelines stipulate that an initiative should be taken by the beneficiaries to identify and recommend the Support Organisation of their choice to the state for approval and not the other way round, the above evidence confirmed to a large extent the argument of state-control.

3.2 Project management and the role of Housing Support Centres

Similar to the international concept of housing co-operatives, the South African government has adopted self-help institutions called Housing Support Centres. The literature (see, for example, Turner, 1976), also indicates that one of the key tasks of housing co-operatives is to promote what Turner called 'autonomous' people-driven housing delivery through the self-help mechanism. Following the state's interference with the autonomy of both housing co-operatives and Housing Support Centres, respectively (Ntema, 2009), these self-help institutions never-in-practice became autonomous. As part of project planning and initiation, the policy guidelines require the Housing Support Centres to take responsibility for organising the six compulsory mandatory workshops for the beneficiaries and advise them in their initiative to identify and appoint their preferred construction teams or bricklayers (see also South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005). Contrary to both the above policy requirements and the self-help principles, this section raises two main arguments.

First, Housing Support Centres failed to involve the beneficiaries in the appointment of the construction teams. The policy guidelines on PHP stipulate that the "Housing Support Centres only advise beneficiaries on whom to appoint for construction in terms of the required skills and capability as determined by the Provincial Housing Department" (see also South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005). The failure of the Housing Support Centres to allow the beneficiaries to exercise their right to appoint their preferred construction teams are evident in a number of examples. Beneficiaries in all the five focus groups suggested that the first time they saw their bricklayers was on the day they arrived, carrying their equipment and ready to commence construction without them (beneficiaries) knowing how they (bricklayers) had been appointed. One person in one of the focus groups confirmed this:

> Mr Maduna brought his own builders and urged us to help them with mixing mortar and bringing bricks closer and cleaning walls (Focus Group 2, 10/09/2008).

Other beneficiaries from other projects also indicated that, despite their consistent enquiry concerning their role in appointing bricklayers, project managers and trustees insisted that their main concern should be when to occupy their completed houses and that they should trust them to appoint competent bricklayers:

> Our houses were built by builders appointed by the Support Organisation…Mum Winnie told us that it would be their responsibility to appoint builders; we should not make that our problem (Focus Group 4, 12/09/2008).

Some of the beneficiaries also claimed that project managers had undermined the competency of the bricklayers they (the beneficiaries) had recommended to them and never endorsed them:

> Initially, 'Thumbo' urged us to bring our own builders; later on he changed his mind and told us that they would bring their own builders, forcing us to abandon our preferred builders…I refused and was called names (Focus Group 3, 11/09/2008).

In what could be considered an endorsement of their failure to involve beneficiaries in appointing construction teams, all the project managers and trustees interviewed suggested no wrongdoing in their conduct. One trustee suggested that beneficiaries were generally only capable of and competent in helping bricklayers with actual construction and not with the process of identifying the right people for the work.

> *As management we look for skilled bricklayers who then get help from beneficiaries…beneficiaries help them with mixing mortar, bringing bricks closer during construction (Makafane, 2008).*

Expressing similar sentiment another trustee indicated that beneficiaries could not be given responsibility for taking major decisions such as who was to build, but should be entrusted with less important responsibilities.

> *As a trust, we appoint builders and ask beneficiaries to help them with other minor tasks (Makafane, 2008: personal communication).*

Thus, there appears to have been conflict between who the project managers regarded to be skilled bricklayers and what beneficiaries' opinions were in this respect. Managers justified their decisions on technical ability, while communities based theirs on trust. The obvious end result is one where contractors will be blamed if there are any defaults. Therefore, on a psychological level, this has not helped to support dweller control.

There is evidence from three of the five focus group discussions that the project managers and trustees took advantage of the beneficiaries' lack of knowledge of their own roles and rights in a PHP mechanism and used this to convey the wrong information and impose unilateral decisions on them. Although the beneficiaries in all of the five Housing Support Centres visited seemed to know the total amount of their individual capital subsidies (R42 000.00), they nevertheless allowed their respective Housing Support Centres to dictate not only how the material was to be used, but also how to distribute and use the surplus material. Beneficiaries in Kutlwanong (Odendaalsrus), Tumahole (Parys) and Meloding (Virginia) claimed that they were told (by their respective Housing Support Centres) that building material was for the entire project and not for individual households. This implied that the Housing Support Centres were entitled to retrieve all the surplus materials from the individual households with completed housing and could either use such surplus for other beneficiaries or even in another, new project. As a result, there was no means whereby beneficiaries could relate the quantity of material used on their houses to their total subsidy of R42 000. 00. In one incident, some of the beneficiaries suggested that they had never been part of the process of project breakdown and costing; something that rendered them powerless to question even quite obvious questionable acts by the project managers. Said one of the beneficiaries:

We don't know and were never told as to out of our R42 000 subsidy; how much our material actually cost and how much was left if any…because at one stage we were asked to pay people who were hired to dig foundations, out of our own pockets (Focus Group 2, 10/09/2008).

Another beneficiary implied that one had to risk being called names by the project managers for being stubborn, in order to get what was rightfully theirs. He also confirmed that:

[i]nitially they (Housing Support Centre) told us that all the surplus material would be ours, but later they changed and said every bit of surplus material belongs to the Housing Support Centre…although they build my house with material they took from other people, I refused to give them surplus bricks (Focus Group 3, 11/09/2008).

Attesting further to the unfair treatment of beneficiaries by their project managers, one of the beneficiaries mentioned that they:

were strictly instructed that when there is material left after construction, only Mr Biko would come and collect it… initially, some people wanted to argue they were entitled to the surplus material, but ultimately that was resolved (Focus Group 5, 28/10/2008).

Although the above situation could, on the one hand, be attributed to a general lack of knowledge among the beneficiaries, the situation could, on the other, be attributed to the the fact that the majority of the beneficiaries seemed to believe that questioning such issues, while it was guaranteed that they would receive complete houses, would make them appear less grateful. They were also of the opinion that qualifying for a PHP house was more a privilege than a constitutional right; thus, being less grateful could result in government withdrawing such a privilege or favour at any time. Such observations raised further doubts about the effectiveness or impact of consumer education that both the provincial and local project officials claimed to have organised for these beneficiaries prior to project implementation.

3.3 Project management and the role of Support Empower Bridge Reconstruction Account (SEBRA)

In 2006 the Provincial Department of Local Government and Housing appointed SEBRA to become its financial agency (Ndlovu, 2008). In terms of its operation, SEBRA executes its functions directly from the Provincial Housing Department offices in Bloemfontein. Following, in particular, experienced delays in project completion, purchasing materials, lack of financial accountability and poor management

by the majority of the Housing Support Centres in the province (Ndlovu, 2008; Ntema & Hoosen, 2008), in 2006 the Provincial Housing Department decided to appoint and task SEBRA with control and responsibility for procurement process. It is important first to note that central to SEBRA's responsibilities was the duty to ensure that government's initial mandate on housing people through the PHP mechanism would be fulfilled timeously and with no deviation from government's plans and programmes. Evidence given by the five project managers and by a senior PHP administrator proves that, since SEBRA's appointment, there has been a significant improvement in the standard of project management and administration by the Housing Support Centres in the province as compared to the period prior to 2006. There are two key issues that could be attributed to the improved and efficient project management by the Housing Support Centres. First, the introduction of skills development programmes by SEBRA for project managers and trustees and, secondly, effective and efficient project monitoring and control by SEBRA. There is evidence that, since the appointment of SEBRA and the reduction of Housing Support Centres to only 14, there has been an improved rate of projects successfully completed long before the set deadlines. In this context successful completion of projects would refer to a situation where projects are being completed within the set time lines, without the initial allocated project funds being either overspent or underspent. For example, in Parys, the project manager claimed that it took them less than six months to complete 100 units (Biko, 2008b: personal communication). This is a slightly shorter period compared to the lengthy period they would have taken to complete the same number of units prior to the introduction of SEBRA in 2006.

However, the appointment of SEBRA was not (from a self-help perspective) without some criticism. The appointment of SEBRA could be considered a deliberate strategy by the Provincial Housing Department to effect its control of PHP activities. While the Provincial Housing Department imposed, through their appointed Housing Support Centres, their own house plans, SEBRA was instrumental in marginalising both the beneficiaries and the Housing Support Centres from participating in the choice of building materials. Confirming this, project managers and trustees suggested that they were always being made to feel that nothing (either in material or ideas) of value or quality was likely to come from themselves as local officials or their local communities. One of the trustees confirmed this:

> We would usually submit our quotations from our locally preferred emerging suppliers to SEBRA for consideration and

> *possible approval…always to our disappointment, SEBRA would choose their own 'well established' supplier for all the Housing Support Centres in the province; none of our recommended suppliers would be considered (Chaka, 2008: personal communication).*

Expressing similar sentiment, one project manager implied that, despite SEBRA having invested so much in funded programmes for their own skills development, they were still not being trusted to take sole responsibility for some of the basics in project management in which they had received training. He mentioned that:

> *[p]ersonally I think, as part of empowerment, Housing Support Centres should be allowed to run and manage their funds and procurement of their material directly from their preferred local suppliers than to depend on SEBRA (Ngonelo, 2008: personal communication).*

With SEBRA taking sole responsibility for appointing material suppliers and making the final choice as to the type of material to be used, without any input by either the beneficiaries or the Housing Support Centres, could be regarded as a deliberate strategy by government to impose its unilateral decisions on both the beneficiaries and the Housing Support Centres. It could also be argued that central to the marginalisation of Housing Support Centres and beneficiaries in the key decision-making processes may be the government's attempt (through SEBRA) to ensure speedy housing delivery 'using quality materials' as supplied by suppliers perceived to be in good standing. SEBRA may also be perceived to be a state tool to eliminate the practice of what Turner called the use of locally produced resources or materials by appointing its own preferred external material supplier for all the provincial Housing Support Centres. The added disadvantage of using SEBRA in choosing materials and suppliers could be that it runs contrary to the self-help spirit of encouraging use of local resources as well as 'diversity' in resources mobilised by the dwellers when building their houses. For example, in all of the five sites visited, Housing Support Centres used similar wooden doors and bricks supplied by one central supplier. The appointment of SEBRA, in turn, which was known for its marginalisation of Housing Support Centres when negotiating deals with suppliers, and for its constant neglect of emerging local suppliers who had worked with Housing Support Centres prior to its (SEBRA's) appointment in 2006 (Chaka, 2008: personal communication; Makafane, 2008: personal communication), may be viewed as contrary to the spirit both of local economic development and of community empowerment (Ntema & Hoosen, 2008).

3.4   Housing design and planning

The preceding sections have made it abundantly clear that in terms of overall project management, beneficiaries were mostly excluded. According to the PHP Policy Guidelines, the role of the beneficiaries is twofold: first, at the level of the key decision-making process during the project planning and initiation, through their elected Housing Support Committee (HSCom) and, secondly, at the level of the actual construction, through their sweat equity (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2000). However, despite Turner's view that sweat equity or self-construction should not be equated to dweller control, the available literature on PHP has indicated that the role of beneficiaries is being severely reduced and limited so as to encompass only sweat equity (see, for example, Khan & Pieterse, 2004). The evidence from our case studies confirms this trend to a large extent. Nevertheless, one of the emphases of the policy guidelines is the recognition and upholding (by all the role players) of some of the key principles of PHP, such as 'greater choice' and 'increased input' by the beneficiaries in using their subsidies (South Africa. Department of Housing, 2005).

The failure of the Housing Support Centres and the Provincial Housing Department to allow the beneficiaries to exercise their right to participate and to influence the initial process of house design and planning has manifested itself in two visible ways. First, beneficiaries were seldom part of any decision-making process when house plans and designs were discussed and finalised. Secondly, some of the beneficiaries, members of the Housing Support Committee, suggested that their appointment was mainly to satisfy the requirements of the policy and not those of the actual implementation process. They were of the opinion that they were being used by the Provincial Housing Department and Housing Support Centres as window dressing. One of the chairpersons said the following at one of the focus group meetings:

> They said we must elect a committee but I can't remember when we last had a meeting with them (Support Organisation). Until the project was complete…we were never part of their decisions; we were treated like all other ordinary beneficiaries (Focus Group 3, 11/09/2008).

Another chairperson suggested that at times (as committee members) they were taken by surprise by some major developments as these unfolded during the construction process and by the ability of the project managers to always withhold information and sideline them.

We did not even know that our houses (plans) were going to have a front veranda; we only for the first time saw it as it happened (Focus Group 5, 28/10/2008).

Other than the committee members, ordinary beneficiaries in all the five projects visited also suggested that they had been completely sidelined from influencing the key decision processes on design and planning. Beneficiaries indicated that their role had been reduced to one of ensuring the safety and supervision of the use of their materials during construction. One of the beneficiaries confirmed this:

We would sign for the incoming and outgoing material such as cement…always ensured that material issued to the builders was used accordingly (Focus Group 5, 28/10/2008).

Other than that, they were expected to contribute their sweat equity.

We would help with mixing the mortar, jointing and bringing bricks closer for the builders (Focus Group 1, 09/09/2008).

Confirming the exclusion of the beneficiaries from participating in the project initiation processes, some of the project managers and trustees implied that their illegitimate practice resulted from either ignorance or from a deliberate effort to undermine the policy guidelines. One of the trustees confirmed this when he quoted the policy out of context:

We appoint builders and ask beneficiaries as the policy requires to assist them with other minor construction tasks (Mokone, 2008: personal communication).

Secondly, marginalisation of beneficiaries from participating in the planning stages of the project manifested itself in the lack of diversity in the design and planning of houses built through the PHP mechanism in the province. From a self-help perspective, an obvious assumption, in the context of a policy in which dweller-control is central, would be that it is reasonable to expect housing design and planning to be of a diverse nature, since dweller-control is likely to result in 'different' people building 'in different ways.' Despite this (as alleged by the beneficiaries during the focus-group discussions), government appointed state agencies (e.g. SEBRA) and its own preferred Housing Support Centres to impose its decision on beneficiaries to construct houses of its own choice using builders and material that were unilaterally chosen by, respectively, the Housing Support Centres and SEBRA. Some of the beneficiaries suggested that the PHP denied them the opportunity of using their

own housing designs and plans to express their own personal needs and preferences. One of the beneficiaries articulated this problem during the focus group meetings:

> *Our houses look the same because of the plan given to us… none of us beneficiaries could change it…I wanted to have my door next to the toilet but they refused (Focus Group 3, 11/09/2008).*

Further confirming the lack of diversity in the house design and planning resulting from non-participation by the beneficiaries, some of the project managers and trustees suggested that nobody seemed to have the courage to question the authority of politicians, even if it meant carrying out illegitimate activities. One of the trustees confirmed that their houses looked alike

> *because of the instruction from the MEC to apply without changing their original plan…the MEC gave us a plan that included the structure for the inside toilet (Chaka, 2008: personal communication).*

Expressing a similar sentiment, another trustee mentioned that

> *Our houses look the same because of the plan from government…neither we nor the beneficiaries could deviate from that binding plan (Biko, 2008a: personal communication).*

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that institutionalised self-help provides government with a platform to intervene and dominate housing processes. It does not assist beneficiaries to control the processes of planning, design and construction of housing. This is the case both internationally and in South Africa. The case studies used in this article have confirmed this. The irony of such state dominance is that state dominance did not necessarily lead to effective project management and that the assistance of a private firm had to be procured. Although, admittedly, there is a convincing argument for technical soundness and effective financial management, our case studies suggest the following main conclusions:

- Although central to PHP policy guidelines, there are concepts such as 'greater choice' and 'beneficiary input' (referred to by Turner as dweller control), these concepts were, in practice, never experienced by the beneficiaries either during project initiation and housing design or during project management,

as a result of the state's interference with the PHP programmes and its deliberate deviation from the general principles of self-help.

- The Free State Provincial Government still dictates directly or indirectly through SEBRA (top-down approach) the process and imposes its decision in terms of the type of housing (design and planning) to be built, material suppliers, and who (Housing Support Centres) will be appointed to manage the project.

The obvious question is whether a project left to be implemented by the communities according to the guidelines would have been more 'successful'. In the main, this article emphasises that what is needed are government officials who are facilitators rather than dominant role players, and that a fine balance needs to be restored between technically sound housing development and housing development that takes into account both dweller control *and* the policy guidelines. Worth noting is the fact that while this study and its findings are grounded in the pool of existing literature, its main argument is based on empirical findings derived from people's practical experiences of application and practice of self-help on the ground. Thus, a more case study-based primary evidence is being generated and it could further be used to critique and possibly influence future processes of policy review, practice and re-alignment.

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