



*South Asia*

Regional Knowledge Platform

**Integrating Universal Design  
in the proposed  
National Rural Housing and Habitat Policy  
Discussion Summary**

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### **1. Background**

A consultation on proposed “Draft National Rural Housing and Habitat Policy” was organized by Samarthyia and **basin-South Asia** Regional Knowledge Platform with support from Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme (PACS) on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2007 in Indian Habitat Centre, New Delhi. During the course of the consultative process for the proposed policy, across 17 states in India, it was realized that there was a need to conduct a sectoral consultation to incorporate concerns of the physically challenged people in the proposed policy. The purpose of the consultation workshop was to integrate the concerns of people with limited physical abilities in rural India to benefit from habitat development facilitated by the proposed policy. The workshop was attended by 36 people from technical institutions, academia, Civil Society Organisations, NGOs and organizations like IPH, AICB.

### **2. Introduction to the National Rural Habitat Policy-Objectives, Need and Structure**

A brief presentation on National Rural Housing and Habitat Policy to the Government of India was made by Ms. Zeenat Niazi on behalf of **basin-South Asia**. The presentation was well received the need to build in the concerns of the people with special needs was highlighted.

### **3. Presentation on Universal Design and Accessibility considerations in the rural housing and habitat.**

Ms. Anjlee Agrawal from Samarthyia gave a presentation on “What is Universal Design?” Her presentation focused on the concept of Universal Design, problems faced by some people due to absence of barrier-free spaces. She also shared some success stories from Bachau and Anjar in Gujarat where accessible toilets, bedrooms, doors, entrances have been provided for universal use catering to the needs of all sections of the society.

### **Discussion on Universal Design and Accessibility Considerations in the rural housing and habitat.**

- The discussion started with the three most important components that the participants felt are essential for the implementation of Universal Design. These are- **Attitude, Planning and Convergence**.

Attitude refers to a general positive attitude, concern for those who are not able to access public areas /spaces due to design concepts which are not universal in nature and attitude of the user group to demand their rights. Planning refers to a plan for barrier –free environment - buildings, roads, parks, gardens, transport etc, that allows for free and safe movement, function and access for all, regardless of age, sex or coordination.

However for implementation, coordination between the user group and the designers (Architects, Engineers etc), between the various stakeholders-Civil Society Organizations and Government Organizations, and that between existing infrastructure and new innovations is critical.

- It was discussed that time and again there have been difficulties faced by the physically challenged to access public spaces and the situation is worse when it comes to rural areas where there are *kuchcha* roads, open drains, narrow width of the doors and general absence of sensitization to universal access.

It was discussed that the real challenges occurs at 3 levels-

- *Where people take decision:* Often the people who take decisions about building allocation, design, allocation of funds are not sensitive towards the issue of universal accessibility.
  - *Where the design is done:* The designers often do not have requisite knowledge on guidelines of barrier-free spaces.
  - *User Group:* who often accept the situation which denies them the basic right to a barrier –free environment.
- Coupled with all these problem is the problem of availability of common resources and their use. It is at this point that the issue of **political will** comes to light. There is a need for a political environment that would ensure equal opportunities for all and ensure their participation in the society.
  - On a positive note there was discussion on how small efforts have worked out well and increased the accessibility of spaces. Wherever **sound and light effect** has been applied to distinguish spaces like way to the toilets, the entry to the building, library, lobbies, cafes etc, it has been successful. For example-Illumination of public spaces, colouring the edges of the steps.

#### 4. Specific areas of concern in the proposed policy

However a major part of the discussion revolved around what needs to be done and included in the policy proposal to the Government of India.

- **Capacity Building**
  - Sensitization has to happen at all levels. Both the user group and implementers need to be made aware of the concepts of universal design and the need for it.
  - Orientation of the higher functionaries is important towards universal design
  - Training of architects/designers needs emphasis on policy that would talk about universal accessibility of public areas.
  - There is a need to create a body of professionals who would look at and develop universal designs for public spaces.

- **Infrastructure**
  - The policy should ensure development of rural infrastructure that would also take care of the needs of the physically challenged.
  - Accessible roads to schools is an urgent need in rural areas.
  
- **Employment and Livelihood Issues**
  - The design and plan for buildings and other public spaces should be such that it creates opportunities for income.
  
- **Technology**
  - Flexibility in design is a must. However flexible designs often don't pay heed to the local sentiments of the people like habits, behaviour and this needs to be taken care of.
  - Designing should focus on being universal rather than fulfilling separate needs. A single design not only helps in controlling space and expenses but also reduces exclusion and promotes inclusion. For example, there is a need for multi-use toilets and not disabled friendly toilets.
  - There was a need to promote traditional and sustainable technology through the policy.
  
- **Delivery Mechanisms**
  - Political will is essential to incorporate concerns of the physically challenged people in the proposed policy.
  - Dissemination of success stories (for example work done by SPASTAN) is a must which can encourage other organizations towards social inclusion of the differently abled.
  - SHGs should be involved in the implementation.
  - Shared views of the political leaders should be involved too.
  
- **Effective Monitoring**
  - There is need for 'Systems' which can keep eye on the implementing agencies.
  - The tolerance level of people should diminish in the sense that demand should come from the user group for barrier free environment and the services that gets created should be properly used by the people.

## 5. Plenary discussion and group work

The participants were divided into four groups. Each group worked on one of the four questions given below-

- A. What should be done to incorporate the issue of Universal Accessibility of designs in the policy?
- B. Who should do it?
- C. Who else should be involved?
- D. Resources available related to a) knowledge b) information c) laws d) any other?

The following points emerged in the group work and the plenary discussion that followed:

**A. What should be done to incorporate the issue of Universal Accessibility of designs in the policy?**

- Research and development work needs to be done to ensure that the issue of disability is taken up in a manner that it gets incorporated in an integrated way with other issues of concern in the policy.
- Social and economic aspects have to be incorporated while designing buildings.
- Awareness among the user group is a must.
- The implementing agencies need to be trained.
- Monitoring, maintenance, quality controls have to be looked at.
- Schools should be well equipped with all facilities for children with cross disabilities.
- Extensive lobbying/campaigning at various levels of Public Administration is important.
- An appeal should be made to the Planning Commission to incorporate this.
- Needs could differ region wise. So different geographical regions need to be identified. Need assessment questionnaires should be circulated and pilot studies should be conducted for the purpose.
- Every Ministry should have a sub -plan for disability in the 11<sup>th</sup> five year plan with appropriate resources.
- Academic syllabi should include this subject in the course structure for middle and high schools.
- Information about universal designs and concepts should be made accessible through Mass Media.
- Multiple models need to be made available.
- A model project needs to be developed that can be replicated .
- Social Audits need to be conducted and students of architecture should be initiated in the process.

**B. Who should do it?**

- Villagers, local bodies, NGOs.
- All levels of the ministry of rural development including PRI
- IPH, CCPD, Science & Technology Mission Mode.

**C. Who else should be involved?**

- INGOs, Civil society, PWDs and Corporate Sector (CSR).
- PPP(Private Public Partnership) is important
- Architects\students should be involved by giving them proper training
- Health workers, CBR workers, BDOs, CDPOs.

**D. Resources available related to a) knowledge b) information c) laws d) any other?**

- Resources are available locally as well as from central and state government. They need to be percolated down to the village level with proper monitoring and review.
- Laws like IAY, NREGA and PWD Act are available.
- New schemes towards universal design should be merged with the existing government schemes for implementation.

**“Not allowing a person equal opportunities and participation is an infringement on his/her rights as a citizen of this country.”**