



National Rural Habitat Policy : A Proposal to the Government of India

PROCESS BRIEF

Background

The increasing housing gap, especially in rural areas in India, the poverty alleviation potential of the rural habitat development and the impact of adequate habitat on the social, economic and political mainstreaming of vulnerable communities has long been discussed. The elements of success – factors that lead to sustainability and replicability of housing initiatives were discussed in a document brought out by Development Alternatives in 2005. Influencing the national housing and habitat policy was seen as a strategic step in order to replicate the small successes at a large scale and improve the quality and increase the quantity of rural housing and habitat stock in India .

A study of the latest Housing Policy of the country (1998) revealed that there is a mismatch between the “spirit” of the policy document and its interpretation in the field in rural areas. One reason identified was the policy document itself. The existing document, although very comprehensive, failed to address specific concerns of rural India – where more than 60% of the population resides. It is biased to the needs of the urban middle class and does not offer any facilitatory supports beyond “grants” to rural poor. It does not recognize the critical links between land, natural resource management and livelihoods of the poor within their habitats. Most of all it does not respond to people’s inherent strengths of entrepreneurship and self-help.

The above situation necessitated a re-look at the national housing policy.

The initiative from basin-South Asia:

As a first step: The Indian members and partners of the **basin-South Asia** platform, decided to work towards influencing the National Policy so as to catalyze the development of a new National Rural Housing and Habitat Policy – the first one of its kind in India. Along with experts and participants from various sectors – government, banks, private sector basin members first

developed a 'framework' for a national rural habitat policy for India. This was published as a book "Framework for A Rural Habitat Policy For India: responding to needs of the poor" with support from the Building and Social Housing Foundation, UK. This book was based on dialogues with village families, communities, local governance institutions, technical and social non-government organizations, academicians, financial institutions and policy makers.

The book was released by the Honorable Union Minister of Rural development Shri Raghuvansh Prasad Singh. It set in motion the process of acting upon the recommendations suggested in the Framework document "to develop the first National Rural Habitat and Housing policy for India.

The process so far has led to :

- An early dialogue with the Ministry of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation responsible for revising the National Habitat Policy. The discussions with the Chairperson of the Special Commission on National Habitat Policy – Mrs Chitra Chopra, IAS, are seen as instrumental in the eventual distinction between rural and urban habitat policy concerns. A draft for the new urban housing policy was then prepared, while the rural housing policy was not yet addressed.
- A parallel process initiated by the Government of India to look into rural housing situation was the investigation of the rural housing programs of the Government by a Standing Committee on Rural Development of the fourteenth Lok Sabha. The **basin-SA** platform took advantage of this process and its members provided evidence both oral and written, to the committee regarding actual successful initiatives on ground and the factors responsible for it. They emphasized the need of policy support and facilitation to replicate the successes on ground and launch a Lok Awas Abhiyan. **This twenty second report on Rural Hosing brought out by the Standing Committee on Rural Development strongly recommends the need for a "separate Rural Housing Polciy for India"**.
- As a next step, the **basin-South Asia** platform convened a workshop for the purpose of drafting a base document to initiate a national wide debate on rural habitat policy. This workshop was attended by representatives from the civil society, local governance institutions, banks, financial institutions, and academicians. The resultant "draft" of the

National Housing and Habitat Policy for India was presented to the Honorable Minister of Rural development and to various nodal institutions across the country.

- The honorable Minister has taken personal interest in forwarding the process to write a new policy for the country. He has taken a discussion on the subject to the Planning Commission and has discussed with the Finance minister regarding the potential of such an initiative.

Through his support, a nodal officer in the ministry at the Director Housing level has been appointed to coordinate the process of formulating a new Rural Housing and Habitat Policy for India. At the ministry level a working group has been formulated for the purpose in which Development Alternatives represents the **basin-SA** platform and the civil society concerns.

The ministry has also recommended that a commission for Rural Habitat and Housing Policy be formulated by the Planning Commission.

- In parallel, the **basin-SA** platform is conducting consultations at the village and state level, with civil society institutions, local and state governments, academic institutions, nodal governmental institutions of the country such as NABARD to comment upon, receive inputs and thus revise the first draft. This process it is envisaged will enable concerns of different strata, varied stakeholders and diverse geo-cultural contexts would be addressed
- In its endeavor to take the draft across the country, the **basin-SA** platform has associated with other partners and platforms. While the core support to the platform is from the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC), India, the supports for conducting consultations for the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Goa-Daman-Diu have come from the Poorest Areas Civil Society Program of the DFID, UK. Architecture and Development, India (the Indian office of A&D, France) is supporting the consultations in Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Andaman's and Nicobar Islands. The consultations for Rajasthan, and Karnataka are being supported by the SDC through their Rural Housing project and partners and the consultations in Kerala, and Himachal Pradesh are being partly supported by the respective state Governments.
- Participants at the consultations include a majority of civil society organizations working at the grass roots with village communities, district and state level banking institutions,

local governments and also academic institutions from the respective states. The voice of the civil society is receiving response from the State Governments and the states are requesting for special sessions with their functionaries.

- The inputs being received at the consultations are being documented in written as well as film form by the **basin-SA** platform and regularly sent to the Ministry of Rural Development through the nodal officer coordinating the working group on rural housing policy.
- The **basin-SA** platform and the PACS platforms are also initiating a discussion forum to enable feedback from people / institutions who are unable to attend the consultation workshops in person.
- Eleven state level consultations covering 17 states with 30 village level and 4 district level consultations have been conducted so far. Two sectoral consultations on issues of finance and Universal Access have been conducted inputs to the Ministry of Rural Development have been provided through two Working Group meetings till date. A national consultation is planned in May 2007, at which time it is proposed that the country wide inputs received from various stakeholders shall be presented formally to the working group / commission on rural habitat policy of the Government of India for integration into the Government's Policy Initiative. The **basin-SA** platform has engaged with both the government-policy makers as well as grass roots institutions in its present efforts to influence the design of the First National Rural Housing and Habitat Policy for India. In this process, it has performed the following roles:
 - "listening from and understanding the ground realities, analyzing factors responsible for success of housing Initiaves and bottlenecks in the rural habitat processes.
 - Effectively communicating the strengths, limitations and needs for setting about a large scale rural habitat revolution (Lok Awas Abhiyan) in the country and possible strategies to the policy makers.
 - Providing a positive push towards initiating a national level Policy. A mechanism has been set up whereby the concerns of the varied stakeholders in different geo-cultural regions of the country can be communicated to the Government Policy makers and through this process influence the ongoing Government of

India process for the formulation of the first National Rural Housing and Habitat Policy.