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Sites and Services *(Hari Srinivas)*

Under a wide variety of types and variations, "Sites-and-Services" schemes are the provision of plots of land, either on ownership or land lease tenure, along with a bare minimum of essential infrastructure needed for habitation.

**INTRODUCTION**

Rapid growth of urban areas in most developing countries in the last few decades has led to shortfall in many sectors, primarily housing. The problem has been two-fold: on one hand, the majority of the people moving to the urban areas have lacked the necessary asset and financial holdings in order to acquire a "decent" house. On the other hand, the designated government agencies and bodies have not provided sufficient housing units which are affordable for the poor majority in urban areas. The proliferation of slums and squatter settlements has been a result of this scenario. But a growing understanding of the dynamics involved in the development and expansion of squatter settlements has led to a number of innovative housing schemes in various developing countries to solve the "dilemma" of housing. Particularly with the intention of improving the environmental quality of squatter settlements and provide it with the basic necessary infrastructure, one such innovative schemes which has received wide acknowledgement and following has been "sites-and-services" schemes.

The realization that providing a "complete" serviced house by government agencies is not possible or simply cannot be afforded by most low-income families prompted a shift in focus from supplying a fully serviced house to that of providing only serviced land. The key characteristic of the approach the use of the beneficiaries' "sweat equity" and other internal resources (community, financial and so on) in the actual construction and development of the houses.

Sites-and-services schemes became the byword for solving the problem of squatter settlements. Squatter settlements were and has always been considered illegal and in order to relocate and rehabilitate the squatters (as a function of "slum clearance"), plots of land (or sites) with infrastructure on it (or services) were provided, and the beneficiaries had to, in most of the projects, build their own houses on such land. There are a wide variety of sites-and-services schemes, ranging from the subdivided plot only to a serviced plot of land with a "core" house built on it.

**HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT**

The genesis behind Sites-and-services schemes is not new: low-income people have always been housing themselves, albeit "illegally", in most urban areas of the developing world. The key departure from earlier housing schemes, like low-cost housing or subsidized high-rise housing units, is that it recognized the ability of the low-income households to build their own house, provided an opportunity was given.

Particularly in face of the failure of the conventional housing approaches, coupled with a number of studies that pointed out the ingenuity and perseverance of squatters to house themselves, providing sites and services only was touted as a answer to the problems of housing the poor in developing cities. Many countries in South America, Asia and Africa took up this concept, and with the World Bank strongly advocating this approach and providing key finance for a number of projects, the idea received widespread approval.

Sites-and-services schemes have also faced considerable opposition and failure in a number of projects, primarily due to a series of assumptions and misconceptions on the way in which low-income families house themselves.

**SITES-AND-SERVICES: THE BASIC PRINCIPLES**

The key components of a housing scheme are the plot of land, infrastructure (like roads, water supply, drainage, electricity or a sanitary network), and the house itself. Various inputs that go into them include finance, building materials/technology, and labour. Thus, the sites-and-services approach advocated the role of government agencies only in the preparation of land parcels or plots with certain basic infrastructure, which was to be sold or leased to the intended beneficiaries. The next step of actual house building was left to the beneficiaries themselves to use their own resources, such as informal finance or family labour and various other types of community participation modes to build their house. The beneficiaries could also build the house at their own phase, depending on the availability of financial and other resources. This adopted the basic principle of the development of a squatter settlement but without the "squatting" aspect.

**TYPOLOGIES IN SITES-AND-SERVICES SCHEMES**

Depending on the investment made, resources available, the implementing agency or degree of organization of the beneficiaries, sites-and-services schemes were activated in a number of differing ways. This variation was a result of the attempt to strike a balance between minimum "acceptable" housing conditions and affordability of the beneficiaries. While following the basic rule of a plot of land (sites) and essential infrastructure (services), the degree of participation and inputs of the implementing agency on one hand, and the beneficiaries on the other, varied greatly. They ranged from an empty plot of land and some services (like water, electricity and sanitation connections) to the provision of a "core" house (consisting of a toilet and kitchen only) on the plot of land with attached services.

Some of the variations attempted in sites-and-services projects include:

* **Utility wall:** A "utility" wall is built on the plot which contains the connections for water, drainage, sewerage and electricity. The beneficiaries had to build the house around this wall, and utilize the connections from it. Some projects provided this utility wall in the form of a sanitary core consisting of a bathroom/toilet, and/or a kitchen.
* **Latrine:** Due to its critical waste disposal problem, many project provide a basic latrine (bathroom and/or toilet) in each plot.
* **Roof frame/ shell house, core house:** The roof is the costliest component of a house and requires skilled labour to build. Therefore, some projects provide the roof structure on posts, and the beneficiaries have to build the walls according to their requirements. Conversely, a plinth is sometimes built by the implementing agency, which forms a base over which the beneficiaries can build their house. Other variations to this are the shell house (which is an incomplete house consisting of a roof and two side walls, but without front or rear walls) and a core house (consisting of one complete room).

**ACTORS AND ACTIONS IN SITES-AND-SERVICES SCHEMES**

The two key actors in a sites-and-services project are the intended beneficiaries and the implementing agency. In most cases, the intended beneficiaries of the project belong to the lower income group of an urban area - for example, squatters who have been relocated from their original illegal settlement. They are characterized by low incomes, informal sector jobs or irregular employment and lack the necessary assets to enable them to afford a "formal" sector house. With basic skills in construction, many are in a position to build their own house (there are however exceptions to these features - which have resulted in the failure of many sites-and-services schemes).

The other principle actor in the sites-and-services schemes is the implementing agency. In most cases, this is a government department or similar body, like the Housing Boards. Operating from goals and objectives on a city-wide scale and for all income groups, such agencies initiate sites-and-services schemes both for the provision of housing of low-income families as well as removing "eyesores" that squatter settlements depict.

The basic division of the stages of implementation between these two principle actors determines the type of scheme being proposed. Several other actors play essentially supportive roles, including various government agencies responsible for provision of infrastructure, non-governmental or voluntary organizations and so on.

**SHORTCOMINGS OF THE SITES-AND SERVICES APPROACH**

With several assumptions and misconceptions regarding low-income families, sites-and-services projects have been subject to many shortcomings in its conception, identification of beneficiaries, implementation and cost recovery. Thus sites-and-services schemes have often been rendered unaffordable or inaccessible for the lowest-income groups by bureaucratic procedures, institutional requirements and political problems. Some of the constraints have been:

* Location: With high land costs in urban areas, most sites-and-services schemes are location on the fringe where such costs are not very high. This however causes two problems: one, the large distance between the site and existing delivery networks, off-site and on-site provision of infrastructure is high and construction can be delayed. Two, the extra distances that the beneficiaries have to travel (and the consequent extra costs) to the employment centres would discourage many beneficiaries to take advantage of such schemes.
* Bureaucratic Procedures: Selection procedures, designed to ascertain that applicants meet eligibility criteria, tend to be cumbersome, time-consuming and full of bureaucratic pitfalls, and provide opportunities for corruption. Besides, for many low-income families, the eligibility criteria are impossible to meet due to informal sector jobs or low/irregular incomes.
* Delay in provision of Services: Due to a lack of coordination between the various implementation agencies and a "spread" of responsibility of providing the infrastructure and services, there is considerable delay in the final provision the services, even after the land has been allocated to the beneficiaries.
* Standards: High standards of construction and building quality is set by the implementing agencies making such schemes unaffordable to the target beneficiaries. Some sites-and-services schemes, for example, prohibit income generating activities on residential plots, including rental of rooms: they, thereby, limit the opportunities of residents to earn an (additional) income to pay for their plot and their house.
* Cost Recovery: Most sites-and-services schemes are plagued by poor cost recovery. One reason is the high costs that beneficiaries have to bear shortly after moving into the scheme. They have to pay for the plot as well as construction of the house, while they might be facing loss of income due to the move to the new scheme. Transport, water and electricity costs add to the burden which they might not have had before. But some of the main reasons for poor recovery has been delay in provision of services, inadequate collection methods, lack of sanctions for non-payment and absence of political will to enforce payment.

**FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR SITES-AND-SERVICES SCHEMES**

The positive aspect of sites-and-services schemes that deserves support is its recognition of the ability of people to house themselves, with a little backing from the government agencies. Thus the role of the government changes from that of a "provider" to an "enabler". It also enables them to save scarce resources by "sharing" the responsibility of housing with the intended beneficiaries. On the part of the beneficiaries, it makes best use of existing/potential resources, both at the household level as well as the community level. On a large scale, it enables the low-income families to obtain decent housing and services, at levels that can be afforded by them.

While sites-and-services schemes are not a blanket solution for all ills of low-income housing, it does provide potential for future housing, making best use of existing resources, both governmental and household. A number of local conditions and circumstances determine the type and scale of the scheme to be used.