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Provision of public housing in Singapore

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1 Title of practice or experience

Provision of public housing to a large part of the population in Singapore

1.2 Category of practice/experience and brief description

The provision of mass, affordable public housing has improved living standards for a large number of Singaporeans. The main vehicle for implementing the public housing policy is the Housing and Development Board (HDB). In 1997, 85% of the population owned or lived in a HDB-developed flat. The Singapore model has been widely hailed as a success and is often studied by other countries which have yet to solve the housing problems of their urban population.

1.3 Name of person or institution responsible for the practice or experience

Housing and Development Board, Singapore

1.4 Name and position of key or relevant persons or officials involved

Not applicable

1.5 Details of institution

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1.6 Name of person and/or institution conducting the research

Third World Network (This report was prepared on the basis of information materials from the HDB as well as papers and books by academic and other sources.)

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2. THE PROBLEM OR SITUATION BEING ADDRESSED BY THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

In almost all Third World countries, housing the urban poor in suitable conditions is an uphill battle. The pace of urbanisation, the rate of economic growth, the availability of land for housing, the increase in land prices and inappropriate strategies for urban planning and land appropriation all directly contribute to this problem. Most governments have attempted to implement housing programmes in order to house their urban poor. However, such programmes have usually met with failure or only limited success. Efforts to improve their quality of life are also often negated by the rapidly deteriorating housing conditions in the slum and squatter areas. The lack of appropriate planning and land policies hinders any attempts to effectively shelter the poor. To further compound this problem, city-planning and management policies are often at odds with the policies designed to obtain and maintain adequate shelter for the urban poor.

This is the general situation in the majority of Asian countries. However, Singapore has been a notable exception to this rule. Singapore has been able to implement city-planning and urban-management policies that actually benefit the poor, and its housing programme has been successful and admired for producing low-cost, affordable housing on a mass scale. Its present-day situation, however, evolved out of the same problems and conditions that still blight other Third World countries today.

The rapid growth of Singapore island at the turn of the century produced slums in the central city area. In 1918, the Colonial Administration set up a Housing Commission to study the housing problem in the central area. The results of the study led to the setting up of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) in 1927 with the mandate of housing the homeless. It was empowered

to plan roads, regulate sanitary conditions of buildings and draw up schemes for land acquisition. The SIT was, however, not given the authority to carry out large-scale housing construction. As a result, during its 32 years in existence, it only completed 23,000 units of flats.

In 1947, when the Housing Committee was set up, it produced some shocking findings. 72% of the population or 680,000 people lived within the central city area. About a third of the population were living within an area of 4 square kilometres. Urban slums burgeoned, breeding disease, encouraging crime and posing fire hazards.

The Land Acquisition Ordinance which was passed in 1920 was amended in 1946 and 1955 to give the government powers to acquire more private land for comprehensive new-town development and to seek price stabilisation. However, the powers granted were limited and the process was cumbersome and slow. The SIT had only been given building authority in 1932 and managed to construct 20,907 units between 1947 and its demise in 1959. Its construction rate by then was one new flat per year per 150 families. By 1959, the SIT had only managed to house a meager 8.8% of Singapore's 1.6 million people.

The population density within the city centre area was estimated to be 50,200 persons per square kilometre in 1957. Large numbers of people still lived in continually deteriorating overcrowded slums and squatter areas with virtually no service facilities. It was estimated that in 1959, around 250,000 people were living in dilapidated pre-war housing in the central city area and around 300,000 were living in shanty huts in other congested squatter areas.

This was the situation that the present Singapore government inherited when it came into power in 1959. The government was faced with a lack of professional manpower, an inadequate building industry and limited financial resources. It had committed to fulfilling its election promise to construct 10,000 units of low-cost housing annually in its first five-year programme. On 1 February 1960, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was established to carry out this task.

Singapore also faces an extreme shortage of land. Its total land area is currently approximately 640 square kilometres. The population of Singapore was 3.02 million in 1990, and has been increasing at an average of 1.7% annually since 1967. Population density is amongst the highest in Asia, second only to Hong Kong. In 1990, population density was approximately 5,000 people per square kilometre.

Nearly half of the available land in Singapore is already built up, while a considerable proportion consists of land designated as water catchment areas, forest reserves and for military establishments, which can never be put to economic use.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE AND ITS MAIN FEATURES

Public housing in Singapore paradoxically embodies certain aspects of the diametrically-opposed paradigms of a free-market and a socialist system. It does not strictly subscribe to either the paradigm of socialist states where housing is viewed as a right and entitlement which is the state's responsibility to provide for, nor that of free-market systems where the market is allowed full reign in the housing sector. The HDB is supported by public funds, yet is essentially a private developer. Financial resources for housing do not need to compete with the financial demands of other sectors of the economy. Since the HDB is responsible for the provision of most housing in Singapore, a situation is avoided where free-market conditions reign. However, the market is not eliminated entirely in order that returns on financial output can generate new cycles of construction. This avoids the pitfalls of market-dependent systems where prices of housing are often beyond the reach of a large part of the population, or of the socialist systems where the absence of capital returns ends up stultifying the further provision of public housing.

The HDB is responsible for all aspects of the public housing programme except for the fixing of the sale and rental prices of the housing units, which is undertaken by the Ministry of National Development. The HDB has been given extensive powers with respect to land acquisition, resettlement, town planning, architectural design, engineering work and building-material production. The HDB is not merely a provider of low-cost housing, it also manages its estates and provides commercial and industrial premises as well as recreational, religious and social facilities in its housing estates. The HDB also undertakes other projects such as land reclamation. A typical new town built by the HDB is planned to cater to all needs. Transportation is co-ordinated with the Public Works Department, bus companies and the Singapore Mass Rapid Transit. Easy access to commercial, industrial, institutional and recreational facilities is taken into consideration and provided for.

The broad spectrum of tasks and projects undertaken by the HDB provides ample opportunities for it to derive income. The sale of and rental collected from commercial and industrial premises is one such example. Revenue is also generated by ancillary facilities such as car parks and markets. Returns from these income-generating activities are then directed to financing further public-housing construction.

Land for public housing

The availability of land for public housing is the first consideration of the HDB. In order to house the urban poor, adequate quantities of land must first be made available in order that housing units can be built. This requires forward planning and the earmarking of suitable land.

Compulsory land acquisition

Due to the extreme scarcity of land in Singapore, the price of land rises very quickly. To allow the authorities to acquire land quickly and cheaply for public-housing purposes, various legislations were passed regulating compulsory land acquisition. Compulsory land acquisition has been the most effective way of obtaining land for public development. The Land Acquisition Act also establishes resettlement policies which enable large areas of squatter land to be cleared and for the squatters to be rehoused in low-cost flats. This has given the squatter population a chance to enjoy better housing and living standards.

The Land Acquisition Ordinance passed in 1920 and amended in 1946 and 1955 had its first significant amendment made in 1961. Following a fire at Bukit Ho Swee, this amendment was passed which allowed for land devastated by fire to be acquired at not more than one-third the vacant site value unless otherwise specified by the Minister. The one-third figure arrived at was to ensure that landlords did not benefit unduly from an appreciation in the value of their land that would then be free from any encumbrances.

The Foreshores Act was amended in 1964 to exclude payment of compensation for damages to owners who lost their sea-frontage due to land reclamation.

The Land Acquisition Act of 1966 repealed the 1920 Ordinance. It gave the government increased powers regarding compulsory land acquisition. The process of taking possession of land was expedited and compensation for landowners who had their properties taken over was regulated. In 1973, the Land Acquisition (Amendment) Act was passed in order to curb speculation on land and to limit the cost of land acquisition. The compensation for acquired land was fixed at the market value as at 30 November 1973 or at the date of Gazette Notification, whichever was lower. This was to ensure that the cost of compensation did not fluctuate too drastically with market conditions. The market value is determined on the basis of its existing use or the Market Plan Zoning of the land, whichever is lower. This ignores whatever potential the land may have had for future development. The Act was then further amended in 1988 and compensation was pegged to the market value as at 1 January

1986, or to the value on the date of the notice of acquisition, whichever is lower. But by 1995, the government started to pay the market rate for all future acquisitions.

These laws have enabled the authorities to acquire land at extremely affordable costs and by the 1980s, a considerable land bank was already in existence. However, it must be noted that this land is held by the government. The HDB does not have its own land bank. It bids for land from the authorities, competing with other land users and government agencies. The eventual cost of the land is still considerable, yet still well below the free-market price. The HDB has emerged as the major land-acquiring authority. By 1985, the HDB owned more than three-quarters of the land in Singapore. It has purchased vast quantities of state land from the Land Office of the government and has also acquired considerable amounts of private land through negotiating private treaties.

Resettlement

Compulsory land acquisition in Singapore is supported by a sound resettlement policy. The resettlement policy is necessary as some of the land acquired for public housing purposes or required for development projects had been populated by squatters, small-scale farmers and residents of dilapidated buildings who had to be resettled in acceptable accommodation. Resettlement is thus necessary in the interest of social justice. It is also in line with the policy of providing squatter and slum dwellers with a better standard of housing and living.

The Resettlement Department has been a permanent department within the framework of the HDB since 1963 and is the central authority for resettling squatters from state and private land required for development by government and statutory boards. As both clearance and housing operations come under the jurisdiction of the same authority, the two activities can be planned simultaneously, and any dislocation without rehousing can thus be avoided.

The government has also formulated a comprehensive resettlement policy that is subject to regular reviews and refinements. Resettlement policies are aimed at providing equitable compensation, resulting in minimum adjustment and making a real improvement in the housing conditions of the resettled population (Wong and Yeh, 1985).

Keeping the cost of production low

Besides acquiring land cheaply, the HDB also keeps the cost of production low, so that the low cost can be passed on to the consumer, which keeps

the price of housing units commensurately low. This is achieved through a whole host of measures which increase efficiency and keep costs to a minimum.

The scale of the projects, the repetitive nature of the work, tight control over building contracts and prompt payment are major cost-control factors. For large quantities of housing, it is necessary to adopt standardised building plans with a short construction period. Design takes into account durability and minimum maintenance costs. The HDB designs and supervises all of its projects. The HDB is thus the developer; it however engages private contractors to undertake the construction. Construction costs are kept down through technological innovation, which includes the increasing use of the metalform concrete framework system since 1974 and the various projects that have made use of the prefabricated system.

The HDB also manages and produces its own materials required for construction. Brickworks, tileworks and sand and granite quarries have all been set up. This ensures adequate supply to meet the needs of the construction industry at reasonable costs. The HDB also helps local and foreign material manufacturers develop suitable new materials for HDB use.

Since the early 1960s, the HDB has also managed its own pool of labour, with the setting up of the Work Brigade which was established to provide elementary training for workers to become semi-skilled tradesmen in the building industry. The HDB has also been authorised since 1984 to assist the Ministry of Labour in processing work permit applications for foreign workers, due to the labour shortage situation at that time.

The role of the Central Provident Fund

Compulsory land acquisition, as we have seen, has allowed the HDB to acquire land at lower prices. Cost-cutting and cost-effective measures also contribute towards low-priced housing units. These measures are accompanied by the arrangements that have been made by the government through the Central Provident Fund (CPF) for the financing of the HDB's public housing programme.

The CPF is a state-managed, employees' compulsory social security savings fund which was set up in 1955 by the colonial government to provide social security for the working population of Singapore. Both employers and employees contribute a certain percentage of the employee's monthly salary to the fund. The rate of contribution by both employer and employee has varied over the years, and is generally allowed to fluctuate according to the health of the economy, thereby acting as a wage-regulating mechanism. Contributions can only be withdrawn on retirement at age 55, on permanent inca-

pacitation or for certain approved purposes. In effect, the CPF is a compulsory savings scheme which earns interest and which is tax-exempt. The CPF operates in a circuit in which financial resources are channeled from the public via the CPF to finance the construction of public housing, which the public, in turn, purchase using their CPF savings. CPF savings make up the bulk of national capital formation and have allowed the government to amass substantial foreign reserves. A proportion of this has been channeled towards investment in public housing (Chua, 1997). CPF funds are also used to purchase government bonds that are partly used to finance loans and subsidies to the HDB (Chua, 1997). These set-ups allow the government to draw from the savings of the public to finance public housing. The HDB can thus avoid the expensive interest rates of commercial lending institutions.

Government subsidies and loans

Government subsidies for public housing keep the cost and price of housing units well below the market rate. The HDB's annual deficit is fully subsidised by government expenditure grants provided from the government's current budget. From 1960 to 1989, the annual subsidy varied between S\$1 million and S\$120 million. However, this represents only, on average, 2% of the annual national development budget estimates since 1975.

The government's Development Fund also provides long-term loans for the HDB's capital expenditure (Tan and Phang, 1991). Since 1986, the interest rate for these mortgage financing loans has been pegged to the floating CPF rate and the loans are repayable over 20 years. **Also**, the excess of loans each year over the value of flats sold is treated as a long-term loan pegged at 2% above the CPF rate and repayable over 20 years. These rates have always fallen below the prime lending rate in the market, particularly during years of high inflation.

Home ownership

It has been the government's objective to increase ownership of public housing to achieve a fully home-owning society by the end of the century. As a result, housing policy has encouraged public housing tenants to become home owners instead. Initially, the **HDB's** policy was to only provide rental units. Then in 1964, when the government believed that the acute housing shortage had been eased, the 'Home Ownership for the People' Scheme was introduced to provide and assist people to purchase low-cost flats.

The Home Ownership Scheme became the overarching framework within which more detailed housing schemes, policies and procedures were formu-

lated. It aims to provide public housing for the large proportion of the population that private housing fails to house. This Scheme marked the decline of the rental proportion of public housing over the years. The fraction of HDB housing units in rental occupancy fell from 100% in the early 1960s to 76% at the end of 1970 to 38% in 1981 and to 16% in 1989. The HDB now no longer builds rental units and satisfies the declining demand for rental units through vacated rental flats.

The Scheme possesses some notable features. The Housing and Development Act under which the HDB operates provides that a home owner of public housing cannot be deprived of this property even in the event of bankruptcy. The Scheme also offers a housing loan and allows for the use of CPF funds to finance public housing (see below). These steps were taken to spur this Scheme after its initial slow start.

Since 1968, financial incentives such as exemption from the 20% downpayment requirement have been given to encourage some tenants to purchase their rental property from the HDB. In addition, some of the rental housing that was built in the 1960s and by the SIT was demolished in the late 1970s. Since 1982, only one-room and two-room HDB flats have been available for rental to eligible tenants. And from 1985, public housing tenants with household incomes of less than S\$800 have been given various financial concessions to enable them to purchase public housing. To discourage rental of public housing, the head of the household must be over 29 years of age before that household can apply for rental housing.

Purchasers of public housing, however, have to satisfy certain eligibility conditions laid down by the HDB. Such conditions include Singapore citizenship, non-ownership of any other property, owner-occupancy, a minimum family size of two, and household incomes that fall below the income ceilings set by the HDB. These eligibility rules were very stringent in the 1960s and 70s, but were gradually relaxed once most of the population had been adequately housed.

New ways are constantly found to accommodate any segment of the population that may be barred by the eligibility rules from purchasing public housing. The income ceilings have often been raised, and as such, 90% of the population is now eligible to purchase subsidised public housing. This enables the government to subsidise housing for almost its entire population with the exception of its top 10% income earners who are in no need of subsidies anyway.

As the HDB has a virtual monopoly over the housing market, the market does not determine the price of housing. The low price is set by the government, through the Ministry of National Development, taking into account the state of the economy and the levels of affordability of the general public at

any point in time. The selling price of housing units is thus kept low by pegging it to the affordability of the purchasers (Chua, 1997), while also taking into account its low cost and government subsidies. Each price increase is carefully studied by the government. This has worked towards encouraging home ownership among the Singaporean public, even amongst those in the lowest income brackets.

The subsidies provided to the purchaser are differentiated according to the various classes of housing; the larger the housing unit, the smaller the subsidy. Thus, the more needy receive a greater subsidy.

It should also be noted that owners of public housing in Singapore purchase a 99-year lease to their properties, unlike owners of most private housing in Singapore who purchase their properties freehold. This leasehold arrangement separates the housing unit from the land and allows the government to compensate and resettle any lessee if and when the land may be required for development, since the land is always retained in government ownership.

Liberalisation of the Central Provident Fund

In September 1968, legislation was enacted to allow members to withdraw from the Fund to finance the purchase of HDB housing. Numerous legislations have since been enacted to allow the use of CPF funds for other purposes such as to purchase home protection insurance and approved financial assets, and to pay for medical expenses and education. Under the Home Ownership Scheme for low-income housing, eligible members are allowed to use their CPF savings for the 20% downpayment, and their monthly CPF contributions can be deducted directly for mortgage payments of housing loans offered by the HDB for the purchase of housing units. This allows purchasers of public housing to be able to make provision for home ownership without a resultant decrease in monthly disposable income. These loans are now repayable over a maximum of 25 years and the mortgage interest rate has now been pegged at 0.1 percentage points above the floating CPF savings rate. In effect also, employers are partly financing their employees' housing.

The compulsory Home Protection Insurance Scheme that was introduced in 1981, allows for a one-time deduction from CPF savings to pay the outstanding housing loan in the event of the death or permanent incapacity of the sole breadwinner of a household.

Various other schemes have also been effected for the purpose of financing housing. For instance, members could use their CPF contributions to purchase middle-income housing from the Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC). The HUDC, a government-owned company, started its

middle-income housing programme in 1974 but handed over its residential development function to the HDB in 1982. CPF savings can also be used to purchase private residential property and non-residential property. As part of a major upgrading programme for public housing estates, CPF savings can be used by HDB households to repay renovation loans offered by the HDB, which are repayable over a period of ten years.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE AND ITS ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS

The Housing and Development Board was originally constituted as a statutory body under the Ministry for Law and National Development on 1 February 1960. Since 1975, the HDB has come under the charge of the Ministry of National Development. Its key functions have changed and evolved over the years and can now be said to be to provide lower-income and middle-income housing and related facilities, and to provide estate management services.

The Board is headed by the Chairman and eight board members. The Chief Executive Officer and the two Deputy Chief Executive Officers come under the Chairman and the board members. The Internal Audit Department reports directly to the Chairman, but reports administratively to the Deputy Chief Executive Officer for Properties and Administration.

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer for Building and Development heads the Building and Development Division which comprises various departments: Contracts and Administration; Architectural; Civil Engineering; Structural Engineering; Survey; Electrical and Mechanical Engineering; and Building and Project Management.

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer for Properties and Administration heads the other two main divisions: Estates and Lands Division, and Administration and Finance Division. The departments under the Estates and Land Division are: Estate Administration and Property; Land Administration; Housing Administration (with 19 branch offices); and Industrial Properties. Under the Administration and Finance Division are the Secretariat, Finance, Research and Planning, Information Services and the Legal Department.

5. PROBLEMS OR OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED AND HOW THEY WERE OVERCOME

The Land Acquisition Act had been criticised by some quarters as being an affront to the concept of justice (Lim, 1983). The forced clearance of squatters and slums and the relocation of households and families sometimes met with considerable resistance due to the hardships experienced by those people

as a result of their relocation. This problem was tackled practically at a few levels. The resettlement staff held dialogues with the squatters to identify their needs and problems, and these were usually settled at the time of relocation by the provision of the best possible alternatives. The relocated residents also complained of a shortage of amenities in the housing estates. Much has been done to address this problem. The HDB new towns are now self-contained with full facilities such as schools and shopping centres. As to the question of the improvement of resettlement benefits, compensation rates for resettlement and displacement were increased and are constantly being revised to better provide for resettled people.

In 1979, the boom in the private construction industry resulted in a shortage of labour and construction materials. As a result, construction costs began to rise, causing the price of private housing to rise as well. This effectively increased the demand for public housing, putting pressure on the HDB to increase its construction output. The uncertainty over the supply of labour and materials resulted in a poor response by private contractors to the HDB. This situation was only alleviated in the early 1980s when the rate of inflation slowed down significantly. Wages and prices of materials stabilised.

In view of such frequent upsets, the HDB set up a formal long-term resource plan in 1982 to monitor technology, contracts, labour and materials. This plan has allowed the HDB to expand its construction programme significantly without setting off uncontrolled cost inflation.

6. EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

At its inception, the main objective of the HDB was to meet the serious housing shortage at that time. At the initial phase, the provision of a large number of units took precedence over quality. Rapid construction relieved the tremendous demand for low-cost housing. This massive housing programme generated much-needed employment and economic activity during the early 1960s.

The HDB built more than half a million units of public housing from 1960 to 1990. 85% of Singaporeans now live in public housing estates, 90% of whom own the 99-year leases on their subsidised homes. In 1960, 1970 and 1980, this ownership figure was at 9%, 36% and 74% respectively. This figure had climbed tremendously by 1980, due to the overwhelming public response to the liberalisation of the CPF funds for purchase of public housing. In 1968, with the introduction of the Home Ownership Scheme, 44% of all public housing applicants elected to buy their homes. This figure rose from 63% in 1970 to 90% in 1986.

The contribution of the HDB's public housing programme to the well-

being of Singaporeans has been great. The quality of housing and living environment in Singapore has been favourably compared to the situation in other urban centres in Asia and beyond the region. An overwhelming majority of the Singapore population is housed in public housing. The average Singaporean has been able to enjoy better housing than that enjoyed in some developed countries.

The public housing sector is a substantial and dynamic contributor to the dynamics and growth of the national economy. The public housing programme has made a noticeable contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country, and has provided employment to those in the construction industry as well as to those in related industries. For the average Singaporean, ownership of high-quality affordable public housing has probably been the single most palpable material benefit of the country's rapid economic growth.

7. SUITABILITY AND POSSIBILITY FOR UPSCALING

The massive scale and variety of projects and programmes undertaken by the HDB are already testament to its size and scope. No further upscaling is needed or necessary.

8. SIGNIFICANCE FOR (AND IMPACT ON) POLICY-MAKING

Urban-planning strategies in most Third World countries are often at odds with policies to improve the lives and living conditions of the urban poor. The effective adoption of an alternative and effective urban development strategy is only possible with a basic restructuring of the social priorities and development directions of many Third World governments today.

A firm political commitment to social development is necessary to ensure that the required resources are channeled for the benefit of the underprivileged and the community as a whole. It is also important that sufficient land in suitable locations is allocated for housing the urban poor. Without positive intervention, land for housing the urban poor will become increasingly scarce, as, irregardless of economic growth, the urban population in most Third World cities is on the increase. This priority should come before other concerns if resources are limited. The provision of infrastructure and physical shelter can be improved over time as resources become more readily available.

The key elements of the Singapore housing policy include firstly, a strong political commitment to public housing; secondly, financial commitment which comes in the form of loans and subsidies; thirdly, legislative support which allows the government to acquire land cheaply and quickly and to exercise legal authority on matters related to public housing development and admin-

istration; and fourthly, supportive government policies such as the liberalisation of the CPF.

Many studies have shown that the issue of security of tenure is the most important housing concern for the urban poor (Lim, 1983). Only when there is security of tenure can collective community participation be organised and generated for self-improvement and the maintenance of communal facilities. This should thus be the first issue to be tackled by governments in implementing effective public housing policies.

Land acquisition by the government for public housing has been a controversial issue. This can be very much an emotive issue, seen by some as an infringement of the individual's rights to ownership of land and viewed by others as a necessary measure to enable home ownership by the majority of people. Strong political trust in and support for the government may well be a necessary prerequisite before a government can embark on such a process, passing legislation that is bound to meet with opposition and taking action that will initially be unpopular. A meticulous process of scrutiny to prevent abuses of the Land Acquisition Act has been part of the Singapore policy. The issues that must be given top priority are equitable compensation and the provision of sufficient and suitable housing for resettled peoples.

As noted by Lim (1983), "A solution for housing the urban poor is always possible, as urban land is an available resource in all countries. It is the lack of political will and understanding of the dynamics of urban development, the ideological hang-ups about the land issue in the free-market system, the shortsightedness and self-interest of the urban elite, and the inadequacy of modern planning practices that have long created the illusion of its insolubility." There are important lessons from the Singapore housing policy that might confirm this conclusion.

9. POSSIBILITY AND SCOPE OF TRANSFERRING TO OTHER COMMUNITIES OR COUNTRIES

Singapore is one of the few countries in the world to have successfully introduced and implemented a large-scale public housing programme with private ownership of individual units. Its success has sometimes been dismissed from wider applicability on the basis that certain circumscribed conditions cannot be replicated or are not present in other countries. The first has to do with the small size of the nation and its population and the second with its strong government and lack of opposition. It is often conceived that the success of the public housing programme in Singapore relies heavily on these two factors, and that indeed the programme could not have succeeded without them as prerequisites, in the light of the numerous public housing failures in

other developed countries.

Such an argument would be unfair as it disregards the HDB's success and the substantive lessons of policy, principles and practice that can be learned from the housing policy. Although there may be unique conditions in Singapore that favoured the chances of success, learning why the HDB's programmes have succeeded would be invaluablely instructive. Modified application of the HDB's housing policies can be tailored to suit various countries with their varied ideological governance systems. As the Singapore example has proven, universal provision of housing and an essentially market economy need not be incompatible, provided there is strong governmental intervention in the social policy.

10. OTHER COMMENTS

All public housing built by the HDB is in the form of high-rise flats. This is due to the acute land shortage on the island and the need to maximise land utilisation. In order to provide quality living conditions with as large a dwelling space as can be afforded, and given the high population density of Singapore, the housing units have to be high-rise.

There has been much criticism locally and internationally concerning the necessity and desirability of living in high-rise buildings (Lim, 1983). The criticism centres on the possible long-term psychological and social effects of high-rise living and the safety factors of congested and high-rise structures.

However, in view of the land shortage problem, this debate and controversy remains largely a moot point until better and more appropriate design solutions for low-rise, high-density housing are developed. In any case, the social and psychological effects of high-density living have still to be contended with, as high-density living is unavoidable in this small island of more than 3 million. For countries that have greater land mass than Singapore, it would of course be possible to develop public housing with a lower density rate or even landed houses rather than flats.

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