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INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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- In Suragao City, The Philippines, women's clubs organized mothers' classes, income-generating projects and improved domestic water supplies, for which they mobilized community contributions to a value of 14% of the construction costs;
- In Karachi, Pakistan, women in a low income urban neighbourhood of 6000 people became motivators of household latrines. Eighty percent of the households have now replaced their bucket latrine by a sanitary latrine and soakpit. The women have also started street cleaning and home schools for girls as their religion does not allow them to visit the public school system;
- In Mexico City, a low-cost housing scheme included a small-scale plant to recycle waste water and organic waste into compost and clean water for irrigation. The plant is operated by women heads of households and managed by a women's cooperative. Its members now visit other neighbourhoods as promoters and trainers of small scale community-based waste disposal systems.
- In Nairobi, Kenya, a group of women living in an urban squatter area built, financed and ran their own extension to the city water supply with support from women members of the national party until a proper expansion of the city network became possible;
- In Belo Horizonte, Brasil, an urban squatter community built and runs its own school, dispensary, women's vocational training course and water supply. The water supply enabled the women to begin a launderette whose income helps to finance the water system.

Why involve women?

These examples clearly show that it can be highly beneficial to involve women actively in the development of their own neighbourhoods. Information to women has led to community support of government projects and the mobilization of women's resources, e.g. in a slum upgrading project in Lusaka, Zambia. Women's organization, or women membership of community organizations has played a role in the initiation of community self-improvements, e.g. in a poor urban neighbourhood in the capital of Honduras, and the Brazilian and Kenyan cases mentioned above.

Their involvement in local planning and design has also ensured that the specific knowledge and interests which women have were fully utilized in the project. Thus, women have pointed out that the planned location of public taps constituted a risk to children because they necessitated crossing a very busy road. Elsewhere designs and locations of public and private latrines have been changed to make them safer and easier to use for women and children.

Involving women in local information and planning has also made projects more accessible to the poorest types of families, those without a male head of household. With the growth of urbanization the number of women

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heads of households is also steadily growing. It has been estimated that this group of households now amounts to ca. 30 % of all low-income urban households. These women and their children are among those with the greatest need and motivation for low-cost urban services such as housing, water, health opportunities for income generating and education for their children. Yet formal selection criteria and conditions, such as a male household head as applicant and achievement of a minimal housing level within a certain period has frequently limited the access of this large group to organized housing improvements such as site and service schemes. Where special steps were taken to encourage such women to apply, their participation increased immediately, e.g. in Nairobi, where 43% of successful applicants were women and in San Salvador, with 40% female participants.

Chances of successful improvement of low income urban neighbourhoods increase when the projects are built on the felt needs and capacities of the inhabitants themselves, and their active participation in local planning implementation and maintenance of the services. These felt needs often differ for men and women. Women spent more time in their direct neighbourhood and are confronted more directly with problems of water supply, sanitation, waste disposal, drainage and safety. Child care and care for the family's health are two other traditional women's tasks. It is therefore not surprising that when women are also asked about their felt needs, projects for environmental improvement and primary health care get a high priority in the community.

Without the active involvement of women such projects have no chance of success. Existing infection risks will only disappear when all households use safe water for drinking and more water for hygiene, when latrines are installed, kept clean and used by all, when children are also taught how to use a latrine and wash their hands afterwards, and when drinking water is stored safely in the house and drawn in a safe way from the storage vessel.

These tasks are typically a women's responsibility. Yet environmental projects are frequently still seen as the exclusive domain of policy makers and engineers, and for community participation, the male local leaders and heads of households. As a result, women are often excluded from such decisions as the location of taps, the management and upkeep of waterpoints and the formation of groups who together share and pay a metered connection or communal washing and toilet facility. In addition, experience shows that women often are highly motivated to not only contribute to the improvement of their direct environment, but also to the operation and maintenance of basic services which they could not afford on a more commercial basis.

Thus, the knowledge, motivation and resources of half of the adult population remains underutilized. This is a negation of women's capacities and a sad waste in the light of the ongoing urban explosion. In the next 20 years, urban areas are expected to grow at an annual rate which is almost 4 times that of rural areas. In 1980 there were 26 cities with over 3 million people in the world. Sixteen of these or 60% were in developing countries. By the year 2000 there will be 26 cities with 10 million people, of which 90% will be in developing countries.

How to involve women?

How women can take an active part in the planning, implementation and consolidation of urban neighbourhood improvements varies with cultural,

socio-economic and political circumstances. However, a number of generalizations can be made as an entry point for a discussion of experiences and exchange of knowledge.

Where the preparation of projects involves any local studies it is very important that also women are consulted in such studies. This has certain implications for the interviewers carrying out such studies. In all cultures it is an advantage that those are women, for ease of communication with other women and permission from husbands for a separate talk, but in some cultures female staff is essential, in any case in the initial phases. Where women can meet together and there are no great divisions in ethnic background or otherwise, good results have been obtained with group discussions in separate women's meetings to identify common felt needs, willingness and capacities to participate etc. and lay the basis for women's organizing where such organization is absent.

Local meetings are also a common way for community information and project discussions. To involve women more actively in such meetings special steps are usually needed, such as, getting the understanding and support of local leaders for involving women in local planning and decision-making, informing women about the meetings and encouraging them to attend, facilitating their attendance by having the meeting at a suitable time and place, having a creche for small children etc. and making it easier for them to express themselves. Having small meetings at the lowest level, in an environment where people know each other, or having separate women's meetings also makes it easier for the women to express themselves when they are really encouraged to give their views.

What kind of improvements of the habitat are possible depends to a great extent on the type, history and status of the settlement of the area concerned. The closer the unity in background, interests and experiences, the more opportunities there will be for community-based improvements. In neighbourhoods with a high turnover and a large number of single men who have come to the city to find work and sent money to their families there are less opportunities for and interest in working together for local improvements and more interest in provisions provided for consumers at a low cost, such as rented housing and commercial bathhouses. Old slums with a stable population of larger families have more stability and sense of community, but earlier experiences with improving their environment have often been negative, so that it needs the stimulation of an external agency, governmental or non-governmental, or a personal intermediary, such as a concerned architect or engineer to start an improvement project based on community involvement.

The legal status of the settlement also plays an important role. Sometimes, e.g. in the case of Lusaka, Zambia, mobilization and involvement of the community, including the women, greatly increased once steps were taken towards legalization of the settlements and people knew their investments would not be lost through demolition. In other cases, particularly in Latin America, the illegal status of the settlements have been a uniting factor and have stimulated communities to set up basic services which the cities could not provide for them for political and economic reasons. The needs and perceptions of the women for better housing, environment and educational opportunities for their children have often played a great role in such community self-improvements.

Two key elements in women's active involvement in physical improvements are availability of income-generating activities and access to construction skills and materials. Experiences of among others the World Bank in San Salvador, the Working Women's Forum in Madras, India, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and the Banco Central Hipotecario in Colombia show an excellent recovery rate for credit to small groups of women entrepreneurs. The income which these and other women earn and over which they have a say is spent primarily on the basic needs of the family, such as food, soap, utensils and water charges. Once united in groups or informal networks, the women also start to pursue common interests, such as day care centres, evening classes, and health and family planning services.

A specific constraint for women in house upgrading and site and service schemes is that they do not always have the necessary construction skills. Project organizations have filled this gap in different ways. In Madras, poor women who are unable to construct their own house can also get a long-term loan to have the project construct the simplest kind of shelter (roof and walls) attached to a central "wet core" of household latrines and a communal tap. This so-called radial design reduced overall construction costs, so that individual loans could be raised by 20% and monthly repayments reduced from Rs. 22 to Rs. 10. Other projects provide assistance by making low-cost designs and providing reliable contractors. In Panama, the Servicio Nacional de Formacion Profesional organized women's courses in masonry, plumbing and carpentry and allowed the women to pay after construction, so that they could let part of the houses built to get the necessary income for loan repayment.

For community self-improvements as well as in projects undertaken by external agencies, local organization is very important. Women can more easily participate in community organizations when men and women can be a member in their own right. Functioning of women on committees is facilitated when women can choose their own representatives, when there is more than one woman on the committee and when women committee members fulfill functions in line with their traditional responsibilities, such as health, children and communication with other women. Where separate women's committees are more appropriate culturally, these are more successful when the women have united around common interests, have got access to training or other necessary inputs and have support of male leaders and husbands. The women themselves have often found excellent ways of obtaining such support. Important for these organizations is also their development of administrative capacities, such as for planning of community activities and management of local contributions.

Such effective involvement of women has specific implications for planners and implementors. Awareness of why and how to involve women, specific mention of women in project plans and objectives, not merely as target group, but as active participants and partners, involvement of female staff at all levels, including increasingly women from the low income areas themselves as fieldstaff and community workers, and adequate budgetary arrangements for consultation, organization and training of women are some of the steps that can assist in making the invisible contributions of women to urban development more visible and providing a basis for more evaluation of results and benefits.

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