

**PRACTICE VERSUS THEORY**  
**THE DILEMMA OF CONTEMPORARY HOUSING RESEARCH**  
**METHODOLOGIES IN THE POOR ECONOMIES -**  
**THE CASE OF NAMUWONGO SLUM UPGRADING PROJECT IN KAMPALA**

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**ABSTRACT**

With no exception the towns and cities of Uganda, like in many other underdeveloped countries, have all experienced problems caused by massive rural-urban migration, resulting in unauthorized and unplanned informal settlements. The reaction of governments has been varied, from outright indifference to limited attempts at solving the problem. In most of the cases, any intervention is rarely guided by researched information. Where there have been attempts to carry out research prior to intervention, the results have often turned out to be far from the expectations of the research findings. In this paper, the author attempts to highlight the discrepancies between recommendations of research carried out using conventional methodologies for a slum up-grading project at Namuwongo in Kampala and the reality after intervention.

**KEY WORDS**

Informal settlements, slum up-grading, site and services, community participation, research methodologies, social research, data collection.

**INTRODUCTION**

As a largely agrarian country, Uganda for a very long time had the lowest urbanization rate in Africa. Since the early 90s, however, Uganda has faced massive migration from the rural areas into the urban centers. This situation has led to acute lack of decent housing for the majority of Uganda's urban dwellers. Most of the migrants have settled into what are locally described as slums. By comparison to slums in developing countries, these settlements are simply unfit for any kind of human habitation.

Most underdeveloped countries, including Uganda, simply do not have the resources to carry out any kind of intervention to improve the conditions in the informal settlements. If there have been attempts to intervene, these have not been backed up by researched information. The results in such circumstances, as might be expected are often worse than the original situation. Where some form of research has been carried out before intervention, the methodologies used have been based on contemporary western social science research methodology, without any attempt to address local conditions.

In 1984, the Uganda Government, with the help of Habitat, launched a project aimed at improving the living conditions of people in Namuwongo, one of the most notorious slums in Kampala. The project was preceded by a study, conducted by the Ministry of Housing. The aim of the study was to find out about people's lifestyles, incomes, social behaviour, etc., in order to propose sustainable solutions for them. Some attempt was

made at involving the people in the study as much as possible. However, at the end of the project, none of the intended beneficiaries remained in the project area. To date, Namuwongo is a slum of another nature, the rich man's slum, with good houses, roads, services, but with no privacy due to acute congestion. What really happened?

## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

Without much debate, we all realize that for a project of this nature to succeed, community participation is essential. But community participation is a relative phenomenon. What really is community participation phenomenon?

One would assume that for a project to fully owned by the beneficiaries, they must have the feeling that they participated in the decision to proceed with that project in the first place. In the case of Namuwongo the assumed beneficiaries were never consulted about the formulation of the project.

When dealing with people living under abject poverty, it is self-defeating to employ methodologies that are used in research on more affluent communities. The people's ego is a key factor if the researcher is to succeed. In the case of Namuwongo, the first step in community consultation was a meeting for the project team with the potential beneficiaries on site. The team came to meet the beneficiaries with already pre-conceived ideas about what was to be done. At the meeting the people were informed about the proposal to upgrade their area. They were not given the opportunity to debate whether there was a need to upgrade the area, how it should be done should the decision so favour, or even who should benefit from the exercise, and even who should be in charge of the project. Moreover, they were not given the opportunity to air their views on how the beneficiaries would finance the exercise.

The purpose of the meeting was manifold:

- To form a record of the residents of the project area
- To serve as confirmation to the authorities as to how many families resided in the project area
- To convince the community that their slum area could be upgraded
- To gauge the level of acceptance by the community for the project.

These sound like the same factors any planners of slum up-grading projects across the globe would be looking for.

An enumeration process ensued, followed by election of community representatives, who were then to represent the rest of the community at planning meetings at the Ministry of Housing. It was at these meetings that most decisions were taken, including the conditions of the up-grading process. The community representatives were then expected to report back the decisions of the meeting to the community they represented, which decisions they were bound to accept.

## **PROJECT PLANNING**

Planning a project like the one at Namuwongo should start from assessing the need for the project, a process which should involve the community. In the case of Namuwongo, this crucial stage was skipped. The most important decision was imposed from above, or worse still from without.

The basic concept for the project was a site and service scheme on public land, which the community 'illegally' occupied. Up-grading would comprise creation of individual sites along with the provision of basic services, including roads and piped water. All the structures in the area were to be demolished as they did not conform to the city's building regulations. Nobody stopped to ask where the residents would go as they built their new homes!

The basis for the planning concept was questionable from the word go. The planners assumed that all the families on the land in the planning area were capable of paying for the land and obtaining titles for it. In the study that was undertaken prior to implementation of the project, the researchers sought to know the income levels of the family by asking them how much they earned, how often they ate, etc. These questions were not qualified by the numerous factors that make the African extended family.

It is often erroneously assumed that the socio-economic factors affecting the poor are similar irrespective of geographical location. In fact, an extended family in Uganda is very different from an extended family in Columbia. In many Ugandan cultures, there are no equivalent terms for step brother or cousin, for example. In the Ugandan context, step brothers and cousins are simply brothers. This has a very important implication for one's income, which may not be very easy to measure. Either that person earns some income as a result of these relationships, or actually has to support these not so distant relatives that the researcher so often does not remember to enquire about. It is not so difficult to see why even people with no income of their own will readily say that they have the capacity to buy a site in the slum up-grading project.

After the basic concept was accepted by the community, the process of actual physical planning, including demarcation of sites and service routes began. As is expected, the technocrats assumed that this was a feat beyond the capacity of the local community. What do they understand about physical planning anyway? The only research the planners undertook was literature review, in which they identified examples of planning solutions in similar conditions. There was no attempt to find out from the beneficiaries what kind of neighbourhood they would wish to have, what orientation they would prefer, what materials of construction they would prefer or could afford, and so on and so forth. At least the planners agreed with most of the planners that they were too poor to build their houses in one go and designed incremental schemes. But even then, the beneficiaries were never consulted about the specifics of the order in which they would wish to build incrementally. In short, the community was by and large excluded from the physical planning process.

## **COMMUNITY EDUCATION OR COMMUNITY DEDICATION?**

The majority of the community in the Namuwongo project came from a rural background devoid of any kind of modern civilization. If the project were to succeed, education of the community about living properly in an urban setting was essential. Attempts at educating the community were made. But the methods left a lot to be desired. There is nothing a rural immigrant de-tastes more than being told that they have a rural character in them. His impression could be given to the people being sensitized unknowingly when unnecessary emphasis is put on the fact that the beneficiaries are entering a new, more civilized way of life. This appears to have happened in the Namuwongo project. Several former beneficiaries gave as reason for their pulling out of the project the manner in which they were disregarded during the community education sessions. Without properly laid out guidelines, the facilitators do more of dedicating the community to the project than educating them about the project.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Any well-planned project must identify possible limitations that are likely to affect the proper implementation of the project. This must be done at the research stage. In the case of the Namuwongo project, there seem to have been serious omissions in this respect. During the course of implementation, several apparently unforeseen problems appeared. These included the following:

- Heightened interest in the project by the middle income groups due to the increased marketability of the land in the project area;
- Influx into the project area of imaginary 'relatives' leading to complications in determination of such issues as plot ratios;
- The apparent wide range in income levels of the beneficiaries, some of whom were actually middle income earners residing in the project area for various reasons;
- Inability or unwillingness by some of the beneficiaries to begin construction work at the same time for different reasons.

It is clear that these problems could not have been foreseen because of the structure of the pre-implementation study.

## **THE RESULT**

The Namuwongo slum up-grading project was intended to benefit the apparently poor people who illegally occupied public land. The result was far from the intention. Today Namuwongo is occupied mostly by middle income and even some high income families. How did this actually happen? Below are some of the reasons for this discrepancy.

**i) APPRECIATION OF LAND VALUES**

One of the biggest problems facing Kampala City is the lack of services such as good roads, piped water, electricity supply, sewerage services, schools, etc. The Namuwongo project promised all these. Given the added advantage of its proximity to the city center (within walking distance) the project became a big attraction to the middle income groups, who were quick to buy off the intended beneficiaries.

**ii) MONETARY GAINS**

The majority of the intended beneficiaries were poor people, who earned a living the hard way, mostly through hard labour in the city's commercial district. They lived, according to the popular expression, from hand to mouth. On a bad day they would go without food. So when the opportunity of getting a good sum of money in one go came their way, it is not difficult to understand why many of them jumped to it. They saw in this an opportunity to get quick and easy capital to begin a business which would make them bid farewell to poverty for good.

**METHODOLOGICAL DEFICIENCIES**

The project as originally planned did not attain its objectives. From the problems identified above, it is clear that there were some problems with the methodology used in planning the project and assessing its success. The pre-implementation study made should have been predominantly of a social nature, taking into account the intricacies of an African society in transition. As it were, the study dwelt mainly with the physical planning aspects of the project and under-played the importance of the social science aspects.

The research methods that could be used in a study for a project of this nature would include the following:

- Formal interviews
- Informal interviews
- Questionnaires
- Observation
- Experimentation
- Document analysis.

Apparently only the first one was used. Given the complexity of the project, however, all the methods should have been used in order to compliment each other and to fill gaps where more formal information would lack.

For interviews or questionnaires to give correct and objective results, the interviewer must avoid ambiguity, vagueness of words, leading questions, presumed questions, hypothetical questions, embarrassing questions and questions involving memory.

The interviewers must be trained to have the following attributes:

- Honesty
- Accuracy
- Interest
- Adaptability
- Personality
- Intelligence and education.

The other methods mentioned above would be carried out in a more conventional manner as they do not directly impact on the psychology of the beneficiaries.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Namuwongo slum up-grading project was first and foremost a social project, that only required technical input at the very end. Instead, a lot of emphasis was put on the technical aspects of the project at the expense of the social content.

The little social study that was conducted did not address the intricacies of the society in transformation and instead relied on conventional assumptions of an industrialized society. The often advanced argument that what happened to the project was a result of inevitable economic and social pressures is true to an extent, but the situation could have been very different had an adequate social study been conducted prior to the implementation of the project.

## **REFERENCES**

*(to follow)*