Social Aspects of Urban Housing in Cairo

Public housing should be evaluated by the occupants themselves and not by government officials, planners and social scientists. The low-income target group should be consulted and participate in the design plan stage, as well as on the location and administration to ensure that the space and urban environment conforms to their life-styles, economic activities, cultural values and social behaviour. The social consequences of planning without popular participation are reflected in the many problems facing public housing projects. In brief the main complaints with public housing constructed since 1980 in Cairo include: geographic isolation; economic hardship, and the suppression of cultural identity.

Geographic Isolation
Public housing in the 1950's and 60's despite its uninspiring design and unwelcome shabby appearance on some of the major streets of Cairo was advantageous for low-income groups in that it was integrated into the economic and social mainstream of the city in proximity to markets, workshops, shops, schools, hospitals. This policy of integration of the urban poor into the city reflected the government's concern with social goals which included preservation of the social fabric and minimisation of economic hardships involved in relocation.

The major complaint of occupants of public housing constructed since 1980 is its geographic isolation. Occupants of low-income housing in areas such as Doueuka, Ain Shams, Madinet Al-Salam listed proximity to work or al tiwil as their major priority. This factor assumes greater importance the poorer the family, who often prefer to live in tents or in shabby temporary shelter in Doueuka than to move selectively well built 2- or 3-room apartments in Madinet Al-Salam.

The criterion for siting low-income housing projects on the city outskirts reflect a shift in value priorities by government planners, from social objectives to economic considerations. At a time when the government is unable to cope with the thousands of families evicted from old stock housing (10,000 houses are liable to collapse in Cairo and Alexandria each year) it has planned demolition of whole quarters in the city centre (Eishash Torgoman, Al Mahadmad) to be vacated for tourist, banking and other "open door policy" priorities.

Relocating inhabitants 2 to 8 kilometres beyond Cairo airport was called "slum clearance" and "urban reconstructions" by the authorities and the local newspapers. Families displaced in 1980 from mosques and historic monuments in the historic city centre (evicted by speculators who buy low-rent buildings located on prime commercial land and proceed to tear them down) have also been relocated to these new housing projects.

Economic Hardship
The relocation of low-income groups from the inner city to public housing on the outskirts has resulted in economic hardship and in many cases total loss of income for one or more members of the families. The urban policies which affect low-income groups most adversely according to occupants of public housing are the following:

Cost of Housing and Workshop Space
For the first time in its history the gov-
ernorate is “selling” as opposed to “renting” flats; a measure which has meant an increase of up to 200 percent in monthly outlay for shelter. While workers, producers and employees can afford what is still considered reasonable in market terms (LE.18-22 a month) for a flat, the very poor who were paying minimal sums for rooms in the rent-controlled inner city (LE.0.5-5) are unable to meet these payments. (Pension for the aged, widows, etc. averages LE.10 a month.)

All shops and workshops were sold by the governorate for LE.8,000-12,000. While small artisans, producers and tradesmen could have afforded to pay reasonable rent (up to LE.20-25 a month), they have been unable to secure the capital necessary to buy into shop and workshop space. These commercial spaces have been bought by merchants and speculators, who saw in them a good investment. Even today most of these premises are closed; depriving the communities of useful goods and services. At the same time the mainly self-employed occupants of the low-income housing (vendors, artisans, repairmen, etc.) are unable to find workspace in their own community.

**Employment**

Most bread-winners have to use public transport to continue to seek work in the inner city. This means a minimum of two and half to four hours each way, thus aggravating an already overburdened transport system. It also means an outlay for transport fare averaging about LE.12 a month per person.

While in the old quarters employment in informal sector activities, including selling of inexpensive cooked food (koshari) and household articles, provided employment to many of the unskilled poor, these activities have been banned in the new public housing areas. As licences are not issued, all attempts at gainful employment by vendors and hawkers is subject to harrassment and confiscation of goods by the municipal authorities.

Deprived of work and shop space many families use their balconies to hang signs advertising their occupation e.g. plumber, or if fortunate, to occupy a ground floor flat to sell tinned goods and vegetables. These families are also subject to harrassment and fines since their lease stipulates that no commercial or manufacturing activity is allowed in the flats.

A petition for workshop space from small artisans, producers and vendors was presented to the governor of Cairo in January 1984 by the M.P. from Gamalia and the president of a voluntary association from that area and is still being “studied”. This was despite the fact that the voluntary association located and measured vacant land near the housing, and offered to find financing to build the shops and workshops.

**Cost of Food**

By eliminating shop space for the small grocer (bakal), the vegetable and fruit seller, the vendor of cooked foods (koshari), government authorities have deprived low-income occupants of sources of inexpensive food. Government cooperatives sell mainly canned and packaged goods. The poor cannot afford to buy cheese by the kilo and need the little grocer who sells a slice of cheese and a few pickles — often on credit. Vegetables brought in daily from Bilbeis and Cairo are sold with considerable price mark-up. Even local bilad (Egyptian bread) has to be “imported” from Cairo as the government’s bakery only produces white bread. Thus the cost for necessary basic goods and services have soared for the low-income occupants while income has diminished.

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1. Egyptian Pound (LE) is equivalent to US$0.83

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**Break up in the Community Structure and its Consequences**

**Break-up of Community Ties**

One of the consequences of relocation of families to the outlying areas is the break-up in family and neighbourhood ties which provided psychological security, mutual support and social stability. The traditional support system based on trust of neighbours is also suffering.

**Elimination of Social Support System for the Urban Poor Family**

The separation of the poor from the higher income groups, since it is only the poor who have been evicted has meant that, in the public housing in the new areas, poor families are deprived of the counsel and zakat (charity) of the better-off members of the community.

The urban poor in the historic city centre also benefited from an extensive network of services provided by voluntary agencies which were founded by
well-to-do or educated members of the community. The services ranged from day-care centres, vocational training centres, dispensaries, family planning clinics, burial aid societies, old age homes, Quranic schools, adult education programmes, children's club, family reconciliation centres and other community development services. Governorate policy is to equip each housing area with one combined social-health unit and one voluntary agency and believes that this fulfils the needs of the urban poor.

Politicisation in New Urban Areas

Having designed and assumed responsibility for the construction of public housing — both the "temporary shelter" in Douecka and the permanent public housing in Ain Shams and Madinet al-Salam, the governorate assumes it has the right to be the sole guardian for social and political action. Any attempts by local residents to organise themselves to solve their own problems or for voluntary agencies to extend their services to the new areas have been suppressed. For example a request from a voluntary agency to obtain a flat from the governor to offer services in Douecka has not been granted since January, 1980. A similar request to the governor for a flat in Madinet al-Salam presented in January 1984 was denied on the grounds that no flats are distributed to voluntary associations — only the National Party members were able to promise one. Thus occupants of public housing are subjected to political control unprecedented in their old quarters. Incentives to political participation are visible in permits accorded to set up small workshops in Douecka.

Control

Another mechanism of control has been created in a special police force called shorted al marafek whose main responsibility is to clear all streets of "obstructions"; which means vendors, kiosks, carts and encroachments. Since licences are not issued to vendors and carters all informal sector activities relating to trade and transport are automatically considered illegal.

Periodically shorted al marafek sweeps down confiscating carts and goods, destroying kiosks with bulldozers giving owners no time to collect and retrieve merchandise. A representative of the ILO (International Labour Organisation) was present during such a campaign in Douecka in the Mokattam Hills (although as there is no car traffic in Douecka the kiosks on the sides of the road could hardly be considered to obstruct traffic).

The psychological damage done to the poor who have sometimes invested a lifetime's savings is reflected in such statements as "there is a vendetta (tar) between the government and the people". Efforts to stop this by the M.P. from Gamalta were too late for many. It remained for the voluntary agency to try to aid some of the victims with small amounts of seed money to relaunch their business.

Suppression of Cultural Identity from Two Planning, and of Traditional Occupations and Lifestyles

Many of the problems facing low-income housing projects stem from the fact that decision-makers in the government are alienated from their cultural traditions and instruct planners and architects to design western-style residential areas which may be suitable for middle class families but do not accommodate the lifestyles and traditional occupations of the informal sector.

This mentality (which has been called "autocolonisation") seeks to penalise the traditional artisan, small entrepreneur and petty tradesman by denying them means to exercise their occupations. Shops and workshops go to larger entrepreneurs and speculators from outside the area who can afford to buy the commercial space. Leases stipulate that no manufacturing however noiseless or non-polluting, can take place inside the flats; small kiosks are not allowed to be built to serve as workspace; vendors and hawkers who supply the poor with inexpensive basic goods are not allowed to circulate in the streets. Human street-culture so characteristic of the traditional quarters has been wiped out to prevent obstruction of traffic which hardly exists as the urban poor possess no cars.

Policy-makers hope that the inhabitants will be transformed into "modern Egyptians" in this new environment, while in fact these families are facing a slow but certain economic death.

When this is pointed out the reply invariably states that London, Paris and New York are not like this. The western model is always wrongly invoked.

Thus the destruction of indigenous cultural identity is at the root of most of the social problems arising from public housing projects.

The solutions also lie in its rediscovery.

Nawal Mahmoud Hassan is an Egyptian sociologist. She is the director of the Centre for Egyptian Civilisation Studies in Cairo and has been involved, for many years, in the preservation and revitalisation of old Cairo and Nubian settlements at Aswan.