

Working with and for marginalized communities

The Undugu Society of Kenya is the largest indigenous NGO in the country. Kuria Gathuru explains how the organization's way of working has evolved to enable them to continue to help many of Kenya's most marginalized people.

THE ALLOCATION OF HOUSING from the founding of Nairobi in 1899 up until independence in 1963 was based on colour and economic background. Migration to the city was restricted by law, so growth was contained and infrastructure kept pace. After independence, men and women flooded in from the rural areas, in search of new and better lives. For the women the driving force was the customary inheritance system, which allows only sons to inherit their father's land, and leaves marriage as the only option for daughters.

Within two decades, Nairobi's population mushroomed. The city's infrastructure was not designed for such a large population, and housing in particular was inadequate and inappropriate. These new migrants were too poor to rent houses, so they squatted on land that belonged to the government, the local authority, or to private individuals, and founded the first of Nairobi's many informal settlements. Today, of an estimated population of 2.3 million, about 20 per cent of the people are considered 'high income', and they occupy 80 per cent of the residential area. Over 60 per cent of the population live in Nairobi's 76 informal settlements, usually making do without roads, piped water, toilets, schools, drainage, or health care services. It is with these communities that the Undugu Society works.

Undugu is a Kenyan NGO, established in 1973 through the efforts of Father Arnold Grol, a Dutch Catholic Priest. The original objective was to help street children. Over time, the aims have changed from rehabilitating children already on the streets to addressing the circumstances that lead the children there. After abandoning the earlier practice of moving the children out of the city (and away from its 'attractions') to a rural home, Undugu began to work in their communities instead.

Undugu soon learned that before any concrete structural or technological changes could be made, the participation of the community was essential. Now all work starts with the community. The following objectives underlie all Undugu projects:

- To enhance the socio-economic status of people in low-income areas through an integrated approach to community and small-scale business development.
- To enhance the sense of responsibility of people in low-income areas for their own development.
- To provide non-financial assistance to other organizations that are involved in similar activities.
- To progressively reduce to a minimum level the organization's dependence on donor funding.
- To influence policymakers to change their attitude and practices to policies that are favourable and appropriate.

To achieve these objectives the organization has adopted an integrated development strategy, and is now working with the whole community.

The two major worries of people living in informal settlements are insecurity and poverty. Developing and empowering the people living in a community can lead to the enrichment, in a number of ways, of that community. For this to happen a change in attitude and practice is required both from the community members and from the policymakers, and everyone

must make a commitment to developing the area that they live in. The aim is to have people-centred rather than sector-centred development.

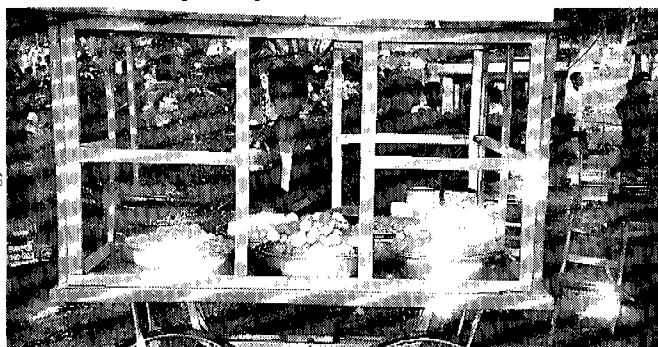
Undugu has adopted the *multiple entry point intervention strategy*, which integrates the organization's various programmes, combining housing, health, education, agriculture, appropriate technology, and others into a single programme. This has enabled programmes of work to be carried out with minimal cost to either Undugu or the community. Fieldworkers are encouraged to be flexible and innovative in their work.

The whole technology development process has also been adapted to integrate the technology and social work aspects of



Undugu began by working with children, but is now involved in community development.

Street food — dietary staple or health hazard?



The street-food trade provides an essential service to urban dwellers in the South, and is an important source of income and employment for the urban poor.

Very large numbers of people, in fact: studies by the Washington-based Equity Policy Center (EPOC) in seven developing countries show that street foods provide employment for 6 to 25 per cent of the labour force in the cities studied. The incomes of these workers were three times the average agricultural wage.

Street foods provide a high proportion of the daily nutritional needs of millions of people, including the very poor. The EPOC studies show that they can account for as much as 20 per cent of the food budget of a typical urban family. Far from being some sort of easy or extravagant option, the studies also show that buying street foods can work out cheaper than cooking the same meals at home. On the macro level, it has been proved that street-food vending plays a critical role in the economy of the developing world.

As you might expect, there is another side to this success story. Neither the nutritional, nor to the microbiological quality of street foods is all it could be. These problems are often overstressed, however, and the quality of snacks sold on the streets is often no worse than the meals prepared in restaurants.

Becoming a street-food vendor, and staying in business is difficult. The trade is often illegal, and when the vendors are driven off the streets their families suffer. What is needed is an approach that fosters the sale of safe street foods. Legalizing street foods in developing countries must surely be a priority for anyone concerned with equitable development.

Realizing that the permanent abolition of street foods is not a practical option, many municipal governments have begun to address the issue seriously. In a move similar to the gradual softening of attitudes towards 'squatters', city politicians have altered their approach, from confrontation to co-operation. As with responses to the housing shortage, a single solution is not possible, because it could not reflect the incredible variations of culture, food habits, and municipal constraints that characterize the sector.

Nonetheless, there are models which could be adapted in diverse situations. This is illustrated by events in the Egyptian city of Minia, where a group of influential citizens and government officials formed an NGO to work with the street-food vendors. The Organization for the Development and Support of Street Vendors in the City of Minia provides a possible model for working with vendors in other cities in Egypt and, with considerable adaptation, in other countries. ●

Further reading

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development. The Undugu team and the communities have worked together on stabilized soil blocks, urban agriculture, fibre-concrete roofing tiles, banana-fibre baskets, and waste recycling technologies, such as the briquetting of paper and sawdust for fuel, the re-use of waste motor and cooking oil for making soap, and the recycling of plastic, among others. The development of these technologies led naturally to the formation of small businesses, with the help of the business development department, which is facilitated by business advisors and social workers. They found that many of their clients were not going into business just for the money, there were also social reasons: to keep busy and to create an identity for themselves.

Shelter development

It is very difficult to pinpoint a specific entry point into the technology development process. Since the beginning Undugu has gone through three major phases: 'show and tell and give'; facilitation; and collaboration.

During the first phase, Undugu had just begun working in the slum areas. A lot of time was spent just talking with the communities, and we learned that shelter was their number one priority. As early as 1974 the organization was showing people how to upgrade their dwelling units. Undugu also established the Mathare Valley Village Polytechnic, in the sprawling slum of Mathare. The aim of the polytechnic was to transfer technical skills to rehabilitate youths and others from the area.

The second phase, facilitation, used extension services to convey messages and change attitudes. During this phase, 1980-90, there was greater emphasis on the creation of facilitatory structures, such as democratic forums, and action research at the community level. This was more effective than the 'show and tell and give' phase, which had created dependency among the communities.

The experiments that occurred in this phase identified technology options which helped to strengthen links between Undugu's production units and the communities. To us at Undugu this phase identified key breakthrough concepts which are still being implemented and redefined.

The third and final phase emphasized collaboration, where Undugu and the communities share responsibilities in technology choice and community development. A system of attaching trainees to artisans was established as an alternative to the village polytechnics, and it was found to be more effective, with trainees adopting skills more quickly than their counterparts in formal institutions. The parents or guardian of a trainee pay half the costs, and Undugu contribute the other half. The trainees are attached to community artisans who in turn are upgraded through both product development training and recognition by the community.

Undugu believes that stimulating and fostering peoples' participation in their own development is the best way to bring out the creativity and true potential of individuals and communities. While this is usually the case, it does not apply in all situations, and at the moment the effects of structural adjustment programmes and other local and international factors have been strangling the empowerment process. This is resulting in feelings of exhaustion and entrapment within some sections of the marginalized communities, such as the artisans, commercial sex workers, and single mothers and their children.

Marginalized communities

Undugu defines the terms 'affordable' and 'appropriate' in relation to the developing urban communities with whom we are working: what is affordable and appropriate to them is affordable and appropriate to us.

We use the term 'developing' community to describe a process (of people on the move) rather than a 'target'. These developing communities are all located in informal settlements, and one of the most significant projects in which Undugu has applied its principles of community participation is in the upgrading of informal settlements in Nairobi.

The initial involvement was and still is aimed at meeting the needs for shelter at minimal costs. Through a collaborative venture between the local administration and the affected communities, Undugu embarked on the construction of 200 houses in Kanuku at a cost of about KSh5000 (about £75 in December 1994) per two-roomed unit. These units were initially made of mud and wattle and were later plastered with cement to increase their durability and make them more resistant to both fire and floods. The other slum upgrading activities include installing drainage systems and toilets, planting trees, and building water jars to collect run-off from the gutters on the roofs.

Apart from Undugu's housebuilding activities it was also the International Year of Shelter in 1986, so Undugu's attempts to search for sustainable solutions to informal settlement upgrading received considerable encouragement. As a result, technologies have been developed that are affordable and appropriate for communities in marginal urban environments.

Upgrading an informal settlement involves both improving the living environment and facilitating other development activities. It needs people to participate in building housing and sanitation, and in improving other social and physical infrastructure. Above all it is a process of restoring hope among the marginalized communities of Nairobi.

Undugu initially became involved in low-cost shelter in Kitui village in 1983: when a fire destroyed over 150 cardboard and polythene structures the community asked Undugu to help them to rebuild their homes. The outcome of the project was 500 dwelling units, a nursery school, and a community hall made of mud, wattle, and corrugated iron sheets. The community and the local administration participated fully in all stages.

Transformation

Another upgrading scheme, this time in Kanuku-Kinyago village, was started in 1984 after floods, fire, and eviction made the people decide to really solve their problems. The community knew of Undugu's work because of Kitui, and approached them for help. By the end of 1985 500 dwelling units and 20 water jars had been built, with courtyards, roads, drainage, and other infrastructure. An additional 200 houses have been built by people using resources generated from the village. The former flood plain (which had been used for brewing illegal liquor and for waste disposal) was in 1988 turned into an urban gardening site.

The additional infrastructure that came in later included 24 toilets in Kanuku, 48 VIP toilets in Kinyago, and 54 toilets in Kitui village, plus a Basic Education School in Kitui and social hall/community nursery school in Kinyago. Some members of Kanuku village decided, in 1985, to improve their housing further. Forty two-room houses were built and plastered, and drainage and water jars were installed. These improvements were tailored to fit land tenure policy, urban building standards, and the survival mechanism of the low-income communities.

These activities began by applying rural housing standards in informal settlements. The shifts in urban housing policy have enabled Undugu to use low-cost housing technologies like sisal, cement, stabilized soil blocks, and VIP latrines. The impact of these technologies on sanitation and housing have influenced further policy shifts towards affordable housing. The possibility of building both low-cost high-rise structures and collaborative ventures are being considered with the Housing and Building

Research Institute, University of Nairobi. Already some community members have started constructing low-cost high-rise buildings in Kitui — an indicator of how innovative the informal settlement communities are. This phase of the work has been termed 'from fear to trust', as communities have been empowered, and they experiment and share results among themselves.

In 1991 some members of the community asked Undugu to help them build permanent houses on their plots in other low-income areas of Nairobi. With support from IT Kenya and Homeless International the experiments on affordable housing are now turning into reality — although more slowly than expected.

Women

At Undugu, upgrading means improving the total living environment, and includes people who are marginalized in all activities, and therefore need to be reassured of their identity.

A major lesson that came out of our experience in informal settlement upgrading is that human development and empowerment facilitates the reconstruction and development of the environment, and any project that lacks total community support will not succeed. Based on this it became clear that women hold the key to informal settlement upgrading. It is worth noting that between 60 and 80 per cent of the heads of households in such environments are single mothers who do casual work, or are engaged in hawking or other small-scale enterprises.

In the Kitui-Pumwani Upgrading programme, for example, women have been involved in all project phases, ranging from needs identification through implementation to evaluation and monitoring. The women comprise between 70 and 80 per cent of the membership of community groups in the area. Through women's groups Undugu has been able to overcome suspicion and has been able to gain a key entry point into the community, the local administration, and even the youth who comprise over 45 per cent of the total population of the area.

The upgrading strategy relied fundamentally on the participation of women and youth. Currently there are about 18 women's groups (up from 10 in 1988) and about eight youth groups, all of whom are involved in various income-generating activities. The youth were trained in basic carpentry and masonry skills and are now upgrading houses and constructing drainage and other infrastructure, all with the support of their mothers.

Informal settlement upgrading is a slow but rewarding process for both the NGO and the community. Through the upgrading process we have developed *trust* between us and the community, and learned how to turn failure into a springboard by accommodating it into project planning and implementation.

We do not claim that we have uncovered all the causes or reasons let alone the main problems of marginalized communities. Yet certain facts are significant: in particular the origins of informal settlement upgrading, the community participation, and the determination of the people in Kitui-Pumwani.

In this instance the idea of upgrading did come from the community, and Undugu and donors took it up. But as time went on the community took over and are now upgrading the living environment with minimal intervention from Undugu.

An urban informal environment is very different to a rural setting. Problems are personal and people's survival mechanisms are individualistic. Promoting community participation in a marginalized community is a risky and ambitious enterprise, but our successes and failures have helped us to learn how to work with marginalized communities. ●

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