

People's Housing Process: Enhanced!

By Becky Himlin, November 2008 (Published on NGO Pulse)

Communities can look forward to greater involvement in housing delivery thanks to the approval of a new policy, the Enhanced People's Housing Process (ePHP), adopted in July 2008 to replace the old PHP programme. This policy is the result of lengthy negotiations with the National Department of Housing (NDoH) on the part of a handful of NGOs, dating back to 2004. The new policy adopts a broader definition of PHP, allowing for greater flexibility and choice while maintaining the central principles of people-centred development. The policy framework states:

'ePHP enables/encourages communities to actively contribute and participate in the housing development process so that communities take ownership of the process and not just act as passive recipients of housing.... ePHP recognizes that the community is the initiator and driver of the process. The programme is intended to build on existing livelihood strategies so that social capital that has been built up in a community is capitalised on. ePHP therefore builds on the positive steps that communities have taken to organize and house themselves rather than diminish the contribution that communities have made.'

'The main aim of the ePHP programme is to deliver better human settlement outcomes...based on community contribution, partnerships and the leveraging of additional resources through partnerships. This is achieved by developing livelihoods interventions which lead to outcomes such as job creation, developing a culture of savings, skills transfer, and community empowerment, building of community assets and social security and cohesion.'

The adoption of the policy represents a significant victory for NGOs who, despite a difficult and extended process, kept up the pressure on the NDoH to follow through with recommendations developed through a consultation process that the department had agreed to. However, it was not until March 2007 that the request to review the policy in line with these recommendations was approved, initiating a renewed series of meetings with NGOs, and ultimately resulting in the re-crafted policy.

NGOs that had experience in supporting projects through the PHP, including Planact(1), had joined together in 2004, with support from Rooftops Canada, to articulate a common position for changes needed to make the policy more workable. With the release of the NDoH's 'Breaking New Ground' strategy in September 2004, the group felt that if they developed a position paper it would be a welcome contribution to the goals the NDoH had set itself in the national strategy, particularly its statement that: 'it is essential that communities and beneficiaries of government housing programmes be mobilized to partner in the implementation of the new human settlements plan...Communities and community-based organisations must be mobilised to engage more effectively with the housing programme.'

While the policy recommendations of the PHP Reference Group initially did not meet with any response by the NDoH, when the NDoH initiated a consultation process around the need to review the People's Housing Partnership Trust (an institution with the mandate to support the implementation of the PHP), the participating organisations in the Reference Group were invited, and began to make a noise about how the PHP policy needed to be reviewed as well. The first NDoH consultation conference held in October 2005, which had broad participation

from municipalities and provinces as well as the NGOs making up the Reference Group, developed a new definition for the PHP:

“The PHP is a people centred process in which groups and individuals exercise direct control over delivery in a way that promotes choice over location, tenure, housing, services and amenities. Through PHP, people design and manage their developmental resources to build sustainable human settlements.”

While it had been revealed that new PHP guidelines had just been approved for the programme, the Reference Group raised serious concerns that these did not adequately address some of the fundamental issues as articulated in the Reference Group’s position paper. The group objected to the much narrower definition of the PHP as self-build housing involving contributions of “sweat equity” as opposed to the use of contractors, when fundamentally it should be about a collective, community-based process of decision-making that would seek to address housing in the context of other social needs and community priorities. In addition, the role of the support organisation (to provide organisational, technical and financial support to the community-based process) was inadequately conceptualised and resourced.

The DoH finally agreed to a re-think of the policy that would incorporate the concerns of the NGO sector, and established a PHP Policy Working Group (PWG) in early 2006. The group included the NGO members of the PHP Reference Group, representatives from the NDoH, representatives from the PHPT, UN-Habitat, and an academic, supported by consultants appointed to facilitate the process and produce the final report. The draft recommendations were presented at another NDoH consultative forum in February 2006, and a comprehensive document was prepared by March of that year. The document stated:

‘There is now a defining moment which needs to be seized as it presents the opportunity to revisit the way in which government supports PHP. This needs to be done by fundamentally reviewing and redesigning the policies, legislation and instruments which provide the enabling environment in which people can house themselves. We suggest that the manner in which this is done should be through the co-creation of policy and delivery instruments between government and civil society. It should be based in, and modelled on, the diversity of practice that already exists in the country. It should be informed by a new batch of pilot or demonstration projects. The desired outcome would be to (a) rebuild the government-funded support instrument and (b) inform what action needs to be taken by a national agency to improve the enabling environment for PHP (2).’

While the moment was not seized immediately, a series of attempts to get the NDoH to take the process forward ensued, through written correspondence from the Reference Group members and meetings with various departmental officials. A year after the PWG submission, the NDoH head of the implementation unit for Social, Rental and PHP housing was assigned with the task of resuscitating the policy-making process, and another series of meetings with the NGOs of the PHP Reference Group were held, along with another consultation process in the provinces.

The new policy framework has certainly benefited from the extensive consultation that has taken place, and the programme is poised to be implemented in the financial year beginning 1 April 2009. But much work still remains in developing the detail that would enable the framework to be successfully implemented. Fortunately, the NGOs are still involved at this

stage, having demonstrated their commitment throughout this long advocacy effort. Replacing the 'support organisations' in the old PHP policy will be the Community Resource Organisations, who will serve as implementing agents for the programme. It is imperative that the provinces and municipalities also seize the opportunity to re-invigorate this flagging programme and do their part to contribute to positive development outcomes through e-PHP.

Notes

1. Other organisations involved included the Development Action Group, the Built Environment Support Group, Afesis-Corplan, Urban Services Group, Utshani Fund and FED-UP.
2. Report on Progress in the PHP Policy Working Group, Mark Napier and Jana Perold for the Peoples Housing Partnership Trust, March 2006.