

How to keep the ‘people’ in PHP: an evaluation of the Vosloorus People’s Housing Process

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Abstract:

This paper presents a review of an evaluation of a Peoples’ Housing Process in Vosloorus, which resulted in the construction of 250 homes for low income beneficiaries between January 2003 and September 2003. It is critical to learn from a PHP project such as the Vosloorus PHP, since there have been few examples of successful PHPs in the country. The Vosloorus case demonstrates that a PHP can truly be participatory and still deliver a quality product at a reasonable pace.

The Peoples’ Housing Process (PHP) is a form of housing delivery in South Africa that depends heavily on community initiative and beneficiary involvement in the delivery process, and local job creation and skills development is maximised. Planact, a non-profit development organisation, was involved in supporting a PHP process to upgrade an existing informal settlement in Vosloorus, within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, east of Johannesburg. Planact conducted an evaluation of Phase I of the project soon after its completion in September 2003.

The houses produced were 36-square metre brick homes on already-serviced sites. To build the top structures, local labourers, including beneficiaries, formed teams who worked under the supervision of 10 emerging contractors from the community. Another important characteristic of the process was the promotion of women in the construction process—30% of the labourers were required to be women, and three of the ten contractors were also women.

The evaluation included a survey of 50 randomly-selected beneficiaries of the housing, as well as surveys with labourers, contractors, Steering Committee members and other stakeholders. The paper presents the outcome of the evaluation, focusing on the following issues : community and women’s participation, satisfaction with housing constructed and benefits of the project, potential for other options/choices in housing design, and performance of the Steering Committee and Housing Support Centre.

1 Introduction to the People’s Housing Process

The Peoples Housing Process (PHP) is a form of housing delivery in South Africa that depends heavily on community initiative and beneficiary¹ involvement in the delivery process. It makes

¹ The term ‘beneficiary’ refers to those households who receive a government housing subsidy; despite the obvious shortcomings in the term given the highly community-driven nature of the PHP, it is used

use of subsidies provided through the Department of Housing, but instead of an established developer producing the housing on behalf of the beneficiaries, the community drives the construction process, and local job creation and skills development is maximised. According to Napier [1], this programme drew some inspiration from the South African Homeless People's Federation, which is an organised movement of savings groups in local communities, set up to facilitate self-help housing through a revolving loan fund it established, the Utshani Fund. Napier also traces the influence of other NGOs involved in community-based initiatives for housing as well as the United Nations Development Programme and other international bodies.

The PHP was officially launched in 1998 with the establishment of guidelines for the process. According to Chapter 3, Part 4 of the National Housing Code [2], the PHP is meant to "support specifically the poorest of the poor families who usually only have access to housing subsidies and who wish to enhance their subsidies by building or organising the building of their homes themselves." Stated advantages of the process are that beneficiaries can save on labour costs, avoid having to pay a profit element to developers, and can make decisions on their housing options that are informed by their own needs and an awareness of trade-offs. In addition to the subsidy, the government provides grants that can be used to fund technical assistance and management services for the projects, channelled through a Support Organisation. As of 31 March, 2004, 404 PHP projects involving 272,165 households had been approved through the programme (with no data provided on those actually constructed). [3] This represents 11% of the 2,436,404 total subsidies approved as of that date.

Napier indicates the variable levels of support that the PHP has had, noting a number of obstacles, both in the often negative attitudes toward the process among provincial and local authorities, and in capacity requirements, saying, [4] "There are high levels of scepticism about people-driven projects and the main objections are that such processes are slow and cannot be controlled by the local authority, even if a better house and settlement are the end result." Bauman [5] indicates that housing projects using PHP have recently been increasing, but this has not been necessarily the result of real support for community-based processes, but an attempt to promote housing delivery without being bound by a mandatory subsidy beneficiary contribution of R 2479, which is exempted for PHP projects. PHP has begun to be equated with 'sweat equity' and is often still managed by developers or local authorities. He suggests that the risk-averse behaviour of government authorities is actually restricting the potential of the PHP to lead to true community empowerment, and that the central principle of facilitating a community-driven process should not be sacrificed.

Planact felt it important to evaluate the PHP that it was involved in to ensure that the principles of community participation were adhered to, as well as to determine whether beneficiaries were satisfied with the level of choice they had and with the actual house constructed.

2 Background to the evaluation of the Vosloorus PHP

The Vosloorus Extension 28 PHP, Phase I, produced 250 units of housing from Jan-September 2003. However, a lengthy preparation phase was required, that dated back to the middle of 2000 when Planact was asked by the then-Boksburg Local Council (later Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality) to work with the community on a plan for upgrading this site-and-service scheme. It was in March of 2001 when the business plan was submitted to the Department of Housing along with written support from the local council. When the business plan was approved in

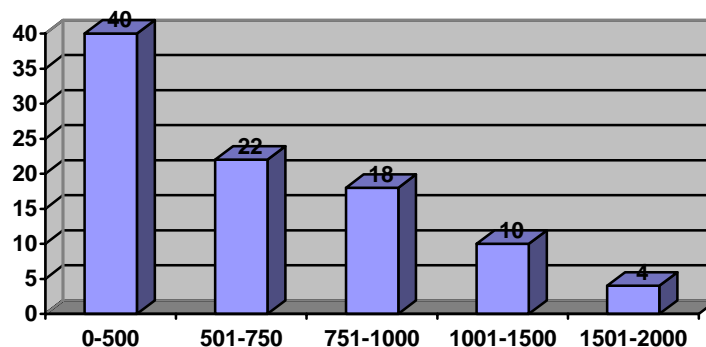
throughout the document, and refers to those who received a subsidy and a house through Phase I of the Vosloorus PHP project.

November 2001, subsidy applications could be solicited from the residents of this area, and over 300 were submitted in June 2002. Enough required for the first phase of 250 units were approved by the end of September 2002. In the following three months, a Housing Support Centre was established and staffed to manage the project on-site, a contractor was appointed to construct the foundations, and enough foundations were constructed so that by January, 2003, top structures could begin to be constructed. The houses produced were 36-square metre brick homes on already-serviced sites. All beneficiaries were required to have incomes of below R 1500.

The project was coordinated by a project team involving a community-elected Steering Committee, the Ekurhuleni Metro Council, the provincial Department of Housing, and Planact, a nonprofit development organisation. Planact served as a 'secondary service provider' for Ekurhuleni Council (who was designated as the official support organisation to the project). Planact was charged with project management duties in addition to capacity-building of the community-elected Steering Committee and was also responsible for establishment of the Housing Support Centre and for ongoing support to its operations. To build the top structures, local labourers, including beneficiaries, formed teams who worked under the supervision of 10 emerging contractors from the community. The teams were drawn from community members who participated in construction training offered by the Department of Labour in July, 2002. A specific objective to promote the inclusion of women in all aspects of the project was a significant feature of the process, with an insistence that at least 30% of the contractors and labourers on the project be women.

Planact conducted an evaluation of the project to determine if the outcomes reflected the initial objectives of the project, and to determine necessary changes to improve future phases of the project. It included surveys with labourers, contractors, Steering Committee members and other stakeholders, although this article concentrates heavily on a survey of the beneficiaries. Of the 250 beneficiaries of Phase I of the Vosloorus PHP, 50 were surveyed.

The beneficiaries were initially sampled based on randomly selecting 10 people from each of the five major areas of the settlement serviced by the project, although some replacement of the initial sample was made when some of them could not be reached for the survey. The survey team is reasonably satisfied that those surveyed can be considered representative of the beneficiaries as a whole. The gender representation was close to what we expect in the community, with 68% female and 32% male. Most respondents were age 36 to 45 (46%), with the second largest contingent from age 46-55 (26%). The incomes reported reflect that the project really serves the poorest of the poor (see figure 1).²



² Please note that percentages in this report may not add up to 100% because of missing responses

Figure 1. Monthly household income

3 Project Evaluation Results: Community and women's participation

Since the PHP is premised on the involvement of beneficiaries in the development of their own housing, we asked a number of questions to explore the level of beneficiary involvement and their satisfaction with the ways that they participated.

The main method of recruiting and consulting with beneficiaries was through mass meetings called by the community-based Steering Committee, and then workshops were held on the various aspects of the process such as subsidy application and the PHP process. Assistance with filling out the applications was provided by Housing Support Centre staff. Most (66%) reported they were 'very satisfied' with the level of education they received about the subsidy application process, with another 18% that were somewhat satisfied. Slightly fewer were satisfied that the subsidy selection process was fair and transparent—56% were 'very satisfied' and 14% were 'somewhat satisfied.' In the interviews it emerged that those who had concerns with this aspect of the process were mainly concerned with all of those in the community who were automatically excluded from obtaining a subsidy due to not being income-eligible, or being renters rather than having secure title to a site.

The number of beneficiaries surveyed who were actually involved in the selection of the Steering Committee were fewer than expected, with only 48% saying they were involved in their election. Yet given that the Steering Committee was elected long before the PHP project officially began, this can be explained more easily—certainly, not all members of the community could have been available at the time of the election (although it was open to the whole community), and specific beneficiaries were not even yet chosen at that time so it was not clear who would eventually obtain subsidy approval. All of those who had first-hand information about the election of the Steering Committee were satisfied that the process was fair and transparent (86% 'very satisfied' and 14% 'somewhat satisfied'). And even those who did not directly elect them accepted the legitimacy of the Steering Committee as leaders for the purposes of the project.

Beneficiaries expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the level of community input into the project planning phase—74% stated they were 'very satisfied' and another 10% that they were 'somewhat satisfied.' This is a positive indication that the project beneficiaries felt a high degree of ownership of the PHP process. There were a few (16%), that reported they were involved in the actual construction of the houses as contractors or labourers on the construction teams. Some involvement in supporting the construction was reported, however, by 28% of beneficiaries—this ranged from deciding on the location/orientation of the house on the site, to carrying bricks or personally supervising construction. A staggering 96% of those surveyed said they were aware of the effort made to provide women opportunities through the PHP project, which provides evidence that the commitment to women's participation was an explicit objective of the project that not only was discussed at Steering Committee level, but was popularised in the community.

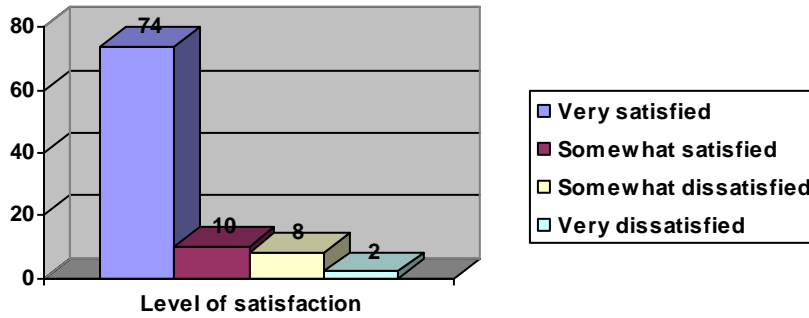


Figure 2: Community input into the planning process

As noted, the contractors and labourers were also separately interviewed as part of the evaluation, and the issue of women’s participation was also probed in those interviews. While all acknowledged the high degree of women’s participation, women also did report instances of discrimination. On more than one occasion in the process of surveying women laborers, they have noted the poor working conditions they are made to endure, which included demeaning verbal reprimands, subservient roles within construction brigades, and consistently being short-changed in regards to days called into work and pay. When asked, “What was the hardest thing about being a woman on this project?” one female respondent said, “The way they treated us...they shouted at us like children.” The responses of men at all levels of the project varied, some acknowledged the project’s ability to have incorporated women successfully, while others noted their presence but were not convinced of their importance to the project. Statements like “they ran away because the work was too heavy” or “they were too slow, we could not use them” were not uncommon. Some female contractors noted that some male labourers resented working for a woman. The women did tend to be less experienced than their male counterparts. But they also expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to develop skills and earn income and were committed to participating in future phases of the project.

4 Project Evaluation Results: Satisfaction with housing constructed/benefits of the project

It is critical that the PHP beneficiaries not only feel involved in the process, but that they are happy with the project outcomes, and that the housing provided is appreciated as an improvement in their lives. Part of this assessment is simply their impression of the quality of the housing, but there is also the more personal impact that owning a permanent home makes on these families.

Eighty percent of project beneficiaries surveyed said that the home constructed was better than they expected, with 10% saying it was about the same as what they expected, and 10% that it was worse than expected. We then asked specific questions about their satisfaction with the size of the house, the design of the house, the quality of materials, and the quality of construction. Here, some mixed results begin to appear, with quite a number of beneficiaries noting dissatisfaction with the quality of materials or construction.

Overall, beneficiaries were fairly satisfied with the size of the house--82% were either somewhat or very satisfied with this aspect. Eighty-two percent were also somewhat or very satisfied with the design of the house, although some expressed that they would have liked more choice of design. Only one design—a square house, was offered on the first phase of the project.

Regarding quality of materials, 22% were somewhat dissatisfied and another 12% were very dissatisfied. Most of the complaints were around the quality of doors, handles, locks and windows. Those dissatisfied with the quality of construction—16% dissatisfied and 14% very dissatisfied—complained of rough floors, cracks, and sloppy bricklaying. Even those who were ‘somewhat satisfied’ often mentioned a few deficiencies in their units. It is clear that, while the majority are satisfied with the quality of the product, some improvements can be made in this area, and better quality control is required. Stakeholders (the community Steering Committee and government representatives) acknowledged that material supply was the most difficult issue that obstructed progress of the project. One material supplier was contracted, the material was bought in bulk and stored by the contractor, and the contractor was responsible for delivering all material in small batches on site. However, due to cost-cutting the quality of some of the materials was not very good. In addition, irregular delivery by the contractor hampered the construction process and may have contributed to uneven quality of construction. The cement for the foundations was hand-mixed to meet an objective of employing more people, but also resulted in some uneven quality.

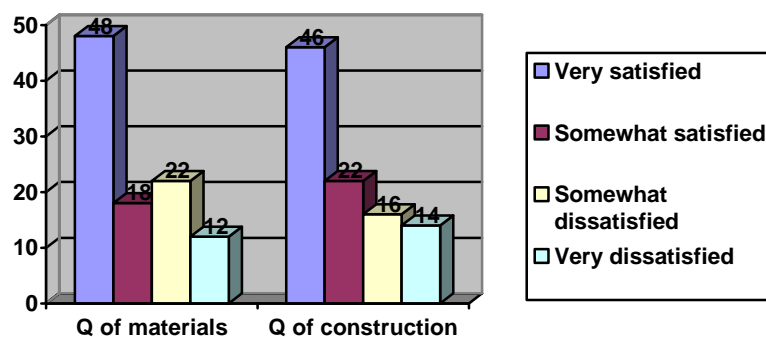


Figure 3. Quality of materials and construction

Beneficiaries were asked to comment on the benefits that they see because of the housing—it is clear that all of them appreciated their new homes immensely, and that they could not have managed to build a permanent structure without the subsidy. Most were simply happy they no longer had to stay in a shack: ‘No more tin shacks!’ exclaimed one. The increased space and privacy was seen as the greatest benefit for many of them, allowing their children or other household members to have a separate room. As one respondent declared: ‘(There is) a bigger space for my family. (It) gives me dignity as a man and father.’ Others emphasised the fact that they now owned their own homes, of which they could be proud, and that was an asset that could be passed on to their children. One commented: ‘The children don’t have to stay in a shack, they have a home, and they know that it is ours forever.’ Another mentioned that they were not ashamed to have relatives visit and stay with them any longer.

Others commented on the physical benefits of a permanent structure: ‘My child is warm in the house’ commented one respondent, and another: ‘There was dust and sometimes rain in the shack,’ and another, ‘I used to get flu always staying in a shack, but now I am warm in the house.’ Some emphasised the increased sense of security they felt staying in a permanent structure. A few mentioned their hopes to improve and even extend their home over time. Observations by surveyors noted that many households were already plastering their internal walls or making other small modifications.

The sense of permanence created by owning a home and the benefits for the children appeared again and again in the responses. In fact, nearly all of the respondents said they planned to stay in

their homes for the rest of their lives—of the remaining two respondents with a different answer, one said they would stay at least 20 years, and one that they didn’t know how long. Because of this, our questions about how much they thought they could sell their home for and about their awareness of the restrictions and requirements regarding the sale of their homes didn’t seem to make much sense to the beneficiaries, as they had not even considered this possibility.

As one beneficiary summed up her feelings: “I am very happy-- even when I die I will rest in peace!”

5. Project Evaluation Results: Potential for other options/choices

Since this was the first PHP implemented in the area, and the Steering Committee wanted to make it as logistically simple as possible, there was not much room for beneficiary choice in terms of housing design, size, materials used, etc. There was also no provision for savings to be incorporated into the process so that a bigger house could result. Therefore, we decided to explore these issues to find out how interested the beneficiaries might have been in these various options.

The respondents tended to be either ‘very interested’ or ‘very disinterested’ in the options presented, as shown in Figure 6. Regarding contribution of their own savings in order to make a bigger house, fewer beneficiaries indicated interest in this—only 30% would have been very interested in this, and 56% were ‘very disinterested’ in this option. It appears that these very low income households (all were earning under R1500 per month when they qualified for the subsidy) probably don’t view savings as a real possibility, or if they do, might only consider saving for other purposes. When pressed to estimate how much they thought they could have saved in a 12-month period, the median amount mentioned was R800.

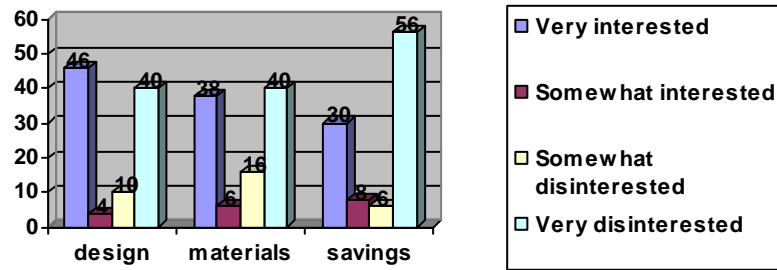


Figure 4. Beneficiary interest in different options in the PHP

6 Project Evaluation Results: Satisfaction with Steering Committee and Housing Support Centre

An important part of the evaluation of the project is the extent to which the beneficiaries were satisfied with the Steering Committee and the Housing Support Centre, as community structures set up to implement the project. Eighty percent of the beneficiaries surveyed said they were ‘very satisfied,’ with the job the Steering Committee did in implementing the project. Another 14% were ‘somewhat satisfied’ and very few registered dissatisfaction.

Several questions were asked regarding services at the Housing Support Centre, and very high approval ratings were consistently obtained. Results on the accuracy of information provided at

the Housing Support Centre, providing information in a way that was easy to understand and updating the beneficiary on the status of their subsidy are shown in Figure 5 below.

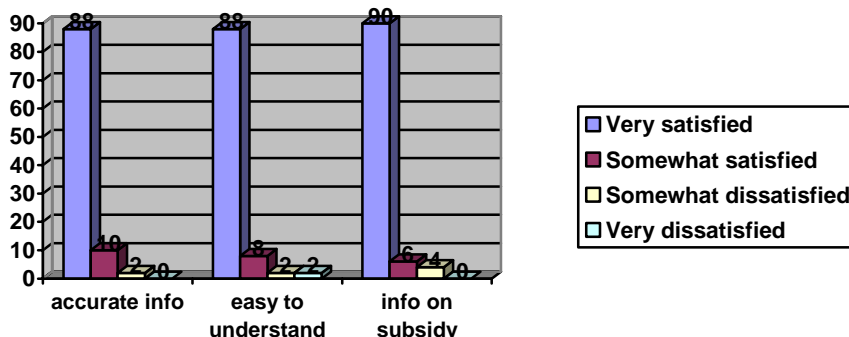


Figure 5. Housing Support Centre ratings on information provided

7 Conclusion

The Peoples' Housing Process is meant to ensure greater satisfaction with and greater investment in the housing product by ensuring that beneficiaries of the housing are directly involved in driving the housing process. In addition, the quality of the product should not be compromised. It is quite important that those involved in housing programmes such as the PHP evaluate whether the project meets the objectives, in order to demonstrate the value of community participation and not just take it for granted. In the case of the PHP in Vosloorus Extension 28, it is evident that the majority of beneficiaries are satisfied with the process and the product, although some dissatisfaction with housing quality does feature among some of the respondents. The evaluation also demonstrates the potential for women to be involved in housing construction, although it is honest about the difficulties women do face in overcoming discrimination in the construction arena, especially when they are less experienced. It is hoped that evaluations such as this one can contribute to better PHP practice and better results.

References

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All other information in this document was sourced from direct interviews with project beneficiaries and participants, September through November 2003.