

# Innovations for sustainable development in cities of the South: the Habitat-Cuba approach

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It is well known that the Cuban Revolution has provided broad and equitable access to national systems of education, health, employment, social security, cultural, sport, recreation, and so on. After a traumatic start to the 1990s, when the country was left without commercial, financial, technological, political, or military backing or aid, Cubans nevertheless managed to survive and began to establish their own direction in a particularly adverse global context. Cuba's rapid insertion into a neo-liberal form of globalisation is now having social, cultural, and economic impacts. As was to be expected, the development of commercial relations has begun to generate inequalities in our cities, at the human level, as well as in the physical and practical sense. We need to find effective ways to neutralise this process.

However, the crisis also helped us to realise that the existing development model was unsustainable. It is becoming clearer that for social policies to be completely subsidised from the centre is, quite simply, unfeasible. We now know that technologies that are based on the excessive consumption of energy, that are not economically viable, that tend to destroy the natural environment, and lead to unsatisfactory buildings and other constructions, are totally inappropriate. In addition, they tend to generate a welfare mentality which paralyses initiative and creativity.

Housing is an area in which the technological approach has been especially inappropriate, both environmentally and culturally, because standardised production does not take local conditions into account. Architectural and urban planning solutions that might be acceptable in cold climates in countries with large reserves of energy have been singularly out of place in the Cuban context.

On the other hand, even if social programmes could achieve blanket coverage, the sheer cost of maintaining the essential housing programme forced the government to make a choice. The decision was

to provide housing to workers who were involved in government job-creation programmes (agriculture, industry, tourism, science, etc.). The needs of new couples, of immigrants from the countryside to the towns, or from one province to another, of private sector employees, or workers in the informal sector, had to be deferred. In most such cases, these needs were met through the individual's own efforts. Looking back over the last 40 years, approximately half of all housing has been built by the residents themselves.

Such is the background behind the emergence of organisations like Habitat-Cuba: a group of professionals, most of whom have worked in state institutions involved with urban planning, urban design, and housing, who have come together with a view to trying to change the approach and mentality concerning the way in which the urban environment is created and transformed. Habitat-Cuba indeed aims to become a centre of technological and cultural innovation.

This innovation is founded upon three pillars: supporting the conscious participation by the residents of low-income neighbourhoods in changing their surroundings; encouraging them to think of economic, cultural, and environmental solutions that are sustainable; and stimulating greater interaction and co-operation among all the relevant social actors.

I should emphasise that Habitat-Cuba's approach is not simply a methodological approach (that is, a specific path to follow in order to reach a given end) but rather an attempt to accompany the process through means of an institutional strategy that will reveal within any given context not just *what* to do but *how* and *with whom*. Habitat-Cuba therefore seeks to serve as an intermediary that can articulate and draw together the traditional state approach to housing and residents' self-help initiatives.

The housing problem is a complex matter that involves a range of actors. The three most important of these, each of them having its own approaches and visions, are the state (represented by local government institutions which take decisions on the deployment of resources), urban professionals (who supposedly provide appropriate solutions), and the community, or the people experiencing the problem. Traditionally, the housing question in Cuba has revolved around two kinds of activity. On the one hand, people have been solving their own problems in isolation from the other two actors (i.e. often without any technical help, without legal title, and without access to credit). On the other hand, the state has had the capacity to combine material

and financial resources with technical help, but without adequately involving the affected population in meeting their needs – except, that is, as part of the workforce. Habitat-Cuba seeks to facilitate the integration of these three actors in transforming the urban environment, something that demands that we work very closely with each of them.

First, we try to encourage residents of low-income neighbourhoods genuinely to ‘own’ whatever technical solutions are adopted. This can only be done if the community participates fully in everything, including how they conceive of the neighbourhood and how they view housing needs. It is vital that any solutions respond both to social demands but also to the natural and human environment. This implies community participation not only in the implementation phase, but also in the diagnosis of the problem and in the generation of ideas to address it. We need to find ways to ensure that people’s initiatives become more sustainable while the community also becomes more autonomous. In other words, moving from social architecture to the social management of architecture.

Second, it is a question of discovering ways of achieving stable co-operation and dialogue among public institutions that permit them to ‘own’ their new methods of working and to do things in ways that can be replicated by the bodies responsible for deploying state resources. To do this, these institutions must not merely modify their use of technology – using local materials and technologies adapted to the problems and resources of each locality – but also facilitate local participation.

Third, professionals in the urban sector – mainly architects and engineers – need to understand that it is not just a question of putting up buildings, but that in the process of transforming the urban landscape they are also building communities in the sense of social relations, be that co-operation, representation, or exchange. Moreover, that in the process of building individual houses, we are contributing to the construction (or destruction) of much broader physical and social spaces, i.e. neighbourhoods and cities. We need to think globally but act locally, moving nimbly back and forth between urban architecture on a city-wide scale right down to the local neighbourhood.

But changing the habits and behaviours of each of the different actors is not enough. There are also various general principles that should guide our work:

- To achieve effective co-operation, it is critical to try to harmonise the distinct *timescales* in which each participant thinks and acts: technicians, aid agencies, residents, public institutions. Each one of these tends to have a distinct perception of the necessary and realistic rhythms at which the various processes can evolve, and this is something that constantly gives rise to misunderstandings. It is therefore important to make the effort to inform and explain to all parties in such a way that each can understand what may be perceived by the other as unjustified pressures either to rush ahead or to delay work. Residents are often exasperated by the slow pace of planning and project implementation processes, while technical experts also become restless with the necessarily slow pace of participatory processes.
- It is essential to understand the potential significance of these experiences from three different angles: from that of research (which permits us to reflect upon and learn from our successes and failures); from that of concrete actions (without which the local population sees no point in the process); and from the perspective of training (which allows knowledge to be passed on and so contributes to the creation of culture).
- It is equally important to have an appropriate understanding of the role of international co-operation projects. These should be situated within a programmatic framework that gives them meaning, and these same programmes must also fit into an institutional strategy. The purpose is not just to resolve the housing problem, but also to develop new ways of working. Thus, projects should not become ends in themselves, but rather serve as demonstrations of the principles mentioned above: environmental sustainability, appropriate technology, community participation, and inter-institutional co-operation.

Finally, one of the greatest challenges facing initiatives like Habitat-Cuba is to generate activities that are both replicable and sustainable. It is not enough to be innovative if this technological input has no real social impact. We therefore need, first, to confront institutional inertia directly and to engage in a process of trying to convince the state entities – which, in the case of Cuba, assume responsibilities the length and breadth of the country – by combining good arguments and concrete actions. Second, we need to build firm bridges that will allow new generations of students (as well as their teachers) to live these

experiences in the flesh, as it were, and so bring new life to the closed world of academia. Finally, we must learn to discover, together with ordinary people, ways that will enable them to assume their role in these processes, without being either manipulated or abandoned.

What role for European scientific co-operation in this context? It is clear that any proposal should be jointly designed by those offering and those receiving such assistance. But it will play a significant role only if it addresses certain questions: what are we willing to give up, not so much in the material sense but in terms of culture? To what extent are we really helping others, or in fact helping ourselves? How should we approach the enormous economic and financial imbalances between the two sides of such a partnership? How can we avoid reading the South with dictionaries and grammars of the North, and vice versa? How, for instance, can a population that is not itself protected go about protecting the natural environment? Do we want just to transfer experiences or resources, or are we looking for mutual exchange? Co-operation with the South: sustainable for whom?

Experience to date suggests at least three essential concerns: first, that in order to achieve sustainable results, international co-operation needs to be willing to collaborate over the long term and to be firmly rooted in the local context. Second, technical or cultural exchange needs to be two-way, allowing for a fluid dialogue based on mutual knowledge or recognition of the scientific, social, and institutional context of each party. And third, this collaboration needs to be framed in integrated programmes based on combined actions in development, in research, and in training. There is no other way to be sustainable.