World Habitat Day: Launch of secure tenure campaign

NAMIBIA 26th October, 2002

The three main actors in the context of this launch were the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia SDFN, Namibia Housing Action Group, NHAG, the local, city, regional and central government departments.

The need to have a launch was expressed by the federation since a very long time. They were able to see scope in using the event to strengthen the ties they already have with government. Among most of the African countries, it can be said that the Namibian Federation does have the best relationship with government compared to their other counterparts.

There has been a history of engagement over time and the launch was a reflection of the relationships at different levels of government over time.

The federation too has grown in numbers. There are today at least 8,000 members saving. Some regularly, some not so regularly.

However there are saving groups today all over the country from the north to the south. We were also able to see a number of houses constructed by the Federation when we visited the communities in Windhoek. The Federation used our presence to highlight one such case of a pensioner's house just constructed in a community called "People's Force". This is the first house constructed by the SDFN for a pensioner. The SDFN member groups put 10% aside from their loan fund to use for assisting welfare cases that cannot afford to construct their own houses. The pensioner's contribution is the monthly repayments.

The launch itself had about 2,500-3000 people. It was one of those launches that was very neatly organized and went off very smooth. The government was very present from all levels both the city of Windhoek, other local authorities from other cities in Namibia and the Ministry for Land, Resettlement and Rehabilitation. The Prime Minister was also present at the event. The Indian High Commissioner was also present.

There were many Federations from other countries that participated in the launch under the banner of the Slum / Shack Dwellers Federation. This way it gave the international team a focussed identity.

There were about 7 people from Thailand, 2 from the Philippines, 2 from India, 20 from Zimbabwe, 3 from Kenya and 5 from South Africa.
The Launch somehow calls for a celebration of what the communities have been able to achieve so far with their cities and gives us all a chance to celebrate this growth of the federation and what they have been able to achieve so far. So our collective presence is recognition and acknowledgement of this. It also gives countries not so well organized to get motivated to go back home and strengthen their own groups and their relationship with their cities.

The day of the launch marked this moment in the history of the city of Windhoek where poor communities and government were talking to each other on equal terms. Each one had done some homework and this was the occasion to make this public and focus on building and strengthening this relationship.

Government commitment got translated with them making an investment of 1 million dollars to the Federation two years ago with which the Federation constructed 66 houses. On the occasion of the launch another million was given to the Federation. It is not much in terms of the scale but it marks a continuation of a good relationship between the Federation and government. It is not as if the government is very clear about what they are getting into but there is enough of a trust relationship which allows them to make this investment. Today there are shack settlements in all local authorities and in many informal settlements in urban areas of Namibia consists of over 74 000 families and an estimated population of 333 000. Of these some 8 000 families are part of the federation and save. There are also a few other organizations that save while do not belong to the Federation.

Actually this is perfect timing for the Federation to strategically influence government in a way that yields maximum results. There is already a lot of house construction going on in various parts of the country. However, this needs to be consolidated and joint strategy developed which leads to a policy that enables every slum dweller to get a house that is secure. On government side they too are eager to find a way forward.

This seems completely possible in the Namibian context as there is a political will. ((It gets a bit confusing sometimes as in one of the speeches the Prime Minister’s secretary spoke giving the next million to the rural areas so that it discourages people to come to cities. However this is so stereo typical a reaction and expected but inspite if these contradictory messages there is still a lot of space for the federation to manouver and build on this relationship. comment: this was apparently said by the Permanent secretary of MRLGH. He is not that well clued up to put it mildly and we are ignoring this statement.))! The million was given by the Deputy Minister of Regional Local Government and Housing

ON DAY 2, We all attended the opening of a pensioners house In “People’s Force ” that is what the group was called and comprised of 80 structures.

This event was used to once again talk about the history of the members of People’s Force and how the house came to be constructed. Though the house was incomplete, the Federation wanted to celebrate this in front of government officials, the rest of the community and other community leaders of Windhoek and from other regions. The opening was symbolic of what the efforts of the Federation can produce - simple low cost housing and the communities can take responsibility for designing and construction with loans that are affordable.

Post the inauguration we were all divided into different groups and sent to different settlements. Joel, Jockin and myself stayed on at People’s Force and spent time with the women’s leadership walking and talking with them around their settlement. This walk was very interesting as it gave an insight into a lot of small details that needed to be highlighted among the leadership. It is often easier for an outsider to see what is happening on the inside. There were some important lessons here.

1. The daily savings were not so strong and therefore this impacted on their own limited capacity to address the issues that were important for them.
2. Once people got a house they were no longer interested in saving or being part of the Federation though there were so many issues unaddressed. e.g. lack of toilets and sanitation. being the priority.
3. This was also a reflection of a core leadership pattern at a national lever that needs to be a little
more larger in number and broad based. This way it also cuts down the stress on just a few leaders at the top trying to manage everything.

These were some of the issues that need attention by the leadership in the Namibian Federation.

The government today has a major "build together " program where by they provide housing loans at 5 % interest. NHAG feels that there is scope to draw in this resource if they plan to plunge into housing construction in a big way. This of course they are not so sure about? There continues to be a deeper concern of other issues of employment, regular incomes and HIV - aids. NHAG feels they need to concentrate on building communities and their capacities before it can take on housing construction in a big way.

Our reaction to this was that we need to see all these parts as ONE whole and only when we view it in that way will find strategies that will we be effective. So it is important for them to find the right balance and see the connection between secure tenure, employment opportunities and HIV AIDS. Most African countries are confronted with this in a big way and the challenge is to be able to weave the 2 together.

DAY 3: was a workshop designed by the city of Windhoek and NHAG. This was more to give a forum for government officials from the various SDI countries who attended to be able to interact with local officials and communities on looking at a city strategy, both back home and in Windhoek.