

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO LAND AND PROPERTY:

A REVIEW OF SHELTER COOPERATIVES IN UGANDA

Mwine Kyarimpa

Shelter remains one of the most challenging basic needs in Uganda. Walking down the streets, or rather alleyways, of Katanga and Bwaise in Kampala or Katete and Kajogo in Mbarara, one is hit by the horror of poor housing facilities. The intensity of the horror is amplified by the living conditions of the slum dwellers who inhabit them. Biblical saying in Proverbs 14:1 that every wise woman builds her home is rendered irrelevant here. Just like some forces challenge the gravitational pull, the housing situation in these areas defeats any individual effort to build any decent homes. Over and above the seediness, most of these homes are also characterised by absentee fathers and sickly children. In spite of such challenges, with combined efforts, and member-based initiatives, some cooperatives have sought to grapple with the poor housing demographics in Uganda.

The formation of the Uganda Housing Cooperative Union (UHOC) has its roots in related history – a united attempt to provide adequate housing for the low-income earners or the socio-economically disadvantaged communities, the majority of whom are struggling mothers. The epitome of these are the hundreds with babies

fastened to their backs who stroll around the countryside in search of a place they can call home. Formation of UHOC in 2013 was a bold move to confront the housing challenge in Uganda, by the coming together of 10 housing cooperatives with the hope of improving the depressingly poor housing standards. With a number of female-based cooperatives, the union has been able to defuse the chauvinistic mentality that it is men who should construct houses. Though the demographics of the female-based cooperatives still signify a union of stigmatised women – the widowed, the HIV-positive and victims of gender-based violence in homes, UHOC is empowering more women to get engaged. Tapping into the religious movements that have recently organized most of the women has been even more constructive. The youths, too, though unemployed, have since got interested in the housing initiative. The fight has been extended to negotiating for property rights for different groups of women and enabled the women to assert themselves, take up the mantle and spearhead the construction of desirable homes. Women are not only saving and financially contributing to the construction of houses through buying shares, but they also now sit on the construction committees of several

housing cooperatives where house-dreaming and designing are done.

Shelter and Settlements Alternatives (SSA), one of the cooperatives under UHOC, attests strongly to woman's engagement in housing cooperatives. Not only has the dream for adequate housing become a reality, but from this have accrued the dividends of decent, affordable and sustainable human settlements. One can't fail but get inspired by the amazing Wakiso-Bujukko housing demonstration set up by women and the urban poor. SSA has joined the campaign to deconstruct the stereotypical narratives that relegate women's rights to land and property and foreground the role of women in determining the kind of settlements they wish to reside in. However, being careful enough not to assert another hegemonic social trajectory, cooperatives have taken a gendered approach to building a new Uganda through engaging men in these empowering initiatives. For many families, the house designs have been a handiwork of both husbands and wives.

This development relieving the distress that grips those young males wishing to join the institution

of marriage who fail for fear of having to carry the burden of building the house? Both women and men should determine how a home should look. Moreover, though the onus for a definite home most times rests on the man, a decent home is always a woman's mantle.

Dorothy Baziwe and UHOC's Edward Kiyingi revealed more about housing cooperatives.

In putting the formation of the Uganda Housing Cooperative in context, Kiyingi said that since housing is a fundamental basic need, they sought to enable members with low incomes to access adequate housing in Uganda.

WOMEN ARE NOT ONLY SAVING AND FINANCIALLY CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOUSES THROUGH BUYING SHARES, BUT THEY ALSO NOW SIT ON THE CONSTRUCTION COMMITTEES OF SEVERAL HOUSING COOPERATIVES WHERE HOUSE DREAMING AND DESIGNING ARE DONE.

When I asked Dorothy Baziwe what the inspiration for SSA was, she said that SSA started as an NGO working in communities in an effort to improve their living conditions. Since poor solid management and crowding in informal settlements, such as slums, were rampant, SSA was an approach to enable the grass-roots person to change their housing situation and access decent and affordable housing.

Members were drawn from the northern, central and eastern regions. The

initiative is member-based and therefore relies on members that are normally given technical support whenever the need arises. SSA also has an advocacy arm whose mandate is to advocate and lobby to the central government as well as regional and international bodies for the right to adequate housing.

SSA is a sort of conduit. Relying on the findings it comes up with in communities, it lobbies and advocates certain rights. Membership of SSA is open to people who are interested in a cooperative approach to housing. They pay a membership fee and an annual subscription.

SSA has influenced a number of policies, such as the National Land Policy. Before the formation of UHOC there was a gap in sensitising communities to the functionality of the housing cooperative model. However, the groups that SSA recommended have become successful housing cooperatives. SSA has also worked with women and the urban poor on their rights to property and land.

Kiyingi agreed with the above testimony and added that UHOC has a lot of land scattered within the cooperatives, many of which are, in fact, through with their housing prototypes. They have also come up with a rural model and, with the involvement of SSA, UHOC has an already established a housing demonstration.

Ms Baziwe added that they had been working with a group from Kisenyi





that was under threat of eviction. The cooperative was registered in 2014. Housing units were conceptualised and designed with the involvement of the members. Each housing unit comprises two bedrooms, a toilet, a sitting and a kitchen area and cost US\$ 26 million. To occupy a house, one has to pay a commitment fee of one million shillings. The monthly payment for each household is US\$ 75,000/=. Since it is a cooperative, families only hold the right to occupy after payment of the US\$ 26 million.

Ms Baziwe asserted that since the agricultural cooperatives – the most numerous – have been dominated by men, this trend has crept into the housing cooperatives. However, women have been empowered to understand their rights and to carefully select which people to partner with. Nevertheless, women still feel intimidated; they still find it difficult to respond when challenged in such cooperative meetings and they shy away from taking up leadership positions.

Regarding recruitment of staff, Ms

Baziwe revealed that SSA's staff are drawn from university students who are training in areas such as architecture, engineering and sociology. SSA tries to ensure gender balance in recruitment. In UHOC, on the other hand, according to Kiyingi, it is the number of shares one holds that determines one's eligibility, irrespective of gender. However, everyone is given an equal opportunity to attend training organised by UHOC. On her part, Ms Baziwe said that navigating the political currents related to housing has not been easy but SSA has chosen not to be side-tracked. Kiyingi's experience has, however, been different. He said that since cooperatives are autonomous, UHOC works with each of them independently. This is because their dreams are always different.

Ms Baziwe observed that the future is very bright. Men are starting to want to talk openly with their women over several socio-economic issues in greater and greater numbers. Furthermore, more people, including women, are beginning to take up the initiatives to reconstruct society themselves. SSA has a gender

policy, for both an internal and external purposes which guides how SSA functions and interacts and engages with its constituencies.

In connection with the organizational structures, Mr Kiyingi remarked that there is need to streamline them more. This is because the top structures are affected by the lower ones. UHOC emphasises the inclusion of women on their committees, so that they, too, can have the opportunity to rise to the top.

Ms Baziwe also revealed that SSA has cooperatives that are female-based and others with both male and female members. These are found in both urban and rural areas.

Kiyingi asserted that government support is unreliable because of the politicised divide that characterises housing. However, cooperatives cannot sit and lament but have to continue to push for decent housing. They have, in fact, come up with different types of interventions to achieve this.