

Shelter for the Homeless: Asian-Pacific Needs and Australian Responses.
By J.D. Conroy, Australian Council for Overseas Aid Development
Dossier no. 22. Canberra: Australian Council for Overseas Aid, 1987.
Pp. 141.

The aim of this book is stated clearly. It deals with the shelter problems of "Australia's poorer neighbours" and Australia's responses, as a donor and provider of technical assistance, to the housing-related problems in these countries. Among the neighbours that are given particular attention as case-studies are China, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia.

The book is divided into four sections.

Section I cursorily reviews the literature on housing as a basic human need and gives a sketchy account of the linkage between rapid population growth, urbanization, and housing problems. What is significant here is the author's extension of the concept of "housing" to "shelter" thus expanding the scope of the analysis substantially.

Section II covers all the related and essential elements of shelter provision policy. Conroy argues that every government should, as a matter of general policy, create the conditions under which effective demand for housing could be met because housing development could itself be an engine of economic growth in developing nations. However, to maximize economic benefits certain conditions should be satisfied; for example, the construction technology adopted should be labour-intensive rather than capital-intensive. The first strategy helps to absorb the level of unemployment and underemployment. Contrarily, the second acts as a drain on foreign exchange, which developing countries can ill-afford, because of the need to import machinery and materials. Other factors such as investment in infrastructure, provision of land tenure, and mobilization of domestic savings into housing investments are each discussed in separate chapters in this section.

In terms of policy, the author points out that there has been a switch away from direct provision of subsidized housing, built to unrealistic Western standards, to indirect intervention such as sites-and-services schemes and settlement upgrading. The latter approaches are preferable in Third World nations because (1) they do not constitute a constant drain on the national economy as in direct housing provision and (2) they encourage the households themselves to invest directly in their own

housing requirements which helps to mobilize household resources into the housing market, which in turn helps in capital formation at the macro-economic level.

Section III provides three national case-studies, each illustrating a specific element of shelter provision problems discussed in Section II. The case of Papua New Guinea shows how unrealistic housing standards in urban areas led to importation of construction materials, which resulted in pricing even government subsidized houses out of the reach of the masses. The costs of construction also stifled the capital-poor indigenous construction industry. Indonesia is used as an example of the success of the settlement-upgrading strategy. China is given a brief historical treatment to illustrate the difference between "pre-economic liberalization" of the 1980s and the current push for limited privatization of housing. In addition to these national cases, the plight of women, and especially that of households with female heads, is discussed separately.

Section IV is, perhaps, the *raison d'être* for this slim monograph. It reviews some of the shelter-related projects in which Australian aid agencies are involved in Thailand, Shanghai, Manila, and South Pacific islands. Due to the ready-to-hand comprehensive assessment of Australia's contribution to water supply and sanitation development in Indonesia, this effort is given specific attention. The assessment of aid programmes is discussed within the framework provided by the committee that reviewed Australian foreign aid policy as a whole. This was the Jackson Committee which pinpointed the urban sector as one of the targets for aid because of the urgency of the problems and because Australia, being a highly urban nation, would possess the necessary technical know-how to solve these problems. The Australian Government appears to have accepted the argument in principle but to date have only marginally implemented this recommendation; consequently, the author argues for a broad range of aid programmes to be stepped up apropos the countries in question.

The monograph provides a fast introduction to the issues discussed and is useful for precisely the audience that the author has in mind, namely, politicians, opinion leaders, civil servants, the interested public, and as a reference for undergraduates in housing-related studies. One constant irritant of the book, however, is its terrible production, where

phrases are often repeated in the text and, in some instances, whole paragraphs are missing (pp. 73-74 and 109-10).

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