

## Chapter IX

### PILOT PROJECTS AND RESEARCH IN SOCIAL HOUSING

#### A. Pilot projects and experimental programmes

1. The social housing sector provides an excellent basis for experimental programmes as the public subsidies can easily be connected to conditions concerning particular projects. Such conditions can concern technical innovations (new building techniques, use of specific materials, industrialized building, ecology and so on), new social approaches (social mix in housing estates, building by and for special interest groups, integration of vulnerable households), and economically-oriented new solutions (such as new financing methods, cost reduction by self-construction).
2. In all these fields, pilot projects have delivered valuable results, while risks have been minimized. Germany has adopted such policies already, in the 1960s. In more recent times, Vienna, for example, has set up a programme of “theme-oriented housing estates” where the city first defines a certain topic (such as car-free housing areas, solar energy housing areas, or estates with the focus on immigrant integration, on gender aspects, or on new forms of living and working under one roof) and then gives its construction side subsidies under these clear conditions.
3. Building exhibitions have been another successful instrument for experimenting with new technologies or planning methods, aiming at prototypes for future regular use. Such exhibitions were organized as long ago as the 1920s (for example by the various *Werkbund*-societies in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia) and again after the Second World War. Exhibitions also promote greater international exchange of experience and can be supported by national or international programmes.
4. National experimental housing programs often focus on specific issues and may concern either quality aspects or cost aspects (or both). The Netherlands, for example, has supported such activities in the social housing sector by defining a certain percentage of the total subsidized housing construction as experimental projects, and France has recently carried out a special pilot programme on low-cost housing.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Evaluation and research

5. Those countries which have a social housing policy have usually also set up special evaluation systems. These may be part of the administration in charge of the housing subsidies, or they may be carried out by independent research institutes. In either case, the evaluation has to be done on a regular basis and in a way that enables both long-term surveys and cross-sectoral comparisons.
6. Features of efficient evaluation include independent research bodies, stable research budgets, effective procedures for self assessment, the use of comparable codes of governance, and benchmarking.<sup>2</sup> Medium-term housing research programmes enable the public

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<sup>1</sup> *Atelier Qualité 2000*

<sup>2</sup> *Duckworth 2003*

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administration and the research institutes to plan their activities and their resources ahead and to establish partnerships.

7. Fields of social housing research may deal with all housing- and building-related topics but in all countries they include investigation into the supply-demand ratio,<sup>3</sup> on the affordability of social housing for the main target groups, and on means testing. New research fields – and possibly new job opportunities – occur in housing counselling (such sanitary and health advising) and with carrying out audits, especially with vulnerable groups in social housing.

8. Performance measurement has become central in social housing policies as, due to budgetary restrictions, the cost-quality relations of social housing suppliers have to be analysed on a continuous and comparative basis. Performance reports are also given to social housing tenants in some countries, as in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> This requires new formats of reporting, replacing a “culture of statistics” by a performance culture in a non-expert language. In some cases regular reports are even demanded by law (tenants’ legislation) or by subsidy regulation.

9. Involving social housing tenants directly into the evaluation can achieve good results. For example, inhabitants from certain social housing neighbourhoods have been invited by the Citizens’ University of Marseilles to establish a dialogue with researchers in order to explore the constraints and possibilities for collective action in their areas.<sup>5</sup>

10. Housing research, as a comparatively new field of scientific work in most countries, has already led to the organization of national and international transfer of know-how and of research results, for example within the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) or in cooperation with existing international organizations such as CECODHAS. Also the EU is supporting such activities within its sixth Research Framework Programme.

### **C. Conclusions**

11. The social housing sector provides an excellent basis for experimental programmes, as the public subsidies can easily be connected to conditions concerning particular projects. In many respects, pilot projects have delivered valuable input to housing programmes.

12. Countries which have a social housing policy have usually also set up special evaluation and research programmes, evaluation being carried out on a regular basis and in a way that enables both long-term surveys and cross-sectorial comparisons. This includes new methods of performance measurement which in some cases involve social housing tenants directly in the evaluation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Lawrence 2002*

<sup>4</sup> *Walker 2003*

<sup>5</sup> *Lorcerie 1995*

**D. Recommendations**

**1. Pilot projects, experiments**

- (a) Public authorities should establish experimental housing programmes within their overall social housing policies.
- (b) Public subsidies for new social housing projects should be connected to conditions regarding technical innovation, new social approaches, and new economically oriented solutions.
- (c) Pilot projects and building exhibitions should be organized to profit from experiments and from international know-how transfer.

**2. Evaluation and research**

- (a) Special evaluation systems on a regular and comparative basis should be set up within the framework of social housing policies.
- (b) Evaluation should be enhanced by the creation of independent research bodies and by stable budgeting. Medium-term housing research programmes should lead to close partnerships between the scientific community and social housing institutions.
- (c) Regular social housing developers' performance reports in a non-expert language should be made available to the public, particularly to the social housing tenants.
- (d) Concerning the transfer of know-how and of experience, countries should make use of existing international research networks and of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).