

Third World Housing Development and Indigenous People in North America

BY WINONA LaDUKE

T*his article is about the experience of North American indigenous peoples in providing themselves with secure community-based housing. It illustrates that cultural differences require different responses and that the underlying problems of systemic discrimination within colonial and paternalistic socio-economic structures impoverish and oppress women and children. This article is part of a larger study commissioned by the Seventh Generation Fund, a non-profit Native foundation in Hoopa, California that supports Native grassroots advocacy and economic development.*

Homelessness is an indice of under development and of lack of access to capital and other resources with which to shelter one's family. Housing is also a basic cornerstone for development work in any community, as the need for food, clothing and shelter are prerequisites to the health and well-being of a community. It is within this context that I have undertaken this profile of housing initiatives in third world development, and their implications for Native communities in North America.

Housing is a critical problem in Native communities in North America. Many Indian people live in overcrowded conditions or in homes without proper sewer and sanitation systems. In addition, the lack of infrastructure — whether roads, electricity or sewers — in many reservation communities continues to mark a level of underdevelopment not present in adjacent non-Indian communities. There are a great number of similarities between Native communities in North America and third world communities internationally.

However, in terms of housing, one significant distinction between North American Native communities and many poor communities in the third world is the existence and prevalence of the so-called informal housing sector. In many third world communities, the lack of access to land and capital has meant that people have constructed shanty towns, usually on the outskirts of large cities. Many development organizations are working to upgrade the housing of people in these areas. There is, of course, a so-called informal housing sector in Native communities in Canada, but more prevalent (largely in the past two decades) has been the emergence of federal housing programs, so-called cluster and band or reserve housing. This type of housing for Native people is a result of a colonial policy different from that in the third world. These housing projects, similar to urban public housing projects, pose a new set of problems and challenges to Native people.

While Native communities have distinct interests and needs in terms of homes, and may not have an interest in replicating the

amenities of the dominant Euro-American society, most communities would like to have modest homes, enough space for all family members, and adequate plumbing, electricity or other services to fit their needs. The fact is, this is a dream, not a reality in most Indian communities. However, the present conditions, and the basis from which we have to work to meet the need for shelter is a result of a long historic process of colonialism, and an underdevelopment process in which the Native communities and their ability to meet community housing needs have been adversely affected.

In the past 100 years, many Native communities have faced forced removals and relocations from their traditional territories and homes. This has had significant social, mental and economic consequences on these communities. The impact of forced relocation on Indigenous communities has come under discussion by the World Bank, an institution that has played a significant role in many relocations internationally. In outlining some resettlement guidelines for projects, The Bank has noted that

The very nature of involuntary resettlement gives rise to special social and technical problems.... A feeling of powerlessness and alienation is often engendered in those who are relocated, especially when entire communities are uprooted from familiar surroundings. To the extent that pre-existing community structures and social networks disintegrate and tightly knit kin groups are dispersed to new relocations, social cohesion is weakened and the potential for productive group-action is diminished.¹

Most Native communities are living with problems that began with the initial involuntary resettlement, whether it was 100 years ago or ten. Many Native communities are facing feelings of disempowerment and disorganization and are struggling to reorient and reorganize themselves to meet the challenges posed by the lack of a cohesive socio-political infrastructure.

The problems resulting from involuntary relocation have been further exacerbated by a number of governmental and sometimes donor/church initiatives. There have been two major facets of the new problem. First, the structure and resources of the community have been altered so that they no longer are able to meet local community needs in housing, food or other basic requirements. Second, communities and individuals have become dependent upon paternalistic institutions for many of their basic needs.

Pliny Fisk of the Centre for Maximum Potential Building Systems, discusses the impact of colonialism on the ability of communities to house themselves. He notes, in a discussion of Miskito Indian communities in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, that

colonialism

*has resulted in a skills and equipment shift that no longer fully relates to the capabilities of the region. This gap between what is presently used, and what could be used is reflected in housing deficiencies, skills deficiencies and equipment mismatches which in the end culminates in an identifiable economic deficit in the region.*²

In other words, many communities are "outward facing." Skills are directed towards exterior job/economic interests and reservation resources are directed towards off-reservation markets. In the effort to regain control of housing on the reservation, Fisk and other practitioners have sought to rebuild internal infrastructures and alter the outward-facing economic and resource system.

A second significant problem is the emergence of dependency in many third world communities. This is also apparent in the Indian reservations and reserves. Michael Cernea, in The World Bank report, comments on the impact of the "dependency syndrome" on relocated villages. He notes:

*People subjected to relocation are prone to develop the syndrome of settler dependency if paternalistic help policies are applied.... Such policies discourage self mobilization, and undermine the settlers commitment to self support and development.*³

A key issue is mobilizing the participation of people who are affected by dependency for the purposes of self-determination and self-directed development. It is clear that the underlying social impacts of relocation and the resulting structural disorientation pose a long-term challenge for new development initiatives in the Native community.

These underlying problems have not been addressed by Canadian and U.S. federal initiatives undertaken in the past twenty years to mitigate the problem of homelessness. Housing initiatives undertaken by such organizations as the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other federal agencies are essentially "top-down" programs, and as a result, have in many cases been mismatched with local values, land use patterns and needs, and reinforce

problems of dependency and feelings of powerlessness.

These problems are illustrated in a case study done on the Grassy Narrows Reserve in Ontario by a group of CMHC consultants. The study, entitled "A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Planning and Design with Native Canadians," offers insight into a recent relocation and a new housing program in a Native community.

The Ojibway sense of community derives from the cultural and kinship bonds of a group of people, not necessarily from physical proximity. Historically, many Ojibway or Anishinabeg people have lived most of the year at hunting, trapping or harvesting camps in the bush, returning to a major village for the purposes of trading and ceremonial activities. The European concept of community is quite different

from this, and is derived primarily from the proximity of a number of houses to a central village and commercial or cultural centre. Anthropologists have termed the Ojibway community "dispersed settlement pattern," compared to the "urban" or "concentrated" settlement patterns of European communities.

With the contamination of their water and food supplies by mercury leaching from the Reid paper plant at Dryden, the Grassy Narrows community was forced to relocate. Centralized water and sewage systems were developed by the Canadian government, and new houses were built for the community. As A.G. Leslie, chief of the Agencies Division of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) (1964) remarks,

It is desirable that housing on Indian reserves be on a community planned



basis so that all services such as stores, schools, etc. will form part of the housing community. Many times in the past, houses have been constructed for the convenience of the individual, and when we try to provide roads, water and sewage systems, it is a most difficult problem.⁴

The new project, based on the economies of scale, is contrary to the Anishinabeg sense of community and space. This has caused social problems and a disruption of order. The people feared "losing the traditional way of life and were disturbed by the design of the new village, with its prefabricated buildings laid out in symmetrical patterns of congestion. They debated the advantages and disadvantages. The people were proud of the old village. It had been built by them."

Today, people speak with regret of leaving the old community, and with a helplessness toward what has been imposed on them from the outside.

*On the old reserve, your closest neighbour was maybe a quarter of a mile away. What we don't have now is space. When you are all bunched up like we are now, problems start. We're too crowded, too close. We don't live like the White man, that's not our way. The white man lives close together, but we don't. We like to live far apart in families.*⁵

While the case study is of one Ojibway reserve in Ontario, the implications are accurate for many Indian communities. The governmental housing initiatives of the 1960s to the present have had the effect of moving many people into identical HUD houses in close proximity. The programs have met the technical requirements of providing housing for the Indian community, but have caused a social and physical disruption of the economic, cultural, political and social aspects of the community at the same time.

1988 was the United Nations-declared International Year for Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH), and as such generated a great deal of discussion and work internationally on the problem of homelessness. A home is one of the last vestiges of self-determination. To have the ability to determine the plan and location of a home are a basic exercise of a personal right to self-determination. The United Nations,

in its General Assembly Resolution on the IYSH, also looked at homelessness as a part of an overall series of social and economic problems. The IYSH recognized that "the housing shortage and the situation of the shelterless is not really a disease, but rather a symptom of the larger dimension of poverty." It is within that context that most work in this discussion appears to fall.

In the study on housing, from which this paper is derived, the researcher reviewed development literature, consultants' work, United Nation documents, and the work of a number of international organizations concerned with housing and construction. A number of themes underlie the overall discussion. These include:

1. *The relationship between landlessness and homelessness.* Millions of people, including millions of indigenous people, continue to be dispossessed of their land on a yearly basis. Others cannot gain access to land because of laws, economic interests or other institutions that restrict or have expropriated access. This problem is international, and is within the borders of the U.S. as well. In the Native community, the present dispossession of groups like the Dine of Big Mountain (and their pending forced relocation to urban areas like Flagstaff) has been documented as a cause of homelessness. In the non-Indian community, the plight of rural farm families and the subsequent relocation of these families to urban areas is also an indication of the relationship between landlessness and homelessness. We cannot address one issue without the other.

2. *Homelessness is intimately related to other issues such as poverty.* Housing initiatives which have the most success (in this survey) were combined with integrated community development initiatives. Critical issues such as access to credit, infrastructure, community education, organizational and individual empowerment and employment all need to be addressed in consonance with housing for the effort to have a long-term successful impact on the community.

3. *The most successful housing initiatives are those which are highly participatory.* Top-down, "donor controlled" housing initiatives exacerbate the problem of

powerlessness and disenfranchisement of the already disenfranchised. The more participation by homeowners, community groups and other community members in the project, the more linkages in the project and the stronger the potential for its success.

4. *A critical and often overlooked issue in housing development is the role of women.* The IYSH noted that 15 million people die annually from malnutrition and disease, and that the highest incidence of this is in slums. These deaths are directly related to inadequate shelter, water supply and inadequate waste disposal. Women and children are the majority in these areas. And women in particular, because of their double and triple work loads (and lack of access to political power, money, skills and other resources), are least likely to be able to make improvements in their shelter conditions. In many cases, women and children are those who stay the most significant portion of time in these "shelters." Integrated and comprehensive shelter strategies are needed, with special emphasis on women and their meaningful participation.

5. *Sustainable housing development strategies are intimately linked with use of ecologically sound technologies and local resources,* whether physical or human, and as a part of an overall integrated development program.

¹ Cernea, Michael, "Involuntary Resettlement in Development Projects Policy Guidelines in World Bank Financed Projects," World Bank Technical Paper Number 80 (1988), p. 7.

² Fisk, Pliny, "Indigenous Building Systems for the Miskito Community of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua," Centre for Maximum Potential Building Systems (Austin TX [Mimeo], 1985).

³ Cernea, *op.cit.*

⁴ Simon, J.C. et al, "A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Planning and Design with Native Canadians" (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, External Research Program, August 1984), p. 65.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 69-70.

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