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PARTNERSHIPS IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING: THE IMPACT OF CONFLICTING INVESTMENT CRITERIA

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Accessibility to housing for lower income groups in Australia has been experiencing a severe decline in the last few years. On the supply side the public sector has been reducing its commitment to the direct provision of public housing at a time when market demand has strengthened, creating substantial price increases in all sectors of the housing market and in most urban centres. One possible solution to address the problem of reduced accessibility to affordable housing has been through the development of partnerships but recent investigation of the literature (Susilawati and Armitage, 2004a) and previous research by the author (Susilawati and Armitage, 2004b) suggest that the attractions of this approach may be specious. The research reported in this paper investigates the nature and incidence of these impediments as presented by survey of a number of stakeholders who have been involved in partnership arrangements in the Queensland affordable housing sector. By means of a series of in-depth interviews, the investment criteria and the impediments to achieving the desired outcomes of the participants in the partnerships are identified. Interestingly, the incidence of conflict and diversity between partners has elicited some unanticipated outcomes and responses which have ironically strengthened the process. Some of the negativity attached to future commitment to such partnerships has been found to be the anticipation of a worse outcome than that expected from independent action.

Keywords: conflict, investment criteria, partnerships, affordable housing project, exploratory study.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies discuss the affordability issues of housing, especially in respect of the decrease in affordable housing stock in Australia (Affordable Housing National Research Consortium, 2001; Berry, 2001; Berry, 2003). In Queensland, the Department of Housing has been the major low-income housing provider but it has also been reducing its commitment to the direct provision of public housing as Commonwealth funds are reduced (Seelig, 2004). The need for older housing stock to be upgraded has absorbed further the Department's capability for building new public housing stock.

Moreover, the housing boom has prompted many investors in affordable housing to sell because of the high cost of refurbishment and the expensive cost of maintenance. In addition, housing prices are escalating due to indirect costs and land shortages (Housing Industry Association Ltd, 2003). As a result, many of the current affordable housing owners or the new investors convert the old affordable housing stock to modern and expensive housing. In order to cover the high cost of refurbishment or

new construction, investors push supply towards the higher-end market which gives a better return for their investment.

In the initial study, preliminary interviews related to Public Private Partnership arrangements for affordable housing where ‘the stakeholders still exercise their traditional roles and adopt traditional concepts for housing developments’ (Susilawati and Armitage, 2004a).

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of contradictory investment decision-making criteria of stakeholders in the implementation of partnership arrangements in affordable housing. Prior to the discussion of the in-depth interview results, the stakeholders’ investment criteria and partnership arrangements in affordable housing are discussed.

AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOUSING INVESTMENT CRITERIA

Housing for low-income households has long been known as low-cost housing, social housing or public housing. However, those terms have negative connotations. Firstly, the term low-cost housing implies the quality of the house is below standard to minimise building cost. Secondly, social housing has ‘not for profit’ inference which may impede private sector involvement in this type of investment. Thirdly, public housing in Queensland has developed a stigma for concentrated low-income housing with high crime rates. The state government needs to define clearly the new terminology *affordable rental housing* to promote its adoption.

The Queensland Department of Housing (2004, p.1) defines affordable rental housing as those dwellings appropriate to the needs of low-income households in terms of design, location and access to services and facilities as well as having rent charges which do not exceed 30% of gross household income for people in the lowest 40% of the income range. To assist adoption of the current terminology, further explanation of product type, household income class and rent level is needed to clarify this new approach (see Table 1: Benchmark of affordable rent ranges).

Table 1: Benchmark of affordable rent ranges for low- income occupants*

Dwelling Size	Gross household income range (\$/week)	Benchmark Affordable Rent range (\$/week)
1 bedroom	296.35 – 501	137 – 196
2 bedrooms	375.43 – 659.16	169 – 254
3 bedrooms	454.51 – 738.24	193 – 285
4 bedrooms	612.67 – 817.32	248 – 309

* Based on the Centrelink benefit levels as at 1 January 2005

Source: Queensland Department of Housing (2005b, p.3)

In the above table, the benchmark affordable rent includes rent assistance to increase household capacity to pay ‘affordable private’ rent. The affordable rent range calculation is based on an income range. On the other hand, the market rent is based on location and housing features and amenities. Although some investors might not see this as an attractive investment options, it provides clarity regarding the anticipated income.

Brisbane Housing Company (BHC), an independent, not-for-profit organisation, was funded initially by the Queensland Department of Housing and Brisbane City Council, to provide affordable housing in Brisbane. Unlike other community housing organisations, BHC charges a discounted market rent (74.9% of market rent) and operates under defined low-income household eligibility measures based on Centrelink criteria (Brisbane Housing Company, 2005b). Other community housing organisations and public housing charge tenants a rent based on their income.

Major stakeholders in affordable housing development are government, the private sector and community housing organisations. The three tiers of government are responsible for the areas of regulation and economic management to support investment in housing through interest rates, investment incentives and a range of other funding initiatives (Department of Housing, 2003, p. 2-2) The state government, private and community sectors are responsible for the delivery of housing through the construction process and also for property and tenancy management.

The Queensland Department of Housing defines an affordable housing provider as

- “a property owner and/ or manager, whether private or not-for-profit, who meets the requirements of the *Property Agents and Motor Dealers Act 2000* and is either:
- (a) registered under relevant State legislation (e.g. the *Residential Services Accreditation Act 2002*, the *Retirement Villages Act 1999*, or the *Housing Act 2003*); or
 - (b) accredited under relevant national standards; or
 - (c) in partnership with an organisation that meets the requirements of (a) and (b)”.

(Queensland Department of Housing, 2004, p.7).

The private firm’s primary goal is to maximise the present value of the expected future profits of the company (Samuelson and Marks, 2003, p.15). Hence it seeks to fulfil the firm’s shareholder expectations. However, a company has other stakeholders whose needs also should be satisfied: its customers, its employees and the local community. Satisfying its stakeholders is recognised and included as a social responsibility of business, but it can create potential conflict in the decision-making process.

On the other hand the government needs to satisfy the ‘social-welfare criterion’ (Samuelson and Marks, 2003, p.17). The government need to weigh the costs and benefits of their decisions to all affected groups. Moreover, resource allocation and priority setting become more complex nowadays with the expansion of public services (Fisher, 1998, p.1).

The aim of a not-for-profit entity has been described as not being the generation and distribution of profit (Committee of Inquiry, 2001, p. 91). A community service not-for-profit organisation is created to provide service outcomes. If there is any surplus, it will be used to expand the service provided.

In the housing sector, the Queensland government uses the term not-for-profit organisation or community sector to categorise any community organisation which is managing rental housing. In general, a community housing organisation uses income from rents to manage and maintain its properties. It applies any surplus to fund further expansion or development (Brisbane Housing Company, 2005a). For example, the BHC is classed as:

- “a public benevolent institution and endorsed as a deductible gift recipient according to the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* (so that donations (of \$2 or more) are tax

deductible to the donor) and a charitable institution and endorsed as an income-tax-exempt charity in terms of the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997*".

(Brisbane Housing Company, 2005b, p.7)

Each stakeholder has different goals for investing in the affordable rental housing sector. In the private sector, affordable housing will be treated as a product generating income to maximise profit, whereas, in the government sector, the goal will be one of social-welfare optimisation and community housing organisations want to provide services in managing affordable housing. The next section discusses further the identification of collaboration among the stakeholders.

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOUSING

As discussed in the previous section, the Queensland government has introduced new approaches to the delivery of more affordable housing. It published a range of guidelines to support individual and/ or partnership investment in affordable housing:

- Affordable Housing Strategy (June 2001),
- State Planning Policy (discussion paper –April 2002),
- Affordable Housing Summit in Brisbane (15 November 2002),
- Local Government Housing Resources Kit (October 2003),
- Affordable Housing Design Guidelines (September 2004),
- Benchmark Affordable Housing Rents Schedule (January 2005),
- Partnerships (no date)

(Queensland Department of Housing, 2005a).

In a general context, a partnership means working together with other stakeholders on the same project. More specifically, in this study, a partnership is defined as ‘a relationship where two or more parties, having compatible goals, form an agreement to do something together’ (Frank and Smith, 2000, p.5). In a partnership, parties share the investment of resources, work, risk, responsibility, decision-making, authority, benefits and burdens. Therefore, a more complex issue can be completed more efficiently with the existing resources. In other words, more housing outcomes can be generated with a partnership arrangement which would be impossible to achieve individually. The roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in housing delivery have been described in the previous section.

Since funding has been reduced, government has extended the offer of partnership proposal from any organisation outside the public sector to increase the supply of affordable housing in priority areas and/ or for low to moderate incomes (Queensland Department of Housing, 2005a). The range and type of assistance which can be offered includes advice, help with drawing plan preparation and, in some circumstances, grants for feasibility studies.

In addition, the Queensland Department of Housing has recently invited expressions of interest to apply for capital grants for the delivery of affordable housing (Queensland Department of Housing, 2005b). The capital grant will require the not-for-profit organisations and/ or local governments to contribute 20% of the grant value. The main intention of this initiative is to bring resources into a partnership arrangement to expand the current affordable housing outcomes. In the second stage, the Department requires more extensive/ detailed financial analysis, risk analysis, social outcomes and asset contribution by the stakeholder partner to the project. The

government also provides funding support for preparing the detailed analysis which shows indirectly its acknowledgement of the complexity and cost of preparing partnership proposals.

In Queensland, a mix of housing type, size and tenure across the South-East Queensland region was recommended (under housing mix and affordability housing principles) to meet the current and future diverse community needs (Office of Urban Management, 2004, p.31). In this draft regional plan, a further increase in housing densities is recommended especially in areas around 'regional activity centres and public transport nodes as potential Transit Oriented Development (TOD) sites' (Office of Urban Management, 2004, p. 32). The above strategic plans have already been implemented in some major inner city re-development projects in Brisbane, such as the Kelvin Grove Urban Village and other Brisbane urban renewal projects.

Some other small partnership projects between private and community sectors in Brisbane have been created with higher density agreement from the local government. The private sector achieves higher density in the inner city development and/ or car parking relaxation in exchange for an agreement to allocate part of the housing development for affordable rental housing (planning gain), although the affordable rental housing component in isolation does not satisfy the profit requirement due to low rental income. Moreover, some investors do not want to manage the property in the long term. Therefore, a community housing organisation with experience in managing community housing schemes can be matched with the needs of the private sector to manage the affordable rental housing element. As a not-for-profit organisation, it is tax exempt and all income can thus be used for tenancy and property management expenses.

The private sector participant gains additional floor space for profitable development, as medium to expensive housing, which can recoup the building cost of the affordable rental housing. The social benefit from the development of mixed housing will provide an interspersed of affordable housing in one area. Social mix, as well as cross-subsidy from expensive housing to affordable rental housing, will make this type of project economic and socially attractive.

Despite the potential benefits, some drawbacks may be encountered when building partnerships as shown in Table 2. Finding complementary partners to produce an optimum outcome is not easy and financial losses may result if the outcome of the partnership arrangement is negative.

In a partnership arrangement, trust and information are also very important issues. They have a positive association: without trust the parties will not share information and, then, without further sharing of information, trust cannot be increased. Tomkins (2001 in (Grubnic and Hodges, 2003, p.177) defines trust as:

“the adoption of a belief by one party in a relationship that the other party will not act against his or her interests, where this belief is held without undue doubt or suspicion and in the absence of detailed information about actions of that other party”.

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of partnerships in affordable housing

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Outcome	Creative solutions Job creation More profitable outcome	Financial losses can occur (more expensive or less profitable than without partnership)
Power and status	Enhance existing capacities	Power and status differences between the partners
Communication	Improve communication	Intra and inter organisational conflicts
Organisation	Holistic approaches and shared finding of solutions	Difficulty in merging institutional values and cultures
Technology	Promoting change	Non compatible technology
Partner selection	May involve new participant	Difficult to change partner

Source: Susilawati, Armitage and Skitmore, 2005, p. 6, derived from Frank and Smith (2000)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A series of in-depth interviews has been undertaken to explore the contradictory problems of building partnerships amongst affordable rental housing providers including government, private sector and not-for-profit organisations. A semi-structured questionnaire has been used as guidance for the interviewee to derive necessary answers as well as to allow new questions to be added, related to the set questions provided, when appropriate. Moreover, both interviewer and interviewee are able to clarify the questions or answers directly for explanatory purposes. This paper only discusses some of the questions in the semi-structured questionnaire, being those relating to the investment decision-making criteria of stakeholders and the barriers to implementing the partnership arrangements in the affordable housing sector.

The study describes the qualitative and quantitative responses in regard to barriers to building partnerships. Table 3 shows the quantitative questions consisting of six listed factors which are derived from those disadvantages of partnership nominated in the third column of Table 2 and restricting an organisation's ability to build partnerships for affordable housing projects. Respondents were asked to circle the level of importance on an ordinal 5-point scale for each listed factor. The answers range from the least important factor - scored as one - to the most important - scored as five (see Table 3).

The snowball sampling technique has been used in this study, where some of the latter participants were encouraged to join by earlier respondents (snowball sampling) (Jackson, 1995, p.401). The respondents for this research were representatives of stakeholder groups directly related to the management of existing or future affordable housing and social housing or partnership liaison groups. From sixteen participants, eight had participated in the initial interviews and they were contacted mainly by email and telephone. The new participants were introduced by the earlier interviewees, in line with the snowball sampling technique.

Table 3: Constraints to building partnerships for affordable housing projects

Factor	Score				
	Low importance		High importance		
Negative outcomes (more expensive or less profitable than without partnership)	1	2	3	4	5
Power and status differences between the partners	1	2	3	4	5
Intra- and inter- organisational conflicts	1	2	3	4	5
Difficulty in merging institutional values and cultures	1	2	3	4	5
Non-compatible technology	1	2	3	4	5
Difficulty of changing partner	1	2	3	4	5
Other factors (raised in discussion)	1	2	3	4	5

Source: Susilawati, Armitage and Skitmore (2005, p.7)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4 shows the profile of the sixteen participants in this study by organisational group. There are six representatives of the private sector, five government officers and five representatives of not-for-profit organisations.

Table 4: Respondent profile

	private	government	not-for-profit	total
Local	2	2	2	6
Regional	4	3	3	10
Sub-group	6	5	5	16

A summary of decision-making criteria, classified by stakeholder group, is shown in Table 5. Each item is independent from others although in the same stakeholder group. The data indicates stakeholders manifest different opinions based on their roles and past experiences.

In general, the respondents viewed the financial performance criterion as the most important consideration in the affordable housing investment and the majority of stakeholders gave consideration to long term investment outcomes and holistic approaches in delivering sustainable affordable housing outcomes. Finally, stakeholders mentioned building multi-stakeholder partnerships as a means of optimising affordable housing outcomes.

State and local government officers proffered divergent views on the decision-making criteria for investment in affordable housing. The state government adopted the role of regulator in stating their criteria; whereas, local government identified themselves as facilitators of affordable housing delivery and regarded overall housing outcomes as their principal decision criterion.

Risk is consistently recognised as an important investment criterion. State government and private sector hold varying perspectives: the private sector pays more attention to the required rate of return (which may be adjusted based on the risk that they have to bear), whereas state government representatives considered a partnership arrangement to ameliorate exposure to investment risk.

Table 5. Decision making criteria by stakeholder group

Stakeholder	Economic	Social and Environmental
State government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Efficiency - Value for money - Cost benefit assessment - Whole life cycle costing - Spending policy (subsidy) - Risk mitigation through partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deliver sustainable affordable housing outcomes
Local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good planning and smart design for planning bonus agreement - Cost of delivery versus potential incomes for mixed housing - Attracting more funding in housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social justice, fair housing system - Triple bottom line
Private sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lower rate of return for affordable housing for less risk (more certainty) 	
Community housing organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Long term relationship to achieve competitive pricing - Partnership and each focus on own strengths - Fit affordability criterion (cost of housing less than 30% of household income) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved accessibility: to public transport, services, hospitals, shops and employment - Suitable design

Source: Author, 2005

The following section evaluates the impediments to building partnerships among stakeholders by reference to their primary objectives as indicated by the interviewee (see Table 6a, 6b and 6c).

Table 6a ‘Government: investment objectives versus barriers’ shows that the government respondents are critical not only of other parties but also of their own organisation and of other levels of government. For example, tax policy is a federal government responsibility criticised by both state and local government. As shown in Table 4, no participant represents federal government. Resource allocation has also been shown to be a major issue with the funding prioritisation directly related to the voters’ preference. As a result, some government policies are inconsistent and have moved in different directions. Without strong pressure from the public, government will demonstrate no political will and consequently less funding will be located for affordable housing. The organisational culture is also a major concern for private sector and community housing respondents in working together with the government.

Table 6b ‘Private sector: investment objective versus barriers’ suggests that the private sector may adjust their required rate of return if affordable housing demonstrates a lesser risk than other type of housing investment. However, the government is unwilling to lessen the private sector risk (risk averse government - refer Table 6a). Without any special consideration, such as tax and/ or planning incentives, investment in housing requires a market rent to underscore profit for the investor. Rent assistance programs only support some of the eligible households and will not be sufficient for prime locations such as inner city areas. The government is reluctant to provide a long term commitment to subsidise ‘non-viable’ affordable housing projects.

Table 6a: Government: investment objectives versus barriers

Objective	Barriers to achieving government's objectives stated by:		
	Government	Private Sector	Community Housing
To accumulate sufficient funds	budget constraint; priority to low-end housing	Lack of funding	imbalanced funding
	lack of tax incentives	Lack of tax relief	lack of tax incentives
	bureaucratic; risk averse; tighten by legislation		bureaucratic; risk averse
	asset management role	perception: government does not trust private sector control land supply	government does not trust their current social housing system not take on enabling and facilitative role
Social responsibility	no technical support	no clear guidelines	no national approach; inconsistency
	do not want to publicise bad performance	afraid of competition if sharing information	
Electoral responsibilities, interested in votes	no strong commitment	lack of political will; desire; commitment	lack of political will
	not a such a high public priority as health lobby	no real action: fear of vote loss	vote loss issues
	lack of public acceptance; NIMBY*	NIMBY; density rejection	lack of public acceptance; not subsidise people in need; NIMBY.

Note: * NIMBY = Not In My Back Yard

Source: Author, 2005

Table 6b: Private sector: investment objective versus barriers

Objective	Barriers to achieving private sector's objective stated by:		
	Government	Private Sector	Community Housing
Profit (may be adjusted relative to risk)	lack of tax incentives	lack of tax relief	lack of tax incentives
	no subsidy on non viable project; long term viability	market mechanism	
	limitations in the planning system; insufficient planning incentives	car park relaxation; increase floor space density for well located area	
		housing standards too high and over engineered	

Source: Author, 2005

Table 6c ‘Community housing: investment objective versus barriers’ refers to the current condition of most community housing organisations which are small and have only a minimum number of skilled personnel and resources. All stakeholders agreed that community housing organisations need to build the capacity of their resources in order to manage larger affordable housing stocks.

Table 6c: Community housing: investment objective versus barriers

Objective	Barriers to achieving community housing’s objective stated by:		
	Government	Private Sector	Community Housing
Manage housing provision: crisis, transitional, long-term	lack of skilled personnel to manage	lack of skilled staff; financial position not good	lack of skilled personnel; technology
	attitudes; culture; skills (asset and tenancy management)	reluctant to share resources and amalgamation	
	capacity building to manage property effectively	education in different areas	peak bodies and government organise bank of resources to be shared

Source: Author, 2005

Ideally, each party provides their best endeavours and uses the amalgamation of resources as efficiently as they are able. Conflicting investment criteria limit the ability of stakeholders to work together in projects.

As shown in Table 7a ‘Importance of drawbacks by stakeholder’, both private sector and government respondents agreed that the principal barriers to entering into a partnership were the expectation of a worse outcome than acting independently. The community housing organisations view power and status differences as the most important drawback to entering a partnership. The second highest concern for the private sector is the inter- and intra- organisational conflicts and, for the community housing organisation, the difficulties in merging values and cultures between partners.

Table 7a: Importance of drawbacks, by stakeholder

Factors	private		government		Community Housing	
	mean	std dev	mean	std dev	mean	std dev
Negative outcomes	5.00	1.41	4.08	1.20	3.60	1.52
Power and status differences	3.10	1.00	2.00	0.89	4.20	0.84
Organisational conflicts	4.20	1.28	3.50	1.22	3.40	0.55
Difficulty in merging values and cultures	3.20	1.19	3.83	0.75	4.00	0.71
Non-compatible technology	2.10	0.86	1.50	0.84	2.00	0.71
Difficulty of changing partner	3.60	1.25	2.08	1.11	3.00	0.71

Source: Susilawati, Armitage and Skitmore (2005, p.9)

Some respondents provided further comments on the drawbacks which are listed in Table 7b. In the discussion about partnership outcomes, each stakeholder re-stated their investment goal or criteria. Affordable housing has not been seen as a lure to investment without such further attraction as income guarantee or tax incentives.

Table 7b: Stakeholder generated drawbacks

Factors	Government	Private Sector	Community Housing
Outcomes	not attractive investment, so need an exemplary profitable project social outcome	no real incentive to have best possible design or maintenance over a long period	positive outcome for tenants, not necessarily profitable in terms of dollar
Power and status differences between the partners	working together	not important	the same level of power, control and knowledge; recognised and managed differences to ensure that quality in partnership
Intra and inter organisational conflicts	avoidance is important, happens at different levels (individual/ section/ department, etc)		
Difficulty in merging institutional values and cultures	for a specific project, people can have different values but they have common interests so they can work together	very important to have that set and clear goals and qualified either in contract or under statute	you do not have to agree but acknowledge and respect, also understanding values and cultures and come up with the common model for working
Non-compatible technology	not important	not a project killer; not a problem	something that can be overcome (requires money)
Difficult to change partner	exclusive partners for one project	May be unimportant or very important	choose partner with compatible objectives for longer term partnerships

Source: Author, 2005

As mentioned earlier, the community housing sector is concerned about their resource limitations leading to an unequal bargaining position in the partnership arrangement. Whilst it is recognised that it is impossible to transform different organisations in order to share the same values and cultures, there is acknowledgement and respect for the differences and opportunities to work together with common interests and clear objectives in partnership arrangements.

In summary, the stakeholders pointed out many issues in the area of framework, leadership role and organisational aspects. They also stressed the need for some incentives and capacity building for current resources to work collaboratively for affordable housing solutions. Moreover, affordable housing is not recognised as a significantly problematic issue on the political, economic and social agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

Affordable housing is not seen as an attractive investment for government because it wields little influence at the ballot and so no integrated approach to developing an affordable housing framework has been achieved in national level. It is certainly an unfavourable investment choice for the private sector because it is not offering the required rate of return. Meanwhile, community housing lacks the resources to undertake projects. Without major changes in our community attitudes as well as major public sector support for affordable housing investment, affordable housing will not be recognised as an attractive investment choice.

In general, the contradiction between stakeholders' investment decision-making criteria is one of the major impediments to initiating partnership agreements. The government wants to accumulate sufficient funds with minimum risk and commitment. On the other hand, the private sector wants to optimise profit which might be achieved if government can guarantee income or provide some kind of incentives for investment in affordable housing. The private sector will accept a lower rate of return for lower risk projects. Conversely, both government and community housing organisations criticise risk-averse attitudes for not allowing it to happen.

Successful partnerships are impossible without trust and a willingness to share information, risk and benefit. Although the diversity of partners may allow stakeholders to multiply individual strengths and to reduce individual weaknesses, government and private sector fear the risk of a worse outcome from having partnerships than they expect from independent action.

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