# Public Housing Governance in Singapore:
# Current Issues and Challenges

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## Abstract

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was established in 1960 to solve Singapore's acute housing shortage after the People's Action Party (PAP) Government came to power. In its first five-year programme from 1960 to 1965, its priority was to construct flats quickly and cheaply, with the emphasis on building one-room emergency-type units. After four decades as Singapore's biggest housing provider, the HDB has built more than 800,000 flats to house about 85% of Singapore's population. HDB new towns are planned to be self-sufficient with commercial, recreational, institutional and other facilities to cater to the daily needs of the multi-ethnic population.

Public housing governance is now focused on the decentralization of HDB functions with the introduction of town councils. First mooted in 1984, town councils were set up as a way to give residents a greater say in the running of their estates. With the onset of the greying population, the HDB has now launched public housing for the elderly. Recently, the HDB has embarked on an experimental housing project by building the first super-highrise flats to house future citizens. Last but the least, the mission of the HDB, which started with providing affordable homes, has evolved to include the wider aim of promoting the building of communities. This paper examines these current governance issues and new challenges in managing Singapore's public housing estates.

*Key words*: *Public housing, estate management, HDB, communities, town councils.*

## Introduction

Arguably, the greatest potential legitimacy that can be gained by a government is through direct provision of housing because its efforts and results would be most visible (Chua, 1997). After the World War II, housing conditions in Singapore were largely characterized by overcrowding, dilapidation, poor sanitation facilities and inadequate infrastructure. This state of affairs was further aggravated by an exponential increase in population and grew haphazardly into urban slums and squatter population. In 1948, a report by the Housing Committee indicated that, out of a total population of 938,000 persons, 680,000 were housed within the central area. This constituted more than two thirds of the population at that time. In fact, housing then became a pressing political and social issue (Lim et al, 1988).

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was constituted as a statutory board on 1 February 1960 to take over the work of the Singapore Improvement Trust set up by the British Colonial Government from 1927 to 1959. Confronted with this urgent and massive task, HDB's first priority to build as many flats as quickly as possible in the shortest time possible and at the lowest cost (Wong & Yeh, 1985). The emphasis then was on quantity. Their design was simple and functional with basic toilet and kitchen facilities. After more than four decades as Singapore's biggest housing provider, the HDB has built 862, 918 flats to house 2,854,000 people or about 85% of Singapore's population (HDB Annual Report 2001/02).

This paper examines the current issues and new challenges in Singapore's public housing and how housing policies have evolved and implemented in response to changes in the population demographics, lifestyles, and societal needs. Specifically, we discuss the policy issues relating to the decentralization of housing management, housing the elderly, introduction of super-highrise flats for the near future, and community building in public housing estates.

## Role of HDB

Under its corporate charter, the HDB is vested with the responsibility for the building of homes for the people, clearance of land required for redevelopment, resettlement of families affected by clearance schemes, provision of loans for purchase of flats, and the management of both rented and sold properties. In order for the HDB to perform its role to implement a massive public housing programme, the Singapore government supports the public housing programme through financial assistance and legislative reform. Financial aids come in the form of government grants and loans such as housing development loans that cover development programmes and operations. Legislative support is provided with the passing of the Land Acquisition Act in 1967 which allows the authorities to compulsorily acquire private land for public housing or other development programmes. This Act, together with sensitive resettlement policies, has enabled the HDB to clear squatters and slum areas smoothly and resettled the people in modern public housing estates.

The year 1964 marked another milestone in Singapore's public housing when the HDB introduced the Home Ownership Scheme to help the people own flats. The scheme not only provides citizens a stake in the country, but also a means of financial security and a hedge against inflation and rising rents. Initially, the scheme experienced a slow start. Four years later, the availability of Central Provident Fund (CPF), a form of social security, further contributed to the popularity of public housing. Here, applicants were allowed to use their

CPF to pay for the downpayments and monthly repayments for their HDB flats. As a result, this gave a tremendous boost to the public homeownership scheme.

By the early 1970's, about one-third of the population had already been housed in HDB flats. This period was marked by rapid construction and crystallisation of the 'comprehensive town planning' approach. HDB new towns are planned to be self-sufficient with commercial, recreational, institutional and other facilities to cater to the daily needs of the multi-ethnic population. Each new town includes a town centre, neighbourhood centres, bus interchange, schools, sports complexes, landscaped parks and employment centres such as factories. Each neighbourhood was self-sufficient in terms of open spaces, playgrounds, landscaping elements and surface car parks.

In the 1980's, greater emphasis was placed on providing a quality living environment. The 'precinct concept' was introduced to foster residents' identity with their neighbourhood and to promote social interaction. The precincts, comprising 400 to 600 dwelling units, were equipped with a landscaped open space for communal and recreational facilities. The precincts were linked to one another by landscaped pedestrian paths to form neighbourhoods. The aim is to create a 'Total Living Environment' to meet residents' needs for a quality living environment, recreation and accessibility to facilities.

The 1990's saw increased emphasis on creating a quality and picturesque environment, as well as a strong visual identity for the precinct, neighbourhood and town. Landmark buildings, landscaping, open spaces, special architectural features and finishes helped to achieve a sense of identity and territorial exclusivity. Special attention was also given to the preservation of natural landscape features such as hills and rivers. Figure 1 shows the percentage of population in HDB housing estates over the past four decades.



Figure 1: Percentage of Population Housed in HDB Flats
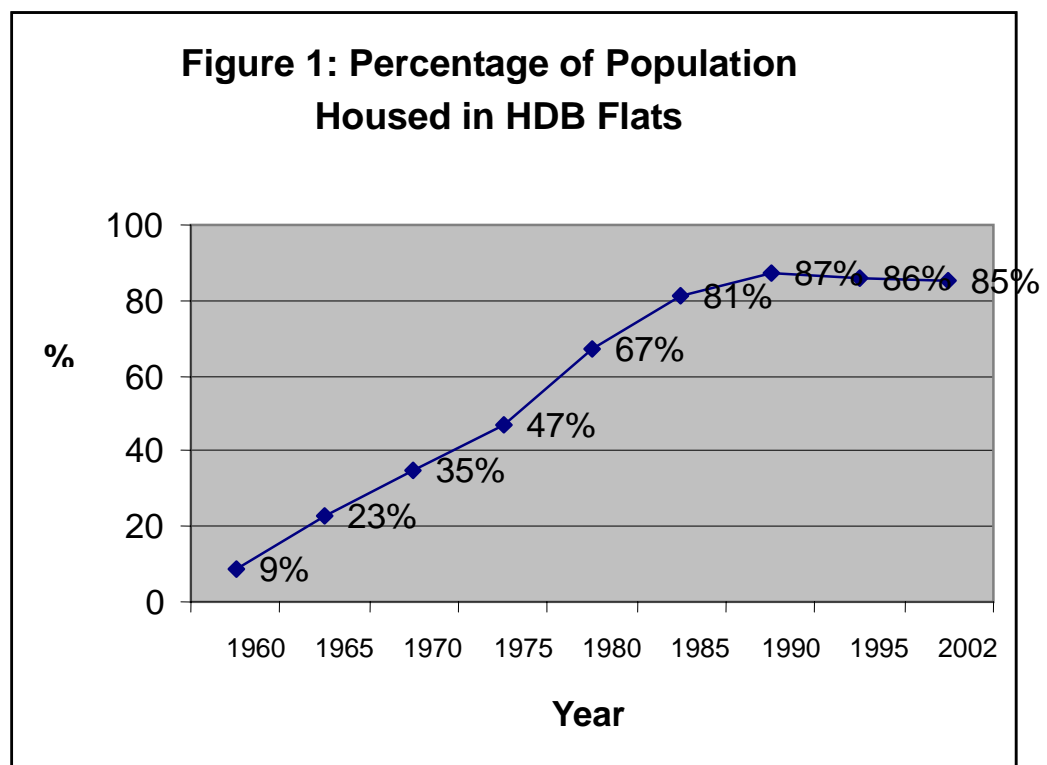
Source: HDB Annual Report 2001/2002

**Devolution of Public Housing Management**

The HDB has from the outset recognized that maintaining the housing stock is just as important as erecting it (Wong and Yeh, 1985). Since its inception in 1960, HDB had been managing all of Singapore's public housing in new towns and housing estates. However, managing the homes of 85% of the population who live in HDB flats is an enormous task for any public housing authority. The government also realized that the HDB had grown too large for it to be able to respond to the differing needs and preferences of people living in different estates.

In 1988, town councils were introduced based on the principle of giving the community a sense of self-determinism and self-reliance (Ooi, 1990). However, the idea of town councils, which function very much like a mini-government, is not a new one. Other countries, such as France and Britain, have local councils which run villages, towns and cities. In Singapore, this represents a big change in thinking since previously the housing authority has all along been making decisions practically on everything.

Under this decentralized system, each town council has the freedom to decide at the constituency level and to employ their own workers or appoint a managing agent to run their town. In this way, residents' needs can be met on the ground quickly. More importantly, the residents are given an opportunity to decide for themselves the kind of environment they want to live in and to create a distinct identity for their own estate.

The number of public housing units managed by town councils varies with the number of constituencies. Therefore, each town council can be in charge of at least one constituency or more. Town councils made up by a cluster of constituencies or Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) will be able to reap the advantage derived from economies of scale by sharing facilities and resources. Each Town Council is chaired by a Member of Parliament who has the power to appoint 6 up to a maximum of 30 members, of which two thirds must be residents from public housing estates. These town councillors may represent various professions such as architecture, engineering, law, business, and others.

When first introduced, town councils were a fairly new concept. There were concerns on the extent of powers on decision and policy making, as well as their role and standard of performance as compared with what the HDB has previously been doing which managed all housing estates under a centralized management system.

After more a decade of existence, it is observed that town councils have been able to exercise its powers to improve the living environment in the housing estates. They have generally performed well in terms of service delivery and maintenance standards, although there may be variation among different town councils (Ng, 2002). Even within large towns managed by a particular town council, the performance could differ from constituency to constituency.

**Housing the Elderly**

Singapore's population is aging at one of the fastest rates in the world. The growth rate of 3.8% ranks between that of Hong Kong's and Japan's (Shantakumar, 1996). By the year 2030, it is estimated that there will be one million Singaporeans aged 60 and above. In view of the fact that the elderly will constitute a significant proportion of the entire population in

Singapore, addressing the problems of Singapore's ageing population including their housing needs has been singled out as one of the key challenges on the national agenda.

Although there is an emerging trend where the elderly prefer to live independently, it is still important to recognize the existence of an inter-dependent inter-generational relationship between the young and the old. For example, grandparents would help to look after their grandchildren while the children in turns provide emotional and financial support to their aged parents. Thus, public housing policy has to come up with various ways of helping these families to stay close together though not necessarily within the same household. For example, new housing designs should provide for what is commonly known as "intimacy at a distance". In other words, the elderly want to live near, but not with, their children.

The HDB introduced the Studio Apartment Scheme in 1998 so as to enable the elderly to maintain their independence and privacy, without sacrificing the close company of their children, friends and peers. These purpose-built flats are designed with high quality finishes and provided with elderly-friendly fittings and fixtures, as well as communal facilities, to allow the elderly to "age-in-place" within the community. The scheme also enables residents who are 55 years old and above to enjoy additional income by cashing in on their housing assets by selling their existing flats and purchasing smaller ones.

The studio apartments are sold on 30-year leases and they come in two sizes - 35 sq. m. and 45 sq. m. selling for between S$47,800 and S$71,700. Initially, these flats were built in Bedok, Jurong, Tampines and Yishun. The scheme was well received as they are considered affordable and designed specifically to meet the elderly's needs. As a result, Bukit Merah and Toa Payoh have been added to the list of such housing estates.

HDB would be introducing further changes enabling more elderly people to benefit from the Studio Apartment scheme. To achieve a better resident mix and to promote more social interaction between the elderly and younger residents, future new studio apartments will be planned, built and integrated with other HDB flat types e.g. 4-room and 5-room.

In addition, the HDB has initiated the move to improve the living conditions of the elderly in 1-room rental blocks with a relatively high concentration of elderly households.
To make the blocks and flats more elderly-friendly, lifts are modified to stop at every floor. Other improvements include better and brighter lighting in corridors and installation of non-slip tiles and easier to handle lift-up lever taps and support handbars in the toilets. In addition, all flats are fitted with an alarm system that allows the elderly to call for help with a simple tug of a string. In addition to improving the physical conditions, residents also recieve community-based care and support services, such as home help, meals and goods delivery, and social and recreational programmes provided by voluntary welfare organisations.


**Public Housing of the Future**

The Concept Plan 2001, which sets out the long-term strategic plan for Singapore, envisions the creation of a liveable city, providing a variety of housing locations and types. To plan for a scenario of 5.5 million population and a reduction in household size, 800,000 new homes are needed, in addition to the 1 million dwelling units today. Given the constraints on the availability of land for new development, some of these new homes will come from building more high-density and very high-rise housing close to the city and Mass Rapid Transit

stations in areas without restrictive height controls. Building additional homes in the city will allow more people to take advantage of the amenities that the city offers and live closer to where they work, minimizing travel times.

As part of the urban renewal strategy to inject more public housing into the city and attract new households to rejuvenate the Tanjong Pagar area, a 2.5 hectare site at Duxton Plain, including Blocks 1 and 2 Cantonment Road, will be redeveloped by the HDB. Unlike the general practice of adopting a density of 2.8 plot ratio and no more than 30 storeys (except 4.0 plot ratio and 40 storeys at selected locations, such as Toa Payoh), the density and height for the Duxton Plain site will be increased further to between 7.4 and 8.4 plot ratio and up to 50 storeys. The new development, which will be the tallest public housing in Singapore, can provide up to 1,800 new homes and is currently scheduled for completion in October 2007. If this 'experiment' succeeds, it could be replicated in other parts of the island where building heights were not limited by aircraft flight paths (Lim, 2001).

An international design competition was launched in August 2001. The design of the new blocks has to preserve 'the special memory of the place'. The winning entry is the work of a Singapore firm called the ARC Studio Architecture and Urbanism, out of 202 entrants from around the world. As shown in Figure 2, the proposed public housing development consists of seven 48 storey blocks, recreational areas interspersed at different levels of the buildings, as well as a number of commemorative gardens and parks. The proposed design was simple and "urbanistically effective," maximizing views from the units, encouraging greater social interaction through the design of communal spaces, and providing a wide variety of floor plans, while minimizing the "impact of the high-density environment." It is also able to make good use of the small 2.5-ha site to provide high-density, yet liveable homes that are buildable and cost effective.

Figure 2: Winning Design of Singapore's Super High Rise Public Housing



Source: Straits Times

A survey involving 900 households living in 20 to 30-storey flats for at least six months was conducted by the HDB in 2002 (Chong, 2003). The aim was to determine how well residents had adapted to their present high-rise, high density living environment. 'The survey also sought to find out their perception towards 50-storey HDB blocks. The survey results found that only about three in 10 people 'did not mind living in blocks as high as 50 storeys'. This group of residents was mainly in the younger age group of below 30 years old, with a higher level of education, a higher mean household income of S$4,100, and had prior experience of living on higher storeys. However, residents' comfort level with higher storey blocks (eg 50-

storey blocks) is expected to increase over time as such blocks become available in the market. As the Duxton Plain is a pilot project, more studies would have to be undertaken to assess and understand the impact on residents as a result of super high-rise living.


## Community Development

"The house should provide a home, the focal point for a full and happy life for the family, set in surroundings where there are opportunities for attaining the wider goal of a full and happy community life (Macey, 1982). However, the term "community" has a wide variety of interpretations. Community can be considered to comprise five basic dimensions: geographical boundaries; provision for basic needs; social relationships among residents; common norms and values; and community sentiments (Wong and Yeh, 1985)

According to its corporate mission, the HDB aims not only to 'provide affordable homes of high quality', but also to 'promote the building of communities'. On the other hand, the physical design and planning of the public housing estates are considered important factors as they either obstruct or facilititate every-day social exchanges and community development (Chua, 1997). There were also concerns as to whether the *kampong* life (Malay term for village), which is characterized by its 'relaxed' pace of life, communitarian cooperation and happy days despite the lack of material comfort, is lost (Chua, 1997).

Consequently, the People's Association (PA) was established on 1 July 1960 to help foster racial harmony and social cohesion which form the basis for nation building. Twenty-eight community centres were first set up to provide a meeting ground for the various ethnic, language and religious groups. Grassroot organizations which are run by volunteers are also formed to provide a catalytic role in promoting bonding and participation in community activities. They include the Citizens Consultative Committees, Community Centre Management Committees, Residents Committees, and lately, Neighbourhood Committees.

Given the multi-racial and multi-religious characteristic of the society in Singapore, the ethnic integration policy was introduced in March 1989 to ensure a balanced racial mix within HDB estates and foster greater racial harmony. Till today, the HDB continues to work with other government ministries to provide social facilities and amenities. New towns are planned with precinct spaces such as amphitheatres and pavilions to give residents more opportunities to interact with one another for a more cohesive community


## Conclusion

Singapore has achieved one of the most successful public housing programmes in the world. With the majority of the population residing in HDB flats, public housing here has become a way of life for Singaporeans (Wong and Yeh, 1985). Nevertheless, public housing policies and management need to keep in tandem with rapid socio-economic changes and the increasing complexity of the housing needs of its population. Town councils will face greater challenges in meeting the increasing demands of residents for quality service and applying new technology to increase efficiency and control costs. In addition to the physical aspect of estate management, town councils would also have to play a supportive role in promoting a sense of belonging in the constituency.

Welfare and the types of living arrangement for the elderly are also gaining wider attention. Clearly, there can be no single solution to the problem of providing suitable housing for the ageing population without disrupting valuable social patterns. The aged should be supported by their families, the government and the community, to live and be integrated into the mainstream community for as long as possible to remain as independent as possible (National Council of Social Services, 1996). Hence, planning and designing of housing with essential supporting services should be carried out for this group of people who are more at risk and deserving of care and consideration.

As the first super high-rise public housing estate is going to be completed by 2007, it marks another milestone in public housing where the future population is expected to stay in flats that are located at even greater heights. This new form of housing development will open up new challenges and call for innovative methods in public housing management and maintenance. The attendant social and environmental issues relating to high-rise, high-density living will also have to be addressed. Last but not the least, while HDB continues to meet the rising aspirations and higher expectations of the new generation and translate future needs into viable designs and plans, the major task ahead is to facilitatie community bonding in the public housing estates.


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