



Challenges for Large Housing Estates

Problems and solutions during three decades

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Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Vestergaard, H. (2013). *Challenges for Large Housing Estates: Problems and solutions during three decades*. Paper presented at Overcoming the crisis -integrating the urban environment, Tarragona, Spain.
<http://www.enhr2013.com/>

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Overcoming the crisis -integrating the urban environment

25th ENHR Conference, Tarragona 19-22 June 2013

Challenges for Large Housing Estates: Problems and solutions during three decades

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Keywords: Troubled Housing Estates, Large Housing Estates, Improvement Programmes, Social Housing, Housing Policy, Housing Market

Abstract

This paper examines policies and improvement programmes implemented to improve troubled housing estates during three decades. It is based on evaluations of implemented programmes conducted for the Danish ministry of housing and the National Building Fund as well as similar studies from other European countries. Case studies illustrate local developments and outcomes and are the base for questioning the original identification of problems and thus the chosen solutions. Perspectives for current policy initiatives in the field of troubled housing estates are discussed in a general housing market context.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the current state of affairs and experiences from programmes aiming to solve problems within the large distressed housing estates in Denmark. This occurs at a point of time when Danish housing improvement and rehabilitation programmes are aimed at being integrated and targeted directly in order to solve social problems at the estate level. Currently extensive renovation programmes are initiated to boost building investments and employment. The perspective and approach of the programmes at the local level have generally moved from narrow housing policy to broader welfare and integration policy. The background for this discussion is research on distressed housing estates since the beginning of the 1980s including evaluation of the effects of extensive partly government sponsored improvement and rehabilitation programmes. The research includes case studies on estates involved in several past improvement initiatives as well as in on-going initiatives. Also it is important to note that social and ethnic segregation began rising on the social housing estates long before it became a general political issue in Denmark in the early 1990s, culminating in the announcement of a "Ghetto problem" in 2004 and a stigmatisation of 29 estates as "the black spots on the map of Denmark" in 2010. This stigma lasts and is exacerbated by economic recession. The impact of joblessness is especially felt in deprived housing areas.

Utopia lost! - The situation in the 1980s

The notion of troubled social housing estates in Denmark was first suggested to me in the beginning of 1982. I had accepted being a consultant on Danish social rented housing for a British initiated research project on social housing in Europe and America (Harloe, 1995). During a telephone conversation I was asked if there were any troubled social housing estates in Denmark with construction faults, empty flats and social unrest. The question took me with surprise.

Being a scholar of urban renewal (Vestergaard, 1977) I knew that the chief challenge of Danish housing policy was the low standard of the private rented housing stock in the older urban centres. This concern was a lack of modern amenities, a bad state of repair/rundown buildings, no outdoor facilities and open spaces and a low standard of services, etc. The housing to replace these conditions was the modern large flats with a view, bathrooms, spacious kitchens, balconies, laundries, playgrounds, green areas, traffic separation, organised parking etc. built by the non-housing associations. This was the modernistic suburban housing concept designed before WWII (CIAM, 1933; CIAM:Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) and planned for under WWII in special housing committees anticipating housing shortages after the war (see e.g. Indenrigsministeriet, 1946; Bos, 1946). The concept also held a promise of easy access to kindergartens, schools, shopping, restaurants and public transport soon to come (Vestergaard, 2004).

Troubled housing estates in Denmark

However, already the following year in 1983 I participated in the first research project to map out the prevalence of troubled housing estates in Denmark and what could be done to improve these estates. The first surprise was the resistance among stakeholders, like non-profit housing organisations, to the idea of doing the study. However the National Federation of Social Housing agreed to support the idea, if we did not go public with information on the project or the names of the housing estates we were visiting. The second surprise was to see the miserable condition of these estates on location and that it was a wide spread phenomenon: Nearly all suburbs around Copenhagen and the provincial cities all over the country had one or more troubled housing estates. They were all recently built, and were usually the last large housing project the local housing organisation had started to build in the years before the Danish housing and building market crashed in 1974. Problems to rent the flats were widespread and operating deficits were met with rent increases, service cuts and minimum repair and upkeep as each individual estate was (and still is) a self-sustaining economic unit. The housing management often took distance; the residents felt abandoned; local government and civil servants took no responsibility; the housing organisation often saw the troubled estates as imposed on them by interests in central government and in the ministry of housing and building. However, a widespread belief was that these estates would get out of the unfortunate situation after the first 15 years. According to local practitioners you just had to wait it out: Turbulence was to be expected at new housing estates.

The concrete panel blocks of housing were constructed but essential parts of the initial plan for many estates were never realised or came very late. The late coming parts were adequate

infrastructure like trains and busses, shopping facilities etc. Schools and kindergartens were often established in temporary buildings. Retail trade could be small vans coming around on a weekly basis. Private services like supermarkets did not locate unless substantial incentives like very inexpensive premises were available. These new housing estates were for many years the latest and most expensive local housing alternative. It was always possible to get a flat there. Households, with a choice on the housing market, quickly left and moved to better priced and located housing. This was often a single family house. Those staying behind were often families with social problems living on temporary transfer incomes. There were many households with many children on the estates and there were relatively many single parents and large immigrant families. Also refugees and other distressed households could be housed here on short notice.

In the first part of the 1980s no good solutions to the challenges at the troubled housing estates were to be found in Denmark. And those who managed to rent out all their flats by carrying out marketing campaigns did not always experience this as a solution: The housing organisation and its management was satisfied to have the flats rented out and no deficit on the accounts; however the municipal social security office and the police at the same time experienced the estate being filled up with residents needing income support, health and handicap services, special schooling and care etc. and too many incidences of domestic disputes and crime. In one case (the Gullestrup-plan in Herning) an advertisement campaign in major nationwide newspapers had attracted residents from the capital Copenhagen with no local ties or jobs to a large peripheral estate. The transition was described as coming from a situation with too many empty flats to a situation with flats filled up with troubled families needing support from the municipal social services department and special schooling and handicap support which the municipality could not match on short notice.

A journey to troubled estates in other countries

A next step was to look to other countries: What were the policies and measures to combat troubled housing estates in Sweden, UK, US, the Netherlands, Germany, and France? A look to Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, Rosengård in Malmö, Angered in Gothenburg, Rinkeby in Stockholm, and Knowsley outside Liverpool illustrated how much worse the residential situations in Denmark could actually become.

In Sweden extensive turnaround projects were introduced in the beginning of the 1980s. Here municipalities e.g. contracted management consultants like Formator to reposition estates on the local housing market. Also multi storied concrete panel blocks in e.g. Goteborg were built down to row houses and the surplus panels were to be used elsewhere in Sweden or exported. In places housing blocks were converted to business premises (Norrestad, Landskrona) or just closed off and put on stock for later use (Häśleholmen, Borås).

In the UK the solution to run down municipal housing estates were privatisations, fencing off, surveillance, gates, guards etc. One important aspect of the British housing regeneration strategy was privatisation. This was done either by selling off to the tenants or by permitting private non-

profit housing agencies takes over the estates. For many local authorities, privatisation was the only possibility of avoiding a financial squeeze. By selling off houses, funds were raised for the renovation of the remaining municipal estates.

A visit in spring 1985 to Merseyside with 'the Piggeries' in Everton, Liverpool and Knowsley challenged me to write a feature story for a major Danish paper: "Housing in Liverpool - Hooligan's City" (Vestergaard, 1985). The intention was to warn that young people living at troubled housing estates in Denmark might end up behaving as the Hooligans from Liverpool did at Heysel Stadium outside Brussels in May 1985. Here 40 football fans lost their lives and 150 were injured. An alert to the fact that the concentrations of children and young people on the troubled housing estates in Denmark urgently needed more attention to securing the everyday life conditions was necessary.

From the US tales of and from charismatic persons making a difference for arresting bad behaviour and initiating HUD financed neighbourhood improvement schemes were presented at housing conferences in Europe. These presentations were always one of the uplifting presentations on a conference and inspired to consider a visit on site to see the miracle.

In The Netherlands the traditional urban renewal in the older inner city quarters still took the attention in the 1980s. However housing built just after WW II was of a low standard and some of the larger and newer estates like the Bijmermeer were hard to rent out and crime-ridden.

In the early 1980s, the German federal republic experienced a general increase in vacancies in many of the big housing estates, and comprehensive improvement and rebuilding projects were launched and supported by the federal government on an experimental basis.

In France results of initiatives concerning the solving of problems in distressed urban areas was largely a deferment and temporary curbing of the problems. No actual confrontation with the everyday life-world of the residents had actually been achieved. So in 1988, an inter-ministerial committee for social development of urban areas was created. The committee developed later into the ministry for social integration (Ministère de l'Intégration et de la lutte contre l'exclusion).

30 years after – the present situation: from focusing on stigmatisation and political image making to a renewed stage of investments in renovations and social efforts

Today the situation in Denmark concerning the troubled housing estates is that those in focus in the beginning of the 1980s are nearly all still on the agenda and estates constructed after 1980 have even been added. Also smaller estates located in smaller towns have been losing out and stigmatised as the local ghetto. The estates in focus in the 1980s had already before they received their first financial support for investing in a major renovation at one or more occasions received individual financial support for operating costs from a troika of mortgage institutes, the state and municipalities.

Today resources for these improvement programmes is mainly covered by the National Building Fund originally established in 1966.¹ The fund is a pot of money being collected as part of the rent payments from non-profit social housing built before 1966. The deposits in this pot is increasing fast due to the fact that the debt service on the original subsidised 50-year loans to non-profit housing build after WWII will continue when they have been paid out and thus collected in the fund. In addition to financing renovations of troubled housing estate the funds are also used to finance regular major upkeep in the estates that have paid into the fund as well as new investments in non-profit housing including housing for the elderly, initiated by municipalities.

Since 2004 the troubled housing estates have until 2013 been increasingly stigmatised by government policies. They increasingly became and still are a political battlefield in relation to integration of ethnic minorities and crime policies. In 2004 a new procedure for making up the list of troubled housing estates was introduced. Housing estates listed had a large amount of ethnic minorities, low average incomes and a high frequency of residents on temporary transfer incomes like social security benefit, unemployment benefit etc. The list was published on a governmental webpage and revised once a year in the month of March. An estate on this list was allowed not to follow the rules for having to let an empty dwelling to the next household on the waiting list. Also it was exempt from having to rent out to households being allocated from the municipal social waiting list. In effect this became a list of the worst estates, named the "ghetto list", which started to be relisted in the press every time there was an incident of crime or arson etc. on one of them. Estates hardly ever being mentioned as a troubled estate in the press suddenly started to be mentioned over and over in a negative context and named a ghetto. Googling the name of one of them brought up the list on the webpage of the ministry. In addition to this it has become a quite common procedure for politicians in the right wing parties to profile themselves as being anti-crime and anti-ghetto. In 2010 the PM and other cabinet minister made high profiled media-covered visits to troubled estates, making promises to stop the negative development, stating that the behaviour of youth and especially ethnic minority youth is not to be tolerated. An unhappy conflict between a local protestant vicar and youngsters resulting in the vicar moving from his official residence in Tingbjerg in Copenhagen provoked the PM and other politicians to participate in a Sunday church service on the estate. Somehow the sitting government from 2001 until 2011 tried to use the troubled housing estates as a platform for election spins to stay in office. The listed estates were named the black spots on the map of Denmark by the Prime Minister. Up to the general election in November 2011 the then sitting government and the opposition try to outdo each other in proposing measures to combat the ghettos.

¹ The National Building Fund [Landsbyggefonden] (original named The National Building Fund of non-profit Housing Organisations [Boligselskabernes Landsbyggefond]) was established in relation to a major political agreement on housing in 1966. The aim of the fund is to increase self-financing in the non-profit housing organisation sector. The fund is a self-owning institution established by non-profit housing organisations and set up by law.

In the following three cases – Lyngbyen in Gullestrup outside Herning, Vejleåparken in Ishøj and Bispehaven in Aarhus Vest - being in the works for more than 35 years are described in order to illustrate the situation up until 2010.

Gullestrup

One prime case is the estate, Lyngbyen in *Gullestrup*, originally constructed 1973-1980 by a local cooperative housing organisation and named “Gullestrup-planen”. The plan was a result of a Nordic town planning competition in 1965. The design was a modernistic urban plan to accommodate the housing needs for an anticipated fast expanding population. It was located outside a major and prosperous provincial town, Herning, in the middle of Jutland. The original plan promised a new urban quarter, spacious and well equipped flats with a view to nature, full traffic separation, underground parking, local services etc. In the beginning of the 1980s, 14 years after the estate was first built, large flats never occupied, was in the process of being renovated in order to arrest accelerating decay of individual flats. The Gullestrup-plan was an estate with more than 500 flats in housing blocks located along a paved walking street and in strings of two storied row houses. The design might have been fitted into a dense urban setting. However, it was located in open countryside with empty flats, no services and an underground parking facility where tenants did not dare to leave their car if they happened to have one. The estate has since been included in a number of nation-wide improvement programs. In 2010 empty flats was still a challenge. A new major overall scheme was being implemented to move the estate out of its negative reputation, change the flat make-up and attract new types of tenants. Part of the scheme was to remove one of the housing blocks. Compared to the situation in the beginning of the 1980'ties the estate had benefited from the extension of the urban areas of Herning, so the location had become less remote and the services in the adjacent area had improved. However the negative image stayed on. And the deprived situation as a pocket of relative poverty and transient population had not changed. Often the middle class residents moving to the adjacent areas did not enrol at the local municipal school. These children attended private schools, in order not to mix with the poor and less resourceful residents at the housing estate.

Vejleåparken

Vejleåparken, originally named "Ishøj-planen", is a controversial and challenging estate built 1970-1973. It was originally built by the oldest cooperative housing organisation (AAB-Copenhagen) in Denmark in collaboration with a newly established local non-profit housing organisation. Today 85 per cent of the flats are managed by the cooperative, while the last part now is managed by a nationwide housing management organisation, Domea. The estate has twice received an international honour because of good quality and high standard accommodation. Features honoured were differently coloured concrete panels, spacious flats, high standard kitchens and bath rooms, shutters, rubbish shoots, car-free walking etc. Despite the high technical standard the estate soon

became a synonym for the problems affecting large social housing estates planned and built around 1970s. From the start it had letting difficulties, it was described as monotonous and very soon social and immigrant-related problems arose. These conflicting views affected especially Ishøj-planen as it was the largest of a string of new neighbourhoods with social housing constructed in rural municipalities south of Copenhagen along the Køge Bay according to an advanced urban planning strategy. The Køge Bay development plan detailed the "thumb" of the Copenhagen Finger plan. The Finger plan provided a strategy for the development of the Copenhagen metropolitan area. The thumb consisted of new urban developments and transport systems in eight former rural municipalities expected to get fast population growths. The Ishøj estate was very large, which was dictated by the contemporary belief that large units were economically better to implement. However this assumption has never been confirmed, even it was a basis for all the large plans for social housing estates built up to the end of the 1970s (Vestergaard 2004).

Vejleåparken consists of 53 blocks of flats with about 2,000 dwellings located along pedestrian streets with parking around it. Blocks form large, planted courtyards, in which children's institutions and a local centre with the estate administration and small shops are located in low buildings. In the southern end of the estate there is a school. To the north is located a very large complex with town hall, library, communal swimming bath, large indoor shopping centre and train station. The flats were spacious and well equipped - and used the best technology that you had in the 1970s.

In the beginning of the 1980s *Vejleåparken* had a concentration of immigrants and it had the reputation in the press of being the estate in Denmark with most immigrants. Added to this were disputes in the national press on how the local mayor tried to prevent immigrants and refugees from moving in. The reason for the disputes was probably that *Vejleåparken* initially counted for the dominant share of the housing stock in the municipality, Ishøj, where *Vejleåparken* is located. And as one of the largest housing estates in Denmark, it also became one of the first estates to experience a concentration of immigrants. Ishøj also became the place where the limits of the rights of the tenants to get the flat they had queued up for were tested in court.

When the persistence of the problems at the estate became obvious after the first renovation project implemented around 1990 the local council demanded a good and professional management of the estate. These requests became a source of frustrations in the cooperative housing organisation. Here the normal routine was to let the local elected tenants' board function as the daily management at the estate level. This model of management was successful in smaller estates in the city of Copenhagen but did not work in *Vejleåparken*. In practice it was not possible for tenants in their free time to manage an estate of this size and complication. At least not an estate characterized by social problems and ethnic conflicts. There is no doubt that a constant attention and demand from the mayor and the local authority on keeping up the standard of maintenance and management makes a difference in *Vejleåparken*. Also Ishøj is a municipality taking responsibility towards solving social problems at the estate level. Even the social problems in *Vejleåparken* were not solved or influenced by the physical renovation project the local authority continued to work with them. The same can be concluded about the organisational problems.

The renovations around 1990 was an attempt to improve the entrances, leaking windows and the open spaces while the recent more thorough renovations, taking place 2003-2009, have meant a total conversion with new brick facades, insulation, closed in balconies and new bathrooms as well as a total redesign and renewal of the open spaces, paths as well as accessibility measures. The latest renovation is so far the largest renovation project ever carried out in Denmark. It took place during the construction boom peaking in 2007 and it suffered from delays due to lack of skilled building workers, especially bricklayers. Part of the 2003-2009 initiative was also a municipal takeover of the letting of all empty flats in all the local social housing estates. The purpose is to avoid tenants on low incomes continuing to be concentrated in Vejleåparken. The municipal housing office has a final say on who can rent a dwelling independent of an eventual position on a waiting list. An extensive public relations initiative was attached to the renovation project. And in 2008 an intensive social and cultural effort was initiated until 2013 in order to improve tenants' involvement in the local life. In 2009 the larger flats were still hard to let and adolescents were a continuous source of worry.

The estate makes up about 25 per cent of the total housing stock in the municipality and for the viability of the municipality, having no more new building land, it is very important to keep up the population and thus to make sure that Vejleåparken is able to attract new residents and to get people to choose to stay on. When the 270 Danish municipalities were reduced to 98 with the recent administrative reform in 2007, Ishøj had 20,000 inhabitants. However in order to stay an independent municipality it has to keep up this figure at the same time as the population is aging and the households get smaller. Measures to achieve that have been to increase the density/ plot ratio of Vejleåparken by establishing new dwellings on top of the housing blocks, adding lifts, building additional dwellings on part of the open area around the estate and finally to divide larger flats into smaller. The recent initiative, a social and cultural development plan – Kulturbroen, was a development project working to grant the residents competences and qualifications needed to be successful on the Danish labour market and to encourage integration in a multi-cultural, secular and democratic society through work, education, and local network formation. However, due to different priorities between the consultant and the chairman of the residents' board this initiative collapsed.

Bispehaven

Located in the western part of Aarhus, Bispehaven provides a good example of the renewal history of a troubled housing estate over its 35 year life (Vestergaard 2009a, 2003, 2000b, 2000, 1999; Christiansen et al 1993 and 1991).

Built between 1969 and 1973, Bispehaven is a relatively large estate of almost 900 dwellings, some of which are in high-rise blocks. The built-up area is relatively densely utilized and part of the estate is dominated by underground parking where the main stairwell entrances to the high rise blocks also were located. Bispehaven has been through two major renovations: One in the end of the 1980s and one 20 years later finished in 2009. The estate still holds relatively many large flats

fit for families, even a number of the large flats were divided up into two smaller flats as part of the renovation in the end 1980s. The estate had a difficult start being located at the very outskirts of a major city Aarhus). Originally it was planned as part of a major centre with extensive shopping and service facilities and easy access to transport facilities. The whole project was drawn up and initiated by a small municipality, Hasle, just before Hasle was merged with the neighbouring large city of Aarhus. This merge was as a part of a general administrative municipal reform in 1970. Actually an important motive for planning the large dense estate was an attempt to increase the local population in order to sustain Hasle as an independent municipality. However, it was not until 1990 the area started to attain an urban character with services and transport facilities matching the original intentions.

Bispehaven has always had a low status at the local housing market. But its location in a major growing city, with Denmark's second largest university has saved it from having major letting problems. The tenants at the estate have, to a very large degree, been either people wanting a foothold at the local housing market when moving in from elsewhere in Denmark or people that ended up there as they needed to live in social housing; and the waiting list to get a flat was relatively short until after the last renovation. One of the largest concentrations of Somalis in Denmark lives in Bispehaven. They benefit from the spacious flats and of Bispehaven hosting the Somali Women's Association in Aarhus.

The estate and the housing organisation to which it belongs were almost synonymous and run by the same group of people until the beginning of the 1990s. The tenant's board failed to have a grip on managing a large and technical complicated estate. As the problems at the estate escalated in the beginning of the 1980s the social situation deteriorated. Attempts to improve the situation were initiated, but they always faded out due to a lack of resources and internal conflicts. Not until a new manager was employed from outside the estate did things start to change. This included a more professional approach in meeting the social problems. E.g. new staff in the two jobs as social workers was employed by the professional housing organisation and not by the tenant's board. Also a special effort to meet the needs of refugee children at the estate was established by the local authority social office at the request of the housing organisation. The policy of the estate in the 1990s was to offer good housing at a good price and advertise that. All in all the social problems at the estate were not influenced by the renovation project but the situation seemed to be changed due to a new and more professional management being established after the physical improvements. This estate would have been in a far more depressed situation if it had been located in a part of the country with decreasing population and decreasing demand for rented housing.

After the latest renovation project finished in 2009 Bispehaven are doing quite well in a local context, as neighbouring estates like Gellerupparken in Aarhus Vest are performing poorly and attract negative attention. A very ambitious renovation plan have been designed for Gellerupparken but it is undecided and the local tenants here are negative to the plan, as they do not want any of the housing blocks demolished. Bispehaven tendered and carried through the latest renovation plan before the construction market peaked in 2007 and was able to get a lot more output from their budget than projects out for tendering at a later date. Also Bispehaven has a strong management and

the tenants support the local work. The management has dedicated stood up for the estate and improve its image by being accessible and meeting the press in person. Finally the letting of flats in Bispehaven has been changed, so persons not able to pay the rent or not having connection to the labour market cannot get a flat even they might be the next on the waiting list. They will be referred to rent another flat in a less deprived housing estate. Also the municipality does not use its right to allocate to every fourth vacant flat at the estate but use the allocation possibilities at less deprived estates.

Discussion/conclusions

Troubled housing estates in new urban areas became an issue in many European countries in the late 1970s. The new large recently built modernistic housing estates were often difficult to let. Rent loses, inadequate maintenance, anti-social behaviour became a concern. The situation also developed in Denmark where a main concern was the renewal of the oldest housing stock in the slum areas. The expectation was that the teething troubles in the new estates would disappear soon. This has not been the case and after three rounds of more and more comprehensive physical interventions it is obvious that architecture competition and construction work cannot do the trick of bringing an improved everyday life to the residents of the troubled housing estates.

Maintenance and refurbishment of the building stock is major challenge in a recession as the use of idle capacity in the building sector can help to increase economic activity and employment.

Special programmes to improve troubled social housing estates in Denmark date from 1985 when about 100 social housing estates were identified as being in need of renewal. When the evaluation of the program was concluded the message was: This is a social issue not a question of building technics and construction faults (Christiansen et al 1993). Then an area-based approach was introduced in 1994 by a new government Urban Committee which had been given the responsibility of developing a programme to solve Denmark's so called 'ghetto' problems (Vestergaard, 1998). The Committee wanted to change previous strategies from only a 'indirect' approach based on general subsidies to the non-profit social housing sector to a more 'direct' or targeted approach also to solving social problems. A package for the assistance of 500 troubled social housing estates was launched which included physical renewal, re-financing options, possibility of debt relief and the deployment of 100 social workers. A budget was allocated also to support a broad range of social activities. In the very premature final evaluation of the programme published in 1999 it was not possible to point to convincing positive results and the conclusion was: "The negative development on the involved estates have been impeded and the situation would be much worse if the programme had not been there" (Andersen, 1999). Since the year 2000 the National Building Fund of non-profit Housing Organisations and various local social housing funds have initiated renovation and improvement activities in more than 100 vulnerable housing estates and at investments in the energy efficient and sustainable renewal of the housing organisation stock (Vestergaard, 2009; Vestergaard & Haagerup, 2009 and 2010; Bech-Danielsen et al, 2011). Lyngbyen, Vejleåparken and Bispehaven presented in this paper were part of this programme.

The current centre-left government which took office in 2011 has adopted a more cautious rhetoric when discussing troubled housing estates. A Ministry for Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs was re-established, and the minister has focus and attention on improving the vulnerable housing estates. In April 2013 an agreement between the government and most parties in the opposition allowed the National Building Fund to increase spending on renovations and social initiatives in the troubled housing estates. However, it is still The National Building Fund, thus the social housing organisations and various local social housing funds that in practice initiate and fund the improvement programmes. In effect the social housing sector has become a lever for the government's plan for growth in order to boost employment. It is stipulated that the employment grows by 71% per year as a result of increased investments in the existing social housing.

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