The Role of *Ïdïrs* in Neighbourhood Upgrading in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

Efforts have been made by NGOs, Governments and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to upgrade slum[1] areas, particularly in the cities of developing countries. In many of these cities, the challenge still remains as the process of rapid urbanization continues to negatively affect the resource allocation and provision of services. According to UN-Habitat, in 2001, 924 million people (31.6 %) lived in slums and it is projected that in the next 30 years the number of slum dwellers will be about 2 billion (UN-Habitat, 2003). In Addis Ababa, it is estimated that 80% of the population are living in slums and 85% of the housing stock is believed to be located in slum areas.

The lessons learned from the slum clearances of the 50s and 60s were the backdrop for initiating various slum upgrading programs including self-help housing, which was advocated by architects such as John F. C. Turner[2]. In the mid-1970s, the concept was widely adopted by the World Bank (Werlin, 1999) and it was promoted in the form of *in-situ* settlement upgrading in existing slums or in providing sites and services in unoccupied areas The key lessons learned from the experiences of the 70s were that slum dwellers are not part of the problem but part of the solution.

This paper analyzes the role of a coalition of burial associations (*ïdïrs)* in slum upgrading. In agreement to Turner's theory and the experience of the 70s the *ïdïr* members residing in slum areas

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[1] 'Slum' is an imprecise concept that has different meaning to different groups. Western concept of slum dwellers makes distinction between those that aspire to better themselves and fulfill social norms and those that reject the accepted social values. The former merit assistance while that latter do not. This dichotomy parallels the classification often made to slum areas as 'slums of hope' and 'slums of despair". In developing countries slums may refer to lower quality housing and are used interchangeably with, spontaneouse settlements, shanty houses, squatter settlements, 'informal'/non-formal settlements and low-income housing (UN-Habitat 2003). It has now been re-introduced in the development discussion, as dwellers themselves prefer to be referred as 'slum dwellers', for example, as in a 'federation of slum dwellers' (See also d' Cruz & Satterthwaite, 2005:7 and Hassan et al, 2005:18). In the context of Ethiopia it signifies physically deteriorated neighbourhoods inhabited by relatively poor households, rather than the classic slums of despair.

[2] John Turner was a British architect who worked in slums and squater settlements of Peru. He advocated the idea of building housing to suit oneself rather than constructing mass housing advocated by many western organizations.

were found to be part of the solution by mobilizing themselves into a coalition interested in neighbourhood upgrading. The study is based on a case study of a coalition of *ïdïrs* known as *Täsfa Mahbärawi Lmataqäf Mahbär* (*Täsfa* Social and Development Association) located in Addis Ababa. The paper draws from the author's PhD thesis. The data was gathered during two periods of fieldwork in 2004 and 2006. It was gathered largely through a qualitative survey method that relied on both secondary and primary sources- semi structured interviews, informal discussions and observations.

2. The *Tesfa* Social and Development Association (TSDA)

The Täsfa Social and Development Association (TSDA), is a coalition of 26 *ïdïrs* in Addis Ababa established with the aim of improving the poor living conditions of its members. *Ïdïr*, which is basically a burial association, is found in many towns in Ethiopia. Out of the many types of *ïdïrs* (based on ethnicity, sex, age, work place and residence) the most dominant is community *ïdïr*, also called, *yäsäfär ïdïr* or *yäkäbäle ïdïr*. It is formed by households living in the same neighbourhood (*säfär* or *käbäle*)[3]. Members are expected to pay their dues, attend meetings and participate in burials by accompanying the coffin, extending emotional support to the bereaved and offering food and drink to mourners. It also extends material assistance including tent (for temporary shelter), tables, chairs, and kitchen utensils. Culturally, there is a general belief that the more a funeral is attended by as many people as possible the more the status and respect attributed to the deceased and bereaved. Therefore, it is not uncommon for families to belong to more than one *ïdïr*. In their present form, community *ïdïrs* usually have by-laws governing their activities. The by-laws generally include the purpose of the association, titles and duties of officers, membership fee, frequency of contribution and fines for non-compliance with rules and regulations. In addition, the by-laws state that the *ïdïr* is non-political and non-religious.

The first attempt to engage *ïdïrs* in activities beyond their primary function of providing support to families of the deceased was made by the Imperial government in the late 1950s. The strategy was to coordinate the activities of *ïdïrs* through established associations comprising a group of *ïdïrs*. According to Mekuria (1976), the model centres took another direction following the failed coup of 1966 against the Emperor in which, allegedly, the leader of *Mächa Tuläma ïdïr* used the

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[3] *Kebele* is the smallest administrative unit (local government).

association for political motives. Since then, *ïdïrs* have been expected to be non-political and open to all individuals irrespective of age, sex, ethnicity and religion (Fekadu 1976, Pankhurst 2003).

During the period (1974-1991) of the socialist government, according to Pankhurst (2003), *ïdïrs* were generally viewed as reactionary forces incompatible to the communist ideology and the government's administrative structure.   Following the fall of the socialist, military government in 1991, there has been a growing interest on the part of some NGOs and the government to transform the activity of *ïdïrs* beyond their main burial function. Currently, in Addis Ababa, out of a total of 4007, *ïdïrs*, 962 (24%) participate in some kind of development efforts (Tenagne 2003).

3. TSDA's formation and activities

TSDA is located in the *Kolfe-Qäranyo* sub-city of Addis Ababa.[4] *Kolfe-Qäranyo* sub-city covers an estimated area of 6,510.4 hectare out of Addis Ababa's total area of 54,000ha**.** According to the Addis Ababa City Administration Urban Management Institute (2005), the *Kolfe-Qäranyo* sub-city has a population of 281,119, or 9.54% of Addis Ababa's population. The number of households in the sub-city is about 55,000. More than 4000 household of this sub-city belong to 26 *ïdïrs,* which are members of TSDA. The survey also indicated that a majority of the housing in the sub-city are classified as slums.

Ïdïrs are often caught in a dilemma regarding their role as community-based organizations. On one hand, *ïdïrs* are more and more criticised for not being involved in development efforts, and on the other, they are cautioned not to stretch and indulge themselves in development works, lest they end up performing neither their traditional task nor community development initiatives. The argument for the first critique is that they are the most genuine, voluntary and independent associations; hence their involvement in development would result in achieving ownership and continuity. The argument for the second critique is that they do not have the capacity, both human and financial, to undertake and manage community development. The concern is, even if they develop capacity, they will be replicating formal NGOs and this role could be at the cost of sacrificing their traditional burial function and losing their flexibility.

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[4] Addis Ababa is divided into ten sub-city administrations each having about ten *käbäles* under its jurisdiction.

In recent years the formation of coalition of *ïdïrs* for the purpose of community development is highly encouraged. The objective is to keep the autonomy and independence of member *ïdïrs* while maintaining their primary burial function and also allowing them to enjoy the benefits of carrying out development efforts. To this effect there has been a growing interest on the part of NGOs, the government and some *ïdïrs* in forming *ïdïr* coalitions. The self-initiated *Kolfe* area coalition of *ïdïrs (TSDA)*, the ACORD (an NGO)-initiated coalition of *ïdïrs* of *Akaki and Ferensai legasion*, and government-initiated coalition of *ïdïrs* in some sub-cities can be cited as examples. In the succeeding sections the case of Tesfa Social and Development Association (TSDA) will be covered.

TSDA was initially formed with the vision of tackling poverty and assisting members of *ïdïrs* who could not afford the monthly due because of old age or lack of income. Prior to the establishment of TSDA, members who could not pay their dues were forced to lose their membership. In such circumstances, if a family member died, families of the deceased would be forced to beg on the streets in order to cover burial expenses. Having seen many such unfortunate situations and being mindful of the role that *ïdïrs* could play in community development, a few *ïdïr* leaders came up with the idea of forming a coalition. Following consultation with their constituent members, TSDA was formed in 2000.

As of May 2005, TSDA had twenty-six member *ïdïrs* with more than 4000 households comprising a population of about 29,000[5]. Each *ïdïr* member pays a membership fee of 200 Birr and additional 1 Birr for the coalition based on its membership.[6] In most *ïdïrs,* a member pays a monthly due of 11 Birr out of which 10 Birr is collected by the *ïdïr* and 1Birr is due to TSDA.

Generally, *ïdïrs* secure their legal personality by registering with the municipality. This legal registration permits them to hold meetings and run their day-to-day activities, but it does not enable them to function as NGOs. For example, they cannot solicit money from external sources to carry out upgrading functions. NGOs secure their legal status only after they register with the Ministry of Justice. In June 2000, TSDA registered with the municipality of Addis Ababa, and in March 2002 with the Ministry of Justice (Voice of Tesfa, 2002). TSDA's registration with the Ministry of Justice was a major turning point as it enabled TSDA to function as an NGO.

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[5] Source: TSDA's Planning and Programming office
[6] The exchange rate of USD 1 is about 13.00 Birr

4. TSDA's administrative structure and its relationship with member *ïdïrs*

TSDA is run by an executive body (referred to as Board of Directors) made up of elected officials of individual *ïdïrs* who, in turn, are responsible to all members of the constituent *ïdïr* (General Assembly). The administrative structure is based on a simple concept that the coalition should be run by *ïdïr* leaders that would have dual responsibilities. Thus, the leaders of member *ïdïrs* would be simultaneously a member of TSDA's Board of Directors. This dual structure was found to be effective as the link between the grassroots, who are members of individual *ïdïrs*, and TSDA was easily facilitated.
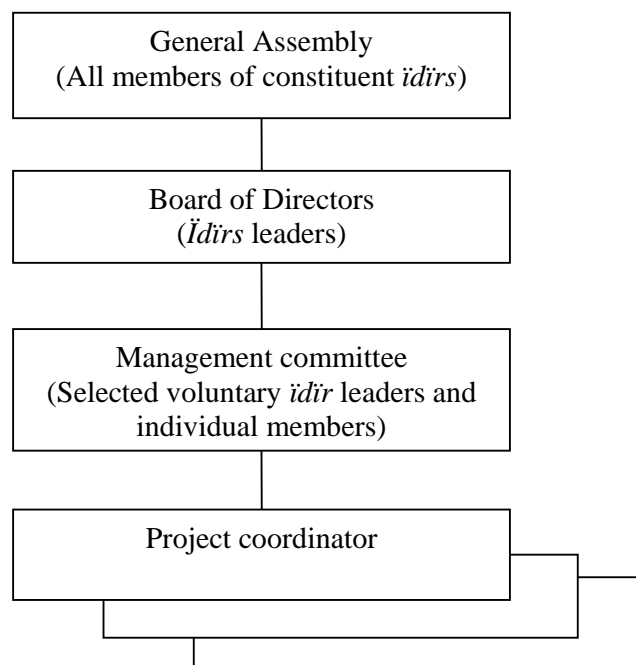

Fig 1. Administrative structure at the initial stage of TSDA
Source: Interview and Voice of *Täsfa* [7] (2002).

As the number of member *ïdïrs* started to grow it became administratively unwieldy to have all the leaders of member *ïdïrs* on the Board. At the same time, the exclusion of some leaders from the Board created a gap in the communication link. Therefore, a Council, composed of all the leaders of individual *ïdïrs*, was introduced to serve as a buffer between the General Assembly and the Board of Directors (See Fig 2). The grassroots convey their voice through the *ïdïr* leaders who may be members of the Council and /or members of the Board of Directors.

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[7] Newsletter of TSDA

In the past, *idïr* leaders were elected on the basis of social status, community acceptance, age and leadership ability. According to Tenagne (2003:7), currently one's level of education, the length of duration in the community, administrative experience and willingness to serve are being added as important criteria in addition to the traditional factors. Many of the key TSDA leaders are ex-army officers with extensive experience in mobilizing and managing large groups of people. In addition, some of them are retirees with secured private income, which has enabled them to utilize their resources and free-time to the welfare of the organization.
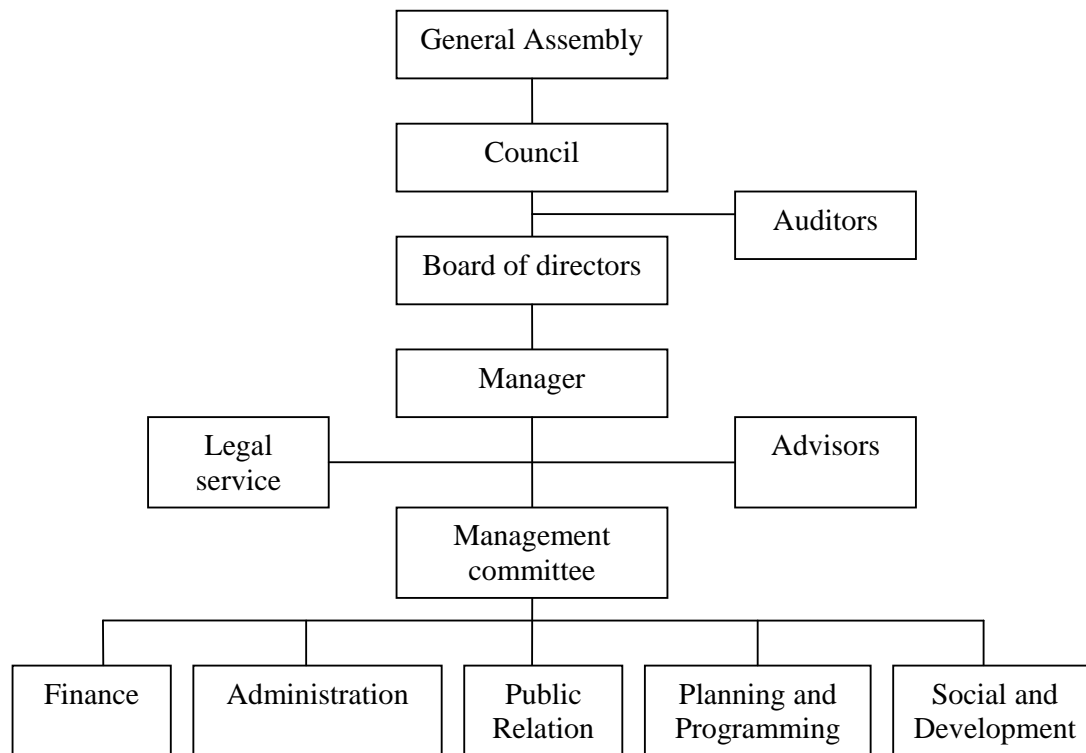

Fig. 2. Current administrative structure of TSDA
Source: Extracted from the interview with the head of *Täsfa's* Planning and Programming Office

5. TSDA's development activities

Many NGOs in Addis Ababa, such as the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), Mary Joy Development and Support Organization, Hiwot HIV/AIDS Prevention Organization, CARE Ethiopia, HelpAge Ethiopia, Hope for African Children Initiative (HACI), Concern and DKT Ethiopia have been working in partnership with *idïrs* in various areas of development. Currently, there is an increase in the number of national NGOs interested in collaboration with *idïrs*.

The campaign against the spread of HIV/AIDS is the most notable intervention area that has enhanced the collaboration between NGOs and TSDA. Slum areas have limited access to health facilities which has made them prone to increased deaths of HIV/AIDS victims. The high mortality rate from HIV/AIDS has directly affected *ïdïrs*, as they have to pay to every bereaved family a sum amounting to 550 *Bïr*. This unfortunate circumstance has led to a sharp decrease to the financial capital of *ïdïrs*. To alleviate the problem, in addition to increasing members' monthly contribution, *ïdïrs* are getting interested in collaboration on development efforts focused in the prevention of HIV/AIDS (Akalewold, 2003; Tenagne, 2003).

In particular, NGOs such as ACORD Ethiopia, CARE Ethiopia, HelpAge Ethiopia and HACI have been closely working with TSDA. In partnership with HelpAge, TSDA has initiated several projects worth over 500,000 *Bir.* The projects include the physical upgrading of 51 houses for the elderly (See Fig. 3 & 4), a loan of 500 *Bïr* to 75 destitute elderly for an income generating revolving fund, grant fund to 25 children of the elderly, eye cataract operations for 136 elderly and regular provision of uniforms and school equipment for 90 orphans. Table-1 presents a detailed listing of the various projects.
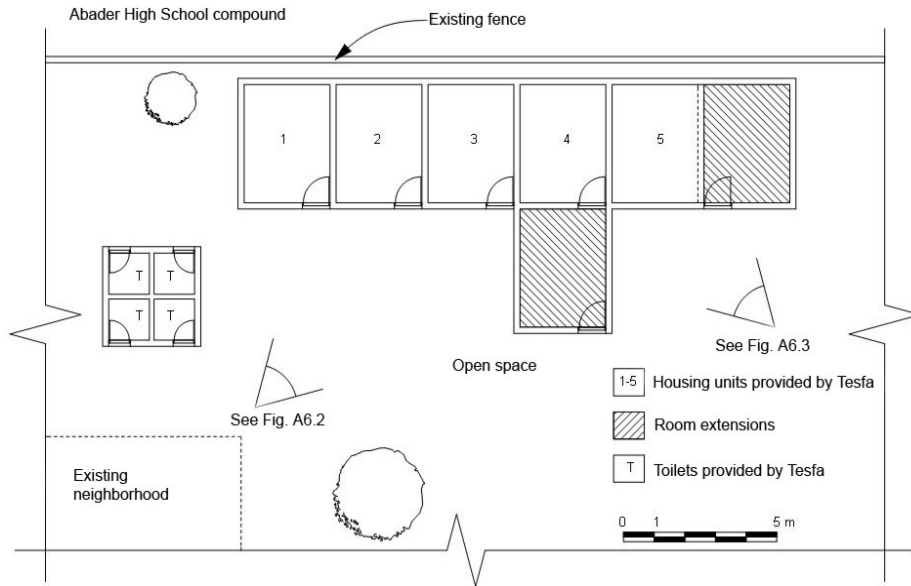
Fig. 3: Floor plan of TSDA built houses

Fig. 4: Picture of TSDA built houses. Floor plan indicated above

Table 1: *Täsfa*'s activities

Project components	Type of activity
HIV AIDS prevention and support	Sensitising 5400 members of 26 *ïdïrs* of the need of community care for orphaned and vulnerable children and HIV/AIDS affected families
	Training and workshops of awareness creation for 26 *ïdïr* leaders and other community representatives
	Psychological and social support for 50 grandparents in charge of orphaned and vulnerable children
	Education for 50 orphans and vulnerable children
	Training for 50 home-based facilitators,
	Training for 30 peer educators
	Support for 35 HIV/AIDS victims
	Strengthening anti HIV/AIDS counsels in 5 *käbäle*
Housing	Upgrading of 50 houses for grandparents with orphaned children
	Upgrading of 5 houses for households considered the poorest of the poor
	Construction of 5 new housing units for relocated poor households
Micro credit and income generation	Establishing saving and credit bank
	Providing seed money for 49 grandparent - headed households
	Skill training for 800 orphans and helping them secure jobs
Health	Eye cataract operation for some elderly persons
Direct handouts	Regular provision of clothing and school materials for 105 orphans
	Regular provision of school material for 400 orphans

Source: Extracted from the information given by *Täsfa's* administrator (2006).

6. Summary and Conclusions

At present, TSDA and other *ïdïr coalitions,* initiated by NGOs and the government, are involved in neighbourhood development programs that includes slum upgrading, saving and credit schemes, construction of infrastructure, and fighting HIV-AIDS. Coalition of *ïdïrs* provide the above services while maintaining their autonomy, identity, independence and the flexibility to provide traditional functions. By registering as NGOs, they have the legal power to enter into partnership with other NGOS in their effort to promote development in their neighbourhood. Poverty, the increase in deaths of HIV/AIDS victims and the need for dignified burials were some of the key factors that pushed *ïdïr coalitions* to participate in community development and collaborative programs with NGOs.

Members had to respond to the call of TSDA in its efforts of community development. They were afraid of the risk of expulsion from *ïdïr* membership and suffering social alienation and finally undignified burial ceremonies should they fall on hard times. These factors have helped TSDA run its functions with relative ease. Thus, one can conclude that culture has played a major role in motivating individuals to participate in *ïdïrs,* and through that, in development. Within a short period of time, membership in TSDA reached 26 and the coalition leaders were able to win the confidence of the constituent members of individual *ïdïrs*. This was largely due to the fact that the coalition was self initiated without outside interference, and the quality of leadership was sound. Therefore, based on this case, one can draw three important lessons that are critical in institution building: the importance of the integrity and capacity of leadership, the need for autonomy and independence and the role of culture, in this case burial function.

Ïdïr coalitions, once established, are driven by their own internal dynamics. Since they are member-led organizations, their activities remain continuous and they are relatively easier to assume ownership of development projects. Despite these positive elements, one has to be cautious in initiating a coalition of *ïdïr* from outside, particularly those initiated by the government. *Idïrs* are sceptical towards initiatives coming from the government, lest they are co-opted or exploited in the pretext of development partnership. The scepticism is largely born out of the history of the relationship between governments and *ïdïrs*. The role of the government should, thus, be to create an enabling environment, namely: easier legal procedures, facilitating acquisition of land for development, and minimizing bureaucratic hurdles. Similarly, NGOs can play a critical role in promoting partnership with *ïdïr* coalitions without creating a sense of dependency.

One of the major challenges of slum upgrading is the lack of capacity to expand the scale of operation or coverage of programs.   The work of NGOs, the government and TSDA, so far, has been a patchwork of limited coverage. Compared to NGO-sponsored or government-initiated upgrading efforts, *ïdïr* coalitions have greater opportunity to work on a larger scale because the coalitions are based on already existing institutions, which are found through out the city. The strategy to achieve a large scale of operation, however, should not be based solely on interest.   For example, if the membership of TSDA remains open, more and more *ïdïrs* will be interested in joining. However, this could have its own drawback. If the membership of *ïdïrs* under TSDA is not limited both in terms of spatial coverage and neighbourhood cohesiveness, then its management capacity could be challenged. Besides, the wider the area covered and the more the membership attracted, the more the

risk that TSDA may lose its intimacy and the trust of its membership; because the confidence in the leadership of the coalition is built on the personal neighbourliness among the leaders and inhabitants.

The establishment of as many manageable coalitions as possible can lead to a horizontal network of coalitions sharing experiences from each other. Existing coalitions, such as TSDA, may serve as pilot projects from which others can learn. TSDA has been organizing workshops and seminars for like-minded *idïrs* to this effect. It should be noted, however, that the establishment of a network of coalitions that are agents of change and not merely participating in development is only one component for large scale upgrading. There are additional components such as political will, clarity of purpose, institutional organization and financial readiness of city government that should be in place. Provided, these components are in place, the transformation of *idïrs* into upgrading actors, through the creation of coalitions, could be a viable option for city-wide neighbourhood upgrading.

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