



Informality and Affordability: Approaches from the Global South and Opportunities for the Global North

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Abstract: *The changing world economy since the 1970s and the decrease in welfare and deregulation in the Global North have led to an inefficient and declining stock of affordable housing. In the Global South, the need to economically catch up with the Global North has led to a lack of sustainable affordable housing policies. Social and affordable housing policies in the Global South have been either non-existent or very inefficient. The aim of this short paper is to start a discussion (and contribute to the existing ones) on how the social dynamics of informal settlements may be a source of new approaches to the provision of affordable housing in the Global North and South. Despite their illegal status and characterisation as urban blight, informal settlements are frequently illustrative examples of collaborative processes in the areas of planning and development that depend on the social connections and relationships among squatter households.*

Keywords: Affordable Housing; Global South; Comparative Housing Policy; Global North; Informality.



Introduction

Housing is a basic need that every person should have access to; however, housing affordability is a huge issue threatening the urbanising world. Government subsidies for low-income housing, rent regulations, and policies for public housing to reduce poverty have been slowly abandoned for a more marketised housing market in the urban world. This has led to a lack of affordable housing not only in the Global South but also in the Global North (Leishman, Rowley 2012; Clapham 2018; Garcia-Lamarca, Kaika, 2016). The developing part of the world is usually referred to as the Global South by many scholars (Roy 2009; Merrifield 2014; Robinson, 2011). As Robinson (2011: 3) states, for urbanists the markers of being from the Global South or the reference to it as less developed, underdeveloped or developing are consistent with 'limited urban structure, informal construction methods, lack of planning, lack of economic opportunity, informal economic activities, large population growth with limited economic growth, external dependency'. In addition, those working on developing geographies have maintained that urbanisation in poorer countries is ultimately related to the wealth and power in wealthy countries (read: Global North). However, these analyses have had the consequence that the two experiences, that in wealthy and that in poorer cities (read: in the North and South), have rarely overlapped or been relevant to each other (Robinson 2006). This paper takes the perspective that these experiences are intertwined and both affect each other, meaning that not only the North affects the South but the South affects the North. Even if the term Global South itself has its own drawbacks and there is still a debate going on as to what it means and which countries are considered to be the South, it is what many scholars call the Global South that has usually been associated with the increasing and more apparent influx of informal settlements (e.g. Turkey, Brazil, Mexico, India, etc). However, in the Global South people have started to create their own solutions, such as the *gecekondu*s in Turkey or the small property houses in China. Henri Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city' talks about people in informal settlements, as '[t]hey are excluded so they take', but, he continues, 'they are not seizing an abstract right, they are taking an actual place: a place to lay their heads. This act – to challenge society's denial of place by taking one of your own – is an assertion of being in a world that routinely denies people the dignity and the validity inherent in a home' (2004: 311). In this sense, squatting or living in an informal settlement is born out of the basic need for shelter. Inequality in the housing sector, ultimately, has led many people both in the global North and South to despair and, as a result, to seek housing and shelter in informal settlements (McFarlane 2012).

The aim of this short paper is to open a discussion on investigating the workings of affordable housing processes in the specific situation of informal settlements, and on what the North can learn from the Global South to the North. Global economic restructuring since the 1970s and the roll-back of the welfare state in the Global North have been major contributors to a crisis in the availability of affordable housing stock (Merrifield 2014; Warf 1999; Harvey 1989; Leitner 1994; Fainstein 2001). In the 1970s, the Global financial system expanded dramatically and foreign investment was dominated, not by capital invested directly in productive functions, but rather by capital moving into and between capital markets (Smith 2002). In other words, the period since the 1970s witnessed the financialisation of the world economy. The developed part of the world experienced the retreat of industrial production and therefore a decrease in the primary circuit of capital (Merrifield 2014). Real estate that works as a secondary circuit of capital started to rise and capital shifted to this arena, as the primary circuit of capital slowed down. This rise in the real estate sector has become the main factor behind urbanisation in the 'developing world' (Lees et al. 2015). In the experience of the Global South, massive urban



redevelopment and regeneration projects can be on a level that is at odds with the neighbourhood they are in, creating big spaces of gentrification and gentrification-driven displacement (see Shin, Kim 2015; Ribeiro 2013; Goldman 2011). At the same time, this situation has close links to the refashioning of Northern cities, such as the inner city areas of London and New York when it comes to real estate speculation and the accumulation of wealth through investment in real estate (Lees et al. 2016).

In recent years, housing affordability among lower income groups has been relatively absent from Europe's social and political agenda. As a result, there have been substantial cuts in the provision of affordable housing in a number of countries (Housing Europe 2015). Affordable housing (or the lack thereof) is increasingly seen as a local issue, and since housing is a basic need, many people have started to look for alternatives. One such alternative involves creating bottom-up initiatives that promote a participation society. There have been attempts in several European countries to promote active citizenship and inclusive societies (Elsinga 2014). This kind of search for alternatives along the lines of a more individual and informal way of urban planning is exactly one reason why informal settlements in the South should not be dismissed, as they have been doing the same thing for decades now.

One cannot take it for granted that residents of the slums in Mumbai or Mexico City practise more informality than the urban poor of New York and London. As McFarlane (2012) argues, it is more likely that different modes of urbanity involve a different sort of informality. In other words, just because residents of Mumbai or Mexico City go through 'middle men' to get access to certain services and infrastructures and the residents of London or New York engage in this kind of behaviour less, does not mean their lives are less informal overall. One important example of this, as mentioned above, is the explosion of 'participatory planning'. Miraftab (2011: 861) argues that informal politics have already been at the centre of the urban politics debates: 'they include informal practices of urban dwellers and poor citizens in constructing their neighbourhoods, cities and livelihoods'. This kind of planning puts emphasis on community groups and neighbourhood associations, which led to a shift from formal urban planning to a more entrepreneurial mode and then to a call for more informal meetings, networking, and working relationships.

Often stigmatised by policymakers, informal settlements are complex socio-physical entities characterised by very strong internal social ties between inhabitants including a strong sense of community, trust, and collective neighbourhood management (Tekeli 1982; Turkun 2011; Turkun 2009a; Can 2016). To put it simply, even though the increase in real estate speculation and the problems caused by a lack of affordable housing are more visible in the Global South, there are organic (be it informal) housing settlements that cater to the housing needs of the poor. In a world where there is an increasing need for affordable housing, these informal settlements and dynamics that feed them should be investigated to see what academics, activists and policy-makers can learn from them.

Affordability

As Dorling (2014) puts it, a significant part of the population is becoming poorer in real terms, and a growing number of people find housing less and less affordable even in areas where prices have been falling or static. As a result, the term 'affordable' becomes harder and harder to define (Dorling 2014). Housing affordability generally refers to household expenditures, and



ensuring this affordability becomes a challenge. It is difficult to increase household incomes to catch up with the increasing housing expenses, as wages have not been growing as much over time (Anacker, Carr 2011; Rajan 2010). Housing affordability is also about the overall available affordable houses for the general population's income level. This includes absolute and relative increases in low-income renter households, senior households, and immigrant households (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2013)

Affordable housing, on the other hand, refers to the overall housing stock in a community. If most of the community cannot afford to shelter themselves or spend a significant amount of their income just to access housing, that usually means there is not enough affordable housing stock. A lack of affordable housing can also stem from insufficient construction, deteriorating housing stock, insufficient government subsidies, and exclusionary zoning (Anacker, Li 2016; Anacker 2019)

However affordable housing and housing affordability are still very much contested concepts. In recent decades, the debate in housing studies has usually been focused on housing affordability or how to increase affordable housing stock. Of course, the main reason for this focus is because in the age of 'globalisation' the state has withdrawn its support for the most part and housing has started to be seen as a free-market issue (Forrest, Murie 1990; Malpass, Murie 1999; Chiu 2001; Allen 2006). In other words, the increasing dominance of the market in the distribution of housing has raised more concerns about the issue of affordability. But many scholars have criticised the use of affordability as a concept or have noted the difference between affordable housing and housing affordability (Malpass, Murie 1999; Dorling 2014; Edgar et al. 2002; Sendi 2011). Edgar et al. (2002: 59) pointed out:

'The meaning of affordability in relation to housing presents difficulties both conceptually and operationally. The conceptual difficulty resides in the need to establish a normative definition of the housing good and what households should pay for that good. The normative definition of adequate or decent housing determines the nature of affordability and yet this is a vague and relative concept.'

Reeves (2005:16), like a number of other scholars (after him), admits that '[a]ffordable housing is, out of its proper context, an odd phrase. After all, most housing is affordable by someone ... if there were properties which were genuinely not affordable, they would be empty'. The way I use the concept of affordability in this paper is to indicate access to housing based on a price/income ratio that does not place an unreasonable burden on the household. Simply put, affordability is about being able to purchase or pay for something, and the main difficulty remains that there are many households in every society that do not have this ability to afford adequate housing, be it for purchase or rental. Following from this, to increase or ensure accessibility to housing for most segments of the population, this paper opens up a discussion of what it is possible to learn from informal settlements. After all, all residents in informal settlements exercised their right to housing and gained access to housing against all the odds, so their experience can be useful to policymakers around the world.



Rethinking Informality

Informal settlements are thought to be an inseparable part of cities of the Global South and there has been much policy work to rid cities from these settlements. These mostly come in the form of slum removal or regeneration projects that end up with the total displacement of the urban poor (see Potts 2011; Arabindoo 2011). For the cities in the Global North, the debate for informal settlements or how to regenerate/rehabilitate them is almost non-existent, despite the fact that there are still informal settlements (i.e. sheds with beds in London) in these cities as well (see Ascensao 2015). There have also been squatter movements in various parts of Europe, such as Hausbesetzerbewegung in Berlin (see Vaseduvan 2011a), the corolla movement in Spain, with people occupying residences (see Vaseduvan 2015; Stelfox 2013), and residents of London illegally renting out sheds in their garden to the poorest residents of the city (Lees et al. 2016). The illegal 'beds with sheds' go for around £350 a month and the sheds usually do not have hot water and barely any heating. But if the shed is in a bad part of London that is hard to get to, the price can go as low as £240 a month. There is no exact figure for how many sheds are being illegally let in London (Dorling 2014). However, in the district of Slough, it has been reported that (Staff reporter 2013) some 211 outbuildings have been rented out illegally and the local council estimated that there could be up to 3000 sheds occupied in the district (Dorling 2014). These patterns of informality in both the South and the North show what it means to live in precarity and reveals the struggles of residents while they 'try to do more than simply register the factualness of a bare existence' (Simone 2010: 333).

Formality and informality are often conceived as spatial categorisations, and, therefore, informality is spatialised to be assumed as slum or squatter settlements on the political, economic, and social edge of the city (McFarlane 2012). However, this is not always the case. For example, as Dicken (2005) argues, Rio's favelas are not at the edge of the city, and are actually in the middle of its urban logic, as they are a source of power and should be included in discussions about urban law and the population. As Roy (2009: 10) states that informality does not 'lie beyond planning; rather it is planning that inscribes the informal by designating some activities as authorized and others as unauthorized, by demolishing slums while granting legal status to equally illegal suburban developments'. Most of the time, informal settlements are also considered to be outside the scope of the formalised urban market and, therefore, not participating in the urban economy. This kind of thinking led scholars like Hernando de Soto (2000) to call for the 'inclusion' of informal settlements to the formal private housing market through giving official title deeds, so that these settlements can fulfil their economic potential in the market (Lees et al. 2016). However, once the informal settlements are included in the formalised market, there is a great chance of the land prices increasing, which then would lead to the low-income residents being forced to leave the area and move to a cheaper and more peripheral part of the city (Lees et al. 2016). This would only exacerbate the problem of affordable housing.

Thinking about informality as a part of urban practice rather than as a spatial formation goes against the understanding of slums as 'illegal' and the very opposite of 'legal' and formal urban development. In that case, informality also becomes a form of urban critique that seeks to expose the double standards of the state in terms of affordable housing, slums, and 'formal' urban planning (McFarlane 2012). This can ultimately lead one to not only rethink informality, but also, potentially, to rethink formal urban planning in the cities of the Global South as well as the cities in the North. However, this should not mean that informality is yet another concept that depicts the cities of the South as corrupt. This statement has been repeated many times



before: that the cities of the South use planning as a form of crooked deal-making in which the officials get part of the profit for themselves in exchange for unlawful planning permits and development exemptions. Of course, this is not to say that this does not occur in the Global South. It does, but that does not mean it occurs more often than in the Global North. It is this distinction between corruption in the South and that in the North that is problematic (McFarlane 2012: 106). As Alexandroni (2007) showed, the City of London has dealt with tremendous amounts of corrupt money in the form of investments of billions of dollars of cross-border profits from tax evasion and criminal activities (Alexandroni 2007). In short, this just shows that informal agreements and deals made behind closed doors drive urban transformation and development in the North as much as the South.

Research Approaches for New Directions for Affordable Housing

When trying to get rid of informal settlements one way or another, there is a high chance of making the lives of already vulnerable people worse. As is seen in many cases in the Global South and the Global North, rehabilitation, regeneration, or ‘anti-slum’ programmes and projects end up with the eviction of residents and their displacement and relocation to the periphery of the city with fewer resources than they had before (Gilbert 2011). Poor people need shelter that costs as little as possible with easy access to amenities and job opportunities that are mostly located in city centres. Given this, Gilbert (2011: 726) rightfully asks, ‘[i]f anti-slum programmes were to upgrade every awful settlement, where would the very poor live? The only answer for many would be to sleep on the streets’. San Francisco today, and its problem with shelter and homelessness, is a striking example of this.

As mentioned above, informal housing has been associated with insecure tenure because of its lack of property title (Ho 2014). From a neo-liberal perspective, informality will lead to market inefficiency and failure (Dorner 1972; Miceli et al. 2000; Alchian, Demsetz 1973). In this paper I use a different assumption as set out by Ho (2014), which is that ‘what ultimately determines the performance of institutions is not their form in terms of formality, privatization, or security, but their spatially and temporally defined function’. Dismissing functioning communities solely on the basis of their informality will not explain their existence or persistence (for another reading of alternative housing policy approaches, see Clapham 2018).

The institutional function exists prior to the form, and it is only by its existence that its credibility can be demonstrated?]. Credibility is used here the way it is used by Ho (2014: 14): ‘The perceived social support at a given time and space.’ This description of credibility (which is sometimes used as a credibility thesis) can be used to measure the credibility and function of any settlement or property market regardless of its formality or informality. This is especially true as insecure property rights are not equal to socially contested or non-credible property rights (Ho 2014). In some cases, it is true that tenure security brings social support; however, the same thing can be said of informal settlements with insecure tenure but with a strong sense of community. The credibility thesis assumes that in the case of certain property rights or property forms that endure over time, they present a certain function in society. This then means they have a level of support from the community and are perceived as ‘credible’ by certain social and economic actors. Dismissing such forms and institutions as inefficient, irrational, or undesirable becomes a missed research opportunity that could shed light for future policy alternatives (Ho 2014).



Following from this argument, Pithouse (2006) states that while informal settlements are excluded by the state and traditional modes of governance and lack basic necessities (water, electricity, sanitation etc), this also suggests a rare opportunity for a (opportunity to learn about a new?/different?) political and cultural economy (Vaseduvan 2015). The everyday experiences of residents of informal settlements include various types of coping mechanisms and strategies for survival that have the possibility to create emergent sites for new social forms, however radical or militant they may be (Vaseduvan 2015; Hansen 2001). In this case Vaseduvan (2015: 34) asks what this paper at hand is encouraging housing studies scholars and policy-makers around the world to consider: 'to what extent might the activities of squatters offer a critical opportunity for the development of more just and equal urbanisms?' 'If we are not willing', says Simone (2010: 333), 'to find a way to live and discover within the worlds these residents have made, however insalubrious, violent and banal they might often be, do we not undermine the very basis on which we would work to make cities more liveable for all?' (see also Varley 2013; Vaseduvan 2015; Dorling 2014). While most of the characterisations of the lives of informal settlement dwellers are ones of violence and precarity and urban practices are driven by the immediate need to survive, they can also reveal opportunities and ways to resist this violent dispossession to the point where there is hope for alternative urbanism. Ultimately, in a world of increasing accumulation by dispossession and less and less affordable formalised land for the urban poor, these geographies may hold the opportunity for the development of a different city.

The issue of affordable housing and the need to explore different forms of affordable housing in the hopes of finding policy alternatives should be expanded to include all forms of affordable housing, especially ones that have hitherto been dismissed (read: informal settlements). The approach of comparative urbanism seems to be the most appropriate one, as it not only lists many case studies one after another, but offers an arena for the researchers to reflect back and re-theorise many aspects of affordable housing and informal settlements. There is a rich and growing body of work on comparative urbanism (Robinson 2006; Robinson 2011; Denters, Mossberger 2006; McFarlane 2010) which challenges us to theorise the urban within a broader selection of cities including those on the 'periphery' of the global economy. I argue that many urban experiences in the poorer cities are substantially connected to the arrangement of power and wealth in the global North (Robinson 2006), but I wish to expand this claim by exploring how the mobility of ideas might be transferred in the opposite direction. Informal settlements, in this sense, are perfect for enhancing ways of thinking about affordable housing on a world scale. There have been many studies about informal settlements, but there have not been many studies investigating the dynamics of these settlements and how they can be used to enhance our understanding of affordable housing (see for an example, the Karanilkoy case in Billig 2011; Isanovic 2014). This approach can help scholars interested in affordable housing to acquire a more holistic and complete picture of the processes surrounding affordable housing in the global South, thus advancing our theoretical understanding in a Northern context and leading to better policy alternatives.



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