

FROM LOCAL ACTION TO GLOBAL NETWORKS: HOUSING THE URBAN POOR

Edited by Peter Herrle, Astrid Ley and Josefine Fokdal



GLOBAL URBAN STUDIES

FROM LOCAL ACTION TO GLOBAL NETWORKS: HOUSING THE URBAN POOR

Global Urban Studies

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From Local Action to Global Networks: Housing the Urban Poor

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Introduction:

Housing Processes Taking Roots in Local Action and Extending to Global Networks

Peter Herrle, Astrid Ley and Josefine Fokdal

Housing for the urban poor has long been the arena for engagement by the state and by civil society organizations represented by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). It is only during the past two decades that civil society in the form of Community-based Organizations (CBOs)¹ and complex networks between CBOs and NGOs have emerged as significant key players in the housing process that cannot easily be overlooked. Indeed, taking these actors into account, in a way one could more accurately speak of ‘housing *by* the urban poor’. This shift certainly needs to be read against changing international development policies highlighting an ‘enabling approach’, as well as often-local contexts characterized by a weaker state creating space for more civil society activities in the field of housing.

The shift is not only characterized by new key players entering the local housing arena, but also by multi-scalar approaches, from local to global. Once these networks of the urban poor crossed national boundaries and developed powerful mechanisms to impact local housing policies and projects, housing issues have to be looked at from new angles. This implies that housing can no longer simply be addressed through localized projects, but rather at multiple scales. It is thus no surprise that in the recent decade the international debate on housing for the urban poor has been fertilized by fields such as governance and social network approaches.

With some of these networks crossing local boundaries and extending to multiple scales, it is generally acknowledged that housing issues have to be

1 Community-based Organizations (CBOs) include a variety of terms such as People Organizations (POs) and Grassroots Organizations (GROs) with slightly different connotations about their representation and leadership, what they have in common is defined by UN-Habitat (2011, p. 4) as: ‘These organizations, also known as community-based organizations (CBOs) or grassroots organizations, represent the urban poor, either the residents of particular geographical areas or people who share some common identity (for example, they originate from the same area). As structures which allow poor households and poor communities to move from isolation and powerlessness into collective strength, these organizations have become powerful development mechanisms in their countries.’ As an umbrella term in this volume they will be referred to as CBOs, although in some contexts this term might be linked to traditional leadership (see Ley, 2014).

placed in a wider framework of urban development that recognizes the growing power and significance of grassroots organizations and their local and translocal allies. This book aims to bring together different perspectives on multi-scalar approaches within the housing field as the basis for grassroots' engagement with formal agencies. By moving away from romanticizing local self-initiative ('small is beautiful'), we focus on understanding the emerging potential once-local initiatives are interlinked and scaled-up to transnational networks.

The Phenomenon: Urban Poor Organize Locally and Network Globally

The challenge of urbanization is linked to the fact that one third of all urban dwellers in the world are living without security of tenure and in shelter conditions referred to as informal settlements² (Herrle et al., 2006, p. 2). This fact has provoked different views: Whereas some see the cities of the South as a 'planet of slums' (Davis, 2006) or 'shadow cities' (Neuwirth, 2005) because of structural conditions which decouple urbanization from development; others interpret the dysfunctionality of such cities as an innovative 'incubator' (Koolhaas, et al., 2000) or 'arrival city' (Saunders, 2011) or outline an emancipatory potential for civil society actors 'from below' (i.e. grassroots) in urban development (Altwater, 2005; Appadurai, 2000; Pieterse, 2008). Scholars of the latter view argue that informal settlements are not just locations of marginalization but rather places where the urban poor are active and capable of expanding the survival space and influencing the complex circuits of power and economy through everyday politics (Simone and Abouhani, 2005; Bayat, 1997; 2004; Roy and AlSayyad, 2004). From this standpoint it is crucial to understand 'grassroots processes' as influential for contemporary debates on the city. The city in itself contains dialectics between constituting social processes and being constituted by them (Harvey, 1997, p. 231).

The dialectics between social processes and the city have become apparent in current housing discourses. Large numbers of urban residents in the global South lack access to formal jobs and basic services. In the face of the failure or unwillingness of local governments to meet growing urban needs, popular initiatives have, for quite some time, played an important role: they have created their own income activities and established the necessary services and infrastructure, often informally and through collective efforts. In this context of dynamic urbanization informal settlements are rather the norm and the constituting factor, whereas governments were, since the 1990s, increasingly expected to create an 'enabling environment' and assume the role of facilitators rather than direct providers of urban development.

2 'Slum' is a controversial term as it is a stereotype and stigmatizes the status of poor people (Gilbert, 2007), therefore, we are using the term 'informal settlements'.

The enabling approach usually entails the devolution of responsibilities to civil society groups.³ Many of these groups are involved in the provision of urban services and/or engage with the local state in advocacy-related functions. While some of them, such as many NGOs, emerged as a response to external agendas, are donor-funded and run by professional staff; others arise from within the grassroots, accountable to the community. The mobilizing of urban poor⁴ in CBOs has been promoted in recent years and, in many countries, new political rights have been provided that are relevant to the urban poor and their organizations. The urban poor are no longer perceived as the 'marginalized' (Perlman, 1979; Castells, 1983).

Given the above context, the role and function of many urban poor networks in cities has significantly changed. The scope and nature of their activities and relationships is different to conventional organizations based in local communities: They organize locally but by forming global networks they extend their relationships beyond national boundaries.

Since the second half of the 20th century civil society in general has seen a significant intensification of transnational activities (Rucht, 2003, p. 378) and since the 1990s an increase of transnational social movements (Smith, 2005). Urban social movements are either conceptualized as 'localized' class struggles (Harvey, 1973) or as broad-based negotiations around urban social issues in which class does not play a dominant role (Castells, 1983). However, both means of conceptualization have been criticized for ignoring the transnational level or reducing their focus to economic globalization and its local effects (Smith, 2001, p. 145). Social movements have increasingly built alliances through means of networking between NGOs and CBOs, constituting complementary interdependencies between the two and constructing transnational networks (Herrle et al., 2013).

3 Civil society refers to 'voluntary associations between the state and individual citizens and their families' (Mitlin, 1999, p. 5). These civil society associations include, among others, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and Community-based Organizations (CBOs). NGOs are organizations with a primary focus on common good and without self-interest (Neubert, 1994). CBOs are defined as membership-based organizations, mainly operating at the local level through different means of associations, both formal and informal. UN Habitat (2003, p. 151) differentiated between CBOs that represent communities in their local development struggles and CBOs that represent specific groups and their interests.

4 'Urban poor' is a vague term and it is impossible to generalize across boundaries, since poverty has many faces and is diverse in different countries. Commonly accepted definitions are provided by the World Bank as a person living on \$1.25/day or, for comparative means, achieved through the multi-dimensional poverty index introduced in 2010 by UNDP. Here we refer to people living under precarious conditions and with no security of tenure and limited access to urban resources and services (see also Satterthwaite and Mitlin, 2013).

Transnational networks within the housing process are diverse and one needs to take into account regional differences within civil societies as well as diverse political environments. Transnational networks in the housing field have up-scaled their scope of activism and are increasingly navigating across city and national boundaries, thereby becoming visible players in urban development on an international level.

Systematic analyses of these housing processes driven by transnational networks of urban poor and the relationship-building from local towards global are rare. Combined with the informal nature of many of their activities and working relationships, this makes them under-represented in the current academic discourse on housing and urban development. This is also due to the fact that case studies tend to either focus on one locality rather than investigating the linkages established between informal settlements or be reduced to studying the flows instead of realizing that these are always simultaneously embedded in particular territories.

Within the framework of the research project 'Housing for the Urban Poor. From Local Action to Global Networks' funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), research was undertaken on transnational networks of urban poor within the housing field from August 2011 to August 2014. The aim of the research project was to create insights into recent trends and characteristics of typical multi-actor and multi-scalar environments in urban development, specifically within the housing sector. The research project had an international approach with empirical research in South Africa, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Transnational Links 'From Below' Around Housing in the City

Debates around the transnationality of cities can be conceptually divided into those focusing on the impact of transnationality on urban space and those studying the dimension of the transnationality of the city itself (through practices that constitute the network links and space-based actors that constitute the nodes) – or as Krätke, et al. suggest '[...] where processes of globalization are actively produced and from where they proceed' (Krätke, et al., 2012, p. 12).

Thus, globalization induced flows are not only limited to the mobility of goods and capital, but also people, ideas, information; even policies move from one locality to another across borders. This process also entails a change of social relations in terms of their spatial reach, strength and influence, and thereby creates transnational networks of activities (Krätke, et al., 2012, p. 2).

Networks (including multi-level and multi-actor institutions) are optimistically interpreted as harbouring potential for a more humane urban management, especially in urban studies (e.g. Coy and Kraas, 2003; Sassen, 2004). The normative assumption is that networks are better equipped than the state or market to deal with interdependencies and complexity in society (Messner, 2000).

According to Hajer and Wagenaar (2003, p. 3) networks constitute an ‘expansive democracy’. Critics on the other hand argue that network-style relationships may also lead to the formation of inner and outer networks (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p. 323f). From an urban political ecology perspective, scholars speak of ‘metabolic relationships’, which therefore focus on the resulting vulnerability instead of connectivity (Keil, 2010). According to Castells, people unrelated to networks are often oriented towards local communities as the ‘space of place’ while elite information networks are placeless and operate in a ‘space of flows’ (Castells, 1999, p. 446). He argues that communal resistance against the ‘space of flows’ is determined by the ability of communities to build networks with other communities (Castells, 1989, p. 21). The impact and effects of the social processes ‘from below’ that are shaping and influencing other scales have not fully been analysed and understood yet. Sassen argues that globalization and communication technology also enables lower circuits to operate in a transnational geography. Cities are then not only nodes of financial flows but also anchors for cross-border struggles for civil society around trans-boundary issues (Sassen, 2004), thereby revitalizing the relevance of proximity, understanding it as a precondition for establishing networks locally. That conceptual differentiation of transnational practices is coined as ‘flows from above’ and ‘flows from below’ (Smith, 2001, p. 9). Transnational practices in cities can be driven ‘from above’ by transnational corporations and elites, while migrants (Glick Schiller, 2012) or other ‘marginalized’ citizens constitute transnational links ‘from below’.

Studies on transnational grassroots organizations suggest that the emerging transnational links ‘from below’ constitute a new social space, of which only little is known in the field of housing and urban studies. Empirical studies within this field can contribute to a better understanding of these particular processes around housing – since housing can be dealt with as both an issue-based struggle as well as it represents a particular place within the city for the urban poor.

Transformative Potentials of Multi-Scalar and Collaborative Governance for Housing

The urban governance discourse in its essence points to the fact that local governance has transcended the classical concepts that assign a dominant role to government institutions, and extended the scope to a wider range of actors (e.g. Devas, 2004). The urban governance discourse from an urban political economy perspective sees the behaviour of actors determined by varying structural conditions (e.g. Savitch, et al., 1997). Nevertheless regime theory takes the importance of agency into consideration. The assumption is that disadvantaged groups lack forms of capital to penetrate governance arrangements. Stone (2005) therefore suggests altering the position of lower-status groups and outlines that attainable purposes help to bind coalitions and to frame alternative regimes.

In contrast to more structuralist viewpoints, scholars with an actor-centred and new institutionalism perspective argue that multiple actors have differing ideologies which influences the configuration of actors and the outcome they produce (Pierre, 1999; Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995; Scharpf, 1997, 2000; Mayntz, 2002). Even though studies from this sociological perspective are interested in the interagency relations or modes of governance (DiGaetano and Strom, 2003; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Sehested, 2001), they often fail to include urban poor as actors and are rather focused on the 'city' as a locality, less on multi-scale regimes (Stone, 2005, 1993; Stoker, 1995). Research on transnational governance overcomes this locality focus. However, it is interested in the legitimacy of such arrangements and therefore limited to its relevance for democracy (Risse, 2006; Benz and Papadopoulos, 2006). There is neither a focus on housing and locality issues, nor does it reveal the relevance of 'governance from below'.

A rather limited discussion has emerged on the relevance of 'grassroots governance', which is controversially discussed. From one position it is argued that it represents a perpetuation of deregulation or 'neoliberalism from below' (Roy, 2009; Geddes, 2000; Swyngedouw, 2005). Another strand outlines the emancipatory potential of governance 'from below' to produce new forms of social regulation and to reframe the system of governance itself (Altvater, 2005; Appadurai, 2000, 2001).

This latter understanding is in line with corresponding contemporary discourses on collaborative or participatory governance, which has been argued to be a 'Communicative Turn in Planning Theory' (Healey, 1993). Instead of a general critique and rejection of participation which is based on the notion that it does not touch the underlying structural conditions, scholars point out the transformative potential of multi-scaled strategies which involve an operationalization at the individual, structural and institutional level (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Healey (1997) points to a form of governance that is based on consensus-building around collective concerns. According to her, this type of governance puts the state into a collaborative role.

Housing processes for and by the urban poor entail and possibly reveal this transformative potential. Scholarship on grassroots governance with reference to housing issues, however, is largely limited to normative-driven statements about its relevance for housing processes (in terms of development, effectiveness, democracy and empowerment) and tends to overlook its innovativeness in terms of re-scaling and of impacting institutional change at various levels. While insights into several aspects of individual organizations exist (e.g. Archer, 2012; Patel and Mitlin, 2002; Satterthwaite and Mitlin, 2013; Bolnick, 2008), there seems to be a significant lack of a *systemic* understanding of such transnational networks of urban poor and their functioning in the housing process.

This edited volume seeks to contribute to a more systemic understanding by analysing multi-scalar approaches to housing that are centred on grassroots engagement with formal agencies (including local government, higher levels

of government and international agencies) based on empirical research in Asia and Africa.

The leading propositions of the book are divided into concerns related to internal and external structures and relationships. Thereby, the scope is, on the one hand, to contribute with new perspectives on the strategies and mechanism applied by the transnational networks for internal mobilization and empowerment – raising questions about the permanence of the phenomenon and about hierarchies within the networks; and, on the other hand, to point towards new tendencies and strategies for collaboration with other actors in housing and more generally, urban development. Hereby the importance of place-based action in relation to transnationalism ‘from below’ reveals the multiple scales at stake bridging the local-global divide. Framed within the urban governance discourse, the key question becomes how to move beyond participation and towards more collaborative modes of governance recognizing the role of transnational networks for local housing processes?

Overview of the Book

The book is divided into three parts, each being introduced by a statement from experts in practice. Part I deals with the basic features and the ‘Qualities of Networks by Urban Poor’ and thereby reveals characteristics of people-led development. One shared observation is the phenomenon that community groups have emerged in the housing field that do not work in isolation, but form broader networks that extend the local realm. Nevertheless the local seems to remain a ‘glue’ and cornerstone for the unfolding of networks. This continuum of local-global activism has led to new dynamics and complexities.

Somsook Boonyabancha and Tom Kerr open the compilation with a chapter on ‘Urban Poor Housing Development in Asia: From Target Group to Negotiating Partner’. They call for a change of perspective from agency-led development that is driving urban poor communities in a target group role towards people-led development in order for urban poor to become the solution at scale. The authors reflect on and share their long-time experience with and knowledge of people-led development in Asia that is supported by regional networks such as the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), the programme Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA) and the Thai-based parastatal Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI). They observe that by placing the urban poor target groups into large-scale community networks these networks change political relationships and the status of the poor in a city.

The chapter on ‘How Urban Poor Networks are Re-scaling the Housing Process in Thailand, the Philippines and South Africa’ by Astrid Ley, Josefine Fokdal and Peter Herrle results from a three-year research project on ‘Housing for the Urban Poor. From Local Action to Global Networks’ that was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The focus lies on the relevance of