



People-Centered Production, Upgrading and Management of Housing and Human Settlements

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Poor families across the planet, especially in developing countries, are forced to use their own assets to self-produce their settlements, homes and infrastructure, with no support and despite myriad economic and institutional obstacles. In the southern countries, 50% to 75% of homes and many other components of habitat are produced and distributed outside, or in the margins of the market and governmental programs. With different names and characteristics, this phenomenon is worldwide, including in industrialized countries, albeit at a smaller scale. Social groups are emerging in various parts of the world, driving innovative and self-managed experiences capable of addressing the complex challenge of satisfying their needs and the integrated management of their productive, cultural, and community-living processes.

These groups organize themselves to assume responsibility for a broad range of activities: food production; management of strategic environmental components such as water; production, improvement and management of their habitat; defense, promotion and implementation of human rights; the struggle against discrimination and in favour of gender equity, and numerous others. The converging point of these processes is the organized struggle for land, housing, and basic services. Their most visible results: homes, housing complexes, and popular neighborhoods, produced and managed under the direct control of the social organizations and communities living there.

More than one-fifth of the world population lives in very precarious conditions or is entirely homeless. The global number of slum dwellers is projected to increase by five times the one million targeted in the period of the Millennium Development Goals. Public policies in the world globalisation increasingly reduce housing to a mere commodity, and measure human settlements in business terms, leaving millions of impoverished families without options. Most States and governments are unable to contain the resulting urban crisis and to uphold citizens human right to adequate housing. With no serious change in policy direction in rural and urban development, new slums will grow and the lives of slum dwellers deteriorate further.

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Social production of habitat (SPH, concept developed in Latin America) encompasses both the process and product arising from peoples collective initiative at building their own habitat: dwellings, villages, neighbourhoods and even large parts of the cities. By social production processes, the affected people design, plan, implement and maintain living spaces and urban components, creating solutions to the problems arising from their living conditions. (Ortiz, 2003; Romero, 2002)

Social production is a people-centred process, through several self-management modalities, ranging from spontaneous individual self-production, to collective production with high organizational levels and complexity of production, negotiation, broad participation and management. It often involves a joint venture between communities and local governments, sometime also with the private sector. Its purposes are not lucrative, but



practical problem solving and, thus, realize human rights consistent with principles human dignity, State responsibility and fairness.

People-centred production, upgrading and management of housing and human settlements happen in rural and the urban spheres. It applies and builds social resources locally and features social control of the priority-setting, planning, construction, distribution and use of land, housing and neighbourhoods. Community-based production of housing means collective action to satisfy human needs. It considers housing and habitat as the culmination of a process and not only as a material product; as an organic social and cultural output and not an object of exchange; as assets built in partnership of labour, time, expertise, materials and money from all the stakeholders.

Women are leaders and key actors at processes of social production of habitat. Women embrace, construct and fight for an adequate housing as "a place to live in peace and dignity", which is inextricably bound to the workplace, child raising, education, health, care for the elderly, and personal security, as well living conditions as a whole, including also emotion and psychological security for the family, particularly women and children.

Members and regional bodies of Habitat International Coalition (HIC) have been pooling experiences in 6 continents of community-based, social production of housing, in order to make visible such processes and develop an experiential database and informed mechanism for exchanging strategies and skills. Each region gives rise to diverse and specific examples of struggles and efforts that emphasize distinct circumstances and priorities to construct people-centred livelihoods.

Latin American experiences emphasize strategies to secure State support and access to financial resources for community-based production and management of housing and other habitat components pursued under the control of social organizations and enterprises. Organized social movements in many Asian cities must concentrate their struggles in defence against massive evictions imposed by modernization and real estate interests. Social groups actively participate in the introduction and management of basic urban services, mainly water and sanitation, and in environmental improvement in African cities. The Middle East/North African experience encompasses diverse struggles, ranging from poor communities seeking inclusion and access to land and public services, to defence against territorial dispossession and population transfer. European cases address the struggle against the loss and privatisation of social housing and in favour of democratic and sustainable urban management. Amid this diversity, analogous themes and strategies emerge, revealing a wealth of local ingenuity and practical guidance that can help all parties accelerate the learning process and avoid costly errors. (HIC, 2004; Schechla, 2005a)

The local practices are testimonies of social struggle and responsible citizenship, against marginalisation, social and urban segregation, and dispossession and private appropriation of common goods. They seek equitable fair access to the goods and services produced by society, capacity building in negotiation and technical and organizational skills, greater public participation and local responsibility for community development and the exercise of rights and freedoms in the daily lives of citizens. (HIC, 2004)

Experiences in the social production of habitat are diverse in scope and tactic, thus making difficult the task of drawing common conclusions. However, considering the nature of social movements, in general, and those movements of impoverished inhabitants engaged in SPH, in particular, a number of common features emerge. Expressed as observations, rather than definitive conclusions, the experiences under review suggest the following (Schechla, 2005b):

- perhaps more than any other social group, the poor rely on themselves to survive and improve their lot; SPH experiences represent a continuum process evolving from peoples needs and assets towards a better place to live that go beyond political times, pilot projects or overwhelmed best practices;
- social movements and SPH experiences both have no stable / permanent / singular texture, composition or cohesion, but are dynamic, expanding and contracting. The multiple SPH modalities range from improvement and expansion of existing housing, new housing production, to neighbourhood improvement and the production and management of large urban complexes.
- Social groups are driving innovative and self-managed experiences, addressing the complex challenge of satisfying their needs, in an integrated management approach of their productive, cultural, and community-living processes. The relative disadvantage in education, skills, connections and other opportunities makes direct SPH actions the most viable method of self-development;
- the language of rights is found in uneven measure across SPH experiences, but appears to develop with the articulation and justification of collective interests and objectives, especially when the community (and its dwellings) are threatened and/or their claims are contended;



- while alternative development necessarily begins locally, without the states collaboration, the lot of the poor cannot be significantly improved; therefore, the States control over the development process may be over-estimated, but the State can play a more-constructive role in coordinating functions (to respect, protect and fulfil rights);
- State institutions gain legitimacy by upholding housing rights obligations and playing the facilitating role in support of SPH.

Peoples agency to improve habitat does not absolve the State of its obligations to citizens and residents. Governments hold the duty to refrain forced eviction, confiscation and repression of human rights defenders, discrimination, corruption, withholding of services and other violations. International commitments ratify the right to adequate housing and land. Though conscientiously applied only in rare cases, those long-established obligations and instruments of guidance for States and society remain a resource and reference that should be applied to all aspects of development.

This process of pooling experiences has provided a platform to share inter-regionally and to disseminate the lessons learned and proposals for increasing peoples agency and problem-solving capacity:

- Since the informal housing and land market provides shelter opportunities for a wide range of the population, support to the SPH processes appears as a new essential approach to urban poverty within the framework of public policies;
- Self-managed processes -- especially that supported by training, participative responsibility, organization, and active solidarity among inhabitants-- contribute to strengthen community practices, direct democratic exercise, local governance, local and individual economies, jobs and livelihood, participants self-esteem and more vigorous social coexistence.
- Governments, social organisations and technical teams working together develop creative and efficient uses of the financial and political resources as well as the existing practical guidance, toolkits, indicators and methods for formulating public policies, programs and plans, based on the needs and experience of inhabitants, and not only on the companies-interests or the established planning.
- The cases registered by social organizations also identify other obstacles that limit the impacts of their work and their abilities to carry out their projects. Some refer to their own limitations: low educational levels, lack of information on rights, individualism, internal conflicts, the slow pace of democratic processes, and in some cases weak organization and management capacities, resistance to assume the responsibilities implied by exercise of social rights, and intercultural problems. Others relate to the economic and social conditions in which the families and social sectors develop their lives: increasing poverty, unemployment and job instability, dispossession, dependence, and insecurity.

Impact of people-centred production of habitat is not limited to production and improvement of tens of thousands of homes, reordering and rehabilitation of precarious neighborhoods, relocation of populations in risk situations, or attention to emergency housing needs following disasters. Thanks to their innovative proposals and concrete results, many of the experiences have influenced reorientation of housing and urban development policies, and contributed to generate changes in legal, financial, and administrative instruments relevant to social housing, self-managed processes, tenure security, attention to low-income sectors, and environmental improvement, among other issues.

Social production of habitat urges an effective and efficient transformation of local and national policies toward understanding and strengthening peoples process for access and provision of land and shelter. Up-scaling local practices of SPH with public policies at city, regional or national scope for broader supply, upgrading and management of housing and human settlements for the poor propose new challenges and opportunities that have to be mindful of:

- what sustains the peoples process on land, housing and habitat/settlements development, in urban and rural areas,
- what are the forces, both external and internal, that strengthen or weaken peoples processes, including political forces that have a bearing on people's processes;
- alternative ways to develop cities, evolving a bottom up perspective on city development without destroying livelihood, assets and settlements of the poor, and disrupting the informal economy of a city;
- articulating and supporting the people processes with more flexible design-based, knowledge-based and service-based housing policies, programs, actions and outputs with the overall objective of realizing the human right to adequate housing and equitable land use.



The growth of organized inhabitants management capacity and their control over habitat production processes; the channeling of resources from savings, credit, and subsidies within the communities in which the actions unfold, and the subsequent strengthening of popular market circuits, contribute in turn to strengthen the economies of individual participants, the neighborhood community in which they are located, and the popular sectors as a whole. Investment in improvement of an informal settlement is essentially investment in improving the productivity of the people and the urban economy as a whole. Placing the collective and individual human being at the center of their strategies, work methods, and actions, puts into march innovative processes with profound content and impact toward transformation of reality.