

Social Participation for Urban Poor households in Developing countries

Understanding on why and how Urban Poor are involved in making their day-to-day environment.



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Introduction

“Involving people” or “social participation”, when related to architecture, are some general concepts meaning so many things. And yet to this wide covering of signification is adding even more diversity the context they are referring to.

The ambition of this paper is to understand these notions through a precise view, and approach the case of 32% of the world urban population, according to UN-Habitat in 2003. This proportion of the world urban population is referring to the “Urban Poor”, or some 1 billion human beings, for the major part, struggling on developing countries ground. In these least developed countries they represent 78.2 % of the urban population. No need to demonstrate that they represent a crucial issue, their number is enough to traduce the striking emergency to provide these people with adequate urban shelter answer.

We need first to define who are the “urban poor”, and why are they who they are? Then we could go through the participatory process they are benefiting. Why is this process provided to them? And in which ways are the Urban Poor involved in

creating their surroundings and living spaces? Which issues this process is solving? Which are its advantages and limits?

Hopefully, after a better understanding, we could consider the role of the architect toward this precise process? Does the social participation of Urban Poor households change the architect's task, responsibilities? How can the architect favorites a high quality level of participation?

The last part of this paper would present a gathering of thoughts and questioning around the issue of the need of "urban shelter" for Urban Poor, with a consideration for the participatory process approach.

1. Urban Growth and Poverty Increase

Urbanization and Urban Population Growth

The Worldwide urbanization is a rather recent phenomenon that occurs in the 20th and 21st century. By definition, urbanization is the process of increasing population in urban areas. The rural-urban migration, when the population from the rural areas is decreasing to the benefit of cities, is one factor to the process of urbanization. It is even characteristic to its early stage, and in the developing regions of the world, the rural-urban migration is still generating over 30% of the urban population growth. But the main factor of urbanization is the demographic growth. And in developing countries the natural growth increases of 60% the urban population.

The combination of the migration and the natural growth has generated a rapid urbanization that is far from being over as the prospects lead by UN Habitat in 2003 were already assuming, the "future growth of the world's population will almost entirely take place in the urban areas, and mainly in cities and towns of the less developed regions." These same areas where decent living conditions cannot be guaranteed for more than half of the urban population, yet.

Urban Poverty

What first motivates rural population to migrate in cities is the hope to improve their standard of living through access to basic services (such as water supply,

health and transportation facilities, electricity or even waste management) and to more work opportunities.

It's true that economic development of cities goes together with urbanization, but still the cities have to be ready to receive massive wave of population, through their policies and infrastructures. But as it's not the case, unemployment and difficult living conditions are what the migrant will rather systematically find in urbanized areas. And this disillusion can also be physically read through the urban shape, where underestimated number of people will settle on left over and dangerous areas, within or on the margins of the cities. It is said that over 70% of the urban population in the least developed countries have to resort to informal settlement.

These informal settlers are what we could also call the "Urban Poor", *"people deprived from the freedom to decide over and shape their own life"* (Ljung and Tannefeldt 2006:39), the only option they get is to try to survive with daily income and within a very fragile environment. The Urban Poor have no choice then to shelter themselves under unhealthy dwellings, made from recovered materials, without any technical support, and only provided with poor equipment besides of not being linked to indispensable infrastructures as it has been said earlier. The conditions into which they are forced to develop themselves are their first menace.

What is done to help them emancipating from this vicious circle then enter because of being born in the "wrong" place?

Main answers to cope this state of emergency – adequate housing policies?

Informal settlement formation *"is neither an inevitable consequence of urbanization, nor can it be solely blamed on a lack of financial resources. Slums are also produced by bad governances, failed policies, inappropriate legal and regulatory frameworks, corruption and lack of political will."*(Ljung and Tannefeldt, 2006:42)

The examples illustrating these words by Ljung and Tannefeldt are sadly too many... In Caracas, the price of drinking water is more expensive than the petrol, in the meanwhile nothing is being done to gather and filtrate the water from a

waterfall dominating the city, the municipality prefers to let this clean water from the mountain running into the river branches filled with daily garbage that are neither gathered by any collection program in the informal settlements.. If measures are not taken in a larger scale, from the top organization of the society, it makes really difficult to manage a fair organization at the bottom level.

Most of the Low income Housing Programs lead by the local government follow the same vision “many units, fast built, with a minimum cost”, no need to say much more to understand that these policies are far from being socially sustainable. They are just a way to provide standards of what is thought to be a decent dwelling, that is to say only a roof identical to every units spread in lines of row houses, provided with water and electricity... These large-scale housing programs are not economically sustainable as they are not adapted to the need of its users, they won't maintain it, and their degradation will be fast.

Eviction is a very spread process leading to fill up these Low Income Housing Programs. As people are living on dangerous areas, under frightening shelter, the faster and easier solution is to move this population elsewhere and eradicate their living. In addition of loosing the only landmark around which they build up their life, most of the time evicted the informal settlers have difficulty to keep their job, as they are removed far from where they were established before. No need to talk about the traumatism of such a radical transfer of these families, for the youngest but also for the elder that might have spend all their life on the slum they where living before having to move.

“Slums have been the only large-scale solution to providing housing for low-income people. It is the only type of housing that is affordable and accessible to the poor in cities where the competition for land and profits is intense, and the places where they must live if they have little income or no other options ».

(UN Habitat, 2003:123)

It seems obvious that an attentive look has to be brought on slums' architecture and informal settler's households as actor of their living, and that to meet their need and wishes, housing policies has to walk side by side with them : that's what we can call a participatory approach.

2. Participatory Process

What is participatory process?

It is the « user/participant's ability to affect the process and the final result of the housing or living environment he or she lives or intends to live in ». According to the Architectural researcher Henry Sanoff, it is a Human Right and a right to creativity.

It is difficult to estimate when did the necessity of taking in consideration the social and qualitative aspect of informal settlements get started in Developing Countries. But « *policies approaching to slums in the last decades range from passively ignoring or actively harassing those living in slums, to actions aimed at protecting the rights of slum dwellers and helping them to improve their incomes and living environments* » (UN Habitat, 2003:148). And these solutions that attempt to make use of the labor and resources of slum dwellers, seeking to preserve and involve communities, have nowadays become the preferred solution to approach Urban Poor settlements.

Goals define Methods

If the intention to involve the user in the creation of its environment sounds rather specific, yet, according to the goal put being this concept, the process can lead to very different results. Because the goals ones have shape the method ones would use, in social participation it is also true. And two main tendencies can be identified in resorting to participatory processes.

The first one is the « consumerist approach » that see the households as a consumer for who new products have to be created. The priority of this approach is to meet the need and wishes of the target consumer through a consultative investigation method.

The second approach is rather an intention to consolidate the civic right of Urban Poor. This « democratic approach » is grass rooted and seek to strengthen the individual and the community level through concrete participatory process.

While the « consumerist approach » is willing at providing adequate living support to the target household they investigate, the « democratic approach » is

going further in the participation as it's main goal is to generate people's empowerment, by bringing the households as top actors of the process.

Means to involve Urban Poor households?

They are many different contributions that can be made by human beings, individually or organized with others, to participate in improving or creating their living environment. But we can also apprehend them according to the methods they are referring to, even if a same participatory process can resort to means considered of different degree of participation.

About the actors involved, they are also very numerous and divers, that's one aspect of the richness of the participatory process, it's plurality. Architects, engineers, geographers, sociologist, psychologists, constructors, politics, bankers, but also more and more ONG's and Community Based Organizations have all a role to play in accompanying and sharing their professional competences with the Urban Poor to improve their livings conditions.

Consultative means:

- *Interview and questionnaire* are very used means, with a direct contact with the people, to get to know the expression of their needs, their recommendations and critiques but also proposals.

- *Survey* is generally led by professionals, to identify and analyze the challenges and opportunities of a specific place (risks ran, resources available, geography, soil nature, land tenure, current laws, families number and names...).

The objective of the survey is then to bring awareness and discussion with and within the community about these topics. Working as a starting point, the surveys set the basis that link the people sharing a same space together.

- *Meeting, group discussion (with professionals but also between communities)* is maybe the simpler but still very efficient mean of generating the participation of people. Having the opportunity of being heard, saying your own opinion, and exchanging it with other people are key moments in a participatory process, where hopefully trust and self-confidence can be raised.

- *Observation of the current living settlement* is an indirect participatory device. By the information observed, (at different level and on different consideration), professionals can make the space speak for its users. Indeed the expression of

needs, or the uses made of the space can be identified through observation. On the Smokey Mountain temporary relocation housing program lead by the National Housing Authority in Manila it appears obvious that 19m² per unit are not enough for families of 5 members, which is the average family size in the Philippines. People have to extend their unit from each side, front and back, so that they scarcely receive natural light and ventilation, but also their extension made informally are most of the time a menace for the family and its neighbor.

Empowerment initiatives:

- *Workshops (drawings, modeling)* are a way of involving people through their ability to translate physically their need and wishes. Through designing or modeling how they dream their house, its surrounding could be, children and adults can become actors of the design process of a project. Their drawings and models, from an architectural and psychological point of view, are clue elements of a design process worrying to be adapted to precise context.
- *Safety walk* here again led for children or adults allow identifying with precision the key places to consider. The safety of a place is a very subjective feeling that can be better identified by the people experimenting them is their daily life. Pointing out the critical spots, the precise threat make then the improvement easier for professionals of this topic.
- *Saving program* is a mean of empowering the household from a financial point of view. Being able to manage oneself its own financial resources, is a way of obtaining the possibility to decide and invest oneself in improving ones living conditions. Saving program through communities allow also strengthening the solidarity and community empowerment.
- *Association* and associative life involvement are key tools to achieve a high quality of community life. Sharing activities and services within a community are ways of improving living condition from a common to an individual perspective.

Combined approaches – participatory programs:

- *Self-help construction programs* are involving the households in creating physically their living. By taking part, at different scale or phases of the constructive process, the household invest themselves in building up their houses, and their surroundings. Most of the time, workshops, meeting, discussions, trainings, and savings have also been solicited to prepare self-help housing

programs. On one hand, such a program allow to gain self confidence, and proud through investing oneself directly in the construction of ones living space, and on the other hand, if the program is well lead, it also allows to meet the financial affordability of the households.

- *Solid Waste Management programs* are led when, after surveys, meetings and group discussions the households and the community have agreed to be involved into providing themselves with the basic service of collecting and managing their garbage production.

- *Upgrading and Renewal programs*. Upgrading the current places where the Urban Poor have settled is already making them part of the improvement process, then to lead such a program, many devices as surveys, meetings, discussions, even self help construction have been sought. It is a global participatory process that, according to UN Habitat, is « *the best practice for addressing the challenge of slums in developing countries is now participatory slum improvement. However, so far, this has mostly been adopted on a limited scale or at the level of demonstration projects* ». (UN Habitat, 2003:132)

3. Focus on Participatory Programs : Community Solid Waste Management and Self Help Upgrading

Community Participation Solid Waste Management for Low Income

Background:

In many informal settlements, lack of infrastructures and services are a limit to decent living conditions. The causes for that are, first that the municipality is not helping the urban poor as they cannot afford these services, but also that people are not aware of the power they have between their hands, and by showing solidarity to each other. Through a common project, they are able to emancipate themselves from indecent situations, they can recover environmental and social sustainability, even generate income and work together with the municipality. This also means being recognized and respected to the eyes of institutional framework that then, will be more kind in helping them to be legitimate part of the society. Indeed, instead of purely providing communities with technical

approaches, a reorganization of solid waste management combined with community participation is more likely to provide durable solution.

Process leading to participative solid waste management :

Community participation in solid waste management requires first an understanding of the keys factors involves. Knowledge and awareness have to rise about the different collection options existing, the storage requirements, the transportation possibilities, the recycling means and the financing opportunities brought by such a process. It is important that the choices made are by the community itself, and discussed with the municipality.

According to the United Nation Center for Human Settlement that investigates on this process, a Community managed waste disposal consists of the following elements:

- *Primary waste collection (neighborhood – wide collection and storage)*
- *A waste management system, administering and financing the primary collection system*
- *Planned cooperation with municipal service agencies, to ensure a reliable transfer of waste from the primary to the secondary collection cycle*
- *The development of recycling activities within the community;*
- *The development of income generation activities, through processing and upgrading of waste material and development of local industries.*

(UN Habitat, 1989:2)

Shared Benefits of a waste disposal:

On a community organization basis in low-income housing areas, the separation of waste on a household level is very profitable as it allows to :

- remove waste, it provide a cleaner environment
- product fertilizer through composting the organic waste
- recycle of various materials in waste like plastic, paper, glass, and metal
- produce energy through biogas or incineration
- bring a feeling of self esteem to the participants
- generate income through recycling and handicrafts
- achieve savings through early separation of waste (decrease the quantity of waste to collect and transport by the municipality)
- reclaim the land on which the community is settled

The experience of Cairo shows how infrastructures can be improved through social participation. Only 15% of total waste collection of Cairo is kept on dump sites, while 85% is sold on diverse markets. The secret of such an efficient management is based on the families' collection organization, according to which they sort in 15 different compounds their waste.

Participatory Slum Improvement:

Background

This approach emerged in the late 1970s, *“recognizing slums as a durable structural phenomenon that required appropriate responses”*(UN Habitat, 2003:130). Self Help combined with Upgrading program started from the *“assumption of the failure of responses based mainly on repressive options (like evictions) and of the direct and highly subsidized provision of land and housing by the public sector for the poorest segment of the urban population”* (UN Habitat, 2003:130). These people needed to be considered and to show that they were able to solve their situation by themselves.

Process to improve informal settlements through self-help:

Self-help and upgrading policies tend to focus on four main concerns to consider:

- basic urban services and facilities
- secure tenure for slum dwellers and the implementation of innovative practices regarding access to land.
- access to credit, adapted to the economic profile, needs and requirements of slums dwellers and communities.
- enhance the living conditions both at the individual and the community scale

To achieve these goals, the current process' framework is:

- First the community survey and discuss its settlement and the problems related to it. Professionals are also involved to provide the community with specific and technical knowledge and awareness.
- Then is developed a « community improvement plan » that illustrates the strategies the community has opted for. This plan includes different timing consideration of the process, from an immediate to a longer-term perspective.
- Once the plan has been discussed with professionals, and adjusted, it goes to the local government for approval.

Even if the plan can be quite simple, it has to include detailed costs of the upgrading process and a description of project management, including people's participation in labor, technical aspects, tasks to achieve, teaching needed, finances and material resources that have been chosen.

Holistic Benefits

Participative Upgrading program is an undeniable way to enhance the considerable investment people have already made in their housing. It also allows keeping people close to their jobs and making a least impact on their delicate social supports and bonds, which are part of their survival.

Very often, upgrading process is not measurable from a simple glance, and the best examples of neighborhood improvement are holistic approaches taking into account, health, education, housing, livelihood and gender.

“The reclaimed Manila Tondo foreshore, where 200,000 squatters lived, underwent ‘fantastic improvement’ by 1981, with not only better environmental conditions, but also improved livelihoods, more recreational and health facilities, and greater stability and community cohesion”. (UN Habitat 2003:130)

4. Architect towards Participant – A changing role?

Forewords

Seeing the architect as a supreme designer of the Urban Space is an enormous illusion. Architecture has always been plural, and the task of the architect has always involved many professionals, from builders to artists, from sociologist to engineers, or even from philosophers to climate specialists.

But how to consider the potential involvement of any human being in the conception and realization process of the architect's work?

This question is legitimate, and to propose an answer we need to remind us which are the essential tasks of the Urban Shelter and of the Architect?

Thoughts about the Main Urban Shelter and Architect's tasks

Every Human Beings have the right to decent shelter and living conditions. The essential duty of Urban Shelter is to guarantee this right, necessary to human

blooming and well being, here in a urbanized context. And the Architect main concern is to facilitate the access of any human being to the “right of Home”.

Which are the tools of the Architect to achieve his task?

Even if it is the result of a collective work, the architectural answer is rather subjective, as a traditional architectural project is lead and mainly designed by the architect. His heavy responsibilities and the weight of the divers constraints influencing an architectural project are so many concern the architect bringing complexity for him to achieve his task.

How to consider Social Participation from the Architect perspective?

*Meeting people's need and wishes,
providing them with a decent shelter that will empower themselves,
simply in order to, at least, provide them with an environment favourable to the
feeling of well being we are looking after,*

Can it be achieved without consulting the first concerned, the households?

Who better than oneself know what ones need?

The answer is so simple, Participation in any way of the households, as far as the goals are seeking to cope the right to a home are considered, allow to build up adequate architectural answers, thus more sustainable.

Architect Role's Guidelines:

The architect has to consider this dimension, and remember his task. Through his work he can achieve high quality level of social participation. Technician of the space, the architect has to valorize his knowledge and the richness of his approaches by being a good coordinator between the many actors of an architectural process, including its users.

In few words, Architect willing to integrate Social Participation to their work should: (Lena Brahme, 2010:lecture)

- *be social innovators and aspire for social sustainability*
- *keep a keen eye & ear to the people around him*
- *keep a reflective approach*
- *Act as moderator in user involvement processes*

5.Thoughts

Bottom-up and Up-down approach to respond the Urban Shelter need

Participative process makes Urban Poor households the main actors, but they work in close partnership with their community networks, the Municipality and qualified professionals to survey, discuss, prioritize, plan, develop upgrading proposals and carry out the work, to fund and support their right to a decent Urban Shelter.

Main Assets for the Urban Poor Participants

Successful participatory programs led in developing countries, to improve the living conditions of left over populations, provide them with more than a decent shelter. The main assets brought by such approaches are:

- better and more appropriate living conditions,
- expansion and fulfillment of essentials rights,
- awareness and knowledge (on the environmental responsibility for instance)
- skills acquisition (mainly through self-help construction or saving programs)
- decrease of the financial cost of a project,
- livelihood and social sustainability
- inclusion
- relationships and networking in connection with important matters of public interest
- trust, and self esteem
- more favorable environment to enhance personal blooming

“The size of upgrading project budgets is extremely small, but the size of the hope, the energy, the confidence, the security and the new culture in which people come together and work together after the project is finished is enormous”
(Roje:2006:1)

The Architect's role

The architect main concern is to worry about other people's environment quality, making them taking part in his process work is just a way of being more accurate in his task.

To achieve high quality level of social participation, the architect needs to understand the dynamics of the individuals and the forces that shape the physical environment in which they are settled, on a larger scale, from the community to the urban sphere, and even to a more global scale.

Perspectives

Any participative initiative should be driven by more than a research of economy of means. This factor is only one benefit of such a process, but that can, its true, make the difference in a specific context, when it is needed to reach the poorest populations.

If this paper is focusing on the Urban Poor context, mostly on developing countries' ground, and tries to show how efficient can be a participative approach to meet these people with their needs, I believe that their experience could serve other publics and in other urban or rural contexts, and vice versa.

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