Slums, Slum Dwellers and Multilevel Governance

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The continuing existence of slums, which represent a severe threat to achieving development objectives, is officially deplored by almost everyone. Cities in the South today have to contend with spatial fragmentation and growing economic inequalities. In spite of significant international funding, public policies that have been implemented in this area, such as clearance, upgrading or resettlement, have not met with the expected success. Via the major international conferences, efforts have been made to reach a consensus on this issue and to implement institutional instruments involving alliances between urban stakeholders. The international community is trying to create a corpus of norms that would be negotiated and implemented in partnership with local authorities and urban citizens at the city and slum level. But this paper suggests that these norms and projects do not correspond to the present balance of power within the city.

La persistance des bidonvilles, qui représente une sévère menace pour les objectifs de développement, est officiellement un objet d’inquiétude. Aujourd’hui, les villes du Sud doivent affronter la fragmentation spatiale et des inégalités économiques croissantes. En dépit de financements internationaux significatifs, les politiques publiques mises en œuvre dans ce domaine, telles que la résorption de bidonvilles, leur réhabilitation ou leur relocalisation, n’ont pas eu les succès escomptés. Au travers de conférences internationales majeures des efforts ont été faits pour atteindre un consensus sur cette question et mettre en œuvre des outils institutionnels incluant des alliances entre acteurs urbains. La communauté internationale tente de créer un ensemble de normes qui seraient négociées et mises en œuvre en partenariat avec les autorités locales et les habitants des villes au niveau de la ville et du bidonville. Mais ces normes et projets ne correspondent pas au rapport de force actuel.

INTRODUCTION

Ample evidence exists that the national statistics of the countries in the South mask the extent and depth of urban poverty and the intra-urban disparities relative to
income levels, infant mortality, and birth and death rates. According to UNCHS (2001: 4), 36 per cent of urban households in all developing countries have an income below the poverty line. Over one billion people living in urban zones have neither decent housing nor access to basic services. The concentration of certain major collective facilities and services such as hospitals and universities in the cities disguises the fact that a part of the urban population has no access to them and lives in a state of complete deprivation. Dureau (2004: 217) mentions the fact that with deepening economic inequality in urban societies we observe the appearance of cities made up of a mosaic of increasingly homogeneous micro-spaces. Such spatial fragmentation carries a considerable risk that urban societies may lose their internal cohesion. The poor and the rich no longer go to the same places; they no longer use the same means of transport or shop or consume in the same venues.

The objective of this article will be to investigate whether decision makers have adequately dealt with this crucial issue – a pivotal aspect of economic and social development. In their inability to deal with many urban problems, local and national authorities let slums develop as a form of ‘low-cost’ urbanisation. International organisations tried to develop replicable strategies and public policies directly aiming for the provision of low-cost housing and the roll-back of slums. Over the past 15 years, numerous attempts have been made to establish relevant international norms that would then become public policies associating the multiplicity of international, national and local players. The slum would thus become a node involving a number of different stakeholders as expressed by the definition of the concept of governance:

...the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and co-operative action may be taken. It includes formal institutions and regimes empowered to enforce compliance, as well as informal arrangements that people and institutions either have agreed to or perceive to be in their interest (Commission on Global Governance, 1994: 4).

Slum Space and Slum Dwellers’ Habitat: A Policy Nightmare

More than ever, then, slums are part of the sum and substance of cities in the South. Social commentators in 19th-century England and the British census officers in Calcutta and other large Indian cities described the harsh reality of living conditions and the habitat of the poor in slums well before Nairobi and many other Southern cities were even founded. However, few observers would have imagined their persistence over time. The slum as a type of habitat and a modality of urban development has resisted all political and administrative change. In the big cities of the South, even during periods of economic growth, slums continue to develop in spite of international and national projects designed to halt their spread.

At the same time, the slum as a space has still not been clearly defined (UNHSP, 2003: 9 and 196). Definitions vary from country to country and from one author to the next. Should run-down inner city districts be considered slums?