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Housing policy in the City of Buenos Aires. Reflections about the Federal Housing Program

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ABSTRACT

In 2004, the Argentinean government launched a new large-scale social housing program, the Federal Program of Housing, 'Programa Federal', after a 15-year period in which social housing policy was virtually non-existent. However, informal settlement in the city of Buenos Aires has actually increased significantly since. This paradox, high government expenditure on social housing and increasing informality, triggers important questions regarding the way housing programs are designed and how they are implemented. We hypothesize that a large-scale social housing program, such as the Programa Federal, that does not simultaneously articulate a clear land policy and adequately takes into account the social complexity and diversity on the ground, will fall short of reaching its goals. In this paper we examine how the Programa Federal contributes to urban segregation in the metropolis, and generates a 'product' that bypasses the views and needs of its end-users, the future residents, and disregards particularities of the areas in which it intervenes.

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, the Argentinean government launched a social housing program that in terms of budget and scale was more than ten times the size of any other government intervention in the preceding 15 years. The 'Programa Federal' implied a significant departure from more than a decade of neo-liberalism in which social housing construction had come to a virtual standstill. However, despite the fact that the Programa Federal is one of the largest social housing programs on the South American continent, it is uncertain whether it can actually deliver on its promise of providing an adequate housing solution for the popular sectors. Despite the enormous government expenditure, the housing situation of low-income sectors has become more problematic over the past years, as evidenced by growing slums and increasing numbers of people living in overcrowded tenement houses.

This paradox, high government expenditure on social housing and increasing informality, triggers important questions regarding the way housing programs are designed and how they are implemented. We hypothesize that a large-scale social housing program, such as the Programa Federal, that does not simultaneously articulate a clear land policy and adequately takes into account the social complexity and diversity on the ground, will fall short of reaching its goals.

In this paper we discuss the design and implementation of the Programa Federal in Buenos Aires. In particular we examine how it contributes to urban segregation in the metropolis, and generates a 'product' that bypasses the views and needs of its end-users, the future residents, and disregards particularities of the areas in which it intervenes. We draw from classic debates on housing (Turner, Pradilla and Schteinghart), and on how cities are 'produced' (Harvey, Castells, Topalov), and discuss both Latin American and European research.

The paper is divided into three sections. In first section, we briefly present the conceptual framework and theoretical debates. In the second section, a brief description on housing policy background in Buenos Aires. Thirdly, the main aspects of the implementation of the Programa Federal in Buenos Aires are discussed. For this we focus on dimensions that have a direct impact on the possibilities of the program to reach its goals

(legal framework and role of state agencies involved, availability of land, and the construction sector). We also examine what happens with the participation of the potential residents of the new housing and present some exploratory analyses of the residents' perspectives. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the Federal Program against the backdrop of the role public housing has played in urban processes in Buenos Aires historically. This last section does not pretend to be a closed conclusion, but is intended to generate new research questions.¹

ON THE RELATION BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE HOUSING MARKET

According to Topalov (1979), the role of the State in urban planning cannot be explained by conceiving it as a rational actor aiming to serve the general interest of the population through a coherent strategy. Instead, it operates more like a group of institutions that carry out certain processes that ultimately serve the elite's general interest. Seen from this perspective, urban policy cannot be reduced to mere technical planning, but instead is a general social process. This process is "traversed" by the social struggles of urban social movements (class struggles). In this context, the potential of cities as the main spatial form for the capitalist socialization of productive forces is developed (Harvey, 1980; Topalov, 1979; Castells, 1970).

One of the specific aspects of the real estate sector, which is central to the purposes of this paper, is that one of its main components, urban land, cannot be reproduced, while it can be monopolized (Topalov, 1979). Land as a "limited good" cannot simply be produced on demand. Once urban land has "ran out", rural land in border areas will change its use, e.g. be converted from agricultural to urban. This process usually goes hand in hand with speculative practices, due to the considerable price difference between rural and urban land (Jaramillo, 1990). This process leads to great increases in the price and may lead to informality.

¹ In terms of method, we make use of both primary and secondary sources of data. This former regards interviews with key informants related to the Federal Program's implementation, and also a first round of interviews with residents of housing units carried out by the program in the City of Buenos Aires

It must be noted that even during the industrialization process and the “Latin-American welfare state period”, auto-construction or ‘self-help housing’ as a non-mercantile way of producing the city was a widespread phenomenon. Many authors (Fernández Wagner, 2008; Yujnovsky, 1984; Turner, 1977) have argued that the persistence of self-help housing is evidence of the incapacity of private sector to provide an adequate supply houses to the low-income sectors.

What is ‘access to housing’?

Following Turner (1982, 1977), Pradilla (1980), Ward (1982) and Yujnovsky (1984), it can be argued that access to housing means something more than obtaining a housing unit. It also implies access to a set of services that allows one to satisfy basic needs, such as infrastructure networks, a healthy environment, access to medical health and education and recreational activities. The access to these services is intimately related to the inequality between social classes. Space is a central component of the unequal distribution of resources and the “social product”, as it determines whether areas end up being inclusive or exclusive and integrated or segregated. Not only are they a result, the spatial and territorial questions are co-constitutive of the problem.

According to Oszlak and O'Donnell (1976), public policies can be understood as complex actions directed at addressing social issues. Focusing on housing policy, and drawing from actors responsible for putting it on the agenda and those working on its execution, appears to be a fertile point of departure to examine recent changes in public policy in contemporary Argentina.

In this paper, we do so by examining the implementation of a housing program that was designed on the national level and its execution at the local level (the city of Buenos Aires). We combine different perspectives (Aguilar Villanueva, 2000; Pzeworsky, 1998; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984) and understand its implementation as a complex and dynamic process in which its goals and targets are to materialize. This complex process, in turn, is permeated by *tensions and conflicts between the different actors* involved and by *economic and political trends* that can influence the implementation.

HOUSING POLICY IN BUENOS AIRES: A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON THE NATIONAL HOUSING FUND

Social housing acquired increasing importance in the public agenda in Argentina with the creation of the Housing National Commission in year 1955, and with the Federal Housing Fund in 1959, and the creation of the Secretary of Housing in 1965 (Cravino, Fernández Wagner y Varela, 2002; Yujnovsky, 1984).

In recent times, the most important national housing policy was the National Housing Fund (*Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda* – FONAVI). Although it was created in 1972 its implementation did not start until 1977. FONAVI was a centralized body operating nation-wide. The Undersecretary of Urban Development and Housing was in charge of proposing the legal frameworks, decided what kind of projects were to be financed and established the general criteria to select the end-users of the housing units. Meanwhile, each provincial state was in charge of its implementation, through their Provincial Housing Institutes -*Institutos Provinciales de Vivienda*- (Cravino, Fernández Wagner y Varela, 2002; Di Virgilio y Rodríguez, 2007). Until 1992 FONAVI built an average of 32.000 housing units per year.

The social and economic changes of the last decades had important and visible territorial effects in the City of Buenos Aires and came at the expense of social housing policies such as FONAVI (Grimson, 2009; Basualdo, 2006; Pucciarelli, 2001). Before the 2001 crisis, urban policies had to do with the development of large scale urban projects (*Grandes Proyectos Urbanos*) and infrastructure works (Cuenya, 2004). Puerto Madero, a former and largely abandoned port in a central part of the city was renewed following the model of London's Docklands. It represents the paradigm of these urban interventions, which were considered more important than social housing policies. During the crisis that started in the late 1990s and culminated in the 2011 collapse, unemployment and poverty

acquired notorious visibility, and increased the demand for social emergency policies to attend to the needs of so-called vulnerable families.²

Since the beginning of the 1990s, FONAVI did not have a significant impact, either in the City of Buenos Aires or the whole Metropolitan Area (which encompasses the City and the surrounding municipalities). The fund did not reach social groups that had problems entering the housing market and obtaining credit and were in need of a subsidy; which was one of the initial goals of the program. Furthermore, population growth was not supported with active policies on housing. The growth of “new poor” and the negative impact of the economic context on middle class families who started to slip into poverty were key factors in the rise of the demand for affordable housing. The impact of the decentralization processes on national policies, together with the lack of funds of the FONAVI, led to a total stop of social housing programs during 2002. It was not until 2003 that the State invested again in habitat solutions to emergency situations and housing policy in general (COHRE, 2005)

PROGRAMA FEDERAL

After the collapse of Argentina’s economy in 2001 and the critical years 2002 and 2003, a strong impulse for public works destined for the poor sectors of society was generated in 2004 through the creation of the Federal Program for the Construction of Housing (literally, *Programa Federal de Construcción de Viviendas*). The objective was to provide in the construction of 120,000 dwellings countrywide between 2004 and 2006, 5,000 of which were destined for the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. A year later, a second phase of the program, Programa Federal II, was announced, which was scheduled to start in 2006. For the first stage of the program the federal government was to provide the provinces and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires with the financial resources needed to build the new dwellings. These resources included both the funds for the construction of the dwellings as well as the funds for the required infrastructure. The total budget of the program (stage I

² According to figures of the National Census of year 2001, the population of the City of Buenos Aires reached 2,776,138 inhabitants, with a 6,6% of housing deficit. The last Census (year 2010) established that 2,891,092 people live in the city, but data on housing deficit is not available yet.

and II) was around \$7 billion USD. The City of Buenos Aires was assigned \$200 million USD.³

According to the framework agreement worked out between the federal government and the provinces, the distribution of the dwellings between geographic areas and jurisdictions would have a provisional character, to be adjusted according to the efficiency of the execution of the program, and the local characteristics of the housing deficit and unemployment rates in each province. The possibility of complementary funding by the provinces was allowed, especially in those situations where land needed to be acquired, additional infrastructural works were required, or for adding improvements to the projects. The financial resources given by the Federal government were destined for housing units with a specified minimum surface and infrastructure. The provision of the land to build the dwellings on was left to provincial and municipal governments.

In 2006 the second phase of the program, *Programa Federal II*, started in which the construction of 300,000 dwellings countrywide were planned. To the 5,000 units planned for the City of Buenos Aires during the first phase, the second phase added another 6,000 units.

Besides reducing the housing deficit and providing a housing solution for the low-income sectors, the *Programa Federal* has two important explicit subsidiary goals: generating employment and boosting the construction sector.

THE PROBLEMS OF PROGRAMA FEDERAL

The 'Programa Federal' implied a significant departure from more than a decade neo-liberal policies in which social housing construction had come to a virtual standstill. The scale of the program, in terms of financial resources, exceeded 10 times the size of any other government intervention in the preceding 15 years. This implied an important shift in terms of housing policy in Argentina, also compared to the main trends in housing policy on the Latin American continent over the past two decades (Cuenya, 2000).

³ The city government was supposed to receive \$67 million USD during stage I and \$133million USD in during stage II.

However, despite the fact that the Programa Federal is one of the largest social housing programs on the continent, several problems have plagued it since its inception and it has fallen short of delivering on its promise of providing an adequate housing solution for the popular sectors. Despite the enormous government expenditure, the housing situation of low-income sectors has actually become more problematic over the past years, as evidenced by growing slums and increasing numbers of people living in overcrowded tenement houses. In the following section, we explain why the program has failed to reach its goals drawing from its implementation in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires.

PROGRAMA FEDERAL IN THE CITY OF BUENOS AIRES

It is, firstly, interesting to examine the relation between the figures that are announced in the agreements, and the actual levels of execution in the city of Buenos Aires, also known as the Federal District. In June 2007, the Housing Institute of the City (IVC), which is the government body responsible for its execution, presented a total of 26 million US\$ related to public works in Programa Federal 1. This figure was only just over half the budget assigned to the Federal District (\$67 million USD), and also includes funds from the Government of the City of Buenos Aires. Furthermore, of the 31 different projects that were announced, only 13 presented some kind of advance. This image contrasts sharply with the figures presented in the previous section.

The same can be remarked with respect to the amount of units that were projected by the IVC as referred to in the agreements. The IVC announced a total of 2487 units constructed, which is significantly less than the 11.000 units it was to construct during both phases and only 49% of the amount expected for Programa Federal I. These figures raise a number of serious questions with respect to the viability of the policy in the Federal District and invite reflections as to what elements complicated the implementation of the program.

When we focus on specific elements of the implementation of the program in the Federal District, a number of interesting issues emerge. Firstly, the institutional and normative requisites for housing construction. Second, the characteristics of certain structural elements for the development of a habitat policy: land markets and the

construction sector. Third, the dynamics of the executive body, the Housing Institute of the City (IVC).

Institutional and normative requisites

Compared to other jurisdictions, the City of Buenos Aires has regulations with respect to housing construction that are both more detailed and strict. The Urban Planning Code (*Código de Planeamiento Urbano*) and the Construction Code (*Código de Edificación*) lay down the rules for housing construction. Furthermore, the control mechanisms, studies regarding the environmental impact, public hearings and the intervention of the judiciary are mentioned as intervening mechanisms in an administrative complex. According to various interviewees, these bodies often necessity adjustments to be made with respect to the characteristics of dwellings constructed for the public sector. In other cases, they emerge directly as obstructions during the process of execution.

The Federal District is one of the oldest and most institutionalized districts. They do not allow you to build a dwelling without infrastructure and other requirements. It is one of the few jurisdictions with a highly developed normative body with respect to housing. In other provinces it is much more flexible “we’ll fix it and if not, we’ll just arrange an exception to the code” attitude... In the Federal District they won’t allow that [...]. So we are talking different timeframes here.

The interesting element is that while the requirements and standards of quality increase the complexity of the process of implementation of the Programa Federal, at the same time this regulatory body of rules does guarantee that the work executed has a higher quality compared to other jurisdictions (most notably the other municipalities in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires).

Structural elements of the case of Buenos Aires

With respect to more structural elements, two barriers emerge in the discourse of the people interviewed. For housing construction, the first barrier, the bottleneck is the increase in prices of raw materials (cement, bricks, metal). Faced with increased demand, production

companies of these materials have increased their prices. When the budget of the program was defined, the state calculated different price settings than the current ones.

In the Federal District it was difficult to start the works due to the lack of land. Furthermore, there were no construction firms that came out of the 2001 crisis without going bankrupt or in adequate conditions to bid. And thirdly, while at the time supply of manual labour was abundant, the scale of the project led to problems with acquiring labour, construction materials and stones. Almost the entire system of production was not ready to produce on this scale. If there is a lot of demand for bricks, the producers do not make an additional oven, but instead increase the price. And when the price rise they start to reduce the supply, so then there is a strong pressure between price and shortage.

In some of the interviews, the land issue, the second barrier, appeared particularly related to difficulties with articulating a general habitat policy in areas in which the housing deficit was felt most: the urban slums (*villas miseria*). In these very densely populated areas it is difficult to free up space for construction and regularization.

The debate regarding the modalities of acquiring land for the Programa Federal brings with it other elements that should be taken into consideration. What groups are involved in the implementation of the policy? One of the main groups, related to one of the fundamental goals of the Programa Federal, i.e. boost the construction sector, is this sector. Despite possible difficulties in the institutional relation between national and local State, public sector develops a coherent practice on the way to relation with economic actors since the formulation to the implementation process

The other element that is important to note regards the relation between housing construction and land policy. This opens up an issue that will be returned to later: the issue of socio-spatial segregation and the city. The reference of the possibility of developing housing projects in a small scale, in harmony with consolidated neighbourhoods, may also involve other actors (small enterprises, cooperatives) brings in the question of where the new housing complexes located

In this sense, Buenos Aires has certain characteristics that complicate the situation. As noted by one of the people interviewed, the city is a megalopolis, with a highly complicated real-estate market. Habitat policy emerges as an additional dimension within a

complex structure of various forms of production, reproduction and appropriation of urban land. Here the local, national and international level articulate themselves in a complex way, configuring an urban dynamic with different tensions, some highly visible, others more obscured.

The role of the Housing Institute of the City

According to various people interviewed, the IVC reunites a set of characteristics that transforms it into a problem of itself once it tries to develop whatever type of intervention with respect to housing construction and the improvement of the habitat situation in the city. These are chronic difficulties in its functioning: bureaucracy, slowness in its administrative procedures, and its “excessive” size:

From my perspective, the IVC is a structure that should have been destructed and built up again. The housing department has many employees and much administrative weight and they thought twenty times about how to transform it. In the period we are talking about, there have been two or three different governments and each of them had big trouble trying to deal with that structure.

Some organizations that give legal assistance to populations with housing problems agree with this diagnostic. Besides alternating administrations, they note a lack of clarity in the delimitation of its functions which reduce the capacity of the IVC to deal with addressing specific needs (COHRE y ACIJ, 2008). Furthermore, they note the reluctance of the IVC to provide information to the public.

These last perspectives should be completed with the ones of the IVC members. Asked about the diagnosis on the habitat situation, one of the interviewees –a former director of the institute- argues that building new housing complexes destined to a global list of potential benefits was not the priority of the housing policy. According to his speech, new projects were supposed to be related to identify groups that had a visible housing problem: slums, informal renters, trade unions and housing cooperatives.

The setting of priorities by the IVC, invites reflection about some changes in the general set-up of the Programa Federal and its local application. We’ll discuss three main issues:

Firstly, the importance of *working with the existing housing stock* that suffers from some kind of deficit that can be addressed without needing to build new dwellings. From the perspective of the interviewee, the housing deficit is related in large part to this type of situation. Even though the improvement of existing dwellings and the construction of new ones do not exclude each other, the diagnostic marks the implementation process within a context where it cannot provide good responses to one of the priorities intervention guidelines.

Secondly, the *existence of long-term critical habitat situations* in the Federal District: self-help slums and on the other overcrowded tenement houses and pensions. The former require, beyond the construction of dwellings, urbanization. This type of operation is highly complicated due to the fact that land needs to be freed up to construct housing and to widen up the existing alleys and convert them into proper streets.

Thirdly, the potential role of social actors to organize the housing demand. In opinion of the interviewee two situations exist. On the one hand, unions as possible partners to implement the program. In this case, besides organizing the demand, workers organizations often have land of their own, which can provide one of the things the program does not provide funds for. On the other, as long as trade unions can gather formal workers the possibility of recovering the funds invested is much higher. This last thing expresses the absence of a uniform criteria respect of the payment of social housing developed by the Federal Program once the dwellings are inhabited.

Intervention of the private sector in the implementation process

With respect to the participation of the private sector in the development of policy, the key informants are more erratic. So far, all coincided that the private sector did not participate in the design of the Programa Federal. However, when asked about the implementation of the program, opinions differ. On the one hand, the goals of the program assume strong participation of the construction industry. On the other hand, it would not have been appropriate to include them due to the situation of construction companies at the time the program was launched. The great majority either had not recuperated from the crisis or had turned towards other types of business. In this sense, it appears erroneous to suppose that

the program would yield to the pressure of this sector. When the program is announced the first reaction of this sector was mistrust:

- At the time the program was designed and launched, what was the response of the private sector? –Mistrust. That is, the announcement was thought interesting. But in general you see that they did not want to take the risk. First, there were few companies that were in good shape. Second, they were interested in another type of public works. Road work, energy, gas works. A lot of kilometres of the same kind of work. In the construction of housing you have a lot of issues. Even more so when it is in places where people are living.

It has to be taken into account that the immediate antecedents prior to the launching of the program did not invite, from the perspective of the private sector, active and trustful responses. Even though the magnitude of the resources of the Programa Federal made it attractive to think about it, it was also true that there was a risk of sudden changes (political and economical ones), delays in the chain of payment, changes in the political situation, crisis, etc.

The situation also had other attractive for these enterprises. Housing construction was not the only area in which public works were solicited. Those with experience in developing initiatives of the State know certain mechanisms to minimize their risks.

Nonetheless the possibility of a drastic change in the political conditions or in the speed of the program's fund administrative circuit, the enterprises might get "vulnerable". In particular those smaller enterprises and with less financial resources to deal with delays and interruptions in payment. This became increasingly clear in the year 2008.

At the local level, the relation between the private sector and the public sector, with respect to the implementation of the Programa Federal is not easy to uncover. In this sense, the discourses of those interviewed describe the participation of the companies at the biting processes as "normal". It is a normal administrative process, to which both sectors are accustomed and during the period of execution, supposes a relation that is relatively fluid, more or less conflictive but does not offer too many surprises.

On the role of the beneficiaries

The interviewees agree that there is an absence on the definition of who are supposed to be the beneficiaries according to the program's guidelines. The already mentioned reference to reducing the housing deficit -rather than giving a neat definition of potential population involved (that is to say, the future *inhabitants*)- is more of a statistic rather than an accurate characterization of the stakeholders involved in dealing with housing problems (NGOs, CBOs, social movements). With respect to this point, key informers present different perspectives. Some stress that the question as to who the beneficiaries actually are is a point that should have been revisited when evaluating the first stage of the Program.

The absence of an integral consideration of the beneficiaries, or better said, *end-users*, of the 'housing product', leads us to a crucial disregard of a basic, but fundamental, element of the program: location. This disregard leads to a variety of problems, such as difficulties to grow roots in a place, to appropriate the transferred good (house unit) and, consequently, possible informal sales and even the abandoning of the housing unit.

A first round of interviews with residents at housing complexes developed by the Federal Program in the City of Buenos Aires supports this. Despite the fact that in the central areas location can be better than in districts of Greater Buenos Aires, the proximity to slums, transportation problems and difficulties to access to basic services (e.g., hospitals, buses, schools) are mentioned as potential causes to move out. Another main problem has to do with potential conflicts between people coming from different habitational background. It is not only the idea of living close to an informal settlement that some inhabitants find problematic, but also daily life inside the complexes living together with others that have kept their "slum dweller mentality":

The main problem I find living here is with the people that come from across the street [in reference to a slum located there]. Some of them still behave as "villeros" [slum inhabitants] playing music loud all night, and shouting and stuff.

Some people here, some of my new neighbours don't like me because I confront them with the fact that they need to behave now, that they are in a new situation, with new houses, with a nice building. They don't understand that we have common areas, things to take care, and common expenses to pay. I have to play the part of the "bad cop" but I don't care, I have fought too much to now feel I am like living in a slum. They are not all

like that, that wouldn't be fair to say, but some of them... too many of them if you ask me...

We can see two new aspects that should be considered in detail in future research. Firstly, social differentiation processes are potentially harmful in long term as they pose a risk to the sustainability of programs. Beside the fact that specific situations may create conflicts between neighbours, the reference to the 'slum' works as a stigma that (re)produces differences. On the other hand, the cultural habits associated with the new housing typology need to be studied. The common expenses dwellers have to pay are new to most of them. Low rates of payments trend to be characteristic of social housing complexes. In these cases, the difference between those who pay and those who do not brings in another aspect that the State should take into account: promoting participation processes between neighbours.

Returning to the idea of "(re-)locating people " in the territory, it is interesting to think of how the absence of a serious definition of the beneficiaries and the lack of an integral approach to the issue of land and its connection to housing come together when trying to see what kind of city is produced by housing policy.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

It should, first of all, be stressed again that the Programa Federal implies a positive turn of 180 degrees with respect to housing policy in Buenos Aires. Whereas throughout the 1990s housing policy was largely characterized by an absence of social housing construction, the intention of building new housing units in large scale in Buenos Aires is an impressive change by any standard. It could be argued that, the decision by itself of the public sector to undertake an intervention of this scale squarely places back the issue of access to housing on the agenda. Having said that, it is also important to consider whether the "turn towards (re)centralization it expresses is a viable approach for the implementation of such a program. On the one hand, the Federal government is the one that impulses the program and which generates the resources necessary for its execution, sets the targets and lays out a general framework that establishes the borders and applications of the program. On the

other hand, the possibilities for the implementation of the program need criteria to be adapted to the local level. Those variations within the program, i.e. sub-programs that do incorporate land use aspects, the need of complementary funding to keep up with more expensive local standards, or the use of program funds to finance local housing programs can be interpreted as a symptom of the difficulties found by centralized planned policies to provide solutions in local contexts. Contemplating the experience of Buenos Aires, from the lack of land to the absence of constructors in conditions to participate while community actors with experience in self-help housing projects were not involved, are examples of the need of wide guidelines so that local implementation can develop specific strategies for every context.

The Programa Federal has an important disadvantage compared with other previous habitat policies, like its predecessor FONAVI (Fondo Nacional de Vivienda/National Housing Fund). Whereas FONAVI was created by law, the Programa Federal lacks this basis. As such, its continuation depends on the political context. Furthermore, it depends on the economy as the resources necessary to sustain the Programa Federal rely on the strategy of keeping high levels of fiscal surplus.

Secondly, the experience of the Programa Federal requires us to rethink the issue of the relation between national and local levels of government. The program stems from the federal level which retains the right to approve or disapprove each of the projects that are proposed. The requirement of using intensive manual labour as a preferential technology appears to be related to the necessity to include the use of manual labour in the construction industry. Independently of the potential of this requirement to lower unemployment, it is important to consider the extent to which a public policy intended to solve one social problem, neglects certain aspects related to another it also tries to solve (such as the way the manual labour is actually contracted). A significant example is that existing housing cooperation and (local) habitat policies are not considered (e.g. Plan de Emergencia Habitacional). In the Programa Federal, on the other hand, projects are led by private construction enterprises#. It is worth noting in this respect that this reinforces the traditional relation between two actors: the industrial sector and the State (Cravino, Fernández Wagner, Varela, 2002).

These observations acquire a different connotation when we take into consideration other issues related to the centralized character of the Programa Federal. First, its formulation speaks solely of the construction of “housing units” (unidades habitacionales). This may lead to a disregard of contemplating housing “as a process” that links housing to the environment (work, access to the city, networks, etc.). The risk of thinking about housing issues in a narrow way and reducing it to the dwelling itself, and abandoning the idea of a perspective that includes urban services (education, health and transportation), is likely to affect the sustainability of the policy and the eventual permanence of the families in the new housing complexes. Seen from this perspective, the public intervention itself may actually contribute to strengthening mechanisms of socio-spatial segregation that already characterize the metropolitan landscape.

Another aspect that should be considered and which has fundamental implications for the degree of success of the Programa Federal is the lack of specific funds for acquiring urban land. Stated differently, it is important to take this into account when thinking about the difficulties of implementing a housing program without a strategy on how to intervene in real estate market in general, and the urban land market in particular.[#]

At present, while the Plan is still in the process of implementation, we can already identify some actors that appear to benefit greatly from it. One is the industrial sector that produces the raw materials for construction. Second, urban landowners, who in a context of increasing demand, clearly display a speculative logic with the purpose of obtaining an extraordinary rent for their property. The prices they ask for land are so high that they have two consequences: in the City of Buenos Aires housing complexes are often developed in lands located in the southern cone which reinforces the existent social segregation. In the municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires, private lands located in border areas are acquired. This implies that a public policy that has the purpose of delivering certain goods that the market itself does not, ends up benefitting directly the private sector. Then, the access to a house remains in a second place, if not directly subordinated, to other effects and unwritten goals of public policy.

With respect to the gap between the supply of housing and its support (land), another point is to be made. The lack of a clear policy to acquire the land necessary for housing projects is likely to result in getting the cheapest soil available on the market. In

general, this means bad locations, far from central areas and centres of production, and therefore limited ability for generating livelihoods and limited access to the city in terms of transportation. In other words, a housing policy not coupled with a land policy can lead to market forces acting as the final regulator of the future locations of the 'beneficiaries' of the program. Besides reproducing urban segregation, it makes difficult the sustainability of housing complexes themselves. The connection between the newly built complexes and the city may affect the possibilities of families to stay in the long term. Transportation difficulties to workplaces and limited access to other services make it unlikely that beneficiaries actually settle in their new habitat. This is even more so if we consider the fact that basic services in the city are in the hands of private enterprises and therefore subject to mercantilist relations, and in several cases with a low or inexistent infrastructure network (mainly in poor areas). When housing policy reinforces these characteristics in the territory it is necessary to contemplate what kind of city is public sector is actually helping develop.

Conflict between neighbours

Although basic services in the Federal District have an important presence, and the quality of the housing units is considerably better than in other jurisdictions (e.g. Greater Buenos Aires), the fact that the new interventions are urban complexes, instead of single units and separate plots, generates different kinds of conflicts between neighbours. Together with problems related with different habits coexisting in a building whose habitants come in most cases from an informal but individual housing tradition, the difficulty also becomes visible when trying residents attempt to organize common expenses.

Related to the last point, it is important to generate a metropolitan view, both with respect to the analysis of the housing issue and for the study of the responses of public policy. The implementation of the Programa Federal generates different problems in the city compared to the metropolitan area that surrounds it. In turn, the specific issues regarding the implementation vary between municipalities and between these and the City of Buenos Aires, the Federal District. However, beyond these specific issues that play out between different municipalities, there are other problems that require an integral and strategic approach. The problem of scarcity of urban land that was described above is an

important example of a strategic challenge that occurs throughout the area of implementation. The necessity to intervene in land markets in an equitable and progressive manner that promotes inclusion as opposed to reproducing the existing patterns of socio-spatial segregation requires the construction of a perspective that contemplates the kind of city that is being produced. The logic of the real estate market applies to the entire city, crossing political and administrative borders. For these reasons, it is important that the metropolitan perspective is not restricted to the limits of the jurisdictions that compose it

. Finally, it is important to make an observation regarding the participation of both the future inhabitants and community-based organizations. Their perspectives were not considered in the design process and their role in social housing was not taken into account in the implementation. Maybe we should think –together with Turner- that *heteronomous* planning goes necessarily against the possibility of incorporating local experiences on policy making. But perhaps we must focus on the particular aspects of the scenario where this housing policy is being carried out; it is important to investigate how the general political context may affect the relation between the different levels of the state (Nation-Province-Municipalities), and between these levels and civil society (NGOs, CBOs, social movements, etc.).

With respect to this last point, it will be difficult to carry out a sustainable housing policy that can promote effective access to housing for low-income sectors, without incorporating them as ‘real’ and relevant subjects in the process. Only with the active participation and involvement of actors from the community, and taking into account their experiences and practices, the flawed and risky logic of thinking housing for passive subjects –from the perspective of a self-pretended technical expertise- can be halted. The old urban complexes that were built in the late 1970s, during the last dictatorship, are a living testimony of perspectives that, despite being weaker, still occupy several key places in thinking about public housing.

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