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From Grassroots Shacks to the Towers of Power Relationship Building of Global Grassroots Housing Networks. Experiences from Africa and Asia

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From Grassroots Shacks to the Towers of Power – Relationship Building of Global Grassroots Networks. Experiences from Africa and Asia

Introduction

New urban movements¹ use cities as anchors for their issue-based transnational struggles (Sassen, 2004). However, their motivation for transnational activities varies. Most transnational social movements use global platforms in order to make external actors aware of their issues. This phenomenon is not new; however we can observe an increase in transnational civil society activities (Rucht, 2003). A relatively new phenomenon, nevertheless, is to use transnational activities foremost as a form of internal mobilization, peer learning and partnership-building. Because of its seemingly apolitical nature, these kinds of transnational social movements are often referred to as “pragmatic”.

The paper investigates this phenomenon in the realm of housing. It is based on a current research project funded by DFG on “Housing for the urban poor. From local action to global networks” (HUP, 2012), which includes empirical studies in South Africa, the Philippines and Thailand. The trend to local-global activism in housing movements can be observed in various degrees in all three case studies.

Often these movements are differentiated in (‘ideological’) right-based and counter-hegemonic movements on the one side and (‘pragmatic’) alternative development movements on the other. The paper will focus on the more ‘pragmatic’ movements, which are represented by federations aligned to ‘Shack/Slum Dwellers International’ (SDI) and its “sister” model in Thailand, an alliance between the ‘Community Organizations Development Institute’ (CODI), the ‘National Union of Low Income Community Organizations’ (NULICO) and the ‘Asian Coalition for Housing Rights’ (ACHR). SDI and the Thailand model seek to transform power relationships between the grassroots and the state and influence policy through a diverse set of practices; namely self-enumerations of settlements, organizing through savings groups, setting precedents through own projects, learning through horizontal exchanges and partnerships with the state. All of these practices are considered to result in a transformed housing process with the aim at an *internal* effect in terms of strengthening autonomy and assertiveness of urban poor federations, as well as learning processes within the (cross national) network, and an *external* effect in terms of strengthening the negotiation power of

¹ We use the following definition for social movements: „Social movements are thus, in our view, politically and/or socially directed collectives, often involving multiple organisations and networks, focused on changing one or more elements of the social, political and economic system within which they are located.” (Ballard et al., 2006: 3)

the grassroots organisations vis-à-vis the state and other stakeholders on different levels in the housing process through enhancing their capacities, legitimacy and resourcefulness.

The hypothesis is therefore that new mechanisms are transforming power positions and assertiveness of urban poor. SDI's global recognition and its strong position in numerous international agencies² has a leverage effect in local decision-making processes. This paper will discuss and differentiate the political impact of international networks in the housing field, arguing that the emergence of internationally networked grassroots that are backed up by global allies have led to a new culture of negotiation at the local level.

To do so the paper will be structured in three parts: firstly, it will reveal the housing policy context in which the movements are embedded. Secondly, it will outline the process of relationship-building from local to global networks and thirdly, it will discuss what political impact becomes evident in the case studies and what general implications one can draw from the empirical evidence for the global political relevance.

Böhm et al. (2008) deliver a useful overview, distinguishing between different discursive strings on autonomy within the field of social movements: 1) autonomy from capitalistic modes of production; 2) autonomy from the state; and 3) a post-colonial discourse on autonomy from explorative imperialist and colonial powers demanding self-organization for people and local communities in the global south and dependency from more general hegemonic forms of power. Recognizing the limitations to the above outlined discourses, they further argued that social movements and their autonomy cannot be 'detached from accumulation processes of capital, nor from liberal democracy or development' (Böhm et al., 2008: 10), rather an increase of incorporating social movements in policy, creating different nuances of autonomy, allows for social movement to tap in on needed resources (Ungpakorn, 2009). Accordingly, both right-based and 'pragmatic' social movements relish a 'relative' autonomy. 'Pragmatic' social movements on the one hand have a high degree of autonomy in terms of self-governance and finance, and on the other hand have a certain degree of dependency on the state and donors, sometime leaning towards co-optation. The following paragraphs will serve the purpose of giving an overview of the context and the regional differences in which the transnational networks 'Shack/Slum Dwellers International' (SDI) and its "sister" model are active.

² Such as the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers, the advisory board of UN-Habitat's Slum Upgrading Facility (SUF), the Cities Alliance's Governing Body and UN-Habitat's Advisory Group Against Forced Evictions.

Civil Society Actors Engaged in Housing Policy Context

In contrast to the general perception of a ‘poor’ comparable housing situation throughout the developing world, housing conditions in reality vary largely in terms of policy context, housing backlog, delivery capacity by the state and the legal status of dwellers in informal settlements and their protection from eviction and relocation. The countries used as case studies here (Philippines, Thailand and South Africa) share a relative progressive housing policy setting at the national level, which takes up issues such as disaster relief, differentiated tenure forms, new forms of financing and infrastructure upgrading. Often these housing policies have been pushed and influenced by international agencies and the international donor community, who try to mainstream approaches that are more sensitive to the livelihood situation of urban poor households. Similarly shared is a difficulty to ‘translate’ policies into action on the ground, where vested interests and a lack of political will and/or capacities culminate. Shelter provision therefore often remains a state-driven, product-oriented and largely under-resourced endeavour, which hardly responds to the needs on the ground – or, even on the contrary, drives the most vulnerable groups of the urban population from their strategic location in the city – thereby depriving them from their social and economic networks for the sake of a “slum-free” city vision embraced by local decision-makers and politicians.

The state obviously fails to meet the growing need in basic service and shelter provision. Against this background it is the urban poor themselves who have developed tremendous skills and knowledge to create livelihood opportunities and produce housing arrangements that are adapted to their specific needs and requirements. This has led to a shift of housing policies in many countries from production towards ‘enabling’ and facilitating such processes, which eventually led to the emergence of new forms of civil society actors engaging in urban development (Fokdal et al., 2012).

Social movements engaged with the housing process are diverse and one needs to take into account regional differences within civil societies as well as diverse political environments.³ In general, there is a trend to local-global activism of housing movements in all three case studies: namely movements such as ‘Abahlali baseMjondolo’ (AbM) and the ‘Federation of the Urban Poor’ (FEDUP) in South Africa, ‘Homeless People’s Federation Philippines Incorporated’ (HPFPI), ‘Urban Poor Alliance’ (UP-ALL), ‘Urban Land Reform Movement’, ‘Urban Poor Association’ in the Philippines and the ‘Four Region Slum

³ Within the national context often a division should be made between the capital region and secondary cities.

Network' (FRSN) and 'National Union of Low Income Community Organizations' (NULICO) in Thailand. Often these movements are differentiated in ('ideological') right-based and counter-hegemonic movements on the one side and ('pragmatic') alternative development movements on the other.

Rights-based and counter-hegemonic movements are often rooted in a neoliberal paradigm and strive for getting access to state resources and enforcing citizens' rights. The state is seen as a resourceful entity, which needs to be made responsive to its citizens vis-à-vis powerful neoliberal interests. Robins (2008), in his account on grassroots globalisation in South Africa, paints a more complex picture. Firstly, the state is not a coherent entity but rather a "hybrid cocktail" (Robins, 2008: 4) with competing neoliberal and developmental state ideas. Secondly, movements mobilising for their rights can only be successful against a responsive and resourceful state. However, the reality of many developing countries contrasts these preconditions. Robins frames this as "the state is extremely thin on the ground" (2008: 6). In such situations movements might rely more on networks and other forms of belonging and deploy multiple strategies. The case of the 'Anti-Eviction Campaign' in South Africa illustrates that within one and the same movement a coexisting mix of different strategies and tactics is applied (Oldfield and Stokke, 2006). Abhalali baseMjondolo (AbM), a prominent South African right-based movement in the housing field, also primarily lobbies for the right to housing and opposes eviction and relocation of its members, but at the same time might cooperate with local government around improvements in the communities (Ley, forthcoming). This might be counter to the background and experience of many right-based movements that have celebrated successes before the constitutional court but have not seen the desired effect implemented on the ground. Moreover, what appears to be an autonomous movement in reality is only relatively autonomous as members see the strategic value of other forms of sociality and clientelism (Robins, 2008: 12.)

Civil society becomes conditioned by the experience and comes to understand and appropriate more emancipatory forms of citizenship. Alternative development – also referred to as 'pragmatic' – movements are based on a network of autonomous community-based saving collectives. 'Pragmatic' should not be confused here with not strategic. In their work on feminist movements, Marx Ferree and McClurg Mueller (2004: 580) show the problematic of the strategic/pragmatic dichotomy as it seems to suggest that initiatives that are theory-based in contrast to experience-based, and expert-driven rather than locally-rooted, are more promising and are pushing the boundaries of the feminist movements' rights further.

The focus of the research herein presented is therefore on 'pragmatic' movements with a

transnational scope within the housing field and their strategic networking with external actors.⁴ These are represented by federations aligned to ‘Shack/Slum Dwellers International’ (SDI) and its “sister” model in Thailand, an alliance between the ‘Community Organizations Development Institute’ (CODI), the ‘National Union of Low Income Community Organizations’ (NULICO) and the ‘Asian Coalition for Housing Rights’ (ACHR). The SDI network is based on the shared experience of living conditions of its members in 34 countries around the world. The national alliances consist of a federation (composed of saving groups) and a supporting NGO. In South Africa, for example, FEDUP is the nation-wide federation of informal dwellers, supported by the NGO CORC. The ‘sister’ model in Thailand works with similar methods, however, whereas SDI is composed solely of civil society actors, CODI is a parastatal with a direct budget from the national government. Its aim is to support upgrading of informal settlements and more generally to empower civil society in their struggle around housing issues (Boonyabancha, 2009). NULICO function as a nation-wide network of urban poor, who have already gone through an upgrading process, mostly financially supported through the Baan Mankong Program run by CODI. ACHR play an outstanding role mainly as a regional network of NGOs and CBOs active within the housing field in Asia, as well as a supporting NGO for NULICO within Thailand (Archer, 2012).

Even though these networks have a transnational scope, they need to be anchored in a locality in order to take up shared issues and build solidarity among their members (saving groups). In addition, the relationship between the federation and their supporting NGO(s) is issue-based, even if issues change under the umbrella of people-centred/people-driven development within each country. These transnational networks promulgating ‘people-driven’ development have adapted ‘pragmatic’ collaborative approaches towards external stakeholders.

Scaling-up the relationship-building by ‘pragmatic’ movements

‘Shack/Slum Dwellers International’ (SDI) and its “sister” model in Thailand apply a set of strategies for relationship-building on multiple levels (city, region, nation and transnational) within the movement, as well as towards external actors. Thereby they not only combine spatial proximity with global connectivity, but an important aspect for their relationship-building is the underlying understanding that there are no clear boundaries between civil society and the state.

⁴ A clear line between the two approaches as articulated here is not to be drawn. Rather when it comes to methods applied, all social movements use a mixed toolbox in order to build relationships. Nevertheless the primary ideological ground is different.

The above described strategy leads to a quality leap in the relationship-building process: A diverse set of practices form the cornerstone for both internal mobilization as well as aspired transformation of relationships with the state and other external actors. This will be made explicit in the following section by revealing practices, such as self-enumerations of settlements, organizing through saving groups, setting precedents through projects and learning through horizontal exchanges.⁵

Self-enumerations or participatory enumerations are a tool to mobilise communities on the ground and for capacity development and empowerment as they equip communities with a strong negotiation tool through own and often more detailed knowledge and data about informal settlements in a city. This can take different forms, from detailed household surveys to city-wide informal settlement profiling. The enumeration practice is meant to scale up to a joint initiative between grassroots and local governments bringing together different data sets. For example, joint city-wide enumerations lead to improved databases and allow for easier access to funding both for the city government and for the communities (UN-Habitat, 2009; UN-Habitat/GLTN, 2010).

Another important component of organising the urban poor is based on the establishment of saving groups often referred to as “collecting people by collecting money”. Saving groups are the only registered organisational form within the federations and consist of a number of households, which save on a regular basis both in terms of needs and towards a common national member urban poor fund. These national urban poor funds receive further capital through an “Urban Poor Fund International“ (UPFI), which was established in 2007 with the support of various international agencies and donors. It is governed by SDI and used as a facility that channels financial resources through the national urban poor funds of the federations to local saving schemes to support their upgrading initiatives. The federations thereby gain direct control of finances and projects and moreover, the UPFI capital aims at enabling the federations to negotiate and leverage further resources from the state and other actors (Tandon et al., 2010).

This mobilization tool is meant to scale up in terms of being used as a leverage tool that should be combined with external sources. Here City Development Funds are new city-wide initiatives to pool financial resources with local government. These funds are considered a

⁵ In addition to the official relationship-building process, rather informal relationships play also an important role, especially personal relationships among strong local leaders spearheading translocal activities or key persons from the supporting NGOs representing the national alliances at international events. The authors are aware of the relevance of these personal networks, but focus in the following on the collective and more visible part of the networking process.

source for power in two ways: they enable access to more finance and, more importantly, people have a stake in the finance through their savings contribution.⁶

Horizontal exchange between saving groups within one country but also across-borders (translocal) is one of the most powerful tools applied by the transnational networks of urban poor. The identification of particular federation groups or communities as city-wide learning centres, the organisation of regional hubs and international forums, workshops and exchanges (on shared practices such as profiling, enumeration, saving and leadership) and visits by prominent federation leaders to mobilize all contribute to horizontal relationship-building between the grassroots in various places. Internally, exchanges among federations serve as an eye-opener and support the federations in the belief that change is possible. With regards to the aforementioned trajectory towards scaling-up initiatives to other stakeholders as well, exchanges also include local government officials in order to build relationships between the grassroots and local governments. Exchanges, which include external actors, are just as well represented on all levels (city-to-city, province-to-province and nation-to-nation). Spending hours together in an airplane or sharing experiences within a different culture are powerful means for opening up dialog on the local level. Also, meeting peers (minister or local government officials from one country meeting their peer counterparts in another country) is part and parcel of the horizontal learning strategy. This approach of decontextualizing in order to re-contextualize is furthermore applied on the international stage. For international conferences or events, for example, local officials, mayors or ministers are invited to join by the transnational networks. Apart from the impact of shared experiences through the methods described above, relationship-building between ‘pragmatic’ movements within the housing field and the state is often achieved by setting precedence through projects rather than through direct advocacy. Projects are used to change standards often in relation to plot size (such as in Zambia), layout (i.e., re-blocking, such as in South Africa) and set-backs (like in the Philippines). Projects can also address the lack of implementation of existing policy: For instance, the re-blocking projects, which have been implemented in South Africa, are showing possible avenues to implement the government’s informal settlements upgrading strategy.

Exchanges, showcasing of model houses and the production of maps teach communities how to get involved and to intervene in political affairs, a collaborative way of engaging with the state (McFarlane, 2011: 62ff.) This decentralizing of decision-making and building of organisational capital is coined as ‘deep democracy’ (Appadurai, 2001).

⁶ Soomsook during workshop „Housing for the Urban Poor“ at TU Berlin, 31. May 2013

In several cases this collaborative approach has led to bilateral relationships such as formal MoU-based partnerships between the transnational networks and the state – either on national level, such as the MoU between SDI South Africa and the National Department of Human Settlements in South Africa, or on local government level, such as between the city-wide network of urban poor in Iloilo City in the Philippines (ICUPN) and the local government in Iloilo City (Philippines) on conducting joint enumerations and joint upgrading approaches.

There are also multilateral relationships between the ‘pragmatic’ movements and external actors, which take shape in roundtable discussions or through invited board memberships. For example, SDI has become part of various international bodies such as the Slum Task Force of the MDGs, the advisory board of UN-Habitat’s Slum Upgrading Facility (SUF), Cities Alliance’s Governing Body and UN-Habitat’s Advisory Group Against Forced Evictions (Huchzermeyer, 2011). Even though still in its infancy, multilateral relationships have also been initiated by the ‘pragmatic’ movements themselves, such as in the case of inviting housing ministers and international experts to become board members of the Urban Poor Fund International (UPFI).

In all three case studies there is an indication that state actors are more willing to interact when they see the strong support for the networks being made by international donors. SDI for instance has brought about a range of donors such as Homeless International, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Misereor, Cordaid and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) (Ginzel, 2012: 182). The reliance on northern and international donors for transnational activism is especially crucial within the Southeast Asian perspective (Ford, 2013).

All these practices (self-enumerations of settlements, organizing through saving groups, setting precedents through projects, learning through horizontal exchanges and partnerships with the state) seek to transform relationships between the grassroots and external actors, aiming at a systematic transformation of the housing process (project and policy) on a city-wide and on a national level.

From target group to negotiation party

‘Pragmatic’ movements regard themselves as apolitical in nature. In reality, they are by all means political as they relate to the sphere of government and to housing, which is a strong political issue in the respective countries. Their practices are considered to result in a transformed housing process with two aims: (1) an internal effect in terms of strengthening

autonomy of federations and learning for political organisation within the network; and (2) an external effect in terms of demonstrating capacities, legitimacy and resourcefulness of the grassroots level as a negotiation basis for the state and other stakeholders on different levels in the housing process. Both bilateral and multilateral relationships between the ‘pragmatic’ movements and the state open up for new spaces of governance, in which roles are often shifted or where negotiations take place on an international stage in order to impact on a local scale.

The hypothesis is therefore that a new system of transforming power positions and assertiveness of urban poor is emerging. But how does this new system of transforming power positions and assertiveness of urban poor look like?

In general there is evidence for an impact on three levels:

- i) Local level: Transnational networks of grassroots, together with their allies (NGOs) and development organizations, provide leverage and act as a catalyst on the local-level political dialogue on land, finance, shelter and infrastructure. Grassroots can exert pressure on local governments through their strong legitimacy base illustrated by the capacity of mobilizing large numbers of people and their membership in a broader transnational movement. In the process of local dialogue they are shifting policies from demolition to upgrading and from illegal to more secure tenure. Here, it is project-based interventions and the introduction of new instruments which have an effect locally, but also in some cases ‘trickle-up’ and provide evidence for policy adaptations or are replicated at other places in the network. Projects are used strategically for showcasing and setting precedence. For instance projects are used to change national standards often in relation to plot size and layout (such as in South Africa) and set-backs (like in the Philippines). In terms of new instruments, the aspect of city-wide approaches needs to be highlighted, which is prominent throughout all three case studies. City-wide approaches entail new instruments, such as participatory enumerations or joint finance facilities. The latter is a result of the lack of a consistent financing model and ‘inflexible’ financing by international donors. It has led to resource pooling of several international donors, local governments, as well as saving schemes. City Development Funds seem to be transferred to different regions thereby indicating that new instruments are fostered through international networks. In Thailand, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration is contributing to a common fund in some districts, but having difficulties in its

implementation and up-scaling on a city-wide level. In the Philippines, the City Development Fund is being established and further developed through the ACCA programme. In South Africa, the Community Upgrading Finance Facility (CUFF) is seen as a first step to initialize a City Development Fund.

Board membership and roundtables further create new governance spaces on the local level throughout the housing process. Influence on the local level is also exerted through commitments by MoUs signed by local governments with the respective local federation, as well as by inviting local officials and politicians along to exchanges and meetings abroad to learn about the federation practice as well as to see how other officials and politicians work together with pragmatic movements.

- ii) National level: Backed by their international partners, national federations can gain access to policy-making circles on housing issues. Sometimes this materializes in the form of officially signed MoUs. More often, decision-makers are invited on exchange visits to other federations abroad, where they are also linked up with peers (such as ministers) to feel encouraged to cooperate more readily with the federation activities. To what extent this influence materializes in programs and funds is largely determined by the national political environment. Even though the UPFI Report (Tandon et al., 2010) states that little impact has been obtained on the national policy level in the surveyed countries, new forms of land leasing, as well as a greater acceptance of new approaches within the housing process, can be detected. Thus, on the national policy level, transnational networks influence the discussion on upgrading and housing. In the Philippines, it is relatively new that the Alliance is concerned with housing, while all other civil society actors involved in the housing process have been using similar methods for the last 20 years. In Thailand, NULICO has lost its impact on the national level (after elections) and has little influence on the housing process (advocacy through events based on proximity, e.g., demonstrations). In South Africa, the methods and impact leading to a transformed housing process (in terms of signed MoUs and local partnerships to engage in upgrading projects) seem to be stronger, partly due to transnational networks.
- iii) International level: Through international exchanges, internationally-shared mechanisms and internationally-applied tools of mobilization (savings,

enumerations, etc.), a sense of international solidarity among the urban poor is being created that can hardly be overlooked by international organizations such as the World Bank, UN Habitat and key regional players. In addition, the self-representation of international grassroots organizations through their charismatic leaders and representatives injects new ideas into international academic and policy circles.

Influence on policy-making has been identified through two ways: 1) impact on a national policy level, limited to changing (building) standards through projects used to setting precedence; and 2) a transformed power position towards local governments on a city-wide level obtained through new ways of resource pooling and by manifesting the capacities and numbers of the urban poor through the transnational scope of networking. Therefore the transforming power position and assertiveness might be better captured by the following proposition: “From target group to negotiating party”⁷. The transformed power positions need to be seen in the emergence of a new culture of negotiation in the housing field with internationally-networked grassroots at the table, backed up by global allies and a local power base.

Conclusions

This paper revealed and differentiated the political impact of seemingly apolitical ‘pragmatic’ social movements, such as transnational networks of urban poor, e.g., SDI and its “sister” model in Thailand and Asia-wide. However, the extent to which this impact materializes is highly dependent on the political, social and cultural environment of a particular country. The changing and often fragile political environments within the three case studies call for hybrid modes of negotiation in a highly dynamic setting, ranging from local to global.

Transnational social movements within the housing field constantly modify their strategies in order to generate new spaces of governance and to raise their impact on different levels (projects and policies). An example is the shift from membership-based federations to settlement-wide upgrading approaches, in order to generate a more effective interface with the state, as was the case in South Africa. In addition, the development of the international networks presented in this article initially focused on the construction of issue-based

⁷ Title of presentation by Somsook Boonyabanha, Secretary-General of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), Bangkok, Development Policy, Dialogue at the Asia-Pacific Weeks Berlin 2013: Cities in Transformation –Pioneers for Sustainable Development, June 10th, 2013.

transnational networks in contrast to place-based community-driven approaches. However, at a certain stage of maturity (of the federations), the national alliances in all three case studies tend to a) add a place-based aspect to their transnational activities through city-wide projects and programs that are broken down into communities; and b) to extend beyond the classical issues of housing (sanitation, infrastructure, shelter, etc.) into other fields (such as income generation, health, etc.).

Further, our case studies question the generalizing and simplifying notion of a coherent network of one coherent group of ‘the urban poor’. Instead, they provide evidence that there is connectivity between people, events and institutions that transmit a common idea and identity from one region to another, thus forming a sphere with blurred boundaries and numerous internal and external liaisons to other groups and actors including universities, state institutions, etc. Relationship-building with external actors and impacts on policy-making occur in formal and informal ways. First, formally, through legislation, signed MoUs and, in some countries, through the allocation of financial and other resources (i.e., creation of new state institutions and joint enumerations). And second, informally and rather difficult to trace, a gradual shift in housing policies on the national level is assumable due to both pressure on improving living conditions and poverty alleviation from various social movements from below as well as from global agencies and capital investors to produce ‘slum-free’ cities. The overriding factors broadening the power and resource base of the urban poor on national and local levels seem to be ‘numbers’ and ‘contact’ – *numbers* in terms of the sheer number of people federating on a national and international level and *contact* through participation in international discourse, platforms creating international recognition by global key players such as World Bank, international foundations, bilateral cooperation agencies, etc.

Currently the described networks and activities are in constant flux and undergo rapid changes. It can be expected that regional diversification will continue, at the same time transnational alliances and contacts with key players will become even more important in the future for accessing funds. While this trend may lead to increased tensions within and between networks and other actors, it is also clear that without a direct inclusion of the urban poor into housing processes and the programming of urban development, city and national governments will fall short of resolving the most pressing development needs in the future. This will change the role of urban poor communities from participation towards co-operation with other stakeholders in shaping future cities. Transnational social movements already are and will continue to be some of the major catalysts of this new and challenging role.

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