

An outcry against informality. The impact of land on the treatment of precarious settlements, as spaces of political competition: Cambodia, Lebanon, Syria

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Introduction

Forty years on from the first international recommendations at the Habitat I Conference (Vancouver, 1976) and the creation in 1978 of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (now the UN-Habitat Programme), precarious^[1] settlements are today home to nearly one billion people across the world, while the number of inhabitants living in precarious housing conditions is still on the rise (UN-Habitat, 2014).

In dealing with precarious settlements, urban policies have hardly ever followed the recommendations of international institutions. The latter advocate the legalization and improvement of living conditions in such precarious spaces, together with affordable housing provision for low-income households (initially, sites-and-services schemes). Yet, depending on the country and the period, policies have espoused multiple approaches that are sometimes very far from these recommendations. As the case may be, policies favor – or combine – repression or preventive measures, the demolition or rehabilitation of settlements, the upgrading of existing buildings or their replacement under renewal schemes, the eviction of populations or their rehousing, keeping the inhabitants on site or relocating them, legalization of tenure or provision of basic services and infrastructure (Durand-Lasserve *et al.*, 1996). But two main trends repeatedly oppose each other: keeping the residents on site or relocating them.

Why are these policies so diverse and occasionally so far-removed from international recommendations? How and on what criteria are national or local policies formulated? The choices made depend on the actors, the countries and the times, and particularly on the way

[1] The adjectives “precarious” and “informal” used synonymously here are but two of the terms used to describe these settlements, also referred to as “irregular,” “under-integrated,” “illegal,” and, depending on the cities, *bidon-villes*, slums, *achwajyyat*, *moukhalafat*... The difficulty in naming and characterizing these settlements reflects the fact that their definitions, even their existence, depend above all on the representations and the laws and policies that designate and describe them.

in which these settlements are conceptualized by those intent on tackling them (Clerc, 2002). The question of land plays a core role in shaping these policies. The fate reserved for precarious settlements by the national and local public policies is largely contingent on how the actors of these policies perceive land. The different views and approaches to land – as property, place, territory, value, location, space of social anchorage, of rights, norms, economic development, or collective use – set the urban actors at odds in conflicts of strategy or ideal visions, with the result that land has become embedded in these policies as a multidimensional criterion.

Drawing on a comparative analysis of the recent history of urban policy in Beirut (Lebanon), Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Damascus (Syria),^[2] this chapter proposes to explore the role played by the different representations of land and shows how the co-presence and competition between these different conceptions shape public action on precarious settlements.

1. Contradictions and competition in urban policies

Over the last twenty-five years, Lebanon, Cambodia and Syria have seen major shifts in their policies to address precarious settlements, chiefly due to their experience of political and economic liberalization.

1.1. Political and economic openness and the revival of urban policies

In all three countries, the political changes and post-war recovery marking the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s fostered a political and economic opening-up, a return of international institutions and a massive upsurge in private and mainly international investment in a context of liberalization. In Lebanon, the end of the civil war (1975–1989) ushered in a period reconstruction and the return of international investment within a liberalized setting. In Cambodia, the years of transition (1989–1993) saw the end of the war and the Vietnamese occupation (which succeeded the Khmer Rouge regime, 1975–1979), the return of refugees, the return of international organizations, a peacekeeping operation (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia – UNTAC, 1992–1993), the organization of elections supervised by the United Nations, a restored monarchy and the transition from a socialist to a market economy propelled by liberalization, the inflow of investment, and the reinstatement of private property rights. In Syria, until the outbreak of conflict in 2011, the process of opening-up, economic reform, and liberalization of the socialist economy had been more progressive. Law No. 10 of 1991 on the promotion of private investment had accelerated the pace of the liberalization tentatively begun in 1986. This was followed by the political and economic opening heralded by Bashar al-Assad’s accession to power in 2000, and the subsequent 2005 Five-Year Plan that endorsed the “social market economy” to attract international investors.

[2] This chapter is based on field research, an analysis of policy, laws, programs, and projects, as well as on numerous interviews with political urban actors involved in tackling informal settlements. The research was conducted over several years in Lebanon (1997–2001 and 2012–2013), Cambodia (2001–2005 and 2014), and Syria (2007–2012).

In all three countries, management of these informal settlements was also renewed or re-launched in the early 1990s. Firstly, because their situations had changed: in Beirut, irregular settlements had expanded and new ones had sprung up during the war; precarious settlements had re-appeared with the reinstatement of land ownership and the return of displaced persons and refugees to Phnom Penh; and informal areas, dubbed collective infraction areas (*mukhalafat*), had exploded in Damascus, mainly due to inadequate planning laws and rural-urban migration. Secondly, because, in the wake of these political upheavals, urban planners began to tackle the issue head on. The new scale of informal urbanization and the absence of effective local benchmarks had left them powerless – a situation rendered even more difficult by the inefficiency of extant regulatory tools (Damascus), by the existence of spatial exceptions (the Lebanese informal settlements were almost all located in the southern outskirts of Beirut), and by the almost total absence of urban planning professionals (Cambodia). As a result, these actors, often supported by international aid agencies, planned or tested various solutions.

In the three countries, two main options were at odds: (i) rehabilitation (upgrade the settlement while preserving existing buildings), and (ii) renewal (demolish the settlement and rebuild). These two options were envisaged or carried out within a framework of political negotiations (Beirut), through a series of contradictory policies (Phnom Penh), or via concurrent and competing policies (Damascus).

1.2. Beirut and political negotiations on settling populations in urban projects

In the Lebanon, the chief outcome of the policy to tackle irregular settlements was the launch of the Elyssar project. This targeted redevelopment of the southwestern suburbs of Beirut and involved both physical and political reconstruction. The irregular settlements that had developed on squatted land in Beirut's southern suburbs during the civil war had become a stronghold within the city for the militias and political parties of the Shi'ite Hezbollah and Amal. Any intervention in these settlements in the immediate post-war years thus implied reaching an agreement between these two political groups and the Government of Rafik Hariri (who had been wartime adversaries) on the future of these territories; Hariri was keen to gain a foothold there via urban planning, but the Shi'ite parties wished to maintain their political control. The World Bank was ready to provide financing, but the process proposed failed to take on board the political aspect of the project negotiations, which had begun immediately after the end of the war in 1992.

A hotly debated issue central to the negotiations was whether or not to displace the inhabitants. The Shi'ite parties were ready to agree to rehabilitation, but ruled out any project that implied the residents' departure (rehousing them outside the area or paying them compensation, which might have encouraged them to leave the area), as the then Government was proposing. On the other hand, the Government refused any form of regularization, which would have entrenched the situation even further, seeking instead to move the inhabitants out. In 1995, the agreement led to a reconstruction project of unparalleled size. This provided for a reconfiguration of the

identified perimeter, the demolition of all irregular settlements (home to some 80,000 people), the development of 6.7 million square meters, rehousing the inhabitants within the perimeter of the project and a public planning agency to implement the whole. The compromise allowed all of the Lebanese families to be rehoused on site, but at the same time the area was to be intersected by highways (Deboulet *et al.*, 2011), and the inhabitants of those districts deemed by the Government to be out of control were to be resettled in apartments, enabling them to be more easily identified and managed. Moreover, the rehousing of the inhabitants further inland but still within the project perimeter freed up the seafront, a premium value area for real-estate speculation (Clerc, 2012).

The project was only executed at the margin and by special derogation (for highway infrastructure), with the result that the irregular settlements are still there today. Much like the Waad project to reconstruct Beirut's southeastern suburbs after the 2006 war, the crux of the project's political negotiation, alongside the financial stakes of real estate, was the question of population: keeping the population on site (the goal of the Shi'ite parties) as opposed to introducing a greater social and religious diversity (the goal of the then Government).

1.3. *Phnom Penh and the political contradictions of land allocation*

In Cambodia, the history of precarious settlements is tied to the country's history of land. The Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) had abolished private property and completely emptied the cities of their inhabitants. During the ensuing socialist years under Vietnamese occupation (1979–1989), land became state property and the population gradually returned to the cities, where residence permits were delivered. From 1989, private property was reinstated little by little, and all residents could apply for an ownership title for the house and/or field they occupied. Some 4.5 million application receipts were delivered, indicating that the majority of Cambodian households were on the way to becoming landowners or house owners. Until 2001, it was still possible to convert temporary ownership into legitimate ownership if the land had been occupied “peacefully, honestly, publicly without ambiguity” for five years (Land Law of 1992). Many people thus continued to settle on vacant land. But much of this land could not be privately owned, notably the State's private lands and the public domain (roadsides, railway tracks, lakes or rivers), where occupants with neither right nor title had set up informal settlements. In the early 2000s in Phnom Penh, nearly 300,000 people (including tenants) lived in such settlements, representing around one quarter of the Cambodian capital's inhabitants.

During the 2000s, Phnom Penh Municipality's interventions in these settlements were highly contrasted. After the evictions from 1989 to 1996, small rehabilitation pilot projects were implemented as of 1996, partnered by UN-Habitat (Urban Poverty Reduction Projects), along with relocation projects starting in 1998. Finally, in 2003, Prime Minister Hun Sen officially announced the regularization and rehabilitation of all informal settlements within five years. In parallel, given the move towards a market economy and the rise in land prices, occupied and increasingly prized public lands were allocated to investors for development. Initially, four

land-sharing^[3] projects were planned for the city center, but only one of these was implemented. For the other three, the developers negotiated the terms of displacement directly with the resident community, and land allocation with the public authorities. In total, 1,700 families were rehoused onsite and 17,000 relocated to 36 sites within 50 kilometers from the capital, mostly in flood-prone and unserved areas. This was carried out over two stretches of time, 1990–1992 and 1998–2011 (Blot, 2013).

Faced with this land competition between residents wishing to stay in their settlements and investors keen on realizing large real-estate projects, the policy pursued by government authorities in the 2000s was somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the authorities backed precarious settlement dwellers (regularization announced in 2003, continuation of upgrading projects with UN-Habitat). On the other hand, they encouraged their eviction by not regularizing their occupancy under the country's land registration system (funded since 2002 by the World Bank) and by allotting the lands they occupied to real-estate investors in view of large urban development projects (Clerc *et al.*, 2008). Despite their resistance, the residents finally had to leave the settlements and were relocated to distant sites after what were sometimes violent evictions. The authorities have thus encouraged real-estate investors to take over precariously occupied land to the detriment of the inhabitants (Clerc, 2016).

1.4. Damascus and competing policies for urban improvements

In Syria, urban renewal policies and informal settlement upgrading projects appeared concurrently in the 1980s in Alep and then in Damascus from the 1990s. In the capital, these settlements, known as areas of collective infraction (*mukhalafats*), were home to 40% of the city's four million inhabitants in 2004. On the one hand, local detailed urban plans provided for the construction of modern neighborhoods on the sites of these settlements (but very few were realized, as from 1975 to 2008 no hard-wall informal dwelling could be demolished without financial compensation or rehousing). On the other hand, a rehabilitation scheme providing basic services and infrastructure (water, sanitation, electricity, surfaced roads, services, etc.) for the city's informal settlements had been launched following a pilot project funded in 1994 under a United Nations program (UMP, 2001).

This two-pronged policy of renewal and rehabilitation was pursued somewhat differently in the 2000s. All the legislation relating to urban planning and investment crafted in the 1960s and the 1980s was revised in order to modernize and liberalize the economy. For informal settlements, some laws organized regularization while others targeted urban renewal. Moreover, some dozen programs and policies for urbanism and planning were formulated in Damascus by ministries, prefectures and municipalities, at national level and for the agglomeration, often with help from international cooperation agencies (World Bank, Cities Alliance, German, French,

[3] A land-sharing project divides the land into two lots: one earmarked for rehousing the inhabitants on site, built and funded by an investor, who in exchange is authorized to build on the second lot for profit with advantages (low-cost land, higher operating ratio).

Japanese, European cooperation, among others). Here too, some promoted rehabilitation and regularization (under the National Policy for Upgrading and Rehabilitation of Informal Settlements, prepared by the Ministry of Local Administration, or the program developed by Cities Alliance and the Governorate of Rif Damascus in the outer suburbs, for example), while others provided for urban renewal (among which a series of detailed studies for the renewal of 17 inner city zones led by the Governorate, and the Study for the sustainable development of the Damascene capital conducted by the Japanese cooperation [JICA – Japan International Cooperation Agency] for the governorates and the ministry).

The programs running until 2011 revealed a clash between the views and objectives for these settlements and the future reserved for them: the illegal and undesirable settlements to be eradicated, as opposed to consolidated even well-functioning ones due to be upgraded and regularized. A competition thus emerged between the institutions likely to launch urban programs and within single administrations as to what tools and projects should be put in place (Clerc, 2014b). The stance adopted partly depended on the ministry responsible for policy and on whether there was supporting international aid. This meant that the decision-makers at the Ministry of Local Administration, who were engaged in multiple cooperation programs, were more firmly in favor of rehabilitation, whereas others from the Ministry of Housing and Construction were more inclined towards urban renewal. This competition between the various options also arose within a single institution operating with technical and political actors, as in the case of the Governorate of Damascus for the drafting of the master plan. Yet, there was an (often tacit) consensus that these settlements should receive differentiated treatment: those furthest from the city center could be kept, whereas the more central ones located on prime value land could be destroyed to make way for real-estate projects. Competition was thus mainly focused on the pericentral settlements, and on how many and which ones were to be demolished or kept – these being eminently political choices.

2. The prickly issue of land is core to policymaking

Whether these urban policies are negotiated as in Beirut, or contain fundamental contradictions as in Phnom Penh, or compete with one another as in Damascus, this analysis first of all reveals that they cluster around the same two poles, the same two categories – rehabilitation and renewal. Next, it shows that the types of policy defended are tied to the actors' multiple spatial and social representations concerning land. Lastly, it reveals how these representations influence decision-making processes at local and national level.

2.1. *Two conflicting options: displacement or rehousing on site*

Of the two broad categories of urban projects and policies proposed or launched in these three cities – namely (i) rehabilitation, which preserves the buildings, provides the settlement with basic services and infrastructure, and (more rarely) regularizes land tenure, and (ii) urban

renewal, which demolishes buildings and reconstructs a new project –, the first category often seeks to keep the inhabitants on site, even if in reality this may ultimately lead to gentrification, whereas the second category seldom rehuses the inhabitants on site and most often displaces them. In this case, the evictions are carried out without financial compensation, or with a level of compensation that may or may not correspond to the price of the occupied land or dwelling. Among the evicted inhabitants, some are relocated or rehoused elsewhere either free of charge or at a modest price, and sometimes onsite rehousing is announced, but not delivered...

The first category, which dovetails with United Nations recommendations, corresponds to programs and projects in the three case studies that were either not implemented or only partially, or on a small scale, or hampered by later projects: in Beirut, onsite rehousing was not delivered by the Elyssar project; in Phnom Penh, the uncompleted land-sharing project for 1,700 families and the rehabilitation of small settlements hosting around 6,000 families from 1996 to 2001, with some of the settlements being later demolished; in Damascus, service and infrastructure provision for fourteen settlements, most of which were nonetheless due for demolition in the long run to make way for urban planning schemes, or were integrated into urban renewal projects; at the same time, in Damascus, projects and a national policy for rehabilitation stopped in 2011. The upgrading programs (or their pilot projects) are often funded at least in part by international cooperation.

The second category corresponds to the more numerous achievements and/or major programs in the cities studied: eviction with compensation for inhabitants living within the Elyssar project perimeter on land required for infrastructure construction; numerous evictions and 17,000 families moved to rehousing sites over the years 1990–1992 and 1998–2011 in Phnom Penh. In Damascus, the Governorate’s internal discussions on the execution of the master plan were still ongoing in 2011, and no large-scale implementation had been launched. But at the national level, investors were already being allotted land (by tender) on which informal settlements were located. In Aleppo, the State had compelled the municipality to free up municipal land hosting an informal settlement that was already being upgraded by a project with the German cooperation agency. These programs are generally funded by the national authorities and/or the private sector.

2.2. *The key role of spatial representations*

The primacy of the second category – although experts and international institutions advocate the first category – is problematic. The choices made rarely stem from a consensus or a consistent rational process, but hang rather on negotiations and power relations within systems of urban-planning actors who have different objectives, ideals, and interests. The choices made largely depend on the actors’ representations of such settlements and the strategies they formulate to deal with them. Each actor has a specific stance on each project – i.e. a “topical” profile that integrates a system of representations based on a given situation and a place, in the broad sense, that is both real and projected (Clerc, 2002) – and this may change.

The options defended by each actor depend on what image of the city they wish to promote, given that urban planning, since its beginnings, has attempted to respond to social questions with spatial solutions. These responses depend on the actors' ideal projections of future improvements, whether grounded in urban planning theories or otherwise: improvements in living conditions and urban morphology, development of existing spatial and social assets (participation, urban social fabric, inhabitants' know-how). They also depend on territorial, political, and economic strategies: who will reap the profits from land? Who will have political control over these spaces? Will the right to property ownership take precedence over access to the city? Finally, they depend on the judgments and justifications that the actors mobilize around these spaces, according to different value systems (Boltanski *et al.*, 1991), as shown by the different designations given to such settlements and which generally have negative connotations (informal, irregular, illegal, sub-integrated, anarchic, areas of infraction).

The spatial dimension, and particularly that of land, is core to the processes for designing these projects and policies. In the three cities studied, although informal settlements are defined by their non-compliance with the law, rules, and norms, the decisions concerning them are dictated by a settlement's location, its surface area and built environment, type of tenure, property rights, owners, social space, land rights, territorial situation, property values, etc. What is particularly interesting in the way these dimensions are perceived is the currently deepening and even exacerbated opposition between the two traditional functions of land and housing: (i) the patrimonial dimension of investment, taken to its extreme by the financialization of real estate (Halbert *et al.*, 2010), and (ii) the social dimension of housing conditions brandished in urban struggles and demands for the right to housing and to the city (Berry-Chikhaoui *et al.*, 2007; Harvey, 2011).

These representations of the space and land occupied by informal settlements can be matched with one or more types of public intervention.

Table 1. Policy types according to the perception of informal settlements
(simultaneous representations are frequent)

Informal settlements can be perceived as:	If this is the dominant representation, it mobilizes the following options:	If this is not the dominant representation, the following options are possible:
Land with present or future value (value impaired by occupation)	Eviction and urban renewal, with displacement, rehousing or compensation (below value)	Regularization and rehabilitation
Legally owned land (illegal squatting)	Eviction Rehousing elsewhere	Regularization
Political territories...	...allies: stay on site ...opponents: displacement, rehousing	Rehabilitation Urban renewal
Poor spatial organization or non-urban	Demolition and reconstruction	Rehabilitation
Buildings constructed without permit, non-standard	Demolition and reconstruction, with displacement or rehousing on site	Regularization Improvement
Spaces with no sanitation or infrastructure	Services and infrastructure provision, rehabilitation, reconstruction	Laissez-faire
Spaces for settlement and housing (right to the city)	Regularization Rehousing on site, Laissez-faire	Eviction Rehousing elsewhere
Spaces hosting a social and economic fabric	Regularization and rehabilitation	Displacement or rehousing elsewhere, demolition of existing buildings
Urban (vs. village-like) spaces or quality spaces (dwellers' know-how)	Regularization and rehabilitation	Demolition and displacement Rehousing on site
Evolving and adaptable spaces	Regularization and rehabilitation	Urban renewal
Potentially sustainable spaces	Regularization and rehabilitation	Urban renewal
Spaces integrated into the city (vs. marginal)	Regularization and rehabilitation	Urban renewal

2.3. The tangled nexus of land

The predominant representations give rise to operations implying the displacement of the inhabitants. Four of these are directly linked to land, insofar as this is a space that can be appropriated for an individual or group against or to the detriment of another individual or group: i.e. its financial value, property rights, its territoriality, and its use.

The first main representation in favor of displacing the inhabitants conveys the idea that the land is not used at its “fair” value, the occupied land has an intrinsic (financial) value (the value it would have were it not occupied), and is worth more than the value of the housing built there. Settled land, overtaken by urbanization and today often well-situated, would thus bring in lucrative profits. In Beirut, these areas of land border one of the city’s two sole sandy beaches,

close to the golf course and fashionable neighborhoods. In Phnom Penh, the largest settlements are situated on public land in the city center, near the Royal Palace and Casino. The *mukhalafats* in Damascus abound in pericentral or even central districts. These spaces have almost all been subject to urban planning schemes or urban renewal projects. Due to vested interests or by conviction, the authorities often buy into the arguments of investors, who are present in growing numbers given the globalization of investment and the financialization of real estate. They argue that these poor settlements built on prime value land (without ever imagining that the inhabitants could also benefit from the real-estate gains) cannot be left in their present state, and upgrading the city inevitably calls for the displacement of their inhabitants.

The second ubiquitous representation in favor of displacing the inhabitants: the strong attachment to property rights and the unacceptability of these settlements' illegal status (especially squatting, as regularizing this is often seen as condoning unequal citizen rights). This recurrent representation has ruled out any rehabilitation project in Beirut, although property rights were not challenged during the civil war, or by those who recognized a degree of legitimacy for settlement dwellers (refugees, the right to war reparations, the State's failings). The strength of this representation sometimes means that various detours have to be employed to enable onsite rehousing (expropriation then resale to the inhabitants, or the owners' direct buyback from the dwellers or vice versa). In Syria, rehabilitation schemes have been carried out without land regularization, and the Monitoring Committee for the Damascus Governorate's Master Plan announced that it could "agree to a 100-year long program on condition that all these *non-compliant* neighborhoods disappear in the long run." In Cambodia, the informal occupation of mainly public land was at odds with the reconstruction of land rights and the consolidation of the public domain.

The third representation, which may act as a strong driver of action: the settlement's population, its vote, and/or political control turn these places into territorial entities. If a settlement is seen as a possible haven for those who oppose the ruling power, it becomes a space to be (re)conquered through urban policies (renewal is a powerful weapon to that end, as it alters the composition of the population). On the other side, it is seen as a territory to be preserved for one's allies (through rehabilitation, or onsite rehousing). In Beirut, these spaces are viewed as a territory under Shi'ite control, which partly explains the decision not to rehabilitate them (the Government was reluctant to endorse the existence of an enemy territory situated at the doors of the capital and near to the international airport). In Damascus, even today, the informal settlements sheltering the regime's allies are preserved, whereas opponents' neighborhoods have mostly been destroyed by bombing or bulldozers, as happened under an urban redevelopment project crafted before the war and adopted during the conflict (Decree No. 66 of 2012) (Clerc, 2014a).

Finally, again counter to the idea of preserving existing buildings comes the very widespread esthetic-technical notion that the urban space must be planned, ordered, orthogonal or regular, if only to facilitate the passage of infrastructure and fire trucks (Clerc, 2012). An extreme example of this was when the top echelon of the Syrian Ministry of Environment

contemplated eliminating all these settlements and replacing them with farming land. Similarly, public authorities are always highly reticent to the idea of regularizing or upgrading buildings that do not comply with building standards, for reasons of safety and accountability (this is particularly the case for the clearly identified seismic hazard in Damascus).

These representations of land are particularly active and influential, as they relate to strategic rationales to either preserve or conquer space, both locally and nationally: the defense of the State as the source of law and standards, the deployment of sometimes hefty financial interests, conflict-ridden territorial management. These representations feed such rationales and are in turn fed by them.

Other representations push in the opposite direction, towards regularization and rehabilitation. To begin with, a degree of pragmatism is sometimes apparent in order to cope with the massive scale of urbanization. In addition, regularly but more rarely, these settlements are seen by the policymakers as spaces where living conditions are adapted to income, as spaces of sociality, culture, local know-how and social customs, functional and social diversity, and economic production. They are also seen as integrated urban neighborhoods that can evolve and adapt, and are even partly adapted to climate change and potentially sustainable. Several of these representations link up with the idea of a city for all and accessible to all. They are also deeply embedded in rationales for action, but seemingly have less influence over policymaking, even though they are associated with ideal visions of the city and urban struggles for access to the city and given high visibility on the ground and in the media by some urban professionals.

Finally, building without a permit is not always an obstacle to regularization, as shown by the laws periodically enacted to regularize real estate in the Lebanon, or the adoption of a law allowing building permits to be filed after the fact in Syria in 2004. And consensus on the lack of infrastructure and services is a recurring argument not only for urban renewal, but also for immediate, even temporary upgrading, as was the case in Phnom Penh for many small settlements (sometimes subsequently demolished); in Beirut, for the municipalities of the southern suburbs while awaiting project implementation; or in Damascus, in line with the idea that all citizens should have equal access to basic infrastructure. Regularization and infrastructure delivery programs are numerous – a sign that representations of this issue are converging.

Conclusion: precarious settlements are key in the race to acquire land

In the three countries studied, the rehabilitation–regularization approach advocated by the international cooperation agencies has not become totally mainstreamed, despite their funding of several projects and a strong presence on the ground: UN-Habitat even had offices and staff inside Phnom Penh Municipality in the late 1990s, while in Damascus planners worked in partnership with international experts during the 2000s, notably in the Ministry of Local Administration. Rehabilitation was nonetheless encouraged, in the main by actors who had close ties to the cooperation agencies or had been trained abroad or locally, and who brought

what influence they could play to help change mentalities. Moreover, the possibility of marshaling international financing for urban upgrading prompted the setting up of projects attuned to donor recommendations.

Rehabilitation operations were planned for spaces that presented comparatively few issues, using a strategy of one small step at a time. Rehabilitation and delivery of services and infrastructure for settlements were undertaken with no provision for a secure final status or regularization (UN-Habitat/Phnom Penh Municipality, UMP/Governorate of Damascus). Other interventions were conducted in municipalities far from the city center (Cities Alliance/Governorate of Rif Damascus), or under projects opting for a hybrid solution, as in the case of pericentral settlements in Damascus located on Mount Qasioun and overlooking the city (European cooperation project combining rehabilitation and relocation of inhabitants), or west of Road 30 (urban renewal project funded by European and French cooperation, with onsite rehousing) – none of these three projects had been completed before the outbreak of civil war.

Summing up, the representations and stakes involving the acquisition of land by some actors to the detriment of others push decisions in the direction of renewal. When the political, economic, and technical actors that influence public policymaking are opposed to handing over to the inhabitants the total value, rights, or locality of the land they occupy – or if they disagree with a land use that fails to comply with institutional standards – urban renewal projects prevail over the arguments for access to the city for all and/or for the spatial and social recognition of these settlements and their assets (dwellers' know-how, gradual development, density, adaptability, etc.).

These situations, which harbor competing representations and competing urban policies, reveal a race for land not only among actors seeking to appropriate its value, rights and a foothold in the city, but also between these and other stakeholders defending the common or public interest whereby urban space remains accessible to all.

The power of representations of *land*, which are for the most part *localized*, highlights the primacy of strategic rationales of preservation or conquest (of rights, financial interests, territories, use) both locally and nationally, and is key to understanding why international recommendations are difficult to follow. In fact, these defend a public interest that is extraterritorial and *non-localized*, along with universal objectives such as the eradication of poverty, access to water for all, fewer precarious settlement inhabitants, and the emergence of resilient, sustainable cities, as targeted since 2000 by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and since 2015 by the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Yet, cross-country differences still appear with respect to the issues and ways of appropriating land. In Lebanon, the perception that landowners are entitled to capture land and real estate rents is such that all private land is unashamedly constructible. Some owners now even seek compensation from the State when a plot of land loses its right to be built on, for an amount equal to the price of the unconstructed building. For over ten years in Phnom Penh, a strategy has been pursued to (re)conquer public spaces, squatted or not, for private interests with a view

to selling them to investors, be it public amenities such as the city courthouse sold in the 1990s, or lands in the public domain, such as Boeng Kak Lake, sold and now backfilled (Clerc, 2016). In Damascus, the civil war resulted in almost all of the urban planning programs being stopped. What reigns today is the destruction of whole neighborhoods, both formal and informal, in line with the rationale of conquering territories. The only planning project publicized during the war was an urban renewal project on the site of an informal settlement. For the rest, the upcoming challenge will be reconstruction, along with the question of the relevance, the soundness and/or the modalities of redeveloping previously informal spaces – in other words, the settlements whose legitimate existence was called into question before the war, before they were destroyed (Clerc, 2014c).

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