

Informal Cities in a Global Context: what can we learn from them?

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Figure 1: Favela Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro. © Claudio Acioly, 2007

The lecture focuses on informal land and housing development processes. It provides the audience with undisputable evidence that Informal land development – in the form of illegally and informally developed housing and human settlements - is the predominant model of urban development and urban growth in cities of the developing world. The lecture introduces the phenomenon of informality in various dimensions depicting examples from Africa, Latin America, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. The lecture illustrates that despite numerous plans and significant amount of government resources allocated to housing programmes, settlement upgrading and land regularisation

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programmes the magnitude of such informal development phenomenon persists and continues to grow in scope and scale globally. Informal land development processes typically accounts to 20-70% of urban growth in cities in the Developing world. In Central and Eastern Europe this phenomenon has acquired the character of mass illegal buildings with some exceptions like Albania where illegal and informal land occupation has been the norm of urbanisation in its major cities. Examples from Latin America also show that the population growth in informal settlements is by far outnumbering the overall population growth of the city as a whole. The evidences presented suggest a twofold conclusion: that informally supplied land has been a predominant way through which large parts of the population can access land for housing in the city, and that formal housing delivery systems do not provide affordable housing options to many in the city.

The lecture questions the appropriateness of the internationally accepted denomination of slums arguing that there are very specific typologies and mechanisms to access land resulting in different types of settlements and urban typologies. It shows however that according to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme – UN Habitat, there were already nearly 1 billion people living in slums in the world. The numbers don't stop growing and that explains the revision of the Millennium Development Goal 7-MDG 7, Target 11, that states the following: by 2020, improving substantially the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, while providing alternatives to new slums formation. It goes without saying that the reformulation of MDG7-Target 11 makes implicit the need to design preventive measures and policies that anticipate to the problem. And not only improving the situation in the existing settlements. Only then it will be possible for governments and the international community to halt or at least neutralise the speed and scope with which informality grows in the developing world and countries in transition.

The lecture illustrates that next to the typical squatters and encroachments, illegal subdivision of privately owned land has gained scale in many countries, indicating the emerge of a flourishing informal land market. What is more surprising is that examples from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Mumbai, Cairo, Lima, Tirana – just to mention a few examples – demonstrate the mechanisms and processes through which land is acquired, secured and developed regardless of existing legal and urban planning frameworks in place.

The lecture also brings light to the discussion on whether land markets are functioning for a few or whether its logic and rationale excludes a great majority of the population. The latter alternative might explain why the phenomenon of informal land development has reached the proportion and magnitude it has in cities like Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, São Paulo, Cairo, Tirana, Belgrade and Guayaquil which are illustrated throughout the presentation.

The lecture also presents some thesis. One relates to the ambiguity brought forward by scholars in the taxonomy of the phenomenon of informal city. The literature seems to be full of terms like informal or illegal settlements, spontaneous or unplanned settlements, unauthorised or substandard informal areas, etc. and this is generating more ambiguity in policy making and less understanding about the logic of settlement formation and the underlying causes of non-compliance with the formal rules and regulations that govern urban development.