

An Introduction to Socio-spatial Consequences of Urban Poverty in Iran

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1 ABSTRACT

Urbanization is proceeding at an unprecedented scale creating many challenges, especially about how - in a sustainable way - to feed, shelter, and generate employment for the people projected to be added to the population of cities. In cities across the globe, especially in developing countries, hundreds of millions of people live in desperate poverty without access to adequate shelter, clean water, and basic sanitation.

In developing countries like Iran, overcrowding and environmental degradation make the urban poor not only vulnerable to the spread of disease, constant threat of eviction, crime and violence but also affect urban spaces and environments both socially and spatially and given the weaknesses of governance structures, the appalling environmental conditions that already exist in many cities, and existing infrastructure and service shortfalls all lead to manifestation of urban poverty and then, meeting the needs of these people appears an almost impossible task. In this process of urban growth and poverty, slum settlements emerged in most cities of developing countries. These settlements have some characteristics in common with other slum settlements across the globe as well as some unique features related to the history, culture and economy of the area. In Iran, while natural population growth has been the major contributor to urbanization, rural-urban migration continues to be another important factor leading to great increase of urban poverty and negatively affecting the social and spatial dimensions of urban life. In this paper the intention is to analyze the causes and socio-spatial consequences of urban poverty in Iran.

2 INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, the global urban population will grow from 3.3 billion people in 2008 to almost 5 billion by the year 2030 (UNFPA 2007, 1). This urban expansion is not a phenomenon of wealthy countries. Almost all of the growth will occur in unplanned and underserved city slums in parts of the world that are least able to cope with added demands. The pace of urbanization far exceeds the rate at which basic infrastructure and services can be provided, and the consequences for the urban poor have been dire. Failure to prepare for this unprecedented and inevitable urban explosion carries serious implications for global security and environmental sustainability [1]. In cities across the globe, hundreds of millions of people exist in desperate poverty without access to adequate shelter, clean water, and basic sanitation. Overcrowding and environmental degradation make the urban poor particularly vulnerable to the spread of disease. Insecurity permeates all aspects of life for slum dwellers. Without land title or tenure, they face the constant threat of eviction. Crime and violence are concentrated in city slums, disproportionately affecting the urban poor. Most slum dwellers depend upon precarious employment in the informal sector, characterized by low pay and poor working conditions. Illegal settlements are often located on hazardous land in the urban periphery. Perhaps most alienated in city slums are growing youth populations whose unmet needs for space, education, health, and jobs can lead to social problems, further undermining security in urban areas.

3 POVERTY AND URBAN LIFE

Most studies attempting to describe urban poverty have focused on drawing out the characteristics of urban poverty, often by comparing rural with urban poverty. However, there is still much debate as to whether urban poverty differs from rural poverty and whether policies to address the two should focus on different aspects of poverty. In some views, rural and urban poverty are interrelated and there is a need to consider both urban and rural poverty together for they have many structural causes in common, e.g. socially constructed constraints to opportunities and macroeconomic policies. Many point to the important connections between the two, as household livelihood or survival strategies have both rural and urban components (Satterthwaite 1995). Baker (1995) and Wratten (1995) illustrate this point in terms of rural-urban migration, seasonal labour, remittances and family support networks and Baker (1995) illustrates how urban and rural households adopt a range of diversification strategies, by having one foot in rural activities and another in urban. Conceptualizing urban poverty as a separate category from rural poverty is also problematic because of different yardsticks for defining urban in different countries. The urban-rural divide is more a continuum rather than a rigid dichotomy [2]. In urban areas, an important aspect of poverty is often

manifested as the lack of adequate housing and infrastructure. Poor people in cities may have greater cash incomes, but these may be unstable and inadequate, especially when considering the higher costs of living in cities, such as transport and housing. With a lack of formal housing options, many are forced to settle in slums and informal settlements, often on unsuitable land, or live 'invisibly' in overcrowded buildings, and far from employment opportunities. As they often do not own the land they occupy, or possess housing registrations and building permits, they lack a stable asset base, access to credit and basic services [3].

4 URBAN GROWTH AND POVERTY IN IRAN

In Asia, there are wide differences in the urbanization experience both between and within countries. This is illustrated by the differences in the extent of urbanization and projections for the future between countries. In general, there is a strong relationship between urbanization and economic development. Higher-income countries are generally more urbanized than lower-income countries, and urbanization increases more rapidly with economic growth in lower-income countries than in higher-income countries. Over the last five decades, Asia has seen some enormous demographic changes. One of the most dramatic changes of all has been the movement of people from villages to cities. The percentage of people living in Asian cities and towns, as compared to total country populations, is increasing fast. In 1950, about 232 million people lived in urban areas, which represented about 17% of Asia's total population. In 2005, Asia's urban population had risen to 1.6 billion people, or about 40% of the region's total population. There's no doubt that as the Asian region continues to develop, the level of urbanization will increase. The United Nations estimates more than half of Asia's total population will live in urban areas by the year 2025, and by 2030, it is expected that 54.5% of Asia's population will be urbanized. This means that by 2030, one out of every two urban residents in the world will be in Asia [3].

As in many other developing countries, Iran experienced an unprecedented population growth in the second half of the twentieth century. The population of Iran was reported to be about 19 million according to the 1956 census while the 1996 census recorded a figure of more than 60 million for the country's total population. Total population is now estimated to be more than 70 million persons. While the country's rural population has continually increased in the last decades, its proportion to the total population has shrunk from more than two thirds to about one third of the total population, based on recent estimates. The rapid expansion in urban population in Iran between 1980-1990 has occurred without the needed expansion in basic services and productive employment opportunities. The problem was compounded by weak urban government structures with very limited capacity to stimulate economic growth, mobilize resources and provide the most basic services (The war between Iraq-Iran caused a delay in planning and preparing a long term Master plan). Investment in urban areas does not mean to undermine rural development.

The concentration of population in the capital and to a lesser degree in other urban centers, along with tertiary sector enlargement, motivate more and more people to leave tribes, rural areas and smaller towns and cities and reside in the capital and other major urban areas. Concentration of population in itself, coupled with class polarization and informal sector's enlargement, means the availability of more and more urban parasite work. Availability of this kind of employment in its own turn leads to the attraction of more migrants into the major urban centers. As migrants arrive at cities looking for any job to get by, the increasingly acute shortages of housing, overcrowding, and inadequate social services, become a part of daily life in urban centers. At the same time land and housing speculations which are routine practices in an economy in which the tertiary sector has the upper-hand, prevent masses of urban poor especially those who are not organized and work in the informal sector, to find shelter in cities [4]. In this process of urban growth, slum and informal settlements emerged in most cities of Iran, especially in the capitals of provinces. These types of settlements represent the constant struggle of the poor to cope with inequalities that are institutionalized and reproduced within societies. In Iran, the cost of housing has always been considered to be the most important item within a family's expenditure basket. On the other hand, for a slum settler securing a shelter, no matter where and under what circumstance, means the elimination of rent and at the same time excluding better nutrition and clothing. The make-up and appearance of many informal settlements are very often misleading. There is no doubt that such settlements are poor, the majority of the population has miserable lives, and the basic needs of many families cannot be met. But the appearance of the neighborhoods, due to a number of cultural factors, habits, and living styles, may be far worse than what

it actually is. Additionally, it is important to understand the dual and contradictory nature of informal settlements in Iran.

5 UPGRADING PROJECTS FOR SLUM SETTLEMENTS

Widespread problems resulted from formation of informal and slum settlements urged many international organizations, donors, and community groups to address the increasing scourge of urban slums worldwide. In the early Twentieth Century, slum improvement programs in many countries were equivalent to slum clearance—hardly a solution to the problem of lack of adequate housing in developing country cities. Beginning in the 1970's the strategy shifted to one of improving and consolidating existing housing—often by providing slum dwellers tenure security, combined with the materials needed to upgrade their housing or—in areas where land was plentiful—to build new housing. Emphasis on in situ improvements has continued to the present. These improvements may take the form of providing infrastructure services and other forms of physical capital, but also include efforts to foster community management, and access to health care and education. At the same time, some have called for replacing slums with multiple story housing either at the site of the original slum or in an alternate location [5]. Among different kinds of projects planned to address the issues of slum settlements, one of the recent and most common projects regarding slum settlements is referred to as upgrading project. Slum upgrading, as opposed to slum redevelopment or slum clearance, is now widely acknowledged as one of the more effective means of improving the housing conditions of the poor and has been hailed as a 'linchpin' of any urban poverty strategy. It has been defined by the Cities Alliance as consisting of 'physical, social, economic, organizational and environmental improvements undertaken cooperatively and locally among citizens, community groups, businesses and local authorities [6]. Most of the core elements of a slum upgrading project involve construction of physical infrastructure: water lines, sewer lines, pumping stations, street paving, schools, clinics or hospitals. These elements require the investment of capital in or very near the slum. Improvement of the houses in the slum also requires capital. Since slums are typically densely settled areas, these capital investments produce economic benefits immediately at a per capita cost that is quite reasonable [7].

Urban Upgrading and Housing Reform Project (UUHRP) for the Islamic Republic of Iran funded by the World Bank was implemented in 2004. Iran has received financing in the amount of US\$ 80 million equivalent from the World Bank toward the cost of the Urban Upgrading and Housing Reform Project, and it intends to apply part of the proceeds to payments for goods, works, related services and consulting services to be procured under this project. The project is to be implemented in cities of Zahedan, Bandar Abbas, Kermanshah, Tabriz and Sanandaj and includes three components in which component A lays the foundations for launching and sustaining country-wide urban upgrading programs. Component B aims at enhancing housing affordability and the efficient functioning of the housing market. It will consist of foreign and local technical assistance, training and equipment for further defining and implementing the priority actions identified in the Housing Sector Strategy and component C will finance the cost of office and equipment that are required for project management and implementation. To achieve the above, a three phase Adaptable Program Loan was prepared and is spread over a period of twelve years. The key development objectives of this project are to (i) improve the living conditions in under-serviced neighborhoods in up to five provincial capital cities and; (ii) prepare the systems, capacity, and regulatory foundation and initiate market based housing sector reforms. Like UUHRP of other pilot cities in Iran, first phase of the project for Tabriz which included collection, classification and analysis of data is almost fulfilled, but the consequent phases have not been accomplished yet.

6 CONCLUSION

It is important to recognise that the performance of a number of cities in Iran in carrying forward major pro-poor reforms and programmes in land and housing provision has been encouraging. However, for such slum prevention policies to have an impact on the ground there seems to be need for a lapse in time. Generally, the replication and scaling up of successful initiatives in a particular city to national level remains a serious challenge, and meeting the targets is particularly difficult because of inherent complexities due to unique topography of the area, the number of actors and their diversity, the pervasive effects at all levels of inadequate policies, regulations and their enforcement, the lack of adequate information and the need to find

solutions tailored to suit local conditions. Given the region's relatively high slum prevalence and slum growth rates, the immediate steps toward meeting the upgrading targets must be accompanied by actions aimed at reducing the current rate of formation of new slums, that – if unaltered – would lead to much more slum dwellers in the area. Therefore, actions on two directions are required: upgrading of existing slums and prevention of new ones. To this end, both adaptive and preventive strategies have to be applied simultaneously in addressing the slum challenge in this area: firstly, a participatory approach to upgrading of existing slums; and, secondly, adoption of urban policies designed to prevent the emergence of new slums.

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