

Reconstruction of informality through post-disaster urban reconstruction

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Introduction

Informality is increasingly seen as a key feature of urban planning and development in many cities of the Global South (Miraftab, 2012; Roy, 2005). This feature, Roy (2009b) argues, creates a certain “territorial impossibility of governance, justice and development”. In this paper, I examine this proposition by focusing on the urban reconstruction process in two disaster-affected cities. Urban reconstruction is characterized as the “compression of urban development activities in time” (Olshansky et al., 2012). Therefore, informality is expected to be entangled in urban reconstruction policies and planning, and to be more conspicuous given the momentum for urban transformation after disasters.

Looking at two earthquake-affected cities of Bhuj and Bam, this paper seeks to address the under-studied question of how informality is shaped and reshaped during the reconstruction phase. The aim is to highlight some of the distinctive challenges and paradoxes that informality presents for ‘building back better’. In particular, the paper focuses on a common theme that emerged from these two case studies: the dispossession and displacement of marginalized groups from well-located urban land and the accompanying production of new or perpetuated landscapes of risk following urban disasters. I explain who was displaced and how, and which legal, extralegal or market-based mechanisms are to be challenged by disaster grassroots organizations, planners and independent humanitarian actors for averting such displacements. The paper draws primarily on field research I conducted in 2010, 2011 and 2012 in Bhuj and Bam to investigate their long-term recovery after the earthquakes of 2001 and 2003 respectively.

The paper first gives an overview of the policies and programs introduced in both cities after the disasters. In both cities, the state-led assistance distribution and the arbitrary decisions regarding what is formal/informal tenure, who is counted as disaster-affected and who is eligible/ineligible for receiving public assistance were the key driving force for the displacement of low-income renters, sharers and squatters. Both reconstruction programmes initially rejected any direct allocation of assistance to renters, purportedly due to the often informal nature of tenure arrangement practices in these cities. Another reason for excluding the renters and squatters from public assistance was the conceptualising of disaster impacts solely based on damages incurred to private endowments. Neither the reconstruction programme nor the market driven process of reconstruction could supply affordable housing at least until ten years after the earthquake.

At the next step, the paper maps the ways in which the mutually constitutive political and spatial practices of informality resulted in deepening urban segregation and shaping and reshaping landscapes of dispossession in the form of new patterns of informal living in inner urban areas and a new or thickened layer of poverty at the urban periphery in both cities.

Reconstruction of the landscapes of informality in inner urban areas

Having no housing options, low-income renters, sharers, squatters and migrants who came from surrounding areas for construction jobs shaped new landscapes of dispossession and risk both inside and outside the city. Inside the city, they resided in the cracks and gaps of the formal city. In Bhuj, these households erected tents and makeshift housing on vacant lots belonging to the state or private landowners. In Bam, the new landscapes of dispossession were observed in the backyards of single-family housing. Furthermore, like Bhuj, vacant plots provided a space for informal living in the city. These households had to pay rent for living in tents or makeshift units in vacant plots, while having inadequate access to basic services such as water. According to the 2011 census (SCI, 2011), 1,112 households live in this condition in different parts of the city.

Reconstruction of the landscapes of informality on urban periphery

Apart from inner urban areas, the urban periphery also saw new landscapes of informality emerge, shaped by renters, sharers, squatters and migrants. In Bhuj a site in the urban periphery, known as the GIDC site, was designated for temporary housing after the earthquake. Pre-earthquake renters, sharers, squatters and immigrants moved to this site, bought or rented these temporary units from homeowners, whose housing construction was finished. As mentioned, 450 houses were later built at this site for low-income renters with the help of a regional NGO, while the rest of renters and squatters remained in rudimentary housing built as temporary dwellings more than a decade ago. These groups have been dispossessed of the diverse forms of urban life in the walled city including access to jobs, services and their social network in the face of inadequate rental units and rising rents.

In Bam, non-landowners – e.g. renters, shares or new couples - provided they could buy a plot. Those who could buy a plot outside the city's official boundaries could receive a lower amount of assistance (assistance for housing in rural places). The prohibitively high rent in the city and the lure of receiving public assistance forced these households to look for a foothold where land was more easily available: in an administrative no-man's-land, outside of municipal boundaries. The newly built houses outside the city are located next to the earthquake fault zone and do not have adequate access to utilities and services. These houses were built without the state-led technical support programme for safe construction.

Driving forces of the displacement

What emerges from the two cases of Bam and Bhuj is “a tangled and confused web of informal and formal actions” (McFarlane, 2012), which played a role in shaping a fractured pattern of urban recovery and new landscapes of dispossession. In many cases these landscapes of dispossession overlap with the new geographies of risk in these cities. Research on urban informality deals with unsettling practices of categorizations such as legal/illegal or formal/informal. In both cities, integrating disaster risk reduction measures - which in the case of earthquakes are often expensive, engineering requirements - with reconstruction activities was consolidated by regulatory instruments that linked and justified legality/illegality based on safe/unsafe construction practices. At the same time, the state-led technical assistance did not cover the informal, self-help construction activities.

In both Bam and Bhuj the three major contributors to the displacement and dispossession of marginalized groups were: assistance distribution programmes; planning and building regulations; and land governance. Informality was entangled in these policies, regulations and practices, exacerbating the condition of the urban poor.

Assistance distribution programmes: In both cities, the centrality of housing tenure – in the form of registered ownership – in counting and recognising urban citizenship, drove lower-income renters and squatters into homelessness. In both cities, informality, in the forms of interpreting policies (for instance, in defining who is eligible/ineligible for housing assistance), or suspending policies (like allocating land for squatters in Bhuj), worsened the consequences of these policies for lower-income groups. Leaving the housing recovery of low-income renters to market forces directed them to self-help solutions or pushed them to ownership in peripheral locations with inadequate access to jobs and services, leading to a downward spiral of poverty. No technical assistance was offered for the self-help construction activities of these households. In short, the idea of ‘build back better’ was never actualized for these households.

Planning and building regulation: The new urban plans in both Bam and Bhuj largely repeated the common problems of urban planning in the Global South. In Bhuj, for instance, under new planning and building regulations, land parcels could be developed under a much lower regime of development rights compared to pre-earthquake conditions. Furthermore, neither city considered an initiative for securing land and supplying affordable housing for marginalized groups. Interestingly, in the case of Bhuj, the town planning scheme in Gujarat state had the regulatory capacity to allocate land for this purpose through its land pooling and readjustment scheme. This capacity, however, was not utilized in the reconstruction process. Instead, the new town planning scheme ignored the pre-earthquake presence of those informal settlements located in prime locations in the walled city. The new development plan of the city simply stated that “most of the slums in the walled city have been affected badly due to the earthquake and have suffered a lot of destruction. There are hardly any people living there now” (EPC, 2002, p. 152). The state-led rubble removal process facilitated the expulsion of the squatters from the walled city.

Land governance: Reconstruction in both the case of Bam and Bhuj was accompanied with land speculation; the local government turned a blind eye to, encouraged or even initiated, land transfers after the disaster. In Bhuj, the new urban plan introduced three new suburbs in prime locations and housing assistance policies encouraged people to move to these suburbs. As a result, in highly affected areas of the walled city the local government, land speculators and ‘higher’ caste communities become the major landholders. The local authority faced difficulty in selling its plots in these neighborhoods and land speculators only started to construct new houses around eight years after the earthquake. In Bam, land-use change and subdivision of palm groves, which covered 70% of the city area, was banned, partly due to pressure from UNESCO, which considered these palm groves as a part of the cultural heritage of the city. In the absence of any mechanism for protecting these groves, those located in inner urban areas were abandoned with a view to the future land use change, or were subdivided and sold out for residential purposes. In both cities and as a result of this speculative urbanism, large portions of well-located urban areas remained without any good use, while the poor were pushed to the urban periphery or to live in the inner city’s “grey spaces”, where they “are neither integrated nor eliminated” (Yiftachel, 2009).

Conclusion

Bam and Bhuj were similar in being relatively well-resourced cities after the earthquake. Therefore, the displacement and dispossession of marginalized groups was not a result of inadequate resources, but their inequitable distribution. Informality exacerbated and mediated this inequitable distribution.

In this paper, I examined the uneven geography of urban reconstruction in two cities – Bhuj and Bam – and highlighted some of the distinctive challenges and paradoxes for ‘building back better’ in cities of the Global South. In these two case studies, a focus on urban informality served as a form of urban critique in that it sought to expose the ways that claims of what is formal or informal mediate the access of different social groups to resources including aid, urban land and services. Such critique, however, cannot present the whole picture. The informality perspective highlights how different interpretations or suspensions of policies added complexities and challenges for achieving the intended outcomes, but it is less engaged with the question of whether or not those intended outcomes are desirable, and for whom. In Bam and Bhuj, assistance distribution policies, urban planning and land governance were mostly tailored to the benefit of the more powerful segments of the population, and the informality entangled in these policies, regulations and practices exacerbated the condition of the poor. The result was the dispossession and displacement of renters, sharers and squatters from well-located urban areas and formation or re-formation of landscapes of informality and risk inside the city and on the urban periphery.

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