Informal Settlers

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“Informal settlers” is a broad concept that refers to individuals and groups who establish their principal residence in mostly urban areas and types of dwellings considered illegal or in discord with the dominant social norms. Informal settlers are the main producers of the city in the Global South, but they are also found in the Global North.

To settle in a territory implies an act of foundation of a site for dwelling and collective life – villages and towns, originally. “Settler” applies generally to all new arrivals in urban agglomerations. This embodies connotations of colonizers who take over land previously held by indigenous populations, who thus become dispossessed or displaced – some native tribes in Australian and American cities still strive for their landownership rights over already urbanized areas. “Settler” also designates pioneers appointed or protected by governments to occupy a disputed, frontier, or unexploited territory. Although this pattern goes back to medieval times, it has been widely fostered in modern and contemporary times all over Eastern Europe and the Middle East. War refugee camps in Palestine and African countries are considered emergency or temporary settlements although they can last for decades and develop advanced urban structures. All these forms indicate the need to unveil the historical roots, sociopolitical conflicts, and spatial constraints in the origins of settlers.

UN-Habitat (2016) often conflates “informal settlements” and slums according to five

deprivations: (a) lack of access to drinking water and (b) sanitation facilities; (c) non-durable structures; (d) overcrowded houses; and (e) tenure insecurity that facilitates forced evictions. Slum sites seldom comply with planning and building regulations, and are often situated in geographically and environmentally hazardous areas. It is estimated that “in our world, one in eight people live in slums” (UN-Habitat 2016, 2). Although millions of slum-dwellers are subject to numerous violations of human rights, not all lack title deeds, fear evictions, are poor, are undocumented migrants, or are involved in criminal activities (Davis 2006; Neuwirth 2004). Many slum-dwellers work in the formal economy, run legal businesses, and pay taxes. If they are internal migrants, they can enjoy partial or full citizenship rights; for instance, in the example of the *hukou* regime in China and war-driven displacement in Colombia. Slums may be upgraded or regularized by local governments, and residents may be granted permanency. Informality may also last indefinitely and permeate formality, and vice versa, so it is wrong to assume an essential opposition between formal and informal activities (Earle 2014; Perlman 2007; Roy 2005).

In addition to slums, there are other types of informal dwelling that can host newcomers: (a) street sleeping (in parks, bridges, underground stations, door entrances, etc.); (b) “hot beds” in overcrowded rental apartments; (s) unlawful constructions for living on the rooftops of buildings and in subdivided flats; (d) vehicle and travelling living; (e) trailer encampments and tent cities; (f) residence in factories, industrial compounds, and farms; (g) temporary and long-term squatting in vacant buildings; (h) staying at friends’ or relatives’ houses, and anonymous couch-surfing via online contacts; and

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(i) gated communities without planning permits. As a consequence, informality does not necessarily entail living conditions underpinned by destitution, disease, stigmatization, violence, dilapidated housing, peripheral location, and the absence of public space and facilities. Countercultural and left-libertarian squatters, for example, may upgrade their occupied buildings and develop urban movements to fight speculation, housing unaffordability, and gentrification (Cattaneo and Martínez 2014).

Recent research on this topic has emphasized the diversity of land tenure conditions and suggested avoiding binary explanations, paying attention to the peculiarities of each situation, and recognizing a “continuum of land rights” (UN-Habitat 2008). Security of tenure is influenced by legislation, culture, and perceptions. For example, customary land tenure might be considered informal but secure. Informal arrangements in informal settlements can also be considered secure forms of tenure by the residents: “tenure security is not just a matter of legal and illegal, formal or informal status; ‘security’ is a relative concept and a matter of perception as well as law” (Payne, Durand-Lasserve, and Rakodi 2009: 447). Land titling programs have been used, aiming at incorporating informal settlers into the formal land system and therefore into the market. However, evidence shows that in many cases these programs have created more obstacles (higher land prices and potential evictions) in the lives of informal settlers rather than improved living conditions (UN-Habitat 2008).

S Informal settlers encompass a specific social structure and they may engage in various informal practices, not limited to housing. As well as housing, labor and citizenship status add to the informality of the settler, and these informal activities interact with each other (Duneier 1999; Martínez 2017). Informality may be pervasive in those three

spheres combined or only salient in some of them. Gender, religion, ethnicity, demographics, political rights and alignments, and gangs and police rule may be crucial factors in the life of the informal settler. Power relations among the informal settlers and with external groups (developers, government or nonprofit organizations) determine mainly hierarchical forms of social organization.

When poor groups behave informally, this is not a matter of choice, but more likely the consequence of costly or unfeasible access to more formal alternatives and the result of a normative system, especially planning regulations, that establishes what is formal and informal (Roy 2005). Upper classes or elites, however, may choose informal practices among other available options. The meaning of informality varies across space and time and is dependent on the definitions propagated by the dominant groups. These groups spread standards of formal and informal practices that help reproduce the social order and the supply of cheap labor from those living informally (Patel 2010).

Informality can entail marginality, invisibility, temporary presence, vulnerability, noninstitutional actions, and hybrid and anomalous arrangements (Martínez 2014). Not all these aspects are necessarily negative for informal settlers. These groups can also perform bottom-up or horizontal self-organization to contest inequality and informality and to demand improvements to their living environments (exercise their “right to the city”), becoming more visible citizens and partially overcoming their informality (Roitman in press). They can build strong community ties, self-manage the commons beyond market and state control, and get united to resist oppression from both inside and outside (Scott 1998).

There are networks such as Slum/Shack Dwellers International, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Habitat International

Coalition, International Alliance of Inhabitants, and Squatting Europe Collective that offer support to many types of informal settlers at scales beyond the local territory, through advocacy, documenting experiences, and conducting research. Massive operations of rehousing informal settlers in Madrid in the 1980s, for example, involved empowering informal settlers through collective action with the support of activists, practitioners, and researchers (Villasante et al., 1989). Autonomous organizations such as the *piqueteros* from *villas miserias* in Argentina champion class-based mobilizations and achieve subsidies from favorable governments. Some Brazilian favelas have been consolidated as urban neighborhoods, whereas others were eradicated due to urban megaprojects such as the Olympics Games held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

To conclude, evidence suggests the existence of multiple historical trajectories for informal settlers. In addition, there is an amalgamation of formal and informal practices and a variegated institutional management for informal settlements. The structural persistence of informality is often embedded in social struggles for power and strategic actions performed by informal settlers in the face of the contextual constraints they face everyday. Future research should focus on the structural conditions influencing informality, mainly looking at the power struggles over resources and meanings, and at perceptions of informality involving different social groups, as well as at the intersections between formality and informality – “grey spaces” (Yiftachel 2009) or “interface” (Watson 2009) – that offer richer perspectives than the binary construction of formality/informality. Accordingly, investigations into informality should illuminate the political contexts that shape informal settlers’ arrival and survival in specific settings (Fawaz 2009) and the systemic constraints on informal settlers,

instead of only identifying social practices not in accordance with dominant (conventional and legal) norms (Wacquant 2008).

SEE ALSO: Favelas; Informal Economy; Informal Housing; Informal Land Markets; Informal Settlements; Informality; Land Regularization Policies (Latin America); Land Titling; Slumdog Cities; Slums and Shanties; Squatter Settlements; Squatters; Urban Informality

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ABSTRACT

The nature and scope of “informal settlers” are defined according to specific historical conditions, social conflicts, and spatial configurations. In contrast with the prevailing negative features of slums, other types of informal dwelling are here distinguished and a more nuanced account of informal living given. This approach has consequences for the study of land tenure in terms of its diversity, security, and possible formalization. It is argued that investigations on informality need to focus on the power struggles over resources and the meanings and perceptions of informality, in addition to the systemic constraints for informal settlers, instead of only identifying social practices not in accordance with dominant conventional and legal norms.

KEYWORDS

informal settlers; land planning system; social informality; squatting; structural conditions