Social Production of Habitat as a tool for advocacy in an African context? The case of Mashimoni, Nairobi

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Social production of habitat is a phenomenon that emerged during the 70´s in Latin America under a set of multiple experiences of communities looking to produce their own place to live. Consequently, SPH has a material transformation related to housing and/or habitat, as well as a socio-political impact because it represents a different form of appropriation of the city and the urban space. This paper analyses the experience of SPH processes in a sub-African context specifically in Mashimoni-Nairobi and reflects about its effects on new forms of substantive citizenship as well as the possible use of the SPH as a tool for advocacy in an African context. In order to analyse the relationship between SPH and citizenship, the reflection is guided by four dimensions; (1) the everyday practices of use and appropriation of the urban space; (2) participation processes; (3) the community relationships and strategies; and (4) the identity and sense of belonging. The discussion shows that, regarding SPH in Mashimoni, there has been relevant achievements as well as fractures. It can be said that SPH can trigger deeper ways of citizenships, nonetheless, the analysis opens fundamental questions about SPH processes in relation to possible exclusions, tensions, and limitations that talks about the fragility of SPH processes and participation in general. Finally, the paper argues that SPH can effectively be a tool for the advocacy of movements and community leaders in Africa, as a way to simplify and legitimize the processes that different communities and citizens are leading every day in the urban space.

INTRODUCTION

Social production of habitat is a phenomenon that emerged during the 70's in Latin America (Romero, 2002; 2003) under the explosion of a set of multiple experiences of individuals looking to produce their own place to live (Jackob, 2003; Gaye, 1992; Trinidad Dos Santos, 2017). According to what was pointed out by Ferrero (2000), it is a reaction of those who have been historically excluded. In general terms, Social production of habitat (SPH) can be understood as a practice through which community-based organizations are active actors in defining and producing the place where they live (Ortiz, 2007).

Normally, the result of the SPH process accounts for an improvement in material terms, but more important, it can represent a way of using and appropriating the city. A mean for advancing the emancipation of socially excluded and segregated groups (Jakob, 2003; Ortiz and Zarate, 2004). Hence, SPH has proven to be a useful tool for advocacy across social movements, neighbourhood organizations and different social leaders in Latin America,

During the last years, it has been an ongoing and reflective process/ debate regarding the possible use of the concept in the sub-African context as a tool for advocacy and a way to socialize (avoiding reductionism) the work done by informal settlements and neighbourhood communities in relation to habitat processes.

The following is a reflection on the SPH processes in the case of Mashimoni, Nairobi in Africa. This is the result of a desk research in the framework of an alliance between DPU - UCL (Development Planning Unit - University College London) and HIC (Habitat International Coalition) in which it is intended to reflect on the SPH processes, its possible impact on citizenship as well as some of the challenges and opportunities in relation to the use of the SPH in the context of Africa.

MASHIMONI: FIGHTING IN ADVERSITY

At a global level, an intense process of urbanization has been occurring over the last decades. As a result, the creation of slums becomes almost inevitable:

the increase in density, informality, segregation, inadequate housing and the lack of access to basic services is the general rule in these new megacities (Honning, 2009). Africa is one of the protagonists of this phenomenon and Kenya is not the exception with a 60-80% of the population living in an informal settlement (Achungo, 2014). In Nairobi, more than 60% of the population occupies only 5% of the urban area, creating huge informal settlements with almost non-existent health systems, infrastructure, water, electricity and education (Butcher and Frediani, 2014). Located in Nairobi, Kibera is the second largest slum in Africa with approximately 500,000 – 700,000 inhabitants (Schouten and Mathenge, 2010). According to Bodewes (2010), most of the population lives in small shacks made of mud and water with important levels of overcrowding and lack of sanitation. Water and electricity systems are almost non-existent in the area. Mashimoni is one of the 12 villages of Kibera and its composed of 3,500 residents living in 1,500 houses. Different initiatives from the state and from the communities that are promoting use and appropriation of urban space have been developed

in Mashimoni, some of them with positive effects related to evictions, community organization and even strengthening of citizens rights. However, it is possible to identify fractures and risks associated with the experiences around the habitat. The following is a critical analysis based on four dimensions about Mashimoni experiences regarding the processes of social production of habitat and its capacity to open spaces for deeper citizenships and to become an advocacy tool.

SPH IN MASHIMONI: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS

Everyday practices of use and appropriation of the urban space

The use and appropriation of the city refers to the concrete actions and strategies used by the community or social movements to carry out the process of SPH (housing improving, neighbourhood projects, slum upgrading programmes, protest, campaigns, among others).

Habitat: more than a dwelling

In Mashimoni the urban space is strongly associated with the concept of habitat, which goes beyond a house. The habitat is complex, multidimensional and is not reduced only to the physical, but includes the social and cultural levels.

Adversity as a trigger for community and mobilization

Adversity has been transformed in one of the main reasons to mobilize and develop practices to inhabit urban space in an effort to improve living conditions. The above responds to what Ortiz (2007; 2012) describes as the social production of urban space from the need, describing the main causes of the processes of production of habitat as the lack of resources and vulnerability. In the case of Mashimoni, initially the main threat was mostly related to the land insecurity and possible evictions. Over time the threat became more complex (Farzana, 2016). While evictions are still present, other adversities related with the habitat have been the cause of community mobilization and

activation. Water issues, sanitation and also environmental problems are some examples (Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011).

Institutional Strategy: working with the State

Although the literature in relation to SPH and urban citizenship accounts for bottom-up processes that arise from the communities, in the case of Mashimoni the main actions are carried out through state programmes (Rema, 2011). One of the most important programmes developed by the State is the Kenia Slum-Upgrading Program- KENSUP (Karari, 2009; Michael and Nyaoro, 2011)

Between the prevention and reaction: working for development?. The processes and practices carried out by the Mashimoni community have had important achievements in terms of stopping the threats of evictions and attaining state recognition as a "formal settlement". Nevertheless, there is still a fragility that often hinders the community's ability to work on projects that can improve quality of life and obliges them to focus on reacting, diminishing their ability to prevent and advance projects focused on strengthening social development in Mashimoni.

Appropriating the land: creating a network

Led by the Executive Committee, the different interventions and practices developed have been a source in order to construct a network composed of diverse actors; including the state and authorities of Kenya, civil society organizations, social movements, community leaders and even international agencies (Rema, 2011). This network has been an instrument for the development of practices that allow people to inhabit urban space. According to Romero (2003), one of the most relevant effects of a SPH process is the consolidation of neighbourhoods and strengthening of social relations and solidarity within the community.

Participation

Participation encompasses one of the central elements of the SPH processes and urban citizenship. Participation include people´s agency and empowerment in the decision making processes.

Figures1. Mashimoni Slum. Source: Ouma, Ochong, Antonio and Maina, 2017.

Participation as a normative concept:

Mashimoni´s inhabitants tend to show an optimistic approach (and sometimes with a lack of critical view) to participation spaces, understanding them as a tool to incorporate the community in decision making and even open up new opportunities (Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011; Handi, 2011; Achungo, 2014).

Who and how has been the participation?

Despite this optimistic vision in relation to participation, once the reflection about the processes carried out is deepened, it is possible to identify certain problematics.

- **Lack of (participation and) representativeness:** For some Mashimoni inhabitants, the Executive Committee manages to capture a wide diversity of actors and over time has been able to expand and incorporate different groups within the community. For others, participation spaces have not been able to incorporate all the necessary actors. According to Frediani, French and Nunez (2011), the organization generated for the SPH processes clearly does not represent the majority of the community, as the most vulnerable may not be able to be part and afford their participation there. Akiri (2005) points out that the notion of representativeness has been ignored as vulnerable groups such as youth, women and village council were not adequately represented.

- **Elite Capture:** Related to the above and according to Karari (2009), participation in Kibera has not really been focused on community empowerment. It is possible to identify a degree of capture of the participation process by community leaders who, through the process, have reinforced their influence, and have even disempowered the community, since they have not been truly incorporated into the decision making processes (Akiri, 2005). As Rigon (2014) points pout, elite capture in different interventions in Nairobi has undermined the outcomes of development projects and has even exacerbated previous inequalities within the community. One of the risks regarding this elite capture has been its possible politicization.

Towards a participatory practice: tensions and barriers

- **Lack of information:** In the process of KENSUP, the information gap has been so deep that it even threatens the program's effectiveness (Mulcahy and Chu, 2009; Cohre, 2005; Karari, 2009). In fact, the vast majority of the participants are indeed aware of the programme, but the information they have is scanty (Achungo, 2014). Due to this situation, an important part of the work of the Executive Committee and NGO´s is focused on information and sensitization campaigns to increase the degree of knowledge and participation.

- **Practical difficulties:** Things like language barriers, lack of time for people to attend meetings (Achungo, 2014), a lack of facilitation and technical skills by officers (Mulcahy and Chu, 2009) threaten the impact and process of meetings.

- **Tension regarding the project´s scope:** As previously described, conditions in Mashimoni are critical and require action in the short term. Mashimoni is a community with immediate needs; however, the programmes and the SPH process require time, so normally the projects involve long-term programmes. This disagreement between time and needs produces despair in the inhabitants and threatens the sustainability of participation.

- **Disappointment and mistrust:** Either in relation to the government because they consider some of the promises made have not materialized (Achungo, 2011; Karari, 2009) or because in parallel to these programmes, there have been cases of displacement such as the one that occurred recently with the construction of a highway. This distrust is, inevitably, a profound obstruction for spaces of participation and community building process.

Community relationships and strategies

This dimension refers to the networks and relationships and connections created by a SPH process within the community and also with external actors.

Same problems, one community: As previously indicated, an important part of the construction of a sense of community arises from the fact that the inhabitants of Mashimoni, and in

Figure 2. Muungano leading an activity with Mashimoni. Source: Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011

Figure 3. Vulnerability and infrastructure issue in Mashimoni. Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011.

Figure 4. Urban Agriculture in Mashimoni. Source: Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011

general of Kibera, share a situation of vulnerability, exclusion and insecurity that becomes a powerful tool to mobilize and build networks inside the slum (Farzana, 2016). Such is the case for community savings (Rema, 2011).

Different interests: tensions inside the community. Although the Mashimoni inhabitants tends to share similar problematics, it is possible to identify a deep diversity within the community. Such is the case of tenants and landowners in Mashimoni which have different interest that sometimes creates tensions (Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011). Also, the number of different voices and social movements within the community that often make it difficult to build agreements and generate consensus (Butcher and Frediani, 2014).

Conflict and collaboration at the same time: Probably there is a richness in the diversity within the Mashimoni community but also it can have negative effects, becoming a source of conflicts and hindering work as a community. Power relations within Mashimoni are not fully balanced and it is possible to account for a lack of coordination among the participating members: "this limited collaboration weakens their potential to achieve change" (Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011, p.39). Akiri (2005) refers to this problem from a broader perspective. Addressing the entire Kibera area, the author points out that it is possible to identify a history of social movements interacting with the government, which seeks to institutionalize them, producing conflicts and many times co-opting the participation spaces. Nonetheless, within the context of tensions, collaboration and conflict previously described, it is also possible to identify relationships based on solidarity within Mashimoni. That is the case of urban agriculture (Schouten and Mathenge, 2010) and the work within the Executive Committee (Lemmen, et al., 2016).

Identity and sense of belonging

Under the idea of appropriation and use of urban space, the identity dimension and the development of a sense of belonging can be fundamental effects of the process of social production of habitat. It refers to the individual meanings regarding the community.

Excluded from Nairobi: belonging to Kibera

Either by their own choice or because the living conditions forced people to live there, it is possible to see that Kibera feels like a home, a safe place where they feel they belong (Kristersson, 2013). There is no strong distinction made between different villages. In fact, the difference with Nairobi is a much more determining factor in the identity of the inhabitants of Kibera who normally feel excluded from it (Muisya and Yarime, 2011).

Habitat production: deepening the sense of belonging

One of the main result of participation processes is related with the creation/deepening of a sense belonging and identity at the community level (Frediani, French and Nunez, 2011). The aforementioned case of community savings accounts for this (Rema, 2011). According to Farzana (2016), social movements play a relevant role. Such is the case of the Muungano Movement, which leads and coordinates an interaction between members of the Mashimoni community, as well as programmes that have allowed relationships and networks of trust.

SPH: In the process of (de) construction community sense of belonging

There are also spaces where there are tensions and conflicts. Where many times not all the actors are sitting at the table. And where there is a tendency of exclusion of the same ones who have been excluded previously. For example, Mashimoni illustrates that mobilization within the community can be a source of conflict or differences because often there are distinctions and dichotomies between those who are an active part of the movements and those who are not (Butcher and Frediani, 2014, p. 126).

SPH: A TOOL FOR ADVOCACY? CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that the processes of participation, use and appropriation of urban space in Mashimoni are more complex than what is described in this paper. However, it is possible to identify interesting elements regarding SPH in the case of Mashimoni.

Challenges & Opportunities

Fragility of participatory process: There are risks when participation spaces are opened if basic barriers such as access to information are not eliminated. The possible capture of the elite not only puts participation processes at risk, it can even have a counterproductive effect. And as a consequence, more participatory (or active) citizens do not necessarily imply citizens with more rights. Mashimoni realizes the fragility of participation spaces as well as the difficulty of generating a social transformation. The lack of representativeness in participation spaces, the possible elite capture, the demolition of 30,000 homes without previous notice and therefore the distrust on the part of the citizens to this type of processes are examples of this.

SPH with the state: Mashimoni proposes an experience that arises from the need (Ortiz, 2012) but works with the state policies (also goes beyond them). Are these processes of SPH? Mashimoni is perhaps a case that allows us to think that the production of urban space from the need can be done through a work with the state. While there are difficulties associated with working with the state, (many times the communities lose control and autonomy to develop their projects), it is possible to identify opportunities. It allows communities to develop themselves within the legal framework and generate an active relationship with the state in spaces where the state has been ineffective. In fact, is can be said that a good consequence of a SPH process developed with the state can be an opportunity for developing a legal framework that triggers more active and involved communities.

SPH as a tool for deep citizenships?

Mashimoni illustrates how SPH can be a space for participation, deliberation and activation of citizens. Nonetheless, these "urban citizenship" processes require concrete tools for its evolution and probably it is necessary some legal framework changes in order to facilitate and respond to citizen´s claims. It requires citizens involved, but also authorities that facilitate the processes of substantive democracy.

Figure 5. Demolition in Mashimoni. Source: Vidija, 2018.

Recommendations and Future Reflections

The process developed by Mashimoni talks about achievement and fractures. However, it realizes that the concept of SPH can effectively be a tool for the advocacy of movements and community leaders in Africa. A way to simplify and legitimize the processes that thousands of citizens are leading everyday.

Mashimoni case opens fundamental questions about SPH processes. In general terms, the social production of the urban space has been described in a descriptive and (excessively) positive way. It could be interesting to think about a more complex "definition" of SPH and avoid generalizations that assume equality of conditions in different contexts. Is SPH a way of legitimate informality and assume that the communities are the one who needs to react because of the vulnerability? How does SPH understand the role of the State? How we we use SPH in the Sub-African context without loosing the richness of the different context?

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