

Coproducing inclusive cities? Addressing knowledge gaps and conflicting rationalities between self-provisioned housing and state-led housing programmes

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Globally, and particularly in the global south, the majority of urban housing stock occupied by economically weak households has not been built through state programmes or formal market delivery, but by households themselves. While global policies like the new UN Sustainable Development Goals are beginning to recognise the importance of ‘inclusive, resilient and sustainable cities’, housing policies in most countries do not build on vibrant self-provisioning practices as a means to achieving them, focusing instead on centralised delivery programmes and market dynamics. A ‘Co-op City Network’ explored this across Brazil, Eastern and South Africa, India and Germany, finding that networked, transdisciplinary, action-oriented research is needed to help overcome established binaries between programmed and self-provisioned housing and forge new co-designing approaches.

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Introduction affordability, a case for self-provisioning of housing

Affordable housing, which conventionally refers to dwelling stock not costing more than 30% of a household’s income [1], is under-supplied in most cities. While unit vacancies exist in highly developed northern contexts, access to housing in these regions is increasingly dependent on mortgages, with affordability severely affected by

the 2008 global financial downturn, and adjustments in mortgage regulations [1–3]. In the global south, state and private sector housing construction predominantly targets the middle and lower middle class with the majority of those in need of housing left unattended, often finding a home in make-shift shelters [4,5]. Affordability for such households cannot be calculated on the basis of a regular income — it depends on the cost of basic survival, and is achieved through incremental expenses in mostly informal construction of shelter [6]. For mid-2014, an average of 30% of the urban population in developing regions was estimated to live in inadequate conditions or ‘slums’, with the highest concentration in sub-Saharan Africa at 56% [1]. While in certain regions a rental sector dominates those living in unplanned settlements [7], the majority of this population engages in self-provisioning of shelter, through self-construction or through small scale builders often financed through short term loans [8,9].

The policy conundrum between mass housing production and support for self-provisioning

As part of neoliberal restructuring processes since the 1980s in the Global North and South, many governments scaled-down state housing provision, adjusted the financing models of affordable housing programmes and privatised publically-owned housing delivery agencies [10,11]. The 1980s and 1990s saw World Bank and UN-habitat support for the introduction of serviced sites and slum upgrading in many countries, initially as key state-aided self-help projects, and later with integration into enabling urban policies [12]. Both agencies scaled up their support for slum upgrading in the recent decade [1,13].

However, in the past decade, particularly middle income countries have recommitted the state, in some instances with reliance on the private sector, to a central role in large scale and often top-down provisioning of housing involving relocation from informal or self-provisioned settlements [14,15–18]. These programmes have ‘failed to draw lessons from informal housing development’ such as the link between incrementalism and affordability; due to their lack of flexibility and adaptability and their reliance on ownership models they have been ‘captured by other income groups’ [19].

This resurgence of government engagement in housing provision is beginning to transform the global affordable housing landscape, with the adoption of peripherally

located megaprojects as a commitment to reaching scale [20*,21]. The technocratic framing around quantity and speed of standardized unit delivery tends to produce inflexible, segregated housing forms in top-down processes [16]. Peripheral locations further exacerbate socio-spatial segregation [22,23*], have implications for the cost of infrastructure [24], and hinder livelihoods [25]. Research on various continents has confirmed that housing impacts the functioning of urban infrastructures and mobility systems [26] and shapes the quality and dignity of everyday life [27]. Housing also implicates and is implicated by the economy and employment [28].

With renewed commitment to sustainable development through the adoption of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UN-Habitat [1] raises concern with new housing developments 'located too far from livelihoods'. Acknowledging the multiple impacts of housing on the functioning of urban areas, UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda places housing 'at the centre of urban policies', underlining it as a 'socio-economic imperative' [1]. On this basis, UN-Habitat promotes state support for incremental housing [1]. Recent evidence strengthens the rationale for the support of self-provisioned and incremental housing. Firstly, even where economies have grown, a reliance on market processes in state supply results in continued demand for self-provisioned or informally produced housing [29]. Secondly, while market provision has a role to play and could be facilitated through regulatory reforms [30], self-constructed housing continues to have advantages for its inhabitants in being tailored to needs and affordability [31]. Thirdly, formalisation of 'slums' does not automatically correlate with self-help improvement of shelter, if the latter is not specifically supported [32*].

A gap in transdisciplinary knowledge production for transformation

The mismatch between top-down state provisioning and the lived reality of impoverished households is a persistent problem that has defied research insights, many already put forward in the seminal Anglophone debate of the late 1960s to 1980s around the need to shift from public housing to a state aided self-help model [33–37]. Housing and informal settlement policy at the country level does not transform in a linear or reasoned fashion, nor does it directly respond to global policy advice in the intended way [38,39]. While generic 'global' policy advice may disregard regional variations in social, political and cultural context, some economists and political scientists may also feed policy makers with ideologies that sound compelling but have been found to drive inequalities [40]. In the current context of a counterintuitive resurgence of large scale state-driven, top-down development that increases segregation and is unable to effectively target those in greatest need, a renewed transdisciplinary

research endeavour is needed to not only provide an evidence base [6**,41*], but to link this directly to effective forms of advocacy, which can break through the multiple messaging, can compete with dominant rationalities, and hold potential for a more inclusive and sustainable urban future without repeating mistakes of the past.

Formation and aims of COCINET

The *Co-op City Network - Housing for Sustainable Urban Futures* (COCINET) was designed as a transdisciplinary and transnational learning network exploring the potential of social science advocacy to mediate the contested terrain between state housing and self-provisioning. Bringing together social scientists, planners and practitioners from Germany, India, Brazil, East Africa and South Africa generated comparisons and exchanges across diverse experiences. These countries and regions have in common renewed state initiatives in the housing sector as well as a growing critique of these from within the research and activist communities. Despite many differences which we set out in [Tables 1 and 2](#) below, one question concerned all: How could local, national and global policy help to allow self-provisioned housing play a part in creating and sustaining inclusive human settlements? The network participants attempted to understand (a) what enables and constrains self-provisioning practices in different regional and national contexts; (b) how these relate to public action, investment, policies and broader urban reform; and (c) how to unlock the potential of translocal learning and knowledge transfer, particularly when connecting localities across the Global South and North?

Choosing the core partners

Core partners in COCINET were four academic institutions which acted as regional knowledge hubs, each representing specificity in context, self-provisioning cultures and state approaches, and each functioning as a translocal gateway to local actors. TU Berlin contributed experience in transdisciplinary research on self-provisioned housing in Germany, having accompanied co-production processes between grassroots organisations and different spheres of government. TU Berlin researchers had also previously collaborated with the three other institutions of the network. IIHS Bengaluru in cooperation with MOD Institute contributed a well-resourced platform for networking across India/Asia, with active working relationships across grassroots organisations and government administrations. The Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) at Wits University in Johannesburg contributed the South African post-apartheid housing experience, local networks and its involvement in the African Association of Planning Schools (AAPS) and the Africa Urban Research Initiative (AURI). Instituto Casa, a think tank affiliated with the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC) in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil,

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