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Evolution of informal settlements upgrading strategies in Egypt: From negligence to participatory development

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Abstract   The issue of informal settlements represents a key challenge not only in Egypt, but also worldwide. A review of informal settlements upgrading policies shows that governments have moved away from eradication policies to provision, enabling and participatory policies. This shift was motivated by the recognition that informal settlements were not a problem but a solution stimulated by the society when the formal housing markets cannot fulfill its demand. In Egypt, despite all efforts to contain the growth of informal settlements, they are steadily growing. This paper aims at mapping the change of informal settlements upgrading strategies in Egypt starting from negligence to contemporary participatory development approaches and housing policies aimed at providing affordable shelter to the urban poor. Additionally, it examines some best practices of informal settlements upgrading projects to find out the influential driving forces affecting the success of these projects that are suitable for scaling up and replication.

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1. Introduction

Informal settlements represent a universal phenomenon, which many countries suffer from worldwide and Egypt is no exception. It is one of the major phenomena accompanying the accelerated urbanization process worldwide. They are a result of governments' failure to provide adequate and affordable shelter

to the urban poor. Therefore, informal settlements should not be perceived as part of the countries' housing crisis but rather as a solution developed by the urban poor under the existing conditions of limited economic resources and bureaucratic control, and when neither the government nor the private sector could provide dwellers with adequate and affordable housing [1]. The vast number of informal settlements with a huge number of inhabited households is evidence that the policy adopted by government agencies and institutions in charge of managing and controlling urban development and housing policy has been largely ineffective. The total land area of Egypt is about one million sq. km of which only 7.6% is inhabited and cultivated areas (3.5% is the cultivation proportion). Total population is approximately 86.9 million (July 2014 est.) and the population

growth rate is 1.84%. Rural inhabitants comprise approximately 56% of the total population, while urban inhabitants are about 44% [2]. Greater Cairo Region (GCR) is the largest metropolitan area in Egypt and the world's 18th largest metropolitan area, with a total population of 16.4 million (2006 census); GCR includes 19% of the total population in Egypt [3]. Informal settlements are considered to be the dominant mode of urbanization, spreading on urban fringes, either on privately-owned agricultural land or on state-owned land in desert areas. It is estimated that more than 60% of the region's population inhabits these areas [4]. Moreover, it is estimated that between 1980 and 2025 nearly half of Egypt's agricultural land will be lost to informal settlements in the absence of planning or the ability to enforce present laws governing the housing development [5].

This paper aims at investigating the change and evolution of informal settlement upgrading strategies and policies with a focus on the Egyptian context in the period from the 1970s to date. Given the fact that the government's policy to provide citizens with affordable and adequate housing was inefficient and was one of the key causes of the emergence and expansion of informal settlements, the investigation of the adopted policies encompasses both the ones dealing with the causes and the symptoms, a twin track approach as suggested by Payne [6]. Policies targeting the causes are principally discussed in the National policy for providing low cost (social) housing that can be afforded by the urban poor, while the ones targeting the symptoms discuss the upgrading of existing informal settlements and controlling its growth.

The structure of this paper is as follows: The following Section 2 explains the adopted methodology to carry out this research. Section 3 reviews the history of emergence and evolution of informal settlements in relation to political and macro-economic aspects within the Egyptian context. Section 4 explores the adopted approaches, strategies and policies of upgrading informal settlements and provision of affordable housing worldwide. Section 5 is an attempt to map out the changes of upgrading ideologies within the Egyptian context and sheds light on some of the best practices of informal settlements upgrading projects in order to identify the key factors for success and lessons learned from such projects and finally Section 6 includes the discussion and conclusions.

2. Methodology

To carry out this research, the author has adopted two main methods. Firstly, the literature review of publications and official documents is performed to understand the phenomenon of informal settlements and investigate the different academic stances and governments' responses to the challenge of informal urbanization. Secondly, nine semi-structured interviews with the representatives of three groups of stakeholders, who have considerable experience in informal settlements upgrading efforts and the shaping of related policies in Egypt, have been conducted. The stakeholders are: (i) Unit heads at the Informal Settlements Development Facility (ISDF), (ii) Senior officials at the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) Office in Cairo, and (iii) Academic staff members from Ain Shams University, Cairo University and Alexandria University who have had practical experience in informal settlements upgrading projects in Egypt

and have worked with governmental and official organizations such as the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP), ISDF and UN-Habitat. Interviews were carried out separately and were conducted as guided conversations. The main objectives of the interviews were to explore the roles of the different actors involved in shaping the policies and implementing the projects of informal settlement upgrading and whether there is any sort of coordination and cooperation among them. Additionally, the author draws upon her own theoretical and practical experience in the field of informal settlements upgrading since 2007.

3. Origin and evolution of informal settlements within the Egyptian context

Informal settlements within the Egyptian context mostly take one of two forms; (i) expansion on privately-owned agricultural land, principally occurring on the urban fringes, and representing about 80% of informal urbanization, or (ii) squatter settlements on state-owned land, which represents about 15% of informal urbanization in Egypt [7]. For the former, informality does not stem from ownership rights but rather from the illegal conversion of agricultural land to housing as well as the contravention of building laws and regulations [8]. This type is characterized by good building quality and access to most services, while the latter is characterized by considerable variation in building quality, ranging from houses which are one story high and established from make-shift material to high quality cement structures, with an average building height of 6–8 floors and generally the access to services is limited [9]. More details about the formation, typology, characteristics and challenges of informal settlements "Ashwa'iyyat" upgrading can be found in [8–11].

The incidence of informal settlements began after World War II and sped up during the 1960s. For a better understanding of the emergence and growth of informal settlements in Egypt, it is worth mentioning the political and macro-economic driving forces that affected the housing provision in the period prior to the revolution of 1952 and continuing to date. Prior to 1952 housing was never considered a problem. Housing provision was supplied by the formal and mostly by the private sector. After 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser's socialist government started to implement rules to enforce social justice. Thus, a series of laws has been issued to control rents of housing units. Additionally, the public sector assumed a major role in housing supply through local government and public housing companies. The issued laws gave residents more rights over their rented properties and limited the power of property owners in dealing with their properties [1]. These laws resulted in diverting the real-estate market away from rental housing to owner-occupied housing and contributed to the deterioration of the available rental housing stock as property owners stopped investing money in maintenance. Thus, many middle class and low income families were pushed to informal urbanization, which principally took place on agricultural lands at the urban fringes [12]. Another deriving force that played a significant role in the spread of informal settlements was the shift in the economy toward industrialization. Massive industrialization during the 1960s created employment opportunities around large cities, which increased rural–urban influx to Cairo and to the other cities.