Non-state actors in the urbanization process in cities of the Global South

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The image in the cover page shows street life in Ghana, Uganda.

Authors Bio

NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE URBANIZATION PROCESS IN CITIES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Anandit Sachdev and Dana Mazraani in conversation with Ali Madanipour

Anandit Sachdev is a young academic tutor and research fellow at the Jindal School of Art and Architecture, O.P. Jindal University, India. Anandit's teaching and research interests include climate resilience in peri-urban areas, processes of urbanization in the Global South, sustainability in urban design, cartography and urban regeneration. Besides teaching and researching, Anandit is a prolific information designer specializing in the field of data visualization and cartography. In his spare time, Anandit likes to read urban narratives and anthologies.

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CHAPTER 2

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2.1 Introduction

Non-state actors are actively shaping urbanisation processes in cities across the world, while centralized modes of governance are experiencing a reduced role. These non-state actors, ranging from institutions, corporations, international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to civil society actors, are playing conflicting roles in urbanization processes in the Global South; they each have distinctive relationships with the state and with one another. This chapter presents three such distinct roles: that of provision, protest, and profit-making, as adopted by non-state actors in the production of urban space in Beirut, Lebanon, and Gurugram, India. Both case studies critically raise the point of public sector accountability in light of its shrinking role, while examining the increasing role of non-state actors in the production of urban space.

The first section of this chapter investigates how, in Lebanon, civil society groups and grassroots initiatives have resisted undesirable urban development projects initiated by the state, or offered support to local communities, with a focus on the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020. It examines how civil society actors can act as guardians of the public interest against a predatory state or fill the vacuum created by the public sector in supporting the local community. The second section of the chapter analyses the role of another type of non-state actors – private developers and real estate companies – in the process of designing and implementing the master plan of Gurugram, a city in Haryana, India. The case study shows how profit-oriented projects led by non-state actors resulted in the marginalization of underprivileged groups.

2.2 The roles played by civil society groups in relation to the state: the Lebanese context

While the state in Lebanon has played an active role in supporting a boom in the real estate sector that has increasingly benefitted private actors and corporations (Fawaz, 2017; Krinjen and Fawaz, 2010), it has done so at the expense of the natural environment, public and social spaces, and people's livelihoods (Saksouk-Sasso and Bekdache, 2015). Indeed, Lebanon's neoliberal approach to urban planning has increasingly influenced its building law and regulatory frameworks prioritizing private interests over public ones. The state has actively facilitated the circulation of capital at the service of corporate actors closely enmeshed in an 'oligarchic political system' (Harb, 2018; Krinjen and Fawaz, 2010). Conversely, the state has been neglecting its role in providing reliable basic services, infrastructure, public spaces, transportation networks, and affordable housing policies. This has given rise to a myriad of collective reactions by civil society members that have crystalized into urban contestations, mobilizations, and initiatives of varying forms and scales, all converging around similar ideals and demands for a more liveable city (Harb, 2018). In this context of a fragmented state, non-state actors have challenged the status-quo by engaging in counter-campaigns protesting against projects initiated by the state, or by launching initiatives that offer community support – filling a vacuum created by the state's passive role.

To understand why these mobilizations are taking place and in what context, one must first look at the status of urban planning frameworks in Lebanon. Planning has been primarily limited to land use and zoning and has placed less focus on strategies for the future development of the different urban and rural areas of the country. Indeed, the legal systems, planning tools, and institutions have not been revamped since the end of the French mandate in 1943 (UN-Habitat, 2013). In 1977, the Ministry of Planning, which had become inefficient and highly bureaucratic, was dissolved and replaced by an entity known as the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), which advanced more flexible planning and implementation mandates. Over the years, the CDR's position and practices have proven to be highly controversial. Today, urban planning in Lebanon remains limited, centralized, and in dire need of reform.

In the aftermath of the explosion that rocked Beirut on August 4, 2020, which caused hundreds of death, as well as the destruction of livelihoods and property, the intervention of the state is – yet again – very limited and is primarily led by the Lebanese Army. The recovery sector is in the hands of international and local NGOs and local political parties, with no clear coordination, accountability, or long-term vision, let alone a people-centred recovery approach. These circumstances have led multiple grassroots groups to step into the role of relief provision and community support. 'Nation Station' is one of such examples; it relates to a group of youth who squatted an abandoned gas station in the Geitaoui neighbourhood of Beirut to serve as a donation redistribution centre. As of December 2020, the centre has grown to include several relief services, such as a food kitchen and reconstruction services, which employ idle or out of work members of the community. The group also initiated a database of the community's needs that helps to direct NGOs' aid. Furthermore, because of the unreliable and short-term nature of aid, the group's approach has shifted to help the community become self-sustaining, with a motto of 'empowerment over charity' (Nation Station, 2020, slide 13). 'Nation Station' is relying on community relations, partnerships, co-produced knowledge, and squatting private properties, all of which lean towards the radicalization of the urban environment. It is yet to be seen, however, if and how it will institutionalize, whether its approach will be truly inclusive, and what its reach and impact will be.

'Nation Station' is not the first initiative of its kind. Rather, it is part of a series of successful initiatives that have taken place over the past decade, some of which are punctual, but equally impactful. For instance, 'Stop the Highway' (2012-2015) and 'Save the Bisri Valley' (2018-2020) are two counter-campaigns that opposed infrastructural projects initiated by the state – a highway and a mega-dam project respectively – based on obsolete plans from the 1950s and with the CDR as their custodian. Engaged experts and community members led both campaigns successfully, proving the detrimental effects that the respective projects would have on their localities, and their inability to serve as solutions for problems they were claiming to solve (Nassour, 2019). Moreover, 'Horsh Beirut for All' is a campaign launched by local NGO Nahnoo that successfully challenged the Municipality of Beirut to reopen the largest park and pine forest in the city, after it had been closed off for decades for 'unconvincing reasons' (Harb, 2018). After five years of campaigning and lobbying, the park was finally reopened in 2015 establishing itself as one of the main public spaces in the city.

These examples are some of many; cumulatively, they highlight the wide array of responses that civil society groups have advanced in relation to the state's action or inaction and the roles they take on in either protest or support. Their effectiveness owes it to the adoption of new modalities of action and strategies of work, which rely on legal knowledge, the generation of solid data to support their positions, the instrumentalisation of the media, and the reliance on networks (Harb, 2018).

Even though these mobilizations may have had brief or limited success, they can be viewed as negotiations that exert pressure on the system without addressing the structural issues at hand. This section of the chapter argues that with enough aggregation of information and capacity building, local groups can mobilize resources, bring reforms, and hold the people in power accountable. It also highlights how some groups are seeking an alternative to the current system, carving out spaces of their own despite having no counterpart in public institutions. Furthermore, these mobilizations have been accompanied by a rise in the discourse and practice of the "right to the city". The initiatives mentioned above are enabling a new imaginary of the city, one where the social value of land can be recovered, where solidarities and shared space are considered important (Saksouk-Sasso and Bekdache, 2015).

2.3 The case of master plan implementation in Gurugram: the Indian context

Urban development across regions in India is marked by a lack of infrastructure, an unequal distribution of resources leading to inequity, and exhibiting socio-economic disparity as a result of that. These disparities arise due to diminishing public sector accountability in safeguarding public interests, especially those of under-privileged groups. Ahluwalia (2014) observes that the lack of planned development of Indian cities is a result of spatial planning not being central to socioeconomic planning.

Such disparities are evident in the preparation and implementation processes of master plans in India – a process through which the state favours city development for richer segments of society. The Delhi Government's own estimates stipulate that Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the authority in charge of the creation of the city's master plan, has 'overbuilt middle- and higher-income housing while underbuilding housing for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)' (Bhan, 2013; Panwar, 2018). This shows a bias of DDA towards richer sections of society.

While such socioeconomic disparities cannot be neglected, the prioritization of the flow of capital by the state, and the non-participatory nature of the master planning process play significant roles in shaping this lopsided model of urban development. Even though traditional development guidelines place decision-making in the hands of state actors, these groups do not represent the views of many of the city's stakeholders. In addition to this, the lack of public sector accountability stems from the dependence of the state on real estate development to facilitate capital accumulation (Harvey, 2001; Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer, 2012; Pellissery et al., 2016). An increasing shift in the role of the state from providing welfare to its citizens to supporting private investments has fuelled the lack of public sector accountability, which creates marginalized groups. As the state facilitates a pattern of investments in the city by using urban planning and real estate development as tools for economic development, the prioritization of economic development over civic benefits empowers profit oriented

non-state actors to spearhead development projects in the city, while promising little accountability on behalf of state actors themselves. Consequently, private developers and real estate companies end up playing larger roles in urban development processes. Since these groups are profit-oriented, developments led by them are fragmented, and focused on projects that promise a higher return on investment rather than facilitating collective public benefits. Such practices form the very basis of development witnessed in the city of Gurugram (previously Gurgaon), Haryana. Haryana is one of the richest states in India with an estimated GDP growth rate of 7.7% in 2019-20 (Economic Survey of Haryana, 2020). This, along with Gurugram's proximity to Delhi, the capital city, has played majorly to its advantage.

State actors in Gurugram have been involved in the planning processes without much accountability with regards to planning implementation. Goldstein (2015) notes that the establishment of the city's Municipal Corporation (MC) was in 2008 and held its first elections in 2011. The roots of urban development in Gurugram can be traced back to early 1990s, and are largely attributed to private developers developing suburban land driven by economic interests. This over 20-year gap between regulation and development led by economic gains has resulted in fragmented urban development, and has left a huge gap in infrastructure provision for many stakeholders.

Involvement of these non-state actors is not a new phenomenon. Gurugram's urban development model can be traced back to a response to macro level economic reforms that India went through during the early 1990s (Goldstein, 2015). These new economic conditions deregulated the real estate market, and paved the way for private sector-led urbanization in Gurugram. One of the first private development companies responsible for initiating urban development processes in Gurugram was Delhi Land and Finance Corporation (DLF). The company chairman, K.P. Singh, largely used his influence and political networks to get necessary permissions to push through DLF's projects in the area and initiate the development process (Goldstein, 2015). In the years that followed, economic growth coupled with the construction boom of Gurugram validated the state's shift in policies to favour private developers. Consequently, large real estate companies built up huge areas in Gurugram, starting a wave of development. These took the form of high-end residential and commercial projects, which favoured the wealthy while sidelining the interests of other stakeholders (Rajagopalan and Tabarrok, 2014). The absence of a municipal corporation until 2008, further facilitated this private developer-led model of development over guaranteeing public services (Chatterji, 2013; Rajagopalan and Tabarrok, 2014). This contributed majorly towards inequality in the city while raising questions about public sector accountability.

Other non-state actors such as landowners and farmers also played a large part in Gurugram's fragmented development. These actors supported private developer-led models for their own gain by selling their lands to private developers. These deals resulted in a fragmented assimilation of land in the hands of a plethora of private developers, which later resulted in a pixelated development of gated residential neighbourhoods, urban villages, and urban infrastructure (Goldstein, 2015). Additionally, the delivery of urban services and infrastructure has increasingly become privatized and high-priced, leaving some stakeholders to struggle with access to basic services, which would usually be provided

by state agencies (Rajagopalan and Tabarrok, 2014).

This model of urban development has become the norm over the last two decades. Fragmented development has occurred in the city with little public sector accountability towards safeguarding the rights of marginalized groups. This model of urban development renders master planning a rigid planning tool that selectively favours the capital-driven role of non-state actors while ignoring the needs of non-elite stakeholders.

2.4 Conclusion

Cities and urban spaces are sites of contradiction. They are "places where power resides" as well as "settings of struggle" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 386). This chapter focuses on the contradicting roles of provision, protest, and profit-making, as adopted by non-state actors in the production of urban space in the Global South. In the case of Gurugram, we observed that the actors were profit-driven and further noted that their actions resulted in the creation of a lopsided model of development, which exerts or exacerbates negative externalities such as urban poverty, environmental issues, lack of urban infrastructure, and privatized public spaces. Such practices have been challenged by alternative groups of non-state actors as seen in the case of Lebanon, where civil society groups have sought to fill the vacuum created by the state and have also opposed and resisted undesirable urban development through debate and negotiations with the public sector.

Such contradictions in the roles played by a plethora of state and non-state actors have further shaped the production of urban space, giving rise to new vocabularies in planning practices in the Global South and questions about the role of planning today. What is the role of planners amid disparity between state priorities and community interests? And how does one envision a future in a context marred with deeply entrenched structural issues, untrustworthy public institutions, and economic crises?

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