Building urban livelihoods: two generations in an unauthorized settlement in Damascus
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CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

Over the last four decades, cities - especially those in the developing world - have been expanding exponentially. With this growth in ‘urbanization’ and as a consequence of a rise in urban poverty, the issue of urban problems is now a topic of international importance. It is estimated that the world’s urban population will grow from 2.86 billion in 2000 to 4.98 billion by 2030 (UN-Habitat, 2003). Of this, nearly two billion people are currently living in urban areas of developing countries and over half live below the poverty line. Thus together with this surge in the urban population growth and the pressures associated with it we are likely to see what I like to term the ‘urbanization of poverty’. The physical and spatial manifestation of increasing urban poverty and intra-city inequality can be characterised by the slum. However, according to UN Habitat, there is no clear and internationally recognized operational definition of the slum. ‘Other notions were used instead to document the existence of slums: percentage of population living in unauthorized settlements, the durability, equality and size of housing units, the level of basic services (…). While slum dwellers in the developed world constitute 6% of the urban population, in developing countries they account for a staggering 42% of the urban populace’ (UN-Habitat, 2003:6). Five components reflect conditions that characterise slums: insecure status; inadequate access to safe water; inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure; poor structural quality of housing; overcrowded (Ibid).

The case study in this book reveals some of these components and instead of using the term ‘slum’, I will be using the term ‘unauthorized settlement’. This will be defined in this work as a residential area, which has developed without permission from the concerned authorities to build. Settlers in Duelha are in fact experimenting with a semi-legal status: they either own a parcel of agricultural land which they put to use as a housing unit; or they rent it from private owners. In both case, the use of the land as residential area is occurring without permission from the Syrian authorities.

Many studies have been carried out into life in and the causes of urban slums, beginning with the Chicago school studies in the Twenties. The Chicago school represents a classic approach based on the main idea that urban studies and its way of life must be addressed. It included many famous scholars such as Park et al, who published his book The City (1925), Wirth (1925), B.H. Zorbaugh (1929) and later Whyte (1955), Lewis (1968) and others. More recently, studies of slums and/or unauthorized settlements, around the world have added to our knowledge, not only as classical urban studies but also as links with the phenomena of development and more specifically with livelihood strategies in both rural and urban areas. Recent studies combine a focus on rural-urban migration, urbanisation, urban poverty and livelihood. Examples of studies concentrating on the livelihoods of slum inhabitants include those by Moser, who studied four slums in Latin America (1996). Other relevant studies focused on the physical mobility of slum inhabitants,
concentrating mainly on housing needs and its relevant aspects. These studies include that by Van Lindert who examined the mobility and the market of the real estate in the poor areas of La Paz (van Lindert, 1991).

Table 1-1: Population living in slums in 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Areas</th>
<th>Total Population (million)</th>
<th>Total Urban Population (million)</th>
<th>Urban population (as % of total population)</th>
<th>Urban Slums (as % of urban population)</th>
<th>Urban Slums population (million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>5,255</td>
<td>6,134</td>
<td>2,286</td>
<td>2,923</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed regions</td>
<td>1,148</td>
<td>1,194</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing regions</td>
<td>4,106</td>
<td>4,940</td>
<td>1,439</td>
<td>2,022</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Developed Countries</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UN-Habitat, 2003

While the above studies are numerous, multi-dimensional in approach and cover large communities in diverse areas of the world, there have been only a small number of studies that have focussed on slums or unauthorized settlements in the Middle East. Egypt is the exception, however, and several investigations have been carried out in Cairo. As the metropolitan Cairo area increased from 2.4 million in 1965 to about 10 million in 2004, inhabitants in this large city suffered from the rapid urbanization, partly due to the fact that the growth of available housing did not keep pace with the urban growth. The deficit of housing combined with Egypt’s prominence in the Middle East has therefore attracted many scholars to study poor communities’ livelihoods in their localities (Al Husaini, 1991; Singermann, 1995; Hoodfar, 1996; Awad, 1997).

Syria is a different case and only a few studies can be found that address the issue of urbanization. The few existing studies deal mainly with rural migration and the housing crisis in Damascus, including outlying areas and unauthorized settlements (Jawish, 1977; Rabdawi, 1993; Dergham, 2001). While the problem of congested areas and a lack of suitable physical housing have been both recognized by scholars and government, the livelihoods of the urban inhabitants have largely been ignored.

This study focuses in general on urban conditions in Syria and in particular on the livelihoods of people living in one of the unauthorized settlement slums called Duelha in the capital city Damascus. Over the years, Damascus has attracted a large number of migrants from other cities and rural areas. According to the Syrian historian Jarjur Tawfik (1980), the most prominent causes of Syrian migration towards Damascus consisted of Palestinian refugees flows, the pull of educational opportunities, industrial and commercial activities, and the push of a high birth rate in rural areas and socio-economic causes such as widespread poverty. In order to achieve the study objectives, I lived and
worked in this unauthorized settlement and observed the daily life of the local community. I focused specifically on households and courtyards, the main units of the social system. Within these social units, I traced the livelihood strategies that people adopt and how they succeed in managing their daily life in a new habitat. In contrast with most of the previous studies on Damascus, which are based mainly on statistical and census data, this study is to my knowledge the first to be carried out which gives a picture of a 'living' slum, or the daily struggle of a community living in an unauthorized settlement. It shows how individuals and families create and build their livelihood.