MICRO-PLANS VS SLUM UPGRADING:
Facing the Challenge of Regenerating Informal Settlements

V. Monno, V. Cosma
Dipartimento di Ingegneria dell’Ambiente e per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile
II Facoltà di Ingegneria - Politecnico di Bari
Taranto, Italy

ABSTRACT

Under the pressure of increasing tough global competition and due to the weaknesses characterising the traditional slum upgrading approach, more and more often, the ‘do nothing’ or evictions are used as the most rapid ways of solving the ‘informal settlement’ problem. To counter this trend in this paper we hint at the requirement of looking beyond slum upgrading and experimenting with new solutions. Drawing on the criticisms of this approach as well as a project carried out by the Bari (Italy) group of Engineers Without Frontiers NGO in Kamza, a Municipality at the edge of the metropolitan area of Tirana in Albania, we maintain that such an approach can only solve some ‘technical’ problems; this however leaves dramatic social, economic and environmental problems pervading the informal settlements’ everyday life unchanged. Finally, we propose slum upgrading as a participative regeneration micro-plan whose contents strongly depend on the context in which it has to be developed, but whose goals should be an integration of upgrading solutions and the strategy of urban development, legalization and spatial reorganization of the slum and its rehabilitation.

Key words: Slum upgrading, micro-plan, place, relational.
Introduction

The formation of innovative strategies aimed at managing and regenerating informal settlements is one of the most crucial challenges which many cities in developing countries have to face to promote a more sustainable and appropriate urban development. The slum upgrading approach seemed to offer a viable, even partial, solution to this challenge. Involving people in participative planning processes would have allowed their needs, desires and priorities to shape the future development of their neighbourhoods. Proposing plans of regularization, mobilizing human and economic resources, and incentivizing informal economies would have empowered local communities and discouraged local governments to take evictive actions as well as strengthening the local economy. First adopted in the 80s, it has been increasingly used in many informal settlements all over the world, and, according to the experts, is now considered to be a key tool in making informal settlements liveable. Despite it being repeatedly adapted to lessons learned through experience, the ‘do nothing’ and eviction approaches often continue to be the local governments’ preferred methods of solving the ‘slum’ problem. If however this can be ascribed to an increasing tough global competition, it also arises from a pervasive distrust in the real potentialities of such an approach in transforming informal settlements into a formal city. Criticisms on its efficacy abound in literature (Abbot, 2002). Most of them focus on its inability to cope with legalization issues or highlight how it is only able to produce minor improvements in the material everyday life of the poor. Others argue that by raising local land values it has led to gentrification processes that eventually push target groups out only to establish new slums elsewhere. It has also deepened people’s distrust in public institutions, NGOs and International Organizations by making instrumental use of the participatory process (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Furthermore, some of these institutions maintain that by celebrating urban informality, this approach distracts people’s attention from everyday social injustices and the denial of human rights. By ignoring the source of the dramatic social, economic and environmental problems pervading everyday life in informal settlements, this approach can make the illness tolerable, but does not cure it (Kothari and Mongue, 2002). To sum up, slum upgrading can be seen as in some way co-implicated in the propagation of informal settlements (Esho et al, 2007). Although all these criticisms have instilled a new wave of realism in upgrading discourses and practices which are now focusing on issues concerning ‘secure tenure’ and the most suitable associated funding mechanisms, its emphasis on the short-term rather than the long-term and its downgrading of the importance of physical (land-use) planning still persists. Drawing on these criticisms, in what follows we argue for an approach to the regeneration of informal settlements which bridges the slum upgrading short term perspective to a long term strategy of urban development. This is aimed at legalization, spatial reorganization and social integration of the slum in relation to the urban environment in which it has been growing and whose contents strongly depend on the context in which it has to be developed. Our hypothesis has emerged as a critical reflection on an upgrading project which was carried out by the Bari group
Regenerating Informal Settlements

EWF NGO in Kamza. The paper begins with a brief description of the origins of informal settlements in Tirana then goes on to highlight the structural weaknesses of EWF project. Finally, it argues the need for reframing the well-established slum upgrading understanding as a micro-plan approach. Far from thinking of a micro-plan as the right solution to such a wicked problem, we suggest that the development of regeneration micro-plans can be a starting point in challenging uneven urban developments and in trying to experiment with more appropriate management options of informal settlements.

Informal Settlements in Tirana: Origins, Problems and Solutions

Tirana is the capital of Albanian. As well known this country is still grappling with a difficult transition from the communist regime to the capitalist. In the 90s, after the collapse of the communist regime, a new phase of urban development started in Tirana. It was shaped on the rapid privatization of property ownership, which occurred in the absence of any accountable planning system or accountable national program of rural lands and housing estate privatization (UNEP, 200). This caused increasing immigration flows from the countryside to the city (Table 1) and the emergence of a vast amount of homeless households. Several years after the collapse of the communist regime, one third of the national population lived in Tirana (Fig. 1). According to informal statistics which take into account illegal immigration flows, the population living in the Tirana region doubled in only seven years: between 1990 and 1997 its population increased from 347,500 inhabitants to 600,000.

Table 1 Urban population growth in Tirana (Source: INSTAT, Census 1989 and 2001).

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<tr>
<th>Population by district</th>
<th>Population by city *</th>
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<tr>
<td>Main districts..... 1989..... 2001</td>
<td>Main cities....1989.....2001</td>
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<td>Tirana......... 368,213....523,150</td>
<td>Tirana...... 238,057... 343,078</td>
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Under the pressure of such a demographic growth, the urban development was mainly informal. The expansion of informal settlements in the Tirana region and the Municipality was impressive (Figure ). In fact, the Master Plan of Tirana which had been adopted in 1990 and which is still the only legally binding document governing this city’s urban development, was unable to provide support to or solutions for the tremendous transformation caused by both the changed structure of property ownership, property rights and immigration flows (Zanfì, 2007). At the same time, incomplete cadastral coverage, obsolete records, confused property rights and a shortage of affordable building plots were underlying factors that favoured development throughout the Tirana region within informal zones (Driscoll, Lee-Chuvala, Shutina 2007). In 1999, 95% of the housing estate had been illegally constructed (ISPU, 1999). As far as the municipality is concerned, informal
settlements spread around the northern edge of the city in the abandoned rural land once managed by farmers’ cooperatives. Tirana’s built-up area grew from 12km2 in 1990 to 56km2 in 2002 (Sergi, 2004). If its population had doubled in thirteen years, in ten years its urbanized area had quintupled, its main axis being the Durazzo and Kamza road. Just as in other developing countries, in Tirana too, the former informal settlements are an agglomeration of shanty houses where the poorest strata of the Albanian population live (Fig. ). Most informal settlements have been constructed in environmentally degraded areas lacking hydraulic, sanitation and transportation infrastructures. They are overcrowded, unhealthy and localized in Tirana’s northern peripheral areas. In them, the illegality assumes two different kinds: i) houses are built on illegally occupied plots; ii) houses are built illegally on owned land plots.

During recent years, informal settlements in Tirana have changed: they have become a mixture of shanty houses and multilevel detached houses (Fig.2 ). Tenure rebuilds among the squatters have been upgraded from the original shanty houses to detached houses where the number of floors has increased along with their income. These informal settlements are now on the urban outskirts of Tirana. Nowadays, the most overcrowded and problematic informal settlements in the Tirana metropolitan area are Breglumasi, Lapraka, Bathore – Kamza, Frutikultura. Only 20% of their inhabitants can count on a secure tenure and income, while most of the population has a precarious minimum income. A very small number of families own a small enterprise. Their poor urban and environmental quality has dramatic consequences on their health. Children are the most vulnerable since they spend most of their time in these settlements’ unhealthy streets. Between 1995-1998, due to both emerging conflicts concerning the land property rights and an increasing pressure to regenerate it in order to make it competitive in a globalised world, the informal settlements became a visible phenomenon in Tirana. The National Government decided to start taking decisive action with the aim of returning plots to their previous owners and regenerating Tirana.

“The first demolitions started rather as an attempt by the state authorities to show their resolution in the matter. The demolition work was welcomed by the population. Public confidence in the seriousness and resolution of the
authorities to set forth zoning regulations, depends on the attitude the authorities take for major zones of illegal building in the capital city, such as in the Rinia park and along the banks of the Lana river, where much green space in the city centre was destroyed by well-off informal enterprises. The authorities were extremely harsh in their reaction. The buildings in question were demolished within a relatively short period of time and there was little resistance. But there were considerable economic losses involved. A survey carried out by students of the Polytechnical University of Tirana showed that along a four kilometre stretch of the Lana in Tirana, there were about 550 unauthorized buildings, the equivalent of a physical investment volume of US$ 6 million, not counting the economic spin-off effect of the economic activities carried out, employment and tax revenue. This constitutes quite a large profit that might have gone to the local authorities if the investments had originally been carried out in a legal manner.” (HDPC, 2002: pp. 86)

![Figure 2](image)

However, the economic and social costs associated with the eviction policy discouraged the National Government from continuing with such an approach. In 1995 with the support of USAID, the Tirana Land Management Task Force was established to begin identifying new urban initiatives in order to respond to problems and conflicts characterising the rapid growth of Tirana. In mid-1997, after an extensive policy dialogue between the World Bank and the Government, the Government decided to start regularization (urbanization) of the informal settlements by providing access to urban and social infrastructure, and launching the implementation of the World Bank financed Urban Land Management Project (ULMP). As a necessary precondition for these improvements, a special law was passed in order to exempt some areas from restitution of the original lands to previous owners in two informal settlements that had been chosen as pilot areas (Bathore and Lapraka) (World Bank, 2007).

“The project was modestly successful. On the positive side, it played a catalytic role in urbanization and the eventual integration of Bathore through
defining the right of the way within the informal settlements, and enabling extension of infrastructure networks such as access roads, water supply, and sewage. At the same time, the project attracted other donors who provided financing for schools and kindergartens. The project also provided a demonstration of practice in developing informal settlements and developed a database for the current occupants to assist in future legalization. On the other hand, however, the project was not able to help the residents in the informal settlements obtain a clear title, as it has been found that there are many types of existing land tenure and a single prescription cannot be adopted to legalize them. The cost of urbanization and integration, mostly civil works for infrastructure networks, were significant but not out of line with experience of other countries for this kind of investment”. (World Bank, 2007).

In 1998 via the ULMP programme, the World Bank funded the Strategic Development Plan for Greater Tirana. It aims to boost economic growth and improve the quality of life and infrastructure system of the Capital. Specifically, the plan proposes to revitalize the land market in the increasingly scarce urban land by increasing urban density and the control of urban sprawl.

As far as slum upgrading projects are concerned, only very few have been implemented in Tirana. The most successful ones are Co-PLAN\(^1\) in Breglumasi (which was awarded as ‘best practice’ by UNCHS in 1998) and Strengthening Capacities of Communities in Need in Albania in Bathore/Kamza.

An Upgrading Project in the Informal Municipality of Kamza

The following short portraits of the Kamza Municipality explains why in the spring of 2006 a group of students and volunteers from the NGO EWF (Engineers without Frontiers) from Bari – Italy, who had already been involved as experts in other informal settlement rehabilitation projects in Albania, went to Kamza to formulate their own slum upgrading proposal for a particularly disadvantaged area of this Municipality (Fig. 3).

At the beginning of the 90’s Kamza was a rural area located ten kilometres form Tirana. Over the following years it was transformed by about 60,000 migrants into one of the most problematic informal settlements. In fact, in the collective imagery it has become known as the “dirty dish.” The urbanization of Kamza was triggered by different factors including the lack of housing and vacant building plots in the city, and its strategic location in the transportation infrastructure system. In 1996, in order

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\(^1\) Co-PLAN emerged since 1995 out of an upgrading program supported by donor organisations, carrying out activities in the field of social development and infrastructure improvement in the low-income neighbourhood of Breglumasi, Tirana. Nowadays, Co-PLAN is a professional NGO.
Regenerating Informal Settlements

Figure 3 The EWF Slum Upgrading Project in Kamza

Surprisingly, this plan underestimates issues concerning both quality of life and legalization. Although it proposes a controlled urban development and new improved hydraulic, sanitation and transportation infrastructure, issues such as housing and urban rehabilitation, or the opportunities to link the informal to the formal city, and Kamza to Tirana are not touched upon. It also promotes legalization only in some areas leaving the others in a sort of limbo. Consequently, as far as the regeneration of the informal settlements is concerned, it is left to voluntarism, the private initiative or to slum upgrading programmes funded by diverse donors to deal with. For example, in 2004, the “Urban Development and Environmental Requalification in the Municipality of Kamza by means of public/private cooperation and civil society participation” was promoted in collaboration with Co-PLAN.

The upgrading project which was carried out by EWF-Bari is the result of the cooperation between this group of volunteers and the Kamza Municipal government. Specifically, EWF prepared a rehabilitation project for a small but particularly degraded area of this municipality in order to make it more sustainable. This area, which resembles the mixed landscape of many other Albanian informal settlements, is characterised by the coexistence of legal and illegal tenures, shanty houses and finished as well as unfinished multilevel detached houses clumped together in a semi-urban environment lacking any urban infrastructure. As usual, the construction of hydraulic, sanitation and transportation minimal infrastructure, and the improvement of the quality of the shanty houses are problems that also need to be resolved in this
area. In order to find viable technical solutions to these problems, the EWF project was organized into two phases. The first was a participatory analysis of both local problems and solutions that the people living in these areas had already invented to survive. The second one was indeed conceived as an expert matter: Basing their solutions on their participatory analysis, the EWF volunteers prepared a plan listing a set of eco-compatible and viable technical solutions to this context’s problems and needs, and divided it into four main fields of action: waste, water, energy and housing. They proposed a plan detailing: i) how to carry out rational waste recycling, energy saving, and rainwater storage and reusing; ii) ecological materials to rehabilitate shanty houses and the re-pavement of streets in order to cover and separate them from open drain sewers and so on.

In the Pursuit of ‘the Missing’

Once back in Italy and the project finished, an ambiguous feeling about this experience started creeping in to our consciousness. On the one hand, we felt proud of being involved in it. On the other hand, we perceived that something was missing. Thus, we decided to critically revise the project and find ‘the missing.’ We went through all the material we had produced during the participatory analysis and the project itself a second time. Criticisms mentioned above about slum upgrading immediately resurfaced in our minds. Although the project was a minor voluntary effort which had not been funded by any donors and thus influenced by them, it showed many of the pitfalls embedded in other slum upgrading projects. Again and again, it did not open any window of opportunity to act on structural causes at the base of informal settlement creation and propagation. It was just a short-term project downgrading the importance of the place itself. Through a process of reviewing interviews and our own memories, what we discovered missing was a place at the intersection of a transition not yet finished. We had missed the complexity of the ‘space’ or the ‘place’ which is embedded in even such a small place as this (Atkinson, Millstein, Oldfield and Stokke, 2003). To quote Massey, we could say that the project was lacking a relational conception of place (Massey, 1994). I

The small area upgraded by the EWF volunteers appeared in the project as an enclave of hope and despair whose informality had been presumed to be already known. As such, it had deserved the adaptation of pre-existing solutions for the sake of a very ambiguous concept such as sustainability (Gunder, 2007). The slum upgrading approach acted as a multicultural framework (Schön and Rein, 1994) which hid the complexity of the problems to be resolved. The emphasis of the EWF project on technical solutions implied an acceptance of working within an area seen as a void context, meaning a sort of enclave of humanity and inhumanity with no relation to other places and processes. As with any other critical analysis, it stimulated us to search for possibilities to break the impasse by taking into account a relational conception of place which we identified in the many conflicts emerging from the
review of the project, interviews and memories. Obviously, conflicts concerning land use, legalization and accessibility have emerged recurrently in our analysis. For example, the mix of shanty houses and finished/unfinished houses was reported in both the interviews and our memories as a new conflict between the poor, an emerging middle class and a new reach class of people each requiring (depending on their social status and property rights) specific solutions aimed at turning this informal environment into an urban landscape. On closer examination, it appeared that only a few households live in shanty houses, their primary desire being to have a decent house and job and not seeing their shelter improved by even a little. Similar comments could be made about the use of public spaces. In turn, these conflicts show the absence of any connection between EWF projects and the Strategic Plan. This last point could be reinterpreted in the light of emerging conflict as a way to attract capital. Its ambiguity regarding legalization could be seen as a will to ‘do nothing’ in order to make the plan more flexible to capital investment. To make these conflicts visible we have decided not to limit our efforts to drawing a simple map of them.

**Figure 4** A micro-plan for a small informal settlement in Kamza

What we propose is a micro-plan (Fig.4) in which each regenerative action is associated with a specific conflict. For example, the plan suggests demolishing rather than improving the shanty houses, cleaning the degraded sites, converting them for social use, and moving their households to public buildings to be built in the same area. Conflicts of property rights and accessibility are associated with them. From our perspective, the micro-plan is not the right solution but only a starting point which challenges uneven urban development and tries to experiment with more appropriate management options. The micro-plan is only a track.

**Conclusion**

This paper maintains that slum upgrading can only solve some ‘technical’ problems characterising informal settlements contingently and argues for looking beyond it and experimenting with new solutions. This push, from our perspective, emerges from both theory and practice. The story of the EWF project in Kamza and our proposal of replacing it with a participative micro plan support such a need. The EWF project
shows how slum upgrading, by acting as a multicultural framework, risks hiding the complexity of the problems to be solved. Our proposal to revitalize slum upgrading as a participative regeneration micro-plan pushes to reconnect problems and solutions with specific places. The idea of a micro plan hints at the necessity of reconsidering the contents of our actions as being strongly dependent on the context at hand and calibrating upgrading solutions to visible and invisible strategies of urban development, legalization and spatial reorganization of the slum and its rehabilitation. A micro-plan does not hold solutions; it looks for them by drawing on repertoires of expertise and experience. It doesn’t forget that any rehabilitation or regeneration proposal is the place of contentious politics and not just a quick-fix tool to solve problems which are presumed to be already known. Far from thinking of a micro-plan as the right solution to such a wicked problem, we suggest that the development of regeneration micro-plans can be a starting point in challenging uneven urban development and in trying to experiment with more appropriate management options of informal settlements.

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