Inequalities in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region (Argentina): Tensions in Public Policy Guidelines destined to the Informal Settlements

AUTHOR

María Mercedes DI VIRGILIO, UGA, CONICET (Argentine)

ABSTRACT

The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region is defined as a heterogeneous and unequal area. Public actions and strategies, market and social actions, have an impact on the configuration of the Metropolitan Region. The different action logics interact with each other and, thus, configure and compose territorialities that challenge the socio-urban integration and coherence guidelines that public policies intend to promote from different government levels. To explore the guidelines that lead the implementation of those initiatives and their effects on the territory constitute a key factor to understand the production of such inequalities. Those initiatives –in their interaction with the territory– crystallise in different territorialities: on the one hand, the formal, commoditised, and globally integrated city. On the other, the popular city, informal, overcrowded, with important infrastructure deficits, etc. This paper focuses on the forms of integration achieved (or not) by popular urbanisations located in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region. It intends to account for the measure in which public policies and interventions achieve (or not) the integration of those territories to the formal city.

KEYWORDS

Urban inequalities, Informal settlements, Public policy

RÉSUMÉ

L'aire métropolitaine de Buenos Aires peut être définie comme un espace hétérogène et inégal. Les actions et stratégies d'initiative publique, privée ou sociale ont une incidence sur la configuration du territoire métropolitain. Les différentes logiques d'action qui configurent et composent les territorialités interagissent entre elles et mettent au défi les orientations d'intégration et de cohésion socio-urbaines que les politiques publiques, à partir des différentes instances du gouvernement, cherchent à promouvoir. Dans ce cadre, entreprendre des recherches sur les orientations qui sous-tendent la mise en place de ces initiatives, et ses effets sur le territoire, constitue un élément clé pour comprendre comment se construisent les inégalités. Les différentes initiatives – en regard de leur interaction avec le territoire – se cristallisent dans des territorialités distinctes : d'une part, la ville formelle, aux services publics et privés globalement intégrés et, d'autre part, la ville populaire, informelle, surpeuplée, avec d'importants déficits d'infrastructure, etc. Notre travail se concentre sur les formes populaires d'intégration urbanistiques réussies (ou non) au sein de l'aire métropolitaine de Buenos Aires. Ainsi, le propos est d'essayer de rendre compte dans quelle mesure les politiques et les interventions publiques parviennent à promouvoir (ou non) l'intégration de ces territoires au cœur de la ville formelle.

MOTS CLÉS

Inégalités urbaines, politiques publiques, urbanisation d'origine informelle

INTRODUCTION

The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region covers more than 15,000 km^2 and, according to 2010 census data, it houses a total population of 14,935,402 inhabitants: 37% of the country's total population concentrated in less than 4% of the national territory. Within the Region, the city of Buenos Aires registers a population of 2,891,082 inhabitants; the first ring, 5,045,783 inhabitants; the second one 4,864,499 inhabitant and the third one, 2,134,038 inhabitants (map 1). It is a heterogeneous and unequal area. Public actions and strategies, market and social actions, have an impact on its configuration. The different action logics interact with each other and, thus, configure and compose territorialities that challenge the socio-urban integration and coherence guidelines that public policies intend to promote from different government levels. Within this framework, to explore the guidelines that lead the implementation of those initiatives and their effects on the territory constitute a key factor to understand the production of such inequalities.

Map 1. Región Metropolitana de Buenos Aires, Aglomeración Gran Buenos Aires (city and municipality), 2001
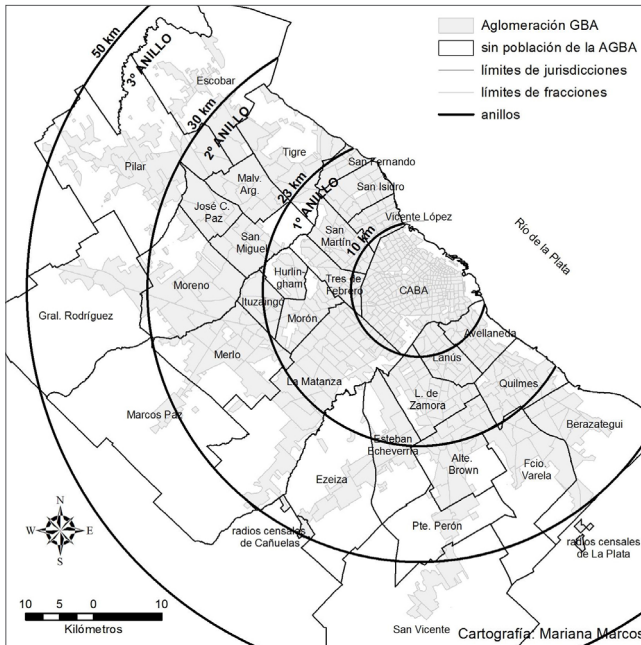
Source: Marcos (2015)

Within this framework, public, market and social initiatives –in their interaction with the territory– interact and crystallise in different territorialities: on the one hand, the formal, commoditized and globally integrated city. On the other, the popular city, informal, over-crowded, with important infrastructure deficits, etc. This paper focuses on the forms of integration achieved (or not) by popular urbanizations located in the Buenos Aires

Metropolitan Region. It intends to account for the measure in which public policies and interventions achieve the integration of those territories to the formal city. If it were so, the question is how they do it and what forms of integration they may produce. If they do not achieve it, then the question is "why not?".

This work is based on quali-quantitative information gathered within a major multi-city comparative research project[1] about housing and household dynamics in (former) irregular settlements that have consolidated over a period of thirty or more years. The results of this study have been recently published (Ward *et al.*, 2014). Based on the results of the research, the actions displayed in popular urbanizations of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region and their consequences in terms of integration and socio-urban cohesion are re-examined.

1. PUBLIC INTERVENTIONS IN THE METROPOLITAN TERRITORY

The 2001-2002 crisis marked a breaking point in terms of the prevailing pattern of accumulation, and produced its deep reformulation. The resulting accumulation regime stressed the importance of internal aggregate demand, of industrialisation and, particularly, of commodities exports as source of currency to keep a controlled balance of trade and to break up the historical external restrictions. Within this context, since 2002, the State actively intervened in the regulation of economic activities and in the provision of various goods and services. In the same way, public investment increased considerably by promoting, either directly or indirectly, strong territorial transformations through a sustained increase of social public expenditure. These initiatives evidence a recovery of the role of the State as a fundamental social actor in socioeconomic activities, not only as a mere regulator, but also as a producer and provider of goods and services.

Since then, the "marks" left by State action on the territory tended to multiply. Unfortunately, they did so within a framework that may be characterized as one of fragmentation and disarticulation, not only among its different levels, but also between different organizations standing at the same level. A renewed trend arose towards the centralisation of social policies, marking a certain tension with the unfinished decentralization process, reformulating it partially. Therefore, a large part of the decentralisation process carried out during the 90s responded to the need to reduce the national government's tax burden, so that the establishment of articulation instances for decentralised policies geared to avoid segmentation and fragmentation that deepen territorial inequalities were left pending. Within this framework, the main social policies carried out during the last stage were marked by the leading role played by the National State. Rodríguez *et al.* (2007) have named this phenomenon a "decentralizing turn" in the field of social sciences, a feature that may be extended to social policies. Thus, socio-territorial policies multiplied, promoted by state bodies through different plans that require the articulation between provincial and municipal government levels, producing a renewed and marked presence of the State in popular neighbourhoods. The same situation may

---

1   This paper was developed within the framework of the project "The rehabilitation of consolidated irregular settlements in Latin American Cities: Towards a 'third generation' of public policy analysis and development", developed by the Latin American Housing Network (LAHN) between 2006 and 2013, directed by Peter Ward (University of Texas, Austin) and coordinated in Argentina by María Mercedes Di Virgilio.

be pointed out regarding the relationship between provincial and municipal governments, particularly in those provinces that count on a greater margin for manœuvre in relation to the availability of their own resources to generate public policies.

Nevertheless, unlike other sectors, in dealing with the processes of habitat production, the public guidelines left urban growth to the detours of the market, as a clear continuity of the neoliberal period. Since the actions of private agents on the territory –urban developers, pirate plot dealers, and small informal financiers– only addressed a limited proportion of the demand, this situation produced new land occupations and conflicts over the appropriation of urban space. Conflicts over access to the land extended during the last decade, both in rural areas due to the agro-exports boom and in urban areas as a product of real estate valuation, speculative practices, and a lack of adequate regulations.

In this way, a scenario is configured in which public action, in spite of its recent revitalization, always arrives ex post, in a disarticulate and fragmented manner, trying to consolidate what is informally generated in those territories that are still produced today under the sign of neoliberalism. In order to revert this logic, it is not enough to "send down" State resources for universal or targeted social policies, but to change the manners and mechanisms used for the production of urban space. Therefore, the challenges that face integral public action are still pending.

2. MAIN RESULTS

The housing federal policy launched by the government of Nestor Kirchner aimed at rewriting the country's housing history under the guidelines and interventions of the Federal Plan for Housing Construction in its different forms. In the 24 municipalities that constitute the conurbation of the City of Buenos Aires, the foreseen intervention equated the demographic growth of the last inter-censual period, while the volume of housing solutions[2] equalled that of the housing interventions carried out during the last 27 years (1976-2003). Within the context of scarce urban land –a characteristic feature of the region- the Housing Institute of the Province of Buenos Aires implemented the federal housing policy under the form of "Urban Land and Project" that solves land acquisition for social housing through the market and by means of building firms[3]. This kind of implementation in the country's most populated and extended metropolitan region produced effects in the production of urban space and in its citizens´ everyday life. During the period 2003-2010, the federal housing policy did not imply a breakdown of the market logics in the assignment of intra-urban residential localisations for the lower income population sectors. On the contrary, it widely recognised the market as an efficient mechanism for the allocation of urban land. "The position of social housing within the socio-spatial structure is not neutral, since it is produced by a mercantile and institutional relationship as from which the [city's] complex value in use is asymmetrically distributed" (del Río, 2010:14). At the same time, these disadvantageous locational positions necessarily articulate within the

---

2   Particularly between 2004 and 2007.

3   Within a context of recession and economic crisis, the housing policy was not only an answer to a persistent housing deficit, but even more so it was a development tool for extra-sectorial intervention strategies. It was basically a policy for the building of public works using intensive labour that operated concomitantly as employment policy and social restraint. Thus, housing production was conceived as a road that would enable to exit from the crisis.

inhabitants' housing trends and produce a negative impact in terms of the accumulated locational capital[4].

The implementation of the federal housing policy evidenced, once again, the central tensions in which the issue of urban-housing exclusion-inclusion is defined: *who, and how, appropriates the urban rent produced by the state action and the social collective*. State interventions within the territory produce important *marks* in the daily life of popular sector families as well as in their habitat, inasmuch as they contribute to define *opportunity structures* that enable them to face their daily life's requirements. Access to *opportunity structures* is linked, on the one hand, to the characteristics of the land market segment and the kind of habitat in which the families carry out their daily life and, on the other, to their *localisation conditions* associated to different ways to access land, services, urban equipment, working places, etc. Thus, *opportunities associated to localisation* introduce important social differences among dwelling places and, also, among their inhabitants, constituting, in this way, a critical factor of socio-spatial stratification (Di Virgilio, 2011).

This and other interventions, intrinsically positive, were mainly fostered by the national government but they were not articulated with land management plans headed by local governments, thus generating an important mismatch between available resources and legal planning and land use regulations powers. In fact, the federal housing policy was implemented, in most cases, disjointed from a production policy and a recovery of urban land, as well as interventions in the real estate market –purchases, sales and rents. This mismatch deepened the determination of political mediation authorities, increasing the importance of alignments and the logic of political accumulation among different State levels. Within this framework, the municipalities politically aligned with the national government received larger resources than those of the political opposition. The mismatch of interventions gained in some of the cases, thus fragmenting and segmenting the territory.

It is important to note that in some originally informal neighbourhoods (shanty towns and settlements), federal housing plans were articulated with initiatives geared to domain regularization and to the improvement of the neighbourhoods. The domain regularization processes are subject to a very complex implementation due to the multiple regulations and the heterogeneity of the actors involved (state, political and community) (Herzer and Pirez, 1994). The definition of land use is a prerogative of municipalities and of the City of Buenos Aires so that the first interlocutor, or one of the most important ones, involved in the regularisation processes are the local governments. Nevertheless,

---

4   "According to Abramo (2006) the families can dispose of a locational capital that appreciates/devaluates in time according to the relative localization within the permanent reconfiguration of the map of urban externalities and the long term intra-neighborhood qualification. When they have to take a decision, families make inter-temporary budget calculations that follow the relative position of their capital (property-dwelling) within the intra-urban hierarchy, they evaluate the benefits/losses of their residential mobility (possible territorial displacement from the family residential unit) in the intra-urban structure. The repositioning of that capital may mean both an ascending mobility for the family as well as stagnation of their quality of life. Nevertheless, stagnation in the urban locational hierarchy does not necessarily mean a decrease in the family's welfare or vice versa. A displacement towards the periphery translates into a monetary gain that, then, translates into a bigger residential surface, and at the same time into larger transport costs, but also into a potential social uprooting. Thus, the movements in the accessibility map are related with the consumption of space, the time taken by displacements, the neighborhood's externalities, the history of neighborhood consolidation, among other factors" (del Río, 2010:11).

the national government and the government of the province of Buenos Aires are large landowners and usually where informal urbanizations are settled. Thus, owners must comply with the transfer of land domain to local governments so that the process may proceed.

In general terms, the municipalities of the Province of Buenos Aires have been much more permissive than the City of Buenos Aires regarding land occupation –even reaching the stage of designing or adapting specific regulations towards that end. In fact, for a long time, the City of Buenos Aires showed much more erratic actions in this area and it even implemented explicit eradication policies. Since the democratic recovery, although the City has implemented explicit settlement policies in informal neighbourhoods, their advancement has been quite meagre. Formally, the settlement and urbanisation of shanty towns is present in all programmes and regulations approved during the last two decades. Nevertheless, the actual implementation of assigned budgets and the progress in works show a lack of political willingness to definitively solve the informal habitat problem. The juxtaposition –and even clashes– of diverse regulations makes the implementation of regularization policies very difficult, sometimes covering them under technical quality and living conditions standards. On the other hand, the Province of Buenos Aires in general terms, and its municipalities in particular, showed a larger capability to capitalise the regularisation processes in political terms, guiding their rhythm and advances. In many cases, advancements that were initially granted were later on blocked indefinitely.

The complexity of the political regulatory contexts associated to the different jurisdictions must be added to the differences regarding the type of urbanisation. It seems to be a fundamental factor when analysing the success (or not) of the initiatives. The settlements[5] usually comply with the formal urban weft and the layout of plots and housing usually corresponds easily with established urban regulations in force. Also, their population density is usually lower and land use is less intense. In general terms, land real estate values are lower because they are located at longer distances from the city than the shanty towns. These conditions find less resistance for the development of domain regularisation processes. In shanty towns[6], on the other hand, regularisation processes tend to be more extensive in time because the original conditions of urbanisation are highly irregular. Also, they are located in higher real estate value areas, a condition that limits the possibilities of settlement. In all cases, they are ex post interventions regarding the process of land occupation. Instead of solving housing issues, they evidence the limitations of sectorial policies. Within this framework, initiatives geared to regularisation have only been a palliative, without producing a definite answer to the issue. In fact, the process of these policies implementation evolves during long periods of time and they rarely achieve to comply reliably with the complete regularisation of the

---

5   The settlements or land seizures imitate formal urbanisations regarding plot dimensions –300 m²– and the urban grid –with an inclusive reservation for green spaces and social and urban equipment. The settlements' urban weft is similar to that of the formal city (Cravino, 2010).

6   Shanty towns are irregular occupations of vacant urban land that produce irregular urban wefts. They are not neighbourhoods designed into blocks, but organized along intricate passageways where vehicles cannot generally go through. They respond to the addition of individual practices, deferred in time. Initially, the dwellings are built with waste materials. After some time, some of the inhabitants build their dwellings with masonry. Population density is very high (Cravino, 1998).

neighbourhoods that were the object of intervention. Normally, the intervention is partial and slow, producing situations where the *original informality* –linked to the land occupation condition– overlaps with *other informalities* generated vis-à-vis the development of building of the dwelling, the subdivision of plots, the sale of airs[7], the death of the original settlers, etc.

As a conclusion, we can establish that as the research has largely proved the 90s did not imply a "State withdrawal" but the reformulation of its forms of management and modes of intervention, subordinating itself to private capitals and a market-based logic. We can thus establish that the process of State recovery in Argentina since 2002 was not necessarily accompanied by the articulation and planning stages that are needed to make this renewed state intervention a territorial structuring factor. On the contrary, state action seems to be late and little efficient and produces negative effects since it either reinforces pre-existing territorial fractures or creates new ones.

REFERENCES

Abramo P., 2006, *A cidade da informalidade. O desafio das ciudades latino-americanas*, Río de Janeiro, Sette Letras, FAPERJ.

Cravino M.C., 1998, "Las organizaciones villeras en la Capital Federal entre 1989-1996. Entre la autonomía y el clientelismo", *1st virtual conference of Anthropology and Arquaeology*, October 1998, Buenos Aires, Brasil [www.equiponaya.com.ar/congreso].

Cravino M.C., 2010, "El crecimiento de las villas y asentamientos y sus causas", *INFOHABITAT* [www.infohabitat.com.ar].

del Río J.P., Duarte J.I., 2011, "Las modalidades de gestión del suelo y la localización de la vivienda social en el Conurbano Bonaerense (2003-2009)", *in* Di Virgilio M., Herzer H.M., Rodríguez M.C., Merlinsky G. (comp.), *La cuestión urbana interrogada. Transformaciones urbanas, ambientales y políticas públicas en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, ed. El café de las ciudades.

del Río J.P., 2010, "El lugar de la vivienda social en la ciudad. Una mirada desde el mercado de localizaciones intra-urbanas y las trayectorias habitacionales de los destinatarios", *III jornadas del doctorado en geografía "Desafíos Teóricos y Compromiso Social en la Argentina de Hoy"*, La Plata, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 29th-30th September 2010.

Di Virgilio M.M., 2011, "Producción de la pobreza y políticas públicas: encuentros y desencuentros en urbanizaciones populares del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires", *in* Arzate Salgado J., Gutiérrez A., Huamán J. (coords), *Reproducción de la pobreza en América Latina Relaciones sociales, poder y estructuras económicas*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO.

Herzer H., Pírez P., 1994, *Gestión urbana en ciudades de tamaño medio de América Latina*, Nairobi, Hábitat-ONU.

Marcos M., 2015, "Análisis socioespacial de las condiciones sociohabitacionales de la Aglomeración de Buenos Aires", *in* Miraglia M., Caloni N., Buzai G., *Sistemas de Información Geográfica en la investigación científica actual*, Los Polvorines, ed. de la Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 185-199.

Rodríguez M.C., Di Virgilio M.M., Procupez V., Vio M., Ostuni F., Mendoza M., Morales B., 2007, *Políticas del hábitat, desigualdad y segregación socioespacial en el área metropolitana de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, Área de Estudios Urbanos del Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, UBA.

Ward P., Jiménez E., Di Virgilio M., 2014, *Housing Policy in Latin American Cities. A New Generation of Strategies and Approaches for 2016 UN-HABITAT III*, New York, Routledge.

---

7   The sale of airs refers to the sale of terraces or rooftops for the building of new housing units, independent from the ones built on the ground floor or the first floor. Access to these new dwellings is usually by an outside spiral staircase.

THE AUTHOR

María Mercedes Di Virgilio
IIGG (UBA)
CONICET
mercedes.divirgilio@gmail.com