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Constructing Legitimacy through Pro-poor Housing? Branding Cities in Egypt and Morocco as “Slum-free”

1 Introduction

City branding has become an important component of neoliberal urban planning, spurred by the increasing popularity of entrepreneurial urbanism and growing international competition among cities to attract business, investors, and tourists.¹ Although the theoretical reasoning behind it derives mainly from experiences in Western contexts, where urban neoliberalism has resulted from growing private sector influence in response to dwindling public resources and a retreat of the state, city branding is also occurring in parts of North Africa, where strong states continue to shape urban planning agendas.² Here, neoliberal logics seem to be strongly interwoven with the central state’s interest in the (re)development of its largest metropolitan areas, which Bogaert refers to as “neoliberal authoritarianism” in the case of Morocco.³ Similarly, in Egypt, the growing influence of (foreign) private capital in planning and construction is entangled with the central state defending and enhancing its own leading role in strategic urban planning.⁴ The crucial interdependence of neoliberal urban planning and the interests of a strong central state are most visible in urban megaprojects – Cairo’s former vision Cairo2050 and the New Administrative Capital in Egypt⁵ and CasablancaMarina, TangerMed, and the Bouregreg waterfront in Rabat/Salé in Morocco come to mind.⁶ While their image aspirations follow neoliberal reasoning, their description as “presidential” or “royal” projects underlines the crucial political significance and leading role of the central state in city planning.⁷ In their reach beyond city and national borders, such megaprojects serve two strategic purposes: to attract global attention and capital and to project images of modernity, progress, and po-

1 See Anttiroiko, 2015.

2 See Barthel, 2010; Steiner and Wippel, 2019.

3 See Bogaert, 2018.

4 See Barthel, 2010; Elmouelhi, 2019.

5 See Elmouelhi, 2019.

6 See Barthel and Planel, 2010; Mouloudi, 2010.

7 See Barthel, 2010.

litical stability to the outside world *and* its citizens in a bid to rectify reputations damaged by years of political turmoil.⁸ By these means, urban megaprojects have become flagships for branding cities, nations, and ruling regimes.⁹

Branding strategies are not limited to megaprojects, however. Academically less well known is a related type of city branding directed at those parts of the urban society that state authorities perceive as a potential threat to new image constructions. This mostly means “slums” – *bidonvilles* in Morocco and *ashwa’eyat* in Egypt – that have suffered from negative stereotyping associating them with poverty, chaos, crime, and a lack of state control.¹⁰ Constructed as *the* symbol of “underdeveloped” megacities,¹¹ the so-called slum has disturbed efforts by the ruling elite to project images of modernity, progress, and a powerful and caring state. In response, the “slum-free” brand has emerged in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), supplementing classical forms of city branding strategies centring on megaprojects.¹² Achieving “slum-free” nations aims to show both external (i.e. tourists and investors) and internal stakeholders (i.e. marginalised populations) the government’s dedication to “development” and a “pro-poor” attitude of the president or king.

This chapter sheds light on the histories, discourses, and consequences of the act and concept of branding cities as “slum-free” in Morocco and Egypt by regarding Morocco’s *Villes Sans Bidonvilles* (Cities Without Slums) programme and the Egyptian government’s goal of making the country “slum-free,” initially by 2018.¹³ Adopting a comparative approach, we aim to highlight an often-overlooked aspect of city branding, namely its effects on a local population rhetorically appropriated by state-led image building. Does city branding overlook its people or is it likely to drive improvement through socially sustainable housing solutions? Following these aims and questions, the chapter starts with a grounded literature discussion that reflects on the emergence of “slum-free” branding practices at the global level, as well as in Egypt and Morocco. Then, it reflects on slum dwellers’ attitudes towards and perspectives on policies associated with “slum-free” branding, taking a comparative look at such policies’ potential consequences for affected groups. It does so by building on previously published material gained through our

⁸ See Beier, 2019a.

⁹ See Steiner and Wippel, 2019.

¹⁰ See Bayat and Denis, 2000; Beier, 2020; Gilbert, 2007.

¹¹ See Roy, 2011.

¹² See Huchzermeyer, 2011.

¹³ After several extensions, the Egyptian Informal Settlements Development Fund announced in mid-2021 that the goal to make the country “slum-free” should be achieved by the end of 2021.

own, separate empirical field research in Casablanca and Cairo,¹⁴ as well as the supervised work of students.¹⁵ The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of commonalities, but also differences between practices of “slum-free” branding in Egypt and Morocco.

2 Discourses, Interests, and Meanings Behind the “Slum-free” Brand

2.1 The Invention of the “Slum-free” Brand

The “slum-free” brand has its origins in international politics, dating back to the late 1990s when the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the World Bank jointly founded Cities Alliance to fight urban poverty and support liberal urban planning. The initiative was kick-started with the publication of the action plan “Cities Alliance for Cities Without Slums,” which aimed to “improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.”¹⁶ In 2000, the UN repeated this objective in Millennium Development Goal 711, which initially quoted the initiative’s bold slogan “Cities Without Slums.” This reference was discarded some years later, but MDG 711 made the notion of “developed” cities as slum-free the norm.¹⁷ Beyond the MDGs and its replacement by the more progressive Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the slogan continues to inform international policies and attitudes toward slums and is still part of the official logo of Cities Alliance.

Both the MDG 711 and Cities Alliance faced substantial criticism for bringing back the term “slum” with all its negative connotations.¹⁸ Roy remarked that the slum has been made the “most common itinerary through which the Third World city (i.e. the megacity) is recognized.”¹⁹ In other words, MDG 711 with its focus on slums framed them as the ultimate expression of urban poverty and so-called underdevelopment.²⁰ Following this, Huchzermeyer criticises the normative slogan “Cities Without Slums” for offering governments a welcome opportuni-

¹⁴ See Beier, 2019b; Elmouelhi, 2014.

¹⁵ See Reda Ali, 2019.

¹⁶ Cities Alliance, 1999: 1.

¹⁷ See Huchzermeyer, 2011: 2.

¹⁸ See Gilbert, 2007.

¹⁹ Roy, 2011: 225.

²⁰ See also Beier, 2020; Bhan, 2009.

ty to justify slum eradication policies with MDGs' call for development.²¹ For example, in South Africa, "[f]raming 'slum' (...) clearance as a 'development' obligation under the Millennium Declaration (...) seemed convenient, particularly when the world was anxiously watching a country live up to the (...) requirements to host a soccer World Cup."²² Although in their key publications²³ Cities Alliance and UN-Habitat have promoted participatory slum upgrading as "best practice," the less carefully formulated slogan has driven policies that tackle some of the symptoms rather than the causes of urban poverty, including by demolishing slums.²⁴ The quantitative methodology regarding the proportion of the urban population living in slums, informal settlements, or inadequate housing that is used to determine progress toward MDG 711 and its successor, SDG 11.1, has created a bad incentive for the large-scale demolition of slums.²⁵

Most relevant to the remainder of this chapter is the crucial link of the "Cities Without Slums" slogan to neoliberal urbanism. Huchzermeyer writes that the international best practice of in-situ slum upgrading sits uncomfortably with international organisations promoting urban competitiveness and private engagement in city planning.²⁶ In contrast, some states may see slum eradication and resettlement as a welcome way to realise ambitious plans for urban redevelopment and "worlding."²⁷ This may include clearing centrally located land that is informally inhabited, displacing politically undesired population groups to urban margins and demolishing so-called urban eyesores to promote image- and profit-driven "urban fantasies."²⁸ The slogan "Cities Without Slums" has thus led to the resurgence of a developmentalist modernism fuelled by the neoliberal dogma of urban competitiveness and characterised by large-scale, often privately financed interventions prompting displacement and a growing number of evictions.²⁹ On the one hand, states have used the term "slum-free" to promote their visions of development and of a glass-and-steel modernity, which marks a visible counterpoint to the image of the congested and backward megacity in which the slum is central.³⁰ On the other hand, the slogan inspired a renaissance of large-scale housing and

21 See Huchzermeyer, 2011.

22 Huchzermeyer, 2011: 34–35.

23 See Cities Alliance, 1999; UN-Habitat, 2003.

24 See Bhan, 2009; Huchzermeyer, 2011.

25 See Beier, 2020.

26 See Huchzermeyer, 2011: 33.

27 Cf. Beier, 2019a.

28 Cf. Bhan, 2009; Watson, 2014.

29 See Brickell, Fernández Arrigoitia, and Vasudevan, 2017.

30 See Roy, 2011.

resettlement projects – some with explicit reference to the MDGs and “Cities Without Slums” – that move away from politically undesired in-situ upgrading policies.³¹ Despite the tendency of these programmes to foster segregation, displacement, and marginalisation, politically, they mark and promote *visible* and measurable governmental engagement in the field of housing, as well as care for the poor, which may enhance the legitimacy of the ruling regime, as we will further outline below.

2.2 Moroccan Perspectives

In Morocco, the national *Villes Sans Bidonvilles* programme (VSBP) literally refers to the “Cities Without Slums” slogan. Established in 2004 and justified as a direct response to MDG 7.11, the aim of this housing and resettlement programme is to eradicate all *bidonvilles* in the country and to resettle its inhabitants mostly to apartment housing in new satellite neighbourhoods at the urban margins (cf. Fig. 1).³² The Moroccan government evaluates the VSBP in a strictly quantitative way by regarding the number of cities that can officially be declared “slum-free” (in 2021, the official count was 59 out of 85 target cities).³³ Thus, VSBP’s primary objective is the physical and visible elimination of *bidonvilles*.³⁴

Yet, the VSBP is framed as a social policy fostering inclusion in urban areas and has helped augment the image of King Mohammed VI as “the king of poor”³⁵ – a visible move away from that of his precursor, his less popular, strictly authoritarian father King Hassan II, who died in 1999.³⁶ In addition, in 2003, suicide attacks conducted by a number of Casablanca’s *bidonville* dwellers in the city centre, which some perceive as having directly influenced the development of the VSBP, seemed to provide proof that *bidonvilles* are breeding grounds of religious extremism, which (again) made their eradication a political urgency.³⁷ The offer of new and better housing to *bidonville* dwellers can thus be read in a socio-political way as a neo-patriarchal strategy to enhance the monarch’s own legitimacy. Hence, the call to make Morocco “slum-free” became part of the pro-poor branding strategy of the new royal regime, a “social” policy, and a powerful coun-

³¹ See Buckley, Kallergis, and Wainer, 2016.

³² See MHPV, 2012: 14.

³³ See MHPV, 2021.

³⁴ See Harroud, 2019: 16.

³⁵ See Navez-Bouchanine, 2012: 171 and 216.

³⁶ See Bogaert, 2018: 166.

³⁷ See Navez-Bouchanine, 2012: 171.



Fig. 1: The construction of a new town on the urban margins of Salé, Morocco, for residents resettled from *bidonvilles*

Photo: Raffael Beier, 2021.

ter-narrative to the growing extremist influence on the urban peripheries following years of repression under King Hassan II. In his first *Discours du Trône* after the 2003 suicide attacks, King Mohammed VI underlined the precarious housing situation under which *bidonville* dwellers suffer and that “bear[s] the risk of becoming uncontrollable [so] that our cities would transform into places of exclusion, ostracism, [and] hate.”³⁸

Yet, the desire to make cities “slum-free” does more than brand the regime as pro-poor – it also serves a more economic purpose to showcase Morocco’s development “progress” and “modernisation” to external and internal stakeholders. For example, in December 2012, one year after the start of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, the international marketing company Globus Vision described Morocco in a multiple-page supplement to the *Financial Times Germany* as an “impressive,” economically strong provider of stability in a region in turmoil. The advertisement includ-

³⁸ Quoted in MHPV, 2013: 75.

ed one short contribution titled “Morocco does away with its slums.”³⁹ Thus, the declaration of 59 Moroccan cities as “slum-free” works to promote to potential investors the “success” of development agendas and efforts to eliminate signs of “backwardness” and “poverty.” Focusing on a *bidonville* close to the airport of Casablanca, Arandel and Wetterberg note that the decision to demolish the houses and relocate the neighbourhood instead of upgrading existing structures was justified by the wish “to project an image of prosperity and modernity to visitors”⁴⁰ who arrive at the international airport.

The branding of cities in Morocco as “slum-free” is part of globally oriented city rebranding strategies. Under King Mohammed VI, Morocco has invested heavily in big urban projects aiming to create “world-class” cities following international role models.⁴¹ Megaprojects such as Casablanca Marina and Casablanca Finance City aim to upgrade the image of Morocco’s economic capital, transforming it with glass and steel into a modern, international financial hub attracting foreign direct investment and international business. Following Bogaert, these projects not only embody a national vision of urban modernity, but also simultaneously discredit slums as signs of backwardness, disturbing an image of “progress.”⁴² Indeed, in 2001, King Mohammed VI voiced his concerns about the growth of “insalubrious housing”:

This development (...) threatens our undertaken development efforts to ensure that our cities can attract productive investments. This is particularly relevant for the tourist sector, which is especially important to us. Architectural and urban beauty enhances the chance of attracting investment in this sector.⁴³

In this sense, the “slum-free” brand becomes a tool used to turn neighbourhoods that supposedly embody poverty invisible⁴⁴ and to project images of urban modernity and national development to external stakeholders.

³⁹ Globus Vision, 2012: 4, the authors’ own translation.

⁴⁰ Arandel and Wetterberg, 2013: 143.

⁴¹ See Barthel and Planel, 2010; Bogaert, 2018: 78–80; Mouloudi, 2010.

⁴² See Bogaert, 2018: 2.

⁴³ Quoted in MHPV, 2013: 49.

⁴⁴ See Harroud, 2019: 16.

2.3 Egyptian Perspectives

In Egypt, the “Egypt without Slums” plan (in Arabic *Miṣr bidūn ‘aswā’iyyāt*) was announced during the first period of El Sisi’s presidency in 2014, marking a new resoluteness and momentum in dealing with “the challenge of slums.” In a related political speech, El Sisi referred to Egypt as a great country that should strive to become modern and progressive by providing all Egyptians the possibility to live a decent life: “It is impossible to allow such *ashwa’eyat* again!”⁴⁵ Following Sharp, “Egypt Without Slums” resembles a new war on urban informality that echoes former militarised approaches to slums dating back to the Siege of Imbaba in the 1990s.⁴⁶ However, unlike direct militarised confrontation, interventions today increasingly use the media to frame informality as a threat, on the one hand, and the government’s efforts as proof of its care for its people and a desire for progress, on the other. Together with the construction of new cities and a new administrative capital, “Egypt Without Slums” forms part of “The New Republic” brand that aims to illuminate national power.

In June 2021, to celebrate seven years of El Sisi’s presidency, a number of short national television advertisements included a new phrase – #thenewrepublic – that was to be used to brand efforts by the Egyptian government to renew its cities, including through slum relocation projects. “The Egyptians have succeeded in developing 298 *ashwa’eyat* unsafe areas in different governorates (...). 177,500 families have received new apartments in safe and healthy areas,” one such advertisement proclaimed. Likewise, this on-going media campaign helps show the regime’s care for the poor. For example, a documentary published by the Moral Affairs Department of the military in February 2021⁴⁷ compares the “miserable” conditions of the slum areas where 18,000 former *ashwa’eyat* families lived with their new housing environment in Cairo’s new showcase resettlement site Al Asmarat (Fig. 2). The short documentary quotes several residents expressing their gratitude to the government for giving them the opportunity to improve their quality of life and for its care for the future of their children, moving them away from the suffering in *ashwa’eyat*. Such media discourses not only help to cast “Egypt Without Slums” as a pro-poor brand, but also foster the stigmatisation of informal areas. At the same

⁴⁵ All quotes in this and the next paragraph are from the official Egyptian TV channels during the July 2021 celebration of the 1952 revolution and translated by the authors.

⁴⁶ In 1992, the militant Islamist group *Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya* announced the establishment of an independent Islamic state in the working-class district of Imbaba. The Egyptian state responded by putting the area under siege, mobilising a huge number of troops. See Bayat and Denis, 2000; Sharp, 2022.

⁴⁷ See dmc, 2021.

time, resettlement sites such as Al Asmarat are closely supervised and controlled by urban management units often run by civil servants with a military background. On the one hand, such management units work to brand the resettlement site as “modern,” because of their similarity to those of upper-class private compounds. On the other hand, they can be seen as a way of ensuring close control of residents who the state has historically perceived as a potential threat.

Since the Siege of Imbaba, the Egyptian state has considered urban informality an urgent security issue requiring immediate intervention.⁴⁸ At the national level, the Egyptian state created the Informal Settlements Development Fund (ISDF) through a presidential decree in 2008 in reaction to a rockslide in Cairo’s Doueka area in Manshiet Naser. Shortly after its inception in 2009, the ISDF classified informal areas as either “unsafe” or “unplanned.”⁴⁹ Unsafe areas, representing only one per cent of the total urban area in Egypt,⁵⁰ mainly require the relocation of dwellers to resettlement sites due to the supposed hazardous conditions of the sites. ISDF press releases, supported by a number of interviews with experts who are close to the process of decision-making, reveal that efforts since 2014 have focussed mainly on the demolition of unsafe areas and the relocation of their residents to new housing. The most recent ISDF progress report states that 41 unsafe areas remain all over Egypt and require the relocation of its inhabitants and the construction of 50,778 housing units before the end of 2021. The Egyptian government used this quantitative approach to show through the media the decrease in the number of unsafe areas. The ISDF provides each governorate with a list of target areas containing some basic information, including a map, the number of residents, and their assigned priority. In 2016, the ISDF allocated more funding for the construction of new housing units than in previous years (around 39 billion EGP, or approx. 2 billion EUR).⁵¹ The governors have striven to facilitate relocation as fast as possible so that they could proudly declare “their” governorate slum-free. During the celebrations of National Day in the Port Said Governorate in December 2018, Port Said was proclaimed the first slum-free governorate.

Recent government action has revealed renewed political will to tackle unplanned areas, which is occurring at a fast pace and before introducing new laws or clear decision-making and implementation procedures. In closed workshops with selected practitioners in 2020, the ISDF presented its updated categorisation of unplanned areas together with the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP) and UN-Habitat Egypt. They now include centres of capital cities

⁴⁸ See Sims, 2010.

⁴⁹ See Khalifa, 2015.

⁵⁰ See Hanafi, 2021.

⁵¹ See Hanafi, 2021.



Fig. 2: Aerial view of the Al Asmarat housing project showing the football field, church, service shops, and apartment buildings

Photo: Reham Reda Ali, 2019. Courtesy of the photographer.

of governorates as well as heritage areas. However, by August 2021, the prime minister had not approved or published these new categories. Despite this lack of institutionalisation of the new approaches, they are already being propagated through media channels. Ezbet El Haggana, an unplanned area in the east of Cairo, is a good example of how decisions are taken following presidential announcements and political propaganda. In May 2020, national television channels highlighted the president's visit to the area, accompanied by high government officials. During the orchestrated discussion, leading politicians highlighted the crucial need to improve the lives of the residents, emphasising the strong concern and clear will of the president in this regard.

3 Slum Dwellers’ Perspectives of Cities Becoming “Slum-free”

3.1 Stigmatisation in Egypt and Morocco

In Morocco, most slum dwellers have welcomed the royal initiative to resettle them in so-called *maisons en dur* (solidly built houses); some communities even took to the streets to demand quicker intervention by the state. While major opposition to the royal VSBP is relatively rare, resistance has centred rather on the means of implementation by criticising the unequal and corrupt allocation of property titles, insufficient investment in resettlement sites, and forced evictions.⁵² The tendency to approve the housing programme is certainly driven by precarious living conditions in *bidonvilles* and a popular belief in the benevolence of the king. Yet, much of its support relates to the stigmatisation of *bidonvilles* (and stigmatising assumptions about their living conditions) as embodied by calls for “Cities Without Slums.”⁵³ For instance, in Casablanca’s largest *bidonville* Er-Rhamna, a young male resident declared:

People in Er-Rhamna are divided in their opinions of resettlement. Many want to stay, but the majority want to leave. Many do not see the problems they will face. They would even accept it if they had to move to the moon. Discrimination is a huge problem. From birth, people here get told that they are second-class people.⁵⁴

Thus, experiences of place-based discrimination (on the job market, in schools, with state representatives, etc.) drive people’s desire to move out of their stigmatised neighbourhoods⁵⁵ and at the same time create glorified projections of life after resettlement.⁵⁶

The stigmatisation of *bidonvilles* in Morocco is not a new phenomenon, but the 2003 suicide attacks that triggered the VSBP intensified existing negative stereotypes.⁵⁷ In daily interactions with classmates or taxi drivers, many residents have avoided mentioning where they live out of shame and fear of direct stigma-

⁵² See Navez-Bouchanine, 2012.

⁵³ See Beier, 2019b: 289–291.

⁵⁴ Interview by Raffael Beier, 14 March 2017.

⁵⁵ See Beier, 2019b: 172–173.

⁵⁶ Cf. Zaki, 2007.

⁵⁷ See Navez-Bouchanine, 2012: 212; Beier, 2020.

tisation.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the VSBP cemented the conviction that *bidonvilles* should not be part of cities, marking its residents even more as undesired urban dwellers. Thus, the “slum-free” brand has both enhanced residents’ readiness to accept resettlement and their “displaceability”⁵⁹ following a further weakening of their urban citizenship status.

In Egypt, case studies in Cairo have shown similar stigmatisation of *ashwa’eyat* dwellers.⁶⁰ *Ashwa’eyat* residents experience place-based discrimination especially when dealing with the formal system – when being stopped at police checkpoints, when applying for jobs, or even when asking a girl living in a formal area for her hand in marriage. This also applies to residents of unplanned, well-established *ashwa’eyat*, even if their living conditions are better and their economic and social standards are higher than those living in “unsafe areas.” Following the revolutionary protests in 2011, for example, residents of Ezbet Elhaggana wanted to rename their place of residency “Al Amal” (The Hope) to get rid of the stigma attached to their neighbourhood.⁶¹ Recently, President El Sisi endorsed the renaming to show his commitment to tackling “unplanned areas.” Furthermore, our previous fieldwork in Cairo showed that many *ashwa’eyat* residents, especially the youth, name another nearby formal area as their place of living. Several interviewed *ashwa’eyat* residents mentioned that after moving to the area, they preferred not to change their address on their national ID to avoid being harassed by police officers if they were asked to show it.⁶² Arguably, many people hope to escape the stigma through resettlement. However, Al Asmarat residents are obliged to change the address stated on their national ID following their relocation. As all Al Asmarat residents have been relocated from *ashwa’eyat* areas, this makes them identifiable as former slum dwellers.⁶³

3.2 Perspectives of Resettlement: Between Hope and Uncertainty

As argued above, in Morocco, experiences of territorial stigmatisation and discrimination have influenced a tendency among *bidonville* residents to welcome the royal VSBP. Some have interpreted it as the late recognition of their legitimate

⁵⁸ See Beier, 2020.

⁵⁹ See Yiftachel, 2020.

⁶⁰ See Bayat and Denis, 2000; Elmouelhi, 2014; Reda Ali, 2019.

⁶¹ See Elmouelhi, 2013.

⁶² See Elmouelhi, 2014.

⁶³ See Reda Ali, 2019

urban citizenship after years of empty promises, social marginalisation, and political repression.⁶⁴ Thus, a general expectation of upward social mobility is palpable, notwithstanding diverse individual attitudes towards resettlement. The prospect of a gain in status is strongly tied to the aesthetics of the new *maisons en dur*, which seem to conform more to an ordinary and socially respected way of inhabiting the city and which signify freedom from the stigma of *bidonvilles*.⁶⁵ From the perspective of the residents, resettlement presents a unique opportunity to renegotiate their place in society (expressed by a significant investment in the interior of the new apartments) and to move up the social ladder. Related hopes range from better protection from the elements and improved services and infrastructure to the diminishing presence of social problems such as youth delinquency, unemployment, and drug abuse. Thus, the macro-political agenda of achieving “slum-free” cities translates on the ground into a claim for recognised urban citizenship and improved living conditions.

Yet, there are also considerable uncertainties in the process of resettlement that have historically sparked opposition from *bidonville* residents. Most significant is the question of affordability, which may explain much of the failure of past attempts to relocate *bidonville* dwellers. In the context of Casablanca, the creation of a new financing scheme based on small-scale third-party funding has made it possible for many inhabitants to become owners of a new apartment at almost no cost.⁶⁶ Here, two families relocated from the *bidonville* are allocated one plot in the new town and instead of constructing the four-storey house themselves, they ask a third party to build the house and to provide temporary accommodation during the construction period. In return, the third party becomes the owner of the two lower floors, while the other two households each own one of the two topmost floors. Due to improved affordability, this “third-party scheme” has strengthened residents’ approval of resettlement. However, the scheme has created new forms of uncertainty and risk, often caused by a sudden retreat by the third party, for example due to financial difficulties. Residents have had to cope with prolonged stays in temporary accommodation, incomplete and inadequate constructions, and additional administrative charges imposed on them.

In Egypt, resettlement was unquestionably the government’s preferred policy in dealing with *ashwa’eyat* until 2010, although international development stakeholders saw it as a form of forced eviction.⁶⁷ After the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the state for a number of years preferred not to resort to evictions from unsafe

⁶⁴ See Navez-Bouchanine and Dansereau, 2002.

⁶⁵ See Beier, 2021.

⁶⁶ For more details, see Beier, 2021.

⁶⁷ See Amnesty International, 2011.

areas. At present, resettlement to new housing is propagated by the media as one of the political achievements of the Egyptian state. The new housing projects in various cities have uniform unit designs and building prototypes financed through a special fund called *Tahya Masr* (Long Live Egypt) that is supported by a number of Egyptian businessmen and corporations.

Thus, resettlement as a concept carries contradictory meanings – it has been met with resistance, especially in the years directly following the 2011 revolution, while also embodying hope for a better life as marketed in national media. Certainly, for many groups of residents in unsafe areas, resettlement supports their hopes and aspirations for better living conditions and a better future for their children. However, resettlement creates several fears, including residents’ uncertainty whether they are eligible to receive an apartment – this is due to possible corruption and their mistrust of public authorities. Furthermore, resettlement may also disadvantageously affect their means of generating an income, their daily routine, and their social life. These are discussed in detail in the following section.

4 Consequences of “Slum-free” Branding: New Everyday Realities Following Displacement and Resettlement

Large-scale housing programmes providing supposedly better housing to people living in informal areas may be politically framed as pro-poor policies. But despite potential gains in shelter quality, housing programmes that leave little choice to its “beneficiaries” inevitably create adverse effects often related to reduced accessibility and the changing character of neighbourhood relations.⁶⁸ This section describes the major challenges posed to resettled residents in Casablanca and Cairo by housing programmes associated with branding cities as “slum-free.”

4.1 Access to the City and Urban Job Markets

In both cities, residents are usually resettled further away from the city centre and their previous place of residence, apart from a few exceptions such as Douar Skouila in Casablanca and El Max in Alexandria. Such constrained moves to peripheral sites have had a negative impact on resettled residents’ ability to access

68 See Beier et al., 2022; Buckley, Kallergis and Wainer, 2016; Koenig, 2018.

central urban functions, including higher education institutions and employment opportunities. Common political assumptions about the continuation of employment and urban livelihoods as relatively straightforward following resettlement can be refuted.⁶⁹ Resettled former residents of Casablanca’s *bidonville* Karyan Central, for example, experienced difficulties in continuing their previous jobs because even unreliable transport in the form of informal bus services and shared taxis is expensive.⁷⁰ Consequently, many factory workers who had been earning a minimum wage and who could previously walk to their workplace felt compelled to quit their jobs after relocation. And even though many residents resettled to Nouvelle Lahraouiyyine found alternative employment, jobs closer to the resettlement site are scarce and more challenging to find. In addition, shop owners and market traders in Nouvelle Lahraouiyyine suffer from a much smaller client base than in their previous location close to Karyan Central, which was famous for its central market.⁷¹ Finally, in Nouvelle Lahraouiyyine, the share of youth enrolled in higher education is significantly smaller than those living in more centrally located *bidonvilles*. The reasons, again, are unsafe and expensive means of transportation and an average increase in households’ fixed expenditure.⁷²

These observations are echoed in Cairo, where Abouelmagd showed that inhabitants of Ezbet Haridy, an informal area in Abbassiya near the centre of Cairo, had less financial security after resettlement: “Their economic status deteriorated due to loss of jobs, labour market, services around their old slum and loss of their financial assets that they left as animals and furniture.”⁷³ In the case of Al Asmarat, the government tried to choose a site closer to the city to avoid the disadvantages of relocation to the city’s periphery. However, despite the relative proximity of Asmarat to the city centre, transportation costs to access the closest shopping centres and places of work are still a financial burden. Some of the residents considered Al Asmarat a prime location due to its proximity to the upmarket Al Asmarat Heights gated community, but still expressed their dissatisfaction with the cost of and time taken to make daily trips after relocation.⁷⁴ Moreover, informal income generation in public spaces or on the ground floor of apartment buildings is banned under the regulations of the Al Asmarat housing management unit, which considers them “uncivilised” practices, even when this is the only source of income for certain families. Such bans thus further limit resettled people’s oppor-

⁶⁹ See Koenig, 2018.

⁷⁰ Similar observations for the case of Rabat/Salé were made by Harroud, 2019.

⁷¹ See Beier, 2019b: 239–251.

⁷² See Beier, 2019b: 265–267.

⁷³ See Abouelmagd, 2014.

⁷⁴ See Reda Ali, 2019.

tunities for income generation in comparison with their previous places of residency. In addition, resettlement projects oblige residents to pay a monthly maintenance fee (approx. 300–400 EGP, or around 15–20 EUR), creating an additional financial burden that makes living at the resettlement sites less affordable.

4.2 Neighbourhood Relations

A second major challenge for relocated residents besides reduced access to urban economic opportunities is changes in social relations after relocation. In both countries, housing programmes contributing to the objective of “slum-free” cities focus on constructing standardised multi-storey apartment blocks in dormitory settlements that emerge from planners’ drawing boards. These new built environments lead to new patterns of social interaction and the loss of the earlier, more consolidated and socially dense neighbourhoods often consisting of incrementally improved self-built houses. Several scholars have found Morocco’s resettlement contributing to an erosion of previous social networks that were characterised by strong social ties and solidarity within multiple small neighbourhood pockets in *bidonvilles*.⁷⁵ A quantitative comparison of relationships among neighbours in Nouvelle Lahraouiyyine and the inhabitants of Casablanca’s *bidonville* Er-Rhamna, for example, showed that the former have significantly less trust in their neighbours, communicate less frequently with each of them, and help them less regularly. This was confirmed by statements by resettled residents who described their longing for their former social life in *bidonvilles*.⁷⁶

In Egypt, President El Sisi praised the provision of finished and furnished apartments to relocated residents in Al Asmarat, as well as the construction of communal spaces and sports facilities, calling it a model that should be implemented across the country. However, the relocation process ignored the social relations entrenched over years of residing in *ashwa’eyat*. Relocated families were haphazardly assigned houses with no consideration of existing social ties among former neighbours and their desire to retain them.

In both countries, residents from the same former neighbourhood pocket have now been resettled in different locations, which has forced them to adapt to new spatial realities *and* new neighbours. In addition, under Morocco’s third-party funding scheme, all resettled people moved to the upper floors of apartment buildings, which reduced access to public life on the streets compared with the denser

⁷⁵ See Harroud, 2019; Zaki, 2007.

⁷⁶ See Beier, 2019b: 233–235.

informal settlements, where social relations were fostered in shared (semi-)public spaces. Street life has been further compromised by regulations restricting informal street trade and markets, as mentioned above. Furthermore, the resettlement sites hardly allow for resident-led construction and maintenance of either infrastructure or housing – a fundamental domain of mutual help in *bidonvilles* and *ashwa'eyat*. Finally, we should note that the dissolution of previously existing social structures need not be viewed in a negative light – some resettled residents in Morocco, for example, have also appreciated a more anonymous social life. However, the social reconfigurations resulting from resettlement certainly pose a significant challenge to residents, affecting their feelings of well-being, belonging, and safety after resettlement.

5 Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

In Egypt and Morocco, the objective of “slum-free” cities that forms a central part of national branding strategies has triggered nationwide programmes that support the construction of low-income housing to provide shelter for residents resettled from so-called slums. A closer look at flagship projects like Al Asmarat in Cairo and Nouvelle Lahraouiyyine in Casablanca reveals that slums are considered a challenge that can easily be addressed by accelerated housing construction. Such product-oriented approaches tend to ignore well-known adverse effects of relocation projects, such as negative financial impacts on resettled families, increased distance from economic opportunities, on-going stigmatisation, and weakened social cohesion as a result of the violent severing of strong social ties that marked life in so-called slums. Providing fully furnished flats in “orderly,” organised settlements, such as Al Asmarat, seems preferred to continued access to the labour market and the protection of social networks.

Yet, despite their questionable effects, resettlement and housing projects have the power to be publicly marketed as positive political actions. They are not only about constructing houses for the poor, but also about enhancing political legitimacy. Like other urban megaprojects, resettlement projects support the construction sector and are used to showcase developmental progress and modernity; state-controlled television channels are primarily used for this purpose. These efforts also serve to attract the interest of potential and existing external stakeholders and investors. At the same time, advertising these projects serves to show that the state actively pursues inclusivity and social justice agendas and, hence, tries to balance the opposite impressions of a state mainly committed to exclusive megaprojects such as Casablanca Marina or Egypt's New Administrative Capital. We argue that slogans such as “Egypt Without Slums” and “Cities Without Slums” are part of

wider branding strategies that seek to enhance the legitimacy of regimes under political pressure by promoting images of benevolent and pro-poor rulers concerned with the progressive development of “their” countries. The slogans aim to underline a certain political potency of authoritarian regimes, with striking similarities between a kingdom such as Morocco and a republic such as Egypt, in seeking rapid improvements in the quality of urban life, especially for underprivileged, vulnerable population groups. Thus, low-income housing and resettlement projects are alluring options for such regimes, especially in volatile political contexts in which regimes fear renewed political unrest and a loss of legitimacy.

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