From Illegal Squatter Settlements towards Legal Shantytowns: Negotiations of Power and Responsibilities in Khartoum Shantytowns

Mohamed Abdelbagi Bakhit[1]

[1.]University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies(BIGSAS), Bayreuth, Germany

mohgism@yahoo.com

The paper is looking on the processes and mechanisms of change in the shantytowns, since established as squatter settlements, and its transformation to legal shantytowns. I explore the negotiations of power and the administrative responsibilities between shantytown settlers and the local government in Khartoum.

Based on extended fieldwork, I found that the appearance of legal shantytowns in Khartoum was a result of what I conceptualize as a demolishing-planning/upgrading policy. Accordingly, many illegal squatter settlements were destroyed and replaced by new or expanded legal shantytowns in the peripheries of the city, heavily populated, but offering more access to public services and infrastructure. Although this policy is viewed as a landmark development by local government officials and by the majority of shantytown settlers, at the same time, I argue, it is fixing and legalizing the status quo of social hierarchies in the city, and serves as mechanism for more depriving and disadvantageous policies towards shantytown settlers.

Transforming illegal squatter settlements to legal shantytowns opened the door for new social and political organizations to emerge. At the time of illegal settlement, the ethnic organizations and tribal leaders claimed the representations of the ethnic enclaves of segregated neighborhoods. But soon after the legalization took place, new local committee members took power, legitimized by their ability to deal with the challenge of improving social services in the shantytowns to be like the better off urban surroundings. The new responsibilities of the local committee leaders required different skills and knowledge to negotiate with the local urban government. The new generation could manage that, as they were born, grown up and educated in the shantytowns. They express different attitudes towards their position in the city landscape by viewing themselves as original and equal settlers, seeking more benefits and also representations within the government authorities.

The urban planning approach in the Sudanese context may differ from other urban planning models, as the government offers only the ownership of the houses, and re-organized the area, without offering provision of social services. Instead the people of shantytowns take the initiatives and organize their resources through the local committees.