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**COPING WITH DISPLACEMENT  
–DYNAMICS OF DISPLACEMENTS AND STRATEGIES  
APPLIED BY URBAN POOR POPULATIONS**

**SASCHA FACIUS**

## **COPING WITH DISPLACEMENT**

**-dynamics of displacements and strategies applied by urban poor populations**

Sascha Facius

Humboldt University Berlin

[sascha.facius@hu-berlin.de](mailto:sascha.facius@hu-berlin.de)

### **ABSTRACT**

The presented research findings focus on displacement of urban poor populations in the Global South in relation to gentrifications by investigating their situation in the original neighborhood and those locations coming after displacement. Gentrifications are conceptualized for that purpose in a pluralistic sense as suggested by Lees, Shin and López-Morales [2015]. Accordingly, it is questioning: “What is happening during the process of displacement with the population of the Urban Poor?” and “How does the process look like and for whom?” by applying a participatory research framework. The paper aims consequently to enrich the displacement discourse about the dynamics of displacement in diverse urban settings and in particular its aftermaths for the affected population. Firstly, it will show that displacement is not a linear process or a single event in time, instead, it creates ongoing threats to further displacements and evictions and can in some instances lead to a cycle of displacement. Secondly, the paper also contributes in a broader perspective to the critical reflection on (western) gentrification literature.

**KEYWORDS:** displacement, gentrifications, urban poor, global south, cycle of displacement

## **1. GENTRIFICATION-RELATED DISPLACEMENT: THE THEORETICAL DISCOURSE**

Grier and Grier [1978] gave a general definition on displacement, which has been applied by several critical researchers and will be applied for this context here as well. Critical reflection on it, however, illuminates several conceptual weaknesses which need to be addressed in order to create a comprehensive concept of displacement processes in the urban sphere. First and above all displacement is more than simply a dislocation from a particular point in a city, it goes far beyond that limited perspective. The definition therefore needs to become enhanced, as done by several other authors: When looking into the distinct forms of displacements, Marcuse [1985] for example added the crucial aspect of “exclusionary displacement” to the picture of displacement. That idea incorporates displacement not only being as a single event in time, but as a long lasting ‘process over time. For example, in the work of many researchers, that idea is included by the notion of economic “tradeoffs” as a possible coping strategy. Yet, to claim urban poor “trade off” food, leisure activities or other substantial expenditures of daily life for being capable to pay rent does not highlight the deep impact of those processes sufficiently. Again, “tradeoffs” could imply that these are temporarily strategies by the poor.

Accordingly, considerations about displacement have to look not only for displacement of individuals, but also other factors such as for example, places and routines of social interaction created by the ‘indigenous’ population which are becoming displaced by the incoming population. This argument is supported next to others by Blasius and Cahill. In order to meet the altered conditions of rent in a for example gentrifying neighborhood, urban poor are getting, according to Blasius [1993], displaced out of their common lifestyle. Cahill (2007) is also arguing in the same direction when he claims, that people suffering from displacement are also getting culturally displaced due to the important connection between place, identity and culture.

Considering displacement as “the essence of gentrification” [Marcuse, 1992] and gentrifications as a global urban strategy [Smith, 2002] it becomes necessary to conceptualize displacement even further in present urban dynamics, as for example seen in the cities of the global south. Here distinct forms of urban restructuring can occur simultaneously in one single neighborhood. Present discourses in urban sociology identify gentrification as one of the major forces for displacement, yet, that term, at least in its more ‘traditional’ understanding from the West, does not necessarily combine many other forms of urban restructuring which are affiliated to gentrification and therefore with displacement. As a matter of fact this paper understands gentrifications as pluralistic as argued by Lees, Shin and Ernesto López-Morales [2015] and includes processes such as urban renewal, urbanization, development projects or slum upgrading into the concept of gentrifications. Consequently, also this paper also incorporates Clark’s definition of Gentrification:

“Gentrification is a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital. [...] It does not matter where, it does not matter when. Any process of change fitting this description is [...] Gentrification.” [Clark, 2005, p258].

## **2. Methodology**

When approaching displacement of urban poor populations a major methodological issue emerges immediately: the issue of “finding the invisible”. Several authors have already elaborated on the issue of how to find those, who have been eradicated from the surface of an urban community. Rowland and Atkinson for example describe the methodological

restrain by stating that: “Displacement is marked out by its near invisibility; where it has happened no indicators remain.” [Atkinson, 2000, p309] Although it is unquestionable that displacement leads to invisibility, some indicators remain even after displacement, the challenge is gaining access to them as Newman and Wyly [2006] indicate. To them the issue of finding the displaced is rooted in the places where the researchers look for them. In other words, if applying methods which are more sensitive to the living knowledge as well as an informal environment, such as methods coming from the participatory research domain, it is possible to locate displaces. Consequently, the following discussion is based in methods from ethnography combined with methods from participatory research, conducted in selected communities of urban poor in Manila for my master thesis [Facijs, 2014] as well as Sao Paulo and Istanbul during my ongoing PhD research.

## **2.1 Target population**

Hartman (1984) was one of the first researcher elaborating on the victims of displacement and identified those individuals at highest risk for displacement: elderly, poor, non-whites and large-households. As a matter of fact, those groups were in the preliminary focus of the research. The target population was therefore defined as a group of individuals living in slums, favelas or other forms of precarious settlements, who are usually highly visible in the urban centers due to the proximity of the settlements to the centers, as well as the possibilities for work, for example port workers, car or tricycle drivers, street vendors or convenient shop owners. The majority of the target population own the structures they live in and almost everyone has access to work because of the low threshold for work within the informal labor market, characterized, for example, by high figures for day labor.

Access to the target population was gained through a snowball approach in which firstly urban poor neighborhoods and communities, who have been affected by different degrees of GentrificationS, were identified. In the next step local agents, such as individuals, community organizations or human rights associations were incorporated into the research process in a participatory manner in order to establish a trustful relationship between the research participants and the researcher himself. Through that it was possible not only to get access to the local population still living in the neighborhoods, but also to find those already displaced by utilizing the local knowledge of the residents.

In sum, in each city the research process took several months of field research in which in terms of the qualitative domain participatory observation, semi-structured interviews as well as expert-interviews were applied. In terms of the quantitative domain in each city a survey was conducted, every time pretested with locals.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Gentrifications**

In the analysis it became clear that gentrifications are almost omnipresent in many districts of the cities visited, yet the specific forms of Gentrifications differ and occur sometimes simultaneously, depending next to others on the spatially build environment, location of neighborhood and political intentions of urban restructuring. However, due to the same root causes for those restructuring processes, meaning the global financialization of the housing sector and with that the worldwide noticeable policy of relocation by providing for those displaced cheap credits, subsidized by state funds, similar processes of displacement and eviction occurring in all the three case studies. It has become obvious during the course of research, that those policies are not housing policies, but financial policies which do not focus on creating opportunities for adequate housing.

In the slums in the area of Tondo-Manila Gentrifications have been occurring due to the urban restructuring plans of the cities municipality. Therefore Gentrifications such as “classic gentrification”, “new built gentrification”, “slum gentrification” and “urban renewal” could be recognized. In the communities of precarious housing in Sao Paulo, namely the central district with its abandoned buildings and corticos “classic gentrification” and “new built gentrification” were found. In contrast, the favelas in the sub-centers have been affected by slum gentrification and urban renewal. In Istanbul distinct forms of Gentrifications could have been pinpointed as well. Classic gentrification, state-led and new-built gentrification are major forces in the central districts of the city, while in the gecekondu neighborhoods in the sub centers Classic gentrification, New built gentrification as well as urban renewal have been identified.

### **3.2 Displacements**

As a consequence to the diverse gentrification dynamics displacement occurs diversely as well. The dynamics and forms of displacement can vary by different degrees between and within neighborhoods affected by gentrifications. They depend next to others on the form of gentrification, location, and form of settlement, historical background of that neighborhood and engagement of neighborhood organization or a housing movement. Of course, the overall political framework does play an important role as well. As a matter of fact, the different precarious housing forms, e.g slums, favelas, occupied buildings or gecekondu effect by their social structure in various ways the threat to become displaced by gentrifications themselves. Given, the situation outlined in the previous paragraph, it is quite predictable that the frequency of displacement and eviction depends on the precariousness of the housing form. Here it can be stated that as more precarious the housing form, as more likely eviction and displacement. However, it is important to note, that the dynamics of displacement, in particular its consequences for the affected populations depend also on the direction of displacement. In other words, displacement affects the population in different degree depending on whether the people get displaced towards the outskirts of a city or getting displaced in close proximity to their original neighborhood.

#### *3.2.1 Relocation towards the outskirts: Cycle of displacement*

In the majority of cases, slum gentrification and urban renewal programs leading to broad scale displacements of the former residents. Yet, in contrast to for example classic gentrification, the urban poor facing displacement due to slum gentrification and urban renewal programs are offered in many instances new homes build by the governments to provide the displacees with housing. However, due to the costs for building of new homes, in some instances thousands of new houses, those relocation sites are usually placed on cheap land, meaning in risk areas or far away of the city centers without decent infrastructure or possibilities for creating a sustainable livelihood. These developments have been seen in all the three cities visited for the research, yet Manila followed by Istanbul appear to relocate the urban poor most faraway to their original neighborhood.

Though, based on the research findings, if urban poor communities are getting displaced towards relocation sites in the outskirts, that situation has been identified as a system with a high probability of creating a “cycle of displacement”. Accordingly, the concept of a cycle tries to mediate between the notion of displacement being chaotic and a process over time. This “cycle of displacement” is characterized by a process of displacement from informal settlements within the central districts of Manila and Istanbul, to resettlements at the relocation sites at the outskirts, followed by people returning often illegally to the urban centers and back into the informal settlements. Those dynamics are rooted in four basic elements: a) the lack of livelihood opportunities, b) the lack of basic services and facilities, c) the impacts of natural hazards and d) economic exploitation. In the final analysis it becomes

clear, that with the ignition of such processes protracted situations for the urban poor occur more frequently, increasing social decline and chances for prosperity due to frequent and reoccurring evictions and displacement.

### *3.2.2 No official relocation or relocation in close proximity*

However, in regards to the case of Sao Paulo or some random examples in Manila and Istanbul, policies towards in-situ relocation have been more commonly applied, reducing the likelihood for frequent and ongoing displacements. Yet, according to the findings from Sao Paulo and Istanbul, if dwellers are displaced out of neighborhoods without the option of a relocation, many urban poor prefer to stay in close proximity to their original neighborhood if possible and are not becoming involved into the cycle. In other words: if urban poor reject to become relocated far away towards the outskirts of cities, they have higher chances to succeed in their struggle for adequate housing.

Despite this, the initial displacement process does always increase the likelihood for further evictions and displacements since each time the loss of various assets, material and intangible ones, force the urban poor in other precarious dwellings and increase therefore the insecurity of tenure.

### **3.3 Strategies**

The Urban poor in the cities visited have developed several strategies in order to deal with the complex urban processes, leading to housing shortage, rising rents, gentrifications and displacement. These communities have been able not only to adopt to but also to modify at least in specific terms the housing dynamics within the city including the housing forms available to them. Yet, the experience has shown that two forces are simultaneously active when looking at process of gentrification-related displacement. One force is the automatism of eviction and displacement due to gentrification and misguided public policies, the other force is the active agency of the dwellers struggling against. The urban poor are applying several strategies not only to make their way around, but also trying in the same moment to improve the housing situation and conditions on a long-term basis for themselves as well as the following generations. Strategies can therefore be summarized as: processes aiming to improve the housing situation over time. Strategies are thereby a route of temporal transition through different precarious housing forms to finally reach the point of a permanent solution for adequate housing. They can be conceptualized along the line of formal and informal strategies, although this distinction does not imply a dichotomy. In many instances, formal and informal strategies are going site by site, are applied simultaneously and cannot be divided completely into such a logical distinction. Additionally, the sets of strategies are almost countless and can include, next to others, economic strategies such as tradeoffs, individual or collective negotiations, organizing, filling law suits against evictions or finding alternative ways of housing by occupying abandoned buildings or land.

Yet, informal strategies applied by the urban poor in order to deal with forced relocation due to gentrifications highlight the creativity and competence of the urban poor to adopt to state-led policies of displacement and will be further elaborated here. In each city included in the research process, a specific local strategy could have been identified. They include for the case of Manila the “leave but keep” strategy, for the case of Sao Paulo the “selling the keys” strategy and for the case of Istanbul the “take and sell” strategy.

### 3.3.1 *Leave but keep (Manila)*

The “leave but keep” strategy is almost one of the only legal gaps in the resettlement policies in Manila. Since Relocates are not allowed to rent out, to sell or to abandon their award, but

**Photo 1: The relocation site of Cabuyao (Manila)**



**Source:** Elaborated by the by author.

do not have any access to livelihood, money or food at the relocation sites, they have to move temporarily back to the city and more or less frequently visit their award at the relocation site. That strategy allows them to live in Metro Manila and “to make a living” while at the same time avoiding conflict with the resettlement laws and provisions. Yet, the frequency of the site-visits depends on the budget and is therefore limited. Those limited visits increase the risk of losing everything at the relocation site, for example, by being robbed, which, according to the interviewees, happens commonly.

Another negative side effect of the “leave but keep” strategy is the externally and internally altered Urban Poor identity: While some of the research participants stated that those strategies lead to external stigma and prejudices against all Urban Poor, they also lead to a disruption in solidarity within the Urban Poor communities. Living in constant transit and considering the additional issue of altered identities, that strategy does not leave much space for social progress. Additionally, and according to the research, the “leave but keep” strategy does not provide a sustainable solution: ongoing processes such as deepening poverty, family separation, and worsening health conditions sooner or later lead to the final abandoning of the award at the relocation site, including the disposal of all personal belongings.

### 3.3.2 *Selling the keys (Sao Paulo)*

In a similar approach to accumulate assets, but in a different framework, urban poor in Sao Paulo have developed another strategy for reducing the socio-economic consequences of displacement, namely the strategy of ‘selling the keys’. Selling the keys means that if a person is awarded with a title for a public housing unit, for example because that person lives in a risk-area in a favela or in an occupation that becomes formalized, that person will sell that award to someone else. Officially, of course, dwellers

**Photo 2: The relocation site of Cabuyao (Manila)**



**Source:** Elaborated by the by author.

with such an award are prohibited to sell it for a few years, but reality looks different. In



particular favelas experiencing urbanization are a common housing form in which the strategy ‘selling the keys’ is applied. Historically, favelas always used to be point of entries for migrants coming to Sao Paulo, and it were always the most precarious areas in which the newcomers settled down due to a lack of financial resources. Knowing that they will be displaced sooner or later in the process of urbanization and with that gentrifications, they are willing to take the risk in order to get the chance for receiving a title and later selling it.

The dwellers applying the strategy of ‘selling the keys’ only have the chance for a singular payment but risking to lose the entitlement for another public housing unit. Yet, that strategy allows them to create a financial asset necessary for survival in a gentrifying neighborhood.

### 3.3.3 Take and sell (Istanbul)

**Photo 3: new-build condominiums in former gecekondu neighborhood Gaziosmanpasa (Istanbul)**



**Source:** Elaborated by the by author.

idea here is to try to negotiate on an individual basis the best outcome for a new-build condominium in one of the relocation sites. Once they won the award, they are moving into that apartment and try to stay put as long as possible, waiting for infrastructure such as hospitals, public transportation and schools to arrive so that the price for the condominium will increase up to the point where the urban poor can make profit out of selling it again. Despite the difficult negotiation process another issue arises frequently when applying that strategy: usually the costs for utilities as well the interest rate for the condominium is too high, leaving sooner or later no other option as to sell the award before it becomes profitable. But even if the dwellers have the capabilities of waiting for such a long time and make profit out of it in the end, the question remains where to move afterwards.

Likewise as in the other two cases, also in Istanbul forced relocation due to Gentrifications occur frequently. In particular dwellers in the gecekondu neighborhoods of Istanbul are forcedly evicted and offered accommodation in new build condominiums in the periphery of the city. However, that policy has a long tradition in Istanbul and was already applied during the 1980ies when the first wave of gecekondu neighborhoods became formalized. However, during those times in-situ relocation or at least relocation to close proximity was one of the main goals of that policy. Nowadays that policy has shifted towards relocation into the outskirts, creating the same issues and restrictions for the urban poor as seen in the other cases, namely lacking basic assets for survival, such as for example infrastructure or livelihood opportunities.

As a matter of fact also in Istanbul the urban poor population have tried to adopt to the altered policy of long-distance relocation by applying the strategy of “take and sell”. The



#### 4. Conclusion

The procedures of eviction and relocation due to gentrifications cause a major impact in the social, psycho-social, social-economic and environmental settings for the affected families and individuals. During the research it became clear, that it is the daily routine of urban poor communities in the three cities visited to resist against the threat of gentrifications and displacements, to have no rest, experiencing the feeling of being powerless and a “*persona non grata*”. As a matter of fact the daily exposure to stress and uncertainty, combined with the general unhealthy urban environment, influences mental and physical health conditions and diminishes possibilities for social advancement. On the other hand, the most apparent feature of the urban poor population is, however, their deep connection and dependency on the city. For them, it is “only in the city where they find hope and receive a chance”, where social services are locally accessible and where, above all, the urban community provides livelihood opportunities. There are, furthermore, only minor fees for transportation due to the short distances, visibility causes a louder voice for political participation as well as networking.

In the light of these considerations, it has become evident that the urban poor populations are coping with displacement similar to the not linear proceeding but ongoing processes of gentrifications and displacements. Those processes differ locally due to several factors, but in all instances the urban poor are applying several strategies not only to adopt to the situation, but also to make their way around to it. The risks and negative consequences of these strategies might lead to further social decline and perhaps protracted situations in the long run. On the other hand they show that in every city the urban poor are capable of creative agency. Focusing on the coping strategies of the urban poor, offers a decent approach to understand the dynamics, the underlying nature and the challenges of gentrification of informal settlements, forced evictions, resettlements and urban reflux and suggest, therefore, a logical framework for further investigation and intervention.

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