

Empowering the Unprivileged: The Case of Self-renovation in Disadvantaged Areas

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In the 90's, several European governments promoted the involvement of inhabitants as an important condition of success in urban regeneration projects. The dialogue with inhabitants was supposed to strengthen a collective movement in the neighbourhoods, to restore social and territorial cohesion and create a local identity among the residents of disadvantaged areas. However, a number of issues can be raised regarding this policy: the commitment of the inhabitants in the decision-making process is difficult to ascertain, especially throughout the whole duration of the project, and in relation to the management of the different stages of the project; it is not always easy to achieve consensus, etc. In particular, it is hard for the project managers to involve the most unprivileged groups, notably people suffering from a combination of social, legal and financial problems. The stake here is not simply their participation in a project, but more specifically their “empowerment”. In this framework, the methods of the French non-profit organization Les Compagnons Bâisseurs are instructive. They provide micro solutions to people living in poor housing conditions through the conception and the implementation of a self-renovation process. The organization proposes technical and financial support so that the most disadvantaged groups can renovate their flats. However, the goal is not only to ameliorate the material living conditions; through the organization of workshops in the neighbourhood, the participation of the inhabitants in the renovation work, the coordination between the team of Compagnons Bâisseurs and social workers, the social inclusion of the most unprivileged groups can be promoted.

EMPOWERING THE UNPRIVILEGED: THE CASE OF SELF-RENOVATION IN DISADVANTAGED AREAS

In the 90's, several European governments promoted the involvement of inhabitants as an important condition of success in local development policies as well as urban regeneration projects. The dialogue with inhabitants was supposed to strengthen collective movements through local and democratic authorities, to restore social and territorial cohesion in the neighbourhoods and create a local identity among the residents of disadvantaged areas. However, a number of issues can be raised related to the commitment of the inhabitants in the decision-making process.

Whatever the aims and the features of these initiatives, the impact of the involvement of residents generally depends on the approach, which will be selected in order to favour the dialogue with inhabitants (inform, communicate, involve participants in the decision making process). Moreover, it is very difficult to maintain a high degree of participation throughout the whole duration of a project.

- The whole population of a high-rise estate can reach ten thousand people. In that context, the community life is not locally so well structured (through tenants associations, sports associations, cultural centres, etc.), so the inhabitants will have few opportunities to communicate and formulate needs and expectations when they face institutional representatives.
- Moreover, a project is often developed in a long-term perspective and does not respond to the daily problems of the inhabitants.

For these reasons, it is not always easy to achieve consensus. In particular, it is hard for the project managers to involve the most unprivileged groups, notably people suffering from a combination of social, legal and financial problems. The stake here is not simply their participation in a project, but more specifically their “empowerment”.

Today I will focus on the most unprivileged people of these districts, those we do not use to see in the local instance or even talk about because of their social disaffiliation and their distance to the labour market. Who are they? How can associations or public bodies succeed in empowering them? To what extent can they also develop sustainable relationships so that they can say: “This is my place”? Here lies the purpose of my presentation.

THE DIFFICULTY TO INVOLVE THE UNPRIVILEGED PEOPLE IN A DEPRIVED AREA: A FEW SHADES OF NUANCES

There are often shades of nuances to notice when it comes to describing the population of a deprived area. The residents of the disadvantaged areas are often conceived as a homogenous group and sometimes categorized in terms of ethnic features and class position. This process of categorization is not explicit but is quite easy to understand if we consider the ongoing political debates on migration and multiculturalism today in Europe (Mac Schane 2010, The Telegraph 2011) or more formally the trends that are observed in the management of the lists of public housing: jeopardization of the residents in the public housing stock, “ethnicization” of the so-called segregated areas, etc (Scanlon et al., 2007).

However, residents of a high-rise estate are not systematically synonymous either with unprivileged groups or immigration. At the micro level, we can easily demonstrate that the social composition in segregated neighbourhoods varies from one neighbourhood to another. In France, for example, the district Le plateau in Champigny has different types of housing stock and is composed of different social groups while other districts are quite homogenous such as Dutemple in Valenciennes where several hundreds of coal miner families live. Le Clos Saint-Lazare in the north of Paris is a district where the associations have made a census

of 50 different nationalities. In short, the social composition can in fact be very heterogeneous from one distinct to another but also within a particular district.

In broad terms, these shades of nuances explain why we have to consider certain households as more unprivileged than others within deprived areas. These households have to deal with a combination of problems such as familial, social, linguistic, economic, administrative, legal, financial and psychological difficulties. The characteristic of unprivileged people who are often described as unemployed and receive basic welfare benefits (income support, child benefit, allowances for isolated parents, etc) is not sufficient in itself.

The combination of problems such as illiteracy, excessive debt and illness leads to extreme situations in housing. Let's take a few examples:

1. The households often have to face conflicts within the family unit or with a landlord because of a rental debt and their situation leads to an eviction.
2. Because of the overcrowded situation in housing, the accommodation is quickly deteriorated and many families do not have the financial and technical resources to renovate it.
3. Many of these persons do not know their rights and duties in terms of rental maintenance. Certain lonesome persons suffer from depression and do not even open the letters they receive.

Due to the complexity of the situations, the management is difficult for the institutions. Some households have to deal with several institutional representatives at the same time such as the job centre, social work or the familial allowance fund. The difficulty to find an adapted response to their cases causes distrust towards any form of participation or dialogue. As a consequence, a certain number of these people stay outside of the public devices and do not participate in initiatives organized in their districts. It is precisely those people whom the association try to involve in a self-renovation project.

SELF-RENOVATION METHOD: A GLOBAL APPROACH TO THE HOUSEHOLD'S DIFFICULTIES

In this framework, the methods of the non-profit organization Les Compagnons Bâisseurs are instructive. They provide micro solutions to people living in poor housing conditions through the conception and the implementation of a self-renovation process. The main objective is to place these households in the centre of the renovation process and make them participate in the improvement of their living conditions.

In general terms, the association develops a set of methods which respond to specific territorial features: (i) renovation project in accommodations and workshops for the high-rise estates, (ii) complete renovations for independent houses in the sub-urban or rural sectors and (iii) experiments related to specific problems such as housing for elderly or adapted housing projects for the Gypsy community. My argument only focuses on the collective projects implemented in the high-rise estates. In 2006, 25 projects were implemented in deprived areas and high-rise estates. These projects allowed intervening with 400 households.

The organization proposes a global approach in order to resolve social, technical and financial problems so that the most disadvantaged groups can renovate their flats themselves. The goal is not only to ameliorate the material living conditions; the association Les Compagnons Bâisseurs is well known for its ability to combine different supports in order to formalize an adapted project that respects the will of the residents. The representatives association and their financial partners use to say that this kind of action recovers several vocations. In that way, these activities can be considered as a hybrid approach that at the same

time includes technical advice during the renovation, time of socialization, social orientation and financial support.

I would like to stress two themes related to these actions: how the association improved the autonomy of the households in their daily life and how they promoted mutual aid and favoured social exchange during the renovation process.

THE COMMITMENT OF THE HOUSEHOLDS SUPPORTED BY A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

First, the renovation does not only provide adapted responses according to dysfunctional aspects of the accommodation but aims at improving the autonomy of the households in their daily life: to structure the life of the households between working hours and spare time, to propose different levels of inclusion during the housing renovation, to broach the difficulties of the households within the different dimensions of the project (how to manage a budget, respect a timing, the duty of landlords and residents in terms of maintenance, etc.).

However, the purpose of the association is not to change an unprivileged household into responsible and independent residents. The idea is to provide the pleasure that the renovation of one's own place can imply and bring into light competence and abilities developed by the households. It is the project manager of the association who has the responsibility to place the household in the centre of the project. His role is technical, pedagogic and social. What does it mean concretely?

- The first step aims at gaining the household's confidence and promoting the commitment of the beneficiary before and during the project. He/she develops small tricks in order to favour an equal relationship in order to explain the approach of the association and the positive aspects related to the renovation. "The pedagogical work begins during my first visit to the household. I do not say 'me' but rather 'we' when I present the project, in order to appear as a support rather than a rescuer. It is an attitude that inspires confidence. With this kind of approach, we efface the tragic dimension linked to the acquisition of competence and technical gestures", argues for example one of the project managers of the association (Foultier et al., 2007).
- The second step aims at co-designing the renovation project together with the participants. The household and the project manager define priorities according to the wish of the household, the budget, the technical limits as well as the ability and competence of the participant. It is the household who proposes the nature and the scope of the renovation (selection of material, colour of painting, etc.). It means that the person is able to define his/her priorities and becomes the player of her own project.
- The third step is to define the role of the household in the renovation process. "Self participation" means that the participant has to implement the renovation project. It is important to stress this point because all the beneficiaries do not have the same capacity to renovate a flat. One participant may have professional experience in the construction industry, whereas another suffers from heavy physical or mental handicaps. According to the situation, the level of participation is co-designed by the manager of the project and the participant in order to fit the skills and the resources of the participant.

The project manager develops daily relations with a household. The social dimension of his/her intervention refers for example to the time he dedicates to listening to the beneficiaries who express his/her difficulties when it comes to choosing the material and negotiating the

design according to the budget, or still in the friendly exchanges maintained throughout the construction site (meals for example). The conversations gradually lead the participant to develop ties of confidence with the manager and communicate key aspects of his/her life that are useful in order to understand the difficulties that impact on the involvement of the participant on the construction site.

To conclude the point, the relationship is built between the players on the basis of the project and the progress of the renovation site. It is important to stress that the objectives are visible and concrete. It contributes to stimulating the participants as they consider that the objectives of the renovation are reachable.

THE ART OF ARTICULATING THE PRIVATE SPHERE AND THE COLLECTIVE LIFE

An interesting principle promoted by the Compagnons Bâisseurs aims at promoting three inclusion levers during the implementation of the renovation in a high-rise estate. The basic idea is to find the nexus between the private sphere of the participant and the collective life.

First, the association proposes “a mutual aid” between all the participants of the housing renovation process. This aid is open to all the neighbours and family members. In clear, the association suggests that the participant invite people to give a hand at the construction site: the volunteers of the association, previous participants, members of the family, neighbours and other participants. There are no hierarchical relations between the protagonists at the renovation site. Rather, the project is formed through interaction, with an exchange parity, something than can be opposed to the formal relationships in an institutional framework.

Second, the association plans workshops and collective animations in order to favour competence acquisition and social exchange between the participants who are committed in the renovation process. These collective animations, which are co-organized with different public services and associations, concern the maintenance of the housing (energy conservation, prevention of accidents in the home, tenants’ rights and duties, social rights, legal dispositions related to discrimination, etc.) and technical workshops (installation of wallpaper, installation of shelf, elaboration of doors of cupboard, etc.).

Third, the coordinator tries to develop connections with multiple partners at the end of the renovation process. In sociological terms, the coordinator tries to develop weak ties with all the civil and institutional players in order to favour the social inclusion of the participants. Certain evaluations mention that this is one of the most difficult aspects of the self-renovation process because the orientation of the participant depends on the existing players and partnership network as well as the community life that is developed in the deprived area.

All these aspects stress the important role of the representatives of the association (manager of a site, coordinator of the project, etc) who have to face on the one hand the expectations of the institutions and financial partners in terms of efficiency and results and on the other the constant difficulty to coordinate the activities, to respect the timing of the renovation and to respect the degree of involvement of each participant.

It explains why they coordinate the whole renovation process within a political instance and an operational unit. The commitment of a coordinator leads the association to face the institutions, to question their objectives and propose candidates. In clear, the population, the budget and the area targeted are negotiated with the politicians rather than accepted. The selection of participants has to be negotiated within an operational partnership. The difficulties that the project managers face during the implementation of the renovation also have to be discussed in time.

IMPACT OF THE RENOVATION PROCESS ON THE PEOPLE

I mentioned above that there is a category of people suffering from multi-dimensional problems. The hybrid method developed by the association provides multiple solutions to this group, as regards the scope of the renovation and the needs that are formulated by households. Let's take a few examples.

The adaptability of the household to the renovated flat

The renovation process and the mutual aid generally allow the re-mobilization of the household in organizing and maintaining the accommodation (clearing and cleaning of rooms by the households before the beginning of the renovation process).

Several examples illustrate the desire of the beneficiaries to re-appropriate their living space. In Marseille, a housewife realized that she could coat and paint the walls of the living room and the hall herself. In Rennes, a woman wished to embellish her accommodation although she did not have the time and money to do it: "Finally, I am able to decorate my apartment." These persons discover the basic feeling: "It's good to be at home."

The housing renovation strengthens the family relations.

The renovation is an opportunity to structure the life of the families within an accommodation. This process represents an opportunity for single family parents to design a place for their child, a room dedicated to their games, their school work and so on. It can also represent an opportunity to manage a conflict between parents and teenagers since some of them can participate in different tasks during the renovation, take place in the renovation and express their choice.

Self-respect is a trigger mechanism that favours the inclusion process

The fulfilment of the renovation represents a real possibility to conquer self-respect. The beneficiary finds a place in the construction site, gradually forms herself through the tasks but also within the teamwork. The self-respect is actually the first step towards social and professional insertion. M. R. illustrates it perfectly in this process: "For me the project was an important moment in order to regain confidence. It is connected to the recognition of others... I had the impression that I was useful. I was experienced in painting. When there were skirting boards to paint, it was for me. I had not worked for many years and the renovation allowed me to understand things for the future. For example, in a protected environment (an association of insertion for example), I can make things. The project allowed me to fix purposes for myself." A few experimentations in Bordeaux between the social services, associations that promote employability and the Compagnons Bâisseurs show that the self-respect acquired during the renovation process is a powerful lever that can lead to professional opportunities.

The mutual aid, the teamwork and the collective workshops are levers for a better access to public services and for the improvement of the institutional relationship

The renovation process allows participants to reach services and assert their rights. The repercussions of a project are often the result of collaboration as well as intense exchanges on the ways of life of some and/or on the functioning of such and such service. In Bordeaux, Rennes, Castres or Marseille, the project managers of the Compagnons Bâisseurs who perceive the difficulties and problems raised in a family, have a favourable position in order to orient the households to public services (schools,

social services), services of care (dentists, doctors), associations (elimination of illiteracy, recreational activities for the children). In Bordeaux, for example, R. had enough confidence in herself to renew the links with the school where her child was registered: “Today, I have less difficulty to get in touch with people, in particular at the school of my daughter. I make contact with the teacher. I am not so shy as before, I feel less isolated.”

A FEW WORDS TO CONCLUDE

I have presented a limited view of the work that is implemented by this association. For instance, I have not brought into perspective the partnership that is necessary to lead this kind of project at the local, regional and national level.

I did not even mention the limits that the staff of the association is confronted with. For example, many politicians and technicians involved in the decisional process consider that the cost of this action is too high. In more general terms, the action is recognized and carried out locally but despite their lobbying at the national level, they do not have institutional recognition on a national scale. The self-renovation process remains a micro-solution, which is considered as a good experimentation by local developers.

The most important aspects that I have wanted to bring to light in this paper are linked first to the ability to promote a social inclusion process through a housing renovation. In my mind, finding a place to live is constitutive of our identity and it represents one of the first steps of the inclusion process. In that sense the housing policy is very close to the social policy.

The second major idea is that public authorities have the capacity to structure and to favour social innovations through this kind of housing programmes. But these initiatives are not sufficient by themselves. It is necessary to leave the logic of control, which prevails in the evaluations of public programs, and promote social innovation in the civil society.

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