

The Settlements: a Challenging Way of Life

Papers n. 17 - July 2020

Cristianisme i Justícia - Roger de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona
+34 93 317 23 38 - info@fespinal.com - www.cristianismeijusticia.net

A quarter of the populations of cities around the world live in some type of informal settlements. That represents some 883 million people, the majority of whom live on the Asian continent, but also in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin American countries, the Caribbean, and European cities. This means their basic rights are being violated, and this is why the United Nations has proposed improving the living conditions of these people and promoting access to adequate housing before the year 2030.

Living in a settlement

“A house is a place where people can develop and exercise all their rights; it can only be considered adequate when it has access to drinking water and sanitation, electricity and other basic services; when it is near schools, health services and employment opportunities”. This is how the Special Rapporteur to the United Nations on Adequate Housing explains what it means to have a home.

The issue of the right to housing means going beyond the four walls that make up a house, and implicates other rights associated with the individual also: feeling secure in one's home, and not having to worry about being evicted at any moment, having basic needs met, not having to live in a toxic or dangerous environment, etc... Half of the world's population live in cities and the majority of these lack adequate infrastructure and services. According to UN-Habitat,¹ people who feel most insecure living in cities are those living in informal settlements.

In the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, they represent 72% of the urban population and in the countries of South Asia, that figure reaches 59%. Ultimately, this problem affects the majority of countries around the world. In 2018 for example, the French government counted more than 16,000 people living in 497 informal settlements.

Changing your child's shoes because the ones he was wearing got covered in mud when he went outside the house;

not having a mailbox for your letters; waking up in the middle of the night because it's raining and the water is leaking through the roof of the factory where you're sleeping; washing all your clothes because eviction day is coming and you don't know when you'll have access to running water again; not being able to invite your children's friends over to the house to play... these are some of the daily difficulties experienced by those living in settlements.

Informal settlements in Barcelona?

In a modern technological city like Barcelona, which only last year welcomed 12 million tourists, these realities are also hidden. 15% of the population of Barcelona lives at risk of poverty and exclusion, and some 4,200 of that figure are homeless people, and therefore even more invisible. In 2014, a dozen families that lived in huts and trailers on a plot of land made their situation known to the city mayor. "Barcelona is beautiful, but it also has its hidden issues. We are some of these hidden people and you need to take us into account", they told him in a letter.²

Knowing how many people live in settlements is essential in order to quantify the problem and then tackle it. In Barcelona, the first public statistics we have are from the year 2011 and they mention 695 people: the latest figures from 2019 mention 836 people. These are single adults as well as families with children who live in temporary structures, huts and trailers located on vacant plots of land, in disused factories and on wastelands.

Their origins are diverse: in recent years, many people arrived from Eastern Europe and they currently make up the majority of those living in settlements;

there is also a noticeably large group of families there for more than twenty years who arrived from Galicia and Portugal seeking opportunities for a better life; there are even people from various African countries and other places. Ten years ago, the majority of these people were concentrated in certain large areas of Barcelona, now they are spread over smaller areas and separated in different districts of the city as well as nearby municipalities, where they have settled after suffering repeat evictions.

The letter received six years ago by the mayor of Barcelona was sent by a group of Galician-Portuguese families, one of the most invisible groups living in the settlements, and a good example of the lack of effective policies needed to transform the situation. They arrived in Barcelona in the middle of the nineties, when the city declared the end of the shanty-town areas, and so they moved to the streets of the city with their small caravans as their homes. Although their situation has improved today, the majority of them share a history of social exclusion and violated rights inherited from generation to generation. All the families in this group have experienced repeated forced evictions. A report by Amnesty International³ gathered some testimonies a few years ago, among them one from a woman who explained: "My son is six years old and has already lived through six evictions in his lifetime".

In Barcelona, as in all cities around the world, living in a settlement means not being able to live in healthy conditions at an affordable price, but it also brings with it the violation of other rights: the right to electricity and adequate living conditions; to basic psychological and health services; to not being discrim-

inated against because of their situation instead of being considered as residents of the city; to have their opinion count and to have alternatives offered in case of eviction...

The effects of eviction

Through the Association Amics del Moviment Quart Món, we have been able to accompany the families of Galician-Portuguese origin living in settlements in Barcelona for twenty years, during which time there have been several instances of eviction: day and night; with children in school, or at home during the eviction; with just enough time to gather one's belongings and little else... In recent years, some families have managed to access apartments available through social housing or other types of accommodation through their own means; among the almost seventy families that the association currently assists, 67% still live on plots of land, in disused factories and in occupied apartment buildings. At this time, about twenty families are going through forced evictions.

The UN warns that each year millions of people suffer forced evictions or threats to leave their homes.⁴ The reasons are incredibly diverse: urban planning projects, large-scale events like the Olympic Games, speculation on the property market, the criminalization of poverty, various activities and practices in the property market, natural disaster, migration from the countryside to the city, foreclosures, armed conflicts, etc. But how does this affect individuals?

Two years ago, the DESC group published a report⁵ on the right to housing in Barcelona and its impact on people's health. They concluded that housing in-

security and the issue of facing repeated evictions affects the physical and emotional health of families. The UN-Habitat group confirms this and focuses on its effect on children: "The health, educational progress and general wellbeing of children are profoundly affected by the quality of the housing in which they live" and suffering a forced eviction "usually has a profound effect on children".

"Poverty is the cause and consequence of evictions. On the one hand, the lack of options and housing security and the impossibility of accessing housing can force poor people to live in settlements, with the fear of being evicted. On the other hand, the facts demonstrate that forced evictions usually lead to increased poverty", adds the international organisation.

The suggestions that have arisen to tackle the reality of settlements in Barcelona are usually in this vein: do not evict anyone without offering an effective alternative knowing that an eviction would expose them to the violation of other rights; modify municipal regulations so that people living in factories or on plots of land can access social housing when they are evicted; decriminalising the informal way of life of these families and taking advantage of their skills in order to seek viable alternatives; promoting policies that challenge homelessness, with resources and specific economic grants made available that take into account the reality of settlements.

The 2030 deadline

On September 18th 2018, the General Secretary of the United Nations brought a report to the General Assembly of the United Nations⁶ on the right to adequate

housing which put informal settlements under the spotlight, urging them to incorporate the challenge into the Agenda for Sustainable Development. “The world is accepting the unacceptable” when it is “an imperative of human rights to guarantee informal settlements the right to basic dignity”, affirmed the document.

Countries need to act. The Agenda for Sustainable Development urges them to reach a series of objectives before the year 2030. Two of these objectives are to improve the situation of settlements and ensure adequate and secure housing for all. In order to achieve this, the United Nations report offers recommendations: always listen to the point of view of those affected, acknowledge the relationship between having a house and other social rights, encourage re-location to places near to where the families lived, make sure that the judicial system protects the rights of people who live in informal settlements...

Countries need to adopt specific national strategies which take these situations into account and foster an approach that is based on human rights in situations which involve evictions, adds the UN. For example, evictions should not be carried out in times of bad weather, at

night or when the people are not at home, and there should always be enough time to gather one’s belongings.

A short time ago, the United Nations had to remind France of this. According to statistics from the French government in 2018, more than 16,000 people were living in informal settlements and more than 25% of these were children. “It is not acceptable to justify the inaction of a country by debating over which department of the government is responsible: national, regional or local”, warned the UN. They add: “The government entity that establishes first contact with the people whose human rights are affected should guarantee the protection of those rights”, opting for alternative stable housing.

Living in a stable home without fear of being evicted, having access to basic services, to health and education... Defending people’s rights is an obligation of all legislation: national, regional, and local. There is an urgent need to change our outlook and work together so that everyone can live without feeling as though their home is under threat.

Silvia Torralba
Amics del Moviment Quart Mòn

-
1. UN-Habitat and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *The right to adequate housing*. Information leaflet, N.º 21/Rev. 1.
 2. Amics del Moviment del Quart Mòn. (2014). *Carta de famílies que viuen en un assentament a l'alcalde Xavier Trias*. (tr. Letter from families living in a settlement to the mayor Xavier Trias).
 3. Amnesty International Spain. April 2011.
 4. UN-Habitat and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Forced Evictions*. Information leaflet N.º 25/Rev. 1.
 5. DESC group and others. 2018. *Radiografies de la situació del dret a l'habitatge, la pobresa energètica i el seu impacte en la salut a Barcelona*.
 6. Digital Library of the United Nations (2018). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing as a Component of the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context*.