

Pandemics, housing crisis and the value of community-led housing initiatives in the global south

Cidades do amanhã

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How these collective initiatives can lead to a more caring and just urban future

Community-led housing is creative, collective and participatory dwelling

decades, social vulnerabilities have often been materialised in the form of precarious and insecure housing, a global condition that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is time we consider the potential of community-led initiatives as key components to solving the global housing crisis. But amid different social and geographical contexts, how can we best support and develop such practices to meet housing demands at scale?

As we continue to suffer the incalculable and uneven costs of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become clear that health is only one aspect of a multidimensional global crisis. Even with vaccines on their way, millions of vulnerable individuals and families worldwide will still face housing hardship. Loss of livelihoods and income due to Covid-19 has increased housing insecurity, and the fear of forced evictions and foreclosures is part of everyday life in too many neighbourhoods in cities around the world. The pandemic also made life even harder for the homeless and rough sleepers. If staying at home and washing hands is key to protect one's life and wellbeing, local authorities scrambled to address that a key social responsibility was rooted in privilege. Despite global recommendations that local and national governments protect housing as a response to the virus, evidence shows that many evictions were actively pursued by authorities during the pandemic. Not to mention the complete absence of policies and action aimed at settlements with crowded housing units or without access to water and sanitation, as pointed out by UN's 2020 [Report on the Right to Adequate Housing](#).

In an opposite approach, countless solidarity and care networks emerged worldwide, many of them led by civil society organizations. In

have engaged in coordinated actions to alleviate the shock generated by the pandemic. A prominent one is “[Movements against Covid-19](#)”, a network that maps grassroots responses and channels private and public funds directly to groups that work closely with families in peripheries, favelas and other vulnerable settlements. Actions include the distribution of food staples, masks and hygiene items. Housing movements also provide logistical and legal support for vulnerable families, in addition to launching awareness and prevention campaigns. On top of all this, there is an important communication work performed via social media. Through an [on-line platform](#), communities denounce the violation of rights and demand more effective responses from governments and public authorities.

This kind of organized actions illustrate how social mobilisation capacities of social movements and grassroots groups, developed to advance community-led housing, can be applied to respond to situations of emergency. Civil society groups and networks are providing the support that governments have failed to secure to those most vulnerable to the pandemic crisis. Particularly in moments of austerity, strategies developed and led by communities can build inclusive and resilient pathways for urban development. Such capacity comes both from the resilient nature of community groups and their networks, as well as from the accumulated knowledge and experience in advancing housing rights. Now, more than ever, community-led initiatives need to be placed at the centre of housing debates, policies, and initiatives, especially if we want to truly pursue a fairer post-pandemic future.

Across different experiences[\[1\]](#), *community-led housing* generally refers to housing practices that are conceived, carried out and shared by

initiatives that move against market logics of profit and financialization. In other words, community-led housing practices recognize and prioritize the value in living in homes and communities with dignity, as highlighted by [Urbamonde's study](#) on community-led housing during Covid-19.

Community-led housing practices in the global south

Community-led housing initiatives are known by different names according to the geographical context where they arise and their institutional and financial arrangements. Common names associated with those practices include collaborative housing, social housing, co-housing, housing cooperatives, housing co-production, autonomous housing, and community land trusts. We can find some important precedents of community-led housing found in the global south.

In Asia, an important contribution to advance housing rights was made through a partnership between the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) and Thailand's Community Organisation Development Institute (CODI). The former is a 30-year-old network of grassroots communities, and the latter is an autonomous government institution aimed at facilitating civil society's access to public funds. Community-led housing actions financed by CODI fall within the scope of housing co-production, in other words, a more horizontal form of collaboration between the state and civil society. In housing co-production initiatives supported by ACHR, the state's main role is to provide financial, legal and logistical support for diverse community-led practices, each one designed according to specific local needs and aspirations.



Housing units built through community-led practices in Bangkok, Thailand. Source: Alexandre Apsan Frediani

One of these powerful experiences of housing co-production supported by ACHR is the Baan Mankong Program (BMP). From 2003 to 2018, the initiative helped to channel public funds for housing subsidies, loans and slum upgrading actions in more than 300 Thai cities. But beyond the financial support, the protagonism and active leadership of local communities in the BMP contributed to connecting housing challenges with broader structural problems such as urban poverty and inequality. In the case of Thailand, valuing community-led practices meant the upscaling of local housing solutions to city-wide and country-wide decision-making arenas without disregarding local specificities.

In the African continent, the city of Freetown in Sierra Leone has also

are enhancing their security of tenure and coordinating local development efforts by generating Community Action Area Plans. These planning process is the outcome of a collaboration between the [Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre \(SLURC\)](#) and [Architecture Sans Frontières-UK \(ASF-UK\)](#) in partnership with Federation of the Urban and Rural Poor of Sierra Leone (FEDURP-SL) and with the support of [The Bartlett Development Planning Unit of University College London](#). The participatory design and planning methodology involves a series of co-design activities, producing development principles for informal settlement upgrading as well as identifying [potential options for interventions](#). The Community Action Area Plans in Freetown are creating participatory planning instruments that recognise and support incremental self-help housing practices. At the same time, they have been endorsed by Freetown City Council and national ministries as precedents to democratise urban governance in Sierra Leone.



Residents from Dworzak (Freetown) discussing the community action area plan. Source: SLURC

tradition of housing cooperatives and autonomous (or self-managed) housing, which can be noticed in countries such as Uruguay, Argentina, Mexico and Brazil. In Brazil, there are recent experiences where community-led housing practices were actively recognised by the state through national policies, which helped to advance housing rights. Inspired by the Uruguayan cooperative system, the housing program *Minha Casa Minha Vida – Entidades* worked as an arm of the country's core public housing program. Launched in 2009, the massive main public housing program – aimed at delivering housing units for the low-income population in Brazil – was a key part of the national stimulus package in response to the US subprime housing crisis that triggered a global recession. *Entidades* was a specialized stream of finance open to civil society organizations (associations, cooperatives and unions, among other civil society groups) with the relevant capacity to organize and oversee large housing projects. In its eleven years of existence, *Entidades* produced more than 460 thousand housing units led by communities. However, the model is not without challenges. Despite many advances, the community-led strand of *Minha Casa Minha Vida* corresponded only to 0.7% of the total contracts. Also, while non-speculative, the prospective of public investment did increase land prices, which made it difficult for communities to purchase plots better connected to infrastructure and public services.

Now, in 2021, Brazil's housing movements are activating its forces and networks so the precedent and apprenticeship generated by *Entidades* and other innovative housing experiences are not in vain.

Notwithstanding the unfavourable political environment in the country,

the encounters is to co-write a bill where the practice of *autogestão* (common word in Portuguese used to describe community-led housing practices) is recognized and supported by the State as part of the right to decent housing. If approved, the federal bill would mean a smoother path towards the upscaling of local community-led housing in Brazil.



Volunteers from the 'Association for Housing with Dignity' in a project supported by the National Union of Popular Housing and the São Paulo Union of Housing Movements (UMM). Source: UMM

How to best support innovative housing solutions?

As seen in the above examples, community-led housing practices can fill in gaps and provide alternative pathways to state-centric development. However, they still need government support and public investment. As many nations recognize the right to decent housing, governments do

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52

practices. Enabling frameworks are context specific, but should include financial support such as grants, subsidies, tax incentives or logistic and technical support. Within such arrangements, the private sector may also support community-led initiatives, provided that speculation and profit logics do not supersede community's needs and aspirations.

Despite successful models in many countries, expertise remains particularised and we lack general knowledge about what makes community-led housing work, especially at scale. Copy-and-paste replication efforts are unlikely to succeed and technocratic “best practice” models have trouble capturing the local knowledges and valuing social movements. Nonetheless, joint initiatives of grassroots federations such as the [CoHabitat Network](#) are already moving in the direction of gathering experiences of community-led housing worldwide. Global efforts to understand and encourage community-led housing will likely focus on meaningful engagement between peers and sustained efforts of knowledge within and across different regions.

Much is discussed about the “post-pandemic world”, or rather “living in a pandemic world”, given the continued impact of this crisis as well as likelihood of future pandemics. Not only because Covid-19 has disrupted how we live, but also because such crises prompt reflections about what societies should look like in the future. The new coronavirus has exposed the injustices that will make us vulnerable to the next pandemic if left unaddressed. Building a better, safer, healthier world means protecting citizens' rights to live in adequate housing, with habitability; tenure security, cultural adequacy and [other key components of this right](#). This requires us to recognise new ways of inhabiting, producing

housing is bringing as a pathway to make our urban futures more socially just and resilient.

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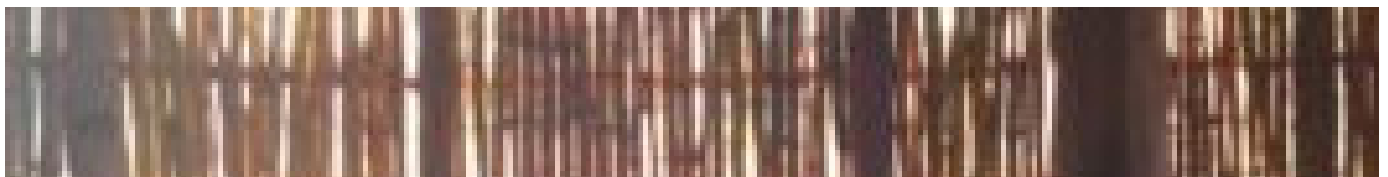
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[1] The reflections from this post emerges from on-going remote dialogue and knowledge exchange initiative about community-led

Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), UrbaMonde, Federation of Urban and Rural Poor – Sierra Leone (FEDURP-SL), Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) and the Union of Movements for Housing (UMM, Brazil).

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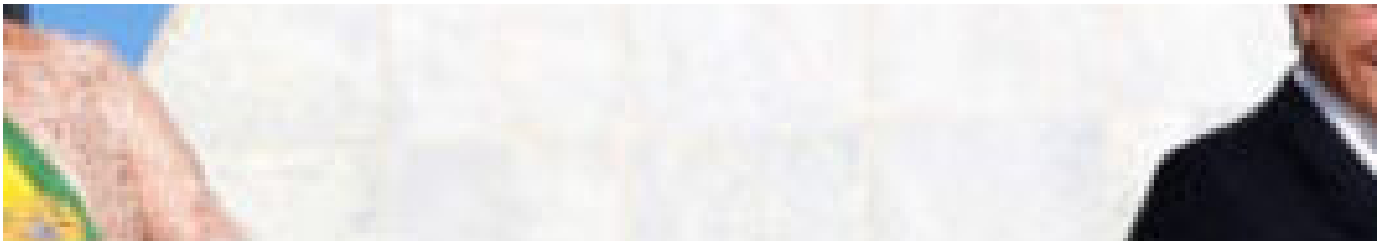
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