



(Re)claiming Citizenship Rights in Accra, Ghana(*)

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Hundreds of thousands of urban dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa face the threat of forced evictions every year. According to the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) over two million forced evictions occurred in nineteen African countries between 2003 and 2006 alone (COHRE 2006). What is most alarming is that Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe have all forcefully evicted residents to make way for urban regeneration projects, despite having ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that enshrines the right to housing and protection from forced evictions.

This case study of the attempted illegal forced eviction of residents in Old Fadama, Accra's largest informal settlement, seeks to contribute to the limited body of knowledge regarding the development of urban social movements in West Africa. It exposes the circumstances, in which the municipal government sought to evict the community, and presents and analyzes the subsequent local urban movement that formed as part of a larger international housing rights movement in order to contest the eviction and find alternative solutions.

Old Fadama's residents appealed against the eviction order to Ghana's High Court, without success. In response, the community sought international support from Shack Dwellers International (SDI) (1) with which it succeeded in halting the unlawful forced eviction and created a constructive dialogue with the local authorities. During this process, Accra's urban poor built a progressive network of community-based and non-governmental organisations that have moved beyond the prevention of the Old Fadama eviction to address broader issues of social exclusion faced by Ghana's urban poor.

The Old Fadama case supports the notion that the negative externalities and detrimental social costs of the globalization of capital and the neoliberalization of cities are creating "new forms of translocal political solidarity and consciousness amongst those marginalized and excluded from the city they inhabit. The globalization of the neoliberal project has therefore been tendentially...associated with the partial globalization of networks of resistance," (Peck and Tickel 2002, p.399).

In contesting the Old Fadama forced eviction, the causes of which were clearly rooted in the municipal authority's neoliberal urban planning approach, the community opened up the political space for the renegotiation of existing power relations. Although this process has encountered numerous hurdles along the way, it has strengthened the capacity of Ghana's urban poor to reclaim their full citizenship and human rights. This is done by demanding to participate in the use and production of the urban space they inhabit through participatory urban planning and by ensuring democratic governance and a more equal distribution of resources, including vital urban infrastructure and services.

Case Study Background

Chapter 5 of the Ghanaian Constitution stipulates the protection of all citizens' human rights and freedoms, including the right of non-interference with the privacy of one's home and the protection from the deprivation of one's property. In addition, the Government of Ghana has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; however international housing rights legislation has not been adopted in Ghana's Constitution, which results in a lack of national legal mechanisms Ghanaians can use to claim their right to housing and protection from forced eviction.

Furthermore, in recent years, Ghanaian authorities have increased large-scale illegal forced evictions in the name of public benefit. Between 2003 and 2006 alone, 7,000 people were evicted from Lake Volta in Digya National Park to free up the area for the implementation of alternative land use plans; another 800 people were evicted from Legion Village by Ghanaian armed forces, and 2,000 traders were evicted from



Accra's Kantanamo market resulting in the loss of their livelihoods.

Old Fadama

The settlement of Old Fadama stretches across 146 hectares and houses an estimated 25,000 to 40,000 residents, making it the largest informal settlement in Accra and perhaps within Ghana as a whole. The slum is located in the heart of the city, to the northwest of the Central Business District, and hosts a mix of informal residential and commercial structures, with many hawker and niche food markets and small businesses. An estimated ten thousand local residents earn their living from business activities within the slum. The settlement grew significantly throughout the 1990s when it became a popular area for housing and work activities for many Ghanaians due to its low-cost rent, close proximity to the city centre, and central markets that provide ample income-generating opportunities.

Present day Old Fadama is a high-density area primarily made up of selfbuilt wooden kiosks and shacks that lack adequate water and sanitation facilities. Flooding is a frequent problem due to the area's location between the Korle Lagoon and the Odaw River. Although the Accra Metropolitan Authorities (AMA) implicitly recognised the settlement by providing basic infrastructure and services in the 1990s, residents live in precarious living conditions and have been facing the threat of illegal forced eviction since 2002 when the AMA served them with eviction notices without providing alternative land or housing.

A study on the Old Fadama settlement produced by COHRE suggests that the Government of Ghana had three reasons for the eviction order: the illegal occupation of government land; the physical location of the settlement within the zone of an ecological restoration project (the Korle Lagoon Environmental Restoration Project, KLERP); and potential health risks posed by the recurring flooding of the lagoon as well as the soil quality of the land the settlement is built on. However, the recommendations of the COHRE report as well as a second independent study on urban waste pollution in the Korle Lagoon(2) suggest that Old Fadama's residents are minor contributors of pollution to the Lagoon and that an upgraded settlement with adequate sanitation facilities could both mitigate the government's health concerns and co-exist with KLERP (COHRE 2004, Boadi and Kuitunen 2002).

Further investigations into the alleged reasons for the eviction notice reveal that Ghanaian authorities are under pressure due to the tight loan conditions attached to the KLERP project —funded by the OPEC Fund for International Development, the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development — which require the removal of settlers living in Old Fadama.

Also, the Ghanaian government believes that the settlement's existence impedes urban planning efforts around the Central Business District. In line with the dominant neoliberal urban planning approach applied in cities across the globe, Accra's Minister for Tourism and Modernisation of the Capital City points out that a modern capital city should be focused around a Central Business District and must be secure, safe and well-structured through adequate zoning laws. It should boast historical monuments and tourist sites, provide adequate social amenities and public open space to its residents and must have sufficient sanitation and waste management facilities (Obetsebi-Lampsey).

If we apply this rationale, Old Fadama becomes the antipode of the modern capital city, but its location right in the heart of Accra, adjacent to the Central Business District, provides the government with opportunities for gentrification through regeneration. The entire area is designated as green space for future recreational use on the city's current strategic planning map. Accra's local authorities as well as much of the country's press have officially adopted derogative language and attitudes toward Old Fadama, diminishing the social status of the settlement and its inhabitants to that of the sinner and outlaw.

The AMA officially calls Old Fadama "Sodom and Gomorrah," the two ancient cities near the Dead Sea described in the Old Testament as cities destroyed by God because of inhabitants' indecent and perverse practices. In depicting the settlement as Sodom and Gomorrah, the government is openly portraying its limited lifespan, as destruction is both forthcoming and rightful. Legitimizing the eviction of outlaws from a place that even God would ultimately destroy due to the vices occurring within is easily justifiable to a constituency, especially if the accompanying propaganda has marked the settlement as a no man's land for other residents due to fear for their safety.



Halting the Old Fadama Eviction through Community Mobilization

The Old Fadama settlement has been socially and politically well-organised since the time when settlement formations began. The settlement certainly resembles any other political group with the existence of power struggles, but residents successfully mobilized politically to contest the threat of forced eviction. The community sought support from COHRE and the Centre for Public Interest Law (CEPIL), a Ghanaian NGO that provides free legal representation to informal settlers threatened with forced eviction, to contest the eviction through official legal procedures. The first step was a joint letter of contestation from COHRE and others, which highlighted the four main transgression points of the eviction order from Ghana's legal obligations before international law:

- The residents were not consulted prior to the eviction order
- The government had failed to consider reasonable alternatives to the eviction
- The advanced eviction warning period of two weeks was too short
- The authorities failed to provide alternative accommodation or other forms of compensation to the residents

Following the letter of complaint, CEPIL appealed to the High Court on the basis of these violations. However, the court rejected the appeal with a response that presents a number of grave errors in international law. As the failure of the Ghanaian authorities to adopt international housing rights legislation in their national constitution resulted in a lack of national legal mechanisms available to adequately fight the case, the residents of Old Fadama investigated alternative methods of contestation which led to a collaboration with SDI.

SDI began as a local grassroots organisation named National Slum Dwellers Federation in Mumbai in the mid-1970s. It gradually expanded through relationship-building with federations in South Africa and Thailand. The organisation was officially founded as SDI in 1996, encompassing federations in fourteen countries across four continents, and is now a global network of local urban activist movements. The core task of SDI is to "organize and unite the poor to influence the way governments, international non-governmental organizations, and TNCs discharge their obligations to the urban poor," (Shack Dwellers International, 2005). The crucial strategies and instruments used by SDI include group exchanges, savings and loan schemes, local upgrading projects, settlement profiling and collaborative efforts with NGOs to create dialogues with government officials and other formal institutions to increase substantive citizenship rights of those marginalized within society.

The publicity around the Old Fadama case and the residents' contacts with COHRE led to the involvement of the South African branch of SDI, with two coordinators visiting Old Fadama in 2003, while in Ghana for an international housing conference. At the time of the visit, residents had already set up various savings groups to improve the physical environment of the settlement. As a result, the visiting team concluded that Old Fadama inhabitants were sufficiently organised and willing to form a local NGO that would be responsible for providing the necessary professional, technical and administrative support to create local community-based organisations (CBOs). These CBOs in turn would provide support to residents in informal settlements to create savings and loan schemes and ultimately build and support a federation of the urban poor in Ghana.

For SDI, the eviction note was merely a symptom of the effects of poverty, marginalization and the lack of democratic governance facing the residents of Old Fadama as well as many other informal settlements in Ghanaian cities. Rather than focusing specifically on halting the forced eviction, SDI sought to develop the



socio-political and socio-economic strength of the community to enable them to claim their right to the city they inhabit.

The NGO People's Dialogue on Human Settlements (PD) was created in 2003, in order to assist the communities to set up a national federation, formally known as the Ghana Federation of the Urban Poor (GHAFUP). In turn, the federation provided official representation for the Old Fadama community before the Government of Ghana.

Within the first three years of inception, PD and the federation saw a number of political achievements for the Old Fadama community and Ghana's slum dwellers. They had created a constructive dialogue with the Ghanaian authorities in order to stall the eviction and develop alternatives, and began addressing broader issues of the marginalization of Ghana's urban poor.

The SDI model that began in Old Fadama in November, 2003, spread to the adjacent Agbogbloshie settlement a year later and has since been replicated in many informal settlements across the country. By 2005, the combined federations had fifty-two savings and housing schemes in 82 communities with a total membership of over 6,000 families. Organisations also expanded operations to four of Ghana's largest urban localities: Accra; Kumasi; Sekondi-Takoradi and Ashaiman.

The activities of PD are expanding to include the upgrading of informal settlements, the development of adequate resettlement programmes, and setting up a special fund to finance community-driven development approaches.

In 2005, around twelve federation members attended the Cooperative Housing Foundation Conference in Accra without invitation and were encouraged to join the discussion table with representatives of various ministries as well as national and international planning consultants. During the event, a large number of conference delegates acknowledged the need for greater community involvement in solving the countries' housing crisis and welcomed the formation of PD and GHAFUP, as well as the international collaboration with SDI.

Furthermore, the founding of PD and GHAFUP, and the involvement of SDI, has secured collaborative efforts and support from international organisations. Homeless International, a UK-based charity that supports community-led housing and infrastructure projects, is providing financial support with grants from the UK Department for International Development and the Waterloo Housing Association, in a quest "to enable Ghana's urban poor to realise rights to adequate housing, safe settlements, secure tenure and affordable infrastructure," (Homeless International). In addition, talks at the 2004 World Urban Forum in Barcelona resulted in a UN-AGFE (Advisory Group on Forced Evictions) mission to Old Fadama in collaboration with Ghana's Department of Local Government and Rural Development. A meeting of relevant Ghanaian ministries in 2005 resulted in the initial development of a relocation plan for Old Fadama's residents and the Government of Ghana requested UN Habitat and AGFE support to further develop the plan.

Despite these initial successes, Ghana's urban poor have encountered numerous hurdles in their quest to claim full citizenship rights, and it remains to be seen if the resulting shifts in power-relations are real and long-lasting. One of the latest setbacks for Old Fadama residents occurred as a result of violent clashes between supporters of different political parties within the settlement during the summer of 2009. Accra's local authorities, under the city's new mayor, immediately took the opportunity to label the settlement as a "risk to national security" and re-ordered the eviction that had been on hold since 2002. The threat of illegal forced eviction had once again returned to the community.

However this time around, relationships between residents and the Ghanaian branches of COHRE and Amnesty International prompted an immediately successful campaign against the AMA's renewed eviction plans. Furthermore, Ghana's central government, the media, and the general public have all drastically changed their opinions about the community and now support the residents' requests for alternatives to the illegal forced eviction.

Reporting on the latest developments in the Old Fadama case, Farouk Braimah from PD highlights that within three weeks, the anti-eviction campaign has managed to renew dialogue with the municipal authorities, as the new mayor is now open to discussions and partnerships with representatives of the Old Fadama community. Although the renewed eviction attempt poses questions regarding changes to power-relations the Ghanaian urban movement has been able to achieve, the speed of the collective response and support from the central government, the media and Accra's wider community are clear signs that Ghana's urban poor have



come a long way in the process of claiming their right to the city.

Concluding Remarks: Transcending Local Peculiarities

The emerging Ghanaian urban movement, formalized through PD and GHAFUP and supported by SDI, supports the argument that the negative effects of neoliberal urban policies have encouraged the development of globalized resistance networks as suggested by critical theorists such as Appadurai (2001), Smith (2002), Peck and Tickel (2002), among others. However, still lacking is an understanding of how these individual political movements can transcend their distinct local particularities and consolidate their quest for specific rights into one large global coherent right to the city movement in order to gain momentum and change the existing inequitable global economic system that lies at the heart of much of the marginalization felt in those different localities.

Being comprised of many horizontally-aligned movements, David Harvey suggests that most of these activist groups are extremely place-based and hence express a “militant particularism.” He calls for the militant ideas developed out of a particular place-based experience to “get generalized and universalized as a working model for a new form of society that will benefit all humanity — what [Harvey] terms ‘global ambition’ ” (Routledge 2003, p.337). In order to develop successful global networks of resistance, movements need to achieve a balance between their “militant particularism” and learn to understand the ambiguities that are intrinsic to transnational collaborations (e.g. different gender or race relations of participating movements) in order to create “a more transcendent and universal politics, combining social and environmental justice, that transcends the narrow solidarities and particular affinities shaped in particular places,” (Routledge 2003, p.339).

The case of Old Fadama clearly demonstrates that there is scope for international urban movements to fight for citizens’ rights and encourage change, but it also raises the question of how these movements can be consolidated and scaled-up. There seems to be ample scope for urban movements fighting against the practice of forced evictions to play a key role in scaling up efforts to create a momentum for the right to the city movement. The severity of large-scale forced evictions, the publicity they receive from the media and international organizations such as the UN, Amnesty International, Witness and others, and the fact that the practice violates various different human rights, offers a platform for consolidated and supported action. Human rights violations that occur during forced evictions are

much more pertinent than the more concealed effects of market-based evictions. The main task at hand may be to further highlight the underlying reasons for forced evictions and to promote the understanding that their occurrence in such a diverse range of localities is the result of global processes rather than a country specific issue. Although there are always locally specific socio-cultural and political factors involved in the process of displacement, there is an urgent need to continue drawing links between the low-income families that have been forced to move away from Brooklyn, New York, London’s East End, or Berlin Kreuzberg due to increasing costs of rent and services that are the epitome of gentrification, and those that are evicted from informal settlements in cities like Accra, Lagos, Johannesburg and Kigali.

Only once we understand the global forces that contribute to the issues communities around the globe are facing can we turn to the militant particularism that Harvey speaks of as a global ambition for the right to the city. The World Social Forum may be an excellent platform for up-scaling this process.

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(*)Community mobilization against the illegal forced eviction of residents in the Old Fadama Settlement

(1) Shack Dwellers International is a transnational network of local slum dweller organisations that have come together at the local and national level to form federations of the urban poor.

(2) This second study was conducted by the Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland.

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