

# Urban development and community participation in the city of New Orleans: Implications to China

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## Abstract

Henri Lefebvre's call of the right to the city claimed that those segregated in urban enclaves or city outskirts, lived in substandard housing, excluded from having an active role in the formation of the city, had the right to the city, that is, the right to a decent urban life, the right to housing, to education, to participate in and change decisions that affect them (Lefebvre, 1996). In the context of urban development, all residents, despite income, race and ethnicity, and migration status, have a right to appropriate housing in order to guarantee security from disruptions in the pattern of their daily lives in homes, jobs or communities. While such disruptions have often been "praised" as a necessary step of urban renewal and development, there are massive inequalities in terms of the right to the city during such renewal and development process. In both developed and less advanced countries, informal local community organizing and formal democratic participation mechanisms have been managed in order to turn the course of events and obtain modest social returns for deprived social groups. This paper reviews the African American and Vietnamese communities' experience during the post-disaster urban redevelopment in the city of New Orleans, discusses community participation strategies and urban governance structure, and tries to articulate what the right to the city entails for minority and/or migrant residents and how community participation might address the concerns of inequalities and disenfranchisements. The paper would then draw the New Orleans experiences and discuss the right to the city in the context of China's migration, urban renewal and community development.

Theoretically and historically, the large scale urban development in the U.S. has been dominated by neoliberal oriented policies and governance, such as urban entrepreneurialism, decentralized regulations, reduced public investment, public/private partnerships, public choice and unregulated growth. Nonetheless, Keynesian urban governance in the 60s arguably emphasized on regulation, participation in government programs, public housing, strong city administration, and regulated development (Hackworth, 2000). Despite the difference between neoliberalism and Keynesianism, to assure the right to the city, there is a need of extensive structural arrangements that characterize democratic participation.

In the city of New Orleans, the disaster Hurricane Katrina in 2005 not only led the city to aggressive works of social engineering but also shattered all concepts entailed in the right to the city. In the wake of reconstructing New Orleans, African Americans are left behind in the process demonstrated by declining population, declining black middle class, increasing disparities in education, employment and housing. Nonprofit groups from the nation came to the city to help fix the neighborhood and the family and do what they think is best for the city, but they frequently ignored the historical struggles that black communities have experienced. In the traditional poor African American neighborhood in the lower ninth ward, there are still thousands of abandoned homes with a few blocks of faux-Creole cottages built by Habitat for Humanity and an array of green homes built by movie star Brad Pitt's organization. On the contrary, the Vietnamese American community has received significant press coverage due to its members' high rate of return and the rapid rebuilding of their own community. While pre-Katrina research described the Vietnamese community as an enclave and self- and inter-dependence, studies over the Vietnamese's return and community recovery disclosed the importance of community

grassroots organizing, high rate of community participation, and community social capital, strong networks within and beyond the community.

For minority groups of people in New Orleans, city-wide large scale urban reconstruction/renewal/development does not offer much venues of participation, particularly participation in the planning and decision-making process, which has associated with middle- and upper-class democracy. Formal mechanism of participation resulted in a new array of privileges as young (mostly white) professionals and national/international nonprofit organizations surging in the city. Grassroots movements with strong community participation, exemplified by Vietnamese community's confrontations with city planner and government, contributed to securing their right to the city, including returning to the home, persevering the neighborhood, and equally sharing the city's growth and rebirth. It is also noted that detailed rights to the city depend on the community's own capacity of resilience and self-reliance. Clearly the right of the city is not granted; neoliberal governance with less investment in public housing poor African American community.

In China, the right to the city has never been a policy theme. Questions have been asked and remained unanswered: do migrant workers or long term residents have the right, and the same right, to the city's housing, education, and job? Whether there is a formal mechanism of participation that would help assure the right to the city? To what extent informal community organizing and participation would help assure their right to the city? And at the end, what are their rights in the city?

#### References:

Hackworth, J. (2000). *The Neoliberal city: Governance, ideology and development in American urbanism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Writings on cities*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.