

Tackling housing shortages or addressing sustainable urban land use? A political economy approach of urban sprawl in public housing projects in Suriname

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Urban sprawl, often associated with low density, fragmented or unplanned urban development, is generally considered an undesirable form of urbanization. Certainly in a developing context such as the Caribbean, it is taking problematic proportions. According to United Nations the Caribbean region is one of the most urbanized areas in the world. Over 75% of all Caribbean's lives in urban agglomerations, often in large, spread-out and unplanned metropolitan agglomerations. (UN Habitat, 2012) As a result, problems arise in protecting natural habitats, woodlands or arable land and Caribbean cities are becoming increasingly dysfunctional in terms of urban mobility, and the provision of urban amenities. (Heirman & Coppens, 2013) (Verrest, et al., 2011)

International donor agencies, national and regional governments in the Caribbean often have strong intentions to set up planning frameworks to guide urban development, frequently borrowing concepts from the developed countries. Western urban planning strategies to combat sprawl however show a rather disappointing success (Phelps, 2012). Part of the failure of planning relates to the fact that discussions and research on sprawl have been far too concerned with urban form and its generic causes and consequences, at the expense of an understanding of the processes producing urban form (Neuman, 2005). The prime focus on urban form in planning literature gave rise to typical planning concepts such as the Compact city or Smart Growth and instruments such as zoning and boundary planning, which are rather technocratic approaches. Moreover, sprawl is a multifaceted phenomenon that

has numerous empirical manifestations and has different causes leading to different consequences in different national and regional settings.

In this paper we argue that there is a need for more attention regarding context specific politics, the institutions, the governance dimensions which actually drive urban sprawl. We specifically argue that in order to fully understand the dynamics of urban sprawl there is a need to bring in a political economy (PE) perspective which takes into account the variety of and interaction between involved stakeholders, their interests and their power positions (Harris, 2013). The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) frame is here used as an operational frame of political economy analysis (Ostrom, 2011).

We use the new public housing programme (2010 – 2015) in Suriname as a prime example of planned public developments in the Caribbean that contribute a further sprawling of the city. In this case we interviewed involved stakeholders in the decision making process of selecting locations for new public housing projects, and asked for their motives, interests and incentives to take certain decisions. In this qualitative case study analysis we use document analysis and in-depth interviews with the main decision makers and public administration (N = 26), academics, professionals and civil society organisations (N=16).

A GIS analysis of the project locations, shows that the Surinamese public housing programme has made an important trade-off between the demand for affordable housing and the need to preserve natural resources, as all of the new public housing projects are located on prime urban sprawl locations. The application of the IAD, revealed that the locations were selected despite the involvement of well-trained planners, the availability of compact city or green city visions and new governance approaches. Rather, urban sprawl is caused by uneven power relationships, perverse incentives and sticky institutions. Surinamese politicians have a strong power over the other stakeholders due to political corrupt incentives such as clientelism and patronage. But also due to incentives that weaken the agency of other stakeholders such as a small society, other development and environmental priorities and limited available capacity to form opposition. In addition other governance, cultural or physical incentives and institutions support the position and interaction among the involved

stakeholders. These are for example detached housing ideal, car dependent society, weak planning instruments, slow planning processes and few technically suitable lands.

The public housing programme in Suriname illustrates very well the context specific and multifaceted character of urban sprawl, but also makes the ineffectiveness of the proposed technocratic strategies tangible and draws attention towards the aspects that matter most in a PE approach.

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