

“The Right to Live in the City”: Exploring Discrimination Against the Urban Poor Inhabitants of Ubon Ratchathani, North-Eastern Thailand

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of achieving the “right to live in the city” for poor urban inhabitants in north-eastern Thailand. We raise the question of who has the right to set the rules of urban spaces, which have changed significantly in terms of the spatial exclusion of poor people. Our study adopts a qualitative case study, using a purposive sampling technique. Interviews were conducted with 30 key informants between August and October 2018. Data were coded, analysed and interpreted. Our findings show that the poor not only have restricted rights to physical space, but the inhabitants are prevented from having the right to live on their own land. We examine the context of new forms of “right to live in the city” associated with the right to historical identity, the right to equal distribution of resources, the right to equal access to resources, and the right to housing inheritance.*

Keywords: *The right to the city, Discrimination, Inhabitation, Urban poor, Thailand*

1. INTRODUCTION

Humanity is currently urbanising: for instance, one-third of Thailand’s growing population lives in cities (Sengers, 2017). Cities are critically sited to show the “urban divide”, in terms of the “right to the city” as the fulfilment of people’s basic needs (Krebs, 2015). It is therefore understandable that with a high degree of community growth, many of the poor are living in cities. This rapid and often unplanned urban growth frequently leads to changes in urban housing and spaces, resulting in conflict over living conditions. According to Hearne (2013), the “right to the city” for marginalized urban poor people encompasses their economic, social and cultural rights. Originally, Henry Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city” referred to a radical reclamation of urban space and social interaction (Lefebvre, 1996).

The growth of urban areas has presented a series of challenges regarding the quality of life of those who live in cities. According to Marcuse (2009), the “right to the city” politicizes the key issue, which can move us to closer to implementing proper access to natural social equality for urban dwellers. Some researchers state that as the “right to live their own cities” is opened up to new actors, this creates a new urban political problem and a conflict of interest among inhabitants (Purcell, 2002). Authors such as Atttoh (2011) examined the concept of the “right to the city” based on various kinds and forms of economic, social and environmental impacts – with respect to rights – that arise therein. Mayer (2009) stated that the “right to the city” reflects the shifting urban social movement within the existing system. A few studies have explored the “right to the city” in the context of the rise of poor urban inhabitants in north-eastern Thailand. Some studies conceptualized that “the right to live in the city of urban space changed, leading to conflict over the right behaviour in the city” (Krebs, 2015). A previous work by Hearne (2013) investigated the “urban divide” instead of “arenas of conflict”, by studying significant infrastructure, well-kept parks, gardens and up-market residential areas. Our study focuses on “the right to live in the city” of poor urban inhabitants, alongside new and emerging rights associated with the area of discrimination. We explore how the “the right to live in the city” can be realized at a practical and community level, with regard to conflicts between old and new city dwellers in public spaces in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand.

Hence, this study presumes that the “right to live in the city” of urban poor inhabitants has changed the lens through which political agency, social inclusion and economic factors are viewed. Consequently, we seek to answer the following question:

Q1. What are the processes that restrict urban poor inhabitants’ right to live in the city, in Ubon Ratchathani, north-eastern Thailand?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Context of Urban Poor Inhabitants in North-Eastern Thailand

The region of north-eastern Thailand has experienced a rapid growth of urban poor inhabitants in the last 40 years, similar to other regions in Thailand. According to the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) report in 2010, in 3,750 urban communities, there was a lack of sustainability and of inhabitants’ rights to live in the city. The inhabitants are at risk of being evicted, due to pressures from both the public and private sectors. Previous studies found that more than 500 communities are being damaged by poverty (Sungkhawan & Thepphap, 2010). The high demands regarding land use, property rights, and state regulations of the public and private sector, have caused a conflict between landlords and poor people. At a local community level, the poor are forced out of economically valuable parts of the city.

According to Sakayarote and Shrestha (2019), north-eastern Thailand experiences great problems of land-use change, community growth, rural-urban divisions and land capitalization. This study indicated that the region has higher conflict, removal of inhabitants’

rights to live, violent forced eviction, and conflict with investors. Moreover, some studies found that community dwellers have no rights to live in their own residence, which is complicated by resurgent authoritarianism (Wittayapak & Baird, 2018; Hirsch, 2020). This right to live in the city has escalated and gained national attention, with local non-government organizations (NGOs) promoting the idea of the community's right to live in north-eastern Thailand.

Elsewhere, poor people in independently organized communities live within specific urban community contexts. As the urban community in Ubon Ratchathani province has grown, people struggle to access the right to live in their community areas. In the west of Ubon Ratchathani province, in the Warinchamrap district there are 32 communities of the urban poor, whose rights to live have been largely marginalized. They, too, were becoming victims, forced to vacate properties and live in poor conditions. Cases from this area have highlighted the problems of poor communities in north-eastern Thailand, as the unprecedented situation raised the need for a civil right to live in the city.

The rejection of urban poor inhabitants reflects the land-rights division between the urban-based elite and poor inhabitant classes in Thai society. In this case, land grabs have been forcing the poor to settle in public state-owned lands; this has made them unable to find land, or at the very least a residence, thus leading to tension and conflict. Conflicts are caused by warranted eviction lawsuits and arrests, to force them out of the disputed areas. This circumstance led to the exploitation of 17,350 poor families in the urban areas; they have been struggling for a right to live in the city, and this had constrained their urban aspirations (Gullette, 2019; Rockenbauch et al., 2029).

Concept of “The Right to Live in the City”

The original concept of the “right to the city” was developed in the 1960s by Henri Lefebvre, a French sociologist; he focused on citizens' participation in the use and production of urban space (Lefebvre, 1996). Subsequently, Harvey (2008) defined the “right to the city” as a central component in political and ethical aspects of capitalist urbanization, reflected in elite modes of legality and state action. This study adopts the perspective of the established city dwellers regarding social inclusion, inequality, and exploitation of the majority of the people. Collective action and bottom-up processes of “right to the city” have been highlighted by social movement, urban exclusion and marginalized communities (Mitchell, 2003).

By foregrounding the right to the city, Duff (2017) focused on the materialization of rights to social and effective use of urban spaces. Previous studies argued that the city authorities can no longer decide to evict the urban poor (Bhan, 2009). As will become clear, researchers have drawn on the idea that the right to the city involves widely varied conceptions of the poor urban inhabitants. Some scholars have conceptualized the right to the city as a collective action and libertarian right against state surveillance (Attoh, 2011). According to Parnell and Pieterse (2010), the right to the city is imperative if a state enforces land-law regulation and management-based policies. Uitermark et al. (2012) claim that the right involves ongoing struggles to maintain order and power in society. In view of the complex nature of the right to

the city, we are calling for a set of radically different policies regarding the right to housing, land, living, and social and economic security.

3. METHODS

Research Design

For this qualitative study, we followed Hill (2012) by employing in-depth interview questions with a small sample, a reliance on words over numbers, and the importance of context, with multiple viewpoints. This approach is well suited to research that requires rich description of respondents' inner experience, attitudes and convictions. We provide practical guidance during each stage of the research process, through adaptive ways of designing, collecting, coding, analysing and reporting data.

Study Setting and Sampling

Study participants were recruited from various communities Ubon Ratchathani city, with a purposive sampling method (Kuzel, 1992). We employed sampling techniques to identify household representatives who experienced varying restrictions on the housing rights of the urban poor. This sampling involved the researchers in speculating, at the outset of the study, as to the dimensions likely to influence participants' perspectives and experiences. Recruitment criteria included representatives of the households of poor urban inhabitants, who consented to the study procedures, and were aged 30 years or more. A total of 30 key informants were recruited: interviewees were interviewed on their way home, or by visiting their home address.

Interviews

Our participants were selected using purposive sampling, a procedure by which information-rich cases are selected, as is relevant to the research goals. The interviews were intended to create a private space in which participants could discuss any sensitive issues that they would be afraid to disclose during in-depth interviews. The interview guide was developed by a research committee. Our interview questions were redefined with input from qualitative experiences; they were written in Thai and responses were then translated into English. In-depth interviews lasted 90 to 120 minutes. Initial interviews were conducted from August through October 2017; follow-up member checks were conducted in October 2018. In the follow-up sessions, participants were provided with results from the study, and were asked questions about the validity of the interpretations.

Analyses

The data analyses were based on content analysis, for an inductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Our analysis procedure started by transcribing and condensing the recorded interviews. Two members of the team (IB and CN) coded transcripts, meeting weekly to resolve coding differences and to create the final codebook, which was used to code the remainder of the interviews. Other team members reviewed a subset of transcripts and met

with the primary coders to discuss emerging themes, as well as discrepancies, disconfirming and confirming cases. Subsequent analytic steps included creating a figure to visually represent the key emerging themes, and an iterative process of data collection, debriefing and analysis (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

4. FINDINGS

Our participants answered the following question: What are the processes that restrict the urban poor inhabitants' right to live in the city of Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand? We conducted interviews with 30 key informants; these indicated that the three processes of "right to live in the city", in the context of Thailand's urban poor, are rights to spaces of the historical urban poor, access to natural resources, and housing inheritance rights.

History of the Urban Poor's Right to Live in the City

The right to live in the city was originally developed by Lefebvre (1996), who explained that excluded groups and communities are seeking to create their own spaces. In this study, we found that the historical right to live in the community was established by the relationships within the social structure. In Thailand, there is a long history of the right to live in the city based on groups and community levels. In urban identity, the historical space pertains to urban dwellers directly obtaining rights to use land. This hidden agency of the urban poor in Thai history means that the legal and bureaucratic boundaries between citizenship and the private and public sectors are blurred.

From historical records, some community members shared the experience that Ubon Ratchathani city has long been opposed to the railway, which caused land conflict, urban poor inhabitants and inequality. Since 1929, in the Lap Lae community, which was the area of railway construction, labourers were settled and exploited their own land. There are no historical records of this issue, because the slum communities were targeted by the public sector in Ubon Ratchathani city. During the 1960s and 70s, our community's community centre was set on fire, but there was no one to talk to about it, and no public sector responded and helped to rebuild it.

Investigation into such rights to live in the community has begun, and much of it has stressed the need to restructure the power relations and urban space. Respondents indicated that poor urban labourers feel social exclusion due to the development of the city. Since urban space is central in good city design, it is essential that the judiciary be involved in urban planning. Some communities were demolished; their residents were resettled in new legal sites, to provide justice for the poor and marginalized. Many jobs were provided under state regulation, and in all of the historical evictions, agencies targeted the structure of urban poor in the community. At the same time, these labourers were exploited as cheap workers, living in slum areas and in waste-picking communities.

This means that the urban poor inhabitants not only faced exploitation, but also lost their own land and struggled in the community. In their community, there was an ongoing struggle to maintain order, power and grass-roots initiatives for the urban poor. The most vocal

communities confronted the alienation of the poor, and the weak articulated their demands to the rich, but were powerless in terms of legal protection and social exclusion. In turn, the undeveloped rights to the community resulted in a large workforce of low-paid labourers with few rights and deregulated kinds. The development of the urban poor is identified with a community conflict between structure and agency rationales; a mechanism that gives the inhabitants a restricted right to exist in the city's history.

Right to Equal Distribution and Access to Resources

Before analysing the data, we first need to engage with the participants' views on the rights to equal distribution and access to resources. Many of the urban poor inhabitants do not call for a "right to the city" or "urban revolution"; these are not usually at the very core of their discourse. Regarding the right to access to resources, the findings did not provide insights into how the urban poor inhabitants connect to this framework, and its various effects. Some participants conceptualized the right to access resources as nodes performing specific functions, with actors and agencies creating conflict between activists in this city.

From a global perspective on the right to the city (2019), rights are best understood as safeguards of social, economic and resource equality. Moreover, they have existed along with dwellers' rights to goods, public services and social opportunities. This signifies the right to inhabit the city, the right to housing and the exchange value of urban spaces. For the inhabitants of the community, no new housing was built to replace the demolished hutments, which would have provided some protection against their residents' displacement. Regularized community dwellers are given rooms in high buildings, but unregularized residents are to be evicted, with no access to resources.

During the same period, the urban poor community has had no ability to access resources and usable land. The significance of poor people in Ubon Ratchathani city's transformation lies both in the displacement they have experienced and in their visible symbolism, due to the process of relocation in an urban poor community; this is a highly violent eviction, with no compensation, resulting in land conflict. The process of the urban poor's access to resources has increased the problems of housing, urban space, public location and infrastructure development. However, the state does not tolerate organized demonstration for community rights, residence and housing, which is contrary to legal codes.

Although the urban poor inhabitants have a legal right to live, it is difficult to regard all access to resources as being equally available to victims. It is noteworthy to highlight the fragmented and uneven characteristics of urban citizens, the city's housing rights regime, and the inequality of social rights and entitlements. For example, for some communities in the Mun river areas, uneven distribution of housing rights has paradoxically created an insurgent space for the right to live. Some participants spoke of significant barriers to accessing physical space because a lack of public support, poorly resourced places, and a rights-based agenda in the urban context. Moreover, some urban areas have high political representation at the municipal level, in terms of both infrastructure investment and areas for poor inhabitants. The achievement of a rights-based city will not happen through the poverty reduction of poor inhabitants alone. The poor inhabitants' access to resources has become a primary condition

of forms of restriction. However, some participants expressed that they had initiated occupations to earn money, but most lived on public land without necessary utilities. For example, we found that the poor inhabitants living in the Don Pu Ta community had been moved to other areas, due to the creation of a state-owned irrigation pond. In Wang Thong community, this area was used to construct the Ubon Ratchathani International Airport building.

Some community members had to build their homes, and then extend over the pond in public areas. They lived without tap water, electricity and facilities for more than eight years after the relocation by public providers. The failure to allocate free basic public services to all communities was a lack of a constitutional right in Ubon Ratchathani city. Key barriers were identified in communities' access to public services, facilities, and inequality of residential rights to the provision of land for poor inhabitants living in the city. One participant stated that "it was not impossible to redistribute land to poor residents, as this is a rights-based service-providing state". It is necessary to determine how and where land for the poor inhabitants was accessed, at what price, as well as whether land rights are safe, secure and economically viable.

In urban development planning, the authorities aimed to support city growth, but they ignored the fact that poor inhabitant groups' needs were not being met. They continued to experience forced evictions, which led to violent demolitions of land for the sake of urban development. There was unequal distribution and access to resources; the urban poor cannot bargain, and the community sought the power to determine their children's right to live in the city. They illustrated that the right to housing, legally approved by the state, is an indispensable requirement of the urban poor inhabitants. In their city, they were not only denied access to resources, land and community; the activists also assumed that being poor had become the ethical basis for the disavowal of their rights.

Right to Housing Inheritance

The right to housing inheritance is defined as the land, housing and occupancy of ancestors being inherited by younger generations. Regarding the right to housing inheritance, we examine three poor communities with problems of transferring land, as follows:

Firstly, in Wang Thong community, poor inhabitants were forced to move from Nong Waeng community (the well-known Don Pu Ta neighbourhood), where they had originally resided for over 100 years. This group of 20 families had to sacrifice their living space that the community had owned for generations. Many of them still live a traditional way of life, but they became separated because of the relocation of public space. For example, a Phiew Chan family member indicated that her relatives were forced out of a location 50 square metres away from home, which they had received from a relative in 1971.

In 1987, provincial staff stated that community members had to move out of the area, due to airport construction. They said that they "missed the land we got from Dad. Wish we could have kept it as our inheritance". Although they received some compensation, it was not enough to help them afford a property in the city, where property costs 1500 Baht per square (four metres per square). It was not worthwhile because of their struggles against the

authority, the demand was high, and the lawsuits take over 10 years before receiving compensation. They feel they are underpaid as poor inhabitant groups, and their housing and land have been taken for the sake of urban development. The restriction of the right to housing inheritance is therefore a restriction of the right to continue their association with the property.

The second problem is the right to transfer land to other generations. The problem of transferring occurred regarding residents' rights to live on their own property, because it cannot be passed down to younger generations. It is a perplexing situation when, for instance, public land is relocated, overseen by a local administrative organization; this leads to unstable occupancy and rights to employment in urban areas. This did not mean, however, that poor inhabitants were given rights to employment, which are separate from the processes emanating from industrialism. It appears that the poor can be employed as urban inhabitants and claim the right to the city. Moreover, we found many communities have obtained a transferable right to rent the land for housing purposes, if it is part of urban development. Securing the right to the city of "every citizen, even the poorest" can be readily evoked in urban poor areas, if there is a change in land use.

Thirdly, a key feature of land rental contracts of between 15 and 30 years is they can be promptly cancelled when the state policy changes. For example, for land rental contracts issued in 1997 and 1998, the railway authority of Thailand attempted to cancel communities' contracts in order to allow private investors to build a shopping mall. With a focus on cities as experimental locations in which to trial new urban development, however, the provincial administrative authority has allowed Ket Keo community members to renew a contract from 2020 onwards. This reflects the risk of uncertainty among community members, who feared that their grandchildren may end up without a place to live.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has examined the "right to live in the city" in Ubon Ratchathani city, north-eastern Thailand, through interviews with 30 key informants. We raise the question "what are the processes that restrict the rights to live in the city, for urban poor inhabitants in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand?" We found that urban development has relied on policies to force the regulation of land, in order to transform public land into housing zones for the poor inhabitant groups. Moreover, our study indicates that the original housing communities' land, located in economic areas, were highly valuable spaces, so that residences were transformed into shopping districts, businesses and offices, to support the growth of the city.

However, relocating the poor inhabitants in community spaces has resulted in instability of their right to live in the city. These groups have lost the right to live in the city because the land is highly valuable space, which the poor inhabitants cannot access. For example, we found that when an urban slum community was relocated, the poor inhabitants were moved to a new housing area where they have lived since 1987. This phenomenon is supported by the work of Lefebvre (1996) and Harvey (2008), who argued that capitalism has serious impacts in terms of social and economic inequality, and unequal access to resources. Within these

contexts, there are living policy disparities across the city, housing tenure has been limited, residents' rights are restricted, and the rights to private property are greatly outweighed by those of public access (Purcell, 2002; 2006; Bhan, 2009; Krebs, 2015; Duff, 2017).

Pursuing the urban poor inhabitants' right to the city argues clearly that the rights to resources, housing, equal distribution and economic security are socially produced, through a process of struggle (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010; Uitermark et al., 2012). According to Bedi (2009), "certain areas of rights, interests, and classification are off-limits" because all unequally empowered inhabitants will face a struggle. This finding is consistent with Islar and Irgil (2018), who found that the urban poor's right to the city was highly restricted, and limited to legal public services and utilities. Thus, Attoh (2011) discusses that the right to the city involves not only many different kinds of rights, but that some right-claims are not necessarily commensurable with others. If rights are thought of as restrictions on actions/actors, then it becomes very difficult to consider the rights as community supports and assistance.

The right to the city is, in this sense, in theory and in practice, diverse with regard to what rights are and what rights cities should implement (Marcuse, 2009). Some scholars discussed the right to the city in terms of a general theory of social justice, while the right to the city has generated interest among urban grass-roots and public regulation research (Iveson, 2013). The rights have become dependent on planning to gain income to provide for social and community infrastructure, social housing and transport infrastructure. According to Hearne (2013) and Krebs (2015), the right to the city is the reduced marginalization of poor inhabitant groups.

On the other hand, regarding the concept of the right to live in the city, Mitchell and Heynen (2009) argued that "the right is precisely its capaciousness". This is because it allows for solidarity to be achieved through the struggle, rather than providing a moral right to break the law. Moreover, Parnell and Pieterse (2010) found that urban poor inhabitants had no choice, as they were denied the right to housing, due to the particular nature of how rights to the city are blocked. These groups are forced to be poor when they have no choice, and there is a lack of legal protection and discrimination. While the increasing conflict over land prices produced by urban growth is a general problem encountered by the poor, cities do not only breed content, they also breed control.

Regarding the literature on the right to the city that arises in response to "neoliberal urbanisation" (Purcell, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Bhan, 2009; Sangkhawan & Thepphap, 2010), our study found that the right to the city includes activists concerned with housing, immigration, the environment and jobs. While right to the city concept focused on the reinvigoration of social movement, we focused on the restriction of the rights of the urban poor and their struggle regarding housing, resources and occupation. Moreover, in Western Europe, the concept of the right to the city has been mobilized in struggle, diversity of movement, urban revolution and the "cry and demand" (Purcell, 2006). Such state/public concepts fulfil key functions of the right to the city (Souza, 2010), but they also represent a potential weakness: that of statism, centralism and hierarchy.

Some scholars suggest that local actors are here conceptualized as nodes performing specific functions in an urban area (Nicholls, 2009; Sengers, 2017; Gullette, 2019); they consider place as “place frames” for a struggle. The struggle has pushed the urban poor dwellers to fight for their right to housing in the growing city space. While the restrictions against poor inhabitant groups meant that they were the least empowered, their negotiations were not represented and served by the public sector. This issue is consistent with Uitermark et al. (2012), who theorized that the right to the city is conceptualized to trigger conflict over space between activists – i.e. regarding trust, contacts and dependence – but also locks them into the context of the city.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study explores “the right to live in the city” of urban poor inhabitant groups in Ubon Ratchathani city, north-eastern Thailand. Using a qualitative method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 key informants, to address the following research question:

Q1. What are the processes that restrict urban poor inhabitants’ rights to live in the city of Ubon Ratchathani, north-eastern Thailand?

The results of the in-depth interviews concluded that three dimensions were involved the right to live in the city: the urban poor’s right to live in the city, the right to equal distribution and access to resources, and the right to housing inheritance. Firstly, the findings enable us to consider the urban poor’s rights to live in the city in terms of groups, communities and urban space. Secondly, the right to equal distribution and access to resources concerns the inhabitants’ connection and access to resources, relocation, social rights and entitlements. Lastly, the right to housing inheritance involves younger generations inheriting land, housing and occupancy from their ancestors.

From a theoretical perspective, this research has contributed to the existing debates on the processes that affect the right to live in the city, in the forms of urban space, and access to resources, housing, land and occupation. This research answers several questions (Bhan, 2009; Attoh, 2011; Hearne, 2013; Iveson, 2013; Duff, 2017), especially as it relates to the cutting-edge concept of “the right to the city”. In addition, the present study provides some practical implications. Our study shows that having access to resources, and support social equality, are highly connected to housing and social rights.

However, our study has some limitations that need to be considered. Firstly, the data collection only used in-depth interview questions. Secondly, a relatively small sample size makes generalizing the results rather difficult. Lastly, the interpretation of data specifically concerned Ubon Ratchathani, north-eastern Thailand, and the findings may not be generalized to include communities in other regions and countries. In future, research could contribute to the literature by examining “the right to live in the city” based on both macro

and micro-data. It must be noted that with a quantitative method, allowing hypothesis testing, the findings could be generalized with empirical evidence, to provide insightful implications.

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