INFORMAL SETTLEMENT DWELLERS IN ALGERIA: HOW LOCAL INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS

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1. Introduction

In scientific research with a purely economic perspective, informal settlements have often been viewed as bad physical environments, associated with illegality, marginalisation, precariousness and social problems. Over the years new perspectives have emerged. In 2000, De Soto used the term "survivalist strategies" to highlight the ingenuity and creativity of informal settlement dwellers (De Soto, 2000). Friedman introduced the notion of empowerment, self-organisation and coping strategies by which informal settlement dwellers improve their conditions (Friedman, 2005). Roy has emphasised how informal settlements need to be understood in a different way and introduced urban informality as "an organizing logic" (Roy, 2005: 148). This shows the growing interest in re-understanding urban informal settlements by stressing the importance of social context and dynamics in the formation and development of informal settlements.

Recent Algerian research has begun to reveal the dynamism of informal settlement dwellers, their commitment and their struggles for the improvement of their living environment (Bekkar, 1995: 64; Semmoud, 2009: 67; Kerdoud, 2005; Mouaziz, 2016). Starting from this perspective, this chapter aims to highlight the socio-spatial, cultural and contextual factors that contribute to the formation and persistence of informal settlements in Algeria. It focuses on the case study of Batna, one of the most dynamic cities in eastern Algeria and the most affected by the expansion of informal urbanisation. Its share of informal housing exceeds 60% (Chaline, 1990: 188). In addition to this, Batna is a colonial city that was founded in 1870. This specific characteristic of the city, which sets it apart from other Algerian cities, makes it easier to identify the conditions of emergence and expansion of its informal neighbourhoods by examining its urban growth process.

The first aim of this chapter is to examine the process of informal settlement expansion. Secondly it tries to understand the cultural and

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local dynamics of formation and transformation of informal settlements in this city. Focusing on their initiatives and practices, the chapter seeks to examine the means by which informal dwellers organise and initiate actions to improve their living conditions.

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this article, we focus our attention on recent and peripheral settlements in the city. The investigation is structured in three types of analysis. Firstly a spatial analysis is made in order to obtain an insight into the housing conditions and spatial issues in informal settlements. This is mainly based on data collected in numerous masters' theses by architecture students at Batna University which I supervised from October 2016 to June 2017.

Secondly a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including community leaders and representatives of public authorities in Batna municipality, chief planners and experts in various urban planning and construction services. The objective was to gain a range of insights into specific issues related to the causes and consequences of the emergence and expansion of informal sites in the city as well as the impact of public policies and improvement programmes at these sites.

Thirdly, informal discussions with focus groups in each of the selected settlements were arranged to collect qualitative data. The proximity and contacts established with the dwellers over a year of site visits helped in arranging informal in-depth interviews with two informal settlement leaders in the neighbourhoods of Ouled Bechina and Hamla. They were asked open questions focusing on their complete migration history, their daily life and practices in order to examine their degree of involvement in their neighbourhood's life.

3. Informal settlements in Algeria

Throughout the colonial period, strong disparities existed in Algeria between the "planned" European city and the "informal" autochthonous city. Informal housing was the prevalent urban housing model of the indigenous populations. After independence in 1962, the housing sector was not given any priority since many houses were left empty by the European *pieds noirs* and others who fled the country after the war of independence.

The impact of social policies and the agrarian revolution on the development of informal settlements in Algerian cities during the 1970s was significant (Boulahbel, 2005: 62). The agrarian reform programme redistributed land to landless peasants and relied on cooperatives run by the government. To deal with the ongoing nationalisation process, many private landowners subdivided their agricultural lands into small parcels and proceeded to sell them as urbanised lots. A written agreement was arranged informally in order to assure purchasers who were attracted by the lower prices of the land plots despite them being outside the prevalent legal norms.

Some selected informal settlement dwellers in Batna were asked open questions focusing on their complete migration history, their daily life and practices in order to examine their degree of involvement in their neighborhood life.

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In the 1980s, Algerian cities experienced a rapid urbanisation process fostered by population growth and accelerated by industrialisation and rural exodus to the cities. This resulted in an expansion of slums around large cities, such as Algiers, Constantine, Oran and Annaba. Industrialisation and rural flight were the main underlying causes of the expansion of slums in the 1980s (Benattia, 1980; Benmaati, 1982).

During this period large social public housing programmes with standardised multi-storey buildings were launched across the country. Unfortunately, in spite of their social character, public housing units were not reserved for the people who needed them most. Municipalities and governorates that were in charge of the allocation of social housing retained a significant share of social housing for executives, officials and employees. Low-income housing demand was not satisfied: people who continued to move towards cities had no alternative but to settle on the fringes in unplanned areas, totally deprived of basic facilities and services.

To deal with this problem, the Algerian government implemented improvement programmes in the urban slums of most cities in the mid-1980s. Originally, the programmes upgraded elements of physical infrastructure, including the development of sidewalks, drains, sanitation and street lighting, which improved slum environments and the health conditions of the poor and their quality of life.

In the 1990s, an economic crisis raged and the government fought a brutal civil war against Islamist insurgents. During this decade an unprecedented decline in the delivery of social housing occurred. The situation was aggravated by massive cityward flows of rural dwellers fleeing the countryside mainly as a result of insecurity. In the late 1990s, the shortage of housing had become critical and there was a large sprawl of informal housing.

In the 2000s, with the economic recovery and civil reconciliation a new housing policy was instituted. Large housing programmes were launched all over the country. Loans and financial aid facilitate the access of middle classes to housing. The social housing formula has been retained, but is reserved only for low-income classes. To make rural people stay in the countryside, financial aid for rural housing has been introduced.

These programmes have improved the housing situation in Algeria and succeeded in meeting the needs of middle-class housing, but the demand for low-income housing remains unsatisfied and left to the informal sector. The informally employed urban poor have been excluded from housing allocation mechanisms. At present, informal settlements remain a problem in most Algerian cities, indicating that increasing demand is not met by formal supply (Bellal, 2009: 109).

In addition to population growth and a housing shortage, the constant rural exodus to cities since independence has a significant effect on the expansion of informal settlements in Algeria. The latest 2008 census data showed the impact of rural migration on urban population growth since independence. The urban population was estimated to be 66.3% in 2008 while it was 49% in 1987 and only 31% in 1966. In contrast, the rural population decreased from 68% in 1966 to 33% in 2008 (RGPH, 2008).

4. BATNA CITY and the development of informal settlements

Batna was founded in 1844. The first settlement was a military camp and the choice of its location was strategic. The objective was to better control local populations and ensure the supervision of military expeditions into the south of the country. Later, planned colonial neighbourhoods developed on the northern extension of the military camp. They were exclusively for European populations and selected families among their local allies.

The Zmala neighbourhood emerged on the southern fringes of the planned city. It was a traditional neighbourhood intended to shelter indigenous and pauperised populations. The urban layout of the city in 1923 clearly shows the distinction and separation between the two cities, the planned and the informal (see Fig.1).

Figure 1. Batna in 1923
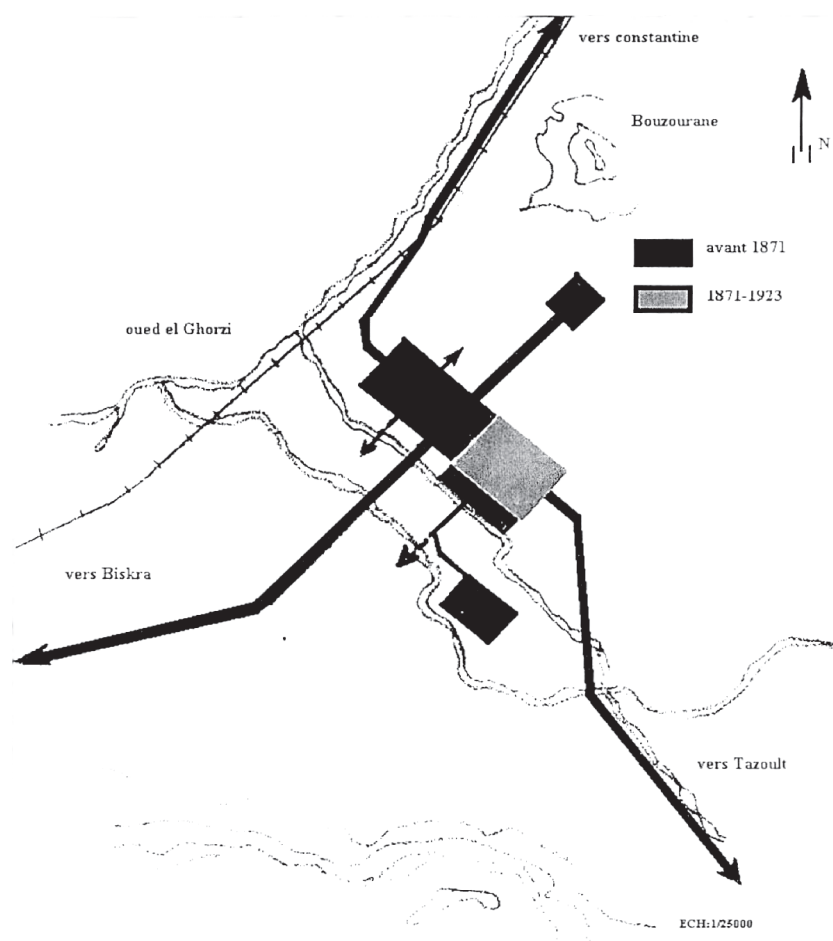
Source: Naceur (2004).

The first spontaneous sites appeared in the 1940s on the outskirts of the traditional Zmala neighbourhood. On the agricultural southern lands near Zmala, the oldest and largest informal district of Bouakal emerged.

At the end of the 1960s, new spontaneous neighbourhoods followed on the outlying peripheral sites of the city: Kéchida on the western outskirts and Park à Fourrage in the east.

The rural-urban migration processes had a profound impact on the proliferation of this informal urbanisation. The drought and the dramatic consequences of the Second World War led to an impoverishment of the Algerian countryside between 1940 and 1949. As a consequence, the city experienced a first major increase of its population from 15,000 inhabitants to 25,000 inhabitants.

Urban population growth continued between 1949 and 1962, increasing from 25,000 to 55,000 inhabitants. This was due to the impact of the Algerian revolution and the effects of the rural regrouping policy in cities to thwart the revolution.

New migrants moving to the city settled in the informal settlements and rented rooms in the courtyard houses. These neighbourhoods constituted ideal refuges for people that were persecuted by the colonial authorities because of their engagement in the revolution. Those of them who had more financial means started buying land from big landowners. The land belonged to large families that were allied with the French authorities; they sold small plots of land according to the purchasers' possibilities.

The private status of agricultural land in Batna was one of the main causes of the growth of informal urbanisation. The agrarian reform law in 1974 accelerated this urban encroachment of agricultural land. The specificity of informal settlements in Batna is that they are not built on land that belongs to the government, but rather on private land that has been purchased by the occupants who built their housing units on it later.

Most of the land on which informal settlements are located was owned privately.

The two largest informal settlements, Upper Tamchit and Tazoult Road, are exclusively built on private land that originally belonged to two large families. Over the years, lands were fragmented and sold informally to new buyers: the current occupants of the neighbourhoods. The Chikhi neighbourhood still bears the name of the original owner family.

5. Impact of the continuous rural migratory flows towards the city

AS A RESULT OF RURAL FLIGHT AND INTERNAL GROWTH Batna has experienced rapid population growth over the past five decades: from 108,700 in 1977 to 319,742 inhabitants in 2013. The Special Aures programme launched in 1968 aimed at modernising the whole region. However, the concentration of equipment and infrastructure in the urban centre of Batna created an urban imbalance between the city and its surrounding rural communities. The creation of the industrial zone in the 1970s has made the urban centre more attractive and encouraged the influx of migrants to the city in search of employment and better living conditions.

FARIDA NACEUR AND FATIHA BELMESSOUS

During the first decades of independence no housing programme was designed to meet residents' pressing needs, despite the urban growth. It was not until 1980 that the first housing programmes were launched: ZHUN 1 with 3,416 housing units and ZHUN 2 with 2,366 housing units. However, delays in housing delivery aggravated the housing crisis, as the first housing units were not occupied until after 1985. Meanwhile, the rural influx increased throughout the 1990s as a result of acts of violence and insecurity that affected the countryside all over the region. The dynamic of the construction market in the wake of the economic recovery of the 2000s then attracted even more peasants to the city.

6. Impact of the improvement programmes on inner informal settlements

As part of the improvement programmes for slums that were launched in the mid-1980s, an urban development programme was implemented in Batna in 1985. The objective was to provide informal settlements with basic urban services including clean water, improved sanitation, electricity and paved roads. The programme aimed to integrate them into the formal fabric of the city through two actions:

1) Completion of basic urban infrastructure like water, sewers, electricity and waste disposal;
2) Street network reconfiguration, improvement of street layout.

Many services were initiated for the improvement of informal neighbourhoods. It was decided to use the free lands for the construction of several public buildings and facilities that were lacking. The resulting changes benefitted the older inner informal settlements. (Naceur, 2013: 405). Currently some of them have become new commercial growth poles that are attracting not only rural, but also interurban migrants (Saidi, 2009: 59; Cote, 2011: 81).

7. Urban SPRAWL: The new peripheral informal settlements

The rapid expansion of informal sites and the private status of urbanised land in Batna has affected the implementation of successive urban development plans negatively since 1994. Urban peripheral areas were extensively consumed because of urban sprawl. However, informal urbanisation continues through three axes: Tazoult Road, Fesdis Road and Route d'Oued Chaaba (Driddi, 2015: 219).

Currently, five illegal neighbourhoods are identified by the Batna municipal technical services: Ouled B'china, Bukhriss and Hamla in the north-west and higher Tamchit in the south and Tazoult Road in the south-east. They are located on private lands on the outskirts of the city, outside of the urban perimeter. According to the latest census data from 2008, 5,878 households containing 34,146 people live in these neighbourhoods. They consist of 8,252 housing units: 5,140 are occupied, the rest are still under construction. The average occupancy rate is 6.64 persons per dwelling.

Figure 2. Informal settlement expansion in Batna

Fig a. Batna in 1974

Fig . Batna in 1985

■ informal settlements

Fig C. Batna in 2017
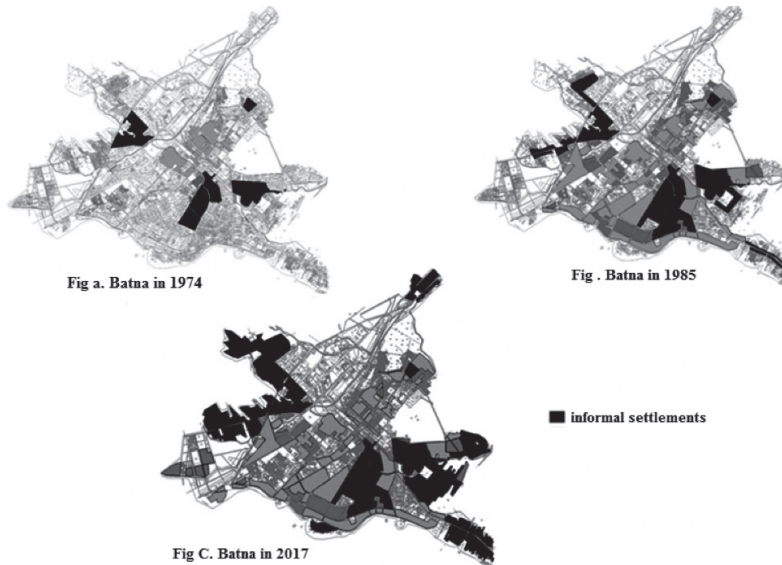
Source: Meziane (2017).

8. How local initiatives and practices contribute to improving living conditions in informal settlements

Impact of affiliation and kinship ties

The majority of rural migrants to the city gathered in informal settlements according to their tribal affiliations and kinship ties. The migratory trajectory history of Ami Houssine, one of the leaders of the Hamla neighbourhood, showed us that even today groups are still based on kinship ties, despite informal speculative market processes.

Ami Houssine arrived alone in Batna from Seddouk, his natal village in the northern Kabylie region, looking for job in construction. He has now become a leader of the Hamla informal neighbourhood. He undertakes his work on many building sites and has over the years succeeded in asserting his mastery of roof construction with wood-frame tiles – know-how that disappeared in Batna with the appearance of the full slab. Like many other migrants he bought a plot of land and built his own house on it. Then he brought the family he had left in his hometown. His success allowed him to found his own building company and to bring many workers from his village, among them his cousins and relatives. To help them settle in the area, he initially hosted them and convinced them later to buy small plots near his land and built on them.

Taking advantage of low land prices, he managed a second time to buy a large plot of land in Hamla in order to resell it to the newcomers among his relatives. He did not hesitate to offer them credit to help them acquire the land lots. In addition to the great number of relatives he has brought, he has organised several marriages between his workers ("Chaouis" natives of Batna) and Kabyle women from his hometown. These alliances consolidated the bonds in the neighbourhood and he became a leader in Hamla over the years.

FARIDA NACEUR AND FATIHA BELMESSOUS

Mutual aid spirit: "Touiza"

In most rural Algerian areas, people help each other to build their homes. This mutual aid draws its origins from the traditional value of "*touiza*": a traditional solidarity practice based on mutual assistance for the realisation of general interest works. House construction is collective work (Adad, 1997: 370). Our observations revealed that the *touiza* value is still present among rural migrants in informal settlements and exists today in different forms. The people interviewed in the old informal settlements told us that until the 1980s most people used to help each other to built houses, especially for structural work such as pouring the solid slab.

The spirit of mutual aid is crucial for residents facing the lack of facilities and comfort in these neighbourhoods (Naceur, 2003: 6). People usually arrange to get electrical connections from a main house that becomes the distribution point for several houses on the street. The neighbours then arrange to pay the bills together to the main owner.

The Oued Bechina settlement is known for its tribal dominance and its high degree of homogeneity. Its dwellers managed to organise themselves and succeeded in equipping their homes with drinking water. Because of the shortage of drinking water, this site has been negatively connoted the "Douar el Attach" the "village of thirst". Gathered around a notable figure, Haj Boutris, who belongs to the Ouled Selam, the most dominant tribe in the neighbourhood, people led many initiatives during the 1990s, ranging from negotiations with the authorities to lobbying for the provision of drinking water for their neighbourhood. They even participated with local authorities in financing the electrification of the entire neighbourhood. Thanks to his prominence as leader, Haj Boutris succeeded over the years in becoming a privileged interlocutor with the authorities.

Informal neighborhoods and job opportunities for new migrants

Informal settlements constitute autonomous units: they offer not only low-cost housing, but also employment opportunities for newcomers. Lack of drinking water has become a source of income for water vendors who cross the neighbourhood with their tanker trucks all day long in order to sell and distribute drinking water in the streets. Garages are the first elements built in most houses. They are usually rented to newcomers who use them for sleeping and as a first base. Afterwards they find job opportunities in the informal building sites around. Once they improve their conditions, they usually build their own houses after purchasing small plots of land in the same neighbourhood. While most migrants are attracted by the construction sector, many turn to vegetable and fruit sales and become street vendors. Others engage in various other informal activities.

Strategies used to ensure their establishment in informal sites

Dwellers bought lands informally in transactions that were illegal and which did not allow them to acquire "building permits", especially since most of the land was originally agricultural and not destined for urbanisation. To deal with this situation various strategies were used to avoid "demolition

140   INFORMAL SETTLEMENT DWELLERS IN ALGERIA:
HOW LOCAL INITIATIVES AND PRACTICES CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS

COLECCIÓN **MONOGRAFÍAS** CIDOB 2018

decisions". Firstly, to secure their transactions, purchasers quickly start building on their lots of land. To achieve this, efficient organisation can be observed on building sites. To avoid urban police controls, construction work particularly intensifies during weekends, or even at night.

Added to this, concrete building materials are used on almost all informal construction sites in Batna: bricks for walls and solid reinforced concrete slabs. These materials make the task of demolition more difficult for authorities.

To improve their living conditions informal settlement dwellers in Batna also apply political strategies, ranging from negotiations with local authorities to pressuring them with sit-ins and the closing of roads. Often they also organise themselves in groups to claim access to water, electrification and sewage networks.

In addition to many informal leaders, numerous "formal" associations are emerging in these neighbourhoods (Naceur, 2003: 5). To better assert their claims to the authorities, people use various media: local radio, print media, television and recently social networks. With political openness, populations are beginning to seek greater representativeness in the political spheres to support their demands. Currently, some locally elected representatives of informal settlements are the new relays and interlocutors with the authorities.

Results of the investigation revealed a high degree of cohesion and a strong commitment and involvement among informal settlements dwellers in their daily life.

9. Conclusion

This chapter showed that urban informality is a lasting phenomenon in Algeria, which emerged during the colonial period and developed further since independence. Industrialisation, the housing crisis and especially the continuous rural exodus to the city since independence are the main causes of expansion of informal sites in Algeria and in Batna. The private status of agricultural land was another cause of the expansion of informal urbanisation in Batna. The agrarian reform law in 1974 accelerated this urban invasion of agricultural land.

The chapter highlighted the socio-spatial, cultural and contextual factors that contribute to the formation and persistence of informal settlements in Batna. Focusing on their initiatives and practices this study showed the means by which informal dwellers organise and initiate actions to improve their living conditions. It showed the dynamism of informal settlement dwellers, their commitment and their struggles for the improvement of their living environment.

The results of the research revealed a high degree of cohesion and strong involvement among informal settlement dwellers in their daily lives. A great sense of community and traditions of mutual, often kin-based, assistance are crucial aspects in the improvements of informal settlements in Batna.

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INFORMAL SETTLEMENT DWELLERS IN ALGERIA:
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