



ELICITING URBAN PUBLIC BENEFITS AND SERVICES: Evidence from community organizations for housing

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For nearly a century, political scientists have debated why some countries offer more generous welfare benefits than others. The answers generally revolve around democratic institutions, political culture, and wealth, among other variables. While questions about the provision of public benefits continue to provide new avenues of research at the national level, decisions around benefits at the federal level significantly impact the day-to-day survival of billions of people living in cities. Research at the city or municipal level on public benefits and services not only serves to elucidate the influence of national governance systems, but also demonstrates how local politics differ in responding to the needs of residents. In other words, we need to know not just the impact of national governments, but also how politics in cities, themselves, generate responsiveness and accountability and drive the motivations of actors within municipal institutions.

Whether or not we, as academics, are directly involved in research on cities in the Global North or South, we know that too many low-income urban residents around the world lack the basic necessities of sufficient food, clean water, and secure shelter. The current crisis surrounding

COVID-19 lays bare the severity of health and economic consequences resulting from these inequities. Basic services, such as trash collection, schools, health care clinics, and public transport often remain outside the means of too many citizens. We also know that given the scale of these challenges, the state must be involved in providing solutions, in terms of subsidies, infrastructural development, land rights, and direct provision of benefits and services. Individuals, communities, and non-governmental organizations simply cannot meet current needs without public support. But how are city, state, and federal governments persuaded to prioritize low-income urban residents given the many demands of their constituencies?

The answer from scholars and practitioners across the world has often been that a strong civil society is needed to push government authorities into meeting the needs of low-income communities. At the city level, however, there has been a long debate about whether community organizations can outweigh the force of coalitions formed by business and government, eager for profit and revenues to be had from urban development (for example, Stone 1988). More recently, though, scholars acknowledge



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the key role that community organizations play in enabling the stronger, more stable growth that comes from increasing equity and security among residents. A growing literature on urban politics finds evidence of the expanding role that civil society plays in providing information on the problems facing low-income residents and advocating for government interventions (for example, see Pasotti 2020 and Paller 2019). As I argue below, from social movements in São Paulo to non-profit community developers in Washington, DC, and everywhere in between, community organizations are fighting every day for city governments to provide greater resources and enact regulations that serve the needs of low-income residents.

More specifically, I investigate the role of civil society in bringing about benefits for affordable and secure housing. For decades a crisis of housing affordability had been devastating low-income communities in cities from Brazil to the United States. In this time, housing security has become an increasingly significant issue in urban politics as residents beg their governments to protect them from surging rents, home prices, taxes, and insecurity. In this context, mayors debate the merits of various policies and programs to promote affordable and secure housing. But what is not up for debate, generally, is the scale of the challenges increasingly apparent to all.

In this brief essay, I share insights on what we know about the strategies community organizations pursue to elicit investment from municipal governments and what we still need to understand in terms of what works across cities that vary by institutions, resources, and governance.

In particular, I focus on the provision of direct housing benefits and policies meant to enable low-income urban residents to access secure and decent shelter in cities across the North/South divide. Evidence from my own research in cities in the United States and Brazil suggests that the strategies of these organizations, which directly reflect their ideology and their relationship with the state, matter for the outcomes they achieve. The means of empowerment organizations pursue effects the path for accomplishing the grand goal of inclusive cities called for by the UN and “right to the city” advocates around the world. In the near future, however, more comparative research across cities will clarify the extent to which differing institutions, cultural traditions, and governance arrangements influence the reach of community organizations working to demand public benefits and services for low-income residents

Urban Challenges

The imperative to study cities is clear to scholars and practitioners of development worldwide. Compared to rural areas, cities across the world hold significant promise for development, including gains in education, health improvements, and income generation. As such, we must confront the many challenges facing cities in order to fulfill the long-term promise of improving the quality of life for all. Between 1990 and 2015, the number of people living in cities practically doubled, led by growth in Asia, and followed by Europe, Latin America, and Africa (UN-Habitat 2016). With this enormous growth in cities has come expanded challenges for providing basic services and infrastructure, key elements for the ability of cities to provide for the quality of life of residents and to maximize productivity among the population. In a study of basic services, in-



cluding potable water supply, sanitation, waste management, transportation, and energy, the United Cities and Local Governments found that as cities gain in wealth, they are better able to provide these services to a growing proportion of the population (UCLG 2013). Significant variation remains between regions as to which cities are increasingly meeting basic needs, and without basic services to start, developing country cities are at risk of stagnation or worse.

Alongside the inability to provide basic services is the growth of people living in slums and informal settlements. According to UN Habitat, though the percentage of the urban population living in slums has declined over the past two decades, the total number of people in slums continues to rise, surging to close to a billion people in 2015 (UN Habitat 2016). Though cities in the Global South have experienced the greatest rise in population and influx in slums, cities of the Global North confront many similar challenges of housing insecurity and affordability. In the United States, cities including Atlanta, Washington, DC, and New York have inequality levels, – as measured by the GINI index – similar to developing country cities, such as Nairobi and Buenos Aires (UN Habitat 2016). By 2025, UN Habitat estimates that over 2 billion people across the globe will require access to adequate, affordable housing. Contributing to the problems of housing globally are lack of supply, lack of political prioritization, and ineffective policies and programs. The scale of these challenges has motivated governments to increasingly undertake public-private partnerships, leveraging the resources of the private sector while often commoditizing basic goods and services for the population. But clearly more must be done to ensure a basic standard of living for urban dwellers.

In Latin America, and Brazil in particular, dissatisfaction with new democratic governments in the late 1990's and early 2000's led to a shift to the left in many cities, often aligned with social movements and non-governmental organizations oriented around housing issues. In the United States, evolving recognition of the continued role of race in housing access, growing frustration with income inequality, and reaction to gentrification pressures fueled the origin and revival of community-based organizations fighting for housing among low-income residents. A convergence in the crisis of affordability across cities motivated an urban politics increasingly focused on the role of the state in meeting residents' need for shelter. UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 states that by 2030, all member nations should "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable," with 11.1 calling for states to "ensure access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services" (UN-Habitat 2016). The question is what or who will drive cities to meet these goals.

Urban Community Organizations

As mentioned above, though past research on urban politics, particularly from the United States, argued against an influential role for community organizations, more recently scholars and practitioners recognize the increasing impact of civil society on creating more equitable conditions for economic development. In particular, Clarence Stone, the pioneer of regime theory in the US, now argues that we are living in "a new era" in which community-level actors have a greater role to play in directing urban policies and programs (Stone et al. 2015). No longer do business interests and government officials simply coalesce to undermine the pow-

er of community organizations, but rather each increasingly recognizes the strength of local actors in creating more holistic, balanced development that ultimately benefits all sectors. In Latin America, as well, there are numerous examples of organizations representing low-income communities confronting the coalition of public officials and real estate interests to elicit investment that benefits the poor (see for example, Rubin and Bennett 2015; Sandbrook et al. 2007).

In addition, the debate coming out of the neo-liberal era regarding the preference for the market over the state to solve social challenges no longer drives discussions of public benefits provision, with acknowledgment that both the private and public sectors play critical roles. In the past two decades cities have seen a surging role for community organizations advocating for affordable and secure housing amidst recognition that the market cannot solve the crisis of affordability nor provide safe options for the lowest-income citizens. Still, housing in particular tests this notion that businesses and government accept the role of community organizations representing low-income citizens because of the direct threat to quick profits and revenues. As such, business interests and public officials still need strong incentives to preserve and create low-income housing (Purcell 2008). The question is how community organizations are best able to wield power to shape program and policy decisions and implementation.

Recent evidence from a survey conducted by UN Habitat, the Global Network of Cities, Local, and Regional Governments, and the London School of Economics provides confirmation

that civil society organizations in general have a largely positive influence on the decisions of municipal government officials to enact urban policies (London School of Economics 2016). While officials ranked elections as the most influential type of participation, they also identified local referenda, public consultations, protests-demonstrations, neighborhood advisory committees, social media campaigns, and public hearings as wielding significant influence.¹

As the survey indicates, community organizations in cities around the world have developed wide-ranging repertoires of activities to influence public policies and programs. While courts adjudicate property disputes, protests arouse disruption in the city, which can lead to enhanced incentives for officials to attend to the demands of protestors. Organizations across cities also undertake occupation of land, buildings, and government property, both out of necessity for a place to live and as a form of bringing the attention of government officials to the problems of housing insecurity. Legal claims, protests, and occupations may also coincide with public campaigns domestically and internationally to shame governments into taking positive actions. Further, collectivizing information, through advocacy campaigns and media reports builds public pressure. Together, all of these tactics often lead to direct negotiation with government officials in face-to-face meetings, sometimes resulting in the promise of new policies and programs.

But the debate remains as to how community organizations make decisions about the best ways to achieve their stated demands, and further, what works in bringing about their pre-

1. For further information, please see: <https://urbangovernance.net/en/>.

ferred outcomes. In my book, *Democratizing Urban Development: Strategies and Outcomes of Community Organizations for Housing across the United States and Brazil* (2018), I argue for recognizing the importance of strategies, rather than tactics alone, in shaping the impact of community organizations in eliciting policies and programs to address housing needs. Sidney Tarrow (1998) famously argued that social movements adopt “repertoires of contention” that range from cooperative to contentious actions, choosing activities at certain times based on the greatest possibility for leveraging power. But by looking at the strategies of organizations, rather than repertoires, we gain a more holistic understanding of the goals, tactics, and targets, without dichotomizing the actions they undertake as either cooperative or contentious.

Strategies involve a plan of action, which is purposive, collective, and context specific (Maney et al. 2012). To this end, in the book I developed a typology of strategies that reflects the locus of collective efforts and the nature of the desired change. *Inclusionary strategies* are those in which organizations intend to influence public decision-making from within government institutions and enable citizen choice, while *indirect strategies* are those in which influence is mediated by persuasion of government officials, voters, or other actors. For example, inclusionary strategies may involve the use of participatory institutions to directly make program and policy proposals, often with the ability to vote on their adoption by the state. Indirect strategies rely on public pressure, votes, or the will of government officials to act as the organization requests. Further, I identified *overhaul strategies* as those that seek to change institutions

or leadership, and *exit strategies*, which involve autonomous solutions or assistance external from the local government. The typology builds on Hirschman’s (1970) revered “*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*” treatise, indicating the choices individuals and groups make in the face of discontent with the state.

The choice of strategies, I find in my case studies of Atlanta, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Washington, DC over the last decade, is largely dependent on two key variables: the ideology of the organization and its relationship with the state. On the ground, we see tremendous variation in the strategies organizations pursue, particularly among those that fight for the right to the city and those that are more conservative in their approach to working within existing political institutions and structures. Organizations that adopt Lefebvre’s classic call for the right to the city in which citizens seek to re-shape the city to be more inclusive and reflective of citizens’ needs, tend to adopt inclusionary strategies, particularly when they enjoy a close relationship with the state.²

For example, housing movements in the city of São Paulo, under a left-leaning mayoral administration in the mid 2010’s, demonstrated a preference for inclusionary strategies as they sought to work within the long-fought over participatory institutions, undertook leadership roles within the city government, and used judicial institutions to claim the rights of citizenship. In Washington, DC, where housing organizations also benefited from a close relationship with Mayor Muriel Bowser and her administration, leaders took a different approach to eliciting money for government programs through ad-

2. See Lefebvre, Henri. 1995. “The Right to the City.” In *Writings on Cities*, eds. E. Kofman and E. Lebas, 63–181. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

vocacy campaigns and public testimony to city council hearings. The constant pressure from groups across the two cities succeeded in prioritizing housing within both administrations, though the outcomes looked different as groups in São Paulo achieved a more expansive institutionalized role while those in DC primarily won gains in funding for housing programs. Both outcomes were critical for assisting low-income residents to secure housing, but in the long run, I argue that community organizations need to be more radical in their approach to structural change in governance arrangements to promote long-term prioritization of housing needs.

Further, Atlanta and Rio de Janeiro represented cases in which community organizations fighting for low-income housing had very weak relationships with the city administrations. In Atlanta, in the mid-2010's, housing organizations lacked the political clout, for the most part, to play a major role in policy making. Their activities were limited by a lack of leadership and fear of disrupting the power structure. In Rio de Janeiro, prior to the 2016 Olympic Games, community organizations, including those fighting against removal for stadium development, sought to circumvent the conservative administration by seeking international attention in the midst of media leading up to the Games. While this type of "exit" strategy held some success for members of the community of Vila Autódromo, in particular, they were unable to break through the political structure for the long-term.

Sustaining the momentum of community organizations to influence urban policies and programs for years if not decades takes extreme amounts of commitment from leaders and members dedicated to the fight. However, if cities are to be more inclusive, these organiza-

tions need to be present at the decision-making table, ensuring that a diversity of voices are not only heard but acted upon in policy making and implementation.

Future Research

Perhaps never before in recent history has it been more important to address the well-being of low-income residents as we face new challenges of global depression and disease. Civil society will have to be at the forefront of efforts to make sure governments respond to the needs of low-income residents as they consider how best to re-start and re-grow global economies. To understand this possibility, we still need to know much more about how an organization's ideology and relationship with the state encourage adoption of various strategies across cities that vary by regime type, cultural traditions, and governance arrangements. For instance, in Sub-Saharan African cities, tribal norms concerning land rights may mediate the relationship of community organizations with government officials. Comparative case studies could serve to identify what works – as well as where and when – in term of eliciting government benefits and services. The imperative for understanding these issues has never been greater, particularly as the world faces the increasing economic, social, and health challenges of the coronavirus, and millions of urban residents are already unable to meet their basic needs. With more conservative governments in power across much of Latin America and the United States, we also need to understand how politics at the city level adapts to these changing realities and enables community organizations to influence the landscape for local funding and implementation of policies and programs. ●

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