Giorgio Talocci (corresponding author), Camillo Boano
The Bartlett Development Planning Unit
University College London

Phnom Penh's relocation sites and the obliteration of politics

In a meeting held in May 2014,[1] the governor Pa Socheatvong dedicated a long time to illustrate the Municipality of Phnom Penh (MPP)'s apparent commitment to community development through their policy to the upgrade of urban poor settlements. Emphasis was placed on collaboration between the Municipality and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with a special mention (almost a boasting) made about the involvement of an American NGO called People for Care and Learning (PCL). The words of the governor sounded bitterly surprising to us, having done research in the relocation site of Andong (Porsenchey district, Phnom Penh) – where the PCL was heavily involved in development – and having collected plenty of inhabitants' doubtful statements about the organisation's actions and conduct.

PCL describe themselves as a 'community for good', that "[f]rom Southeast Tennessee to Southeast Asia […] implement[s] replicable projects that give hope to communities that need it most" (PCL 2015b:1). In Andong, they claim to be building a 'city from scratch': "problems in [the] community are large, and […] could not be fixed without completely starting over" (PCL 2015b:1). And again: "The goal of the Build a City project is to rebuild a community that has lost everything – to give the people new homes, new roads, new jobs, and new hopes. In May 2015, we will open a new city with nearly 1,000 homes for families that were forced out of their old village. The finished city will include a health clinic, a marketplace for 13 small businesses, paved streets, clean water, a church, and free English classes for residents" (PCL 2015a:1).

PCL's words and, as we will see below, actions, are indicative of a patronising approach toward addressing urban poverty issues and the upgrading of poor settlements. 7NG, a Cambodian private company, has used a similar salvationary vocabulary for the project of another relocation site currently being celebrated by municipal authorities, Borei Santepheap II. In Phnom Penh, the alliance between authorities, the private sector and a certain part of civil society in establishing a sort of 'pacifying' system toward (or against) the urban poor is not a novelty. In cases of

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[1] The meeting was part of the programme of the workshop "Cambodia: Transformation in a Time of Transition", held in may 2014 in collaboration between the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Community Development Foundation, and the Development Planning Unit. The workshop focused on strategies for city-wide people-driven upgrading of urban poor settlements.

forced relocation in particular, displaced households are usually compensated with a small piece of land and, sometimes, with services or housing. It has been a common practice in processes of forced relocation, and it usually proves to be successful at least in terms of dividing urban poor groups, weakening their cohesion.

From 1990 on (STT 2007, 2009a, 2011a, 2012d) Phnom Penh has attended the construction of fifty-four relocation sites in the outskirts of its urban landscape. Their constellation is not a homogenous one, and there are considerable differences in terms of distance from the centre (10 to 55 km), square meter allotment size, system of land, housing and facility provision (if any), involvement of actors from the public, private and third sectors, and the level of involvement of the displaced people themselves.

However, while every relocation site must be considered in its terms of its particularities, a comprehensive analysis of their complex topology would be very beneficial, and to date it is still lacking. A lot of attention has been put on forced evictions (Brickell 2014; COHRE 2011; Connell and Grimsditch 2015 – this volume; Durand-Lasserve 2007; Springer 2012) and on their significance within the wider goal of creating a neoliberal order (Springer 2008, 2009, 2010, 2015) in an increasingly globalised, 'spectacularised' and privatised Phnom Penh (Fauveaud 2013, 2015 – this volume; Paling 2012; Percival and Waley 2012; Percival 2015 – this volume). Nonetheless, there is a considerable gap in the literature insofar as no studies have thus far attempted to take a comprehensive look at the galaxy of relocation sites, and to put forward a critical reflection on their significance in the wider urban governmental mechanisms. Most of the knowledge production to date has concentrated on the displacements' immediate afterlives, and a few comparative studies have disregarded the politics (and micro-politics) at play within the relocation sites, and the way their design and management contribute to what we can call a process of pacification and de-politicisation.

Grounding in a wider debate on the de-politicisation of the urban realm under neoliberal policies (Becerril Miranda 2014; Candan and Kolluoglu 2008; Fiori 2014; Mukhija 2001; Talocci and Boano 2015a), we argue that, in spite of the strong resistance often encountered by eviction orders, the reality post-relocation is rather a post-political one (Springer 2011, 2014; Swyngedouw 2005, 2010, 2011). Relocation sites reflect the overarching goal of a neoliberal agenda aiming to exclude the urban poor from any process of decision making: in this sense, the delivery and management of housing products or other facilities or services, far from empowering the poor by enabling their political participation (see Boonyabancha, Carcellar, and Kerr 2012), instead seeks a de facto erasure of any meaningful opposition and

disagreement from their side. As a wider process of 'divide and conquer' – that starts from the negotiations prior to the actual eviction – the capacity of urban poor groups to claim any rights gets fragmented. The reality of the relocation sites thus reflect the impossibility of community mobilisation, of exclusion from any form of political life in the city, and of the poor's existence having been turned into *bare life* (Agamben 1998).

This chapter will start with a critical review of the literature on Phnom Penh's relocation sites, highlighting the fundamental role of the politically engaged production of knowledge by several NGOs committed to advocating for the urban poor's right to stay in the city (see ACHR 2004; Connell and Grimsditch 2015 – this volume). It will then navigate the reality of two relocation sites (Borei Santepheap II and Andong), whose dynamics of transformation have been exemplary of the tendency toward a de-politicisation of the urban realm, analysing the discourses and actions of the actors involved in their production of space (see also: Lefebvre 1991). The conclusions will interrogate the significance of the 'object' relocation site within the wider urban governmental apparatuses, and attempt to reflect on their future role in Phnom Penh's urban development, drawing also from the text of the recently approved National Housing Policy (MLMUPC 2014).

Phnom Penh's relocation sites: reviewing a politically engaged literature, with some missing points

Attention to evictions and relocation processes in Cambodia has been high since the late 1990s and early 2000s, thanks to the involvement of several NGOs – especially Solidarity for Urban Poor Federation (SUPF) and Urban Resource Centre (URC) – in the production of knowledge on the displaced populations and their condition. SUPF carried on the first comprehensive surveys of urban poor communities in 1997, 1999, and 2003 (cited in: ACHR 2004; Fukuzawa 2014), placing emphasis on communities at risk of eviction and on the causes of such risk (beautification of public spaces, new infrastructures and services, speculative residential developments) – establishing a basis for a critique of the current neoliberal stage of Phnom Penh's urban development.

In the meantime URC, in publications supported by UN-Habitat and Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development, began in-depth studies of evictions and the consequent relocations (see for instance: Fallavier 2002) at around the same time, putting forward the first comparative studies between several resettlement processes (Fallavier 2001, 2003). These studies were framed within the MPP's Urban Poverty

Reduction Strategy (Fallavier 2007) and therefore looked at three different dimensions of improvement of access to basic services (including housing), development of income generation opportunities, and strengthening of communities' role in decision making. These considerations are important insofar as they highlight how, although access to housing is a key factor, this cannot be dissociated from income-generation and local political organisation, and particularly how the success of resettlement programmes depend upon the political will of all the parties involved, and not simply technical and financial aspects. Such inquires accordingly question the actual commitment of authorities to outlining a framework for fair resettlement processes.

The organisation Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) took up where SUPF and URC[3] left off in conducting surveys and detailed studies on displacements, highlighting the gradual shift of the urban poor toward the outer districts of the city (Fukuzawa 2014; STT 2009b), and pointing to how this is in fact not due only to forced evictions, but also represents a more invisible and definitely less studied migration of the poor toward a cheaper rental market and peripheral areas where the cost of living is more affordable. STT also has the merit of having started a series of publications that offered updates on the number, condition, and population of the relocation sites in Phnom Penh (STT 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2011a, 2012d), contributing to a greater understanding of their complexity.

It is important to notice how the data coming from these surveys and reports have never been acknowledged by the Royal Government of Cambodia or the MPP, whose 'Urban Poor Assessment Report' (MPP 2012), instead completely overlooks any and all of the dynamics of displacement. Knowledge about relocation sites and urban poor settlements in general is indeed highly contested, and the data collected by third sector organisations has often served as weapon in the hands of activists and affected communities in order to claim their rights and sensitise national and international civil society toward the increasing exclusionary character of the urban realm. More recent research from several NGOs has focused on the infamous cases of Boeung Kak (STT, Water, and Ket 2012; STT 2010), the Railway Rehabilitation project (Bugalski and Medallo 2012; STT 2011b, 2012a, 2012c; Tiskerud and Lindstrom 2013), Dey Krahorm (Licadho Canada 2008; STT 2012b; Talocci and Boano 2015b) and Borei Keila (Licadho & Licadho Canada 2012; Licadho 2008, 2009; Talocci and Boano 2015a). These studies emphasize both evictions and their

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[3] While SUPF simply stopped its activities, URC dissolved and most of its leaders founded STT.

afterlives on the relocation sites.[4] Such production – while focusing on the condition of relocated families in terms of access to service, livelihoods, and on reconstructing their narratives of displacement – has been aimed to both revealing the practices of the government as not complying with national and international legal frameworks on displacement, and the involvement of the private sector (as in the cases of Boeung Kak, Borei Keila, Dey Krahorm) as well as international donors (as in the Railway case) in a general regime of opaque governance vis-à-vis the urban transformation process (see also: Fauveaud 2015 – this volume).

In a similar fashion, STT has also outlined a critique (Lindstrom 2013) of the legal instrument that should regulate the relocation processes, the Circular 03 on 'Resolution of temporary settlements on land which has been illegally occupied in the capital, municipal and urban areas' (RGC 2010). This analysis has the merit of showing the actual impediments that the Circular's implementation is encountering in Phnom Penh (Lindstrom 2013) for four particular reasons, namely: 1) the high pressures on land and the lack of agency of the district and sub-district authorities because of an overly present MPP; 2) its actual lack of agency because of being, precisely, a Circular, and therefore being very low in the Cambodian legal hierarchy and not having the force of law; 3) its deliberate ambiguity in identifying possible beneficiaries while, instead, defining all occupiers as 'illegals', although they may be able to show lawful possession on their land according to the Land Law's criteria (RGC 2001);[5] and 4) its further ambiguity in not outlining any criteria for the relocated to choose where they are resettled or on-site upgrading of their new plots. Also, the analysis interestingly outlines the background to conceiving the Circular 03 and the important role that was played by the German Cooperation Agency (GTZ, then GIZ) in its approval, and how its 'neutral' formulation was de facto the result of GTZ's pressures in order to avoid antagonising the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, while keeping a continued engagement in the Cambodian land sector (Lindstrom 2013).

In spite of these critical insights on the ambiguous role of authorities and development partners, a comprehensive reflection on the role of the relocation sites in pursuing the goals of said political subjects is still lacking. The only recent comparative studies (Chi et al. 2010; McMahon 2015; UNHR 2012) have focused on the analysis of income, education, health, housing and infrastructure provision and land titling on the relocation sites, somehow overlooking the political dimension of the

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[4] Such production of knowledge usually occurs while the same NGOs conduct also activities of support toward the relocated communities, including legal aid, small upgradings, sometimes the provision of rice in the early stages of the resettlement.

[5] To be legal, possession must be: unambiguous, non-violent, notorious to the public, continuous and in good faith (RGC 2001:art.31).

act of relocation, and the (either present or absent) political agency of the relocated groups.[6] In this sense, the contribution of Montvilaite (2014) on the analysis of land transactions post-relocation in Trapeang Anhchanh (the relocation site for the families displaced because of the Railway project)[7] is important in revealing both a certain micro-politics on the relocation site, and their role as yet another element of the wider commodification and privatisation of Phnom Penh's urban realm. The importance of relocation sites accordingly extends far beyond simply being receptacles of exclusion. Newcomers, private developers, and a series of non-governmental organisations play an important role in making the wider picture much more complex, as we will see in the two examples below.

Borei Santepheap II: 'Happiness', or the commodification of space in the relocation sites

Borei Santepheap II (literally 'peace village', henceforth BSII) is probably the relocation site that best exemplifies the involvement of the private sector in the production of space related to resettlement processes, and the consequent further commodification of urban space in Phnom Penh. It is a huge settlement, with a total of 2000 units (7NG Group 2010), built about 20km South-West from the city centre (in Damnak Trayoeung, Dangkor district) which – via tuk-tuk or moto-dup – means about one hour driving from the center of Phnom Penh on bumpy roads. It hosts families evicted from both Boeung Kak and Dey Krahorm,[8] whereby two Cambodian companies, 7NG and Shukaku Inc. (Fauveaud 2015 – this volume; Licadho Canada 2008) are currently building new developments. As we will see, it is reductive to define BSII as 'relocation site', since most of its urban fabric is actually made up by units that were sold on the market.

BSII's land is owned by 7NG, the same company that caused the eviction of Dey Krahorm's families. The illusion of getting a 4x10 metre housing unit in BSII proved (see figure 1) to be an important tool for dividing (and therefore weakening) the original communities on both sites. In Dey Krahorm for instance 7NG reached an agreement on the displacement to BSII with some community leaders and village chiefs. Although this contract was rejected by the majority of the families in Dey Krahorm (Connell and Grimsditch 2015 – this volume; Licadho Canada 2008; UNHR

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[6] The UNHR report has actually a very short section on community participation and social integration (UNHR 2012), though these seem to remain very marginal topics.

[7] Trapeang Anhchanh should be actually distinguished in New Trapeang Anhchanh (where the families displaced from the Railway settlement are) and Old Trapeang Anhchanh, that collect displaced people from a multitude of settlement on the Tonle Bassac (Montvilaite 2014).

[8] In the literature there is often confusion about this, and Borei Santepheap II is alternatively cited as relocation site for families from Dey Krahorm only (UNHR 2012) or from Boeung Kak only (Chi et al. 2010).

2012), others made private agreements and had already started 'decanting' to BSII from 2006 onward. A similar situation happened in Boeung Kak, where some households refused to move or prematurely accepted a low compensation. Of those who eventually moved to BSII, many sold or rented out their units to newcomers very soon afterwards, moving back toward the centre in search of better livelihoods.[9]

A woman who had previously lived in Dey Krahorm tells us that only the people who have a job in close proximity to BSII have eventually decided to stay. Her mother though, living with her, is a cleaner in Phnom Penh and uses a good part of its salary in commuting everyday by motodop. She lives in one of the southernmost units of the settlement, and most houses around hers are empty. She complains that there was not even a lottery system to assign the houses, and the company along with the most powerful subjects within the community decided it all. The latter have also managed to secure the more valuable units facing the main open spaces for themselves. Her mother mentions there had been an attempt to establish a system of community savings at some point, but it did not work out. Today, on the financial side, the only way to have some money for extra-expenses such as medical care or housing upgrades is to apply for an individual loan to a bank, mortgaging the housing unit itself, or to microfinance institutions (Bylander 2015).

It is important to notice how the units are still property of 7NG, which has simply issued housing certificates and not ownership titles, that is the current practice in Phnom Penh in contexts of both resettlement and on-site upgrading. Officially, this is done to avoid the sale of housing units in the first 5 years from the relocation: in most cases though ownership titles are never issued, suggesting that 7NG (or MPP in other cases) simply prefer to retain the ownership for themselves, as a form of further control over the settlements' future transformation. According to a previous study (UNHR 2012) in BSII, 7NG even held onto displaced families' residency books in exchange for housing certificates, giving no guarantee of ever returning them.

In the settlements' central public spaces lies an open structure for a market, yet most commercial units have been shut for good because of lack of business, and many of them have been privatised and converted to housing. A woman tells us that she is paying $400 per year directly to 7NG for her small commercial/residential unit. The unit measures just about 3m by 4m, and she uses the space part of it during the day as small shop. There are three more people with her, her husband and son, both security guards, and her daughter, who works in the garment factory on the North-West side of the settlement. The factory was also built by 7NG, but is currently owned

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[9] Evidence from interviews show how many of them have ended up resettling along the Railway, renting rooms not far from their original location in Boeung Kak.

by 'The Willbes Cambodia & Co. Ltd.', a Cambodian branch of a Korean textile company that provides work to about 2000 people.

On the other side of the main open space we spoke with the owner of a very tall house. He tells us how his family had purchased the house in 2014 for $37000, thinking to that they could sell it in the future if the prices went up further. The previous owner was the village leader, who apparently received a few houses around the settlement. The current owner works as a soldier, and thinks life is easier compared to central Phnom Penh and its traffic. To him there is not much difference since electricity and water supply arrived. He considers the construction to be of a high quality in his house, comparing it to the housing for the poor, which he deems to have weaker foundations and structure than his home.

Just as in Phnom Penh we see a middle class, their presence is no exception in the relocation site. As already mentioned, rather than a relocation site, BSII is a comprehensive project implemented by 7NG, with about 80% of the housing stock sold on the market. Although marketed as a philanthropic operation to give housing to the poor, it instead served to create a new urban centrality and an opportunity for the company to invest its capital in a setting where the cost of land and labour was definitely low. The sale of the housing units subsidised the (poorer) construction of housing for the evicted populations, though confining them at the margins of the site.

The quality of the housing units is decent enough and cleverly designed as incremental, leaving room for future expansion in height, as has already happened in those units where wealthier families reside. However, BSII is far from the idyllic place that is described in a presentation (leaked through the web) by 7NG itself, where it is characterized as being in opposition to the "anarchic, jobless, conflict[ive] situation at Dey Krahorm" (7NG Group 2010:15). BSII was presented as the place where adults could find work (in the garment factory), children would have access to education, and there would be proper health facilities. The presentation shows on-site facilities working efficiently, using random pictures of a classroom, a paediatric clinic, and a factory, all supposedly provided in BSII by a magnanimous 7NG. Contradicting this sanguine presentation, evidence from interviews and on-site mapping suggests that there is no trace of such educational or health facilities, but only some small schools and clinics run by non-governmental organisations. "Happiness" (7NG Group 2010:44) is the word used throughout the presentation to describe the mood and state of mind of the residents that had chosen to resettle voluntarily, while images of a lottery to assign the several units is also shown. Yet according to several interviewees, the lottery never occurred (see also: Talocci and Boano 2015b).

Andong: 'Hope', or the impossibility of community-driven decision-making

If 'happiness' was the keyword that 7NG used to market the project for BSII, the one that People for Care and Learning used for advertising their 'Build a City' project in Andong is definitely 'hope', recurrent in their statements and in Andong's toponymy.

Andong was originally created to relocate about 600 households violently evicted from the Sambok Chab settlement in June 2006 (ADHOC 2012; Chi et al. 2010; Goad 2012; STT 2011a; UNHR 2012). They were taken to Andong when the site was still lacking any form of shelter or basic infrastructure, while many more people had willingly moved to the site in the hope of receiving a plot of land (UNHR 2012). People were organised by the MPP in six different areas according to their date of arrival and not following any original community structure. With time, an outstanding number of NGOs, 17 in total, became involved in assisting Andong's communities, noticeably the Cambodian Red Cross, the Korean Church Relief Team, and the Urban Poor Development Fund. UPDF had initiated saving groups to develop income generation and upgrading plans – with some families getting $500 loans for upgrading their houses and others receiving $1000 to buy houses developed by UPDF itself. Today community savings are still present amongst certain groups of inhabitants, although evidence from our interviews suggests a weak level of mobilization even within organised groups.

In spite of an increase in the level of employment, two areas (known as Andong 4 and Andong 6) have remained considerably poorer than the others and in urgent need of upgrading. In 2012 they became the target of the 'Build a City' project by PCL, with the collaboration of Habitat for Humanity who contributed to the design of 800 housing units funded by PCL itself. These were provided for free in an adjacent site, only 1km away from the original Andong settlement.

Noticeably, PCL has conducted a survey to make sure the project was targeting the poorest families, thereby excluding those households whose income was higher than $30 per month from the project, regardless of the possible connections and social networks within the families that will be actually relocated. Again, as in BSII, families were given a certificate and not the proper housing title – assuming they will avoid selling the units in the short term. As we have seen for BSII, this assumption has proven to be inaccurate, since informal housing transactions inevitably occur, yet, retaining the ownership of the housing stock certainly represents one further degree of control over the settlement's space and resident population.

The new settlement is divided into 11 parallel rows of housing units, which each measure 24sqm. In our visit in May 2015, the construction was almost complete (see figure 2). Roads have been named all as "New Hope, Tennessee" and so on, quoting the names of American cities that recall the term 'hope'. On the wall of the central row of houses an American flag has been painted between the logos of PCL and the MPP. Two rows away, the core values of PCL stands colourfully on another wall: "business, children, education, farming, housing". In a brief meeting with a PCL representative, he talked very proudly of the project, commenting specifically on the incremental design of the units. When asked whether they were trying to facilitate any sort of community organisation prior to the resettlement, his answer was that this could have come only 'after' the achievement of the other PCL's core values – delivering housing, establishing employment, setting up educational structures, providing leisure spaces for children ("we notice that football is very followed in Cambodia, so we'll build a football pitch!")[10], and cultivating the land in the relocation site.

The result is a completely over-imposed design and management of a settlement, wherein any input from already present communities' and household structures and their everyday life, occupations, and aspirations are systematically disregarded. From conversations with Andong's residents it was evident how some of them were initially not willing to move because of mistrust toward PCL and the MPP, and because the design of the units was too rigid, and their size too small especially for large families. Moreover, the 'incrementality' that PCL boasts about seems to be a rather fake one: the structure of the units and their roofs suggest that building upwards in height will be quite difficult. Also, there are rumours that PCL and MPP have forbidden any kind of upgrading in the first five years of inhabitancy, and families are worried because of the low and thin metallic roofs that will likely make the temperature inside the units very high. The same concerns were expressed by a UN-Habitat officer in an informal conversation with us, although this scepticism could not appear in official papers: "those are not houses, they are rooms, they are not suitable for big families, [of] which [there] are many in Andong. Also, they are completely disrespectful of Cambodian culture, I have never seen anywhere else a toilet being so visible from the rest of the room. It is really poor design".[11]

However, at the moment 'not-relocating' does not seem to be an option and the possibility of on-site upgrading has been completely denied, which can appear as nonsensical given the huge amount of resources that PCL has fuelled into the project, which would have certainly granted the possibility of a proper survey within the communities and the design of a solution more suitable for their needs. Instead, a

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10 Conversation with PCL representative, Phnom Penh, 3 May 2015.
11 Conversation with S.V., Phnom Penh, 21 May 2015.

unilateral decision was favoured, in PCL's programmatic conviction of being a 'community for good' and knowing best about the shaping of Andong's future – obviously with the blessing of the MPP that does not have much interest in any sort of community mobilisation from below.

Further complicating the picture, in May 2014 authorities and NGOs[12] reached a general agreement for one final relocation from the central site of Borei Keila, a highly contested space where around 100 families are still living 'illegally' after being excluded from a land-sharing agreement (Adler, Ketya, and Menzies 2008; Rabé 2010; Talocci and Boano 2015a). Although evidence from interviews shows how many of them disagree with this decision, it is very likely that they will now be moved to the 'Build a City' project in Andong. Yet another imposed decision of joining two communities with very different narratives in the same space, as already happened in BSII with the populations of Dey Krahorm and Boeung Kak.

Conclusions

In Borei Santepheap II and Andong we have seen how two very different spatialities, whose production was driven by two very heterogeneous actors (although using almost equal discourses), have produced similar outcomes in terms of the annihilation of politics in the context of the relocation sites. More than just being displaced, urban poor groups are continually divided and excluded from any possibility of decision making, be it planning their settlement, replacing the roof on top of their units, or even choosing which unit to live in.

BSII and Andong are certainly not the only notorious examples of these dynamics – infamous and at the same time celebrated by the authorities as successful, sometimes even visited by international delegations as sort of 'model-sites'.[13] It can seem unfair to criticise these two sites given that on many other occasions – even in recent times as in the examples of Tang Khiev (2009) and Phnom Bat (2012) (STT 2012b; Talocci and Boano 2015b) – people had simply been dumped on bare land without basic amenities like potable water or electricity. At the same time though we cannot avoid stressing the need to place emphasis on the de-politicising action that housing (and a few services) actually carried out in BSII and Andong. The provision of housing units has happened as a process exogenous to any community dynamics

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[12] Information coming from a conversation with R.K., officer at Community Development Partners, Phnom Penh, 15 May 2014; and from a conversation with S.V., officer at UN-Habitat, Phnom Penh, 21 May 2015. The meeting did not get any media coverage.
[13] The inauguration of Andong's Build a City project (4 May 2015) for instance was attended by a total of 1500 people, including many national and international delegations from public authorities, non-governmental organisations and donors.

and structures. Deliberately refusing to engage the community in the design, management and financing of the resettlement process, the MPP and its development partners have conceived a patronising and exclusionary system that is founded on the ambiguities of the country's legal and policy framework – outlined by the Land Law (RGC 2001), the Circular 03 (RGC 2010) and the recently approved National Housing Policy (MLMUPC 2014) – as well as the opacity of Phnom Penh's regime of governance.

In terms of community engagement, the only successful example of relocation has been the one to Akphiwat Meanchey (1997-2000), where the displaced population had been firmly put at the centre of the process (Bugalski and Medallo 2012; STT 2006) thanks to the joint political commitment of the MPP and of development partners such as UN-Habitat and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. On other occasions, the community has been successfully mobilised *a posteriori* such as in the example of Tang Khiev (Talocci and Boano 2015b), but paying a high price in terms of a high rate of early abandonment by relocated residents and a loss of hope among those who stayed. Today though Tang Khiev is a community that has started to thrive thanks to the efforts of a very small NGO[14] and the resilience of its community members themselves. With sad irony, we could notice how they are implementing activities and infrastructure that are very similar, and probably more effective, to the ones that PCL has promised in Andong (housing, education, farming, employment), although not getting any media coverage at all.

It is important to bear in mind that the National Housing Policy, in its ambiguity (Talocci and Boano 2015a), outlines a framework that still leaves plenty of room for resettlement, and for a system of governance that seems totally equal to the ones used in BSII and Andong – and therefore to further commodification of space and de-politicisation of the urban discourse. In such a context, it is imperative to bring politics back to the centre of the urban agenda, and to reinvigorate knowledge production about relocation sites beyond the usual (and certainly fundamental) comparison with the condition pre-resettlement in terms of livelihoods, health, education, tenure and so on. Looking at the design of their spaces and the way these are used, governed and controlled, can certainly indicate a way forward, which must come with the input of affected communities if an accountable and just politics is to take center stage.

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[14] The NGO is called Manna4Life, and is clearly of Christian aspirations. Although this aspects does raise a few issues (Talocci and Boano 2015b), it is undeniable the great work that the NGO has done on site.

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