

# The de-politicisation of housing policies: the case of Borei Keila land-sharing in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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**Abstract:** This article examines the design and evolution of a land-sharing process established for the on-site re-housing of an urban poor group in Phnom Penh (Cambodia), in the locality Borei Keila. The study is based on eight months of ethnographical and action research fieldwork. Some regard this land-sharing process as a success, but we find widespread criticism of it for excluding many original residents of the neighbourhood from the land-sharing agreement, leading either to their eviction or to difficult living conditions on site. We argue that these exclusionary results come from the deliberate misrepresentation of the urban poor group as a homogeneous block, and from the use of the housing provision as a pacifying tool against dissent. The case of Borei Keila highlights the risks of de-politicised and consensus-driven housing policies. It also provides the basis for a conclusive reflection on the recently approved National Housing Policy of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

**Keywords:** urban poor, contested spaces, slum-upgrading, land-sharing, de-politicisation

## Introduction

Notwithstanding the number of informal settlements in Cambodia and in the capital city Phnom Penh, their precarious conditions, and the urgent need for their social and physical upgrading, the country's Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction had not approved a National Housing Policy until May 2014. The Policy (MLMUPC, 2014) in agreement with the 'Circular 3 on resolution on temporary settlements' (RGC, 2010) acknowledges the need for increased land and housing, and the necessity of housing and spatial planning policies to limit the proliferation of new informal settlements and reduce the risk of forced evictions.

Cambodia is urbanizing rapidly. The urban dimension is marked by the exacerbation of the conflict over space, and by its commodification and privatisation (Fauveaud, 2015; Paling, 2012; Percival & Waley, 2012; Percival, 2015; Springer, 2008, 2009, 2015). Cambodia's Land Law (RGC, 2001) has been read as favouring the appropriation and trade of public land by the country's powerful elites, often at the expense of the urban poor (Springer, 2012). Phnom Penh, for instance, has seen an

increasing shift of the poor populations toward the outer districts of the city, in search for cheaper housing (ACHR, 2004; Fukuzawa, 2014; STT, 2009) or because of forced evictions (Connell & Grimsditch, 2015; Springer, 2012; STT, 2009, 2011, 2012).

In such a climate, the recently approved National Housing Policy is not the first effort toward reducing the risk of forced evictions and providing “adequate housing to reside with welfare, peace and dignity” (MLMUPC, 2014:3).<sup>1</sup> In 2003, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced publicly the intention of upgrading at least 100 slum settlements per year (ACHR, 2003; Goad, 2012). This statement, known as “One Hundred Slums Policy” (UN-Habitat, 2016; UPDF, 2006), came with the announcement that four urban poor groups will have taken part in an innovative programme of land-sharing – following a fertile dialogue between authorities and several NGOs (Boonyabanha, 2014; UPDF, 2008), such as the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), and the local Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF).

The only land-sharing project to actually be completed<sup>2</sup> is Borei Keila, and its outcomes are today an object of strong contestation. On one side, the authorities and the private company Phan Imex have praised Borei Keila for introducing a series of innovations in the field of housing in Cambodia (Arputham, 2003; UPDF, 2008). They emphasize its positive results: the use of cross-subsidies from the commercial development of the rest of the site and the consequent free provision of on-site housing units for the urban poor; the good construction quality and flexible design of the new housing; and the requalification of a part of the city once known as a dense and dangerous slum into a mixed-use neighbourhood. On the other side, several NGOs strongly oppose this perspective (HRTF et al., 2012; Licadho & Licadho Canada, 2012; Licadho, 2007, 2008, 2009), emphasising irregularities in the land-sharing agreement and in the quantity of housing units actually delivered. They point to the forced displacement of about 300 households to two different relocation sites in the outskirts of the city (20 and 55 km away from the centre), and the 103 households that still live in the remains of the original slum settlement and a few interstitial spaces, in highly precarious conditions.

In this article, we interrogate both these perspectives, navigating Borei Keila’s complex site and analysing the discourse of the several parties involved in the process. Our investigation uncovers dissident voices and shows how these were programmatically disregarded, or pacified through the provision of housing.

The paper is grounded in two different levels of literature. Firstly, it discusses several land-sharing programmes and highlights their role in replicating exclusionary conditions. Secondly, land-sharing processes are framed in the current debate on the

de-politicisation of urban and housing policies. We argue that policies such as Borei Keila's land-sharing risk reducing a chiefly political issue – that of re-housing urban poor populations – to a solely financial, or administrative problem, which de facto deprives the subjects involved in the process of their political agency.

### **Land-sharing processes and the de-politicisation of urban and housing policies**

Land-sharing is a tool for slum-upgrading, consisting in partitioning a piece of occupied land in two. Occupants are re-housed on a small portion of the original site, while the larger portion can be given back to the landlords for, for instance, future commercial development. Figure 1 shows the specific case of Borei Keila. In so doing, the revenues from development are used to subsidise (partially or fully) the construction of new housing for the poor occupants.

Land-sharing was initially pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s in Bangkok, through the activity of ACHR (Adler, Ketya, & Menzies, 2008; Goad, 2012; Rabé, 2005, 2010; Shlomo & Boonyabancha, 1988), and then influenced experiences of slum upgrading in other countries, such as India and Cambodia. Seven land disputes in central areas of Bangkok were solved through land-sharing projects, re-housing on-site almost ten thousand low-income households (Rabé, 2010). Amongst these, the so-called Rama IV project (Islam & Sheng, 1989; Shlomo & Boonyabancha, 1988) was developed within the government's Baan Mankong housing programme (Boonyabancha, 2003, 2005). It is widely acknowledged as a successful experience, with the on-site construction of four buildings for flats for the urban poor. However, Rama IV, the most direct reference for Borei Keila, was criticised for the divisions, disruptions and frictions that occurred in the original community. Many families had left the site before the delivery of the units, because the construction took a long time; while others stayed but refused to pay the small rent that the community leaders set with the developers (DiNino, Garabedian, Ossa, & Smith, 2006).

Based on the land-sharing principle (Bhide, 2012; Mahadevia, Bhatia, & Bhonsale, 2014), the Slum Rehabilitation Scheme (SRS) – adopted by the Maharashtra State Government in Dharavi, Mumbai, in 1995 – is another example of a policy that struggled to be effective in terms of slum upgrading. The programme is argued to have contributed to an increase in the land values throughout the whole city (Jagdale, 2014) because of a mechanism of incentives to the private developers. Additionally, it is argued to have exacerbated conflicts within the several target communities (Ardhanari, 2011; Mukhija, 2001; Nijman, 2008), because the consensus of only the 75% of one settlement's population was sufficient to approve a rehabilitation project.

The limits of consensus-driven policies (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Deas, 2012) and participatory processes (Boano & Kelling, 2013; Till, n.d.) lie in the potential to displace and marginalise any form of conflict, to discard the potential of oppositional voices. Objectives of socio-spatial equity can be disregarded as part of an evolving consensus around urban policies that, precisely as the SRS in Mumbai, are oriented toward efficiency, competitiveness and economic growth (Deas, 2012; Peck, 2011). In this sense, policy choices and actions become essentially technical issues, and lose their political significance.

This shift has brought scholars to speak of a 'post-political' urban condition (Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2005, 2010, 2011), whereby the room for dissent is restricted, and decision-making is increasingly de-politicised (Deas, 2012; Paddison, 2009). The de-politicisation process entails the reduction of politics to an exercise of solely government and administration (see also: Agamben, 2011) over urban territories and populations. Drawing from this debate, we argue that de-politicising housing policies (Becerril Miranda, 2014) are characterised by the provision of housing or other facilities as mere pacifying tools. The superficial involvement of the target population in the process of decision-making is used to annul opposition and contestation.

De-politicising urban policies have been read as drivers of the commodification of the urban realm (Fiori, 2014). As in the case of Mumbai's SRS, the pro-poor policy *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, which is regarded as the prime execution programme of Brazil's National Housing Policy, has also been critiqued. It is argued to have created a housing boom and an increase in housing and land prices, which, in turn, have made building units for social housing more difficult (Nascimento Neto, Moreira, & Schussel, 2012; Santa Rosa, 2014). Similarly, Turkey's Mass Housing Administration (commonly known by its Turkish acronym 'TOKI') has displaced the poor toward a multitude of isolated mass housing estates in the outskirts of urban areas. While the apparent intent was to 'rehabilitate' informal settlements, these have been in great part demolished to make room for urban regeneration projects incorporated in the public agenda (Candan & Kolluoglu, 2008; Özdemir, 2011). In both cases, programmes have reduced the urban poor's dwellings to housing of minimal spatial and qualitative standards.

While Borei Keila's new housing, as we will see, is far from being low quality, we read the process leading to its construction as a de-politicising one, insofar as it has used the provision of housing to pacify conflicts, and disregarded or marginalised a multiplicity of dissident voices.

## **Methodology**

The paper draws on eight-month of fieldwork in Phnom Penh, conducted mainly in the second half of 2013 and then for shorter timeframes between April-May 2014 and May-June 2015. It is also informed by two two-week workshops<sup>3</sup> on community-driven slum upgrading. The fieldwork revolved around extensive socio-spatial surveys, aiming to uncover and analyse the multiple uses of space throughout the settlement; and around in-depth interviews, which collected the housing stories of 94 poor households in Borei Keila. These interviews aimed, firstly, to reveal the manifold conflicting discourses within what had been instead represented and targeted as a homogeneous group: the households excluded from the land-sharing agreement, now 'squatting' the remainders of the original slum and the interstices between the new housing and the developments on the rest of the site (see figures 1 and 2). Secondly, the interviews aimed to highlight issues and contrasts amongst the inhabitants of the new housing for the poor, forgotten in all the recent accounts of the area.

Other in-depth interviews targeted representatives from authorities and organisations involved at different stages of the process. Significantly, representatives from the private company Phan Imex did not want to be interviewed. This set of interviews aimed to understand roles and perspectives of such actors, beyond the 'official' content of the documents and reports they issued (which were analysed through desk research).

Finally, the participatory workshops on community-driven city-wide upgrading wanted to understand how different individuals and groups were using, living and transforming their spaces, and to collectively envision possibilities of upgrading their socio-spatial environment. The group working in Borei Keila (including the authors) organised, amongst other activities, a focus-group discussion involving five out of the original eight community leaders in Borei Keila, and the District vice-governor. In the workshops, the collaboration with ACHR and Community Development Foundation (CDF), who had partaken in the design of Borei Keila, was important in terms of easy access to the site and contact with the district authorities and the site's gatekeepers – namely former community leaders and current representatives of the poor households.

The following sections introduce Borei Keila's land dispute, analyse the discourses of the various stakeholders, and navigate the site's main spatialities: on one side the remainders of the original site and the new slum in today's interstitial space; on the other side the upper and ground floors of the new housing for the poor.

### **Introducing Borei Keila: the land-sharing and the genesis of the land dispute**

Borei Keila's land-sharing was signed in 2003, celebrating an agreement between the municipality and the Cambodian private company Phan Imex. Representatives of ACHR and SDI played an important role in this process (Arputham, 2003; UPDF, 2003, 2008) and, in collaboration with UN-Habitat, managed to successfully lobby the authorities toward considering on-site solutions for the poor.

Borei Keila's land was divided in two parts. Twelve hectares were used for commercial development, and now host a private university, a government building, a market, office buildings, middle class residential developments and a multitude of temporary uses (gas-stations, markets, parking lots). On the remaining two hectares, in the North West corner of the original plot, Phan Imex planned to build 10 six-storey buildings for re-housing the poor, with 29 flats per floor – for a total of 1,740 families. The construction cost of these buildings would have been subsidised entirely by the commercial development of the rest of the site, with no resulting cost for the urban poor families.

How many were the poor families in Borei Keila though? In 2001, a survey conducted by several NGOs,<sup>4</sup> with the help of community leaders and local authorities (UPDF, 2003), counted a total of 1,482 families (about 7,000 people), organised in eight communities, plus two not-formally-organised groups (Pred, 2003). However, while the land-sharing agreement was being signed, the number of families claiming a title on the land rose to 2,329 (Adler et al., 2008). Many of these families had never lived on-site, and had simply bought the land title from a previous occupant, or bribed local authorities (Adler et al., 2008; Rabé, 2005, 2010). The final count reported 1,776 eligible households (Rabé, 2005), with almost 600 households 'erased' from the list after pressures from the developer. A fierce land dispute followed, and worsened in 2012 when Phan Imex claimed bankruptcy (Khouth, 2012) and refused to build the ninth and tenth building. The total number of units actually built decreased from a total of 1,740 to 1,392, leaving at least 350 households without a flat.

At the core of this confusion is the lack of an institution playing a mediating role between the parties (Rabé, 2010). Indeed, Phan Imex asked NGO representatives to leave the site and the entire process because their work had allegedly slowed down the construction of the new units and risked to legitimise those who were eventually excluded from the original agreement. A representative from UPDF, who was strongly involved in activities of community organisation and provided technical assistance for the design of the new units, told us that:

“It started well, with Somsook [Boonyabanha, director of ACHR] dialoguing fruitfully with the Municipality and Phan Imex, but then the company told us they did not want us to keep organising the communities in saving groups, nor to involve them in the design

process. They went for a denser scheme and assigned the flats through a lottery, which caused issues to many families receiving flats on the fifth and sixth floors... Sometimes there are elderlies in a household, other times the household leader is a seller, and how can you go on with a commercial activity on the top floors? Briberies affected the whole process, with people getting a flat in spite of never having lived on-site, and powerful subjects like policemen and community leaders receiving all the flats on the first two floors".<sup>5</sup>

Amongst the group of excluded households, the number actually having a legitimate claim is uncertain. Most of them underwent violent repression and evictions (HRTF et al., 2012; Licadho & Licadho Canada, 2012; Licadho, 2007, 2008, 2009) and got relocated between 2009 and 2012. A total of 103 families (according to our survey in May 2015) managed to stay on site: some kept occupying the old derelict residential slabs, other re-built small shacks in the leftovers of the new developments. Authorities and Phan Imex have recently proposed one further eviction, and would like to relocate these families to Andong, a relocation site about 20 km away from Borei Keila.<sup>6</sup>

Today's mainstream accounts on Borei Keila demonstrate a binary opposition between a resistant group on one side and, on the other side, an authoritative power (HRTF et al., 2012; Licadho & Licadho Canada, 2012; Licadho, 2007, 2008). In the first group, besides the households excluded from the land-sharing agreement, we find NGOs such as Licadho, Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF), and STT, whose work in Phnom Penh focus on the defence of human and housing rights of the urban poor. All of them, especially Licadho, have filed legal suits against Phan Imex and organised the group of excluded households to demand the construction of the last two buildings. The second group includes Phan Imex and authorities at all levels: the 'village'<sup>7</sup> leaders, as the closest ones to micro-dynamics of power, often representing the bridge for community leaders toward sub-district authorities; the district authorities and the Municipality of Phnom Penh, at the forefront of the dispute given the area's significance in the new Masterplan (BAU, 2007); and the Royal Government of Cambodia, who allegedly favours Phan Imex because its owner is close to the Prime Minister's family (Boonyabancha, 2014). On a more neutral terrain, we find UN-Habitat and NGOs such as Community Development Foundation (once UPDF), which were once central to the process and now strive to play a role of facilitation, though they are often accused by Licadho, HRTF, and STT of following the authorities' agenda.

This binary narratives become meaningless, however, once we uncover and analyse numerous conflicts occurring within several groups of inhabitants.

### **Today's situation: the derelict residential slabs and the interstitial slum**

At the core of Borei Keila's land dispute, stuck between the new housing for the poor and the commercial developments on the rest of the site, lies a derelict landscape of old buildings in decay, shacks of tarpaulin and scrap materials, and sheds of green-painted corrugated iron. Entering from the North Western side, through the new housing for the poor, one will find a thin strip of land now occupied by shacks, roughly aligned on two rows. People relax and chat in the shadow, while life around them is frenetic: a small informal market sell vegetables, motorbikes go back and forth from a parking lot, children play climbing up the fencing walls and apparently not minding the piles of rubbish everywhere. The amount of garbage has grown over time, because of the lack of collection on this side of the plot. It is also common to see rubbish bags falling from the upper floors of the new buildings. Interviewees from the new housing say that some of them do it because of laziness, simply to avoid carrying the rubbish downstairs, and do not seem to mind the annoyance caused to the inhabitants of the shacks. Rubbish bags completely cover also a narrow passage connecting to the central part of the site, wider and more luminous, with the old buildings and a few more shacks [see figure 2].

In our survey, in May 2015, we counted 56 household living in shacks, 39 in the old buildings, 8 in the green sheds, for a total of 103 households. In the interviews we identify several groups often in open conflict against each other.

A majority of households – the 56 living in shacks on the ground floor and 15 living in old building F – have demanded a solution to the land-dispute, and are supported by the local NGO Licadho (Licadho, 2008). Some of them have hung banners with words of protest on their doors, and often wear t-shirts printed especially for them by Licadho. “We want the company to build the ninth and tenth buildings, so we could have the units to which we are entitled. Our life is very difficult now”, says a community representative<sup>8</sup> who lives on the ground floor of old building F, the façade of her unit covered by Buddhist flags. Many people within this group holds different claims and have different aspirations. One man living on the third floor of old building F tells us that he certainly “would accept compensation in money, but the government and the company are no longer available to negotiate”.<sup>9</sup> In the same building, on the second floor, a woman living with her mother, her husband and two kids, says that they “know that the authorities and Phan Imex have recently agreed to a relocation to Andong, and that Licadho might endorse this decision, but we really would not want to go there, even if Licadho will suggest so”.<sup>10</sup> An old woman living in one of the shacks mentions that her son “has got one of the new flats, but we also need to keep staying here because we should be entitled to two units.”<sup>11</sup> She looks exhausted and tells us how difficult her situation is, with two grandchildren living with her. Her house



is made of tarpaulin sheets and built against a fencing wall, partially in ruin; pieces of broken bricks unevenly cover the ground.

Old block H, the northernmost one, is equally derelict but much cleaner. It feels tidier and better conserved (most of the original floor tiles are still there, for instance). Here, the families (thirteen in total) seem to enjoy a certain degree of separation from the rest of the area, probably because of the difficulty in accessing to this building from the central part of the settlement. The relatively lower number of families seem to create a higher level of spatial control, too. We meet a woman on the first landing, resting in the shade along with her kids and a neighbour. She tells us that:

“no, we do not participate to the demonstrations along with the other group, and nobody asked us whether we want to be relocated to Andong. We just want fair compensation, if we cannot get a flat in the new buildings. Otherwise we can keep being here too, our units are fine”.

Toward the east, lies the old block D, away from the chaos of the most congested areas of the plot. It looks as derelict as the other blocks, but a few fragments of it were repainted with colourful paint. Here, eleven households, whose leaders are all policemen, assert to have lawful possession<sup>12</sup> of their flats and conduct their own separate struggle. A woman living in a big unit on the ground floor (her husband built an extension occupying part of the front yard) tells us very passionately that they

“do not believe the company will build the ninth and tenth buildings, and do not want any of the units still available in the eighth building, since they are already in bad conditions. We want to move out but we will not accept any compensation below thirty-five thousand dollars per unit: we live happily and in safety here, we have our own open space with garden and parking lot, so we do not see why we should move away, at least without getting a compensation that would allow us to buy a flat somewhere else. We do not speak to NGOs and do not have any relationship with the people demonstrating against the authorities – and we could not join them, in any case, because of our job”.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, Phan Imex built two green sheds of corrugated iron, as ‘temporary’ solution for families legitimately entitled to a flat in the unbuilt ninth and tenth building. While some of these families eventually accepted a low monetary compensation and moved away, eight of them have lived in the sheds for about six years. Their rooms measure 16 square meters, with no services and extremely high temperatures due to the lack of insulation. In interviews, these households mentioned that they do not want to engage with the struggle of the main group, though they sympathise with it. They mention that they would like to move away but this would entail losing the right to claim a unit in the future. The company keeps them in a suspended condition: they cannot leave, nor protest.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with K., on 10 October 2013.

### **Today's situation on site: the new housing for the poor**

The new buildings and their inhabitants have been completely overlooked or disregarded in assessing the current situation in Borei Keila (Khuon, 2014; Licadho, 2007). Our investigation, while acknowledging the positive potential of the new housing units and common spaces, has instead exposed marginalised populations whose situation should not be ignored.

Although the new housing was eventually designed by Phan Imex's professionals, representatives from ACHR and SDI played an important role in suggesting solutions that were mindful of the complex needs and aspiration of Borei Keila's poor families. All units measure the same size (about five by eight metres), and are all provided with toilets and with a balcony. Their ceilings are 4.2 metres high, to allow the construction of a mezzanine to expand the available floor area. Almost ten years after the construction of the first buildings, several families were able to take advantage of this possibility, with high levels of inventiveness **[see figure 3]**. The units lie on two sides of long distribution corridors, designed with enough width (1.8 metres) to allow good ventilation and small gatherings. There is always a pleasant breeze, especially on the last two floors, and we saw during our fieldwork that most corridors were intensely used by both children and adults **[see figure 4]**. Many families have temporarily appropriated part of the corridors with wooden mats, or set up small commercial stalls. Other families use the corridor for cooking.

Apparently, therefore, there is a clear difference between Borei Keila's derelict spatialities and the new housing. The former community leaders (now all living in the new housing) built on this supposed irreconcilability to publicly endorse<sup>13</sup> the displacement of the poor groups as the only possible solution. Yet our interviews found that most inhabitants of the new housing sympathise with the struggle of the poor groups – though preferring not to get involved because of a possible reaction from both company and authorities. Most interviewees claim to have lost all confidence in the former community leaders, and accuse them to be corrupted.

When looking at these controversies, it is important to consider how the original Borei Keila's communities were disrupted by the lottery system used for the assignation of the flats. Flats of a higher value<sup>14</sup> (on the first two floors) were assigned to powerful people – community leaders and their networks, and policemen – while the other families were scattered. Although residents have slowly built new social and business networks, many mention having limited relationships with their immediate neighbours. Additionally, the turnover of inhabitants has been significant. Many newcomers are

renting or have bought a flat from the original assignees through informal transactions. Newcomers are systematically excluded by any form of decision making, and often blamed for the mismanagement of the common spaces and for minor crimes. The installation of a security door for almost every unit and interviews testifies to a general preoccupation around the lack of safety.

Several interviewees confirmed that Phan Imex still holds a quasi-total control on the buildings, having given a few inhabitants the role of paid 'watchdogs' (one per floor, plus eight 'heads of building'). These people report any sort of activity to Phan Imex and ask the inhabitants for bribes to loosen their surveillance. All interviewees confirmed they had to negotiate with the company through these 'informal representatives' in order to build a mezzanine, to make a modification to the layout, or open up a small activity. "I'd leave if I could, because we are not free here", said one inhabitant. Someone had reported him to the company when he attempted to modify his flat without 'permission'.<sup>15</sup>

On the ground floors, the situation is equally complex. These were initially meant to be community-run spaces with the possibility of installing educational and health facilities and opening up commercial activities. This was to give some compensation to the families that had lost their businesses with the destruction of the original settlement. However, the original community leaders have retained only a small collective space (in building A) and Phan Imex has acquired possession of the rest. One of its offices occupies the ground floor of building D. The company rents out commercial units at market rates, including to people living outside Borei Keila. Some businesses did not make enough profit and therefore were shut or converted in housing units. From a survey conducted in December 2013 and then again in May 2014, we counted 108 empty units and, significantly, 164 residential spaces – of which 31 hosted also a business activity. This is an impressive number if compared to a total of 145 commercial units, and to the 103 households involved in the land dispute [see figure 6]. As for the residential units, the ones facing the main open spaces have direct light and decent ventilation, though just a few of them include sanitation facilities. Moving through the inner corridors, the environment has poor air and lighting. Here, some units occupy a floor area of only four square meters (literally two meters by two), barely enough for a bed or mat [see figure 5].

Voices from these households have never been taken into consideration. A representative of Licadho, a long-time activist in Cambodia in support of urban poor groups at risk of eviction, says that the rationale behind this decision is both an ethical and a practical one:

“our organisation does not want to push into a struggle people that are not already 'active' toward achieving a specific political goal. It would mean to force people into

something, whereas we just want to support and facilitate activities of resistance that are already in place. We would not even have the resources to mobilise such a big number of households”.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conclusions**

In this paper, we outline how many narratives of Borei Keila’s housing process were made invisible or marginalised, and how the promise of delivering housing units (on-site or in a relocation area) was ultimately used to pacify dissent, and to further divide an already fragmented urban poor group. We argue that Borei Keila’s housing process should be read as an example of the wider de-politicisation of the urban realm in Phnom Penh, whereby powerful groups marginalise, pacify or silence a multiplicity of dissident politics. In this way, they impede the formation of alternative courses of action. Policies are said to be consensual and effective, and are disguised as the only viable ones.

Borei Keila’s housing process, in spite of being conceived as a platform for multi-stakeholder participation and marketed as a ‘pro-poor’ policy, has developed under a great unbalance in power relations. The process favours the private company Phan Imex and other powerful subjects such as local authorities and the original community leaders. While the profit-driven transformation of a much of the original plot continues, attempts to conduct community-led surveys, organise community saving groups and facilitate community-driven design, are systematically hampered by Phan Imex. Any form of participation leading to the empowerment of the urban poor and the acknowledgment of different sets of claims and aspirations, indeed, represents a clear threat against the company’s goal of retaining total control over the area.

Additionally, the constant marginalisation of dissent has impeded the emergence of an inclusive alternative. While the upgrading of the derelict buildings looks unlikely due to the high value of the land underneath, evidence from our survey shows how there would be room to redesign the ground floors to accommodate the necessary number of housing units. Moving a number of commercial units toward the inner spaces would liberate room for new housing toward the open roads. However, when this design solution was presented during the focus-group discussion we organised,<sup>16</sup> no parties deemed it viable. Representatives from the district authorities said that the households involved in the land dispute could not have been granted housing on-site, while representatives from NGOs expressed concern around the resources required to start a new participatory process of participatory.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with representative from LICADHO, on 31 October 2013.

Borei Keila's experience is particularly relevant in the current phase of urban development in Cambodia, with the recently approved National Housing Policy (MLMUPC, 2014) slowly moving toward implementation. The Policy was developed by personnel of the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, with the support of the German Cooperation Agency (GTZ) and two important actors that were involved in Borei Keila's process (UN-Habitat, 2015): the United Nations Human Settlements Programme and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. It is not a surprise, therefore, to find several commonalities between the policy document and the process that was initially conceived for Borei Keila. There is an emphasis on the need to avoid displacement of urban poor communities and, rather, pursue on-site solutions, on the necessity of setting up multi-stakeholder participatory platforms, and on the roles that public and private sectors, civil society, and urban poor should play. Yet, Borei Keila's experience makes visible how participatory platforms cannot work in situations of highly uneven power relations, especially when these are totally in favour of a very powerful private company. In the months after the Policy's approval, talks between authorities and representatives from the private sector have occurred quite often. The press fears the construction of non-affordable and non-public housing units, with little or no involvement of the urban poor groups in the process (Post Staff, 2015; Siv, 2015; Vida, 2015).

Again, the political problem of housing the urban poor risks being depoliticised and reduced to a solely financial and administrative issue. We hope to have shown, instead, how a re-politicisation of the housing discourse is strongly needed. Conflicts and disagreements must be properly acknowledged and understood, rather than displaced through post-political and consensus-driven policies.

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### **Figure captions**

**Figure 1.** Map and aerial view of today's Borei Keila: in evidence the land given as a social concession to the poor, the land used for commercial development, and the area where today's slum settlement lies (elaborated by first author).

**Figure 2.** Borei Keila: a picture shot from today's slum settlement, with the new housing for the poor in the background (picture by first author).

**Figure 3.** Borei Keila's new housing for the poor: the use of mezzanines in the housing units (picture by first author).

**Figure 4.** Borei Keila's new housing for the poor: the everyday use of common spaces on the upper floors (picture by first author).

**Figure 5.** A residential unit on the ground floor (picture by first author).

**Figure 6.** Map of nowadays' ground floor, with the residential units, in red, and the mixed use units, in orange, in evidence (survey by first author, with the help of MSc BUDD students, and CAN-Cam young professionals).

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<sup>1</sup> The official version of the document is in Khmer language, but an 'unofficial' English translation was made available by the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction itself.

<sup>2</sup> Of said four projects, three (Dey Krahorm, Railway A and Railway B) ended up with failed negotiations between the several parties, and with the eviction and forced relocation of the urban poor communities (Adler et al., 2008; Goad, 2012; Licadho Canada, 2008; Rabé, 2005, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The workshops were organised by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (University College London), ACHR and the Community Architects Network, and their main Cambodian partners: Community Development Foundation (CDF) and CAN-Cam (Community Architects Network Cambodia). Significantly, representatives of the General Department of Housing and of the Phnom Penh's Bureau des Affaires Urbaines participated in the second workshop. The outcome of the workshops are available at: <https://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/postgraduate/msc-building-urban-design-in-development/in-practice/o-f/of>

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted by the Urban Poor Development Fund (UPDF), Urban Sector Group (USG), Solidarity for Urban Poor Federation (SUPF). This information has been confirmed through interviews with a former representative of Urban Resource Centre (1 August 2013) and with a representative of Community Development Foundation (4 September 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with former representative of Urban Poor Development Fund (4 September 2013).

<sup>6</sup> From the focus-group with District authorities and former community leaders, 7 Makara District, 12 May 2014.

<sup>7</sup> *Phum*, in Khmer language.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Y., on 10 September 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with S., on 17 September 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with K., on 19 May 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with M., on 20 September 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with M., on 20 May 2015.

<sup>13</sup> From the focus group with District authorities and former community leaders, 7 Makara District, 12 May 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Evidence from the interviews suggests that the flats on the first two floors can be rented or sold out for about double the price than the ones on the last two floors (roughly, the monthly rent is 150 USD on floors 1 and 2, and 75 USD on floors 5 and 6).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Y., 30 September 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Focus group with District authorities and former community leaders, 7 Makara District, 12 May 2014.