
Understanding urban poverty in Brazil through the people and their life stories Entendendo a pobreza urbana no Brasil através das pessoas e suas histórias de vida

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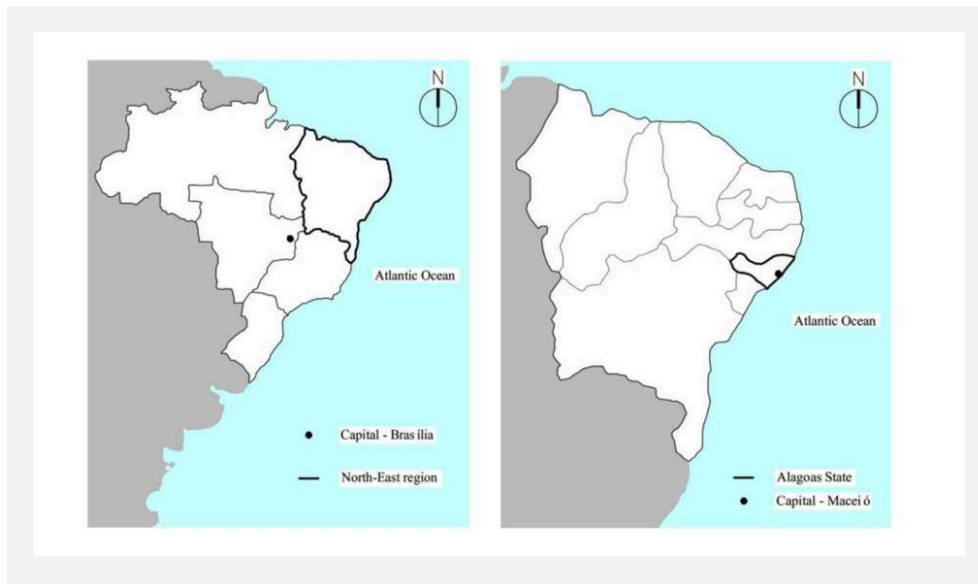
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Introduction

- 1 The more traditional means of carrying out urban research have been poorly adapted to the real circumstances of the deprived urban settlements. For this reason, I decided to embark on a research project that allowed an in-depth and humane examination of the perspectives of the people. I believed that understanding the situation at a grassroots level might bring to light the key factors involved, when drawing up appropriate policies for tackling poverty in deprived spaces where the conditions of the poor are concentrated and stigmatised. Understanding this experience has now become spatialised in the form of territories of poverty and should form the basis of urban

planning and bring about better policies that can enhance the living conditions of the urban poor.

- 2 Although the theoretical basis of the research is underpinned by a review of the international literature, the research was conducted within the context of Maceió, capital of Alagoas, one of the poorest States in Brazil (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2 for its location). In 2000 and 2010, Alagoas was ranked lowest (of 27) in the Human Development Index (PNUD, IPEA and FJP, 2006). The model for the development of the State, which embodies the traditional conservatism and power-base of its elites (through *coronelismo*²), and the monoculture of sugar cane, is strengthened by the paternalistic policies of the state which are based on patronage and either perpetuate or aggravate the problem of social inequality (Kenny, 2002).³ In these circumstances, the urban growth of Maceió has been characterised by a high level of inward migration: the city's population increased by 274% from 1970 to 1996.⁴ In the 2010 census, Maceió had 932,748 inhabitants, with perhaps as much as 80% of the city area being illegally occupied (PMM/BID, 2001).⁵



Figures 1.1 and 1.2 - Location of the North-East Region in Brazil (left); Location of Alagoas in the North-East (right).

Source: IBGE Maps, 2005 and 2009, Brazil and North-East Region, available at <https://portaldemapas.ibge.gov.br/porta1.php#mapa222071> and <https://portaldemapas.ibge.gov.br/porta1.php#mapa745>, adjusted by the author.

- 3 The urban structure of North-East Brazil is a network of small towns and medium-sized cities and three metropolises comprising approximately 7 million inhabitants and representing 12% of the total population of the region (57,981,950 according to IBGE 2010). In the North-East, as throughout Brazil, medium-sized towns have grown faster than large cities. However, in view of the lower levels of economic development in some of these towns, enclaves of poverty persist and with fewer resources and thus there is less chance of eradicating them. Indeed, according to research statistics based on a series of social and economic census data, 53% of Maceió's population lives in conditions of social exclusion - understood as the lack of basic health services, housing, employment opportunities and education (UFAL, 1998). With regard to the question of housing, 50% of the population in the municipality lives in sub-standard housing

conditions. These settlements are made up of 96,607 homes and shelter a population of 401,895 inhabitants (PMM/BID, 2001).

- 4 In Brazil, there is a lack of awareness on the part of the urban planners, about the question of social and spatial integration and this can be explained by the positivity matrix found in the work of the planners and particularly civil engineers (Ferreira, 1993). Thus, a segregationist pattern has arisen as a result of the technocratic knowledge of the planners, the bureaucratic workings of the state machine and the decisions of politicians. Marques and Bichir (2001) state that a particular combination of positivist beliefs and a lack of social knowledge, have traditionally led officials to adopt a perspective that is extremely technocratic and incomplete. Their attitudes provide a fertile ground for various types of conservatism, and as a result, when taking note of the precarious settlements, they have tended to overlook or to stigmatise these territories in technical language (even labelling them as subnormal). As well as this, they have sought 'to invest in them politically' by resorting to the practice of using clientelism as a tool (Rolnik, 2001). In addition, they fail to cooperate with local housing movements or take account of projects that can help integrate the poor in the life of the city, as is reflected in the following comments from the life stories of the residents of the settlements in Maceió:

'The Municipality should work more closely with the social movements. They tend to ignore this issue; for example, they did not invite the housing movements to discuss the Habitar Brasil BID project [Housing project financed by the bank BID], or how it would be implemented. They believe that everything is fine, and we should accept the package without asking any questions. So, we were left without any information; I have never seen the blueprints of the Conjunto Denisson Menezes [Denisson Menezes Housing Project], although I live there. Nothing has been achieved to with regard to the conditions of the project. They carried out all the alterations to the project without providing us with any explanations. The entire infrastructure was built, but it still lacks many things, including the most important of all - social policies.'

- 5 In the absence of a positive attitude where there is a willingness to tackle poverty, inequality and spatial segregation, very poor people are left to adopt life-survival strategies. These may involve cooperation between neighbours, friends and relatives, with networks of reciprocity to help people find occupational opportunities, build houses and become united in a demand for services such as schools, nurseries, health centers and basic facilities (Peattie and Aldrete-Hass, 1981, p.161-165; Kowarick, 2005). Despite the enthusiasm shown by international agencies for the benefits of improving the called social capital, the economic crisis of the 1980s showed that solidarity had been eroded or was weak. Schapira (1999, p.135) states that 'solidarity among neighbours, which used to be strong in the poor neighbourhoods in Latin American cities, has become less noticeable'. As Auyero notes:

Close-knit networks of reciprocity with neighbourhoods and relations, are commonplace features in our understanding of how poor people confront the challenge of survival. With unemployment becoming widespread, these networks do not cease to exist but fail to carry out their usual functions, since they are a 'surrogate social security system'. (1999, p.58)

- 6 When the majority of the residents in a community are without jobs, it is difficult for family, friends, fictive kins or neighbours to help find employment for them? Social capital is undermined when households can no longer sustain the underlying principle of reciprocity (Moser, 1996). As Wacquant observes, when there is a loss of common

identity or shared interests, the settlements become *'an empty space of competition and conflict, a danger-filled battleground for the daily fight for survival and attempts to escape.'* (1999, p.1644)

- 7 Despite their restricted opportunities, the urban poor believe that their lives in the precarious settlements will only be temporary. As Auyero (1999, p.54) points out: *'they regard themselves as part of a general movement of upward mobility of the working classes; slum dwellers believe they are going to leave their slum'*. The slum is understood as something temporary, a bridge to urban integration for social climbers. In view of this, the residents only make a minimal attempt to improve their condition although it will clearly be impossible for many of them to move on.⁶ As a result, the precarious areas become a refuge of physical and social destitution (Eckstein, 1990).

The case for ethnographic techniques

- 8 The decision to lay emphasis on the individual and his/her perceptions and social practices (i.e., the *right to the city* seen through the eyes of those to whom this right is denied), including an interest in mobility and social and political organisation, meant that a qualitative approach would be the most appropriate means of mapping out the informal settlements. Our aim was not to define or measure poverty, but rather to analyse how people understood these conditions materially and socially, how they adapted to them and to what extent these conditions were regarded as the result of state action (or inaction) in real-life circumstances. This aim was thus designed to demonstrate the diversity of individual social experience rather than to consider poverty as a largely homogeneous characteristic of discrete neighbourhoods, a view that often emerges from statistically-based approaches. This diversity involved a degree of spatial analysis that cannot be found in the sources of official statistics.
- 9 The methodological challenge was how to capture these micro-movements, and show how locally-generated, identity-based social segregation can be combined with other scales of connectivity, including those at a local, regional and national level. Social and spatial connections operate on a number of different scales and in ways that may be contradictory. Isolation, the distance from the city centre, and the limited visibility of communities among some State departments, can influence social awareness and practices. What can be regarded as vertical relationships, however, (for example with social movements or with the State through its institutions, policymakers and politicians, as well as the labour market), might involve a high degree of connectivity and affect the way communities are seen and view their surroundings. Connections, with the family, neighbours and local leaders can strengthen patterns of segregation or may alternatively represent a space for opportunity, autonomy, and equality.
- 10 Social practices and their spatial form at the level of the individual, require an awareness of what is defined here as "the daily round". The daily round, as a theoretical-empirical category is essential to understand the processes of social integration and segregation experienced by individuals. The term captures a sense of how macro-scale State policies may affect the day-to-day life in the micro-space of the family or community. A concern with the individual and the daily round has made an ethnographic method possible and allowed a number of suggestive devices to be used, including life stories, as discussed below.

- 11 To start with, a useful means of exploring the interaction between the social and spatial, and become aware of the temporality of the daily round, is by making use of life stories. According to Schwandt (1997), a life story is a generic name for a wide range of approaches centred on the outcome, study, and presentation of an individual's experiences over a period of time. The methodology rests on the assumption that human acts can best be understood from the accounts and perceptions of the people involved, and thus the focus is on an individual's subjective meaning and experience of life. Since most qualitative inquiries assume that the world of experience is constituted inter-subjectively, the purpose of the life story is to link the private and the public, and the personal and the social, through subjective perspectives linked to meanings, definitions, concepts, and practices (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991; Creswell, 1994; Atkinson, 1998).
- 12 The use of life stories, as a suitable strategy of inquiry, stems from the need to balance individual histories with social-historical contexts. Members of different social groups construct different life histories and the ways in which they differ might be important in obtaining a more complete view of daily life. Here, two factors must be taken into account. First, life stories lay stress on the reality of what is *experienced* by the storyteller. Thus, they do not represent exact accounts of the reality of the world outside the self: rather, they offer particular interpretations of the world and as such, are not subject to proof (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Miller, 2000). Second, life stories are always embedded in the socio-historical sphere: the particular voice in a life story can only be understood within a larger context.
- 13 In this specific case, I will conduct an analysis of the territories of poverty in Maceió based on a study of the daily life of the residents of the precarious settlements, while seeking to observe and predict the changing patterns of the spatial/ social aspects of their territory. Precarious settlements, as understood here, cover shantytowns, slums, village communities, clandestine illegal subdivisions, occupations, and degraded low-income housing complexes. The research (for this thesis) investigated 75 life histories of residents from three precarious settlements and was aimed at understanding how the social and spatial integration of the urban poor occurred. It also attempted to analyze the urban poverty that emerged in the precarious settlements, and note the way in which public policies carried out on a macro scale, affect daily lives in the micro space of the family or community. It was thus possible to monitor how state action and the implementation of national and local social housing policies can have an impact on the quality of life of the urban poor. The underlying objective was to design a methodology that can be applied to other localities and provide the basis for further studies that, in terms of continuity, take note of public policies and their impact on the lives of the residents of the precarious settlements. In addition, this research throws light on the daily practices of those who are the target of state intervention, by examining the kind of policymaking that is more efficient and suited to the requirements of the target public, by suggesting alternative measures that can mitigate the adverse effects of State (macro) action in the daily (micro) lives of the urban poor (already observed in the studied areas). While analysing the life histories, an attempt was made to establish a relationship between the life of the urban poor and the political, economic, and urban changes in Maceió. In addition to this historical framework, each batch of interviews was analysed in the light of topics from the Interview Guidelines. These were based on six factors concerned with the major events

in the life of each interviewee, in particular, the following: (i) birth, education, dreams, marriage, struggle for survival; (ii) raising children, relations with neighbours, and social networking; (iii) the daily round, displacement, eviction, migration, ability to adapt to a new environment; (iv) housing, ownership and tenure, segregation; (v) public policies and job opportunities; and (vi) a review of people's lives and their future prospects. These issues are embedded in a flexible and instrumental *theoretical-practical* analytical framework that was applied in a semi-structured manner to allow the life stories to be told in accordance with the wishes of the participants. In addition to the subjects mentioned above, and depending on the person being interviewed, some more general questions were also discussed such as: a) poverty and wealth; b) the vulnerability of the poor; c) citizens' rights and responsibilities; d) social networks and group solidarity; e) relations with the State; f) risks to life and violence (the police, gang warfare, the power of the State); g) the family; h) prejudice and social stigma; and i) thoughts about how social conditions change before and after the election of different governments.

- 14 An assessment of the results of an investigation involves analysing the methodological decisions made during the design of the research, fieldwork, and analysis. The adoption of ethnographic methods was helpful in that they allowed the research to be adapted to the issues raised by the participants. The life stories form the central component of the field research and provide an opportunity to understand individual situations that might be incomprehensible when only based on short and non-sequential conversations or a questionnaire format. The life stories also allow the researcher to have a clear view of the impact of the 'macro' on the 'micro', (in this case, the individual participant), without the intervention of a so-called explanatory *intermediary*; namely, an individual or organization that interprets events and practices on behalf of others. By involving face-to-face interaction, the life stories also enable an instant learning *curve* to be employed so that an issue raised by a participant can be immediately explored or clarified. Overall, the life stories fostered a spirit of cooperation and solidarity.
- 15 I am aware that reaching a definite standpoint is a delicate matter since an engagement between a research participant and the researcher can take different forms. However, this dissimilarity can be partly overcome by adopting three attitudes: (i) ensuring that interpretations are handled with great care, and evidence is always corroborated by consulting other sources; (ii) being aware that however much effort is made, the method that has been adopted will impose constraints on the interviewee's ability to *produce* knowledge; and (iii) laying emphasis on the voice of the people even if this voice contradicts personal, practical and theoretical orthodox positions, and thus allow the urban poor to break their silence and no longer be inhibited by their own community organizations, allied NGOs, academics or State officials.
- 16 From the perspective of the researcher, there are, of course, limitations to the value of adopting a life story approach. These mainly arose because the subject-matter was highly emotional - the need to talk about their own lives brought up sad memories to all of those interviewed and, in some cases, this prompted a reluctance to proceed with the subject. Some participants also displayed a difficulty in articulating their views, partly because of their limited formal education and the few contacts they had had with people outside their immediate family circle or close friends. The younger participants too, seemed less inclined or able to articulate or expand on their life

stories, and occasionally steered the autonomous discourse into a question-and-answer session.

- 17 Another problem, though less frequent, was a sense that some of the participants' comments were affected by social representations that *contaminated* the discourse with jargon, that is, they expressed views not *in their own words* but through terms picked up from the community leaders. Moreover, these leaders gave the impression of being political actors who interfered with the wish of the interviewees to express their own feelings. But with regard to these interviewees, whoever is included in this circle of representatives, already belongs to the spaces provided for political *education* where relating one's life experiences is a part of collective reality.
- 18 Direct observation was of importance in helping the researcher to become aware of the public and private spaces of the areas studied. It supplemented the information contained in the generally imprecise and out-of-date maps, which in some cases marked the settlement areas as blank. The number of each house was rarely marked and there was no record of topographical features such as roads. The strengths and weaknesses of using the life stories as a primary source of information worked like two sides of the same coin. The desire to exercise the minimum control over the direction that the stories would take was a source of concern although it allowed new interpretations and new themes to emerge in a way that was meaningful to the participant (even if they were not a part of the Interview Guidelines). Each interview proved to be a unique occasion; it was impossible to predict what direction it would take.
- 19 In spite of its attractions, I decided not to apply a more constrained interview structure, since I wished to maintain a degree of empathy between the residents and myself and thus make the interviews more relaxed and enjoyable. However, it was evident that this closeness could prevent me from maintaining a necessary detached critical stance or perhaps obscure the issues being raised. Despite this, I continue to believe the basis of my fieldwork was justified and am convinced that exercising a *lightness of touch* proved to be a positive asset in the research endeavour.
- 20 Direct contact with the people involved was a vital aspect of this journey. Listening, observing, and interacting were extremely important for an analysis centered on the perceptions of the people themselves. The most important factor was how the people think and how they react to certain social practices and the actions of the State. In view of this, I have sought to avoid regarding my empirical and theoretical positions as sacrosanct but rather, have made an effort to break down existing paradigms, ideas and taboos about poverty, social exclusion, community planning and mobility. This strategy was combined with triangulation, data documentation and the processing of feedback from other researchers, practitioners and social movements, (both during and after the fieldwork), to validate my interpretations of the social practices and State actions in Maceió. The greatest challenge for this research was to give voice to those most directly affected by urban segregation. Priority was given to understanding how urban struggles are conducted from the perspective of the urban poor.
- 21 Ethnographic techniques were used to provide the social actors with a chance to speak, especially those who are not usually granted a political or social space to make their positions clear. The words of the people comprise my most important evidence and the following comments illustrate how much the residents appreciated their chance to express their views and be listened to sympathetically:

'I liked to be interviewed, because as we live in a canvas shack, we feel more accepted by society. Someone came here and interviewed us inside a canvas shack, and then lived with us and shared our daily suffering, with regard to the temperature, lack of electricity, lack of a job and the prejudice against us from our own neighbors. We feel valued; it was great, and really good!'

22 The methodological implications of using ethnographic data are that the social actors can assess their own particular situation by revealing (or in some cases withholding) their opinions. Life stories are a means of finding out the attitudes of the urban poor and allowing the researcher to make inferences from observations with less risk of imposing a personal slant on the narratives themselves. Life stories are subjective accounts of reality, as understood by the person speaking as it were, and might be influenced by a prevailing political discourse, the media or a recent event. In view of this, there was a need to be aware that the life stories offer interpretations of a private world, that might be corroborated by other sources but the value of which is not in how exactly it portrays the reality that emerges but the human insight they provide into the perspectives of the poor.

23 The stories illustrate how far the poor have to struggle to gain a place in the city. The dynamics involved in the search by the poor for social and spatial integration can also be revealed by making day-to-day observations of the precarious settlements. In this research project, I have introduced the concept of the 'daily round' which has enabled me to understand both the social integration and segregation experienced by the people, particularly in the way the 'macro' (policies) affects the 'micro' (social and individual practices). I believe that the daily round and the life stories pose a challenge to any acceptance of the official version of the facts, the decisions made by State action and the hegemonic view of the poor. They show that in their everyday lives, the poor undergo an acute degree of suffering, a collective state of anxiety and feeling of stigmatization. It should be noted that in the main body of this thesis, I decided it was important to let the quotes stand extant wherever possible, but even shorter statements by the interviewees are indicative of these feelings, as I did in this article.

'... I've always lived in a shack... I don't have anywhere to go... [I have problems] whether I eat or pay rent... [There is] no way of getting a house without joining an invasion... I must fight for a house...'

'... Nothing has gone right since my childhood... [It is a] choice between begging and stealing... [I'm the] victim of violence everyday...'

'... One day we eat and another day we don't eat...'

'I would like to move away from here, because it is a long way from anywhere and hard to find a job, - but it is good living here, it is a quiet place. However, it is only good for those who are retired or who have their own business. But for those who have to fight to survive and have to take a bus every day, it is very hard. Where I lived before, in Jacintinho, it was easy to find a job and there were plenty of cleaning jobs. Every Saturday I earned R\$25 (US\$ 5). I could simply go and come back on foot. I am in a bad situation here.'

24 Often a brief statement will combine these conditions, and speak to a seemingly permanent situation that is unaffected by what we understand to be the broader, macro, changes to poverty and livelihoods in Brazil.

Towards an Updated Definition of Urban Poverty based on the Life Stories

25 The research was undertaken in circumstances where there was a bitter and complex struggle for space and integration being experienced by the urban poor. During the late 20th and early 21st Centuries Brazil experienced considerable economic growth but showed a limited capacity for reversing the spread of urban poverty. In more recent times, there has been a neoliberal agenda, which has affected the country's State education system, health and employment opportunities and this has resulted in a new generation of people who have only experienced poverty. They are poor people who are cut off from the world of formal work, because they lack the skills needed for the urban job market. Moreover, the informal job market is no longer able to absorb everyone. Official figures show that, at present, 52 million Brazilians are excluded and can be characterized as living in precarious conditions, while being engaged in illegal or economically informal activities, and having to rely on an illegal occupation of land. They constitute a legacy of vulnerability and exclusion, where there is little evidence of change and social mobility is almost non-existent. Nothing that is done can ever make up for the years of hardship and deprivation which these people have been subjected to. Urban poverty should thus be understood as a concept that reflects both an experiential and inter-generational situation. A number of writers have attempted to understand poverty from different perspectives, starting, for example, with the 'culture of poverty' associated with the work of Oscar Lewis. These perspectives have led to theories about marginality and more recent concepts such as vulnerability, exclusion and advanced marginality in the work of, amongst others, Wilson, Townsend, Sen, Kowarick, Wacquant and Auyero. The regular usage of these terms has varied over time, and has been largely dependent on academic paradigmatic shifts and policymaking, rather than the changing material conditions of the poor themselves. As a result of working with the three settlements in Maceió, this research drew on the concept of 'new poverty' (the most recent interpretation of urban poverty), which is a hybrid of previous concepts, its most distinctive features being isolation and separation. As it is a concept that is still being formulated, in general terms, the new urban poverty can be thought of as a state where there is a lack of the comforts and basic needs of life and the prospects of rising to a higher social level are increasingly limited. The lack of effective policies for bringing about the economic and social integration of the precarious settlements, condemns these communities to deprivation. In recent times, people with poor parents have only rarely managed to escape from poverty.

'My life involves buying canvas, only canvas... Cooking with firewood... [I have] no work because I live in a canvas shack... [I have] to beg to survive... [and had to] work hard as a child...'

26 As I became aware during my fieldwork, none of the theories and definitions of urban poverty has had much influence on policymaking, which still retains strongly culturalist attitudes, where the poor are blamed for their economic condition. This view, in turn, advocates remedies such as the removal of 'favelas', cleaning up the cities and building housing settlements for the people, which owing to budgetary constraints, the scale of the problem and political imperatives, have to be located a long way from the city centre and often from other sources of employment or limited public

amenities. On the basis of my findings, I am compelled to regard the new poverty as 'turbo-poverty' or 'hyper-poverty'. These terms take us beyond redefining current poverty in terms of its similarity to poverty in the past, but rather understands it as a multi-dimensional poverty that: i) is affected by cultural circumstances, ii) can be interpreted subjectively depending on factors such as sex, age, and ethnic origin and iii) is aggravated by a lack of acquired skills, as well as structural factors and political attitudes. The term suggests that today's poor have little prospect of finding the necessary means to improve their situation. This is quite unlike the idea of poverty that was current 20 years ago or so, when it was believed that the poor had a chance of improving their social position by saving money (and thus enduring social hardships) or acquiring education (for example in the work of Perlman, Santos, and Portes). Turbo poverty no longer offers these alternatives as it is believed that economic inclusion is both extremely limited - almost none of the members of households in the study settlements was a worker in a factory, retail outlet, or office - and provides little chance of obtaining it in social, cultural and political spheres, at least not in any determined path or time-frame. Remarkably, however, as the interviews show, the poor think that they are only living in the favelas on a temporary basis, and thus make little attempt to improve their space or surroundings. Later, they find they are unable to leave and this turns the favelas into no more than areas of shelter from social and material destitution.

'... I would like to move away from here... I try to pay my rent but it is impossible to pay it to the Lixão when one can't earn any money...'

- 27 Their poverty becomes worse and permanent - life in the favelas is no longer transient but an acute form of intergenerational poverty. The concept of poverty that is applicable to present-day circumstances and can thus result in the implementation of suitable policies and practices requires a different method for dealing with it. Instead of laying stress on the production and provision of national resources per capita, attention should be paid to measuring the quality of life. The old-fashioned way of implementing policies, for example, in the realm of education and health, seems to be more efficient than the recent discourse of enlargement of these services. There was a loss in quality after the unsuccessful implementation of a neoliberal policy that provided schools and hospitals for everyone, without enough resource.

'... This is no way to live... being left out on the streets... It is very hard to survive... waiting for state assistance... I go to the health center but I don't have enough money to buy medicine... I went to school but it was no good...'

- 28 Humanizing poverty means understanding that the poor have similar, albeit greater, needs than other citizens and require more attention and resources.

29

A New Housing Policy for the Urban Poor based on Life Stories

- 30 The use of life stories can be of great assistance when defining better public policies. The aim of the research, which has been summarized in this article, is to show the value of life histories as a tool for building public policies, and has led to a series of necessary changes in policies being recommended for the communities residing in precarious settlements. The official policy of the State with regard to the precarious

settlements is either to ignore or stigmatize the territories of poverty. On the basis of the use of ethnographic techniques, it is clear that the housing policies should attempt to undertake the following: i) take into account that residential mobility is a desirable goal; ii) plan and design spaces so that they can be adapted to the needs of poor families both with regard to their size and utility; iii) give thought to the different *housing policies* that can cater for people at different stages of urban integration; iv) revert to the idea of breaking up the settlements in the urban environment of people in low income groups so they are not huddled together in the form of ghettos where there is little prospect of overcoming poverty; v) take measures to select the most suitable size and location for the settlements and later make a careful assessment of the degree of success of each project; vi) limit horizontal urban expansion; vii) increase the overall compact size of cities while including the less well-off within the urban fabric; viii) introduce health and educational services of a good standard; ix) provide an incentive for creativity and the potential business enterprises for the urban poor; and x) give the people a chance to survive through legal means so that they can avoid having to resort to strategies that assist in the social and physical destruction of the environment.

- 31 The programs and policies should also attempt to forge links with the people at the centre of planning, execution and control. Clearly the networks of socialization are adapting to the social changes which they are undergoing but they still play an essential role in the organization of the communities. The urban poor should have greater opportunities to speak, and to be listened to, as well as to be respected for their opinions, when the policies and projects designed for them are put into effect. Knowing how to recognize the value of the accumulated knowledge and experience of the poor should be regarded as an essential feature in the success of the policies. These people have the right to take part in the way their destiny is defined, as well as to be integrated by having their rights granted in practice and their duties clarified so that they can fulfill the responsibilities of citizenship.
- 32 Finally, the cataclysmic global financial events at the end of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic at 2020, have altered the entire economic order of the world beyond recognition. What the future holds is not clear, but the *new poverty*, segregation, and unemployment, remain a part of the daily round of the urban poor. How are we to understand the widening gap between the establishment of a right to the city in principle and the daily round of people in the precarious settlements in cities such as Maceió, when economic factors are uncertain and likely to bring new calls for limited State interventions? This is the hurdle that a qualitative approach for research and practice in the informal settlements must overcome in the coming years.

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NOTAS

1. This article is a summary of the methodological chapter of a PhD thesis - CAVALCANTI, Débora (2010), *Fighting for a Place in the City: Social Practices and State Action in Maceió, Brazil*, - which was submitted to the Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom.
2. Coronelismo, literally "colonel-ism", is an oligarchical system in which a rural elite, dominated by military figures exercises economic and political hegemony through intimidation and violence.
3. According to Neto (1997) the regional economy retains features of historical expansion associated with slave labour and the long transition to a free labour market, - these involve a capacity to keep large numbers of people in a fixed place and absorb a significantly large work force. It also includes the bargaining power of employers which is strengthened by the presence of abundant labour and has made it possible to keep wages low. These historical conditions have allowed the accumulation of surplus value by a powerful landowning class.
4. Maceió began as a fishing village and a trading centre for sugar, timber, tobacco and other regional products in the 17th Century, and gradually became established as the main trading and service centre for Alagoas State, especially by supplying the goods required for of the sugar-alcohol sector. The population data are derived from the 1970, 1980, 1991 censuses and the Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios 1995 [PNAD, National Survey of Households] of the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE, Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics].
5. Illegal land occupation (without title deeds) is not solely confined to the poor. Many middle-class areas are also deemed to be illegal by the planning authorities.
6. Mobility is often essential to enable the strategies of survival of the poor to succeed but Portes (1998, p.11) insists that 'leaving a community tends to destroy established bonds, thus depriving family and children of a major source of social capital.'

RESUMOS

Since the 1990s, our view of urban poverty has broadened to include concepts such as exclusion, vulnerability, and violence, rather than being confined to economic factors. This article seeks to demonstrate the value of surveying the everyday life of precarious settlements so that an understanding can be obtained of the dynamics of the spatial and social integration of the urban poor. A qualitative approach has been adopted that links poverty, mobility, social networks and State action and it is argued that informal settlements are spatial traps since an individual perspective and exploitative relationships are superseding collective action. The use of the life stories of the residents of precarious settlements serves as a means of overcoming prejudices and show how the struggle for a place in the city takes place. They have emerged as a powerful instrument for understanding urban poverty and helping define public policies and thus combat

the problem of continuous mobility and spatial segregation, vulnerability and exclusion. Moreover, they reveal that, although expressing their right to the city, the struggle for a place in the city is not over.

Desde os anos 1990, nossa percepção da pobreza urbana se ampliou para incluir conceitos como exclusão, vulnerabilidade e violência, ao invés de a limitar a fatores econômicos. Este artigo busca demonstrar o valor da observação do cotidiano de assentamentos precários para a compreensão da dinâmica de integração espacial e social dos pobres urbanos. Uma abordagem qualitativa que liga pobreza, mobilidade, redes sociais e ação do Estado é empregada para argumentar que assentamentos informais são armadilhas espaciais onde a perspectiva individual e as relações de exploração superam as abordagens coletivas. O uso de histórias de vida com moradores de assentamentos precários serve para desconstruir preconceitos e mostrar como se concretiza a luta por um lugar na cidade, surgindo como um potente instrumento para entender a pobreza urbana e apoiar a definição de políticas públicas e assim combater a mobilidade contínua e a segregação espacial, a vulnerabilidade e a ,exclusão que revelam que, para além de uma retórica de direito à cidade, a luta por um lugar na cidade não acabou.

ÍNDICE

Mots-clés: pobreza urbana, políticas públicas, histórias de vida, Maceió

Keywords: urban poverty, public policies, life stories, Maceió

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