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# Housing informality in Buenos Aires

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# Housing informality in Buenos Aires

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by Francesca Ferlicca

## Introduction

Attention towards informal urbanism in urban studies academia and public debate is growing. This may be due to three processes: first, this type of urbanization is becoming the prevalent mode of expansion of peripheral areas of the major cities of the Global South. This issue has become critical, given that a huge proportion of the urban population today lives in unauthorised settlement conditions. The countries of the Global South (Asia, Africa and Latin America) concentrate 61.5% of the world's population. The majority of this percentage lives in informal settlements. While recent estimates indicate that today a quarter of city dwellers live in «slums»<sup>1</sup>, projections suggest that this population will reach at least 40% of the total world population in 2030<sup>2</sup>. This situation prevails mainly in undeveloped countries of the Southern hemisphere, although it affects more developed countries too<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, informal urbanism poses an antithetical nature to traditional ideas of planning, as it represents a production of urbanization independent from formal frameworks, which do not comply with official rules and regu-

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *Cities in a Globalizing World: Global Report on Human Settlements*, Hoboken, Taylor and Francis, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *World Cities Report 2016*, United Nations, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> F. Gaffikin and D. Perry, *The Contemporary Urban Condition: Understanding the Globalizing City as Informal, Contested, and Anchored*, in «Urban Affairs Review», vol. 48, n. 5, 2012, pp. 701-730.

lations and emerge as an alternative path of city construction. The fast proliferation of informal settlements in almost every major city in the Global South not only highlights the inability to meet the basic housing needs of inhabitants, but also constitutes a spatial manifestation of the increasing trend of social exclusion, resulting in political and social instability. Hence, large metropolises are growing, and the informal sector is growing within them<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the social and environmental effects of this new way of urban growth are challenging both for local governments and specialists. Thirdly, the massive emergence of this phenomenon questions the role of the planner, exposing the conflicts between two rationalities that shape organizations, institutions and individuals: on the one hand, the rationality of governing, and on the other hand the rationality of need and desire to survive<sup>5</sup>.

Accordingly, scholars do not agree on a definition of informality but tend to settle on the fact that these phenomena are not a pre-modern residue, while they are strictly connected to the dynamics of urban development<sup>6</sup>. Some of these dynamics have been explored, but literature has not paid enough attention to the political dimension of informality, especially on how local governments deal with informality, and how it affects urban policy making, urban management and political choices. The debate has been highly polarized by the work of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, partisan of policy in favour of sustaining access to private property in order to help people entering the legal sphere<sup>7</sup>. But empirical research has not yet focused on how informality is governed and regulated, resources are allocated, and conflicts are mediated.

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<sup>4</sup> S. Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> V. Watson, *Seeing from the South: Refocusing Urban Planning on the Globe's Central Urban Issues*, in «Urban Studies», vol. 46, n. 11, 2009, pp. 2259-2275.

<sup>6</sup> F. Hernández, P. Kellett and L.K. Allen, *Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2012; A.M. Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar Movements at the Crossroads*, New York, Routledge, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> H. De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*, New York, Basic Books, 2000.

## A summary of interpretative approaches to urban informality

In this section we intend to identify the different interpretative approaches that characterize the debate on urban informality. In order to summarize a review of the literature on urban informality, we consider it important to identify the different interpretative approaches that have emerged from the origins of the debate until the recent period. Over subsequent decades, three divergent schools of thought have arisen, where informality has been positioned within a dualist (i.e. marginal economic activities for low-income households distinct from modern capitalism), «legalist» (i.e. excluded from the modern economy due to adverse bureaucracy), or «structuralist» framework (i.e. subordinated economic units adversely related to formal enterprises within a capitalist economy)<sup>8</sup>. While there is a substantial body of literature devoted to the informal sector debate regarding work and other economic activities<sup>9</sup>, the intention here is to focus on how the informality debate has evolved from the 1950's to the current days. The debate on informality originated in the 1950s, concentrating on informal work and the economic aspects connected with it, initially neglecting the spatial aspect and the emerging forms of urbanity. Later, the debate shifted its focus from the informal economy to the analysis of urban phenomena of housing informality, focusing in particular on developing countries.

The identification of an «informal sector» is often traced to Hart's (1973) distinction between formal and informal economic sectors, based on types of employment. In the 1970's the International Labour Organization adopted the informal sector concept to describe «small-scale activities, largely escaping recognition, enumeration, regulation or government protection»<sup>10</sup>. This *dualistic approach* has fostered the emergence of a dichot-

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<sup>8</sup> C.A. Rakowski, *Convergence and Divergence in the Informal Sector Debate: A Focus on Latin America, 1984-92*, in «World Development», vol. 22, n. 4, 1994, pp. 501-516.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. p. 15 in C. Moser, *The Informal Sector Debate, Part 1: 1970-1983*, in C. Rakowski (ed.), *Contrapunto: The Informal Sector Debate in Latin America*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 11-29.

omous perspective between informal and formal economics, without considering any relationship between the two areas. Thus, this conceptualization presupposed formality as the norm, and informality as an aberration, a notion that has persisted despite vigorous contestation.

A second phase of the debate has seen the emergence of structuralist and legalist approaches. Rakowski<sup>11</sup> argued that the contribution of the *structuralist approach* consists in considering informality as an «expression of the uneven nature of capitalist development». Scholars who followed a structuralist approach argued that informal activities are linked to the deepening of global capitalism, the abundance of manpower, a weakening of the application of regulations by government and the interest of employers to avoid the State regulations that govern working and wage conditions<sup>12</sup>. These authors emphasized the need for structural changes in the economy through a new social contract based on laws that protect workers' rights and better application of the regulations. Castells and Portes<sup>13</sup>, at the end of the 1980s, focused on the structure of relations between formal and informal. Unlike both the dualistic school – which conceives informality as a set of marginal activities excluded from the formal economy – and the legalist school – which considers informality as a set of positive forces in a formal contrast linked to strategies of power – the *structuralist approach* asserts that informality is an integral part of a single system. In the structuralist school we begin to see the overcoming of the formal and informal dichotomy, contrasted by a reality constituted by a dense system of relations between formal and informal that are, however, explored from an economic point of view. Furthermore, this approach shows that informality cannot be considered as a phenomenon that refers exclusively to developing countries. The flexibility of informality, whose major strength is high

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<sup>11</sup> C. Rakowski (ed.), *Contrapunto...*, cit.

<sup>12</sup> A. Portes, M. Castells and L. Benton, *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.; S. Sassen, *New York City: Economic Restructuring and Immigration*, in «Development and Change», vol. 17, n. 1, 1986, pp. 85-119; S. Sassen, *The Global City New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

adaptability in different social and spatial economic conditions, has been expressed throughout the world.

According to Rakowski, the other great approach to informality included the *legalistic approach*, which underlined the «legal, bureaucratic» position of the State, re-marking the strong divisions between formal and informal economies. In contrast to the structuralist approach, scholars who follow a *legalist approach* argue that the problem of informality consists in excessive regulation, which increases the costs of doing business<sup>14</sup>. They blame unrealistic standards for the growth of the informal economy. They also stress human agency and its entrepreneurial spirit, and support policies of deregulation and legalization. In particular, the World Bank and its associated scholars have advocated deregulation and legalization through property titles to improve housing conditions in informal settlements in developing countries<sup>15</sup>. One of the main supporters of this interpretation, Hernando De Soto, considered informality as a natural response to real market forces. According to De Soto, provision of legal titles is the solution to informality, and indeed the means for the poor to unlock the potential for wealth creation. His argument is that property ownership creation (through titling) and legalization of their assets would give poor people the security of tenure they need to invest in their homes and businesses, and hence invigorate the economy. Despite its numerous weaknesses, the legalist approach has had a significant impact in numerous contexts, particularly in interventions by non-governmental organizations, international agencies and private entrepreneurs, in particular in third-world countries.

Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris<sup>16</sup>, in an effort to investigate how informality is understood and addressed through policy planning and defini-

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<sup>14</sup> H. De Soto, *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*, New York, Harper & Row, 1989.

<sup>15</sup> S. Malpezzi, S. Mayo and D. Gross, *Housing Demand in Developing Countries*, Washington, The World Bank, 1985.

<sup>16</sup> A. Loukaitou-Sideris and V. Mukhija, *Reading the Informal City: Why and How to Deepen Planners' Understanding of Informality*, in «Journal of Planning Education and Research», vol. 35, n. 4, 2015, pp. 444-454.

tion, identify two other approaches: the *reformist approach* and *critical governance approach*. The *reformist approach*, which sees structural reasons for the existence of informality, does not expect informality to disappear and supports an active role of government and civil society in fostering and improving informal activities<sup>17</sup>. The fundamental research by Peter Ward<sup>18</sup> on informal housing activities, in particular the so-called «colonies» in Texas, falls into this category. Ward acknowledged the importance of the informal real estate market in making home ownership more accessible, and supported the corresponding changes in land development and housing economics regulations. He also supported the strengthening of infrastructure requirements to address health and safety issues in informal settlements. Scholars following this approach question the conventional emphasis on land titles as a legalization strategy for informal settlements. They argue that these titles are neither necessary (the perception of security of possession, the provision of infrastructure and the passage of time can be more important), or not of sufficient dimensions (given that no building finance is available for improvements) nor advantageous to most residents (due to potential increases in rents and displaced tenants). Alternatively, scholars suggest formalization and legitimacy through guarantees and moratoriums against displacement, infrastructure support, and incremental upgrading<sup>19</sup>.

Conversely, the *critical governance approach*, partly influenced by postcolonialism and critical theory, is critical and sceptical of the role of the State in shaping informality<sup>20</sup>. In this literature we situate both the systematic

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<sup>17</sup> L. Peattie, *An Idea in Good Currency and How It Grew: The Informal Sector*, in «World Development», vol. 157, 1987, pp. 851-860; B. Sanyal, *Intention and Outcome: Formalization and Its Consequences*, in «Regional Development Dialogue», vol. 171, 1996, pp. 161-178; M.J. Piore and C.F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity*, New York, Basic Books, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> P. Ward, *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico: Urbanization by Stealth*, Austin, Texas, University of Texas, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> G. Payne, *Urban Land Tenure Policy Options: Titles or Rights?*, in «Habitat International», vol. 253, 2001, pp. 415-429.

<sup>20</sup> A. Roy, *Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning*, in «Journal of the American Planning Association», vol. 71, n. 2, 2005, pp. 147-158; A. Roy, *Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence and the Idiom of Urbanization*, in «Planning Theory», vol. 8, n. 1, 2005, pp. 76-87; A. Roy,

criticism of Ananya Roy on the arbitrary use of State power in the application of regulations as «modalities of regulation», and the concerns of Orin Yiftachel<sup>21</sup> on the new colonial relations deriving from informality and its application. Yiftachel's «grey spaces» seek to reframe static and hierarchical conceptions of urban informality, challenging conceptions that enforce hierarchy and favour the formal. As noted by some authors<sup>22</sup>, such debates seek to reverse urban informality's normative inference, and support the agency of marginalised populations whose informal activities are often criminalised and otherwise de-legitimised.

A question arises regarding the most recent contributions to the urban informality debate. How is the return of the debate on the informal in the academic scene – especially in the Anglo-American context – adding new keys to the phenomenon of informality? In the approach mentioned above, the *critical governance approach*, strongly permeated by the post-colonial and critical theory debate, we substantially recognize three major contributions that bring new theoretical elements: *a)* recent literature emphasizes the abandonment of a dichotomous vision of the informal – that continues to permeate many readings, which see the norm in the formal and the anomaly in the informal – and calls to analyse the interrelations between formality and informality<sup>23</sup>; *b)* calls to study the phenomenon of informality in developed countries, in the so-called Global North, in order to recognize that informality has not only manifested itself in the countries of the Southern hemisphere<sup>24</sup>; *c)* informality is not a phenomenon that concerns marginal

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*Strangely Familiar: Planning and the Worlds of Insurgence and Informality*, in «Planning Theory», vol. 8, n. 1, 2005, pp. 7-11.

<sup>21</sup> O. Yiftachel, *Theoretical Notes on Grey Cities: The Coming of Urban Apartheid?*, in «Planning Theory», vol. 8, n. 1, 2009, pp. 88-100.

<sup>22</sup> N. Banks, M. Lombard and D. Mitlin, *Urban Informality as a Site of Critical Analysis*, in «The Journal of Development Studies», 2019, pp. 1-16.

<sup>23</sup> A. Roy and N. Al Sayyad, *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2004; C. McFarlane, *Rethinking Informality: Politics, Crisis and the City*, in «Planning Theory & Practice», vol. 13, 2012, pp. 89-108.

<sup>24</sup> R.P. Fairbanks, *The Politics of Urban Informality in Philadelphia's Recovery House Movement*, in «Urban Studies», vol. 48, n. 12, 2011, pp. 2555-2570; R.T. Devlin, *An Area that Governs Itself: Informality*,



populations and some researchers have shown its prevalence not only in low-income classes<sup>25</sup>.

Despite the flourishing of this new season of debate, we believe that the way in which informality is understood and addressed by urban planning remains controversial. In particular, little attention has been given to understanding how and how much local planning systems have contributed to the emergence of urban informality, through State action or omission. Furthermore, a certain tendency towards conceptual vagueness can be identified, as well as an attitude to the generalization of the concept of informality and a difficulty in defining what is the informal. This difficulty to arrive to a definition is grounded in the pretention to enclose very different expressions and manifestations in a univocal concept. See, for example, the vast vastness of names used to define informal settlements (*villas, asentamientos, favelas, shantytowns, slums* etc.). Even the use of the terms Global South and Global North, which attempt to encompass geographic realities that are often difficult to compare, contribute even more to flattening the debate and not clarifying the forms in which the phenomenon manifests itself, the actors that are its protagonists, the social networks that feed its reproduction, the local powers that intervene and relate to the informal city<sup>26</sup>.

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*Uncertainty and the Management of Street Vending in New York City*, in «Planning Theory», vol. 10, n. 1, 2011, pp. 53-65; F. Chiodelli, *The Dark Side of Urban Informality in the Global North: Housing Illegality and Organized Crime in Northern Italy*, in «International Journal of Urban and Regional Research», vol. 43, n. 3, 2019, pp. 497-516; N. Durst, *The Nature and Extent of Self-help Housing in Texas: From Colonias to Model Subdivisions*, in «Journal of Planning Education and Research», vol. 36, n. 2, 2016, pp. 145-157.

<sup>25</sup> A. Azuela de la Cueva, *De inquilinos a propietarios. Derecho y política en el Programa de Renovación Habitacional Popular*, in «Estudios Demográficos Y Urbanos», vol. 2, n. 1, 1987, pp. 53-73; A. Varley, *Urbanization and Agrarian Law: The Case of Mexico City*, in «Bulletin of Latin American Research», vol. 4, n. 1, 1985, pp. 1-16.

<sup>26</sup> For example, some authors consider that the phenomena of the informal city in the Global South as a way of access to land and housing for low-income groups is becoming the rule, while in the Global North remain an exception. Rule and exception are in relation to compliance and non-compliance to urban planning and law. The vast differences in the legitimacy and effectiveness of the rule of law remain a main difference that has to be considered in comparing contexts in the North and South. R. Alterman and I. Calor, *Between Informal and Illegal in the Global North: Planning Law, En-*

To overcome these twofold critical tendencies – firstly, the absence of a clear and precise definition of informal settlement and, secondly, the confusion that arises from the false homologation of diverse urban realities based only on a hemispheric criterion – we believe that only from a socio-historical perspective, we can reconstruct the genealogy of housing informality and shed light on the context of its emergence and its interaction with local urban planning and legislations.

Starting from this need for a profound reading of the phenomenon in the Argentine context, we will make the attempt to reconstruct the origin of the phenomenon and the representations that it has built for academics and the normative practices and urban planning.

### **Brief characterization of housing informality in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area**

As in most other Latin American cities, the main way of accessing housing for the urban poor in Buenos Aires has been through the illegal occupation of land. Over a period of roughly eight decades, this has led to the formation of hundreds of informal settlements in the city. In order to understand the current situation, it is necessary to review the different growth patterns of the two most important kinds of informal urbanization in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area: «asentamientos» and «villas», whose definition was theorized by Cravino and Varela<sup>27</sup>. *Villas* and *asentamientos* are commonly found in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area and are the main forms through which the poorest classes of society proceed to the illegal occupation of vacant land. *Asentamiento* differs from *villa miseria* in several ways: while *villa* is the result of a gradual and unplanned oc-

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*forcement and Justifiable Noncompliance*, in U. Grashoff, *Comparative Approaches to Informal Housing Around the Globe*, London, UCL Press, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> M.C. Cravino, *Los mil barrios (in)formales: aportes para la construcción de un observatorio del hábitat popular del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*, Los Polvorines, Argentina, Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 2008, pp. 54-61.

cupation, *asentamiento* consists of an organised land invasion<sup>28</sup>. While the densely populated *villa* has a chaotic appearance, the *asentamiento* has a clearly defined layout, with parcelled lots similar to the urban grid of the city and compliant with the requirements of urban planning legislation<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, whereas *villas* are found both in central areas of the city and in the urban periphery, *asentamientos* are situated in peripheral areas.

Following Fernandez Wagner<sup>30</sup>, it is possible to identify at least three «generations of housing policies» that involve specific moments of intervention to the problems of urban poverty and habitat in Argentina. It should be noted that, far from being consecutive policies, they often overlapped. The first generation of housing policies emerged in the late 1950s under authoritarian governments, and aimed to eradicate *villas*, which were considered an expression of a «primitive» way of life. These policies were based on the theories of 1920s European urbanism, which had the purpose of moving the settlement dwellers into modern housing, capable of «civilizing» its inhabitants. At the local level, this first generation of policies corresponds to the so-called «llave en mano» [turnkey] housing policies, under the modality of large housing complexes, designed for the population eradicated from *villas*. These complexes, usually located in areas far from the urban centre, were financed with public funds and built by large companies through public tenders.

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<sup>28</sup> J.-L. van Gelder, *Legal Tenure Security, Perceived Tenure Security and Housing Improvement in Buenos Aires: An Attempt Towards Integration*, in «International Journal of Urban and Regional Research», vol. 33, 2009, pp. 126-146.

<sup>29</sup> J.-L. van Gelder, *Tales of Deviance and Control: On Space, Rules, and Law in Squatter Settlements*, in «Law & Society Review», vol. 44, n. 2, 2010, pp. 239-268.

<sup>30</sup> R.F. Wagner, *La construcción y deconstrucción histórica de lo social en el acceso a los bienes y servicios del hábitat*, in «Boletín del Instituto de Vivienda», Santiago, Chile, Universidad de Chile, vol. 19, 2004, pp. 13-22; R.F. Wagner, *Elementos para una revisión crítica de las políticas habitacionales en América Latina* in *Asentamientos informais e Moradia Popular: subsídios para políticas habitacionais mais inclusivas*, Brasília, Brasil, Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, Ministério de Planejamento Orçamento e Gestão, 2007; R.F. Wagner, *La perspectiva de derechos en las políticas sociales y habitacionales en América Latina*, Valparaíso, Chile, Ponencia presentada en XIII Encuentro de la red ULACAV Y V Jornada Internacional de vivienda social, 2007.

The second generation of housing policies emerged at the end of the 1970s, when the inadequacy of previous policies became obvious, due to the high operating costs and the failure to improve the living conditions of relocated residents, along with the constant growth of popular urbanization. In this context, a new type of policy was implemented, once democracy was re-established in 1983. The new policies were based on the concept of housing-as-a-process, and pivoted around the establishment of irregular settlements. These massive programs were based on the building of lots, supplied with services, provision of networks and public spaces. These programs comprised participatory methodologies so as to engage the inhabitants in the design and management of the urbanization process.

The beginning of the «third generation» of housing policies coincided with the structural adjustment policies promoted by the «Washington Consensus» and the subsequent structural changes in the State (among others, privatization of goods and public services and labour deregulation) and in society (impoverishment of the middle sectors and general increase in poverty). This stage implied the disassociation of the State from the responsibility of providing housing services, the primacy of the principle of individual responsibility in housing provision, and the facilitation of the housing market through the financing of demand. This approach was promoted by international multilateral agencies (like the World Bank among others) and was aimed to ensure market mediation by financing the purchase of housing primarily through mortgage loans.

Even international organizations could not size the problem of precariousness in housing while they focused on encouraging the State to intervene in the increasingly dense informal settlements through targeted policies aimed at improving the neighbourhoods and regularizing the land tenure situation.

After these three generations of housing policies described by Fernandez Wagner we find that, in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis, the national government (in 2004) launched the Federal Social Housing Program,

an attempt to address the housing deficit, which exceeded in budget and scale all other government interventions of the preceding 15 years<sup>31</sup>. The purpose of the *Programa Federal*, as it is commonly referred to, was to construct 38,000 dwellings in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, of which 5,000 were in the City of Buenos Aires. In spite of this array of housing and habitat policies, the housing deficit has not been reduced. Rodulfo and Boselli<sup>32</sup> point out the persistence of structural deficit and of strong regional imbalances, in spite of a slight improvement in the housing sector.

The recent wave of informality stems from the increase in real estate prices in a largely unregulated market, a condition not mitigated by large-scale social housing programmes, all of which failed due to poor planning and a lack of coordination. Meanwhile, we can notice how informal settlements have increasingly adopted real estate-distinctive features, for example the commercialization of their housing system through renting as a way of access to housing within informal settlements<sup>33</sup>. The Argentinian case features a lack of univocal and long-term regularization policy. In fact, specific *ad-hoc* regulations have been issued over the years. The result is a segmentation of policies and the unequal treatment of the inhabitants in each of the different experiences of regularization of informal settlements<sup>34</sup>.

Recently, the «Relevamiento Nacional de Barrios Populares» (DN 358/2017) [National Survey of Popular Neighbourhoods] recognized the existence in Argentina of 4,416 informal settlements, both *villas* and *asentamientos* – housing more than 810,000 families – approximately 35% of them concentrated in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires<sup>35</sup>. Estimates indi-

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<sup>31</sup> M.M. Di Virgilio, *Housing Policy in Argentina: Reflections on a Decade of Progressive Social Policy*, in «International Journal of Housing Policy», vol. 17, n. 2, 2017, pp. 314-325.

<sup>32</sup> M.B. Rodulfo and T. Boselli, *Dilemas y desafíos de la política habitacional argentina desde un enfoque de derechos*, in «Cuadernos de Vivienda y Urbanismo», vol. 7, 2014, pp. 218-241.

<sup>33</sup> J.-L. van Gelder, M.C. Cravino and F. Ostuni, *Housing Informality in Buenos Aires: Past, Present and Future?*, in «Urban Studies», vol. 53, 2016, pp. 1958-1975.

<sup>34</sup> N. Clichevsky, *Algunas Reflexiones Sobre Informalidad y regularización Del Suelo Urbano*, in «Bitácora Urbano Territorial», vol. 1, n. 14, 2009, pp. 63-88.

<sup>35</sup> Techo, *Relevamiento de asentamientos informales 2016*, Buenos Aires, 2017.

cate that between 2000 and 2015, at least 307 new informal settlements were formed in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, involving an area of 3,250 ha and a population of 345,000 inhabitants. This new wave of informal housing in Buenos Aires peripheral areas is connected both to new migration from other Latin-American countries and to the internal migration of occupants coming from other informal settlements within Buenos Aires<sup>36</sup>. Three out of four of these new informal settlements were installed at the interstitial edges of the metropolitan area. These settlements have the worst levels of socioeconomic and territorial variables, being also nestled in already-vulnerable urban environments, cut out of the city fabric with no means of transportation or connections<sup>37</sup>.

In 2018, after a large mobilization by NGO's and housing rights movements, Argentina has approved the «Ley de regularización dominial para la integración socio urbana» [Law of land-title regularization for socio-urban integration], which foresees an ambitious plan to upgrade the 4,416 informal settlements. The integration process aims to improve and expand infrastructures, grant access to services, create public spaces, improve accessibility and connections, fostering sanitation and mitigate environmental problems, supporting family economic activities, ensuring security of tenure. According to the last proposal of the «Mesa Nacional de Barrios Populares» presented in July 2019, the regularization of the 4,416 informal settlements all over the country will require a period of 12 years and will cost approximately 26 billion dollars<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> M.J. Magliano and M.V. Perissinotti, *La periferia autoconstruida: migraciones, informalidad y segregación urbana en Argentina*, in «Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Urbano Regionales», vol. 46, 2020, pp. 5-23.

<sup>37</sup> R. Apaolaza, *Territorio, transporte y capitales Dinámicas y efectos del aislamiento socioterritorial sobre los jóvenes residentes de los nuevos asentamientos periféricos del área metropolitana de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires, 2018 (Doctoral dissertation, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires en Geografía, Buenos Aires, Argentina).

<sup>38</sup> «Presentan propuesta para urbanizar a todos los barrios populares del país», *BAE negocios*, 2019, 19<sup>th</sup> of July, available online at <https://www.baenegocios.com/sociedad/Presentan-propuesta-para-urbanizar-a-todos-los-barrios-populares-del-pais-20190719-0019.html>.

## Conclusion

In this article we retraced the international debate on urban informality from its origin to the current period. The more recent approach identified, the *critical governance approach*, is useful for an historical analysis of the creation and expansion of urban informality in the case-study. In particular, the critique of the «formal/informal» dualism, helped us to stress the role of the government in shaping informality. Then, we recognized the importance of a socio-historical perspective to reconstruct the genealogy of housing informality in Argentina, by analysing the context of its emergence and its interaction with local urban planning and legislations. We emphasized the importance of resorting to precise historical and territorially-situated conceptual tools such as *villas* and *asentamientos*. In this way, we focused on how legislation, urban planning and socioeconomic developments have led to the emergence, size and shape of informal settlements in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

Tackling the housing informality issue requires a broad approach that includes legislation, urban planning, regulation of the real-estate market, settlement regularization and upgrading, and their interconnection. These processes should not be reduced to their legal dimension of tenure regularization, but be combined with the provision of services and infrastructure, and with employment and income generation programmes with the goal of achieving the social and economic integration of informal settlement residents in the city. Finally, we believe that is necessary to implement a set of preventive policies that widen the conditions of access to serviced urban land and housing, and prevent the generation of new informal settlements.

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