Neighborhood Effects and Reproduction of Poverty: A Social Housing Case from Turkey[1]

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Abstract

The issue of housing for the poor has long been an integral part of urban policy.Recently, Turkish Government started to implement a new social housing policy.This article aims to examine this current policy and its implementation from the perspective of spatial concentration of poverty and the 'neighborhood effects'. It is widely accepted that the social and physical features of the neighborhood affects the life chances of those living there. This is especially more significant for the families in poverty, in terms of finding employment and seizing opportunities to move out of poverty. The findings of this research show that in Esentepe Social Housing Project, which constitute the research field, the negative effects of spatial concentration of poverty are already observable. The social and physical environment of the project appears to deepen the social exclusion that the residents of the project are already facing.

Key Words: Neighborhood effects, urban poverty, social exclusion, social housing, Turkey.

1. Introduction

Recently, Turkish Government started to implement a new social/public housing policy as a part of its overall mass housing implementations. However, these newly built social housing projects are quite small in numbers, especially compared to the housing units produced for the middle and upper classes. Since the housing research is mainly focused on these developments, the public housing projects are not sufficiently studied in terms of its social outcomes. Therefore, a recently built social housing project in Kastamonu (a small city on Black Sea Coast) was analyzed in terms of the socio-spatial dynamics.

The issue of housing for the poor has long been an integral part of urban policy. On the other hand, the socioeconomic dynamics such as deindustrialization, migration and rise of service sector soared to an extent that made urban poverty a growing issue. Housing has been one of the most problematic aspects of this issue. To provide adequate housing to the urban poor, urban planners as well as local and central governments developed various policies and implementation models over the years. However none of them has been completely successful in finding a fair and sustainable formula to solve the problem.

Throughout the history of urbanization, some neighborhoods have become characterized by high rates of poverty as a result of various social and economic processes. In some cases, the poor families concentrated in the inner city neighborhoods that were abandoned by the middle classes. In others, the housing policies dragged poor families into public housing projects, most of which turned into 'ghetto's at some point. Reardon and Bischoff (2011) suggest that the rising segregation of poverty is more a result of housing policy than the result of income inequality (cited by Kucheva, 2013:114). Especially the once popular public housing policies created neighborhoods with high poverty rates as well as social problems, such as teenage pregnancy, violent crimes and high unemployment, to name a few. In most cases, these neighborhoods turned into ghettos, which have been one of the most controversial issues of urban areas in developed and developing world alike. In the face of these problems, the scholars of the urban started to ask the question if gathering poor households in public housing projects was not the best way tosolve their housing issues. The influential work by scholars, like Wilson and his book 'The Truly Disadvantaged' (1987), started discussions about the ills of spatial concentration of poverty.

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Urban policy makers and sociologists stared to question the outcomes of spatial segregation of different socioeconomic groups in the city. As a result, a significant amount of literature was produced around this problematic. In order to understand the failures and achievements of housing policies for the urban poor, it is essential to revisit this literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Concentration of Poverty: Socio-spatial Isolation and Its Outcomes

According to many scholars, 'Neighborhood effects' are extremely important for the life chances of the poor families. Mobility, on the other hand, shapes and reshapes the neighborhoods, as well as the residents' lives and behaviors (Hedman, 2011: 502). 'Neighborhood Effects' literature posits that where people live matters in terms of resources, experiences and qualities of neighbors (Stal and Zuberi, 2010: 4). Neighborhoods affect the opportunities and life-chances of their residents through social networks and economic conditions, which influence various aspects of residents' lives from intellectual development to labor market participation (Gallster and Killen, 1995: 35). Social capital in urban poverty debate also suggests neighborhood poverty may affect low-income residents' life chances (Curley, 2010:79-80). According to Pinkster, neighborhood effects (in terms of employment) can be the result of two mechanisms. Firstly, the socialization within the neighborhood may shape the work ethic of the residents. Secondly, the neighborhood may lack the social networks required to access better employment opportunities (2009: 214).Besides it is widely accepted by the scholars of urban poverty that the spatial separation of poor households leaves these families isolated from the rest of the society (Curley, 2010; Wacquant and Wilson, 1989). Many scholars agree that the social isolation of the poor families is the main dynamic that triggers other social issues for the high-poverty neighborhood.

According to Curley who argues that isolation hasa devastating effect,the mainstream society from which the poor families are isolated follow conventional norms for work, family and communication (2010:80). Therefore, when poor families are socially disconnected from the better-off families, a series of internal and external dynamics follow. First of all, as Wilson suggeststhe spatial separation between the poor and non-poor families could prevent low-income adults and children from interacting with employed individuals and breadwinners as role models (1987: 57).The young people growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods fail to learn and assimilate the norms, values and behavioral codes of society at large (Korsu and Wenglenski, 2010: 2284). Thus, they cannot see the possibilities and/or the opportunities for getting out of poverty. In addition, many urban scholars suggest that poor job accessibility and exposure to negative externalities of concentrated poverty causes employment problems for the low- skilled workers, who are likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods (Korsu and Wenglenski, 2010:2279-2280). Social isolation cuts off poor individuals from job referral networks (Jargowsky, 2003; cited by Kucheva, 2013:114), in which the social capital plays an important role (Briggs, 1998:180).

Given the fact that job insecurity and long term joblessness are among the most significant reasons for persistent poverty, the social networks leading to jobs play a vital role in a poor family's life chances.As Briggs suggests, we draw on 'social capital' in the sense that getting others to help us solve problems, seize opportunities and accomplish other aims that matter for us (Briggs, 1998:178). In this context,the concentration of poor households in certain areas produces disadvantageous social effects, including social isolation or weak networks and declining social capital (Bacquè, et.al, 2011: 256-7).Social networks play a crucial role for jobseekers since most of them find work with the help of their friends, family members and acquaintances (Granovetter, 1973; cited by Korsuand Wenglenski, 2010: 2285). With minimal contact with employed and economically stable people, residents in poverty- concentrated communities have limited access to information and opportunities necessary for upward mobility (Curley, 2010:81). As Wacquant and Wilson alsosuggest residents of high-poverty neighborhoods have fewer social ties that they can draw upon to implement strategies of social mobility (1989: 22).

As mentioned before, the concentration of poor household, leads to many internal and external social dynamics. A high- poverty neighborhood is often associated with stereotypes that negatively affect the employability of residents (Stal and Zuberi, 2010:4) Public housing is highly 'stigmatized' (Kucheva, 2013:115-117). As suggested by Korsu and Wenglenski, many people associate high-poverty neighborhoods with violence, criminality, unwillingness to work, alcohol, and drug addiction (2010:2285). On the other hand, adverse behaviorsthat are believed to be characteristic to the poor are replicated within poor neighborhoods, trapping individuals in a spiral of economic decline and in turn, reproducing poverty (Stal and Zuberi, 2010:4)

Many scholars of urban poverty such as Wilson (1987) agree that poor neighborhoods have negative effects on the children and families living there. Several studies find that crime and violence in the neighborhood are associated with mental and physical health problems, risky behavior and poorer education outcomes for children (Zuberi, 2012: 788). These findings show the existence of 'exposure to danger' as a neighborhood effect' (Zuberi, 2012: 788). As revealed by Gallster and Killen's research, the youth living in high- poverty neighborhoods are more likely to be influenced by (negative) neighborhood effects (1995: 35).

As pointed out by Stal and Zuberi, many scholarsassert that a cultural enclave takes form when socially and economically deprived individuals reside in a cluster (2010: 4).Such isolated and limited opportunity structure may trap residents in a cycle of poverty and can create an environment where residents are routinely exposed to and may come to accept behaviors and norms that clash with those of mainstream society (Curley, 2010:81). As Briggs suggests, many scholars believe that long-term joblessness and school failure predominates in the high-poverty neighborhoods (1997: 199-200). According to Briggs there is consistent evidence that neighborhood makeup influences child cognitive outcome such as school dropouts and teenage childbearing (1997:225).

2.2. A New Approach: Social Mix Policy as an Alternative

The policy makers and executives widely agree on the idea that housing policy is an indispensible part of struggle with poverty. In the last two decades or so, the negative neighborhood effects in the high poverty neighborhoods and the social outcomes revealed by numerous studies sparked a new discussion about alternative housing policies. Social Mix Policy in housing development entails creating and supporting neighborhoods that are mix in terms of economic wellbeing of the residents, as well as the tenure structure (Kleinhans, 2004:370; Popkin, Levy and Buron, 2009:480-481). In other words, socially mixed neighborhoods include residents with diverse income levels; some of who are homeowners and some are renters. According to Briggs, by influencing where and how people live, housing policy should help people on the bottom of the opportunity structure (1998: 179). In that manner, social mixingcan be considered as a method and objective for countering exclusion or ghettoization. (Bacquè, et.al, 2011: 256).Besides, neighborhoods become poorer in two ways: through changes in income of stable residents and through the differential migration of poor and non-poor people into and out of the neighborhood (Kucheva, 2013:117).

In this context, deconcentrating poverty is argued to increase a low-income individual's chances at success, as well as significantly improving the safety and economic wellbeing of those in these neighborhoods (Stal and Zuberi, 2010:3). In other words, major benefits of social mixing can be identified as access to better jobs and schools, to safer streets and better quality housing (Kucheva, 2013: 115). In addition, having diverse social networks that include ties to people of different socioeconomic status can be important for accessing information and resources for upward mobility (Briggs, 1988; cited by Curley, 2010: 81). On the other hand, on the basis of the higher income communities' potential to have greater collective efficacy in terms of effectively sanctioning unwanted behavior, thereby reducing exposure to crime and social disorder(Curley, 2010: 81) as well as increasing the opportunities to move out of poverty, social mix approach can be considered a noteworthy alternative to social housing policy.

2.3. The (Social) Housing Problem in Turkey

It is a widely accepted fact that the housing problem in Turkey can be dated back to 1950s. After World War II, the rapid urbanization due to industrialization caused the need for housing in the big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. The lack of an effective housing policy for the rural migrants with low income led to development of illegal dwellings, namely the shanty dwellings called '*gecekondu*' (Buğra, 1998: 306-307; Ataöv and Osmay, 2007:58). The government policies to encourage the construction of social housing with government loans were insufficient to produce the necessary number of units for the low and middle-income urban residents (Yetkin and Lepkova, 2007: 48-49). According to Buğra, even tough this problem has always been a part of the political agenda; the proposed social housing projects were rarely executed effectively (1998:307). After 1980s, in line with the new economic policies, the government started to take steps to improve the housing sector such as establishing the Mass Housing Fund and providing loans and state subsidiaries to housing cooperativesto increase home ownership (Yetkin and Lepkova, 2007: 49; Buğra, 1998: 308; Ataöv and Osmay, 2007:59). However, these measures could only help to increase the number of home ownership among those with steady incomes, leaving the housing problem among urban residents earning low- income and employed outside formal sector unsolved(Buğra, 1998: 309).

This was mainly due to the fact that with the new economic policies, the capital previously involved in production became interested in investing to the urban land and built environment (Şengül, 2012: 434). According to Işık and Pınarcıoğlu, the economic environment also led to a rapid segregation between the neighborhoods of upper, middle and lower classes. During 1980s, the cooperatives financed by the Mass Housing Administration (TOKI) and the mass housing projects implemented by the administration itself played the major role in housing production (Işık and Pınarcıoğlu, 2002:131-132). Starting from 2000s, the cooperation between local governments and the private sector has become prevalent in housing sector (Ataöv and Osmay, 2007:59).Over the past decade, this cooperation grew into cooperation between the central government and big construction companies. The housing market has become diversified for the upper and upper-middle classes. In that context, the exclusion of the lower middle classes and poor families from the market caused the public housing debateto blaze.

3. Field Research

3.1. The Current Social Housing Projects and Esentepe Case in Kastamonu, Turkey

The social housing project that is the object of this paper started withthe signing of consecutive protocols between Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKI) and Social Aid and Solidarity Fund under the Ministry of Family and Social Policies between years 2009 and 2011. In these protocols and policy papers, the beneficiaries of the social housing projects are determined as the citizens who are entitled to Law 3294, which describes the criteria for entitlement to social aid. TOKI is in charge of the architectural projects of the housing units, which are planned to be in the form of one bedroom and two bedroom apartments built by subcontracting firms[2].

The plans of the units and the apartment complexes are prepared by the housing administration. However, the allocation of the land is the responsibility of the local government. The Social Aid and Solidarity Fund transfers the finances to the Housing Administration, which undertakes the subcontracting process. According to the policy implementation regulations, the beneficiaries sign an agreement to pay for the units over a period of 20-22 years. For the Esentepe case, which constitutes the field of this research, the total amount that beneficiaries are supposed to pay is a grand total of 35000 TL (about 17500 USD).

The social housing project in Kastamonu, which is a small city onthe Black Sea coast, started in 2011. An apartment complex of 324 units was built over a period of one year. The project was announced on local newspapers and on the agency website for about a month. The local branch of the Fund started collecting applications towards the end of the building process. The requirements for application were set by the Fund's regulations. These requirements were, to be at least 30 years old; owning no property, having no social security (excepta 'green card'[3]) and should be in poverty and living on welfare. The agreement between the fund and the beneficiaries indicate that they cannot rent, sell or let someone else (such as married children) use the unitsfor 10 years, even if they pay the whole amount earlier than the agreed time frame. Also, the agreement includes a clause that allows the authorities to evacuate the units, if the beneficiaries do not pay the monthly amount three times.

The residents of the project started moving into the units in December 2012 and all the units were occupied by January 2013.The beneficiaries in Esentepe Social Housing Project started paying six months after they moved in to the units. They also pay for maintenance and central heating. The units have 2 bedrooms, a living area equipped with a small kitchen and a bathroom. The size of the units is 62 square meters. 324 units were built for the Esentepe Social Housing Project.

3.2.Data Collection

The data for this research is collected in the Esentepe Social Housing Project in Kastamonu as one of the early cases of public housing.10 interviews were conducted with the beneficiaries living in the project and three were conducted with the local executives of the project. These executives were the local director of the Social Aid and Solidarity Fund and two members of the subcommittee of the board of directors, which is responsible for the execution of the project.

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[2] See. www.sosyalyardimlar.gov.tr

[3] Green Cards are given to citizens who are living below poverty line and not covered by the social security system. It provides access to basic health services and welfare aid.

The questions of the interview with the beneficiaries included their experiences regarding the application process, the opinions about the projects, the problems they are facing and the comparison with the previous housing conditions, as well as the demographic information. On the other hand, in the interviews with the executives, the processes of application, legal aspects and the problems in the project were the main questions. All interviews were semi- structured with open-ended questions, recorded and transcribed for analysis. Additional data sources were the websites of the institutions involved, namely Social Aid and Solidarity Fund and Housing Development Administration of Turkey; the documents provided by the executives and field observation notes.

The major limitation of the field research was the reluctance of the residents to reveal their opinions and to give information about themselves, especially regarding the aids they are receiving. Therefore, the interviews could only be conducted with those who volunteered. Also as seen in the table below, another limitation of the research was the gender of the respondents. The first reason for the gender bias was the fact that many of the households are led by single mothers. Secondly, the men are never home during the day, even if they are unemployed. A few male residents that were contacted rejected to answer interview questions.

Table 1: The Profile of the Respondents

Gender	Age	Marital Status and Children at Home	Education	Income	Social Security
F	60	Divorced- Divorced Daughter- 1 child	Middle School	$650	Green Card
F	46	Married- 2 Children	Illiterate	$0	Green Card
M	-	Married- 2 Children (1 disabled)	High School	$300	Retired
F	43	Divorced- 6 Children	Illiterate	$200	Green Card
F	41	Married- 2 Children	Primary School	$0	Green Card
F	46	Divorced- 2 Children	Primary School	$300	Green Card
F	-	Married- 2 Children	Illiterate	$0	Green Card
F	35	Divorced- 3 Children	-	$375	Green Card
F	51	Divorced- 2 Children	-	$400	Green Card
F	46	Married- 2 Children	Primary School	$250	None

The general profile of the respondents shows that the overall income level among the residents is very low, as expected. Also it should be noted that the divorced women indicated that their incomes come from the alimonies. Most of the incomes shown are very unstable also and show the 'best case scenario', meaning 'in case they find work', in their words.

4. Findings

In the interviews, the respondents were asked about their experiences during the application process. Almost all of them told that they heard from acquaintances and decided to apply. Only one respondent said her daughter saw the announcement online. According to the local director of the Fund, most of the applicants were already receiving aids (such as cash and food) from the Fund, so they were coming to their office on a regular basis. That way, they could be aware of the projects. Some respondents also added that they were encouraged to apply by the staff working at the local office of the Fund. The application procedure was quite simple, thus they did not have any difficulties to complete it.

The residents were also asked about their perceptions and opinions about the living environment of the neighborhood in general. The first reaction of the respondents was about the unsafe conditions regarding the social environment. All of the respondents agreed that the neighborhood was 'not peaceful', adding that they did not know mostor even any of their neighbors so they were afraid to go out. The interviews showed that this is a major concern especially for families with young or teenage children. They are afraid that something bad will happen to them, or they will 'get out of hand', in terms of getting involved in criminal activities or deviant behavior. Three of the women told that they do not let their girls to play outside or even at the playground. One of the women explained her concern as follows:

> *"My husband and my son are unemployed. Sometimes I want to go to work on beat and garlic fields but I can't because I am afraid to leave my daughter behind. Can you imagine? Even during the day I cannot leave my daughter alone... When I was in my old neighborhood, I was going to the villages to (work on) garlic fields. That's why sometimes we regret that we came here... I guess they did not investigate these people enough."(F, 41 years old)*

When they were asked to give specific examples of the incidences that make them concerned, they did not want to reveal information. They said they did not want to blame people or point fingers. However, in the interviews, the respondents mentioned that they hear people (from inside and outside the project) talk about theft, sexual harassment and violence among the residents. On the other hand, when the executives were asked about these problems and security issues, they say the incidents are very few and overall situation is getting better day by day. They also mentioned they will be installing security cameras and will put a checkpoint at the main gate of the project to monitor the entrance. According to them, this was decided in accordance with the demands of the residents. They also told that eight people are charged for prostitution and similar offences. These residents will probably be evacuated at the end of the legal process. The executives of the project also believe that the major problem about the social environment of the apartment complex is that the families are not 'used to' living in such a setting. Their previous homes were mostly detached houses or small buildings occupied by a couple of families, who were, in many cases, relatives. Therefore, the executives believe that the families will 'learn' to get along and live together peacefully in time.

The physical condition of the units was the only positive aspect of the project, according to the respondents. When they were asked to compare their current living conditions with the previous ones, they mostly mentioned the physical conditions. Since all of them used to leave in very old houses in poor condition or in 'gecekondu's (shanty homes), they perceive living in the social housing units as an enormous difference. For example, the central heating is a very significant easement for them, as opposed to the heating stoves they had before. Also the qualities of the units such as the plumbing, windows and the roofs are much better than their old homes. However, in terms of the physical conditions they have now, the location of the units is a challenge for them. The apartment complex is located on a hill, slightly outside the city center. Even tough the distance is short; the area is not adequately served by the public transport, so the residents have to climb the steep hill on foot. Moreover, they indicate that most of the time they do not take the bus, which goes halfway up the hill because it does not worth the money they pay. The bus fare is a burden for their budget. Therefore, the location of the project is problematic from various aspects. For example, for the residents seeking employment, the transportation becomes a new limitation and for the women, simple grocery shopping can be a nuisance.

When the residents were asked about their opinion and level of satisfaction about the units, the major concern was the plan of them. All of the residents except for one complained about the lack of a balcony. Especially for the daily chores women deal with such as drying laundry and storing food for winter, having even a small balcony is very important. Also they say they need it to 'breath'. Given the fact that they are spending almost all their time at home, they say they need a space to get fresh air. The lack of a public space within or near the apartment complex makes this situation even more problematic for the residents.

Even tough, all respondents were more or less happy about the physical conditions of the units and the buildings, the concerns about the social environment affect their comparisons with their previous neighborhoods. They said they felt much more comfortable and safe in their previous social environment, where they could communicate and be in solidarity with their neighbors. They say they cannot trust anyone in the new setting.

> *"I would be lying if I say I don't miss my old neighborhood, because I could leave my keys to the neighbors, I was in contact with them, I could trust them. All of them were proper families. I cannot trust anybody here... Anything can happen." (F, 46 years old)*

Some respondents also mentioned that they had more opportunities to find work in their previous neighborhoods. Especially for women who work in daily or seasonal rural jobs, the previous neighborhoods provided better connections to hear about the farmers who are hiring and to access the job.

The interviews with the executives of the projects, on the other hand,revealed mostly positive opinions about the projects. They believe that this policy and the implementation of it was a success in general.

According to them, the major problem is the fact that the residents come form different settings, therefore they do not have a culture of living in an apartment complex. This is the reason for the conflicts and distrust between them. They also indicated that even tough the project is completed; they are still involved in terms of solving the problems in the project. They are holding meetings with the residents to regulate the maintenance necessities and setting rules for the management of the apartment complex. They believe that the residents should 'learn' to live together and some security measures should be taken. Otherwise the project can become a problem for the whole city. This perception is also consistent with the opinions of the outsiders regarding the project that is Esentepe is a 'dangerous neighborhood'.

The executives also mentioned the 'unreasonable' demands of the residents. For example, according to them, the complaints about the public transportation are unjustifiable since it is not possible to meet everyone's needs.The executives also mentioned an emerging sense of solidarity among the residents. One of the executives from the board of directors told that the residents are calling the cops when they have a dispute with a neighbor, but later they are withdrawing their complaint when they realize that the accused people can be evacuated. This tendency shows that people are uniting around the fact that they are all in poverty and need the units. In other words, even tough they come from different places and backgrounds; the economic situation forms a common denominator for them to develop solidarity.

5. Discussion

The findings of this descriptive study shows that the recent social housing projects are problematic from the perspective of social exclusion and reproduction of poverty. The data from the interviews show that the neighborhood effects are beginning to be observed in this newly built neighborhood. As discussed above, the social networks play a specific role in the lives of families in poverty. In terms of finding a job, the social housing projects exclude people from the useful networks, which is likely to lengthen the period of joblessness. Also the lack of these networks leaves them deprived of positive role models to move out of poverty. All these negative neighborhood effects regarding the social networks are evident in Esentepe Social Housing Project. The respondents' remarks about how they were in a better social setting previously and they could contact with better off families in their old neighborhoods show the disconnection between them and useful networks as well as role models. The poor neighborhood environments created within the projects concentrates deviant behavior, so that the women and children are more exposed to criminal behavior, even though they do not engage in any.In Esentepe Case, this seems to be the case especially for girls.The lack of adequate and safe social spaces in this case also has complications for the residents of the project. The unstable and unsafe environment makes people even more isolated from the rest of the society. Especially the children are deprived of regular socialization opportunities. So it can be argued that the children of the families living in this project are more likely to live in poverty and deprivation for a better part of their life, which also includes their school ages.

The findings of the research are also consistent with the literature that categorizes the social housing policies as excluding for the urban poor and marginalizedgroups. Castells explains this position with reference to the accessibility and claims that social housing reproduces the inequalities in the society (Castells, 1997: 35-37). The homogenized 'poor' neighborhood and its negative effects created by the social housing policy not only reproduce poverty for the residents, but it also reproduce the inequalities in society as a whole.

Given the fact that this is a new project and the residents have been living in the units for only 4-6 months by the time the field research was held, it may be early to talk about the consequences of the exclusion. However, there is enough evidence to believe that the project will most likely reinforce the exclusion that these poor familiesare already facing. However, the shortness of the time passed since they left their previous neighborhoods gives us the chance to see the change in the residents' lives. As discussed earlier, the literature and recent research show that the housing policies are evolving into social mixing of residents in terms of income and tenure. Actually, the neighborhoods that Esentepe residents used to live were quite similar to this approach. In other words, they came from already mixed neighborhoods. Therefore, the recent social housing policy seems to destroy a theoretically more favorable living environment.

Overall, this research shows the consequences of living in a neighborhood where poverty is concentrated as opposed to living in a relatively mixed social environment. Therefore, it can be argued that the social housing policies with a tendency to concentrate poverty and create homogeneously poor neighborhoods should be monitored in terms of negative neighborhood effects and reviewed to minimize these effects.

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