

THE ISOLATION AND EXCLUSION OF THE POOR DURING THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN ISTANBUL: TARLABAŞI CASE

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Abstract

“Urban transformation” became an important component of the political discourse in Turkey after the 1999 Marmara Earthquake. However, the implementations of urban transformation in İstanbul dates further back. In 1970s, the decentralization of industry was included in the plans among the policies for the city. As a consequence of the neoliberal policies adopted by the Turkish government in the 1980s, urban transformation evolved hand in hand with the market economy. The relocation of the heavy industrial facilities out of the city and the transformation of historic urban centers and squatter areas were listed on the agenda. It was argued that urban transformation implementations would rehabilitate illegal settlements, the housing stock and urban environments of poor quality and the deteriorated historic urban fabric, paving the road to attract foreign investments and to create new employment opportunities. Within this context, İstanbul is envisioned to become a cultural, touristic and financial center.

Especially in the 1990s, as a result of a series of advances in the financial and real estate markets, capital gain in İstanbul became the most profitable realm of capital saving strategies in similarity to the global economy. High profit margins led to the demolition of the neighborhoods where land tenure was problematic and which inhabited economically disadvantaged groups. These neighborhoods were recreated to include office spaces, malls, hotels, restaurants, housing estates and residential towers for the attraction of the middle and upper-middle income groups. Similar to the rest of the world, such a process leads to the isolation and exclusion of the low-income inhabitants from the neighborhoods which are gentrified. Indeed, the majority of the inhabitants in the neighborhoods which undergo urban transformation have to sell their residences for extremely low prices, cannot afford to return back to the areas where they used to live; and therefore, are forced to relocate to the poorer neighborhoods on the peripheries of the city. Thus, cities are transformed into reserved islands, which are clearly split into parts by income groups, and structured to minimize the encounters of different socio-economic groups. Rather than protecting the public interest, urban transformation revolves around the forces of the market economy. This global trend can be clearly observed in İstanbul.

The urban transformation project implemented in Tarlabası is an illustrative example of the evacuation of the poor from their properties and their relocation to other distressed neighborhoods of the city. The transformation of Tarlabası, which turned into a slum due to the historic course of events despite its central location, ignited conflicts between the property owners in Tarlabası, and the municipality and contractor. During the trials of more than 500 lawsuits, both parties accused the other. The Chamber of Urban Planners, Chamber of Architects and many non-governmental organizations objected the project in Tarlabası and declared their point of view in favor of the property owners. After the 6-year-long legal struggle, the low-income property owners could not economically withstand the existing conditions; and they eventually had to settle for the extremely low prices offered by the municipality and contractor and relocate to the poorer neighborhoods on the peripheries of the city. Thus, low-income residents of Tarlabası were excluded and isolated from the city center, while the neighborhood was transformed into a focal point for middle and upper income groups and a high amount of capital gain was acquired.

Keywords: Urban Transformation, Urban Renewal, Tarlabası, İstanbul.