

Urban Slums in Security Housing in China

Zhang Tao, Ahmad Hariza B. Hashim, Jayum Anak Jawan
University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

As wealth gap is widening and the housing price increases tremendously in China, the living standard of urban underclass maintains relatively low level. Therefore, possessing a house is becoming more difficult than ever for those urban poor strata. Consequently, the poor are forced to settle in damp and congested substandard housing where plagues, crimes and relegation of social regulations and morality are incidental with. Security housing system has been established in China, and its purport is to alleviate the housing plight of urban poor people. But in reality, security housing is becoming a new form of urban slum. This paper aims to investigate the causes of this phenomenon and provide some recommendations. In addition, this paper attempts to identify the characteristics of current security housing situation and to interpret the right to housing.

Keywords: security housing, slum, a right to housing, causes

House plays a central role in life of every human being. It is to some extent a building block for a broad realm of interrelated benefits, like job opportunities, good education, health, and tenure security. The common notion of the house is a refuge from the outside world, a desire to escape from other people and from social involvement, the establishment of a place from which others could be excluded, and where consequently one could truly be onself, in control, "more of an individual", capable of loving, and fully human (Stone, 1993).

However, as wealth gap is widening and the housing price increases tremendously in China, the living standard of urban underclass maintains relatively low level. The income of the top 10 percent of the richest Chinese was 23 times that of the bottom 10 percent of in the country in 2007, as compared with the statistics in 1998, when the gap was only 7.3 times (Chen, 2010). Therefore, possessing a house is becoming more difficult than ever for those urban poor strata. Consequently, the poor are forced to settle in damp and congested substandard housing where plagues, crimes and relegation of social regulations and morality are incidental with. All these negative issues are undermining the social economic development and political stability.

Therefore, every member in any society shall enjoy a basic right to housing, and government ought to fulfil its responsibility to formulate relevant policy to guarantee its attainment. Having recognized its role in housing development, government of China has formed its social security housing system in order to alleviate the severity of living conditions of residents in urban areas and protect the basic rights of people, and has established a housing security mechanism to solve the housing issues which mainly consist of affordable housing system and low rent system.

Corresponding author: Zhang Tao, Ph.D., Department of Resources Management & Consumer Science of the Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia; research fields: housing, law. E-mail: zhangtaomike@yahoo.com.cn.

Ahmad Hariza B. Hashim, associate professor, Department of Resources Management & Consumer Science of the Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia; research fields: housing, consumer science. E-mail: ahariza@putra.upm.edu.my.

Jayum Anak Jawan, professor, Department of Social and Development Science of the Faculty of Human Ecology, University of Putra Malaysia; research fields: politics, policy. E-mail: jayum@putra.upm.edu.my.

To a large extent, housing security system is purported to improve the living conditions of poor people and to accomplish the social justice. To eliminate the urban slums is one of the goals of this system. In reality, some affordable housing and low-rent housing are becoming the new urban slums. This paper intends: (1) to identify the barriers which tend to make the affordable housing and low-rent housing become the new urban slums; (2) to better understand the practice and experience of developed nations; and (3) to explore the different alternatives and provide policy and legislative recommendations on urban slums in affordable and low-rent housing.

The research methodology is mainly centered on qualitative approach. Documents are the sources of research including the policies and regulations of housing security system of China and other nations. And the comparative research is applied to distinguish the differences between China and other nations.

New Urban Slums in Social Security Housing Realms in China

Slum can be defined as a community which is inhabited by socially least advantaged people with poor living conditions and sub-standard housing and facilities. UN (2007) defined a slum as an area that combined to various extents the following characteristics:

- (1) Inadequate access to safe water;
- (2) Inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure;
- (3) Poor structural quality of housing;
- (4) Overcrowding;
- (5) Insecure residential status.

Although a large amount of affordable housing and low-rent housing are built in outskirts of urban areas, these areas lack public service, such as school, hospital, transportation, park and shop. All these inconveniences increase living expenses of the low-income residents. In addition, the housing maintenance and management is very deficient. Power failure and water leaking cannot be fixed promptly and burglary happens now and then. All these factors lead to an unstable and abnormal life for the residents. It backfires on the purpose and purport of social security housing. So, it is very important to rectify this problem through policy and law.

A Right to Housing

To understand the meaning of a right to housing, in-depth perceptions about the definition of right are very important. However, up to now, there is no agreed and universal definition of the concept of right. Coleman (1998) defined the right as a legitimate claim. Some scholars' definitions put more emphasis on the power associated with right (Hart, 1982; Kenna, 2005). Based on the statement of Zuckert (2002), rights were the ultimate measuring stick for judgement. Pound (1958) focused on the relationship between rights and the law while he defined the term right. He emphasized that rights were created before law and first, the law recognized an interest, endowed a right to protect that interest and then create a duty protect that right. So, rights are the basic normative standards closely associated with power to protect the interests and claims from people.

Property right as a kind of right is also conferred a protection and remedy. Property is the right to enjoy and dispose of things in the most absolute way, prohibited neither by laws nor by regulations (Bello, 1952). Furuboton and Pejovich (1974) defined property rights as:

Property rights are understood as sanctioned behavioral relations among men [sic] that arise from the existence of goods and pertain to their use. These relations specify the norms of behavior with respect to goods that each and every

person must observe in his daily interactions with other persons, or bear the cost of non-observance. The term “good” is used here for anything that yields utility or satisfaction to a person. Thus, and this point is important, the concept of property rights in the context of the new approach applies to all scarce goods. The concept encompasses both the rights over material things (to sell my typewriter) as well as human rights (the right to vote, publish etcetera). The prevailing system of property rights in the community is them, the sum of economic and social relations with respect to scarce resources in which individuals stand to each other.

These two definitions implies that the civil subjects are empowered a bundle of right to use and dispose of property at his or her own will incur all the benefits and cost out of the use. In general, property right consists of four elements: the right to use the good, the right to earn income from the good, the right to transfer the good to others, and the right to enforcement of property rights (Eggertsson, 1990).

In addition, most legal systems distinguish different types of property between real property (immovable property or real estate) and personal property (movable property or chattels). House is one kind of real property which combines the interests in land and improvements thereto. So, a right to housing is a kind of property rights. However, house as one of kinds of real property is different from other real properties like office buildings and industry factories. It has its own characteristics based on its home attributes.

Housing Provides Security and Sense of Belonging

Most people believe housing is of central importance in their own lives. Rainwater (1973) argued that the primary function of the housing was to provide a shelter from human and unhuman threats. Rybczynski (1989) even thought that the front door of a home was a symbol of demarcation, control and belonging. So all persons should have a degree of security of tenure from forced eviction, harassment and other threats. In addition, housing gives a sense of belonging. Barros (2006) thought home as a spontaneous and rooted feeling and belonging.

Housing Provides Dignity and Personal Identity

Clothing, food and shelter are the basic necessities of life. Rights to them are essential to the protection of human dignity as political and civil freedom. The Massachusetts Episcopal Diocese’s Episcopal City Mission (1986) stated:

Shelter in decent, affordable housing is not a luxury. It is a necessity upon which access to other necessities and the development of healthy, productive families and communities most often depend. Nothing is more essential to the welfare of men, women and children. Nothing is tied more directly to the recognition of the dignity, worth and values of persons. Because housing is so closely related to the welfare of persons and to recognition of their value as persons, nothing is a more basic right than the opportunity, regardless of income or class, to live in that kind of housing which supports the welfare of the family and community... Whether persons of limited income have access to adequate shelter is thus for us at its heart both a question of justice, and a religious and theological question of central importance.

Meanwhile, having a home is a way to establish personal identity. Alain de Botton (2006) described the home as a living being which gave physical and psychological identity and reminded us who we were.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that housing is so extremely essential in people’s life that a right to housing is needed to protect the interests of people. Generally, the low-income stratum is more vulnerable to suffer due to the affordability of housing. This is because market sometimes might not function effectively as the only housing provider and it is not a reliable instrument to distribute housing resources to those who need them most. Coleman (1998) took the inherent failure of market as a creation of space and rationale for rights to operate. He thought that the existence of rights could correct market fallibility. When

market fails to distribute scarce resources appropriately, rights are entailed to distribute directly. Therefore, a right to housing, to some extent, is a concern of policy-maker while they formulate affordable housing policies.

Housing as a Human Right

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; as cited in UN, 1995). Key components to the Human Right to Adequate Housing (Human Right to Housing Info Sheet No. 1) include:

(1) Security of tenure

Residents should possess a degree of security of tenure which guarantees protection against forced evictions, harassment, and other threats, including predatory redevelopment and displacement;

(2) Accessibility

Housing must be accessible to all and, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups must be accorded full access to housing resources;

(3) Affordability

Housing costs should be at such a level that the attainment and satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised. For instance, one should not have to choose between paying rent and buying food;

(4) Habitability, decent and safe home

Housing must provide residents with adequate space that protects them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, and other threats to health, structural hazards, and disease;

(5) Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure

Housing must provide certain facilities essential for health, security, comfort, and nutrition. For instance, residents must have access to safe drinking water, heating and lighting, washing facilities, means of food storage, and sanitation;

(6) Location

Housing should not be built on polluted sites or in immediate proximity to pollution sources that threaten the right to health of residents, and in general, the physical safety of residents must be guaranteed. Additionally, housing must be in a location which allows access to employment options, health-care services, schools, childcare centers, and other social facilities;

(7) Culture adequacy

Housing and housing policies must guarantee the expression of cultural identity and diversity, including the preservation of cultural landmarks and institutions. Redevelopment or modernization programs must ensure that the cultural significance of housing and communities is not sacrificed.

Operational Framework of Housing Security System

The operation of social housing security in China is a systematic project (see Figure 1). This is because some actors play significant roles in organizing and administrating the housing security operational network. The main actors are central government, local municipality, financial institution, developer and beneficiary. Central government and local municipality are the lynchpin of the whole system. Not only can they provide financial support and land appropriation for developers and subsidies for low-income people, but also they are the watchdog agencies as well. Government establishes housing security policies and regulations to organize

and supervise the implementation of the projects.

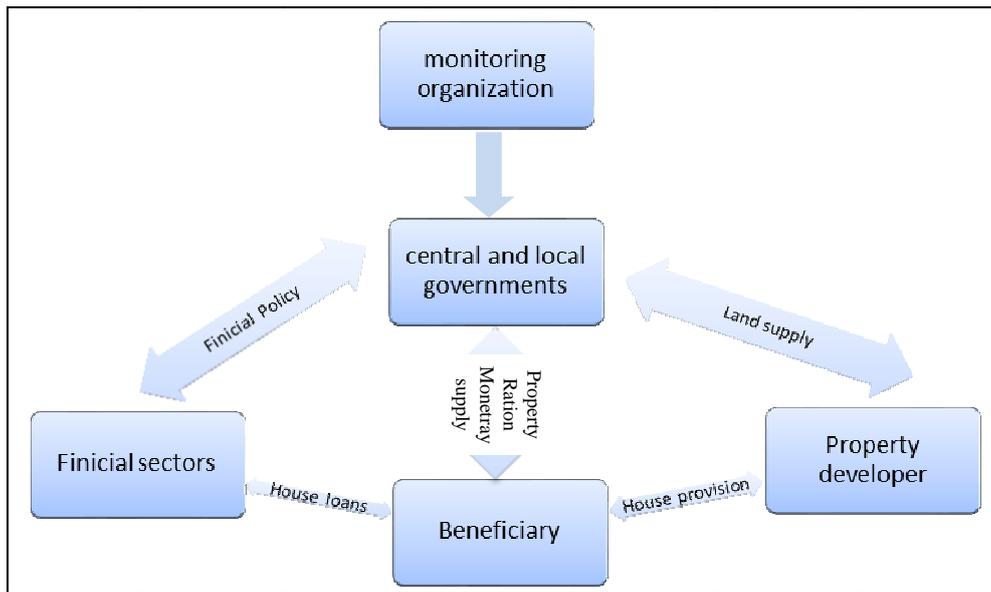


Figure 1. Operational framework of housing security system.

Causes of Urban Slums in Security Housing in China

From the Figure 1, we can find out that the government plays a decisive role in security housing system in China. The government provides not only the lands to the construction of security housing, but also the funds and the managements as well. In recent years, a large proportion of fiscal revenue of government comes from the development of real estate industry. In contrary to the commercial development of real estate, security housing needs appropriation of land from government without payment of use and governments are required to provide financial support. So, security housing provision can lead to the decrease of fiscal revenue of local government. This is not compatible to the economic goal of GDP growth. Consequently, the development of security housing is not fully recognized and the slums in some security housing communities come into being. The following are specific causes of the development of slums in security housing communities.

Poor Planning

Since security housing could only be sold or let with restricted profits and the local government needs to subsidize the land cost, many secure housing construction sites are planned to be located in the boundary layer of the city. All these places are far from basic living facilities. It creates new issues on public transportation system, road network, municipal infrastructure and social segregation, etc.

Poor Quality

The developers of security housing are restricted in term of sales profits. So, they try to use cheap and low-quality construction materials to obtain more profits. There are no lawns or small lawns. The telephone line, internet and television cable are not promptly furnished. Security housing is becoming low-quality housing. After years' time waiting, the applicants get the house finally, and they dare not to complain of the quality of house. So they are forced to settle there.

Poor Facilities

There is no school, hospital and big shops around security housing. The inconveniences cost the residents

more money and time to live here. This happens because the project of security lacks of stable financial funding from the budget of central and local government, and the major source contributing to the fund is from the investment return of HPF (Housing Provident Fund) and other fiscal revenue. Since the budget and resource for long term funding is not clear and stable, “one-time offer” approach becomes the mode to implement the construction of security housing. Therefore, it is difficult for the dwellers to go to school, hospital and to find a job.

Poor Management

Most security housing communities do not have proper management. The garbage cannot be disposed promptly. Community facilities including road lamps, signs and lawn are broken and destructive. Power failure and water shortage happen from time to time. The living environment is very shabby. It is because households cannot afford to employ the companies to manage the communities. Even some security housing communities employ management companies, but arrearage to the management service is common.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Enhance the Safeguard of Land Provision

To avoid the formation of slums in security housing areas, the government should be aware of the geographical layout for the security housing. The land planning of commodity housing and the land planning of security housing should be intertwined. Even in the commodity housing communities, a certain proportion of security housing should be built. This can help to halt the segregation between the poor and the rich. In addition, the low-income people are not excluded from the service of public facilities. The poor can get more opportunities to access to education, employment and medical care to eliminate the gap between the poor and the rich.

Enhance the Safeguard of Funds

The funds for security housing come mainly from two major sources which are national and local fiscal appropriation. Government should distribute a portion of funds for the management and maintenance of security housing and for the improvement of public transportation system. It not only can relieve the burden the low-income people, but also prevent the communities from becoming slums as well.

Enhance the Safeguard of Legal System

Based on the Figure 1, security housing system consists of a group of actors. How to regulate the liability of each actor plays a significant role in preventing the slums formation. The developers are responsible for the quality of security housing, and the government is responsible for the funds provision and the supervision of quality and management. The public can play a part in monitoring the developer and the government.

Conclusions

The objective of security housing is to alleviate the poverty of low-income people and to cover the gap between the rich and the poor. However, in reality, it leads to the formation of new urban slums. It is contrary to the purport of the project. Based on the analysis of causes of the current situation, government plays a significant role in the stopping the trend of new urban slums formation in security housing communities. Government can provide reasonable planning, feasible management and stable funds. These factors are crucial in giving remedies of current implementation of security housing project. Besides, the public should participate in programs by monitoring the implementation of policy.

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