

Expert Workshop “The Role and Relevance of Middle Classes for Urban Restructuring”

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ILS in cooperation with Montag Stiftung Urbane Räume and Ministry of Construction, Housing, Urban Development and Transport North Rhine-Westphalia (MBWSV NRW)

Summary of the main results

In a two-day workshop, experts from seven European countries (France, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Poland, The Netherlands and Germany) discussed the relevance of social mix in urban neighbourhoods by paying particular attention to social interactions between groups with a different social and ethnic background. The discussion mainly focused on middle-class households and their role for urban restructuring. It became evident that although social mix is a central political aim in the represented countries, its impact is strongly dependent on different circumstances regarding

- the national and urban regimes and the respective political guidelines
- the economic and housing market situation in different cities (relaxed, tensed)
- the neighbourhoods’ social composition in terms of social status, household types, middle class fractions, housing status (tenant/landlord), ethnic background
- the neighbourhoods’ dynamic as regards their social composition and their function within the city
- historically rooted/culturally characteristics in terms of city planning, mobility and social interaction behaviour
- as well as the built and institutional environment in the respective neighbourhoods

Some overarching conclusions can be drawn from the talks and discussions:

1. A differentiation between different middle-class fractions is needed

There has to be a differentiation of different middle-class fractions and their role in socially mixed urban neighbourhoods according to their different household composition, ethnic backgrounds, economic and cultural capital, motivations, and strategies. The workshop focused on the interaction between different middle-class fractions and households with a lower social status. Various talks illustrated the interaction patterns of family households and the specific situation of ethnic middle-class households. According to P. Watt, there are factors that can facilitate social proximity between residents in socially mixed urban neighbourhoods, such as:

- common interests (leisure activities, family situation)
- values (politics, religion)
- identity (same ethnicity, age structure or sex)
- longer period of residence in the neighbourhood
- similar educational attainment and income.

External threats, such as large-scale construction projects, can reinforce social proximity between socially, economically and ethnically-culturally different groups. Moreover, gender aspects were mentioned as an additional factor that has to be taken into account.

2. Dynamics of urban neighbourhood development

Mixed urban neighbourhoods can show quite different stages or types in terms of the share of middle classes and their forms of space appropriation:

1. disadvantaged neighbourhoods with only a small group of middle-class households
2. neighbourhoods with withdrawing middle-class households
3. neighbourhoods with a growing influx of middle-class households
4. long-term stable mixed neighbourhoods

The presented case studies referred mainly to urban neighbourhoods assigned to the third type.

A general tendency of structural and systematic privatization or a general withdrawal of middle classes from the public space cannot be observed in the investigated European cities (beyond the Anglo-Saxon context). Middle-class households do not organize their daily life totally detached from the spatial context of their socially mixed neighbourhood. However, they have diverse choice opportunities at their disposal and deploy these in order to selectively tolerate distance or proximity to different social, economic and ethnic-cultural groups.

Living together in a mixed urban neighbourhood does not automatically lead to social interactions between different social groups. By means of their selective use of infrastructure, public space, and contact management, middle-class households distance themselves in their daily life from potential problematic groups or social environments. This disassociation, as particularly illustrated for the London case, can be structurally reinforced through entry barriers to higher priced segments of the housing market. At the same time, these separated social worlds can be less obvious and can also endure when neighbourhood facilities are used collectively, for instance due to the asynchrony of use by virtue of different daily life rhythms.

Urban neighbourhoods being in a process of gentrification with a strong upgrading of residential substance, subsequent price increases, and displacement of residents – a variant of the third type of neighbourhoods – play a particular role. Although upgrading processes of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are frequently initiated by municipalities and/or the state, their socially unfavourable effects, however, are often not cushioned. The influx of middle classes – partly even fostered by previous and parallel commercial transformations – are rather understood as an indicator for successful upgrading policies. This is i.a. proved by M. Bolzoni for Turin. At the same time, a study by J. Gadecki illustrates, that neighbourhoods characterised by an influx of middle classes and subsequent upgrading processes are not necessarily affected by displacement. It is thus important to carefully use the term ‘gentrification’.

A contrasting perspective was presented by F. Pinkster, who examined the fourth type of urban neighbourhoods, a disadvantaged area. The investigations in the Dutch context show that especially those middle-class households stay in disadvantaged areas that are able to disassociate successfully from the neighbourhood’s problems. Their disassociation is expressed by a weak sense of belonging and responsibility (“lack of attachment”) towards the neighbourhood. The fact they these middle-class households develop only a weak sense of belonging and thus a certain kind of distance to problems and potential stress factors enables them to stay put in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

3. Role and relevance of middle classes: Strategies and behaviour

It became evident, that strategies in dealing with social mix of middle-class households strongly depend on their cultural and economic capital. Moreover, the question of social proximity and distance cannot be answered on the neighbourhood but rather on a smaller-scale level. The strategic managing of proximity or the conscious creation of distance in the interaction with social, economic and ethnic-cultural different groups becomes more apparent in some areas than in others, as A. Andreotti illustrates in her research on upper middle classes in four European cities. In public space, parks, libraries or transport, proximity to socially different groups is tolerated more than social interaction in special clubs, associations or within the education system, where social mix is mainly avoided.

In all national contexts it could be observed, that education is one of the most sensitive topics as regards social mix. For middle-class households, social mix is often supposed to have a negative impact on the educational career of their own children. The relevance and role of schools and preschool facilities in urban neighbourhoods for boundary making and bridging of middle-class households was discussed intensively during the expert workshop. The presentations point to the increasing relevance of the social and ethnic school composition for school choice of middle-class parents. It became apparent, that even parents who appreciate their mixed neighbourhood avoid social mix when it comes to their children's education. Boundary making is thus a central element of middle-class parents' educational strategies as well as a crucial driving force for the development of socially selective spaces and educational segregation.

Dependent on differences in educational systems and characteristics of the local housing market as well as influenced by the affiliation to different class fractions, parents deploy diverse educational strategies, as W. Boterman illustrates for Amsterdam. To some extent, school choice strategies are strongly linked to residential strategies. Thus, good schools are a crucial reason for the choice of residential location, whereby relocation to suburban areas as well as to more homogenous inner-city neighbourhoods can be observed. However, parental school choice strategies show different spatial patterns and do not necessarily lead to residential segregation. Some middle-class fractions prefer to stay in mixed inner-city neighbourhoods, but concurrently send their children to socially homogenous schools outside the neighbourhood or 'colonise' together with other middle-class parents socially weak local schools. Since residential relocation to the catchment area of the favoured school is not necessary in countries with free school choice, parental strategies of disassociation are often more subtle.

The influence of the ethnic background was discussed with two different perspectives. On the one hand, using the example of Turkish middle classes in Berlin, C. Barwick illustrated that they particularly appreciate the social and ethnic diversity of urban neighbourhoods. This "taste for diversity" is often expressed by their mixed social networks. In the UK, however, Black Caribbean middle classes showed much stronger boundary making tendencies towards non-middle classes – in particular as regards families' leisure activities. These tendencies are interpreted by C. Vincent as avoidance strategy to existing societal prejudices and discrimination.

On this basis, the following can be generalised: The more common spheres of action are given in an urban neighbourhood, the more confident households are as regards their social status, the less anxious they are about the social reproduction of their middle-class status, the more people know their neigh-

bourhood, recognise and deploy small-scale choice opportunities and the more established the households' own networks are, the less boundary making strategies against other social groups are deployed. If this is not the case, reinforced boundary making of middle-class households can be expected – due to household characteristics (instable economic situation of the household, experiences with discrimination, weak social embeddedness in the neighbourhood) or due to the neighbourhood's (infra)structure (insufficient opportunities for encounter, insufficient choice opportunities),

4. Policy recommendations

The research results from seven European countries lower the high expectations towards the positive effects of social mix on social stabilisation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Only under certain conditions, the spatial proximity of different social groups leads to social interaction. Due to the presence and the increasing influx of middle-class households, local infrastructures often change. However, since disadvantaged residents do not necessarily benefit from these improvements, the changing residential composition in urban neighbourhoods should be monitored carefully through quantitative and qualitative (social environment) analyses (p.r.n. with the establishment of a gentrification monitoring).

As the presentations show, there needs to be a steering of neighbourhood development that enables as many households as possible to meet a variety of needs and interests within their neighbourhood. Neighbourhood development should be accompanied critically by policy makers to ensure that different groups are able to participate in the neighbourhood's daily life. Moreover, in order to strengthen public familiarity with the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, opportunities for frequent encounters are needed. The pace of change can be a crucial factor to shape the development in a way that is acceptable for all social groups in the neighbourhood.

Contact and resource transfer across different social groups is context-specific. Therefore, to promote social interactions and an open atmosphere within the neighbourhood, the focus needs to be on local organisations and meeting places as well as on their interconnection. Preschool childcare organisations as well as schools play a crucial role for encounter and learning within urban neighbourhoods. However, the talks illustrate, that schools can be – but not necessarily are – focal points for encounter and networks between different social groups. To do so, they need to open up to the neighbourhood and to promote and encourage learning processes in dealing with diversity.

Boundary making and disassociation of urban middle classes should be analysed with the knowledge about their fear (of social decline), which is proved by different scientific studies. A. Andreotti, for instance, illustrates a higher willingness of upper middle classes to attend socially mixed organisations as well as to exchange with other social groups, the more homogenous the direct residential environment of the sample is, i.e. the more socially protected their socio-spatial context is. These needs should also be taken into account when analysing urban neighbourhoods.

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