

Bulldozing Rights: When does Redevelopment become a Violation of Human Rights?

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By Cathy Albisa

Every time I talk to my seven year old about possibly moving some day, he says “mom, you know I am not any good at that!” He probably speaks for most people. But most people *do* move at some point – new jobs, better or cheaper housing, better schools, etc. We embrace the anxiety and promise of a new home, and hope it will be for the best. In the best case scenario, redevelopment mimics this dynamic. A community makes a decision that change is needed, and works with government and other sectors to create that change. The human right to participation in development is respected for all residents, and though there are challenges and trade-offs, the community embraces the promise of a better life before a plan moves forward.

The demolitions in New Orleans culminating in April of this year did not represent participatory and inclusive redevelopment that respects human rights. They are part of a nationwide trend where public housing residents are not moving – they are “being moved,” or more accurately displaced. Residents generally have neither vote nor voice in what happens to them and their families. And because there is no actual one-to-one replacement for low-income units, residents are all too conscious that far too many of them will not enjoy the fruits of the redevelopment at all as their homes are not necessarily being re-built for them. Rather, what awaits them is an economically inaccessible private market where affordable homes are becoming as rare as hen’s teeth!

In the context of New Orleans, it has been particularly cruel, even for families that aren’t currently living in their houses. Many displaced families still yearn to come home, and the physical displacement by the storm has been compounded by the bitter images of the homes they have always known being torn down. The voices, sounds, music, and cadence of the world they knew were quickly and permanently drowned out by machines that are bulldozing their rights.

The reconstruction and redevelopment policies in New Orleans appear designed to purge the poor from the city. They savagely dismiss any notion that all people have a right to their city and community, that housing is a fundamental right that has been recognized by human rights documents for more than half a century, and that people are not packages that can simply be sent for storage in some other part of the country. But there is a growing chorus of allies in support of human rights and social inclusion for poor Black communities in New Orleans. Dozens of U.S. based advocacy organizations -- both national and local – community and volunteer efforts in Minnesota, New York, Miami, D.C. and beyond, and international supporters in Egypt, Indonesia, Italy and Haiti have all expressed their dismay and indignation at the demolitions of poor people’s homes in New Orleans.

Affordable and adequate housing is part of the foundation of human dignity, freedom and equality. No person can truly be free if they are deprived of these essentials and, in a very real sense, cast out of society. How can we bear to see children doing homework in shelters? History will not be kind to us if we don’t cry out against these abuses today.

