



## The role of the urban support in the regeneration of vulnerable neighbourhoods.

### Speakers:

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**Abstract:** *The processes of social and urban segregation have got worse during the last decades. Several studies have deepened into the analysis of the causes and consequences of these processes and have tried to define solutions that beyond eradicating some specific problems, were aimed at the consolidation of sustainable urban environments.*

*This paper presents an approach to the problem of urban inequality based on the concept of urban vulnerability as something that goes beyond the social and economic problems. In exclusion processes it is very important to consider the urban context and the physical and structural conditions not only in each neighborhood but also in the city as a whole. The paper seeks to pose a reflection on the urban support, which is understood in all its complexity and thought to be a key to ensure access and the right to the city of the citizens most in need.*

**Keywords:** *Urban vulnerability, accessibility, urban assets, urban support*

### Urban vulnerability and segregation within current context

The economic growth, that took place in Spain from the nineties till 2008, brought along huge economic and redistributive consequences. Always linked to a real estate risk and to the removal of capital from the lowest income families, this growth became into a mechanism of accumulation-dispossession suffered by the most disadvantaged social classes. Several studies, in which the socio-spatial segregation was analysed through the evolution of housing prices (as a proxy index for income), demonstrated the progressive and ongoing gentrification of certain areas of the city in contrast to the constant exclusion of the most vulnerable districts (1).

Furthermore, in 2008 the 6th Report on Spanish exclusion and social development (2), pointed out that since the 90s the investment on social spending in relation to GDP growth had been reduced, from the 24.4% to the 20%. In recent decades, and more intensively because of the financial crisis and the continuous austerity policies, we are being witnesses of an accelerated dismantling of public goods and services, which suffer not only from drastic budget cuts but from privatization actions as well.

These processes of capital transference and accumulation have had profound effects upon the city. The last Analysis of Urban Vulnerability in Spain (3) revealed that inequality and urban segregation did not improve during the first decade of economic boom. Instead of that, it

increased. According to this analysis, people living in vulnerable neighborhoods during the inter-census period 1991-2001 increased by 50.2%. Comparing the analysis conducted in 1996 (based on 1991 census) and the one conducted in 2011 (based on 2001 Census), the number of vulnerable neighbourhoods went from 378 to 604 in a decade.

In cities like Barcelona or Madrid, the growth of urban vulnerability was even more remarkable. In the first one, the number of neighbourhoods rose from 12 to 45, which represented an increase of 36.3% in the population living in vulnerable neighbourhoods. In the case of Madrid, the figures were even more striking. The number of vulnerable neighbourhoods grew more than doubled going from 183.531 to 605.153 of vulnerable people.

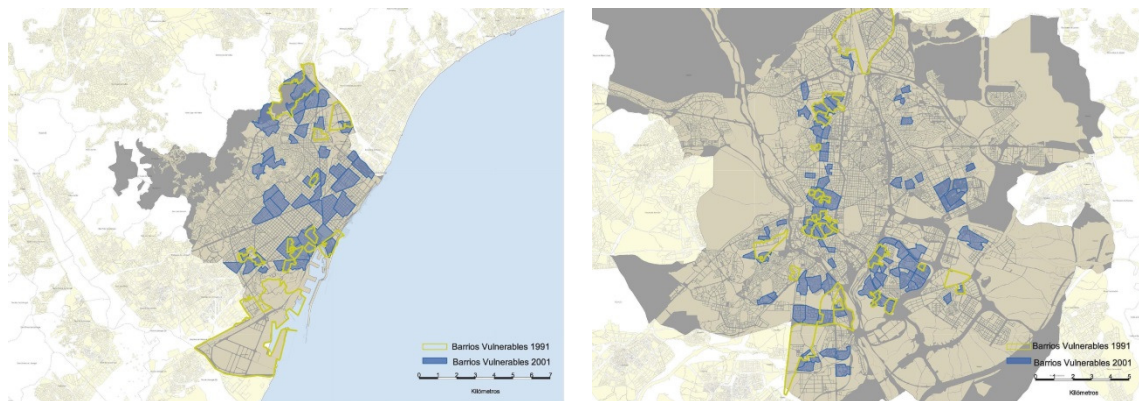


Figure 1 Map of neighbourhoods that were defined as vulnerable according to census of 1991 and 2001 in the cities of Barcelona and Madrid. Neighbourhoods that are shaded in blue, were included in the catalogue which was carried out in 2011 (from 2001 census data) and those represented in yellow line were delimited in 1996 (according to the 1991 census data).

As shown in figure 1, many of the neighbourhoods that were defined as vulnerable according to data from 1991 census, remained the same regarding 2001 data. Overall, social and urban segregation processes were found to be constant overtime in some areas among these neighbourhoods. Many of them are *historic district*, *public developments from 1975 to 1990* or *peripheral allotment areas*. These neighbourhoods, in which networks facilities and equipments are weaker, access to green areas is more difficult, are unstructured neighborhoods and have little relevance as a functional part of the city. Rehabilitation plans or programmes have been carried out in many of them and have been relatively successful in terms of improving part of the housing stock, but have not resulted in a comprehensive and sustainable improvement (urban, social, economic and environmental), which have resulted in a perpetuation of the socioeconomic problems.

Moreover many of the neighbourhoods that were defined as vulnerable, according to the 2001 census data, were not vulnerable according to data from 1991. In the light of these results, a new group of neighbourhoods with different degrees of vulnerability were found. There are neighborhoods that may not necessarily be described as excluded neighborhoods, but in contrast may be located in a weak position compared to the rest of the city. Given these processes, new problems related to the lack of access to basic goods and services arose, what makes urgent the definition of other models of intervention for the urban reality.

The aim of this paper is to pose a reflection on the *urban support* as the key to ensure access and the right to the city of that population more in need regarding the urban vulnerability processes that take place in our cities.

The interest of this discussion lies in the possibility of developing comprehensive intervention models for the existing city which may be able to adapt them to changing needs. This involves a greater involvement of subjects in determining the urban structure as a satisfactor element for their own needs; it “*is about reconstructing the concept of need for sustainability, not only from the relative lack*” (4).

### **Vulnerability and assets. The urban support as a generator of capabilities**

The concept of vulnerability can be understood from different points of view. The sociologists Alguacil and Camacho understand the concept as a process of discomfort caused by the combination of multiple dimensions of disadvantage (social, economic, urban, etc), *in which all hope for an upward social mobility, determined to overcome social exclusion condition or close to it, is regarded as extremely unattainable* (5).

The term has been frequently used as a synonymous to poverty, but it is not the same. Poverty is usually associated to a particular time; it is essentially a static concept, while vulnerability is a more dynamic concept and allows the definition of processes. From the urban point of view it means that the poorest and excluded neighborhoods are undoubtedly the most vulnerable but, in contrast, not all poor neighborhoods are vulnerable.

From a socioeconomic point of view, each neighborhood has some capabilities that make it more or less strong or resilient against adverse circumstances. They may count on capabilities that deal with economic, social or educational qualities of individuals, households or groups. But beyond their capabilities, each neighborhood must have other means of resistance, namely *assets* and rights that individuals, families and communities can mobilize and manage to face difficulties. The more assets they count on, the lower vulnerability may be. The more wear they have, the greater the insecurity is towards a downward mobility process. The assets are generally measured in relation to household (disposable income, real estate, etc.). Socioeconomic variables are used to define the position of individuals, neighborhoods or towns within the segmentation axes Wealth - Poverty / Inclusion – Exclusion, in which several positions or zones can be found (see figure 2).

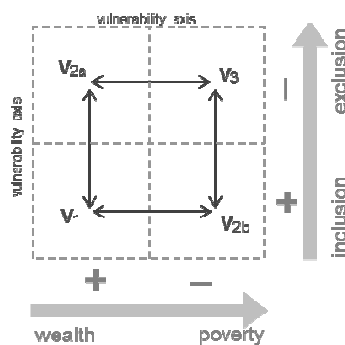


Figure 2. Vulnerability zones through segmentation axis.

In addition to social (human capital, education, etc.) or economic assets (access to the labor market, economic, etc...) and transferring the concept of *asset* to an urban planning



perspective, we understand that an individual, a district or a city has other elements that can work as *urban assets* and that will influence the position of each of them in the segmentation axis of vulnerability. We refer to all the elements that constitute and structure the city, empowering each area or district to meet their own needs. These elements are considered as '*indirect social wage*' (4) which we define as *urban support*.

On one side, the *urban support* would refer to those requirements that are determined by planning, regarding the size and the variety of amenities and facilities so as to avoid the loss of functional coverage. These are all those elements that define the built environment and ensure the potential accessibility, which is understood as the opportunity for people to access goods, services or products. These requirements would be given by urban standards, physical structure, density, size, distances, etc; in essence all those elements that enable to define the area as a structured neighborhood. All of them make up the built environment and therefore would be required as satisfiers of needs identified in quantitative terms. However, they are not enough if we pretend the reconstruction of the concept of need in terms of social, environmental and economic sustainability.

Thus, the concept of *urban support* must be understood as a complex system where, apart from the built environment (facilities, housing, squares, infrastructures, parks, etc), there are also interrelated social spaces which shape a set of spaces that serve as social and cultural support to which everyone should have access. This aspect of *urban support* is the key to understand that ensuring a potential accessibility does not ensure the total accessibility of people to their environment, just because the urban space is not guaranteed as a satisfier of needs inherent to Human Scale Development (6). In this theory, human needs are defined as an unitary system in which they relate and interact. Thus, they are considered as "*the sum of existential needs (be, have, do and be) and axiological needs (subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, freedom)*".

### **Accessibility and the urban support**

Access to the city in all its complexity is a perennial and a recurring theme in urban research, either if it is from a social, economic, anthropological or purely urban and territorial perspective. In every period and according to each discipline, approaches change depending on the problems they have to cope with.

In order to ensure access to the city on equal terms, it must be taken into account the different types of open spaces and its uses, the variety and complexity of the requirements and the different urban scales (housing, neighbourhood, district and city) regarding possible border or boundary spaces between the different scales. The relationship of each neighbourhood within the city must be present. For that purpose, the elements that define the neighbourhood *urban support*, should contribute to avoid exclusion processes through the incorporation of each area or neighborhood as a structural element of the city and therefore necessary for the rest of it (see figure 3).

All these spaces built or not, constitute the urban support that is intended to endow citizens, regardless of their physical, social, economic or cultural characteristics, with social benefits or collective services. These spaces also define the quality of the urban model in relation to the system of public spaces and facilities that were developed to serve the city.

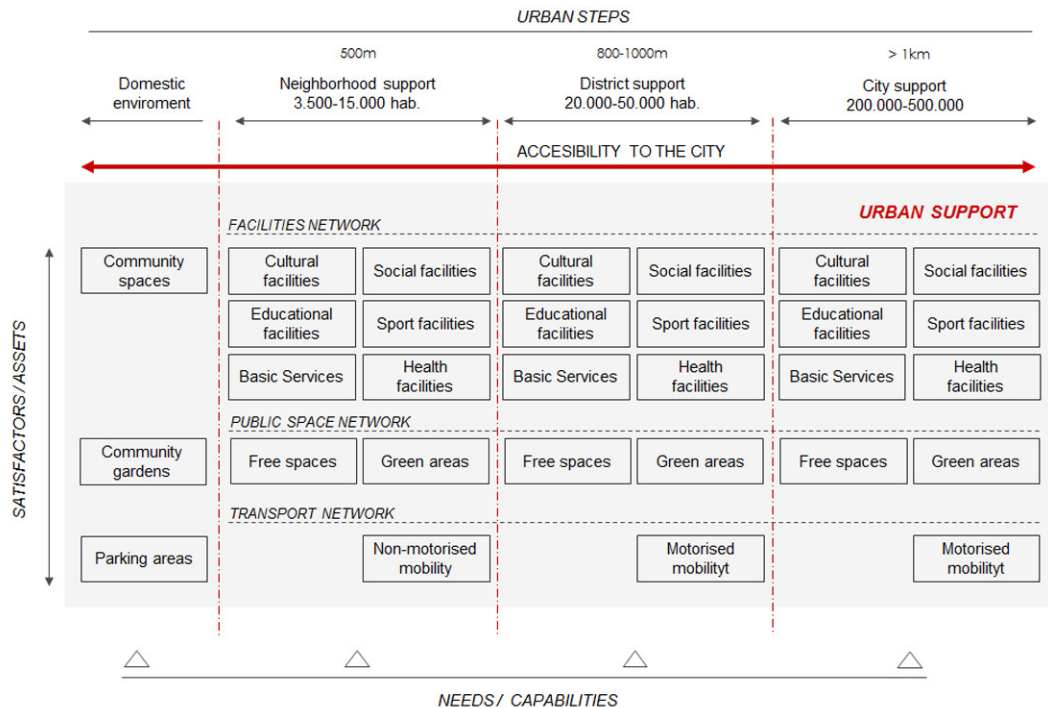


Figure 3 Conceptual schemes that explain the relationship between accessibility and urban support in order to ensure structured and structural environment

Accessibility shortfalls in the city imply lack of access to goods and services offered by the city in all areas and diminish the quality of the urban environment and people's welfare. It also reduces the possibility of integration in the built environment and even damages the environmental quality of cities. Rethinking the city through the concepts of *accessibility* and *urban support* allows us to reconstruct the functional nature of the urban environment so as to ensure quality of life by reducing the urban and social vulnerability.

### Urban Support in the context of the comprehensive regeneration of neighbourhoods

As a result, it is interesting to develop a deep insight into the way precarisation of the urban support affects the processes of vulnerability, in order to develop appropriate indicators.

Among the 624 neighbourhoods that were catalogued as vulnerable (3), a variety of problems and situations, both socioeconomic and urban, can be found. However, considering the results, certain patterns or similarities can be built and thus, it is possible to define the different levels of resilience of neighbourhoods in relation to their socio-economic vulnerability. All this can be established taking into account the assets and capabilities of each neighbourhood and their urban vulnerability which can be measured through the analysis of total and potential accessibility to the urban support.

Derived from the results of the urban vulnerability analysis in Spain, it can be stated that indicators which measure the level of education or access to the labour market were



benchmarks for detecting situations of exclusion or disintegration. The 40% of delimited neighbourhoods exceeded 1.5 times the national value in relation to educational level and the unemployment rate, and the 60% of the neighbourhoods had a ratio of temporary workers above the 30%. Given these socio-economic data along with the location of these neighbourhoods in the city (which are generally located in periphery areas), it can be ensured that access to the labour market, which means access to urban support that structures productive uses, remains a key part of the process of urban vulnerability.

However, it is detected that more than 50% of the 2001 delimited neighbourhoods, exceeded a rate of 40% of dependency. Most of them are aging neighbourhoods (more than the 50% of them have a 10% or more of over-65-year-old-single-person households) with their particular needs and strong gaps in access to urban support in its different scales. In these cases neighbourhoods with a relative or moderate vulnerability were found. In these cases, socio-economic aspects did not define a pattern of exclusion but, there is a risk of social decline or vulnerability increase during an economic crisis like the current one. These neighbourhoods become more likely to generate strong problems related to relative poverty and also related to their integration in the city.

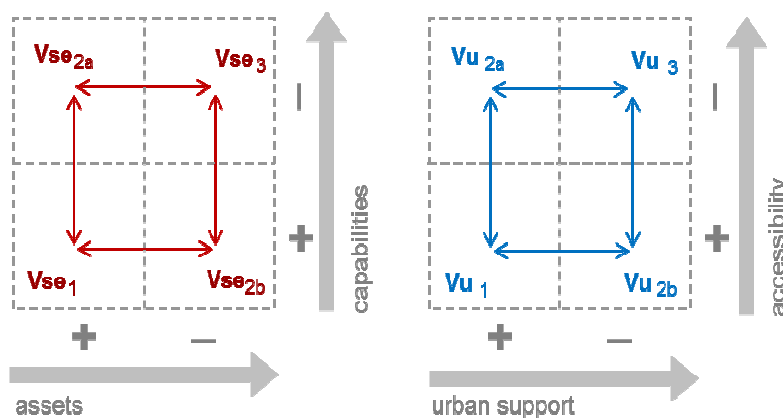


Figure 4. Socio-economic and urban vulnerability zones through segmentation axis.

In this regard, it is important to characterize the different processes of vulnerability from a multidimensional perspective including both socioeconomic and urban variables that can be adapted to each neighbourhood problems serving both the degree and the type of vulnerability. For this characterization, the use of the concepts described above is proposed by relating them in position tables (see figure 4).

The first position table seeks to characterize the vulnerability in relation to the capabilities and needs of the population in order to identify major gaps or asset levels as an element of resistance to brittleness. Thus, four positions of socioeconomic vulnerability ( $Vse$ ) are distinguished through the ratio of assets-capabilities. The more assets and capabilities they



count on, the lower the social vulnerability is. Similarly, in the second table four positions are also defined in order to characterize the urban vulnerability (Vu) in relation to the binomial accessibility- urban support. The better the urban support and accessibility are, the less urban vulnerability exists.

Both tables are linked in order to understand in a more complex way the processes that can result into different levels and types of vulnerability.

This method of analysis can produce useful and complex appraising so as to develop comprehensive strategies aimed at improving neighbourhoods. It is intended to keep track of a basic objective to be pursued any urban intervention, which would be to build an integrated and well-adjusted city. It is not possible to improve a vulnerable neighbourhood dismissing its contextual either social or urban situation. The urgent need of creating structured neighbourhoods with their autonomy and training must be understood along with a recognizable structure in its urban and metropolitan context.

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