

P5 Reflection Report

Formalization, then what?

Graduation Lab: Social Sustainability in Human Habitats
Msc Management in the Built Environment
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Reflection

The following report provides a reflection on the research carried out for my Master's thesis and focuses on several aspects, such as the outcomes of the research as well as the process itself. In the first section, the reflection positions the research within the graduate laboratory, as well as within the master programme. Following this, the report includes a reflection on the methods used, what impact this had on the research, and discuss the limitations. The outcomes are also reflected upon, together with the implications this has for future research. Lastly, the report deals with the ethics of this research and a personal reflection.

Positioning the research within the graduation laboratory and MBE

This thesis is a part of the graduation laboratory 'Social Sustainability in Human Habitats', as part of the track Management in the Built Environment. The topic of informal settlements and formalisation is an issue present in cities throughout the world, and it appeals to the aspect of social inclusion, equity, and to a certain extent, wellbeing, be that physical, financial, social, or environmental. These aspects are what connect it to the graduation lab, but also to the MBE track. While the connection may not be explicit, the research is focused on a phenomenon of the built environment, which connects various disciplines such as housing and urban planning. The research focuses on describing, understanding, and further, exploring the impacts of legalisation (formalisation) on recipient households. This was done by utilising a theoretical framework, which combines two significant concepts in development sciences: capabilities and livelihood assets. Moreover, the findings and conclusions of this thesis can be used to improve urban and territorial development policies and legislation, particularly in the context of the Balkans, as well as across the Global South. Due to this, the research can be considered fitting to the master track, and further, fitting within the Faculty of Architecture, Urbanism, and Building sciences.

Reflecting on the research methods

The research process can be divided into two parts: the theoretical research, which consists of the literature review and the empirical research, which consists of the primary data collection. In the literature review, the main concepts concerning informal settlements and formalisation were elaborated on. In this part, the multi-faceted nature of formalisation is highlighted, which concerns the social, cultural, financial, territorial, and legal. Further, this

looked at the potential of such formalisation programs, as theorised by scholars, as well as criticisms towards it. The framework used for this research was also reviewed in this section.

Theoretical research: literature review and exploratory interviews

This part of the research focused on the exploration of the main concepts used, and the framework which guided the empirical research. Throughout the course of the research, the review of literature continued to fill in the gaps, particularly in the operationalisation of the key themes of the framework. These were not included in the P2, and thus had to be completed later on. Security of tenure, livelihood assets, the vulnerability context, and livelihood and housing outcomes; these were the elements upon which this research was built. What also helped were the exploratory interview with experts on the topic, who provided guidance on the issues relating to the research. There were certain weaknesses in the theoretical research, such as the lack of elaboration on the elements of the framework, the lack of focus on the conceptual model, and the fact that the operationalisation of the elements was done at a later stage. This delayed the start of the data collection and added pressure for the research process.

Empirical research: survey and interviews

The empirical research focused on the collection of qualitative data through a door-to-door survey, semi-structured interviews, as well as open interviews. This focused on the collection of qualitative data, with the survey focusing on security of tenure and access to livelihood assets. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with six households, five of which had volunteered during the survey to take part further in the research. These interviews were focused on the livelihood outcomes, vulnerabilities and external factors, as well as recommendations from the participants. Further, experts and government officials were interviewed, which provided another perspective to the research, leading away from the subjective narratives of the households.

The weaknesses of the empirical research are related to the type of data collected. While qualitative data is valuable and can provide detailed accounts, especially as it focuses on the lived experiences of participants, quantitative data can be generalised and applied to other contexts. This stems from the fact that if you work with bigger samples, the conceptual model can be quantified to more measurable indicators, hence the transferability and generalisability of such a research is greater. Another aspect to be considered is the spread of elements of the framework in two separate data collection methods, rather than one. This was done for several reasons, with the main being the

comfort of the participants, which was crucial in establishing a rapport. Asking them about livelihood outcomes and strategies, as well as their vulnerabilities could be perceived negatively, and therefore, lead to less responsiveness from the participants. The lack of recordings for some of the interviews is another issue, however, this followed the participants' wish for privacy. All these could limit the validity and reliability of the findings making them less transferable to another context, or generalisable.

Reflecting on the outcomes

While formalisation has been the focus of research, and has been debated by scholars, in Albania, this topic has been left behind. The findings of the thesis are mostly in line with what scholars have found in other contexts. There were limited impacts on the security of tenure, however, in few localised cases the presence of the ownership certificate (title deed) gave the participants full legal protection from eviction and demolition. This shows the overall symbolic value of a title deed, which for most participants signified a sense of legitimacy over their property. The research further highlighted the connection between the access to livelihood assets and the real opportunity to benefit from legalisation. Few participants reported this, with experts confirming that a lack of education, skills, or support systems, can keep residents from fully utilising their title deeds. Factors such as recession, increasing living costs, and immigration patterns were found to influence access to assets, as well as outcomes and livelihood strategies of participants. This insight underscores the importance of considering external dynamics and adopting a resilience-based approach to policy design and implementation. Overall, the outcomes of this research can be useful in the development of formalisation policies and practices, that are effective and equitable. It also has implications for new research on informal settlements and formalisation, such as delving deeper into the connection with gentrification, the need for multi-dimensional approaches, and longitudinal studies which can track long term impacts.

Personal reflection

This research has helped me gain a greater awareness of the constructivist approach and the abductive logic of inquiry. Accepting the subjective nature of experiences and knowledge has shown me the value of providing rich interpretations and contextual understandings. Furthermore, the case study approach and mixed-methods data collection methods allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of formalisation and its impact on recipients. As I reflect on this journey, I am inspired to contribute further to the field of

urban development and policy. The findings of this thesis highlight the need for holistic approaches that consider the diverse socio-economic contexts and external factors influencing the outcomes of formalisation initiatives. I hope that my research will inform policymakers, practitioners, and academics alike, leading to more inclusive and equitable approaches to urban development. Another important aspect to be reflected on is ethics. Ethical considerations have been at the forefront of my research, emphasising the significance of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights. Maintaining these standards has been paramount in ensuring the validity and reliability of the research outcomes.

Overall, this thesis has been a transformative experience, fueling my passion for research and reinforcing my commitment to addressing socio-economic challenges in peri-urban areas. It has equipped me with invaluable skills in data analysis, critical thinking, and effective communication. I am eager to continue my academic journey, applying the knowledge and insights gained from this research to contribute meaningfully to future research endeavours and real-world policy interventions.