Article

# Social Innovation as a Driver of Urban Transformation? The Case of Planning Approaches in the Dominican Republic

Abdelillah Hamdouch * and Andiel Galvan

Research Laboratory on Cities, Territories, Environment and Societies, University of Tours, 37000 Tours, France; E-Mails: abdelillah.hamdouch@univ-tours.fr (A.H.), william.galvanabreu@etu.univ-tours.fr (A.G.)

* Corresponding author

## Abstract

This article assesses the role of social innovation (SI) as a driver of urban transformation through the case-based analysis of an ambitious social housing urban project in the Dominican Republic, specifically in the emblematic slum La Barquita, in the heart of northern Santo Domingo. This project was led by a dedicated public body, URBE, which is in charge of the coordination of several institutions and the management of the community participation. Since La Nueva Barquita integrates dimensions regarding the satisfaction of human needs, change in social relations, and increase of citizens' socio-political capabilities, it may be considered a socially innovative initiative in the territorial development discussion. The article builds first on the literature on SI by drawing attention on governance and institutional structures in specific urban contexts. Based on a series of semi-direct interviews, it then focuses on the analysis of key moments regarding the definition, implementation and evaluation of the institutional dimension of the project from its launching in 2013.

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

Rapidly growing large cities in developing countries have undergone poor planning processes and face the consequences of decades of inertia:

> The spatial concentration of low-income, unskilled workers in segregated residential quarters acts as a poverty trap with severe job restrictions, high rates of gender disparities, deteriorated living conditions, social exclusion and marginalization, and high incidence of crime. (UN Habitat, 2016)

Case studies on urban neighbourhood transformation exist from different regions, regardless the urbanisation characteristics and the size of the cities. At the European

level, a continuous series of research projects over the past 20 years have provided theoretical, methodological, and empirical basis for further analysis of local development, social innovation (SI) and social inclusion (Moulaert, Mehmood, MacCallum, & Leubolt, 2017). The majority of the case studies were located in urban neighbourhoods with social exclusion problems in Europe, but also in Lima (Peru), Leon (Nicaragua), and Palestinian Territories in East Jerusalem.

In Latin America, studies have particularly dealt with the urban revitalisation processes in Brazil and Colombia, two contexts with rapidly growing cities, unplanned urbanisation, and large, deprived neighbourhoods. Over the past two decades, the "favelas" projects in Rio de Janeiro, as well as the Integral Urban Projects in the "barrios" of Medellin, focused on the infrastructure and

on social and institutional dimensions to meet the basic needs of the populations (Silva, 2013). These experiences also promoted different forms of citizens' participation during the design, implementation, and evaluation stages of projects. In that sense, we think that SI as a conceptual field provides a relevant perspective for studying institutional, organisational, and behavioural changes in order to combat exclusion and poverty within a deprived territorial context (De Muro, Hamdouch, Cameron, & Moulaert, 2008).

In Santo Domingo, more than 20 public, private and nongovernmental projects have been undertaken over the last two decades in order to remediate, at least partially, the housing, environmental, or poverty problems in vulnerable areas; but the results have been disappointing. The lack of coordination among actors, weak rules enforcement from authorities, and the lack of cooperation among beneficiaries are among the main causes of such failure. In that sense, it has been said that the first reason for the poor levels of compliance with cross-sector coordination efforts to improve people's lives in needy territories in Latin America is that local governments are not solid political actors (Cecchini, 2015). Another reason is disintegration and fragmentation in the subsystems of the local society in deprived areas, which block the potential of individuals to set coherent objectives and achieve common claims (Hillier, Moulaert, & Nussbaumer, 2004).

Our aim in this article is to shed light on the research gap related to urban transformation projects in the Dominican Republic, which have been mainly led by national government and focused on the housing provision imperative. In that way, analysis have also been generally lacking from the broader human needs scope, considering other inhabitants' dimensions of their daily life. Regarding institutional analysis, a lack of interest has been shown on conceiving housing projects at a local government responsibility, perhaps due to the Dominican administrative culture, where national government is in charge of most of the infrastructure building. That is precisely why our article studies the most recent and relevant urban social project in Santo Domingo, undertaken between 2013 and 2016, named La Nueva Barquita (LNB). The developers described it as a model *integral urban project* in the Dominican Republic that combines infrastructure building, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability objectives, in contrast with previous efforts that undertook only partial responses. High expectations have been placed upon this pilot project because of the intention to replicate it throughout the country. Other analyses have looked at financial and citizen participation aspects about the LNB project, but this research may be the first that concentrates on organisational and governance aspects, together with a human needs approach.

Our key research questions are: how does LNB address human needs satisfaction of the inhabitants? How does the project affect urban governance in Santo Domingo? How empowered are LNB inhabitants after the implementation of the project? Our article proposes that insofar as LNB integrates (at least in its initial claims) dimensions regarding the satisfaction of human needs, change in social relations, and increase of citizens' socio-political capacities, it may be considered as a SI initiative.

In academic discussions, urban transformation projects are generally presented with at least some partial aspects of SI; therefore, one should be very cautious when exhibiting rather small and superficial variations as being deep and significant social changes. On the other hand, when listening to practitioners, specifically planners and political representatives, they may easily define projects as socially innovative based only on specific differences of the current project with previous similar ones. Usually they do not specify what exactly they call SI, nor do they refer or subscribe to any of the theoretical approaches of SI. In that sense, the ambiguity of the SI concept makes it difficult to accurately define SI and assess the real level of its achievements in practice.

To escape such pitfalls, we have preferred to contribute to the Dominican urban debate by applying a socio-territorial theoretical approach to the LNB urban project, by trying to identify SI characteristics in the project design and by assessing those SI dimensions as observable in the implementation phase. Thus, our objective is to systematise SI potential or reminiscences at the outcomes level, rather than to meet SI normative expectations.

Firstly, we stress the importance of the institutionalist approach of SI in territorial development, in general (in Section 2) as well as observed in the Dominican urban context (in Section 3). Secondly, the potential SI characteristics of the LNB project are analysed from different stages (Institut Godin, 2015), such as context, process, results and changes (in Sections 4 and 5). Our research is based on qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews[1] were conducted with actors from the community, local governments, the national government, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, academia and international cooperation institutions. In addition, in situ observation of LNB inhabitants in their daily life was carried out. Finally, Section 6 briefly concludes the article and highlights some key reflections drawn from the case study.

## 2. SI as a Driver of Urban Transformation

SIs are understood as particular initiatives, actions and mobilisations that can contribute to improvements or even provoke significant changes in governance struc-

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[1] The study is based on qualitative techniques, such as interviews, field trips, observation, and documental review. Our considerable insights come from ten semi-structured interviews and two open interviews. The interviews were undertaken in 2018. Informants 1, 2, 4–6 represent NGOs. Informant 3 is a University member. Informant 7 is a Government member. Other interviewees include a LNB Barquita inhabitant, an URBE Patronato employee, members from the Catholic church, members from the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), planning professionals and local governments association. French and Dominican newspaper reports, NGO reports, and administrative government documents were useful sources.

tures and strengthen people empowerment (Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, & Hamdouch, 2013). Common ground between social cohesion and economic development is SI, with the crucial support of dedicated local policies (Hamdouch & Ghaffari, 2016, 2017). In that framework, planning practices can be understood as an unequal encounter between different spatial imaginations and urban narratives that different groups hold, all embedded in the political economy of a concrete time and space (González & Healey, 2005). At the local level, SIs rest on two pillars: institutional innovation and innovation in the sense of the social economy, understood as the realisation of various needs in local communities (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005). This socio-territorial approach of SI integrates three dimensions according to its aims, agency power and process: the satisfaction of human needs, increasing political capacities of citizens, and changes in social relations.

The first dimension covers the basic needs addressed in the project, as the ultimate purpose of SI. In order to operationalise this dimension, we may look at different perspectives of poverty, income, and human needs. Traditionally, income poverty receives the greatest attention along with the economic growth imperative as a measure of the development of a society. Nevertheless, inclusion (or exclusion) is not just about income, but also about freedoms and deprivation. Development requires the abolition of the factors opposed to liberties: poverty and tyranny; the lack of economic opportunities and social precarious conditions; the absence of public services; and authoritarianism (Sen, 1999). Exclusive individual income measures may not explain poverty comprehensively as they do not consider household units and their variations. Regarding the standard poverty line approach, a complementary perspective was developed in the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on unfulfilled human needs. In order to determine the poverty reduction potential of a SI, several factors may be studied, such as its relations with the structural causes of poverty, its impact on the solidarity towards poor people in society, the empowerment of the individuals in poverty, and its specific interactions with Welfare State institutions (Ghys & Oosterlynck, 2014).

The empowerment dimension seeks to increase citizens' socio-political capacities and access to resources needed for the realisation of rights. In order to achieve cities that are more inclusive it is essential to encourage excluded groups to share their own needs to ensure their participation and engage with more powerful stakeholders (UN Habitat, 2017). Beyond the deprivations of marginalised territories, the most common vulnerable groups in cities are the elderly, children, women, and immigrants. Indeed, social inclusion efforts in the territory require integral responses and collaboration between actors from different sectors, including those belonging to the community (De Muro et al., 2008; Moulaert et al., 2013). However, the value of community contributions is not always easy to define. On the one hand, author-

ities do not always recognise the neighbourhood as a social power of importance, and may usually perceive it as a destabilising element, whereas for technocrats, neighbourhood councils represent barriers for planning, and for political parties the organised community is seen as a simple electoral instrument (Merklen, 2009, p. 88). There is no consensus on neighbourhoods' role in public urban transformation projects, and thus, depending on the institutional context and the local circumstances, projects may be designed and implemented *with* or *without* the community.

Finally, the process dimension looks at the governance mechanisms that may both enable the satisfaction of human needs and enhance the participation of excluded groups in decision-making. This perspective is part of the sociological institutionalist approach, which suggests, within planning theory, that certain policy actions and micro practices in geographically specific governance contexts may be connected to wider structuring forces (González & Healey, 2005). Therefore, SI analysis must consider the institutional environment where it takes place since it imposes a set of internal relations and external actors. This context may be understood as a constraint ("path dependency"), but it may conversely facilitate transformation insofar as actors shape new norms and put new institutional approaches in place, i.e. open a new path (Fontan, Klein, & Tremblay, 2008). Consequently, it is necessary for communities to try to influence institutional structures and centres of power in order to use the acquired capacities collectively, especially in the fight against poverty (Klein & Raufflet, 2014).

Such dynamics indicate that socially innovative development is not a predictable trajectory but rather a search for the mechanisms to achieve a better quality of life and social justice. Therefore, the focus must be on understanding how urban transformations in governance institutions and agency capacity contribute to improve the daily-life conditions of people who suffer from poverty and marginalisation, while at the same time raise issues that are neglected in established discourses and practices (González & Healey, 2005). For these authors, governance capacity in the urban context relates to the ability of the institutional relations in a social milieu to operate as a collective actor towards the creation of better and fairer quality living environments. In that sense, governance practices evolve in a historically and geographically situated manner, and as political agendas are shaped by many conflicting dynamics, practical governance is confronted with difficult questions of representation, accountability, and legitimation.

From a sociological institutionalist point of view, certain qualities differentiate emerging governance dynamics and their transformative potential. First, institutions, understood as frameworks of norms and practices, are distinguished from organisations; second, the focus of institutionalist analysis is interactions, not decisions; third, analysts emphasise how institutions change and the role of intentionality in promoting such change; fourth, while

some analysts focus on the micro-politics of interactions between specific actors in particular arenas, sociological institutionalists have a strong interest in the issue of governance capacity itself; and fifth, within the planning field, sociological institutionalists have been concerned with issues of identity and place, and the interconnection between these two (González & Healey, 2005).

## 3. Urban Transformation in the Dominican Context

The Dominican Republic has a population of 10,000,000 inhabitants in a 48,442km$^2$ territory (see Figure 1). It is organised in three macro-regions, ten regions, 31 provinces, one National District, 158 municipalities, and 234 sub-municipalities. Politically, it is a Unitarian republic, with a heavy weight of centralism in the political culture. Traditional presidentialism promotes paternalist political leaderships in the territories, which in turn reinforce the ties to the central authority at the expense of weaker local administrations. These factors contribute to explain the deep political, administrative, and financial dependency of local governments to national administrations (Domenella, Parras, & Auradou, 2017).

According to the Municipal Law, municipalities are in charge of providing certain services: the organisation of traffic and vehicular circulation; the management of public space; fire stations; land management; urban planning; green areas and gardens; maintenance of public spaces; the protection of the environment; the construction of public infrastructures and urban facilities; paving urban roads; the construction and maintenance of sidewalks; the preservation of historical and cultural heritage

of the municipality; the construction and management of abattoirs and markets; the construction and management of cemeteries and funeral services; street lighting; the cleaning of local public roads; public adornments; the collection, treatment, and disposal of solid waste; the regulation of urban public transportation; and the promotion of local development. Nevertheless, local governments in the Dominican Republic are weak players in the institutional landscape of the country, and endure three main deficits: autonomy, transparency, and capacities (Domenella et al., 2017).

The focal problem of the municipality is the incapacity of the local governments to transform their environment and become an active territorial development agent (Domenella et al., 2017); local governments are therefore unable to undertake major urban transformation projects that may affect social and economic structures and dynamics in cities. Within this centralised governance scheme, their limited autonomy is confirmed by the fact that traditionally local taxes such as the real estate property tax are collected by the national tax authority, as well as by the inability of municipalities to borrow financial resources, internally or abroad, without permission of the central government. In terms of transparency, allegations of corruption are frequent in local administrations, as well as the misuse of funds. Concerning capacities, there is a lack of soft capacities in terms of technical skills, management, planning, and professionalization of human talent; and when it comes to hard capacities, they fall short of all types of resources. Looking at the financial aspects, 75% of the resources of municipalities come from central government transfers; and of the 10% of the



**Figure 1.** Map Library of the Dominican Republic: the Dominican Republic and Santo Domingo. Source: Vidiani (2011).

national total income that the government should transfer to the municipalities according to the law, less than 3% is really allocated.

One consequence of these conditions is the inability of local governments to reverse inequalities in their own territories. Even though greater Santo Domingo is the largest urban area in the country, with close to 5,000,000 inhabitants, it has profound territorial disparities. The Santo Domingo Metropolitan area is composed of nine municipalities, among which the four most important are the National District, Eastern Santo Domingo, Western Santo Domingo, and Northern Santo Domingo (see Figure 2). The national government has decided to assign almost US$350 million in 2018 as the total budget for municipalities. The National District, the political and economic national capital, concentrates 10% of the national population and may receive almost US$19 million out of the total government transfers to municipalities this year.

While the National District is the municipality that receives the highest amount of financial resources from the central government, it is also the one generating the most resources thanks to diverse sources of income. These sources include the provision of services such as waste management, advertising, construction licenses, among others. As a result, central government money represents less than 25% of its total income. In contrast, for Eastern Santo Domingo, central public funding represents more than 75% of its income, while for Northern Santo Domingo it reaches 50%. In this context, local governments remain as secondary actors in face of the primacy of the central government, which is indeed the only public body capable of building large urban facilities and social infrastructures. Thus, the role of the central gov-ernment is fundamental for significant urban transformation efforts, such as the LNB project.

## 4. The LNB Project

### 4.1. Context

Nowadays, North-Eastern Santo Domingo concentrates around 300,000 people suffering overcrowded housing conditions and social exclusion. La (Vieja, or Old) Barquita is an emblematic slum at the heart of northern Santo Domingo (see Figure 2), the largest impoverished area in the country, and is located on the banks of the Ozama River, which crosses the city (see Figure 3). Its 8,000 dwellers live in near 1,900 housing units in generally bad conditions, with a lack of services (see Figure 4) and are in permanent danger of flooding and mudslides. The La Barquita neighbourhood emerged after the Dominican civil war of 1965, when migration flows rapidly increased from the countryside to Santo Domingo, especially to Los Mina district. Its name comes from the means of transportation utilised by people to cross the Ozama River from Los Mina, in Eastern Santo Domingo, to Sabana Perdida district, in Northern Santo Domingo. They used a "barquita", or in other words, a small "barco"—boat—to carry animals, motorcycles and various objects. This practice lasted until 1978 when the Gregorio Luperón Bridge was built, popularly known as La Barquita Bridge. Lands around the Ozama River, the 4th most important one in the country, had favourable conditions for rice production and livestock grazing. After hurricane David in 1979, there was already an important human settlement in La Barquita. Population increase in this area took place outside the authority of local and
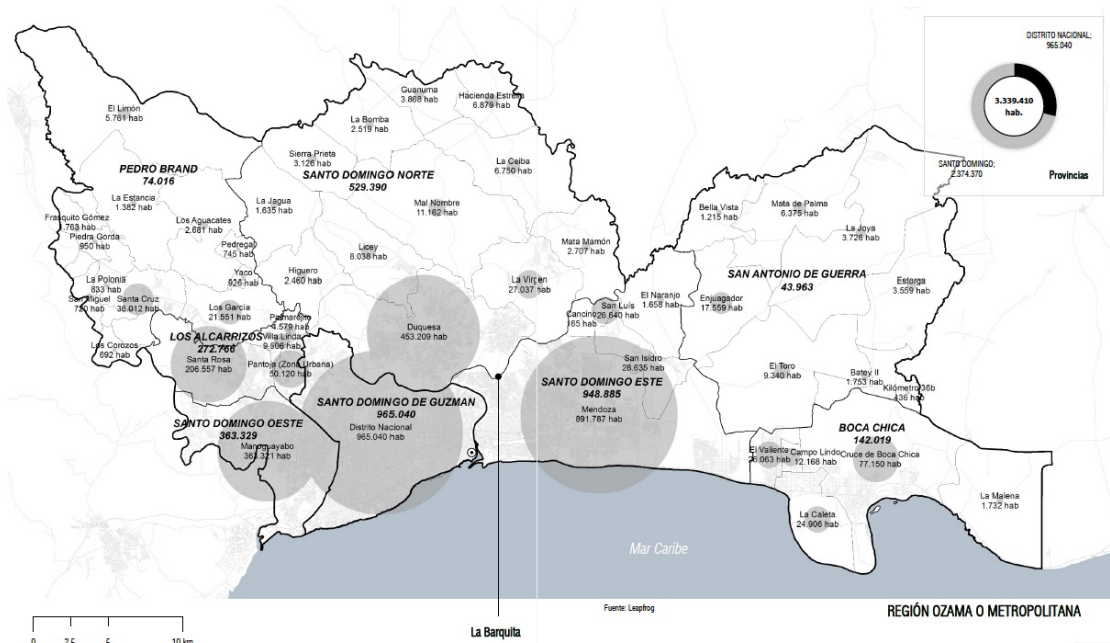


**Figure 2.** La Vieja Barquita in the greater Santo Domingo, and its areas' populations. Source: Unit for the Transformation of La Barquita and its Surroundings (URBE, 2017).

central governments, and thus without any social or urban planning.

Institutionally, the combination of, on one hand, a lack of territorial regulations beyond bourgeois and wealthy areas of the city, and on the other hand, local administrations without minimum management capacities, contributes to understanding why the Dominican state is unable to provide basic public services and to guarantee rights in the territories (personal interview with Informant 1). However, health, food and nutrition, and housing are priorities for people in Santo Domingo (personal interview with informant 5). The housing deficit in the country, both quantitative and qualitative, is estimated at 75% of the total amount of housing units, which accounts for around two million units for a population of ten million (Gabinete Social, 2017). People in the Old Barquita were looking to survive by settling down with their families in empty lands nearby work centres. As a result, this urban model traditionally criminalises those who seek living solutions under informality, which creates informal centres and exclusion, while wealth concentrates in the National District and fosters territorial gaps (personal interview with Informant 2).

By contrast:

La Nueva Barquita is [considered as] an integral urban complex composed by infrastructures, facilities, equipment, and administrative procedures that convert a dream into a legal reality of decent housing, social cohesion, and a replicable city. As a housing complex, it sets standards for use of land for high quality physical and social infrastructures, where relocated families from flood zones and landslides will live. (URBE, 2017)

Certain analysts consider the LNB project to be a consequence of the pressure of public opinion on the newly inaugurated president Danilo Medina's administration in august 2012. The administration had to prioritise this project in La Barquita as a new effort to relocate families living in vulnerable areas, knowing that previous attempts were a failure (personal interview with Informant 4). Therefore, it is a *reactive project*, not a proactive endeavour, since it was conceived when the president made his first "surprise visit" to the Old Barquita community in September 2012 in order to assess the damages of the Ozama River floods that took place after the Isaac storm (personal interview with Informant 6). Another way to address the Old Barquita situation may be to consider that it is also a consequence of historical poor risk management in the city, hence confirming that disasters and climate vulnerabilities are more political than natural phenomena (personal interview with Informant 6).

### 4.2. Actors and Process

The Presidential Decree 16–13, published months later after the first presidential visit to La Barquita, declared this place a highly vulnerable area of the Ozama River, and ordered the relocation of this community. The first commission was created to undertake the necessary studies and consults, and to elaborate technical reports and formulate policy proposals. It was composed of the Ministry of the Presidency, the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Environment, the National Institute for Housing, the Dominican Municipalities Federation, the Father Gregorio Alegría—as liaison between community and government—Architect Gustavo Moré and José Manuel González Cuadra—as General Director of the commission. The following year, Decree 201–14 formed



**Figure 3.** La Vieja Barquita neighbourhood and the Ozama River in Santo Domingo. Source: URBE (2017).

the public body URBE, which substituted the commission in order to coordinate and oversee other public institutions and private contractors on the implementation of different components of the LNB project. Other institutions were also involved in the project as implementing partner, such as the Ministry of Education, the Water and Sanitation Authority, the National Police, and the Electricity Distribution Company.

Financially, the project was supported by a hybrid resource scheme, from the national government and international cooperation through long-term loans. The national government invested 4 trillion Dominican pesos, which is approximately US$110 million. Besides this amount, the French Development Agency gave a US$210 million loan as budgetary support for several urban projects, including LNB project, a cableway project in Eastern Santo Domingo, and the extension of the second subway line.

URBE is plainly in charge of the coordination and monitoring of the actions performed by the institutions involved in the urban project and environmental rescue of vulnerable neighbourhoods around the Ozama River basin. It has financial and administrative autonomy and operates under the authority of the Ministry of the Presidency. Through the LNB Project and the creation of URBE, the aim was to establish a new integrative protocol for urban renovation projects in the country that combines the social and environmental sustainability dimensions. URBE was created even though there are other public bodies legally enabled for these tasks (personal interview with Informant 6). The lack of technical capacities was also a reason to exclude traditional actors from the design and execution process, as well as time constraints due to challenging deadlines for URBE. In terms of housing solutions, there was a major missing actor in the LNB project—the National Institute of Housing (INVI). Although this institution was included in the presidential commissions for the La Barquita project, it seems that it did not have a significant role in advising and implementing the housing solutions.

Furthermore, the only direct representation of the community officially appointed in the commissions by the president was the parish priest of the La Barquita area, Gregorio Alegría. In other words, the interlocutor between the government and the community was the Catholic Church (personal interview with Gómez). Some say it was not adequate to include religious people in the project and for this specific role because of their dogmas and conservative positions (personal interview with Informant 3). Several protests took place involving neighbourhood councils against father Alegría, also asking for more information about certain parts of the plan from the government (Torres, Jovine, Rodríguez, & Pujals, 2017).

Another feature is the Board of Trustees—Patronato—of LNB, an institutional body that was missing in the previous urban initiatives in this country. The Patronato is a governance unit responsible for the man-

agement of the infrastructures and the physical, social, and economic sustainability of the project. It is composed of URBE staff, Father Alegría and community representatives. It governs LNB and is the intermediary between the community and the national government, dealing directly with local governments. Hence, instead of neighbourhood councils, the Patronato has organised residents only per residential blocks and per stairs or floors (personal interview with Informant 7). In addition, the Patronato is in charge of utilities operations: trash collection, public lighting, street patching, gardening, and general maintenance of the project.

### 4.3. Accessibility and Service Logic of the Project

LNB is considered an extreme vulnerable intervention or palliative project targeted at high-risk families. Its social purpose is to relocate people in danger to safer areas, especially poor communities suffering from regular natural threats. Since this type of projects has been conceived to develop contingent actions to specific situations, they do not respond to a planned and articulated right to housing policy (Torres et al., 2017). Among the mechanisms and requirements to be eligible for one of the LNB apartments, there are strict conditions: to have suffered natural disaster, or to live in a recognised high-risk area. Finally, sometimes more relevant than fragile land property rights and environmental vulnerability conditions, an important (though implicit) eligibility criterion for the national government when choosing in which community to intervene is how powerful is a particular needy community on the media (Torres et al., 2017).

In order to identify eligible families of La Barquita to be relocated, the URBE carried out several censuses: one of the renters, another of the owners of houses, and a third of business owners. "They verified the number of families and the conditions in which they lived, in order to make sure that those counted in the census are the ones that had to be relocated in 2016" (González, 2014). In terms of accessibility and use of the service provided, each relocated family signed a contract that will transfer the property to the family in a 10-year period, in a donation operation.

Meanwhile, the Patronato established a mandatory monthly fee of 1,000 Dominican pesos—about US$20—to be paid by each family to offset the costs of trash collection, gardening, general cleaning, and maintenance of buildings and common areas. The Patronato's rationale was that, once relocated, the residents would have to pay the administration of the housing project the same amount of rent that they paid in their old places at La Vieja Barquita (González, 2014). The first inconvenience of this fee was that it was established without enough consultation (personal interview with Informant 4). The second one was that there are not enough jobs in the LNB area and people have meagre earnings, so they cannot afford this regular bill (personal interview with Alegría).

## 5. Impacts and Lessons of SI

### 5.1. Satisfaction of Human Needs

In a wider notion of poverty, basic needs are classified in two types: those defined by private consumption, or the demand side, such as housing and food; and another group including essential services provided by the community such as water, sanitation, transportation, health, education, and culture (Frenesda, 2007). Other specific social inclusion drivers, in a broad view, are: income and consumption, poverty, labour market, political participation and social networks (Oxoby, 2009).

In that respect, LNB was successful in challenging the status quo of the public system in terms of targeting vulnerable populations with urgent needs (personal interview with Informant 4). This project directly contributed to reduce the quantitative housing deficit, through the provision of decent housing to around 5,500 people living in poverty. These families also had access to basic public services in walking distance from their homes, especially health, education, childcare, sport facilities, green areas, religious services, and human security. LNB has therefore created a strongly contrasted living environment when compared to the Old Barquita (see Figures 4 and 5).

However, despite these efforts, unemployment is the most relevant concern of the LNB population and a major threat for the social sustainability of the project. On the other hand, a community leader explained that designers of LNB wanted to convert the beneficiaries into a middle class, but in fact, they continue to be poor and cannot pay basic services although they now have a decent house (Holguín, 2017).

Schwarz et al. (2010, p. 174, as cited in Noack & Federwisch, 2018) avoid a normative understanding of SIs and argues that they may have an ambivalent impact, due to the diversity of actors, intentions, and rationalities when aiming to solve problems. Some contend that SI processes may also create new problems and conflicts (Gillwald, 2000, Lindhult, 2008, as cited in Noack & Federwisch, 2018). In that sense, it was found that when relocating a whole community, there were several consequences that were not taken into account in LNB, e.g., livelihoods in the new territory. Government gave the people a house but not a job, and now they have to pay formal services such as electricity, water, and Patronato's monthly fee without having regular incomes, forgetting therefore that people's needs are indissoluble. In the end, people would try to sell or move to another place (personal interview with Informant 3).

### 5.2. Change in Social Relations: Impact on Organisations and Territories

The pursuit of social inclusion goals is part of a relevant dynamic based on communitarian development (Caillouette, Roos & Aubin, 2013) that associates with governance models characterised by partnerships, co-production and co-construction based projects, together with a combination of different social and economic logics (Klein, Camus, Jetté, Champagne, & Roy, 2016). In this context, SIs may be found in new social arrangements, new coordination modes, and new linkages between key stakeholders (Klein & Raufflet, 2014).

The LNB project established a precedent of social inclusion and comprehensive approach for urban projects in the country. It also challenged the status quo of the public system in terms of targeting environmentally vulnerable populations (personal interview with Informant 4) and responding with a preventive and permanent solution, contrary to traditional post-events temporary projects. Nevertheless, there are concerns about its limited impact. Particularly, it does not shape a structural path for genuine public policy or new governance approaches; it is just a *single* project. In fact, LNB is an infrastructural solution, not a "reform process or a transformative endeavour" (personal interview with Informant 2). In contrast, as observed in other countries (especially in Europe), certain modes of governance have a



**Figure 4.** Contrasts between LNB and La Vieja Barquita neighbourhoods. Source: URBE (2017).

greater capacity to foster creativity and transform established decision-making and governance practices than others (Hutchinson, 2014). Differences between neighbourhood focus and wider-spatial-scale targeting are scientifically and politically significant, and the research shows that a combination of scales increases collaboration and resource mobilisation in SI initiatives (De Muro et al., 2008).

URBE served as a project execution unit for urban issues, a non-existent institutional figure in the Dominican landscape (personal interview with Joly at the AFD) and in a low coordination context with institutional atomisation. Among URBE strengths are the strong technical skills of the team, as well as the ability to learn by doing and adapting to changes due to the newness of this type of project in the Dominican urban landscape (personal interview with Joly at the AFD). URBE could also be defined as a parallel administrative body based in the National Palace (personal interview with Informant 3). However, it could make sense in a highly centralised and presidentialist state as the key to guaranteeing the coordination of more than 50 institutional actors involved. These actors are mainly from the central government and from organised civil society, international cooperation, and the private sector: "Since the idea [of LNB] came from president Medina, for once, different institutions worked together, and everything moved along very quickly, which is unusual", confirmed Joan Giacinti (2015), the president of the Dominican-French Chamber of Commerce.

Certain authors have argued in support of the "co-mingling" of SI with wider hierarchical governance, pointing to the continuing role of the state as a player in initiating and co-ordinating the process of SI (Baker &

Mehmood, 2015). In the case of LNB, government institutions enrolled in the project, coordinated by URBE, built different facilities to guarantee the provision of basic public services. The Ministry of Health built a hospital; the Ministry of Education built three schools; the Institute for Child Protection opened a childcare centre; other institutions built sport facilities, a catholic church, a community centre, a vocational school, parks and squares, sewage treatment plants, gardens, as well as electrical, water and transportation infrastructures. The private sector was another key actor, with more than a dozen contractors working directly with URBE in the construction of 1,800 housing units. As a result, LNB is genuinely a living area with various integrated services (see Figure 5).

In fact, it is likely that if there had been local power from local governments and NGOs, the La Barquita project would have been much more conflictive. This is simply because the Northern Santo Domingo government would not have been happy to receive 1,400 new poor families in its territory without receiving extra financial support from the national government to handle these new families. By comparison, the Eastern Santo Domingo government may have considered it positive to expel part of its population, and in return, receive a brand new ecological park in the formerly deprived riverside areas (personal interview with informant 6). In fact, the Santo Domingo Joint Association, which gathers the main local administrations of the area, was not fully involved in the project, despite its coordination abilities and experiences working in the territories. What is more precise and paradoxical is that the "verticality" of the decision-making process by the central government may have been the reason for the rapid execution of the LNB project.



**Figure 5.** Integrated services in LNB: apartments, businesses, sidewalks, trash collection system, public lighting, and public signs. Source: authors.

Equally important may have been the particular power scheme that prevailed for the URBE top decision-makers. Indeed, the fact that the main leader of the project was not a politician was recognised as a positive feature of LNB. The general director of URBE was the businessperson José Gonzalez Cuadra. He put his private sector management abilities in practice, whereas politicians tend to make promises, but do not keep their commitments (personal interview with Alegría). Alternatively, assigning a businessperson to such an important and strategic project is not that obvious from an institutional point of view (personal interview with informant 3), since the private sector tends to operate with certain verticality and without the democratic spirit that the public or non-governmental sector demands. In fact, LNB was not able to fully integrate neither local governments nor local actors in the process (personal interview with informant 2).

The Patronato, directed by URBE as the developer of LNB and major financial support, was also a decisive actor, compared to other represented community groups. However, the Patronato did not represent the community since excluded people of LNB were not likely to claim their rights because these people were not used to demanding what they deserved. To make it a participative process, it may have needed to be carefully designed to be able to integrate them (personal interview with Informant 4). During the definition of the project, the government stressed the *horizontal* structure for La Barquita project in socio-economic, legal, and technical terms. However, despite the participation of La Barquita dwellers from the beginning, evidence shows that a top-down approach prevailed as people from the community were taught by URBE and acted mainly as receptors of information (Torres et al., 2017).

Likewise, local governments as territorial actors were not fully involved as stakeholders. URBE treated local governments as mere receptors of information, not as part of the decision-making process (personal interview with Gómez). This may be explained by their technical, financial, and administrative limitations. Nevertheless, local governments could have contributed to the relocation and transition of families from La Vieja Barquita neighbourhood to the new housing complex. It just so happened that Northern Santo Domingo municipal authority stared like a spectator at how the central government added a new, closed and over-privileged community to its territory compared to its neighbours (personal interview with Informant 3).

### 5.3. Improvement of Socio-Political Capacities of Excluded People

SI requires the participation—whether conscious and intentional or not—of a diversity of actors, especially from civil society, politics, public administration, and research; thus, it can become a point of encounter between social problems, research, and public policies (Dandurand,

2005). In the LNB project, the participation level of people in the design of the project was not satisfactory. Indeed, the government started to offer things to people, but then converted the URBE-beneficiaries relation in a clientelist way, with strong power asymmetries and no sense of community (personal interview with Informant 3). Therefore, URBE did not permit people to participate in the implementation of the LNB project (personal interview with Informant 4). There were only informational meetings and several workshops with family members to teach them rules for living in a condominium and on how to utilise the apartments, infrastructure, and services they would have at their disposal. The topics addressed were about health, the use of communal areas, trash management, and noise, among others. Attendance was compulsory for every family (personal interview with Alegría). They also had to pass the adult literacy program. The mandatory training for the families, also regarding citizenship and responsibility on services payments, did not seek to change people, but to create a safe environment (personal interview with Joly at the AFD).

As a result, people's participation did not make them active agents in the decision-making process and thus did not change power relations regarding the formulation and execution of the project (Torres et al., 2017). Indeed, "while having concretely offered improved housing and living conditions, La Nueva Barquita did not promote social cohesion because the ultimate beneficiaries were manipulated and utilized" (personal interview with Gómez). In fact, there are serious doubts about the LNB project contribution to strengthening local social fabric (personal interview with Informant 6): giving "things" to people is not enough; educating them is the key to economic and social progress (personal interview with Informant 3). Education can also help to create a "territorial conscience" in inhabitants, understood as the feeling of belonging to a community and the responsibility to advocate for the improvement of the territory, which was not seen in LNB. In contrast, when such conscience exists, local initiatives for people participation can emerge even in a situation where dwellers are not fully consulted for a project because they can react to this exclusion boosted by their territorial conscience (Hamdouch, Ghaffari, & Klein, 2017).

### 6. Conclusions

This article discussed the potential role of SI as a driver of inclusive urban transformation in the Central American city of Santo Domingo. The LNB project has been analysed from a governance angle and from the socio-territorial approach of SI. We wished to contribute to the reflection on urban transformation projects in the Dominican Republic, and maybe more largely in the Latin American context, through an institutional analysis of a potential socially inclusive project. LNB was described as a model integral urban project in the Dominican Republic,

but as we have seen, its outcomes present different levels of achievement in the dimensions examined.

On the one hand, LNB has set a standard in urban projects for impoverished populations in terms of its inclusion focus and the comprehensiveness principle of the solution. It has also contributed with two institutional innovations: URBE, as a project execution unit, and the Patronato, as a board of trustees aiming to preserve the physical and normative integrity of the LNB neighbourhood. Above all, LNB has greatly improved the housing and public services access conditions for thousands of inhabitants in particular and offered them a safer urban environment.

On the other hand, on the decision-making and governance side, things are more debatable. A primary result is the vertical relation between URBE and the community and NGOs. Another characteristic is the timid involvement of relevant public actors as local governments, the national housing authority, and other technical and territorial representative structures. The weight of underlying centralism and presidentialism in urban planning was probably unavoidable in this city. The LNB project has reinforced authoritarian presidentialism and centralism, in terms of local people accepting a vertical unidirectional relation with URBE and the government. In addition, the people have accepted that URBE, in order to guarantee the maintenance and enforcement of the neighbourhood rules, has interfered in the community democratic process. For instance, instead of having an independent neighbourhood council, democratically elected by LNB inhabitants, URBE established, within the Patronato, a parallel structure in order to gather regular information about what happens in the buildings and blocks. Tenants chosen by the Patronato and URBE compose this body of informants. In other circumstances, this structure may have been substituted by bottom-up representative structures as neighbourhood councils.

In fact, the concrete processes that connect actions towards the improvement of situations involving fragile people and the potential empowerment of those people in particular are complex and scale-sensitive, and their outcomes are both unpredictable and more or less positive. As demonstrated by Moulaert et al. (2013), there are many examples of SI initiatives and actions at the very local level that remain rather informal and unique while efficiently addressing some human needs in varied existential fields (housing, education, healthcare, etc.), without necessarily changing the "normal" governance processes on a larger scale. Rather, the initiatives can just find new "local" ways for collectively solving specific problems without requiring official governance and decision-making processes. In contrast, some initiatives that are more or less institutionalised and vertical in their decision-making approach can effectively solve key social problems while not really changing usual governance processes (i.e., giving more space to genuine participation). With some specific nuances, the LNB project falls in the latter situation.

This highlights a situation where the LNB project could have been the opportunity for more "transformative" outcomes in terms of participation and empowerment, and in terms of generalisation for further projects, but it wasn't so due to the particular traditional political culture and context in Santo Domingo, characterised by Presidentialism and Authoritarian decision-making processes. The LNB project represents therefore a missed opportunity to create institutional and technical capacities among relevant actors for similar future projects. Likewise, the replication potential of the project is in question due to financial, institutional, and technical constraints.

However, other institutional and sociocultural contexts, prevailing elsewhere or in the Dominican Republic in the future, may offer outcomes in terms of empowerment, participation, and community building that are more positive through socially creative initiatives in urban transformation projects. Such an optimistic perspective not only derives from the successful cases documented in the literature on the five continents (Klein et al., 2016; Moulaert et al., 2013), but is also an illustration and evidence that the outcomes of socially creative initiatives and projects depend on the specific territorial contexts, institutional and political settings, and complex processes that shape their emergence, implementation and governance conditions. Therefore, in the continuation of the strong research efforts devoted to SI research over the last three decades (Moulaert et al., 2017), more case studies are needed to validate the SI potential of similar projects to LNB and would also be useful for comparative research.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors

**Abdelillah Hamdouch** holds a PhD and Habilitation in Planning and Public Economics, and a French National qualification in Spatial Planning and Urban Studies. He is Full Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Tours and Senior Researcher at the Cities, Territories, Environment and Societies (CITERES) CNRS research unit. His recent research mainly focuses on sustainable territorial development in relation to social innovation and public policies, on metropolisation dynamics at the regional scale, and on the role of medium-sized towns in the new hierarchical territorial dynamics. Among his recent publications are: *Creative Approaches to Planning and Local Development* (Routledge, 2017; edited by A. Hamdouch et al.) and the article "Small and Medium-Sized Towns in Europe: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches" in the *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, *108*(4).

**Andiel Galvan** is a Doctoral Researcher at the Cities, Territories, Environment and Societies (CITERES) CNRS research unit at the University of Tours. He holds a Master of Public Affairs (MPA), a master's degree in Political Science, and a bachelor's degree in Social Communications. His research interests include institutional reforms, urban inclusion, and territorial social innovation.