

Regional Sciences

The Housing Situation of Labour Migrants in Murcia, Spain – A Question of Choice?

Labour Migrants and Housing in the Murcia Region

With foreigners from non-EU countries already accounting to 12.1%, the quota of migrants in the Murcia region, situated in the south of Spain, has increased more than in any other region of the country (INE 2008, see map 1).



map 1

Regular and irregular migrants mostly live in poor housing conditions compared to local inhabitants' standards. The spectrum of deficits ranges from overcrowded houses and shelters badly in need of rehabilitation to the use of self-constructed huts lacking electrical and water connections (see photos 1-2).



photo 1: Homes owned by migrants. Photo: S. Meier

To shed light on the reasons for the migrants' inferior housing conditions, an empirical case study was conducted in the Murcia region. Therefore, more than 500 persons of African, Latin American and Eastern European descent were interviewed using a standardised questionnaire. Additionally, 40 expert interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs, local and regional government, and the real estate and financial sectors.

Causes of Poor Housing Conditions

Deficits in housing conditions can be described as the result of multiple causes (see fig. 1):

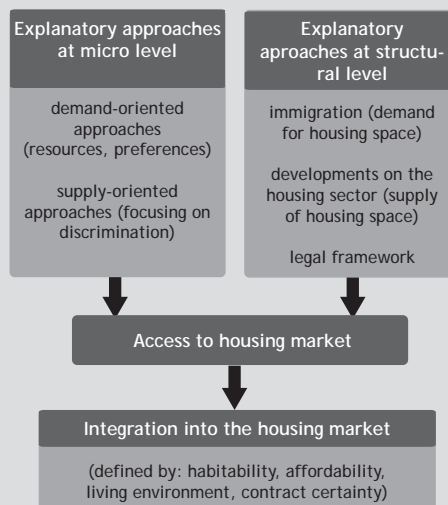


fig. 1: Influencing Factors on the Integration into the Housing Market

At the *structural level*, the history of Spanish urbanisation, the developments on the housing market as well as the housing policy have a considerable explanatory value for the migrants' housing conditions. As a result, the Spanish housing stock is characterised mainly by property ownership. An almost inexistent segment of rental units and the exorbitant price increase on the real estate market within the past few years make it difficult for migrants to gain access to housing space, especially for those with a low income and no residence permit.

Examining the significance of household resources and preferences concerning housing conditions at a *micro level*, there usually is only a small explanatory value. Associated with the increase of resources over time (e.g. knowledge of the language and the functioning of the housing market, obtaining steady employment) as well as the reunification of families, the migrants' preferences adapt to those of the Spanish population.

It is mainly prejudice and discrimination from landlords that hamper the migrants' access to adequate housing. This is reflected in various strategies of landlords in different contexts, ranging the general denial of access to housing space to discrimination in terms of rents and quality. Additionally, the latest developments show that the system of discrimination and exploitation in the accessible housing market segment is reproduced within the migrants' own community. Some migrant groups acquire property in Spain and, as landlords, rent out rooms to less established groups, charging them overpriced rents.

The housing conditions of migrants are therefore not really a question of choice. They are rather a question of barriers that migrants are facing in terms of discrimination through local and migrant landlords as well as the conditions on the housing market.

Perspectives

Though the housing situation of migrants has successively improved over the past few years, we are still a world apart from their integration into the Spanish housing market. Sustainable solution strategies for this problem that are strongly connected with general chances of integration have to take account of the multi-layered magnitudes of influence. Additionally, they will have to create a differentiated structure of supply for diverse needs.



photo 2: Degrading shelter. Photo: S. Meier

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