



Social housing in France: A permanent and multifaceted challenge for public policies



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of the overwhelmingly generous social housing in France that covers a wide spectrum of recipients. Being influenced by electoral power of rotating ruling parties and social ideals, policy formulations are often reflected by idealistic politics which tends to over-stretch the nation's budget and restrict its scope in reaching its target groups. From the 1990s, fund availability has been further hit by economic globalization causing falling business profitability and high unemployment rates affecting notably ethnic minorities. Upcoming social crisis has been met with public response via a series of technical-led remedial acts to promote social integration in housing and by identifying social ills and polarization in sensitive and problematic urban quarters. New technical and financial measures in coping with the complexity and magnitude of social housing are expected to remain highly challenging in the French parliamentary politics.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the nature of social housing and its implementation problems in France as a welfare state. France is selected as a case study as it is representative of the complexity in deploying social housing as welfare provision to the less privileged, yet its implementation is constantly restricted by self-inflicting policy contradictions and national economic performance affecting fund availability. The study of social housing in European welfare states by Scanlon and her counterparts demonstrates remarkably well that they all aim to improve housing conditions for their citizens but are forced to reduce public expenditure by the financial crisis (Scanlon et al., 2014). For France, social housing is situated at the centre-stage of this dilemma which is contextually complicated. Situated in the late industrial capitalism, the French social housing is by no means linear in its development path, and is characterized by both convergence as well as divergence events occurring even within a single municipality over time (Kemeny, 1992; Brouant, 2002), due to different options undertaken by rotating ruling political parties. By Kemeny's (1992) interpretation, convergence implies

that a capitalist state would show signs of developing housing along similar trajectories or objectives with continuity whilst divergence is more often a response to particular needs by the ruling political parties such as physical housing conditions, consumption needs of households and rationale of gathering electoral support.

Though it has never been moved wholesale into the public sector, social housing has been used as a political instrument in the French democratic system where electoral support from disadvantaged groups counts substantially towards return or change for control of political power (Castle, 2004; Chaline, 2011; Driant, 2009a). As such, social housing has played two key roles in the French party politics. The first is to make social housing a highly subsidized item which has appeared *a priori* to be a solution to house the urban poor and those socially disadvantaged as a measure of good governance. Secondly, to guide the course of actions of the social housing policy, a series of laws have been adopted as a legislative tool towards its implementation. Yet, for over half of a century since World War II, there has been a persistent housing crisis characterized by difficulties of access. This posits a permanent and multifaceted challenge in public policies, despite progress in constitutional or conventional rights institutionalized by the French law as well as the European Social Charter which promote housing access in favor of those without adequate resources (Ball, 2011; Council of Europe, 1996; Julienne, 2009).

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Indeed, there is a dilemma and even confusion in the French housing market as France has a “universal” housing policy to house everyone, including the poor (Lévy-Vroelant and Reinprecht, 2014). Housing debates and democratic rights have witnessed the adoption of “the right to property” to protect landlords, and “right to housing” to protect tenants of low-income including the disadvantaged minorities, linked to the “principle of human dignity” (Ball, 2011). France's rights to housing of all citizens on the basis of needs and financial means are believed to be a key source of persistent crisis. Such an encompassing policy covering social housing development, housing subsidies, schemes for rental investment and tenancy guarantee schemes can be seen as a strong social redistribution mechanism of generous allocation of financial resources which are by necessity short in supply, particularly during periods of recurring recessions. For example, in 2008, housing subsidies amounted to merely 37.1 billion euros or 1.9% of the national GDP, hardly enough to go around to meet the objective of promoting housing access, social integration and household improvement facilities such as the heating system. Under the 2007 law of DALO¹ (*droit au logement opposable*—statutory right to housing), some 648,570 households were estimated to be entitled to some kinds of housing aids (Rolland, 2011).

Essentially, this paper aims to address and respond to two key questions: (a) why has a welfare state like France to face persistent housing shortage and poor living conditions of their lower income groups? and (b) what legislative measures have the French authorities taken to manage the housing crisis and inequitable spatial distribution of their social housing? The theoretical framework of the paper is tied in with arguments explaining how rotating ruling governments adjusted and updated tenaciously strategic policies to justify their political responsibility in equity governance via social housing, especially after the socialist government first came to power in 1981 during the era of the Fifth Republic. Before addressing the two research questions, a brief background of the French social housing is first examined.

2. Brief background of social housing in France

In the nineteenth-century France, religious and rising business groups² had acted as a philanthropic incubator towards improving physical living conditions of the urban poor. France's young democratic system then hardly faced any political pressure from the poor as an electoral instrument (Dumont, 1991; Flamand, 1989; Carbonnier, 2008; Chaline, 2011). Having an origin from predominantly “utopian” socialist ideals, and as a response to the early industrial exploitation, “utopian” socialists such as Charles Fourier's (1772–1837) social habitat for workers “living a healthy and harmonious life” and P.J. Proudhon's (1809–1865) activism in labor movements had promoted by consciousness working class welfare (HOR, 2012).

Awareness of working class welfare was especially amplified by the death of 18,000 Parisians from the cholera epidemic in 1832. Such tragic deaths had profound repercussions on social housing as

it attracted social reformists, health and charitable organizations who blamed overcrowding and poor housing in Paris as the key causal factor. Deplorable housing conditions were seen as having harmful effects on workers' economic reproduction ability and on this basis, some manufacturers built decent worker quarters near their factories to provide a more economically productive environment and as a social control mechanism against potential unrest. Another cholera epidemic outbreak in 1849 acted further as a catalyst to expedite this process to improve to an extent workers' habitat (Carbonnier, 2008). Domestic industrial and colonial expansion saw Napoleon III (1850–1870) and subsequently the French parliament using various measures to accommodate rural migrants and workers' living conditions (Stébé, 2009:32). But it was the 1894 Siegfried Law that initiated the first political-driven national low-cost housing policy, which was followed by the 1928 Loucheur Law adopted between the inter-war years. During the immediate post-World War II period, mass production of social housing was politically inspired by Abbé Pierre, a parliament representative, social activist and founder of the Emmaüs movement against social exclusion as a response to the prevailing housing crisis and tragedy.

As a matter of fact, party politics and the voting democracy from the twentieth century had turned out to be increasingly complex, in particular in the post-1945 France as “left-wing” socialist and “right-wing” Gaullist parties realized the importance of using social housing to satisfy rising numbers of low-income working classes following rapid urbanization and industrialization (Stébé, 2009; Sévin and Wong, 2011; Fourastié, 1998). Following the end of World War II featured by post-war economic recovery and restructuring, France saw influx of large numbers of immigrant workers in the lower paid sectors, adding to its working class. On the one hand, as cities expanded towards the suburbs and beyond, social housing was also incorporated within the new towns, and commercially less demanding sites in the suburban zones. A new form of urban habitat had emerged here to accommodate the industrial and low-skilled service workers as a political force in the context of an urbanizing society (Chaline, 2011; Chodorge et al., 2009; Flamand, 1989; Segaud et al., 1998). The “*grands ensembles*” which will be analyzed below is a new urban form.

On the other hand, for ruling political parties, social housing targeted at disadvantaged social groups was a socio-political arena. Here, they had to deal with the issues of social discrimination and exclusionary effects resulting from the supply–demand defects of the real estate market forces discriminating against lower income groups. Policies thus had to be adopted in a sustained manner with law regulations and financial subsidies to direct housing production, aiming at reducing disparity as a political mandate (Chaline, 2011; Lowe, 2004; Malpass, 2008). The following two sections examine the role of politics in the French social housing which provides a basic explanatory framework elaborating why housing shortage and poor housing conditions persist to haunt ruling parties, and the successive law regulations used to deal with social equity issue in relation with social housing.

3. The role of politics in the French social housing policy: persistence in shortages and poor quality European social housing in perspective

In European democracies, social rental housing has been generally used as an income redistributive mechanism and historically as a means to mobilizing the working classes. Their housing policies have been influenced by their respective housing history, socio-economic and demographic factors. The reunification of West Germany and East Germany in the early 1990s, for example, meant more social housing would be required in the economically more developed west to accommodate potential migrants from

¹ The DALO, adopted on 5 March 2007, offers rights to housing for all citizens. Among the 648,570 households affected, six main categories were identified: those without proper shelter; those under expulsion threat without rehousing option; those putting up in temporary shelter; those being accommodated in filthy or insalubrious shelter; handicapped individuals who may live with minors in overcrowded or indecent premises; and those who have been waiting unusually long period of time for new housing (Rolland, 2011; p. 2).

² Most of the early initiatives in social housing provision came from philanthropic or enlightened entrepreneurs and social reformers such as the Association of Entrepreneurs in Mulhouse, manufacturers like Menier in Noisiel (near Paris) or Godin (*famillistère de Guise*). Mulhouse group in 1850 launched the first low-cost social rental housing (*Habitation à bon marché*—HBM).

the less developed east. Moreover, the actual social housing policy put in practice is associated closely with political considerations (Boelhouwer and van der Heijden, 1993; Hoekstra, 2003).

There are largely three models of social housing among the key European Union states. The first is the “residual model” used in the economically less developed southern European and parts of the former Communist states of Eastern Europe where social housing is reserved for the poorest segments of the population. In southern European countries³, self-owned properties are the most prominent, and this means their national budget allocated for social housing would be limited. The second is known as the “generalist model” where social housing is made accessible to a wider cohort of the population by setting a cap to income levels—France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Belgium belong to this category. The “universal model” is the third category which does not have any social target but has an objective to provide subsidized rental housing and rental support. This model is still in practice in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. The choice of model adherence is more a compromised outcome of government or ruling party interests, social and political interactions intervened occasionally by market forces. Empirical evidence has suggested that during the 1970s and 1980s, left-wing ruling parties in Western Europe might not necessarily intervene more than the right-wing parties in favor of social housing (Driant, 2009b).

3.1. The French “generalist” model and practices

Specifically the French law does not give a precise definition of social housing. But in the French context, it may be understood as “housing which has received for its realization direct or indirect aids from public authorities, State or local governments and is explicitly designed to accommodate people with rental matching compatibly their modest incomes” (Stébé, 2009; p. 7). In France’s four different levels of government, the realm of social housing covers more or less the HLM (*Habitation à loyer modéré*) rental housing stock, sometimes extended to include low rental private sector or mixed housing sector, and even old premises governed under the 1948 Rent Control Act of different terms of tenancy. Part of the HLM is nevertheless for sale to qualified households (Voidman, 1988; Driant, 2009a). HLM, by classification, is seen as part of the very social housing or vestibular housing having better status than temporary housing, hostels, foyers whose residents/tenants are in a transitional position waiting for opportunities for possibly upgrading into decent housing on a reasonable time-scale. Access to HLMs would depend very much on locations. Some HLMs have few people in financial hardship whilst some others may have a high concentration of disadvantaged tenants (see Ball, 2005, 2011).

Since the 1970s, the French “generalist” model began to go against the “residual” model by broadening its base of support beyond the poorest segments of the population. Contrary to the “universal” model as adopted by Sweden, for example, whose local governments from the 1990s had begun to reduce rental subsidies, France directed more fund towards its growing social housing market. Despite rising pressure in recent years to consider a greater scope of “residualization” by limiting rental subsidies, France has retained strongly its dynamism in social housing development and moved towards legal strengthening of housing rights for a large proportion of its population (Driant, 2009b; Lévy-Vroclant, 2013; Hoekstra, 2003).

Given “limitations” in public allocations of resources, provision of social housing as a publicly subsidized item has necessarily required the state as a public welfare provider to face the dilemma

of coverage, conditions of access, and offer responses to housing-welfare problems (see Malpass, 2008; p. 2). A comparison across different Western nations has shown a mixed result. The crux of Kemeny–Lowe thesis argues that when more welfare was given to housing, as it was in Sweden, fewer people would own homes (see Kemeny, 1995; Lowe, 2004). The hypothesis of such a “dependency syndrome” is however refuted by the rising homeownership in Britain from 31% in 1951 to 52% in 1971 during a period of rising public welfare spending (Malpass, 2008). Thus, this has to do with rising incomes of households taking place in Britain’s post-1945 era where desire for homeownership would urge families to minimize non-housing expenses in early years in order to lower cost at a later stage for other old age-related expenses.

Economic prosperity which lasted almost 30 years in the post-World War II era, known as “*les trente glorieuses (1945–75)*” in France, had an upward mobility effect. It expanded the private housing opportunities to broader choices of the population, hence reducing pressures of most market-led European economies, including France, in their response to housing affordability problems of lower income groups. Recurring economic recessions from the mid-1970s, then the impact from neoliberal waves with Margaret Thatcher’s privatization measures, had somehow influenced political leadership in handling welfare issues. Budgetary constraints forced politicians to accept self-responsibility and welfare cut, and became less willing or unable to respond effectively to large-scale housing demand and other welfare allocations from the 1980s (see Harloe, 1994; Fourastié, 1998).

Castle’s (2004) observation has revealed another key feature that has made welfare states fall into the trap of vicious cycle of welfare allocations. On one hand, a welfare state has strong commitments of supports towards welfare recipients, making it very difficult to dismiss itself from such obligation. On the other hand, a welfare state is constantly subject to international market pressures arising from recessionary cycles affecting coffer revenues. The two following sub-sections will elaborate with two cases by showing respectively the French model of “*grands ensembles*” as a form of welfare commitment, and France’s world market performance which affects its welfare commitments.

3.2. The “*grands ensembles*”: from problem-solving to downfall

Typically, the “*grands ensembles*” came at an historical juncture as a new product of “post-war machinist era” where stereotypical residential blocks could be mass-produced by the industrialized sector (Tomas et al., 2003). The “*grands ensembles*” consisted of several large and tall blocks of continuous buildings with shared facilities and playgrounds designed for easy access to residents. Constructed with largely concrete prefabricated materials, they were built hastily and economically between the 1950s and the early 1970s to meet large demands for low-cost public rented housing.

At its early stage of development, tall blocks of “*grands ensembles*”, often exceeding 15 storeys, were seen as a symbol of “social progress” and “modern comfort” (with central heating system, bathroom, piped water, built-in flush toilet, and lift). This “image of modernity” incorporating the notion of Le Corbusier’s radiant city was initially not designed for low-income people but to facilitate social integration with a mix of executives, professionals, middle-level government employees and workers in general (Stébé, 2009; pp. 88–92; Tomas et al., 2003). Evolving in its social status over time, the “*grands ensembles*” went through basically three stages from 1952 to the end of 1990s.

Starting as a housing problem-solver in Stage 1 (1952–58), it was a “pet” project of the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urban Planning (*Ministère de la Reconstruction et de l’Urbanisme*) which worked very closely with private enterprises. Stage 2 (1958–1973)

³ In Spain, 82% of the families lived in self-owned houses or apartments in the early 2000s (Driant, 2009b).

marked the period of massive construction that the 'grands ensembles' were incorporated into two spatial planning schemes: ZUP (*Zones à Urbaniser en Priorité* from 1958) and replaced in 1967 by ZAC (*Zone d'Aménagement Concerté*). Over 1.4 million dwelling units were built across France in the ZUPs, and for large cities at their urban fringes or suburbs (Sévin and Wong, 2011).

By 1973, however, the weaknesses including fear of ghettoization, rising unpopularity of this habitat were already well visible, as a result of which a circular by Olivier Guichard, then Minister of Equipment, Housing and Tourism (1972–1974) precluding any further large-scale construction of 'grands ensembles'. Of the total three million HLM units built till 1975, only 900,000–950,000 units or one-third were classified as the "grands ensembles". The oil crisis (1973–1975) had exacerbated the social housing problem with rising unemployment, run-away inflation, and start of ethnic minority concentration in some Parisian suburbs. This transitional period of virtual inactivity lasted four years from 1973 to 1977 before Stage 3 started from 1977 to the end of the "grands ensembles" programme in 1998 focusing on physical rehabilitation and improvement of the habitat (Driant, 2012; Tissot, 2008).

During the early stage of "grands ensembles" development, the French private sector was called upon to help address the post-war housing crisis. As suggested earlier, the private sector had a philanthropic tradition-cum-social ethic in favor of the working class. Functioning in the form of mixed economy enterprises (*société d'économie mixte*) where public and private capital, public corporations and private managerial approach were combined to perform tasks of public interest meant, for the state, not merely a relief to its fiscal burden but also higher efficiency in delivery. Private investors were also attracted by the fact that in their partnership with local governments, it was the latter that bore the sole responsibility for financial losses. During the period 1965–1978, France built nearly half a million new housing units for all income groups yearly in which 80% received government assistance. Of these units built, one-quarter were built by public-private ventures responsible for "grands ensembles" (Eisinger, 1982).

The mass production of "grands ensembles" was not without its social cost. Grouping large numbers of low-income families in a highly subsidized high-rise habitat where maintenance and quality services were difficult to come by had proved to be a failure in subsequent decades in social integration and justice (Driant, 2012; Flamand, 1989). Leaving the relatively low physical quality of "grands ensembles" alone, the socio-political objective of rehabilitation was primarily targeted at delinquency, unemployment, communal integration, social marginalization and exclusion. Such measures came as a convergence of the central right wing administration and the left wing urban populists who were more influential in municipal local governments whose "grands ensembles" could vary substantially from each other. Essentially, this depended on resources available and location of suburbs, measures taken ranged from mild rehabilitation to total demolition in some cases (Tomas et al., 2003; Tissot, 2008). Having portrayed the failure of the high-rise and high-density residential habitat as a cheap measure to meet the needs of the lower-income groups, we next examine how international market has affected France as globalization intensifies over the last three decades.

3.2.1. Recurring recessions and globalization impact on social housing

The magnitude of the French urban crisis is a multi-dimensional expanding crisis epitomized in the realm of housing (shortage, social tensions and unrest). Post-oil crisis since the 1980s saw growing unemployment, recurring recessions that resulted in impoverishment of the lower middle classes, slowing down of building activities due to declining birth rates, and ineffective demand (see Ball, 2011; Kemeny, 1995; Harloe, 1994). Persistent

high unemployment rates affected one-tenth of the active population, and over one-fifth of the younger generations and low-skilled workforce. For the latter, globalization effects are to a great extent responsible in an advanced economy like France.

For most Western capitalist economies, the recessionary 1980s was further hit by intensification of economic globalization that emerged following the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. It is a transformed circumstance of global change that had produced new international division of labor with new winners and losers (O'Brien and Leichenko, 2003). The subsequent fall in profitability in the capitalist core had affected the capital-labor relationship caused by "supply side" crisis. Slow-down of productivity, rising labor costs and rising prices of primary commodities from less developed countries had lowered France's competitive edge. Furthermore, the low ability in "liberal flexibility" to capital-labor relationship in negotiating employment laws and wage rise demands had led to proliferation of insecure jobs. Such failed compromise had forced European industries to shift overseas, and from the mid-1990s, to China (Lipietz and Cameron, 1997). Subsequent post-Fordist innovations in new technology and knowledge-intensive industries ably using flexible specialization and management measures did not benefit the less skilled working classes. On the contrary, such innovative measures had a counter-effect—the deskilling effect of low-skilled workers where they were losers experiencing deprivations in a new pattern of inequities brought about significantly by the globalization processes (O'Brien and Leichenko, 2003; Brady and Denniston, 2006).

Lipietz and Cameron's (1997) study also shows that, among the most advanced capitalist countries, France's ability in negotiated involvement at sectoral level was situated at the lower level of effectiveness, as compared to Japan, Germany and Sweden. Consequently, there has been a shrinking share of manufacturing employment and stagnation of average real wages in much of France. Despite rapid growth in trade and capital investment between advanced and developing countries, it was found that manufacturing employment in most advanced countries fell from 40% in the 1960s to below 25% by 2001. Skill-biased technological change had contributed to the widening inequality of earnings between skilled and unskilled workers (Rowthorn and Ramaswamy, 1997; Brady and Denniston, 2006; Kollmeyer, 2009; Silva and Leichenko, 2004). Deindustrialization and expansion of international trade accompanied by massive imports of cheap goods from low-cost countries had hit hard low- or unskilled workers in advanced economies where established welfare system and relatively high cost of living have rendered difficult to use unskilled workforce in low-value manufacturing sectors (Wood, 1995; Dicken, 2004). New challenges have resulted in new social housing schemes.

The impact on housing supply and quality is hence clear. By 2000, France had a population of 60.5 million and faced a housing shortage of 850,000 units. Of its national housing stock of 28.7 million units, 16.2 million were individual houses, 12.5 million multi-family housing (apartment buildings). Whilst two million dwelling units were unoccupied, about four million people lived in precarious, dilapidated, substandard or unacceptably small housing conditions (INSEE, 2013). Characteristically, housing shortages and poor housing are reflected in five dimensions: (a) absence of personal housing; (b) difficulty in access; (c) poor conditions of housing; (d) maintenance problems; and (e) blockage of upper residential mobility. The Abbé Pierre Foundation estimated that in the early 2010s, 3.5 million of French citizens were victims of poor housing conditions and 8.7 million or 14% of the total population lived in poverty (Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2014; Julienne, 2009).

Rental social housing stock accounted for 4.1 million units, housing 10 million inhabitants, managed by HLM public and private corporations. Since 2000, 2% of the gross domestic product

is allocated yearly to social housing adding 450,000 households into its stock but satisfying less than half of applicants. In order to reduce housing shortage, construction programmes had been planned to produce annually 300,000 units from 2000 to 2005, and 400,000 units from 2006. Budgetary allocations meeting household resources requirements had decreased, by contrast, from 67% to 40% during the same period (INSEE, 2013; Stébé, 2009). This period also saw rising demand from middle classes competing for more budgetary support towards their designated housing programmes. As a result, social housing had received less investment in rental loans for social use (*prêts locatifs à usage social—PLUS*) and subsidized rental loans for social integration (*prêts locatifs aidés d'intégration—PLAI*). What follows is an additional issue that needs to be dealt with: the spatial injustice and discriminating and exclusionary tendencies, and legislated actions adopted to manage them. Inevitably, this swamps the financial resources disposable for social housing budget as it is based on a "generalist" formula targeting at large cohorts of social groups. In 2010, about 10 million people or 17.3% of the French population were tenants of social housing units (Lévy-Vroelant, 2013).

3.2.2. Uneven territorial distribution of social housing

As argued above, fall in international competitive edge and profitability, and subsequent neo-liberal measures adopted in the post-Cold War era did have an effect on France's public housing schemes. At the same time, mega-urbanization process led by profit-led mega-projects brought in also harsh land competitions leading to exclusiveness and social exclusion, notably in the Paris–Ile de France region. Land and housing shortage has edged out social-oriented projects. Thus, only 10% of the new social housing buildings are located in the Paris region where almost 20% of the French population lives (Chodorge et al., 2009).

Uneven distribution across France is attributable to two main factors. First, French social housing is primarily financed through an institutional mechanism (SCIC—*Société civile immobilière centrale*), relying upon national savings (through the *Caisse des dépôts et consignations*) which require increasingly participation of local governments and the private sectors in the mixed enterprises (*société d'économie mixte*). An example of private HLM organizations is "*Logement Français*" which owns 1% of all French housing stock. With a delivery system based on the evaluation of applicants' needs and established through specific assistance and loans programmes, this makes distribution highly complicated and excessively fragmented. On one hand, the assistance coverage has to include the lowest income groups with rental subsidies, and on the other hand, it has to provide rental loans to other middle income groups to achieve a better social mix. About two-thirds of the French households are eligible for this programme. Even higher income middle classes which make up 14% of the population are entitled to certain financial aids (Marchal and Stébé, 2010). Substantial coverage and social polarization have consequently called for more private involvements.

Second, the importance of the role of local governments in social housing has been growing, particularly after the reform undertaken by the socialist government in the early 1980s. The French social housing has then become a highly decentralized local creation adapted to local needs, or at least financially supported by local collectivity whose competence authority can be different from the central state. In other words, social housing is a local initiative serving the national objective implemented in the form of localized politics. The central state intervenes only partly in the housing activity of the local government (Brouant, 2002; Lévy-Vroelant and Reinprecht, 2014; Julienne, 2009). Arguably, therefore, it is the local government which assumes the key responsibility in executing the housing policy. This is particularly true if housing development is associated with social issues, including those in favor of disadvan-

tagged groups (Segaud et al., 1998; Stébé, 2009). Policy measures aimed at managing social polarization and exclusion issues come by all means from the central state.

3.2.3. Social polarization and anti-exclusion measures

During the past decades, the French legislative and institutional measures adopted for tackling social polarization and social housing issues have had different focuses varying, for example, from sectoral to holistic, from decentralization to recentralization, and from rental housing to privatization (see Driant, 2009a). Recentralization refers predominantly to residential segregation of immigrant groups. Since the 1960s, as their numbers rose dramatically as a result of labor demand and progressive ease of restrictions on family reunions, such concentration of immigrant minorities has been a cumulative process of relative poverty linked to low socio-occupational status, unemployment, and shared ethnic identification and socio-cultural practices. Spatially, they are concentrated in the rent-controlled and subsidized social housing neighborhoods in France and elsewhere in Europe. By 1999, almost 48% and 43.5% of immigrant groups from the Maghreb and the rest of Africa lived respectively in social housing neighborhoods in French cities, as compared to 19.7% of French natives (Verdugo, 2011; Table 1). Pan Ke Shon's study (2010) found that immigrants of African origins have weaker upward social mobility and they tend to stay more permanently in disadvantaged neighborhoods than those of European origins.

In French politics following especially the suburban riots in 2005, the emergence of ethnic enclaves in high-rise suburban rental housing, spatial segregation and social exclusion has called for urgent actions in its policy agenda whilst the extension of social care towards middle income households must also not be ignored. With the spread of fear that social housing system might be acting as a ghetto producing mechanism (Préteceille, 2007), Jacques Donzelot (2004) interpreted social polarization was a consequence of a three-speed urban-territorial structure, as follows:

- HLM estates classified as *Zones Urbaines Sensibles (ZUS)*⁴ have been disenfranchised to the lowest status of habitat;
- Gated communities at peripheral areas close to HLM housing estates have lost their real estate value and exposed their residents and school going children to risk of security; and
- Central city areas have been rehabilitated and gentrified resulting in rising property values, excluding low-income groups.

Both Préteceille (2007) and Donzelot (2004) have argued that access to basic housing ought to include not only low-income groups, but also those currently deprived of access: the homeless-jobless, and the illegally employed immigrant workers. Also, as ethnic origins have become visible targets of socio-spatial (formal and informal) issues, racist and communal reactions could emerge and crystallize, becoming highly sensitive in times of very complex critical situation and recurring economic recessions (Guilluy, 2010). In justifying governance, these phenomena have required the public authorities to take legislative measures, which as evidence has later shown have had limited success.

3.2.4. New approaches to social housing: HVS and DSQ schemes

In retrospect, both legal framework and public housing production were used from the end of nineteenth century as intervention acts. Examples can be traced from the birth of the "French

⁴ ZUS or sensitive urban zones are zoning areas of planning policy to include social housing. Less than 30% of the areas are built with HLM. Given their strong communal independence spirit, relatively few very poor and ethnic minorities have been accepted.

Association of Low-cost Housing”—*Société française des habitations à bon marché* (SFHBM) in 1890 led by Jules Siegfried, and the adoption of the Siegfried Law in 1894 to launch the HBM system by giving incentives like tax exemption to non-profit organizations to fund low-cost rental houses for wage earners. During bad times in the early twentieth century, three new laws (1906 Loi Strauss, 1908 Loi Ribot and 1912 Loi Bonnefoy) were promulgated to facilitate loans, land allocations, development procedures (Dumont, 1991; Flamand, 1989: 104–116).

In 1977, a pioneer programme, called the “Housing and social life”—*Habitat et Vie Sociale* scheme (HVS), was launched with an aim to upgrade first generation dilapidated housing estates involving resident participation. Managed by an interministerial committee, HVS was the first step of the “Policy for the city” approach, which coordinated contracts between municipalities, HLM corporations and the government in order to upgrade about 50 urban “quarters” in the suburbs.

But it was in 1981 following the socialist presidential victory of François Mitterand that the real territorial and social urban development policy was implemented in the ZUP quarters, and dramatic decentralization of power to local governments. Mitterand also set up a national commission “For the social development of the districts” (*Développement Social des Quartiers—DSQ*) as a platform for contract negotiations with local governments prepared to implement development projects in their “problematic” districts. Twenty-two out of 148 districts were involved and offered in 1984 budget allocations from the state under the new decentralization laws. This programme was partly meant to manage youth violence and delinquency, by setting up priority education zones (ZEP) and a mission called “banlieues 89” (Peralva, 2005). Other new institutions like the “Interministerial Delegation for the City and Urban Social Development (DIV)” were established to deal with urban issues including social exclusion (Chaline, 2011).

3.2.5. Besson law against exclusion

The rise in social tensions at the end of 1980s and the outbreak of riots in the beginning of the 1990s in the suburbs of the French large cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille) led to the creation of the Ministry of the City tasked at better social integration in the cities. This trend marked the turning point towards emphasis on social integration and right to housing in policy orientation. Three laws were passed towards this end: (a) the Right to Housing—Loi Besson, 1990; (b) Financial Solidarity between the Communes 1991, which requires the contribution of the wealthiest communes to help the poorest; and (c) the 1991 Orientation Law for the City (LOV) aiming to integrate ‘problematic’ districts within the city and organize the ‘harmonious coexistence’ of diverse social groups (Tissot, 2008).

Besson Law had laid the legal foundation in placing housing as a duty of solidarity and the right to housing to disadvantaged groups in the whole nation. Article 1 of the Besson Law of 29 May 1990 (no. 90-449) promised financial aids this way:

Every person or family experiencing particular difficulties, particularly by reason of insufficiency of financial resources or their condition of existence, has the right to an aid from the government, in the conditions fixed by the present law to obtain access to a decent and independent home or to maintain themselves there (Scanlon and Whitehead, 2011).

Thus, the Besson Law acted as a socio-economic redistributor of income. Through housing allowances, its people’s approach allocating direct financial resources might cover up to 60% of the rental value of poorest households (Scanlon and Whitehead, 2011). It also provided an in-principle agreement between the government, the local authorities and the HLM housing corporations that financial resources were made available to enlarge housing supply for low income people or families, including social rental housing. A spe-

cial Housing Solidarity Fund would help eligible households to have financial access to housing, furnish their dwellings or to protect them with loans and subsidies in case of unpaid rent, and also to find jobs. The local representative of the state (the ‘*préfet*’) has an in-principle obligation to avoid social exclusion by setting priorities in the social housing delivery system, even though it seems difficult to abolish the selective mechanism of the public housing corporations in processing applications for assistance. As said earlier, the disadvantaged groups have to overcome a series of guarantees set by the HLM housing corporations which are often limiting factors to access.

3.2.6. Towards a new geography of priorities: ZUS, ZFU, ZRU

From the late 1990s, French government’s attention turned more to segregation in suburbs and the continued difficulty in housing access. State interventions were taken to reactivate the ‘problematic’ housing districts. Some 44 “Zones franches urbaines” (ZFU), the most handicapped zones, 372 “Zones de redynamisation urbaine” (ZRU), regenerating zones, and 334 “Zones urbaines sensibles” (ZUS), urban sensitive zones were set up nationwide.

These new acts were pro-integration by policy intention which encouraged a mix of social groups in same estates. Aids to middle-class housing programmes are integral of this integration policy which provide subsidized social rental housing scheme (*Prêt locatif social*). Indeed, middle classes with higher incomes have gained considerable access to public housing, subject to local governmental decisions and allocation preferences. However, by the mid-2000s, two-thirds of French cities did not reach the national objective of 20% set by the SRU law (Law of Solidarity and Urban Renewal, enacted in 2000) to provide decent housing to disadvantaged groups. In the Paris Region—*Ile de France*, for instance, close to half of its 181 districts failed this target. Wealthy districts like Neuilly-sur-Seine and Le Raincy had less while other less well-off districts such as Le Mesnil-le-Roi (Versailles) and Saint-Cloud (Paris) have built more social housing units than required (Le Nouvel Observateur, 2008). It was observed that many elected local authorities are more prepared to pay penalties for non-observance of the law, rather than taking the risk of offending the electorate who view social housing as a depreciating factor (Scanlon and Whitehead, 2011).

3.2.7. Law of solidarity and urban renewal (SRU): for a better territorial balance and mix of social groups

Having a strong orientation against exclusion, SRU supports urban renewal and stipulates that, at the national level, social housing must be maintained at least at 20% of the municipal housing stock for townships of more than 50,000 inhabitants. This means throughout France, 736 such municipalities would need to build an average of 20,000 social dwelling units per year (DIV, 2004; La Documentation Française, 2010). As said, the SRU law of 2000 has aimed at a more balanced socio-spatial distribution of low-income (sub-) urban population by introducing measures in favor of a larger social mixing in the housing districts and estates. Also, in accordance with the 1999 law on inter-municipal development (*Loi Chevènement*), the new territorial planning approach (schemes of territorial coherence—SCOT—and local urban development plans—PLU) have been equipped with integrative measures such as mass transportation and integrative environment and urban forms. They were later complemented by the 2003 “Orientation and Programming Law” for urban renewal measures, then by the 2005 “Law on Social Cohesion”, enforced respectively by two new institutions: *Agence nationale pour la rénovation de l’habitat* (ANRU—National agency for housing renewal) and *Agence pour la cohésion sociale* (ACS—Agency for social cohesion) (Chaline, 2011: 48–63). In 2007, these institutions were placed under the jurisdiction of a new ministry in charge of housing and city development.

Truly, the specified zones of planning (ZFU, ZRU, ZUS) have been integrated in the 2003 “Orientation and Programming Law” for the city and urban renewal, which is partly financed by the 1% employer’s contribution to the CDC (*Caisse des dépôts et consignations*). The Law has brought in the concept of demolition–reconstruction and urban renewal against the previous concept through upgrading in the sensitive urban zones (ZUS). Some 750 districts and neighbourhoods with about five million inhabitants nationwide particularly hit by unemployment crisis have been selected for renewal. Between 1990 and 2000, the unemployed grew from 400,000 to 500,000 in these zones, accounting for about 22% of their population. Features in these zones include: (a) the majority of the population living in HLM rental flats are not subject to income tax; (b) 30% of the tenant households of HLM flats within the ZUS live below the poverty line—*seuil de pauvreté*; and (c) large numbers of single parent families, young households in precarious financial conditions, poor immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa, school dropouts, and low-skilled workers (Scanlon and Whitehead, 2011; Guilluy, 2010: 39–56; Cour des Comptes, 2012; Toqueux and Moreau, 2002). All these features provide a vivid narrative of living clusters or enclaves of poverty, in contrasted symmetry to the gated communities and well-off districts within often identical urban areas.

4. Concluding remarks

Social housing has played multiple social functions in European democracies: an element of welfare provision, a factor for mobilizing working classes, a compromised issue in coalition government for popular support (Hoekstra, 2003). In France, pursuits for improved housing and living conditions went on par with its pace of industrialization and urbanization from the nineteenth century. Along with this also emerged the urban working classes whose poverty and deplorable housing conditions captured the attention of the embryonic capitalist state. Social housing was a response to social ideals and as a force of labor reproduction. As a democratic and electoral-based state, French successive governments have assumed the role as the key provider and manager of public-subsidized social housing as part of their political mandate and good governance.

Post-World War II has seen implementation of social housing evolving gradually from centralized control to decentralized management style, and being expanded in its scope to include middle classes and to engage private sector involvement. After the 1980s, the French local governments have taken over the implementation responsibility and are a decision-maker and financier to conduct programmes suited to the needs of different social groups. A tendency is to provide a social mix including the provision of decent housing of social character and that for the middle classes (Brouant, 2002; Kam et al., 2014). The broad coverage of subsidies to include middle classes and the policy objective that all citizens should be housed in accordance with their means have in reality over-stretched the social housing budget. Additionally, the social integration policy of solidarity reinforced since the turn of the 21st century has tended to use housing allocations to encourage middle classes to live in the midst of low-income families. Both factors have been to an extent responsible for reducing supply of social housing in favor of low-income groups. In sum, the French housing policy has been increasingly influenced by electoral power which has become the fundamental of statecraft practiced as realistic politics and in policy terms reflected as idealistic politics. The end product were often newly formulated laws ideally and contradictorily designed which were inclined to over-stretch the nation’s subsidy nets, thus restricting its scope in reaching its social housing target groups.

Despite collaboration from the private sector, there is limited success in solving housing shortage and poor quality problems. In local governments’ collaboration with the private enterprises, the former’s obligation to bear all risks of loss had inevitably led to their over-cautiousness in the choice of projects at the expense of socially justifiable but financially unsound projects. The choices were often preferences towards mixed income housing which promised higher rental and returns, and characteristically a middle course “between full socialization and the inefficiency of capitalism” (Eisinger, 1982; p. 146). From the 1980s, nevertheless, private sector has largely moved from low-profit towards higher profit pursuits. Budgetary constraints apart, the “dependency syndrome” of disadvantaged groups is a rising concern in times of recurring economic recessions affecting the state coffers. Globalization impact and the resultant new international division of labor on welfare states like France have led to falling business profitability and weaker competitiveness in its conventional manufacturing, as well as persistently high domestic unemployment rates. On the other hand, innovative knowledge-intensive industries taking place in France have benefited little its young unemployed and low-skilled workers. A case in point is the once highly industrialized north and north-east of Paris, known for its high concentration of ethnic minorities, and unemployed youth.

With the ending and failure of the high-rise and high-density “*grands ensembles*” in the 1990s, social housing had lost a key pillar of support towards disadvantaged and immigrant groups. Furthermore, local governments’ decentralization power in social housing construction, influenced by municipal election process, and rising land prices, has also produced uneven distribution of social housing across France. In spatial terms, social housing sites have proliferated to urban fringes and suburbs for cheaper supply of land and living space. However, the identification of suburban crisis with immigrants and ethnicity as the source of riots and social unrest has proved to be a “simplistic” interpretation of social and economic ills resulting from high rates of unemployment, unskilled workforce and ineffective demand to housing due to low incomes. In countering social ills and polarization, accelerated by economic globalization from the 1990s, a series of remedial acts have been adopted by the French parliament to identify problems of sensitive quarters and priority development zones in suburban zones, in the form of urban renewal, anti-exclusion, and job training measures.

In conclusion, public laws or by-laws on social housing have been formulated one after another in order to respond to the structural social, economic, and territorial problems that the housing sector is crystallizing (Kanner, 2015). These problems are now further complicated by the hazards of international migration which exerts increasing adverse effects on France’s growing rates of unemployment and homelessness. As the “generalist” model continues, there will be more urban districts eligible for special development assistance under the New National Programme for Urban Redevelopment 2014–2024 (NPNRU—*Nouveau Programme National de Renouveau Urbain*). With the ALUR law (*Loi pour l’accès au logement et un urbanisme rénové*) adopted in 2015, low-income households are anticipated to enjoy greater rent control benefits. On the face of it, new technical and financial measures in implementing and coping with the complexity and magnitude inherent in the French housing policy and issues will remain highly challenging.

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