

Factors Contributing to the Development and Maintenance of Informal Settlements in Jamaica

Nicola C. Williams, Julie L. Drolet, & Christine A. Walsh
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

Background

The opportunities and risks associated with residential environments require a transdisciplinary approach to research and interventions (Horlick-Jones & Sime, 2004). Given the variety of factors that impact the ability of vulnerable groups to have secure housing, a key component of social, economic and environmental wellbeing, social workers must engage in research that challenges disciplinary silos. Timeline mapping is a useful tool for gaining insight into significant events in society that shape social, political and economic relationships among people as well as the natural environment (Basnet et al., 2023). These complex and compounding experiences render disciplinary focus inadequate if the aim is to develop a comprehensive understanding of issues and generate practical, context specific solutions.

Squatter settlements have emerged as a housing solution for people who have historically been systematically marginalized from property ownership. However, the discussion of squatter (or informal) settlements, often focus on the social and economic ills experienced by informal households and/or communities without accounting for the historical, social and political dynamics that result in the development and maintenance of informal settlements in Jamaica.

Introduction

Squatting commonly referred to in Jamaica as “capture land” is the occupation or use of land or buildings without any legal arrangements or permission from the legal owner (Reeves, 2011; Tindigarukayo, 2002). Approximately 20% of the Jamaican population live in a squatter household (Statin, 2013). Squatter (informal) communities, are often characterized by insecure tenure, hazard-prone locations, and limited resources, and are vulnerable to the deleterious effects of accelerating climate change (Brooks, 2016; Clarke, 1983, 2006; Goffe, 2017).

Unfortunately, regulatory governance framework, limited resources, and stigmatization of squatter settlements can create barriers to working with the communities toward the creation of appropriate response strategies (United Nations, n.d). A consequence is a dearth of published literature that examines the underlying causes of the formation, maintenance, and expansion of squatter settlements in Jamaica. In order to develop suitable strategies for working with informal communities, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to their establishment and maintenance.

This poster presents a timeline of the factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of squatter settlements and offers insight into additional areas for research to engage informal settlements towards sustainable development and adaptation to climate events.

Evolution of Land Tenure Practices in Jamaica

1494: Spanish Europeans made first contact with Jamaica and the Taino people who are on record as the first inhabitants of the island. Jamaica was claimed for the Spanish Crown (Spain).

1510: Spanish set up their first settlements on the island becoming the first squatters in Jamaica. They established towns and plantations near the coast to provide food for their ships on expeditions seeking gold and capturing other territories to claim for Spain. Transported enslaved Africans to Jamaica to labour on these plantations.

1655: British captured Jamaica from the Spanish. Jamaica became a British colony, and all land was deemed by the British, property of the British crown or crown land. During the Transition from Spanish to British rule Africans enslaved on Spanish plantations escaped to the mountains. They became known as the Maroons.

1681: Introduction of land management system by way of the Letters of Patent law enacted by Britain, which governed the registration of ownership, transfer or lease of land.

1739: After years of war with the British to maintain their freedom, the Maroons were granted political autonomy and rights to their settlement by Britain. This treaty agreement and protection of Maroon settlements is still upheld by the Government of Jamaica.

1834: Slavery was abolished followed by 4 years of apprenticeship period that kept formerly enslaved Africans on plantations as free labourers.

1838: Formerly enslaved people were emancipated and began moving away from plantations to settle unutilized crownlands as a way of escaping poor living conditions on the plantations.

1865-66: The continued maltreatment by the white plantocracy, and the poor standard of living afforded to free Africans resulted in a number of uprising and rebellions including the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion which led to legislative changes by the British Parliament.

1962: Jamaica gained independence from Britain and commenced self governance. Jamaica adopted the British Westminster model which coalesced around two political parties. Independent Jamaica inherited inadequate housing for the (majority) working class population as well as, the racist-classist social hierarchies which fomented into partisan violence and social welfare tied to political patronage. Jamaica's independence brought with it the Constitution which safeguards the rights of every citizen to adequate shelter and a healthy environment. However, Jamaica's economic, social and political upheavals have undermined the state's capacity to ensure that the most vulnerable have access to adequate housing and a safe environment. Thus, squatting, sometimes in locations that are hazard prone, continues to be a response to the inadequate housing and challenges to securing legal tenure faced by different groups in society.

KEY PERIODS INFLUENCING LAND TENURE/DISTRIBUTION AND SQUATTING IN JAMAICA



1494-1655
Spanish Capture and Rule
Xaymaca (Jamaica) captured for the Spanish Crown. The Taino people, on record as the first inhabitants of Xaymaca, were displaced and annihilated by diseases and enslavement brought by the Spaniards. The Spanish set up plantations which they sustained by trafficking enslaved Africans to Jamaica.



1655-1838
British Capture and Rule
Africans escaped enslavement and settled the hilly interior during the British war with the Spanish to capture Jamaica for the British Crown. British expansion of the slave trade and establishment of the plantocracy. Introduction of colonial policies that continue to shape land use and property rights legislation.



1838-1962
Emancipation - Pre-Independent Jamaica
Failure of planter class to treat free blacks with dignity, economic turmoil and high cost of living on the plantation resulted mass movement to vacant crown land. The establishment of colonial laws to force free people back into the plantation system.



1962-1980s
Early Independence
The clash of political ideologies and partisan violence resulted in displacement from slum areas to rural communities and led to the development of political garrisons in urban slums.



1990-2024
Varied responses to Squatting
The introduction of various Government initiatives to support land titling and regularisation as well as the legitimization of some squatter (informal) settlements in Jamaica. Efforts tainted by partisan influence

Conclusion

The complexities of the lived experiences of squatter settlements cannot be neatly captured in a linear model. However, this timeline provides insight into key factors, which transcend disciplinary boundaries, that contribute to the disparities in land tenure, use and development in present day Jamaica. These factors include critical historical, economic and legislative events that continue to determine the patterns of settlement, right and access to property in Jamaica. The intersection of these factors must be explored if work with informal communities are to produce appropriate responses to the lived experiences of squatters in Jamaica as we seek to facilitate environmental justice and climate adaptation that is sustainable and responsive to the needs of all citizens.

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