

P55 - The making of target publics for welfare policies. A multilevel approach

The intermediaries of public housing in a postcolonial context : street level bureaucrats trajectories and remit in Mayotte

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Introduction

When the Comoro Islands gained independence in the 1970's, only Mayotte, out of the four islands of the archipelago, remained under French sovereignty. After different statuses, it finally became the 101st French *département* in 2011 ("*département*" being a major French administrative division). As other French Overseas Territories, Mayotte island "is usually considered as the (tiny) remains of French colonial empire, as opposed to decolonized territories or, on the contrary, the inhabitants are also sometimes described as people that democratically chose an original path of decolonization. From a broad sociological perspective, it raises the question of the mechanisms through which entangled historical domination linger, dramatically change or vanish" (Lemercier, Muni Toke, Palomares, 2014).

This research on public housing policies in a postcolonial context has been carried out through three stays for field investigations in Mayotte in 2012 and 2014, based on interviews mainly, but observations and administrative documents have also been collected.

1. Context and problematic

Public housing policies in Mayotte have dramatically changed since 2005. State policymakers intend to redefine the **public housing financing** as well as the ways to **categorize their target publics** (Girard, 2014).

From the 1970s to the 2000s, the State exclusively subsidized low income home ownership through the building of “huts”, nicknamed the “SIM huts” after the name of the public operator of the building and the management of social housing, the SIM, *Société Immobilière de Mayotte*. 17 000 “SIM huts” have been built in order to put an end to “self-made huts” with precarious materials.

From 2005, a series of orders from the Préfet (the local representative of the State) issued several requirements in order to select and give “families living in substandard housing” priority treatment.

These changes have led to:

- new processes of selection of beneficiaries of low-income home ownership programmes
- the complexification of everyday tasks of the intermediaries of public housing
- a sharp decrease in the number of beneficiaries

= our investigations allow to describe and explain these three trends.

Within the organization that represents the French central state locally on Environment, Housing and Planning matters (*Direction de l'environnement de l'aménagement et du logement de Mayotte - DEAL* of Mayotte) social housing policies are carried out under the responsibility of a department head. For more than 20 years, senior engineer civil servants – all of them being white men coming from mainland France - hold this position. Two categories of actors work directly under their responsibility, or in close link with them:

- the DEAL Mahorese subaltern civil servants and
- the Mahorese employees of the Société Immobilière de Mayotte, the SIM, the public operator of the building and the management of social housing.

This paper does not mainly focus on the front office interactions between the potential beneficiaries of public housing policies and the street level bureaucrats. It rather aims at **depicting trajectories and administrative work of the public housing policy intermediate actors in a postcolonial context.**

How do these street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) in the majority mahorese women deal with their duties in everyday work relations? How do they liaise with the French State administration and the local applicants coming from Mayotte ... or from elsewhere¹, in a context of sharp politization of immigration on the island since the political partition of the Comoro archipelago?

The reform requires them to play a specific role in the way applicants' files are set up and how they are followed up. In doing so, they are able to use local languages (shimaore and shibushi) and rely on extensive knowledge of local families.

The reform introduced bureaucratic criteria (i.e. formalized, standardized and impersonal criteria) that restrict conditions of access.

As we said, the low-income home ownership policies now officially targets "families living in substandard housing". Among them, foreigners are overrepresented. However, the formal criteria exclude foreigners *de facto* as it demands a 10 years resident permit, that virtually nobody obtains on an island where undocumented migrants represent one third of the population (Math, 2012).

Potential beneficiaries have to satisfy 4 other criteria:

- age, residence in Mayotte , sources of income
- last but not least, a criteria has become central in this new frame : the State subsidy is "exclusive" *ie* if one person already owns a "SIM huts" she or he cannot be eligible again.

Hence, a great part of the intermediary agents work is dedicated to put together and check information of client files... in a context of revision of State registers [Etat civil] since 2000. In the process, the occidental nomination system has been imposed over the Islamic system, that is to say: Surname/first name.

2. Identification of beneficiaries within the DEAL

The revision of state registers, the exclusivity of the State subsidy and the official prohibition of polygamy are three measures that make more complex DEAL agent's work.

¹ In 2012 the proportion of foreigners reached around 40% of the total population of 212600 persons living on the island, 95% of whom held Comorian nationality and 39% were born on a French territory.(Balicchi et alii, 2012).

Mounia, a category B civil servant² has been asked to work on the file that listed the persons who had already been previously granted a SIM hut. She then started a huge updating work relying upon her extensive knowledge of the state registers reform and of the real situation of families, that is to say their previous and present names and how properties and land circulated within kinships.

Aged 47 Mounia works at the DEAL since 1990. She comes from a family of eleven children. One of her sister have been “departmental councilor” (*conseillère générale*). She speaks shimaore and seems to define herself more like a creole (according Bonniol’s sociological definition: “anybody or anything that has been born/created here without being initially ‘autochtonous’”). She resent to be contained in an intermediary position instead of accessing to executive management position. She links directly her intermediary “racial” position between Mahorese and white “mainland French” to her intermediary professional position.

She explains that she decided to revise thoroughly the file that listed the persons who had already been previously granted a SIM hut. In her view, checking identities and checking the previous attributions aimed at promoting a certain idea of social justice, as for instance her own mother experienced injustice when she was granted a SIM hut. When she started to identify people in the file, it started a conflict with her superior. Why? Probably because it was directly addressing the compromises existing between category A civil servants and mayors. She’s been told: “look at the cat you set among the pigeons...” (“regardes le pavé que tu mets...”)

When she left to another service, this file had been turned into a genuine data base allowing the control of who had been already granted of a SIM hut. When she left, her attributions have been divided into two positions. One position of assistant that have been attributed to a category A mainland French and another, more basic position, dedicated to data capture, filled with a mahorese women, a category B civil servant named Anissat Ibrahim.

For Anissat, becoming a French category B civil servant represents a professional achievement. She explains that she has actively contributed to check names and identities on the data base, along with activities of counseling the target publics. She also participated to the eviction of polygamy from the low income home ownership subsidy application form. As polygamy openly persists in Mayotte in spite of its official prohibition for new weddings since 2005, she is conscious that it will create a

² (*ie* out of the three categories remaining in French public Service A, B, C (D almost disappeared), C who “provide basic clerical work secretarial, support and carry out routine administration” ; B are intermediary category “responsible for basic implementation of policy” just before category A, who are “senior officials that are responsible for executive management and administrative decision making.” Source : *French politics debates and controversies* Robert Elgie and Steven Griggs. London Routledge 2000

distortion between administrative forms and the families real situations, but she nevertheless pleads for the invisibilization of these categories of “second” and “third spouses” (we will examine in section 4 how this reality is nevertheless taken into account). She also advocates for the introduction of the category of “cohabitation” (“union libre”) in the form - which corresponds to her own personal situation.

3. The processes of preselection of households within the SIM

SIM agents now play a key role in the preselection of target publics as they are setting up the files before they are processed within the DEAL. Within the SIM, the “*makaʒi* service” (*makaʒi* means home in shimaore) is the intermediary between local councilors and the DEAL. Saïd has been working for the SIM for more than thirty years. Previously “sales manager” in “sale department”, his job and his service are supposedly more “social” now. For this reason, a new employee has been recruited in 2010: Annette Zaïnou has a BA (licence) in sociology and a “urban territories management” MA (Master). They both insist on their difficulties due to the restrictive criteria that have been defined by the state. Here is the role of the *makaʒi* service in the process:

The local councils have to identify the potential beneficiaries of social housing. On the base of a list of potential candidates that councils give to the SIM, the *makaʒi* service is then the “counter” to set up files. Its agents identify the candidates, help them to set up the file, elaborate financial plans, and then transfer the files to the DEAL. An eligibility committee gathering DEAL civil servants, agents of the *makaʒi* service and local councilors finally deals with the demands.

The *makaʒi* service have been led to anticipate on the restrictive criteria of the DEAL, regarding identity checking and property assets that families may already have. “We can have a list of 50 candidates and finally keep only five of them” explains Annette. On the contrary of the DEAL, they “do fieldwork” in order to present files that are coherent and double checked with what some of them call the DEAL “suspicion data base”. They explain that they want to avoid family to go through long and administrative processes that has little or no chance to succeed.

As the subsidy system for low income home ownership has dramatically changed, households now have to pay much more significant amount of money that needs to be financed through a bank loan. The *makaʒi* service help households to obtain credit, which also means they turn down some of the households that do not have regular and formal economy source of income.

4. Agents assessment of family situations

An important aspect of the selection of the public both the SIM and the DEAL agents operate is linked to their appraisal of the present and future family situation of the candidates. It engages a judgement that can roughly be summarized as “how one can be sure this is a good family who will stay ten years minimum in their house as they are supposed to ?” and “what should be fair criteria ?” Two issues are particularly sensitive : the actual or potential polygamy (and more largely the instability of marital unions) and the presence of children born from undocumented migrants mothers. They are not supposed to exist and/or to be eligible, but they are here. The file corresponds to one person, but requires the name of the partner. Intermediary agents then adopt different logic in the treatment of men and women files.

State agents globally favour women applicants. The idea is to protect women from alleged men fickleness. Mahorese agents may also refer to customary law that ensures married women a house in their mother’s village – in contradiction with French law on succession – tradition that ensure women relative material stability even in case of polygamy or neglect. This favourable attitude remains ambivalent. Agents nevertheless try to evaluate the risk that women remain alone and unable to pay the monthly contribution that is left to the beneficiary (contribution which is much higher than before since the reform). In that case, some agents tend to openly encourage women to keep up the relation as long as possible. In other cases, women can be suspected to “hide” their married condition in a polygamous household and to fraudulently present themselves as single-parent households. (According to E. Lemerrier’s investigations (2015), the same logic have been set for access to welfare (Income of Active solidarity) : husbands’ income are taken into account for each wife who asks to beneficiate of welfare.)

Men’s applications are even more controlled, as they are suspected to be married to several women and/or to have kids with undocumented migrants they can easily “dump”. The control on the number of kids and of the family configuration is done with the Social Security organization and the Family Allowance Fund (CAF). The considerations the agents develop about these undocumented migrant women are ambivalent. On the one hand the vulnerability of undocumented migrants (especially those from Anjouan island) is underlined. On the other hand, the mahorese intermediary agents, who have experienced upward mobility, who conformed themselves to French procreative norms and to mahorese membership (even when they are themselves born in another Comoro island or married to a Comorian) accuse the Anjouanese women to be responsible for the perpetuation of polygamy and more largely of the perpetuation of men’s domination. Men’s sexuality is naturalized (included white men’s) : their alleged natural fickleness is supposedly fostered by these undocumented migrants that are featured as contingents of weakened wives, women of easy virtue and/or prostitutes.

Conclusion

The reorientation of social housing policies has introduced a certain number of new bureaucratic criteria and procedures. Whereas access to low income home ownership used to be considered as a right for each and every mahorese, there is now a drastic selection among candidates that intervenes at every stage of the administrative circuit. Despite little freedom of action given by the administrative categories that prescribe eligibility conditions, in this postcolonial context, DEAL and SIM agents take part in redefining and differentiating the different targets of social housing.

The combination of legal criteria and their interpretation end up to the fact that foreigners are excluded from the “families living in substandard housing” though they are de facto overwhelmingly represented in this target public. Otherwise, the selection of candidates does not depend on the households income as such : it rather has to do with access to formal economy and to bank loans. Finally, the French State tries to avoid, in its administrative routines, the issue of polygamy and the issue of undocumented migrants. The intermediary agents then have to deal with these issues and develop logics of selection that depend on their appraisal of family situation according to entangled ethnic and gender criteria of judgment.

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