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EGYPT POLICY DIALOGUES

## NEW URBAN COMMUNITIES AS ALTERNATIVES TO SLUMS: A CASE STUDY OF EGYPT'S ASMARAT

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In partnership with



WOMEN FOR JUSTICE FOUNDATION

نساء من أجل العدالة

## About the Author

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Cover photo: Al Asmarat area, part of the the social housing project in Mokattam - Cairo, Egypt, June 2022 | (c) Shutterstock

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## Abstract

Egypt is one of the most prominent countries that are facing serious housing and informal settlements issues. The state has, at different times, developed many policies and development programs to deal with these issues. During the last decade, Egypt has witnessed a new development in addressing the issue of informal settlements: the establishment of new urban communities as alternative areas for rehousing those living in slums. This paper analyzes the Asmarat area as the most prominent governmental project in this regard, asking the following questions: To what extent do resettlement areas meet the basic needs of the population? Does the Asmarat project achieve economic, social, and cultural sustainability as a suitable housing project?

The paper reviewed the Asmarat general plan in terms of the density of residential units, the road network, the distribution of commercial activities, green areas, and open spaces. The paper presents the geographical location of the study area, which is the Mokattam neighborhood in Cairo Governorate, and it reviews the general plan and the footprint for the area to be built; the three phases of the project; and the financial cost, which exceeded 3.35 billion Egyptian pounds (about US\$69.8 million), according to what was announced on official websites.

The paper uses the framework of economic, social and cultural rights as an indicator to assess the area. The first indicator assesses the methods of legal security of tenure. All legal safeguards that protect residents from forced eviction should be in place. The second indicator measures access to natural resources, safe drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation, waste disposal, drainage, and access to emergency services. The third indicator assesses the adequacy and affordability of housing costs in relation to personal income and the cost of daily living for individuals and families. The fourth indicator assesses the suitability of housing for family size in terms of space and protection from cold, humidity, heat, and the spread of infections. The fifth indicator assesses access to adequate housing for all those affected by the removal of their homes, and the need for alternative housing. The sixth indicator assesses the suitability of the housing location in terms of the availability of employment opportunities, access to basic and health services, access to health care and education services, and access to social services. The seventh indicator assesses the expression of the housing's cultural and social identity, and the adaptation of the exterior and interior design and landscaping to this end.

## Introduction

Egypt has historically faced serious challenges in the form of housing crises, resulting in the proliferation of informal housing areas. Government policies in the 1960s and 1970s were instrumental in creating a gap between supply and demand in the housing market, leading to an increase in the size of informal settlements. This rise continued at an accelerated rate – with the succession of Egyptian governments and the increase in internal and external migration during the second half of the last century – until informal areas became an integral part of the Egyptian reality. In the new millennium, they were even used as a tool to serve the political interests of governments.

In the last decade, Egypt has witnessed a major development in addressing informal settlements. This development comes in the context of the Cairo 2050 Plan, which was prepared in 2008 by the General Authority for Urban Planning. This project aims to eliminate informal areas in Cairo. The Egyptian government began addressing the problems with these areas in an order determined by the Slum Development Fund's categorization of unsafe areas into four categories according to their degree of severity.

In light of the Egyptian government's treatment of informal areas and their inhabitants, this paper seeks to evaluate the state's general policies for establishing new urban communities as areas for rehousing residents in unplanned and replanned areas. The Asmarat area in the Mokattam neighborhood was chosen for the study; it is one of the government's most prominent urban development projects launched in the last decade to provide alternative housing for relocated residents from a number of informal areas selected by the government for demolition. Asmarat is a new area and has not been the subject of academic studies, except for a few published urban research papers.

At the beginning of the research process, the paper poses a key question: To what extent do alternative urban settlements meet the basic needs of the population? Does the Asmarat project achieve economic, social, and cultural sustainability as an appropriate housing project?

This paper analyzes Asmarat as a suitable residential area within the framework of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Unified Building Law and its executive regulations for unplanned areas and replanning areas, and Law No. 10 of 1990 on expropriation.

# Methodology, Problem, and Objectives

## Methodology

The paper's methodology studies the current situation of Asmarat as one of the alternatives offered by the Egyptian government to solve the issue of informal settlements and uses an analytical framework to compare the residents' current situation in Asmarat to their previous conditions in their pre-relocation areas. The economic, social, and cultural rights framework was used as an indicator for evaluation, and the provisions of General Comment No. 4 on Article 11.1 of the ICESCR were used as axes and indicators for the evaluation of Asmarat in terms of the Egyptian government's commitment to the right to adequate housing as a basic human right. The researcher relied on previous urban studies of the area, government data published on official state websites, and Google Earth to map the area and analyze the master plan. The researcher also conducted field monitoring in 2022, talked to residents via phone and social media at the time of writing this paper (November-December 2023), and compared the observed testimonies with other testimonies of residents published on press websites. The researcher also relied on his monitoring and documentation of the forced evictions and relocation of residents from their original areas to alternative areas at the beginning of 2016.

## Problem

Informal settlements emerged primarily as a result of the absence of sustainable urban planning and the decline of the state's role in predicting the size and requirements of the future population. This was reflected negatively in the government's housing policies and its failure to providing adequate housing that could meet the needs of families. Recently, Egypt has been seriously addressing the issue of informal settlements and the establishment of new urban settlements as resettlement areas. These areas face many challenges, such as the provision of adequate housing and basic services and the sustainable planning of urban, social, and economic communities.

## Objectives

This paper aims to study the general policies of the Egyptian state in planning resettlement areas and interacting with the

residents of unplanned and replanned areas as it attempts to achieve its development goals. The state intends to ensure the sustainability and integration of resettlement areas by pursuing the following objectives that reflect its strategic directives and the expected impact of its policies.

1. Directing the state's public policies to adhere to international standards and treaties, as well as domestic laws and regulations, to ensure international compatibility and compliance.
2. Analyzing the pillars and obstacles that affect urban development processes in resettlement areas, which will help direct policies toward improvement and sustainable development.
3. Integrating the residential, social, economic, cultural, and environmental elements of the community, and recognizing that the preservation of housing protects the dignity and well-being of the individual.
4. Identifying the basic needs of the resettled population by understanding the social, cultural, and economic status of the population, whether those needs are related to housing itself or to other infrastructure and services.

## Alternative Urban Communities

Over the past decade, the Egyptian government has focused on developing informal areas under the Cairo 2050 plan, prepared by the General Authority for Urban Planning in 2008. The plan aims to make the Egyptian capital cosmopolitan, inclusive, and sustainable, with a focus on social justice. The plan includes four main axes: providing affordable housing; developing unplanned areas; eliminating unsafe areas; and ensuring access to services, education, and quality health care for all.<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian government has allocated a number of uninhabited areas within the greater Cairo region to build new urban communities to relocate residents of informal settlements. In addition to Asmarat, these include Badr, al-Mahrousa, Zohour May, Ahalina, and the completion of the Ma'an project.<sup>2</sup>

1 Mostafa Madbouly, "Cairo 2050 Urban Development Strategy for the Greater Cairo Region" (Arabic), *Journal of the Egyptian Society of Engineers*, 2011, available at [https://journals.ekb.eg/article\\_189587\\_333dbabc-4fa18dd8b4f3e4de8146bc7a.pdf](https://journals.ekb.eg/article_189587_333dbabc-4fa18dd8b4f3e4de8146bc7a.pdf)

2 Egypt Without Slums (Arabic), State Information Service, Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt, July 2014, available at <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/> (Egypt Without Slums, 2014).



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## Asmarat Area

Asmarat is located in the Mokattam neighborhood in the southern region of the Cairo Governorate. It consists of 12 neighborhoods: Misr al-Qadima, el-Khalifa, Mokattam, Basateen, Dar el-Salam, Sayeda Zeinab, el-Tebbin, Helwan, al-Maasara, Maadi, Tora, and 15 May City.

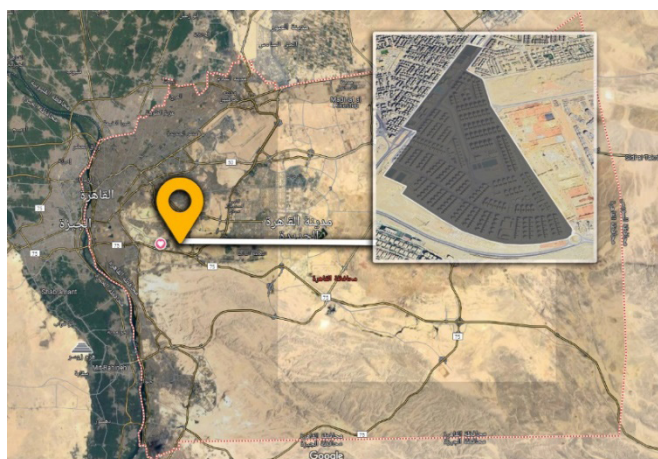


Figure 1: Location of Asmarat area relative to Cairo Governorate.

Source: Google Maps finder setup

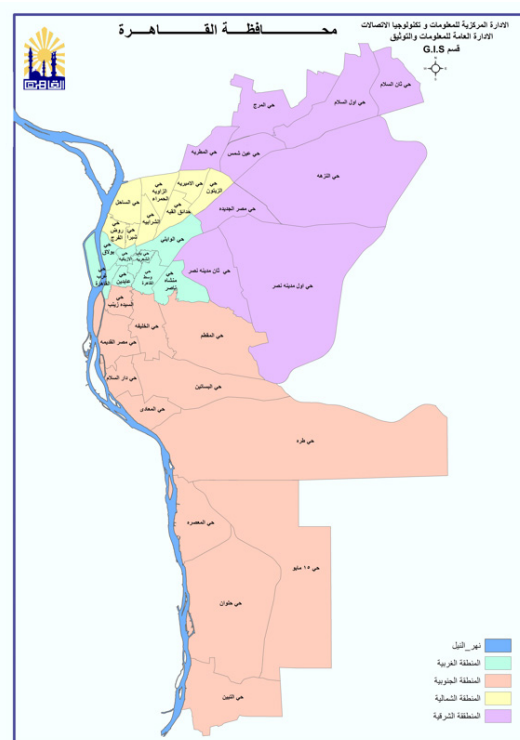


Figure 2: Administrative division of Cairo Governorate

Source: Cairo Governorate Portal.

<http://www.cairo.gov.eg/ar/Pages/Region.aspx?ReID=3>

Mokattam is considered a middle-class neighborhood with most of the basic administrative and social services, large areas, and a backdrop that allows for urban sprawl and the development of existing services. In 2014, the Egyptian government began constructing the Asmarat district between the Upper Hadaba and Middle Hadaba areas in the Mokattam neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> It covers an area of 188 acres, and the construction costs were more than 3.35 billion Egyptian pounds (about US\$69.8 million), from 2014 to 2019.<sup>4</sup> Table 1 below shows the stages of the project, the area of each stage, and the number of residential and commercial units.

Table 1: Phases of the Asmarat project

Phase	Area (acres)	No. of residential units	Building height	No. of shops	Cost (EGP)
First phase	65	6,258	Six stories	240	1.6b
Second phase	61	4,722	Six stories	110	1.6
Third phase	62	7,298	Ten stories	–	1.75b
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>18,278</b>	–	<b>350</b>	<b>3.35b</b>

3 Egypt Without Slums, 2014.

4 “Inauguration of the Third Phase of the Asmarat Project in Cairo Governorate” (Arabic), Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt, available at <https://www.presidency.eg/ar/>

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### Future Urban Extension

The Asmarat area is characterized by a strong urban backbone that is suitable for future expansion in the eastern and southeastern directions. The following figure shows the future growth directions of the area.



Graph 3: Asmarat Urban Area

Source: prepared by the author using Google Earth Maps.

### General plan

The layout of Asmarat is based on a form of the ribbon style that emerged in 1822 created by the architect Surya Mata.<sup>5</sup> The area was divided into three neighborhoods separated by three main roads branching off from a main square. Residential activity dominates land use in the area. It includes four medical units, two ambulances, a clubhouse, five football fields, a bakery, a consumer goods outlet, an open-air theater, a cultural palace, the district headquarters, a police station, civil protection, a post office, a real estate registry, seven nurseries, two schools for primary and preparatory stages, a craft training center, a rosary manufacturing workshop, and a clothing workshop.<sup>6</sup>

5 Ahmed Kamal El-Din Afifi, *Theories in Town Planning* (Arabic), Department of Urban Planning, Faculty of Engineering, Al-Azhar University, available at <https://ia601709.us.archive.org/16/items/planning-theories/Planning-theories.pdf>

6 Mohamed Sobhi Hassan, et al., "Evaluating the Removal and Resettlement Policy for Residents of Unsafe Informal Settlements in Greater Cairo in Light of Sustainable Development Principles: A Case Study, Asmarat Neighborhood as a Model" (Arabic), *Journal of Engineering Sciences and Information Technology*, Vol.7 No.1, 2023, p. 32, available at <https://journals.ajsrp.com/index.php/jesit> (Hassan, et al., "Evaluating the Removal and Resettlement Policy")

Figure 4 below shows the analysis of the main area elements in Asmarat, including the relationship of residential buildings to commercial activities and sports areas, green spaces, the division of the road network of the area, and the longitudinal spaces between residential buildings. It shows the dominance of residential uses over the area in contrast to the relatively weak coordination of green spaces and open areas. This shows that the planning idea for the area relied on providing the largest number of housing units as a quick solution for relocating the residents of the areas to be demolished.

The general plan of the area shows a reliance on motorized traffic. The roads surrounding the area are planned with a width of 30m, internal main roads with a width of 20m, secondary roads with a width of 15m, and internal roads with a width of 10m. Longitudinal urban spaces between buildings within the block range from 4m to 8m,<sup>7</sup> while pedestrian walkways and bicycle paths are absent from the plan.

7 Hassan et al., "Evaluating the Removal and Resettlement Policy".

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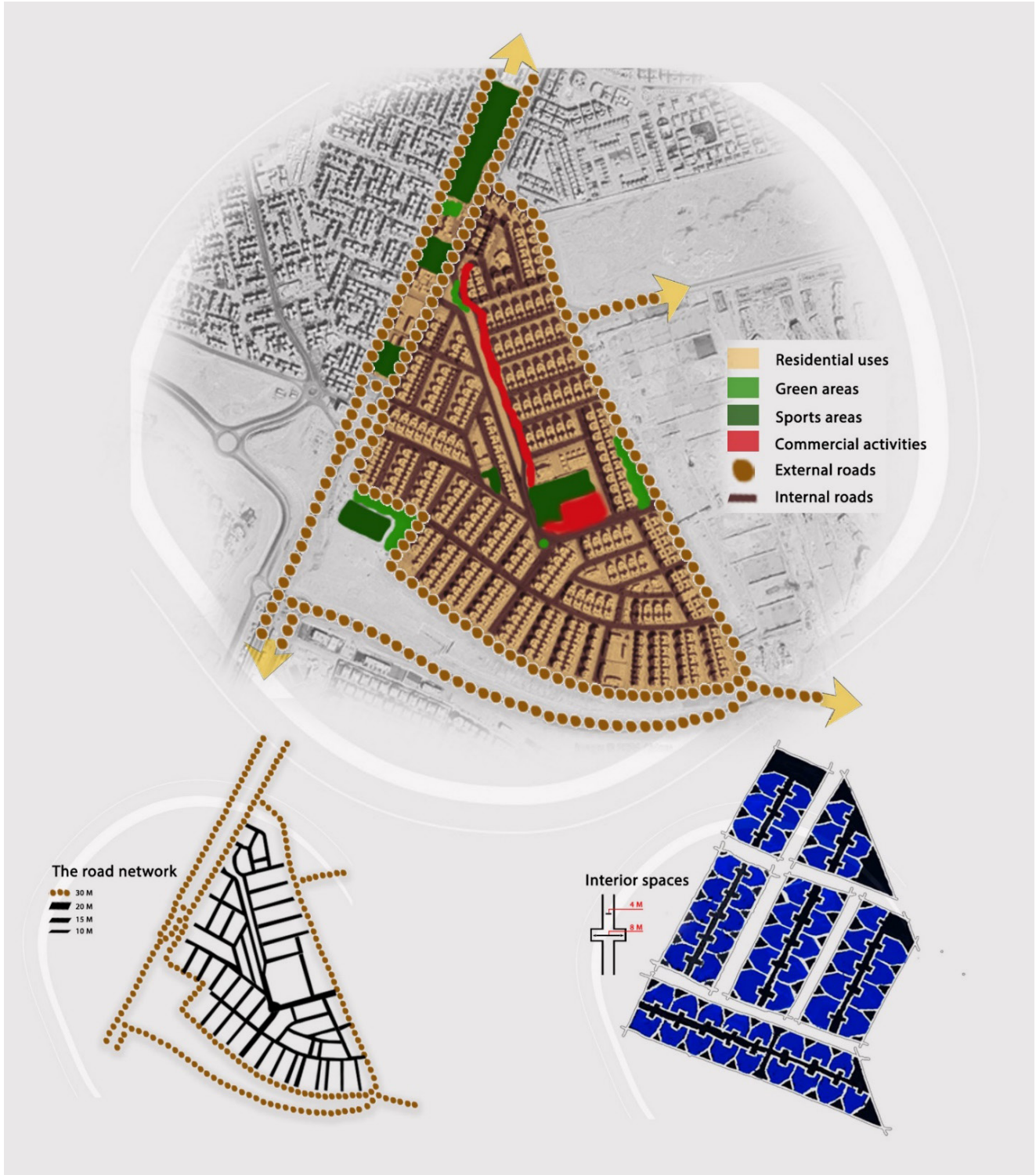


Figure 4: Analysis of the master plan\*

\*Note: Prepared by the researcher



# Case Study: Examination of Asmarat

The right to adequate housing is one of the basic human rights ensuring a decent life for an individual or family. It is one of the provisions of the ICESCR that obligates states and other parties to ensure dignity and a stable standard of living in accordance with the principles of the UN. Accordingly, this

study took the provisions of General Comment No. 4 on Article 11.1 of the ICESCR – which clarifies the conditions that must be met for adequate housing – as indicator for measuring the adequacy of housing and the extent of Egypt's commitment to international covenants and conventions.

Table 2: Asmarat assessment indicators

Housing Right Indicator	Definition and Measurement
Security of tenure	The legal guarantee of occupancy between rentals and ownership. Legal safeguards should be in place to protect residents from forced evictions.
Access to basic services and facilities	Including natural resources, clean drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation, waste disposal, drainage, and emergency access.
Affordability	Adequacy and affordability of housing costs in relation to income as well as the daily living costs of the individual or family.
Suitability for housing	Suitability of housing for the size of the family in terms of space and protection from cold, humidity, heat, and the spread of infection.
Accessibility of housing	The right of access and adequate housing for all those affected by the removal of their homes and in need of alternative housing.
Accessibility of the location	The suitability of the housing location in terms of employment opportunities and access to basic services, health care, educational services, and social services.
Cultural appropriateness	The housing reflects the cultural and social identity of the residents and adapts the exterior and interior design and landscaping to this goal.

## Security of tenure

The only legal form of security of tenure in Asmarat is usufruct contracts, or “right of use” contracts (with the exception of the Maspero Triangle residents relocated to Asmarat, who signed ownership contracts after losing hope for staying in their original area).<sup>8</sup> All residents are required to pay a rent of 300 Egyptian pounds (about US\$6.26) per month. For usufruct contracts, the contract runs for the life of the contract holder and is inherited by relatives up to the third degree who are permanent residents at the time of the contract holder's death.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the existence of the legal title to occupy the dwelling, the risk of eviction still exists under the fifth clause of the usufruct contract, which provides for the withdrawal of the dwelling and the eviction of the family without prior warning or court order if the monthly contract value is three months late. The tenant is obliged to pay late amounts with interest at 7% per annum. Some families are unaware of the rent requirement, while others are unable to pay, and all late-paying residents are surprised with eviction notices after accumulating up to 7,000 Egyptian pounds (about US\$146) in arrears.<sup>10</sup>

8 Omnia Khalil, “From Community Participation to Forced Eviction in the Maspero Triangle”, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 14 June 2018, available at <https://timep.org/2018/06/14/from-community-participation-to-forced-eviction-in-the-maspero-triangle/>

9 “Photocopy of one of the usufruct contracts issued to residents of Asmarat” (Arabic), Youm7, May 2016, available at <https://www.youm7.com/story/2016/5/31>

10 Hisham Hagar, “From Duweiqā to Asmarat for 300 Pounds” (Arabic), Al-Manasseh, 24 April 2018, available at <https://almanassa.com/stories/3010>



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A number of housing units were withdrawn due to late payment of rent.<sup>11</sup> This was confirmed by the head of the Slum Development Fund, Khaled Siddiq, who explained that the apartments that were withdrawn were those where the occupants changed the use of their apartment, while other occupants had failed to pay the rent.<sup>12</sup> He defended this choice by saying that the rent charged was already low and did not exceed 10% of the unit's value. Some of those evicted preferred their previous situation: they may not have had a legal title to the homes they grew up in, but they were not required to pay a monthly rent or risk eviction.

Usufruct contracts are not a guarantee against eviction and forced eviction. This was most recently seen in the Egyptian government's dealings with the residents of Dahiyat al-Gemayel.<sup>13</sup> Residents were surprised when the government terminated the usufruct contract without consulting them. Forced evictions began after residents bore the costs of rebuilding the area and the government refused to sell the land to the occupants.

### Provision of basic services and facilities

This indicator addresses the basics necessary for the livability of housing. It includes access to natural resources, clean drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation, waste disposal, drainage, and access to emergency services. All of these items are considered to be available in the study area.

### Affordability

This term refers to the alignment of the affordability of the monthly value of housing with the rest of the household's cost of living. The majority of the population does not have fixed employment, but rather works at daily jobs as drivers, carpenters, blacksmiths, tannery workers, or other manual labor jobs. Widows and the elderly rely on a social security pension of up to 350 Egyptian pounds (about US\$7.30) per month. Residents found themselves required to pay 300 Egyptian pounds (about US\$6.26) per month in addition to

a down payment of 4,270 Egyptian pounds (about US\$89). Most of the residents we spoke to emphasized that they could not afford these amounts, and that it added to their burden. The government imposed these sums on them despite the fact that most were landlords in their former areas and paid nothing in rent. Several press reports confirmed that residents are unable to pay these sums and are threatened with eviction from their homes.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, this indicator is in alignment with the first indicator: the lack of legal security of tenure is in part due to residents' inability to pay rent.

Is it the government's responsibility to provide affordable housing even to those who cannot afford rent of around 350 Egyptian pounds (about US\$7.30) per month, which is very low compared to the high rental values of housing units in Cairo? Asmarat is considered an affordable housing project for marginalized groups. This issue can only be answered after asking several follow-up questions. First, was the economic situation of the residents targeted for relocation to Asmarat studied before establishing this rental cost, and was it presented to them for their approval? Second, does the Unified Building Law, which determines the methods of dealing with the residents of unplanned areas and re-planned areas, stipulate the imposition of rent on the residents after their relocation?

To answer the first question: according to the residents we spoke with and published press reports, they did not participate in this decision. This rent value and requirement was imposed on them. They were also surprised by the amount of the down payment to be paid before receiving housing. To answer the second question: the law and its implementing regulations outline the methods of negotiation with residents and differentiate between owners and nonowner occupants. The law only gave owners the right to: (1) redistribute the property in the same proportions after the replanning if they wished, or (2) choose to receive immediate compensation according to the value of the land before the implementation of the new plan, or (3) receive compensation according to the value of the land after the implementation of the plan. If the owners did not agree to any of the proposals, the administrative authority would deal with them in accordance with Expropriation Law No. 10 of 1990.<sup>15</sup> For nonowner occupants, the executive regulation of the law stipulates

11 "A Citizen Reveals the Details of the Suffering of Asmarat Residents after the Withdrawal of their Housing Units" (Arabic), Al-Nabaa, 17 May 2018, available at <https://www.elnabaa.net/705074>

12 "The Head of the Slum Development Fund Reveals the Truth about the Eviction of the Residents of Asmarat" (Arabic), Slum Development Fund, available at <http://www.isdf.gov.eg/NewsDetails.aspx?news=88>

13 "Egyptian Commission Condemns the Government's Continued Displacement of Residents of Dahiyat al-Jameel" (Arabic), Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, February 2024, available at <https://www.ec-rf.net/>

14 "Government warns Asmarat Residents of Eviction" (Arabic), Akhbarak, 2018, available at <https://akhbarak.net/news/15422146/articles/30724579/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9>; see also, "Asmarat Residents Between the Hammer of Rent and the Anvil of Administrative Seizure" (Arabic), Al-Shorouk, 22 March 2017, available at <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?c-date=22032017&id=09367cbc-018c-4917-a5ad-9f33f85b04b7>

15 Expropriation Law No. 10 of 1990 (Arabic), available at <https://man-shurat.org/node/398>

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that an alternative dwelling of the same size and level shall be provided. The administrative authority shall provide a temporary dwelling or pay an appropriate rental value until the transfer to the new dwelling is completed. However, this was not applied in Asmarat. Everyone, whether they were owners or nonowner occupants, was equally dispossessed in their former neighborhoods. Everyone also had to pay the same rent and down payment, which was not stipulated by law.

### Habitability

This indicator assesses the suitability of housing in terms of its suitability for family size and construction method that protects against cold, heat, humidity, and the spread of infection. For the study area, all housing units have the same size of 65m<sup>2</sup>. This area corresponds to small families of three or four members. Larger families were not considered, in violation of the Unified Building Code, which stipulates that housing units for resettlement should have an equal number of rooms to a families' previous home. Residents were also not allowed to transfer their personal belongings and furniture to the new units in Asmarat, nor were they allowed to change or dispose of the furniture in the units.

### Access to housing

Asmarat is a resettlement area; the competent executive authorities decided to provide housing in Asmarat for those affected by the demolition of their homes in their original areas. This allocation was determined by the Unified Building Law and its executive regulations and Law No. 10 of 1990 on expropriation. Studying the case of Asmarat, and based on previous studies, it was found that the ambiguity of the rehousing mechanism and controls, and the administrative authorities' reliance on complex methods to prove ownership, led to some unexpected results. For example, during the field visit to Asmarat, the researcher found two resident families who had not been residents of informal settlements and were not affected by the demolition of their homes. Instead, they received housing units after paying a bribe to one of the employees working in housing unit allocation in Asmarat.

Finally, compensation was only calculated for housing units without commercial activities, neglecting intangible and indirect losses and costs such as psychological damage, loss of family, and social disintegration.<sup>16</sup>

16 "The Hidden Cost of Relocation: Moving from Ezbet Khairallah to Masaken Osman" (Arabic), Tadamun, available at <https://www.tadamun.co/>; see also "Losses and Consequences, Quantifying Violations of the Right to Adequate Housing: A Tool for Assessing the Impact of Demolitions, Confiscations, and Forced Evictions", Land and Housing Rights Network, available at <https://www.hlrn.org/toolkit/arabic/explore/e4s7sub1.html>

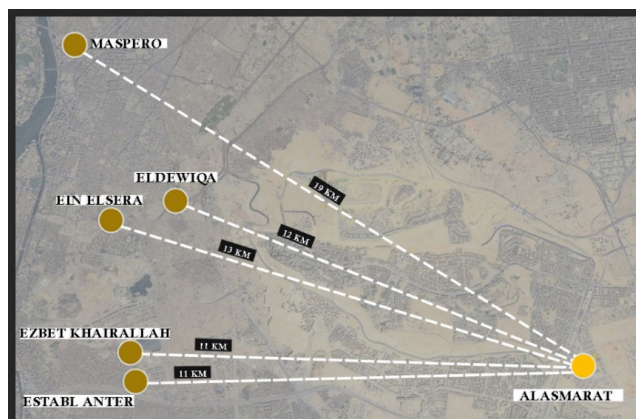


Figure 5: The distance between Asmarat and some areas of origin of the inhabitants.

### Site accessibility

This indicator assesses the suitability of a location in terms of nearby job opportunities and accessibility to basic services, healthcare, education, and social services. Most basic services are available in Asmarat, such as schools, health units, a police station, a post office, and a real estate registry. The following points were noted:

- The actual need for many residents to have access to possible real estate services was not taken into account. During the field visit to the real estate registry office, the researcher observed that ten residents were denied the opportunity to write powers of attorney because they had not booked in advance through the online application. While talking to them, it became clear that they do not read or write, and do not even own cell phones.
- There is a shortage of medical services and a deficit in some specialties, limited only to emergency cases, forcing residents to go to hospitals outside the area and thus increasing their economic burden.
- The residents who worked as local vendors, traders, and shopkeepers in their original areas was not taken into account, and they were only compensated for housing units.<sup>17</sup>
- Although a number of shops were available in the area, they did not open at the beginning of the project and were not reserved for the affected residents. They were instead auctioned off, and the new residents were left out of the competition as their economic power had declined. As a result, large merchants dominated

17 "Residents of Manshiyet Nasser Protest Against Not Being Compensated for Their Shops" (Arabic), Akhbarak, 2016, available at <https://akhbarak.net/news/9554970/articles/23403851/>

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economic activities in Asmarat.<sup>18</sup>

- Most residents kept the jobs they'd held previously, close to their original areas, due to the lack of suitable job opportunities near Asmarat. The cost of commuting to and from work every day therefore increased, and the cost of transportation fares – which are constantly rising with the increase in fuel prices in Egypt – added to that. Figure 5 above shows the distance in kilometers traveled by some residents. The distance was calculated via Google Maps as distance only; it does not account for the time traveled, which can vary significantly based on road congestion. The distance from Asmarat to the Maspero Triangle is 19km; 12km to Duweiqā; 13km to Ain al-Sira; and 11km between Ezbet Khair Allah and Istibel Antar.

## Cultural and social relevance

Asmarat residents are longtime residents of the Cairo and Giza governorates. Thus, their relocation to a location within Cairo is not an urban alienation, and they are easily acclimatized to the new location. However, these residents have special social characteristics while living in their previous neighborhoods. New Asmarat residents tended to have strong ties among their family and previous neighborhood. Residents would move about their areas on foot, reflecting a lifestyle rich in face-to-face interaction. Further, the low building stock in some areas facilitated a strong relationship between residents of the same building, who were often members of the same family. The low number of residents per neighborhood also facilitated the strengthening of these social relationships, as all residents were likely to know each other. Finally, the distribution of commercial activities in the neighborhood was balanced, which facilitated communication between residents of the area and enhanced the connectivity of street traffic to neighboring buildings.

These geographic and physical characteristics led to the increased importance of community interaction and integration of activities in shaping the social and urban structure of informal settlements. Although this interaction occurred spontaneously, it helped create a strong and cohesive community. These communities only needed planning and organization to transform them from informal to formal.

Asmarat lacked this type of social structure and was planned to be a residential area where the street had nothing to do with the buildings:

- The high-rise building plans (six or ten floors) created a reliance on the elevator, reducing the number of residents seeing each other on a daily basis, unlike in their previous areas.
- The limited distribution of commercial activities to a few buildings on the main streets, and the lack of them in the corridors between blocks, has led to a lack of connection between the street and the building. Consequently, the street, which was an extension of the dwelling in the previous residential areas and on which their social movement depended, has become separate.
- Asmarat relies on motorized traffic, without taking into account the provision of pedestrian infrastructure. This is evident in the narrowness of the interlocked sidewalks in relation to the width of the internal roads, with structural obstacles hindering pedestrian movement on the sidewalks. Pedestrians resort to using the roads designated for motorized traffic, which reduces the safety and ease of pedestrian movement in the area. There's also a lack of bicycle paths.

These factors together have weakened the strong neighborhood relationship that Asmarat residents previously experienced.

It is further worth noting that, as an emerging urban community, Asmarat could have created a socially cohesive community and a clean environment that relied on pedestrian movement and bicycle use as a social and environmental solution, especially in light of the current threats of climate change to urbanization and the increase in carbon emissions.<sup>19</sup>

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18 The Urban Development Fund announced the sale of 19 shops in Asmarat via public auction on its official Facebook page on 21 November 2023 (Arabic), available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=642864561358050&set=pb.100069035355729.-2207520000&type=3>

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19 Ibrahim Ezzeldin, "Urbanism in Egypt Under Threat Amid Impacts of Climate Change", The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 13 March 2023, available at <https://timep.org/2023/03/13/urbanism-in-egypt-under-threat-amid-impacts-of-climate-change/>



# UN Human Settlements Programme Indicators

The UN Human Settlements Programme published the results of a study of a sample of Asmarat residents to assess their satisfaction with services in the area.<sup>20</sup>

- Dissatisfaction with their housing unit was highest, at 56%; 39% were satisfied, and 4% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- For public services, 68% were dissatisfied compared to 32% satisfied.
- An overwhelming 92% are dissatisfied with the property system, compared to 8% who are satisfied.
- Similarly, 92% are dissatisfied with the cost of rent and overall cost of living, versus 8% who are satisfied.
- Regarding the availability of job opportunities, 84% were dissatisfied, 12% were satisfied, and 4% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

## Analysis and Findings

After reviewing the research, including the researcher's field study and previous research, compared alongside the indicator framework, the following findings are evident:

1. The seriousness of the state's general policies to end the issue of informal settlements in Egypt.
2. There was a lack of transparency of information for planned relocation and rehousing areas. This can be seen in the difficulty of accessing the full data of the

replanning areas; the conditions and regulations of rehousing through official government websites, which have only incomplete data; and the announcement of the opening of these areas by the president of the republic, which hinders researchers.

3. The state's general policy neglects the principle of community participation and only interacts with residents of informal settlements when necessary to implement its decisions.
4. There is an absence of economic, social, and cultural studies for residents of informal settlements. This was evident when Asmarat provided job opportunities in fields unfamiliar to its new residents, provided services in ways that residents could not navigate, and isolated community-building street traffic from the dwellings. Thus, the rehousing areas cater only to the survival of the housing unit itself.
5. The compensation policies for expropriation were inadequate, and compensation was given for residential units only, neglecting business owners.
6. Usufruct contracts are a temporary legal solution to occupying a dwelling. The government has the right to terminate them and evict residents.
7. Cases of administrative corruption allowed some citizens who were not residents of the areas to be resettled to pay bribes to receive housing units in the resettlement areas.
8. Asmarat faces difficulties in providing integrated networks of bicycle paths due to the narrowness of main and side streets. Asmarat could have been an inspiring model for creating a pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented urban environment, as it provided the perfect opportunity for planning an efficient bicycle-based network. This approach would have been a strategic shift that could have been replicated in other new urban settlements, contributing to sustainable transportation, improved air quality, and urban life.
9. The project to develop Asmarat ignored international legal issues; it failed to comply with international treaties such as the ICESCR, including General Comment No. 4 on its Article 11.1 on the best practices for implementing the right to adequate housing. It further ignores General Comment No. 7 on the same article, which criminalizes forced evictions, and even local regulations such as the Unified Building Law and Law No. 10 of 1990 on expropriation.

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20 Mohamed Hamdy Mohamed Ali and Reham Reda Ali, Egyptian Slums and Land Conflict – Pre-and Post-Slums Eviction and Relocation Land Governance Challenges: A Case Study of Al-Asmarat Project, Egypt, UN Human Settlements Programme, 2022, available at <https://arablandinitiative.glt.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Egyptian-slums-and-land-conflict.pdf>

## Recommendations

This paper offers several recommendations to: decision makers in the Egyptian government, specialists represented by the Ministry of Housing, the General Authority for Urban Planning, the New Urban Communities Authority, the Supreme Council for Urban Planning in the Cabinet, the Slum Development Fund, the Ministry of Local Development, and data centers represented by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics and the State Information Service.

First, regarding specifically Asmarat and possibly other future new urban development, it is vital to incorporate resident participation and interaction with decision makers, whether by electing representatives or announcing public hearings to study the economic, social and cultural situation, for topics including:

- Modifying the legal guarantee of occupancy, guaranteeing noneviction in case of late payment, and providing legal remedies and the right of recourse to the judiciary;
- Limiting the monthly rent to no more than 30% of an individual's or family's income;
- Distributing commercial activities fairly within the area, and giving residents the right of establishing and running shops;
- Restructuring administrative services in accordance with how residents use them;
- Covering the shortage of medical services in the area;
- Replanning streets to minimize motorized traffic, and creating pedestrian corridors by reducing the number of traffic lanes and increasing the width of sidewalks; and
- Increasing green spaces and distributing them throughout the area, and replanning the public spaces to suit the residents' use of them, including shade and seating.

Second, regarding the state's general policies:

1. The state should adhere to international treaties, laws, and internal regulations during development processes, which can be achieved through:
  - Unifying the administrative bodies responsible for the development process, including the committees that count the population of unplanned areas and replanning areas;
2. The state must commit to sustainability standards in plans, through:
  - Applying the articles of the Unified Building Law in negotiations with residents, and giving them the freedom of choice to be compensated, move to another place, or return to their areas after development, without imposing one of the options on them;
  - Making an official announcement on the conditions and controls of resettlement, and establishing fair policies for the value of compensation, including compensation for moving from the original area and moving away from the workplace, as well as compensation for changing the cultural and social environment. Compensation should not be for land or housing units only;
  - Making information transparent and available on official state platforms, announcing general and executive plans before their implementation, and announcing the controls and conditions of the inventory, evaluation, and rehousing processes, enhancing the participation of civil society and citizens in decision-making; and
  - Adhering to the Egyptian constitution in criminalizing forced evictions and announcing their litigation mechanisms.
3. The state should establish effective mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effects of development on the lives of residents and ensure that the desired goals are achieved. This could be achieved through community coordination committees as an effective way to ensure that the government continues to communicate with residents and meet their needs.

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### About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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