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The study of the informal city using the sources available: the case of illegal urbanisations in Andalusia

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The phenomenon of illegal urbanisations in Spain emerged towards the end of the 1970s, with its period of greatest development and extension being in the 80s and, in some cases, well into the 90s. Although there are certain discrepancies among the various works that have studied the reasons behind the beginning and extraordinary development of this process, these are basically focused on two hypotheses. Firstly, there would be those who point to the phenomenon being presented as a response to the economic crisis of the 70s by large sectors of the population with fewer resources to provide themselves with a place for weekend leisure; and, additionally, as a farming area to obtain extra income, as well as a precarious secondary residence. And, secondly, other studies point to the rigidity of the new regulatory framework on urban planning after the approval of the Land Law of 1975, which would lead to the development of the supply of plots on rural land for urban uses outside the planning and at very competitive prices.

Beyond these issues, in Spain the result will be the development of a phenomenon that will have significant consequences for the municipalities involved. Although with different names depending on the territorial context – pirate urbanisations, illegal plots, pirate plots or clandestine plots –, the phenomenon of illegal urbanisations has not received much interest from the scientific field. The reasons behind this fact may be very varied but, in all likelihood, one of them is the fact that approaching the topic is a complex task due to the scarcity of sources that allow it to be studied in broad spatial and temporal contexts. In fact, most of the available works have been sponsored by public administrations; like in the case of the Community of Madrid, Andalucía, Aragón, Castilla y León and Extremadura.

In this context, the objective of this article is to highlight, firstly, the scarcity of existing sources for the in-depth study of the phenomenon of illegal urbanisations on intermediate scales; and, secondly, when these sources exist, their limitations to allow a diachronic analysis of the evolution of the process. In addition, the possibilities offered by certain cartographic sources are explored to understand the territorial and spatial scope of illegal urbanisations, as well as their limitations and potential. The Autonomous Community of Andalusia was chosen for the empirical development of the research for several reasons. Firstly, because it is the only region that has drawn up two inventories of illegal urbanisations. Secondly, because it is one of the autonomous communities where these urban processes have reached the highest levels of development, having even been the subject of a special report by the Ombudsman's Office, which describes the



consequences of an illegal urbanisation as an “ecological catastrophe” for the region. And, finally, due to the existence of the so-called Andalusian Spatial Reference Data, a repertoire of far-reaching cartographic information in terms of the topics covered as well as in terms of updates.

From a methodological point of view, the research has been proposed as a systematic search of the sources available from documents prepared by official bodies or public administrations for the analysis and diagnosis of the phenomenon of illegal urbanisation. The condition that these sources must meet is that they must make it possible to identify, locate and quantify the illegal urbanisations. The aim is to establish the diachronic evolution of the phenomenon in the region between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 2000s, as well as their scope and territorial impact. With these criteria, only two documents were located. The first is the *Inventario y Catálogo de parcelaciones urbanísticas* prepared by the General Directorate of Urban Planning between 1988 and 1989. The second, is the *Inventario de parcelaciones urbanísticas en suelo no urbanizable en Andalucía*, prepared on behalf of the General Directorate of Land Management and Urban Planning in 2004. The lapse of almost twenty years between the preparation of the last cited document and today has become an opportunity to seek alternative sources to make up for the lack of information on the phenomenon. This fact has led us to explore the scope and limitations of the Andalusian Spatial Reference Data (Datos Espaciales de Referencia de Andalucía, the most comprehensive and up to date cartographic source available for the entire region. For this reason, its potential as a source for the characterisation of the phenomenon of illegal urbanisation is analysed. The continuous updating of this source together with the change in the information layers that are being offered for the different topics, as well as the attributes from which to characterise them, has resulted in choosing the update carried out in March 2017 for the thematic block entitled *07 Urban System*.

The results show that, from the data of the *Inventario de Parcelaciones Urbanísticas 1986/1988*, in the region there were 24,058 ha occupied by urban plots. In provinces such as Málaga, slightly more than 50% were on development land; on the opposite side Cádiz, with 100% of illegal plots on non-development land, and Córdoba, where barely 2% were located on development land. The inventory also provides information about the use of buildings. In this sense, in most of the Andalusian provinces, the predominant use of this type of settlement was as a second home. Indeed, although the average for the region as a whole suggests that the surface area occupied by urban plots dedicated to second homes was only 52.57%, an analysis by province would make it necessary to explain this statement. Thus, the existence of some of them where the second home is almost testimonial, as in the case of Cádiz with only 8.09% or Huelva with just over 23%, introduces a certain distortion into the regional average.

The second work for the inventory of urban plots developed on non-development land was carried out between 2002 and 2004. The proposed methodology chose to leave out of the scope of the inventory “the phenomena of urban indiscipline associated with isolated building without territorial continuity, even when they are made up of a large number of scattered buildings” (Dirección General de Ordenación del Territorio y Urbanismo, 2004b). Therefore, single-family detached properties built on non-development land outside of urban planning that were not part of a settlement were not taken into account. Therefore, one of the phenomena with the greatest social and territorial scope in spatial areas such as the Axarquía region in Málaga. Some of the most relevant conclusions of the study reveal that the phenomenon, far from slowing down, had intensified in the period of time between the two inventories. In this regard, the document points out that, between both works, an increase of 714 new illegal plots has been observed. The absolute data are even more significant; in 2003, there were 1,138 illegal urbanisations in Andalusia, occupying a total surface area of 18,216 ha and housing 38,622 illegally constructed properties. There is still a localisation pattern that links some provincial capitals to the parcelling phenomenon (Sevilla, Córdoba, Jaén and Granada). However, compared to what occurred in 1988, now the Málaga and Almería coastlines are less affected, whereas the Atlantic coast of Cádiz has expanded, as well as the mountainous area of Málaga and Valle del Guadalhorce, where the phenomenon, although with certain nuances now presents an extraordinary importance.

The result of the analysis to the *Andalusian Spatial Reference Data* could be quite close to the incidence of illegal urbanisation processes in Andalusia today. In short, under the premises of the methodology used, a total of 6,820 settlements have been characterised under the typology of discontinuous or divided in the



region, which occupy a total surface area of just over 50,000 ha, representing 5.84% of the regional surface area. The degree of urban sprawl in some areas is particularly striking, coinciding, to a large extent, with the result pointed out by other works (Cuenca, 2016). In this sense, the areas with the greatest concentration of urban sprawl are located close to the regional centres (Málaga, Jaén, Córdoba or the Bay of Cádiz); but it is also shown with special relevance in areas that until now had not appeared, such as the surroundings of the municipalities forming the urban agglomeration of the valley of Almanzora in Almería, or the area of Eastern Costa del Sol - Axarquía in Málaga.

The results of the research have made it possible to verify that both the 1988 *Inventory of urban plots* and the 2004 *Inventory of urban plots on non-development land in Andalusia* are a very important source for an in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon of illegal urbanisations. On the one hand, they provide information on the diachronic evolution of the process on a regional scale and make it possible to measure the degree of effectiveness of the strategies implemented by the different administrations to control and redirect it. On the other hand, the existence of data on a municipal scale makes it possible to conduct analyses at these scales, as well as to understand the behaviour of the phenomenon on a provincial scale. However, it would be necessary to regularly update this type of document in order to ensure that the process has the level of monitoring it requires given the serious effects of all kinds on the territorial structures where it is present.

The research has shown that the DERA are an adequate source for analysing and monitoring the illegal urbanisation processes taking place in most municipalities in the region. For this reason, it would be of interest that in future updates, the path started in the 2017 version – the subject of analysis in this paper – is resumed, in the sense of incorporating attributes to the information layers on population settlements or centres that allow them to be characterised from their genesis, especially due to whether or not they are suitable with urban planning and territorial planning.