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Workshop

Housing, illegality and criminal actors

**Emerging illegal
practices vis-à-vis the
global housing crisis**

September 9 & 10 2025

Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding
Geneva, Switzerland

PAPER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP (PDW)

HOUSING, ILLEGALITY, AND CRIMINAL ACTORS

EMERGING ILLEGAL PRACTICES VIS-À-VIS THE GLOBAL HOUSING CRISIS

**September 9 & 10, 2025, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding,
Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland**

Organizing Committee

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Housing has become a critical global challenge. While an increasing proportion of the world's population struggles to find affordable homes, others endeavour to maintain control over existing housing. This crisis is exacerbated by rapid urbanisation and migration, placing pressure on cities to accommodate growing numbers of socioeconomically disadvantaged residents. The issue extends beyond urban suburbs, as processes such as touristification and gentrification in wealthier neighbourhoods inflate housing and rental prices throughout entire cities.

Informal housing has long been a reality in the Global South, where marginalised populations have traditionally sought shelter in urban slums due to weak state institutions and unregulated housing markets. (Malik et al., 2020; Meth, 2017). While these informal settlements have historically emerged as a result of community-led efforts, they are now increasingly becoming targets for market speculation due to rising "rentisation" (e.g., Ávila Martínez, 2022; Stang Alva et al., 2022), with criminal groups starting to exploit the housing needs of vulnerable populations (e.g., Araujo 2019; Muller 2021).

In the Global North, it has been assumed that banking systems would enable individuals to purchase a house and that governments would offer social housing. Informality primarily manifested in illegitimate occupation as a political endeavour. (Martinez, 2019). Today's reality is more complex, as housing has become a prime investment vehicle (Card, 2024; Gil & Palomera, 2024), reshaping the infrastructure of the housing market and, to some extent, its imbrication in illegality or criminality. Examples of this trend include emerging forms of commercialisation surrounding housing, such as eviction groups. (Pozzi & Rimoldi, 2017) and underground housing markets where occupied apartments are illegally sold to criminal organisations (Dumont & Clua-García, 2025).

This Paper Development Workshop (PDW) aims to open new vistas on the housing, illegality, and criminality nexus underpinning part of the global housing crisis. We invite papers using an ethnographic or qualitative approach to tackle questions such as:

- What socio-spatial and political conditions contribute to the emergence and evolution of illegal housing practices and strategies?
- What emerging illegal practices and strategies facilitate individuals' access to housing?
- How do these practices and strategies interact with existing laws and housing policies?
- How are illicit housing markets structured, who are the principal actors involved, and what norms and conventions govern their operations?
- In what capacities are vulnerable populations engaged in these markets, both as victims and as active agents?

This PDW aims to guide researchers across disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, criminology, geography, urban studies, organisational studies) in developing their work. Each author will be allocated 10 minutes for their presentation and 35 minutes for discussion. Two invited discussants will evaluate each paper and offer constructive feedback to create a compelling narrative and enhance a theoretical contribution based on this data. All authors must also commit to reading two selected papers prior to the workshop to provide additional written feedback.

Abstract submission

Please send an abstract of 500 words and a short biographical note to gdumont@em-lyon.com and elena.butti@graduateinstitute.ch by March 31st, 2025. Notification of acceptance will be sent by May 1st, 2025. Draft papers must be submitted by August 1st, 2025.

There is no registration fee. We cover lunch and coffee on workshop's days. Partial grants can be provided to a small number of participants with limited resources to contribute (but not fully cover) travel expenses. Please indicate if you require financial support, and why.

Participation in the workshop and a discussant roundtable are open to interested non-presenters. Please register with elena.butti@graduateinstitute.ch by September 5th, 2025.

References

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- Meth, P. (2017). Informal Housing, Gender, Crime and Violence: The Role of Design in Urban South Africa. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57(2), 402–421.
- Pozzi, G., & Rimoldi, L. (2017). Marginal Uncertainties Making a Living and Working on the Outskirts of Milan. *EtnoAntropologia*, 5(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.1473/234>
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