

Margot Delon: Nanterre, Champigny-sur-Marne – what has become of the slum children?

There is no one typical destiny for the children of slums and of their successor transitory neighborhoods. My sample, or rather my group of respondents, included blue-collar workers, a barman, consultants, business owners in the building sector, teachers and unemployed people; people who lived in assisted housing and homeowners; people who ended their studies early and others – granted, more rarely – who pursued doctoral studies. In other words, poverty does not have a homogenous effect on life trajectories. It is not just because people lived in a slum at the same time that all the children experienced the same paths. That was the first step.

The second step was to discern the explanatory factors for the diversity of paths. My work showed that local actions supporting people in the most precarious situations did have long-term effects. It is because volunteers, activists, and associations became involved in the lives of people in Nanterre and of their children, helping with homework, allowing some to move out of the slums and even fostering new aspirations for them to leave their environment, that relatively greater upward mobility occurred in Nanterre versus Champigny, which did not have as many external actors present.

However, my work also showed that these local efforts did not suffice in the sense that the children who fared best in the long run were those whose parents had the most economic, social and cultural resources, that is, parents who had moved down the social ladder because of migration. Even when they were in high socio-professional positions, the children of Algerians actually always suffered greater discrimination than others; be they executives or senior officials, discrimination and stigmatization always weighed on them due to structural racism, which local efforts to support people in the most precarious situations cannot do much to dent. In short, these actions do have an effect, but for things to fundamentally change more structural social transformations are needed.