

Rethinking African urbanism from the slum

Edgar Pieterse is Professor in the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics, holds the NRF South African Research Chair in Urban Policy and directs the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town.

Amidst the lingering global economic downturn and the dramatic rise of the emerging economies, Africa is increasingly being dragged into the globalisation narrative. The influential business think tank, McKinsey Global Institute, demonstrates that over the past decade Africa's average GDP growth rates have been climbing and inching closer to the levels commonly seen in South-East Asia until the global recession in 2008. They also underscore that between 2004 and 2008, return on investment in Africa was higher than in any other region in the world. In their bullish outlook, this signals the beginning of a long-term trend, which they evocatively brand as 'lions on the move'. The other notable business think tank, Monitor Group, place cities at the centre of this optimistic storyline: 'the economic future of SSA [sub-Saharan Africa] is more connected to the success of its cities, and the competitive clusters based there, than to its nation states. Cities today generate most of the sub-continent's wealth, with many thriving despite obvious challenges. Rapid urbanisation turbocharges economic growth and diversification, enhances productivity, increases employment opportunities, and improves standards of living.' Tellingly, both of these institutions and the panoply of multilateral development agencies agree that the one binding constraint on this pent-up potential is Africa's massive infrastructure deficit across all fronts.

The World Bank produced an important body of work in 2010 that, for the first time, provides a comprehensive overview of the scale and dimensions of the infrastructural deficit across Africa, broken down to reflect both urban and rural aspects. The infrastructure diagnostic report pegs the overall infrastructure deficit at US\$93 billion per annum. This is the level of annual investment required to address the current backlogs and cope with future growth. According to the same report, presently the level of annual investment peaks around US\$45 billion per annum, suggesting a massive shortfall, which of course

means that the scale of future investment costs continue to climb well above the US\$93 billion estimate. The following table from the diagnostic report provides a high-level summary of the sectoral composition of the infrastructural deficit, without disaggregating it between urban and rural areas.

Table 1. Annual Infrastructure Investment Requirements for Sub-Saharan Africa

Infrastructure sector	Capital expenditure	Operation & maintenance	Total spending in US\$
ICT	7.0	2.0	9.0
Irrigation	2.9	0.6	3.4
Power	26.7	14.1	40.8
Transport	8.8	9.4	18.2
Water & sanitation	14.9	33.0	47.9
Total	60.4	33.0	93.3

It is important to read this table in relation to the dramatic prevalence of slum living conditions across most African cities, which, according to the last State of African Cities Report, stands at 62 per cent. Moreover, the 2008 State of the World's Cities Report demonstrated that not only does Africa have a much higher slum prevalence level (62 per cent), but also that the depth of deprivation is also much more acute compared to South-East Asia and Latin America. In other words, of the four dimensions of slum living – overcrowding, informal housing, insecure tenure and lack of access to water and sanitation – 37 per cent of slums in Africa have 3 to 4 of these conditions, compared to 5 per cent in southern Asia and 8 per cent in Latin America. One of the central drivers of poor health and well-being is of course the absence of water and sanitation along with overcrowding and precarious living environments. However, apart from recognising the low levels of access to basic services

such as electricity, water and sanitation, it is also stark that where these services are provided, they barely reach the two top quintiles of the population. The bottom 60 per cent is simply not reached, because the modalities of finance and delivery are driven by the imperatives of cost-recovery and the prioritisation of economically important spaces: nodes of commerce and movement of goods and services and the residential estates that house the middle classes and elites. Tellingly, this approach is characterised and lamented by the WHO as evidence of, fundamentally, the unjust and unequal distribution of resources, wealth, information and power in these societies.

There is a particular view of the world, cities and the role of the market that underpins a growing confidence that Africa's cities are finally being recognised as critical anchors for the overall economic renaissance. At the risk of crudifying a number of complex processes and perspectives, my stylised account would suggest a new urban policy dogma that goes something like this: if Africa is to take its place in the global economy, it must urgently address the critical infrastructure deficits in energy, connective infrastructure (roads, rail, ports, airports, ICT) and water. These fundamental economic infrastructures can then catalyse larger processes of economic development that will raise land values and the asset base of local authorities, which can then recoup their investment through taxation, which, along with national transfers, can be used to address the massive problems associated with slum urbanism. However, this virtuous loop depends on appropriate regulatory reform, which includes, *inter alia*, decentralisation of built environment functions and fiscal powers to cities, easing the cost of doing business to attract more foreign direct investment, and suitably secure and networked residential stock for the middle classes and entrepreneurs that will drive these new investments and businesses. The resulting revenue that stems from creating this 'enabling environment' for economic development can then be deployed to fund and progressively expand a sensible slum upgrading programme, which fosters the connection between enhancing aggregate economic growth and raising everyone's living standards by providing access to essential services in the most disconnected areas of the city.

Within the logic of this mainstream policy mindset, the primary obstacles to the realisation of this agenda are foremost a lack of political will, which can

be traced to a reluctance to devolve powers to cities, and a deeper underlying fear that cities will in due course breed political opposition. Consequently, political elites tend to ignore the pressing importance of rapid urbanisation and its attendant demands for substantial infrastructural investments. As a result, in many official policy documents there is tenor of frustration and desperation with most African governments which simply fail to do the bare minimum to come to terms with the material realities of urbanisation and its economic, social, technological and political imperatives. There is clearly some truth to this line of analysis. However, my contention is that the new urban policy canon for Africa is undermined by a number of more fundamental conceptual problems.

There is very little acknowledgement that with the low economic base, combined with massive demographic expansion over the next forty years or so, large-scale structural disconnect from the formal economy, and already very high levels of income inequality, slum living will remain a defining feature for the foreseeable future. In the mainstream urban policy approach there is seemingly little appreciation for the cumulative consequences of poverty and ill health if slum living conditions are allowed to remain as high as they are. In fact, there is little evidence that the overall negative economic impacts as large-scale poverty exacerbates social conflict and undermines economic productivity. The continuation of slum urbanism as the dominant material condition in African cities is informed by fascinating and grim forecasts in *African Futures 2050*, published by the Pardee Centre and the Institute of Security Studies. According to the study, 'Over the entire half-century [1960–2010], Eastern Africa gained only about \$150 per capita and Western Africa about \$130 per capita, while GDP per capita in Central Africa has remained almost unchanged since 1960.' This is an unfathomable accomplishment of economic, political and social failure. Looking ahead to 2052, an even larger and more dramatic process of systemic exclusion will potentially eclipse this inventory of failure across most African countries. The income poverty trend lines and projected GDP per capita shifts that stem from this work are instructive.

It is important to understand that both the East and West African regions will more than double their populations over this period, from roughly 300 million in 2010, to 700 million by 2050, respectively. Keeping this prospect of interminable poverty

in mind, it is sobering to remember that presently slum prevalence is almost 62 per cent. The forecast data and speculation seem to suggest that Africa will double its population by 2052, moving from 1.1 billion in 2011 to 2.3 billion; and an urban share of 40 per cent in 2011 to one approaching 60 per cent by 2052.

A reasonable conclusion to arrive at where these trend lines meet is that urban poverty, ill health and associated slum urbanism will continue to be a major feature of city life for at least the next four decades. It is difficult to place store in the policy thinking of the World Bank, and various other multilateral development agencies, as far-reaching enough to effect a dramatic departure from current patterns. There seems to be an unshakeable, if even irrational, belief that rational government with sufficient commitment can get a handle on the problem and systematically introduce effective planning, regulation and management to ensure the virtuous circle of development, in the parlance of the Africa Infrastructure report. Such a misplaced perspective fails to engage with the cumulative effects of informalised economies, settlements, social-cultural systems and political cultures. Figure 3 offers a stylised account of the fundamental logic that drives urban development patterns in most sub-Saharan African cities in order to signal the systemic nature of informal urbanism.

Moreover, the World Bank perspective definitely fails to engage with the robust analysis of the WHO that suggests that the persistence of slum living and associated poor health conditions and outcomes can be traced to the distribution of power in cities and society at large. It is relevant to quote the major report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health established by the WHO at some length: ‘The poor health of the poor ... are caused by the unequal distribution of power, income, goods, and services, globally and nationally, the consequent unfairness in the immediate, visible circumstances of people’s lives – their access to health care, schools, and education, their conditions of work and leisure, their homes, communities, towns, or cities – and their chances of leading a flourishing life. This unequal distribution of health-damaging experiences is not in any sense a “natural” phenomenon but is the result of a toxic combination of poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics. Together, the structural determinants and conditions of daily life constitute the social determinants of health

and are responsible for a major part of health inequities between and within countries.’ Interestingly enough, in proposing a way out of this, the Commission falls back on the idea of a strong, independent, capable, and one could argue, generous state. There is surprisingly little in the work of the Commission on what is to be done when this kind of developmental and interventionist state is simply unlikely for a variety of historical and material reasons.

In placing most of the burden for improving health outcomes on the shoulders of the state, admittedly working in partnership with civil society and the private sector, there is an insufficient grappling with central and vital roles of various categories of civil society organisation in shifting the political economy of slum urbanism at the level of the street, the household and the intimate neighbourhood scale. In my reading the only way in which the vicious circle can be interrupted, deconstructed and remade into a new urban logic is if civil society organisations, rooted in the interest of the urban poor, can articulate an effective package of economic, governance and political-cultural reforms, rooted in a plurality of local experiments and dogged mobilisations. At this point it is important to steer clear, even if for a while, from the morally driven discourses on participatory development and virtuous civil society organisations. In fact, it is in thinking through a new imaginary for urban civil society that the work of urban theorists such as Asef Bayat, Ananya Roy, AbdouMaliq Simone and Mark Swilling comes into its own.

The first step in breaking through to a compelling theory on African and Southern urbanism is to develop a deep theoretical and philosophical appreciation for the unique lived dynamics of an urban logic and patterning that continues to grow and adapt, despite the absence of the conventional underpinnings of industrial modernism. This enterprise is large, complex and demanding in its own right and deserves dedicated exponents. This larger enterprise of reimagining urbanism is an entry point, a gateway onto understanding alternative organising logics and energies. The fundamental intellectual, policy, design and artistic challenge confronting (African) urbanists is to draw out the logics, emergent dynamics and aesthetics of everyday urbanisms, and connect those with normative imperatives to squarely address the dramatic injustices that I touched upon before. By force, this will require a savvy understanding of dominant market logics in the shaping of cities, but

this is merely to understand and pinpoint an alternative positioning.

This new, different, alternative vantage point must be the adaptive livelihood imperatives of poor households. Building on the rich work of John Friedmann on whole economies, circa 1992, it is possible to layer and articulate three economic facts of life that cut across poor settlements: social economies, informal economies and formal economic systems. These are not iron-clad categories, for they are mutually constitutive and dependent, but also overlapping in the routine reproduction of settlements and household survival strategies. Given the predominance of unemployment and informality, the most urgent and critical alternative vision we need is to systematise our thinking on the nature and function of social economies.

An agenda for the role of social economies can be organised around a large-scale community focused public works programme trained on the following: the care economy, including localised health and education support services; ecological system services as manifest in green and blue infrastructures; cultural and artistic services for the youth and children; and classic public works programmes centred on road building, school building, and continuous maintenance and repairs of these institutions along with clinics, early childhood centres, transport interchanges, and so forth. An example from South Africa may be apposite. Among the youth demographic, more than 50 per cent cannot access formal jobs, even though they may have completed primary and a portion of secondary schooling. At the same time, South Africa has the largest HIV/Aids prevalence rate in the world. In order to contain and manage the scale of the Aids pandemic, it is vital that a national network of home-based care workers be established. These care economy service workers need not necessarily have a formal medical training but must work with affected households to ensure that anti-retrovirals are taken in conjunction with sufficient nutritional intake, as well as various kinds of psychological support to help sufferers and their families deal with stigma and shame. Since nutrition is such an important aspect of these localised support systems, these community workers can also serve as linchpins with various food security initiatives that combine the imperatives of urban agriculture, with restoring green infrastructures and enrolling children and older persons in various handcrafts that can restore connections with soil and ef-

fectively, hope.

For such an initiative to flourish it requires two vital resources: committed activists to take ownership of these programmes at a neighbourhood level, and taking responsibility for embedding such programmes within a community driven spatial vision that in turn is translated into specific fine-grained interventions that will gradually and determinedly improve living and economic environments, especially collective public spaces that flow with and from public transport arteries. Such dynamics of course assume a generalised awareness about the importance of spatial and design literacy refracted through local idioms, sensibilities and desires. The second ingredient is an institutional context that can facilitate systematic maturation of adaptive systems and projects, which in turn is the basis for scaling up social processes and institutions that can transform the quality of life and aspiration in these seemingly marginal and hopeless settlements.

On this point I concur with Arjun Appadurai and Marty Chen that the social technologies of slum movements, street vendors, waste pickers and so on, offer vital clues about alternative organisation and governance systems. These institutional innovations are vital to articulate the interests of the urban poor into the heart of global, national and city-level boardrooms of power, where the traditional calculations about urban growth and investment are unreflexively enacted. At the heart of these new generation social movements is the idea of a 'social-cultural operating system' and technology that addresses the profound material and economic needs of the urban poor through a strategy premised on empowerment through collective action. However, against a backdrop of long-term political and market failure, an ethnic and sensibility of autonomy accompany their approach. Nothing is expected from the state. Nothing is anticipated from the formal private market. Instead, residents club together in various assemblages to try to make their minimal incomes stretch further by leveraging each other's support, intelligence and labour to gradually but systematically move everyone forward. At the core of the intelligence system is a capacity for cannibalising, subverting, appropriating and recasting the resources and expectations of the formal city of government regulation and private ownership.

In closing, my central thesis is that the future of African urbanism will be shaped by the logics of of-

ficial outlooks and resources that drive large-scale economic infrastructural investments and generally reproduce the predominant inequalities that mark our cities. Our cities will also be shaped by the routine actions of the urban majorities that continue to be excluded and ignored in the analytical and risk registers of powerful actors. However, as the century unfolds, and new kinds of social movements refine their social technologies, combined with the benefits of cheap digital technologies mediated by mobile telephony, and enact and articulate their spatial visions for their settlements – the real city – we will see incredibly dynamic, contested and surprising urbanisms emerge. I have no doubt that the street, the slum, the waste dump, the taxi rank, the mosque and church will become the catalysts of an unanticipated African urbanism. So, let's pay attention in our quest to better understand the determinants and drivers of well-being in the heart of the city – the slum.

Contact:

LSE Cities
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE

+44 (0)20 7955 7706
lse.cities@lse.ac.uk
www.urban-age.net
www2.lse.ac.uk/lsecities

Alfred Herrhausen Society
Deutsche Bank
Unter den Linden 13/15
10117 Berlin
Germany

T +49 (0)30 3407 4201
ute.weiland@db.com
www.alfred-herrhausen-gesellschaft.de

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