WHAT ARE SUSTAINABLE AFRICAN CITIES?
Heinrich Böll Foundation – Africa

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Inclusion: A Sustainability Agenda for African City Growth

A n old South African song of the anti-Apartheid struggle is called “Meadowlands”. It commemorates a forced removal of many black and coloured people from the bustling, multi-cultural neighbourhood of Sophiatown in Johannesburg to the suburban township of Soweto in the late 1950s. The creolised tsotsitaal lyrics echo through the African continent’s historic urban transformation, which is well underway today: *Ons daak nie, ons pola hie*. “We are not leaving, we are staying right here.”

Inclusion. A place to call home. Such are the essential challenges that urbanisation has evoked for ordinary people and communities throughout the continent. The lessons emerging from both the successes and challenges of city growth in Africa suggest that developmentally sound approaches hinge on the extent to which ordinary people are incorporated into the financial flows, planning institutions and political processes by which it takes place.

Yet these lessons are not part of the dominant understanding of processes of urbanisation and development in Africa. This is true whether we look at the worlds of academia and theory, or the worlds of policy and politics. The urban population in Africa has almost tripled in fifty years, and this has been accompanied by a proliferation of informal settlements that lack access to basic services such as water and toilets, land tenure, housing and formal employment. These inequities are the overwhelming experience of the continent’s young, urban population. Over one-fifth of Africa’s population is between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, and in eastern and southern Africa, this proportion rises to one-third.

Building a Strategy
Economic inequalities track closely with political exclusion. In truth, approaches such as “participation”, while common to the sustainability agenda, carry little weight in the big decision-making flows that actually impact on African urbanisation. Instead, they have been watered down to mean either a) consultation with ordinary people and communities on projects and programs that have already been conceived by large actors in government and the private sector, or b) the ability of communities to hold such actors accountable for promises after they make them.

“Political sustainability” – a broad notion of social and economic inclusion – coupled with environmental sustainability, is quite simply not the dominant paradigm of development and urbanisation in Africa. If we can generalise at all about African cities – a questionable task in and of itself – then the image of fancy skyscrapers rising next to sprawling informal settlements perhaps best represents this process.

So the task is twofold: first, to understand what we mean by “sustainability” in the first place; second, to strategise for embedding “sustainability” in the influential agendas that drive African urbanisation in the present and for the future. Such an approach has to link housing, land and employment in order to build inclusion into the urbanisation process. It also has to identify where...
the kinds of citizen groupings and organisations are emerging that allow for more responsive approaches to this triangle of needs.

Finance, Planning, Politics
The exclusion of the urban poor from planning for growth implicates three major trends.

First, the financial arrangements that determine urban development are exacerbating divides of inequality in terms of access to services, land and employment opportunities. Little finance is allocated in either national or international aid budgets for the upgrading of informal settlements. Local governments struggle to collect property and land taxes, and have little financial discretion to direct resources to the upgrading of informal settlements.

Second, the institutional arrangements and planning processes that impact on urbanisation orientation, and the money that is directed at poverty alleviation continues to exhibit “rural bias”.

Meanwhile, the finance available to industrial and real estate development in urban areas has a sharp tendency to not benefit the people and interests that fall outside of the formal sector.

Take two examples of spatial disparities in East Africa, which demonstrate the stark inequalities of financial flows to African cities. In Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, over 70 percent of households are on land whose ownership rights the law does not recognise. In other words, the vast majority of the city is “informal”. Even starker is the situation in Nairobi, where recreational space occupies more total land than do slums. Sixty percent of the city’s population lives in slums. While the formal world is accessing finance and the power it accompanies, the populations that are growing most quickly in African cities experience deeper exclusion.

Second, the institutional arrangements and planning processes that impact on urbanisation
Participation is all too often a byword for using the poor as a means of an *ex post facto* rubber stamp of consent after key decisions around project conception and even implementation have been made by governments, private investors, and external aid agencies.

The challenge is not only a question of whether there is a moral need to include the poor, but even more, a question of how responsive existing institutions are to changes on the ground. The financial flows of urbanisation in Africa currently override the shaping capacity of institutions, especially in both local and national governments. The imperatives of private developers and corporations override the potential for the state to intervene effectively to mitigate the negative effects of the market.

In a sense, this is another version of how economist Joseph Stiglitz described what has happened to Western financial institutions in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, in which processes of economic growth have been “privatizing gains but socializing losses”. Charles Sabel and Sanjay Reddy have identified the key institutional problem as an inability to “learn”. Hence they propose steps for “learning to learn”, a method for examining the constraints of both supply and demand that policy-makers and institution-shapers must address. This means identifying new problems for policy, and opening up decision-making to be more accountable and, in fact, empirical.

Yet this can come off as pie-in-the-sky dreaming. Cities in Africa are a crucible for both the new global order of nations and new institutions that make the decisions that impact on economic growth patterns. In such areas, as Mark Swilling, director of the Sustainability Institute in South Africa, recently noted, institutions and ordinary people alike require “the ability to learn and unlearn very quickly in the blink of an eye as context shifts”. How can Sabel and Reddy’s “learning to learn” framework possibly address this reality?

The third and related cause of exclusion, and the necessary impact of inclusion on the sustainability agenda, concerns the political processes of urbanisation in Africa. In essence, the current exclusion of the poor from decision-making, project conceptions and fundamental re-imaginings of city development fundamentally impedes a more responsive set of institutions along the lines of “learning to learn”. When the urban poor are considered objects of developmental decisions of others – when ordinary people are a nuisance to be ignored or evicted – informality continues to hinder economic growth and the development of social fabric in cities.

Most poverty alleviation approaches are focused on supporting individuals and households to achieve basic human needs. But from the sustainability perspective – understood broadly – this actually undercuts the need for political inclusion. Given the constraints on political agency and economic opportunity that exist among many communities of the poorest of the poor, representative organisations of the poor are of particular significance.

It is therefore time to pay more attention to the kinds of popular institutions of the poor that can be effective at influencing formal institutional structures. These exist in many parts of the world currently undergoing rapid urbanisation. Even those cities that are not in Africa offer significant learning opportunities for alternative political approaches. A few different types include a) city-wide community networks of informal settlement dwellers in Thailand that work with a government program for slum upgrading called Baan Mankong; b) street committees in places like Karachi, Pakistan, that work with local government through the Orangi Pilot Project; and c) national and city-wide slum dweller “federations” in many countries in Africa and Asia, that are part of a global network called Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). In all of these cases, the most important lesson concerns the ability of government, especially at the local level, to reform existing institutions or create new ones that allow...
communities and officials to speak with each other as equals and to make decisions jointly.

**Investing in Community Organisations and Networks**

With this triangular framework for understanding the challenge of the sustainability agenda as it pertains to urbanisation in Africa – finance, planning, and politics – we need to begin understanding the strategy for actualising such an approach. We need to get deep into the real-world practices that, over time, cohere to create this kind of impact-driven approach to sustainable urbanisation. The notion of “learning”, as Sabel and Reddy, amongst others, have put it, is useful for describing how small changes in institutional practice can be geared towards exactly this kind of high impact.

In particular, we need to consider the lessons of communities that are actually involved in a learning process with elements of local bureaucracies. These relationships help to develop alternative mechanisms for delivery and to construct deeper bonds of citizenship through the links of community associations with state bureaucracies.

An instructive case is a set of interactions between community associations and low-level bureaucrats in the Informal Settlements Unit of the Department of Housing in the municipality of Stellenbosch in South Africa.

The informal settlement of Langrug is home to about eighteen hundred households, according to a community-led household survey in 2011. The settlement had gone with approximately forty toilets for all eighteen hundred families for many years. In 2010, a rich landowner nearby threatened to sue the municipality for the polluted runoff coming from the settlement on to his property.

The rich were making the claim in this case. But it is the poor who have gained attention from the claim. The municipality had long tried to provide services to Langrug through ad hoc, top-down methods. These previous attempts had been met by vandalism and destruction, as the community felt that there was no consultation about the needs or priorities of the settlement.

Over 2011 and 2012, both the community and low-level bureaucrats have changed. The bureaucrats visit the community much more often and sit in joint meetings with community leaders to plan improvements for the settlement. The city has also begun employing community members, who work on upgrading projects through short-term public works programs. In just a year, the community has achieved more toilets and water points, reorganised shacks near small flood plains in the settlement, and cleaned drains. The community and city government have begun working together to formalise the settlement and provide land tenure to residents. The community has also begun to alter and deepen its governing structures in the wake of its new experience in working with local government. Leaders have created smaller block committees, as well as issue-based committees (e.g., to plan for a new community hall that will serve a number of businesses and social organisations, and a health committee).

These lessons echo throughout the country and throughout the world. Langrug is linked to the Informal Settlement Network, a social movement that is part of the global SDI network. SDI has therefore used its international reach to bring communities and city officials from elsewhere in South Africa, and from other countries in Africa and Asia, to learn from the approach that the Langrug community and the Stellenbosch authorities have been exploring.

**Merging the “Top” and the “Bottom”**

From the perspective of actors working at the “bottom” of urban politics – community organisations, professional NGOs, legal advocates –
An integrated approach to sustainability will embed the human need for belonging to place, to land, and to community, within the broader processes of urbanisation.

“sustainability” too often turns into small projects that appear sustainable, but that do not make any impact at the large scales of financial flows, planning institutions and political processes. Without an articulation of precisely this sort of impact – a broad theory of change to achieve sustainable urbanisation in Africa – we cannot expect to see sustainable cities emerge from the urbanisation process well underway. Often this means that the “bottom” needs to be prepared to find new modes of working with large “formal” actors, especially the state.

From the “top”, the sustainability agenda demands the inverse of such a critical perspective. National and local governments in Africa have struggled to build in the adaptive responsiveness required to deal with rapid change in populations, built environment and economies. Those that have are learning to develop and invest in partnerships with community-based groups and organisations, especially those that constitute themselves at the city-wide level. This is not the simple decentralised model of private-public partnerships, but an approach to partnership that leverages the strategic strength of the grassroots to strengthen public institutions in their ability to perceive and adapt to the rapid changes of urbanisation.

“Path-dependent” views of development have long suggested that historical and especially colonial legacies condemn people in Africa to overwhelming poverty and suffering. Consequently, intervention by aid agencies, multilateral institutions, private actors and national governments has too often manifested in a context that either ignores these legacies and “path dependence” altogether, or assumes that their outcomes make the urbanisation of poverty a historical fait accompli. This mix of hubris and fatalism has led to flows of funds, institutional designs and political power that not only ignore, but actively exclude the poor. Ordinary people continue to persist as objects of interventions by those who are much more powerful, and therefore have little voice.

So we return to the old South African song, “Meadowlands”. Such a collective plea for belonging needs to underpin the sustainability agenda if it will be able to impact on an alternative view of urbanisation in African cities. This means investing in the capacities of communities, just as much as it means investing in the projects and programs that are geared towards achieving the physical “outputs” of inclusionary development: basic services, land, housing, employment.

This also means investing in community organisations, and the networking of these organizations – especially at the city-wide scale – in order to build the political processes at the city and national level that can achieve such physical outcomes. An integrated approach to sustainability will embed the human need for belonging to place, to land, and to community, within the broader processes of urbanisation. This may be our only path to upending a phenomenon that, in Africa, has thus far exhibited all-too-prevalent tendencies of exclusion.

Endnotes
4 UN-Habitat, State of the African Cities 2010, p. 3.