

## STRENGTHENING THE WEAPONS OF THE WEAK: INFORMALITY, URBAN REFORMS AND SUB-SAHARA AFRICAN CITIES

Hakeem Bakare, John Bryson and Lauren Andres

It is widely known that Africa during this century will experience significant demographic growth combined with enhanced urbanization. Managing urbanization and conducting urban reform in Sub-Saharan African cities is extremely challenging. There has been on-going international support to enhance city living including research and evidence on the strength of informal economies, [informal settlements](#) and informal governance. But, urban living remains challenging in many African cities and this partly reflects failure of evidence-based governance combined with limited planning capacity and funding.

Across African cities, it is important to highlight the importance of informal interventions as an important citizen-led weapon to enhance urban living and sustainability. Having said that, we also want to insist that we are not romanticising informality but are here attempting to unwrap its diversity and complexity.

Informality sits within what has been named as insurgent urbanism ([Miraftab and Wills, 2005](#)) and stresses the importance of citizen-centric resilience in the planning and development literature. This approach to place-making is often adopted in the absence of one or more forms of state-mandated regulation and more formal approaches to place-making informed by spatial planning.

However, in African cities an important point of departure for recently, it has been [suggested](#)



*Canaan Estate is the product of the decade-long controversial slum upgrading project in Kibera*

domain of the poor as it is evident across many political, social and spatial urban development processes. The current future of many African cities lies in a combination of formal and informal place-making processes.

This argument characterises the socio-political, socio-economic and socio-spatial manifestations of informality in Africa which has affected the success of many urban plans and policies meant to formally guide the transformation of cities toward sustainable development. Emerging plans and strategies to promote African-led development continue to recognise informal actors and informality as key weapons to alleviate poverty and meet the urban infrastructure needs of the continent. It is worth noting that these types of informal place-making solutions developed and implemented by and for residents results in a complex mosaic of patches

within a city. Some patches will benefit from informal citizen-led place-making and other patches will not benefit. Socio-political manifestations of informality highlight the importance of these citizen-led interventions in developing local solutions to place-based problems. It is important that government encourages rather than discourages this type of informal place-making.

Many governments in Africa identify limited financial capacity as a major barrier in the implementation of many ambitious policies. In many instances this has led to a 'Keep in View' approach to such formal policies while resorting to informal plans or [alternative-substitute decision-making](#) to meet immediate needs. This approach is often politically motivated and intended to meet the needs of elites rather than being citizen-centric. There is a tendency to this occurring in [states](#), known for the provision of inadequate

and or poor-quality state-provided services including infrastructure-enabled services.

Problems with state provision encourages citizens to exploit any available opportunity to live and meet their livelihood needs through informal processes. The socio-spatial results of these informal actions results in the growth of slums within and around so called 'formal' cities. Informal governance occurs as a result of the inability of the state to deal effectively with the provision of social and economic services that are required by citizens. Through informal governance, citizens engage in service provision to leverage, in most cases, the failure of the state to provide affordable and sustainable infrastructure for all citizens. Now, informality includes alternative substitute options common to all development actors across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). It is a weapon which if properly coordinated and integrated into the development process by African leaders through collaboration and co-creation would enhance economic development and urban living. SSA countries would also develop according to their capacity rather than adopting often over-ambitious investments that might be ineffective. International governments and non-government organisation (NGOs) have identified the power of citizen science and

how the state could be nudged towards enhancing citizen liveability and livelihoods. As such, NGOs have been providing different forms of assistance in terms of funding and capacity building for states and civil societies to undertake research that will inform context specific, evidence based and implementable place-making policies. One such support is the [Official Development Assistance](#) (ODA) funded research by the UK government in the policy area of Kenyan housing. The UK government has spent about £13.0m on research relating to housing for the benefit of Kenya.

Recently, the UK and Kenya hosted a research [symposium](#) at Strathmore University, Nairobi on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2019 to showcase existing research partnerships and explore the potential for new innovative interdisciplinary collaborations. The symposium developed from the Kenyan government's recognition of the need to provide affordable, new and decent houses as one of the Big Four Agenda items identified to shape the country's socio-economic development strategy until 2022. The symposium highlighted the need to collectively pull together research and policy resources to inform housing policies that promote sustainable development. One important lesson learnt from this

symposium was the display of innovative housing and city infrastructure technologies as well as innovative research particularly underway in Nairobi. All these actions, however, indicate that state and non-state institutions are engaged at different scales in the drive to promote sustainable urban development in Nairobi.

Nevertheless, there is an absence of a coherent approach for pulling resources together to address the problem of rapid African urbanization. Foreign governments, such as the UK, need to support and strengthen African governments in the promotion of co-creation and collaboration in place-making process. The current position highlights that government action is not inclusive. This has made citizen scientists work separately from the state and private investors have engaged in monopolistic behaviour that does not support the development of an [inclusive growth strategy](#). Adopting a collective action approach will help strengthen the weapons of the weak by encouraging citizen-led informal interventions that are intended to enhance the quality of urban living and enhance economic activity. What is required is a people-centric and place-centric approach that will focus on the creation of a responsible and inclusive approach to economic development.



*Cities within a city: Aerial view of Kibera slum settlement and the high rise neighborhood in Nairobi*