Dealing with social diversity

a framework for socially just government intervention in poor urban neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT

Interventions in poor urban neighbourhoods often assume that all residents have similar aspirations and needs. However, these neighbourhoods rank among the most unequal settlements, and interventions can create winners and losers. Different dimensions of diversity have to be taken into consideration in planning such interventions to ensure a just outcome. Through the analysis of specific examples of urban regeneration, the paper identifies three interlinked aspects of diversity that need to be considered. These relate to Fraser's dimensions of social justice and to the pillars of the right to the city. We find that slum upgrading projects assume that all residents aspire to better housing and are willing to invest their savings and effort to achieve this. However, this is not a priority for everyone living in informal settlements. For many, the informal settlement is a relatively cheap housing option located close to good educational and economic opportunities, allowing parents to save for children's education. Interventions in informal settlements seldom consider the impact of market dynamics on different groups of residents. In informal settlements with some rental housing, improved infrastructures can lead to sudden increases in rent, displacing the most vulnerable residents of the settlement. Attempts to take diversity into account in participatory processes with local residents generally only recognise a limited number of dimensions of identity. They tend to divide people based on one dimension only, as if there were no others. However, people have multiple identities and some can be more salient than others when it comes to slum upgrading. This paper argues for an intersectional and relational approach, focusing on the relations between residents, and between different groups of residents.

KEY WORDS

diversity; intersectionality; informal settlements; social justice; urban development

INTRODUCTION

Intervening in poor urban neighbourhood to improve living conditions has become a major priority for governments in the global South. Urbanisation has often been accompanied by the growth of informal settlements and other poor neighbourhoods. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 focusing on "making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" has increased policy attention to these urban settlements. However, governments struggle to approach those living in these settlements. Often, they assume residents have homogenous characteristic and identify one policy approach for the entire settlement. However, these neighbourhoods are some of the most unequal places in the world. This means that interventions creates winners and losers. Improvements in infrastructures and services may suddenly change land, housing and rental markets. For example, infrastructure improvements can rapidly increase rent, displacing long-term tenants unable to cope with the changes. This paper argues for the need to consider residents' diversity in the planning and implementation of urban interventions. Different dimensions of residents' identities – including gender, ethnicity/race, class, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, citizenship status – intersect between them determine the way in which interventions affect residents and the extent to which they are able or not to respond to their aspirations and needs. Moreover, interventions risk to reinforce specific dynamic of oppression and marginalisation which depends on the power relations between these identities. This means that any intervention must understand the complexity of local power relations. However, these multiple simultaneous identities are dynamic and change over time, meaning that a constant consideration for the implications of social diversity must accompany the process of policy implementation and its adaptation to existing condition.

Figure 1. Freetown, Sierra Leone

Albeit with regional and national differences and sometimes with variations proposed by different funding development agencies, increasingly poor neighbourhoods are intervened through processes of

slum-upgrading or urban regeneration, with the idea of allowing residents to remain as much as possible in their settlement. However, in practice, it is often difficult to plan a project that can cater for different residents in terms of income, livelihood activity, tenure type, etc. There are at least three main challenges to achieve a just development intervention in poor urban neighbourhoods. The first is to gain a comprehensive understanding of internal diversity given its simultaneous and multiple and dynamic nature, and how this diversity shapes needs and aspirations of different individuals and groups. The second is the need for some foresight into how interventions are impacting different individuals and groups, based on careful assumptions on how the intervention will impact other processes, such as livelihood opportunities, and land and housing markets. The final challenge regards the ways in which project implementers can implement achieve the meaningful participation of different residents in the decision-making process.

FRAMEWORK

These three challenges are summarised in framework developed by the author (forthcoming) in which they are associated with three important dimensions of social justice identified by Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1998, 2000) and they have a policy hook in the pillars of the right to the city conceptualised during Habitat III (United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, 2017).

Dimensions of Social Justice (Fraser)	Pillars of the right to the city (Habitat III)	Dimensions of diversity in slum upgrading
Recognition	Social, economic and cultural diversity	Diversity of needs and aspirations requiring different interventions
Redistribution	Spatially just resource distribution	The diversity of impacts of urban development interventions on different groups and individuals
Participation	Political agency (inclusive governance)	Diversity in participation to decision-making

Table 1. Framework showing the interlinked dimensions of Fraser's social justice, right to the city, and dimensions of diversity in slum upgrading. Author elaboration.

- *Recognition. Diversity of needs and aspirations requiring different interventions:* poor urban residents are diverse and reside in unequal settlements. Urban development interventions differ greatly in their capacity to recognise and address the diversity of residents' needs and aspirations.
- *Redistribution. The diversity of impacts of urban development interventions on different groups and individuals:* urban development interventions have profoundly different impacts on different groups and individuals residing in the city. Analyses of urban development interventions challenge discourses of win-win projects that benefit all residents and present a complex and nuanced perspective on who gains from what intervention. Such analyses highlight the political choices inherently embedded in every step of an intervention about which individuals and groups to prioritise.
- *Participation. Diversity in participation to decision-making:* local governance structures often reflect unequal power relations at settlement level, making it difficult to ensure that they adequately represent the diversity of interests, particularly of the most marginalised people.

RECOGNISING DIVERSITY

The first challenge is linked to the failure to recognising the diversity of needs and aspirations. In poor urban neighbourhood, this is often linked to a failure to understand the function that the settlement and the housing it provides play in the life project and livelihoods of different residents. For example, in the informal settlements of Nairobi, residents priorities range from proximity livelihoods and good education, to cheap rent, saving to invest in human capital or saving to invest in land elsewhere for retirement (Mwau, Sverdlik, & Makau, 2020; Syagga, Mitullah, & Karirah-Gitau, 2001, 2002; Weru, 2004). These priorities are shaped depending on a number of dimensions of identity, for example, an important dimension in Nairobi is class and this intersects with gender, ethnicity, and livelihood type. The large majority of the residents of informal settlements are tenants. They rent from what are generally called: structure-owners, because, in many cases, they do not own the land (which is often public) but have built structures that they rent out to tenants. Structure owners can be resident in the settlement or outside (absentee) and own a small number of rooms or several structures, each one with 6 to 8 rooms (many households will only rent one room).

Let us know consider how this diversity plays out regarding development interventions aimed at improving housing and related infrastructures. Some very poor tenants would not be able to afford to put any more money into housing as they already struggle to pay their rent. For example, in Korogocho, one of Nairobi's informal settlements where I worked, prior to a slum-upgrading project, 64% of the respondents to the project's socio-economic survey did not have enough food. Even the most affordable project implies an increase cost of housing. As a minimum people may be required to pay for services that they can currently live without or pay less with informal connections (electricity). Moreover, the participation in these collective projects require considerable time—a resource which involves difficult trade-offs with work to sustain their household.

A large number of less poor tenants still has limited interest in improving housing through projects leading to home ownership because this means shifting the little resources available into an uncertain process. They correctly know that their best chance at social mobility is through their children education, rather than better housing. Moreover, in Nairobi, they may be unwilling to invest all their resource into a risky project in an ethnically mixed areas where post-election violence meant that many risked their lives and property when waves of violence spread in these settlements (De Smedt, 2009). However, beside children's education, many households who still have a link with their rural area of origins feel that investing in some land or housing there is a safer investment and a good place to retire. The extent to which tenants from poor neighbourhoods are actually investing in rural areas needs academic scrutiny, nevertheless the aspiration is still shifting their investment plans.

Those structure owners currently benefiting from very profitable rental income are sometimes wary of projects potentially affecting their revenues. Projects putting on the same level structure owners and tenants equalising their rights face fierce resistant from the first powerful group and are politically unfeasible. However, for structure owners, a credible plan to formalise their property and increase its value without challenging their ownership claims is often welcomed. There are some extreme situations where concentration of informal property cannot realistically be recognised by the state through a transfer of a significant size of public land to a single owner, especially if there are also the long-term tenants who reside in such settlements for decades. Still, often government recognise existing ownership claims over those of tenants.

Finally, a number of development projects in Sub-Saharan Africa offered bricks walled housing with piped wated and electricity by building multi-storey buildings so that most of the original residents could fit. However, this new housing arrangements has destroyed the networks of social relations and livelihood around the dwelling that had allowed people to survive. This has a specific gendered dimension because often women with children, use the dwelling as a business enabling them to simultaneously carry out productive and care work. For example in Kibera (Kenya), the door or window directly on the road allowed to be close to their customers with whom they have a strong relation (Flores Fernandez & Calas, 2011). Similarly, in peri-urban Maputo (Mozambique), the outdoor space is used for urban agriculture which is a very important source of households' food security and complementary income (Montedoro, 2022).

DISTRIBUTION

> "It is impossible to understand from the outside the complexity of economic interests linked to the slum environment. These interests range from exploitative to entrepreneurial to survivalist. Given this complexity, one cannot accurately foresee from outside how an intervention will impact on communities, households and individuals, their income generation and their access to basic services. Yet, in the context of deprivation, vulnerability and fragile livelihoods, it is important to predict the impact an intervention will have" (Huchzermeyer, 2008, p. 22).

As beautifully put by Huchzermeyer in her analysis of Nairobi, urban development interventions targeting informal settlements will unleash powerful dynamics shaping housing and basic services markets. These are able to dispossess and expel most residents. Once projects are in motion, governments with limited bureaucratic capacity to regulate these dynamics and protect and identify those vulnerable are unable to prevent the adverse impact of these processes. Market led displacement can be sudden or more nuanced but still brutal. For example, the simple construction of a paved and illuminated road and other few minor interventions was able to move the rent price of a room in Korogocho from KES250-400 in 2008 to KES2,000-2,500 in 2015 (Rigon, Dabaj, & Baumann, 2019), while improving the value of informal plots of land of almost ten times. This meant that without making any investment, structure owners found themselves benefiting from increased rent and informal property values, while tenants had to either move out leaving their place to higher income population or pay much higher rent for a public infrastructure built with donor money that was meant to benefit all residents.

Without a diversity analysis of distributional impacts of the outcomes of an interventions, most residents are not simply excluded from benefiting but they are adversely affected with the displacement from their housing and livelihoods.

REPRESENTATION

While residents' participation has become a mantra of development projects, including urban interventions, it is often difficult for participatory processes to be ensure all voices are able to contribute fairly to decision-making. In fact, most of these processes are managed in such a way as to have the community represented but they seldom reflect on who within the community participates and shape decisions. At best, these processes ensure that some categories are present: women, young people, elderly, etc. However, there is little intersectional awareness to ensure that these women, people and elderly do not also all belong to dominant elite group based for example on class or ethnicity. Moreover, there is often little reflection on the costs of participation and how the most vulnerable are disproportionally burdened. Even when vulnerable individuals are to participate, their

presence does not imply *voice* (Rigon & Castán Broto, 2021) because they hold realistic assumptions about the long-term unequal power relations and thus very cautious about putting forward their own interest if it conflicts with that of the most powerful (Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, & Véron, 2005).

CONCLUSION

To deliver just outcomes, urban development interventions must consider the three important dimensions of diversity analysed in this paper. They have to continuously question the extent the intervention is able to take into consideration the diverse needs and aspirations, achieve fair distribution of outcomes, and include a diversity of residents into the decision-making. When such analysis is not possible, it is better not to intervene at all because doing so can lead to negative adverse impacts on the most vulnerable residents whose livelihoods and life may be displaced. This paper calls for an understanding of the complex existing arrangements around which lives and livelihoods of poor urban residents are built around particular places and how these arrangements are shaped by the intersection of their complex identities of gender, ethnicity, class, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and citizenship status. Finally, it provides a framework for all those involved in intervening in poor urban neighbourhoods in the global South to reflect on intra-settlement social diversity and its implications for urban development projects.

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