Planning for sustainable urban livelihoods in Africa

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Abstract:

This chapter explores the role, success and failures of spatial planning in shaping African cities and its influence on livelihoods. To date, planning in Africa has largely failed to address the needs and livelihoods of the poor and struggled to address wider issues such as spatial and economic inclusion, health inequalities, future pandemics, and climate change. Planning for sustainable livelihoods across Africa must consider the distinction between universal or more generic approaches to planning and the experience of particular places and people, specifically, accounting for the needs and practices of informal entrepreneurs. This chapter first explores how the legacy of colonial planning has impacted the segregation of spaces and hence of livelihoods, particularly those of the poorer communities. It then discusses the barriers faced by planning to address the informal nature of the livelihoods of lower-income communities. Finally, it sketches out the challenges that need to be overcome and how planning for sustainable livelihoods should thus be tackled in Africa in the future.

Introduction

This chapter explores the role, successes, and failures of spatial planning in shaping African cities and its influence on livelihoods, particularly lower-income livelihoods. Spatial planning is understood in this context not as a regulatory mechanism but a means to facilitate, ideally, the delivery of better places for the future and particularly a more holistic, more strategic, inclusive, integrative, and attuned approach to spatial, urban, and sustainable development (Haughton et al. 2009). We build upon Chambers' and Conway's (1992) definition to understand livelihoods as capabilities, material and social assets, and activities that support everyday living. Such livelihoods are sustainable if they can be maintained, recover from shocks, and allow for the survival and wellbeing of individuals and households, in various and diverse urban contexts. This is particularly critical for the poorest and more vulnerable communities whose daily survival often relies on informal activities and arrangements (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

Unpacking the challenges behind the process of planning for sustainable livelihoods is especially important in overcoming poverty, inclusion and health inequalities, future pandemics, and climate change. Urban planning plays an important role in developing sustainable livelihoods; given this, there is a need to better understand the ways in which planning visions, mechanisms, and challenges impact them. To date, planning in Africa has struggled to meet the needs of the poor, especially concerning livelihoods. Drawing upon these considerations, we structure our argument as follows. First, we explore how the legacy of colonial planning has impacted the segregation of spaces and hence of livelihoods, particularly those of the poorer communities. We then discuss the challenges faced by planning in response to the informal nature of the livelihoods of lower-income communities. Finally, we sketch out how planning for sustainable livelihoods can be tackled in Africa in the future.

1. The development of African cities: colonisation, race, and segregation of the poor

The way cities and neighbourhoods have been shaped in Africa needs to be understood as a legacy of colonial planning. This has created path-dependency that has played an important role in creating differences in the livelihoods of the poor from those in other cohorts.

1.1 The legacy of colonisation: shaping African cities

Patterns of spatial ordering can be observed in indigenous populations before modern European colonisation (Silva, 2016). One common feature was the tendency to prioritise collective action rather than segregation, with the structuring of public spaces including market squares, farms, and playgrounds (Amankwah-Ayeh, 1996). Here, the so-called planned way of using and managing spaces was linked to how spaces were used to support everyday living. With colonisation and the transfer of European planning systems and models in the African continent at the end of the nineteenth century, space became managed according to the interests of colonial elites (Parnell, 2002), thereby contributing to inequalities and having long-term consequences for contemporary cities.

Planning colonial cities responded to the need for effective occupation of colonial territories and conditions for white colonisation of rural areas (Silva, 2015). This meant developing effective strategies to enable the plundering of resources from colonial territories (Ross and Telkamp, 1985), the possibility for extraction of agricultural surplus and provide services, and political control (King, 1985). Planning was also influenced by eugenic theories (Munanga,

2016), which underpinned spatial segregation based on race. In many colonies, such segregation was justified by a discourse on health, as "sanitation has correctly been identified as the metaphor which colonialists first invoked to justify the establishment of segregated locations that facilitated the control of urbanised African workers" (Parnell, 1993: 488). As planning relies on the physical organisation of space and its diverse infrastructures (transport, water, electricity, housing etc.) such models of development have a long-term legacy, particularly in dividing and segregating spaces.

Later planning was one of the active forces in shaping cities further. From 1948, it played a critical role during the apartheid period in South Africa (Harrison et al., 2007). These types of planning interventions dictated the racial development of spaces, and hence of livelihoods, with white livelihoods being far more sustainable and resilient than any others. This cohort was provided with better quality housing, more reliable infrastructures (water, energy) and occupied better locations (e.g., mostly away from high-risk flooding areas). In contrast, the more vulnerable (black livelihoods) were forced to live in more marginal areas, including the edges of cities, with limited access to reliable basic services and very little acknowledgement of their everyday needs.

1.2 Colonial planning and its long-lasting impact on the livelihoods of the poor

Colonial planning generated uneven development between regions and countries, with clear patterns of rapid urbanisation, spatialised racial segregation, and social inequalities that are still visible today. Poor settlements – known as informal dwellings, slums and townships – are still characterised by significant burdens which fail to be addressed by planning and other connected policies. There are concerned with poor health outcomes (Marais and Cloete 2014; Satterthwaite, Sverdlik, and Brown 2019) including exposure to indoor and outdoor air pollution and high TB levels. Residents are at risk of greater exposure to harm due to hazards including fire, floods, and other environmental related risks (ibid). Communities face entrenched poverty linked to increased difficulties in practising urban agriculture and home-based livelihoods due to the lack of space and services (Crush, Hovorka, and Tevera 2011).

Contemporary African cities are thus still designed to have formal, well-provisioned areas for the middle-/high-income communities, with less consideration given to low-income areas. The provision of and access to key services is a major issue. There has been a move in some African countries to start providing supermarkets in low-income areas (Battersby, 2017). This has had

mixed effects. It has eased the travel burden for poor households who typically use a range of formal and informal food providers to access food. However, it also resulted in a decline in the number of spazas (small, home-based shops) following the opening of supermarkets; hence livelihoods were affected. Worryingly, planning was identified as one of the key obstacles to the operation of spazas owing to the lengthy and costly process of obtaining planning approval. There are also examples of municipalities in South Africa using planning law to push out informal traders in favour of supermarkets and formal stores, with this partly being motivated by the fact that the latter pay municipal taxes, whereas the former do not (Competition Commission, 2019). This observation reveals the main tension between planning and providing for sustainable livelihoods: addressing informality.

2. Planning, informality, and the livelihoods of lower-income communities

Planning to date has failed to account for sustainable livelihoods, particularly those of the poorer communities. This is linked to three main challenges: land management, the design of lower-income neighbourhoods, and zoning and its account of commercial uses which all struggle to account for the importance of informal uses and activities.

2.1 Land management

While informality is a key component of African cities, it is not or is barely accounted for by existing planning regulations and policies (Pieterse, 2014). This choice is conditioned by the lack of other economic alternatives and by the inability of the system to recognise an informal place of living and its diversity. For entrepreneurs to access formal institutions, from banks to government, proof of address or proof of ownership is often required. This has an impact on livelihoods as only an estimated 10% of land in Sub-Saharan Africa is formally registered as private property (Bah, et al. 2018). This lack of formal ownership has multiple implications. For one, properties without formal ownership cannot be used for loan guarantees. Furthermore, the various approvals necessary for businesses to become formally registered often require the consent of the property owner to make the application. If 'formal' ownership is unclear, these applications cannot be made. This results in a situation of 'enforced informality' where formality becomes an impossibility for entrepreneurs (Charman, et al., 2013); by essence this constraints the development of more profitable businesses and economic activities hence affecting livelihoods.

Land use management often aggravates this situation as, even if property ownership can be proven, most town planning schemes are based on modernist ideas that perpetuate segregation, considering a house only as a place to live, not a place for business. This forces households to make an application for planning rights when they want to formalise their home-based businesses. However, this process is costly and takes considerable time. Low-income households typically cannot afford, nor can they wait for, approval before operating, as often the home-based business is their primary means of survival (Charman et al., 2017). Again, this has clear implications on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable left with little options to secure regular and stable incomes.

2.2 Poor design of lower-income neighbourhoods

Beyond issues of planning rights, the lack of consideration of the multi-dwelling, multi-use nature of poor households leads to the inadequate provision of services and poorly planned and designed housing units. An example of this from South African cities is backyard dwellings, which are either rented out to generate a livelihood, or used to accommodate wider family networks; they constitute the second most common form of housing in the country. However, settlements are rarely designed with backyard shacks in mind nor with the idea of being used for various purposes (living/working/providing additional incomes); thus, the infrastructure often cannot handle the additional demand on utilities. This results in unsafe illegal electrical connections, which pose a fire risk, and increased demand on infrastructure (sanitation, power supply, etc.) often resulting in utility failures (Lemanski, 2009).

The presence of backyard shacks often leads to the sharing of sanitation facilities which were only designed to accommodate a single household, which leads to poor hygiene and breakages, which in turn leads to a high incidence of diarrhoea and other water-related ailments (Govender, Barnes, and Pieper, 2011). Similar issues have been noted for home-based enterprises, as the provision of state-subsidised housing does not usually provide a separate space for livelihood activities, leading to an overlap of business and home activities, which can hinder business operations (Gough, Tipple, and Napier, 2003) thus impacting the profitability of the activities with wider implications on the households' incomes. This testifies from the disconnection between how the most vulnerable live, work and survive and how space, buildings and infrastructures are designed and planned .

2.3 Zoning and commercial uses

Often the zoning of low-income areas makes no, or limited, provision for commercial land. This makes it difficult for larger businesses to exist in low-income areas, as there may be no sites large enough to accommodate the needs of these businesses. Even if the sites are large enough, they are forced to go through a cumbersome approval process, and the servicing of the site may require significant upgrades to accommodate higher-order land uses (Parnell and Pieterse, 2010).

Informal traders who operate in formal business areas are rarely accepted by authorities and face regular evictions. For example, Zimbabwe in 2005 launched Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order, which in three months almost decimated the whole informal economy of Zimbabwe. The motivations behind this campaign, which are echoed regularly in similar exercises that occur throughout Africa, was to 'restore order,' and informal traders were accused of hiding criminals, practising illegal activities, and not practising hygiene, thereby 'spoiling' the image of town and country. The very name of the operation, Murambatsvina, conveyed this message, which translates to 'drive out the rubbish' (Rogerson, 2016). While planners were not directly involved in this operation, planning was complicit in that many of the modernist planning arguments were used by the authorities to justify and rationalise this operation (Kamete, 2009).

It is apparent that Africa has struggled to understand, account for, and support sustainable livelihoods for the lower-income communities. Failure of the planning system and profession has been a key factor in that respect. We now turn to which shifts are needed to allow planning to support the development of sustainable livelihoods.

3. How to overcome the challenges to planning for sustainable livelihoods

The failure to plan for sustainable livelihoods needs to be connected back to four issues: planning resource and scarcity, inclusion, the need for people-centric and localised approaches, and political commitment.

3.1 Tackling planning resource and scarcity

The lack of planning resources and the scarcity of the profession is a significant burden in Africa, with huge discrepancies from one country to another. Such skill shortages and a limited number of planners to deliver planning (UN-Habitat and APA, 2013) are not only associated

with financial resources, lack of investment in skill development, access to education (Mateus et al., 2014) but also with path-dependent socio-economic and political factors. For too long, African cities have been ignored and developing the planning profession was not considered to be a priority. Capital and major cities have attracted the most skilled practitioners whereas smaller cities and rural territories struggle. Such polarisation leads to unequal distribution of planning skills and capabilities across countries; this is reflected in the capacity and resources of local governments to develop and implement planning interventions to enhance livelihoods (Watson and Odendaal, 2013).

As a result, African urban planning tends to be outsourced to multinational consultancy firms (Watson, 2014), who are often based in the Global North. Unrealisable visionary planning futures are created, ignoring the political subtleties and everyday needs of local communities, particularly of the most vulnerable. This 'planning as best practice' approach focuses on creating neo-liberal models of developments, influenced by models applied in cities of the Global North, is underpinned by governments rejecting any "improper" solutions, defined according to Northern standards. Often the outcome is the criminalisation of the livelihoods and shelter strategies of the poor and most vulnerable (Charlton 2018). This reinforces the segregation of spaces and the lack of acknowledgement of informal needs and practices. Providing more resources for the planning profession, while accounting for the needs of the many and not the few, is essential if planning is going to contribute to shaping sustainable livelihoods. This rests upon an inclusive and socially just approach towards urban planning.

3.2 Addressing inclusivity

To date, planning in Africa is not inclusive enough. It does not account for the diversity of needs and practices of individuals and communities, particularly those with low incomes (Andres et al., 2020a). A socially just form of African planning should mandate the inclusion of informal traders, microenterprises, and public transport facilities in all-new shopping centres, thereby fostering integration, not exclusion (Denoon-Stevens, 2016). This can be delivered in practice. The City of Johannesburg (South Africa) is currently implementing this through a zoning scheme requirement which states that all retail areas larger than 5000m^2 must make provision for public transport facilities and informal trading facilities and ablutions (City of Johannesburg, 2019).

To be more inclusive, planning can encourage specific forms of development, for example, by proactively changing the zoning rights of properties; commercial land uses can also be encouraged in areas that work best for the city as a whole (Denoon-Stevens and Nel, 2020). An example of this is Eveline Street in Windhoek, Namibia. Property owners along this street were informed that their properties were to be rezoned to permit business rights. This contributed to the doubling and diversification of microenterprises along this street between 2008 and 2016. This was also supported by the rectangular plot sizes and wide pavements, which created spatial conditions that were conducive to a mixed-use environment (Tonkin, Charman, and Thiresh, 2018).

Other inclusive actions that planners can take include making provision for home-based livelihoods in state-subsidised low-income housing developments. In Mathare 4A, Kenya, live-work units were provided to housing recipients who had previously run a home-based business, which provided separate space for living and business activities in one building. These were clustered on main roads, providing better access to potential markets, and the increased space allowed businesses to grow, while the separation of work and living spaces led to a higher quality of life for business operators (Kigochie, 2001).

3.3 Promoting a people-centric and localised approach to planning

To tackle the lack of planners and planning resources, a new form of people-centric alternative approaches to planning is needed, recognising the importance of informality in Africa. This will enable individuals and communities to shape their livelihoods with a focus on more responsible and realistic place-based outcomes (Andres et al., 2021). Such approaches are very limited to date. Such a shift rests upon empowering local communities, with assistance from social welfare departments and humanitarian agencies, to acquire and apply place-making skills. This must build on existing capabilities and activities, resulting in a process of localised inclusive place-making which would transform liveability and livelihoods. At the centre of this responsible inclusive planning agenda is the creation of a new place-based partnership between people and planning that will alter futures through releasing the transformative power of citizen-centric innovation, largely based on survival mechanisms (Andres et al., 2020a) and the collective power of small actions (Dittmar 2020).

Accounting for locality complements empowering residents to co-create living spaces with urban planners through developing workable and pragmatic practices, which feeds into how

new forms of spatial planning have been identified (Haughton et al., 2009). Localised approaches can be delivered through land use plans (e.g., subdivision plans) which favour ownership and influences urban forms (Lai and Davies 2020); they can also be implemented through micro-scale approaches allowing flexibility in the use of space, specifically towards informal practices.

People-centric approaches to planning sustainable livelihoods require solutions to contextualised needs; this is essential to ensure preparedness and resilience to crisis. The recent African epidemics (Ebola), the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the ongoing challenge of TB have highlighted the need for planning to focus on planning out opportunities for disease transmission. This is important in the African context where WASH facilities – in other words, the provision of water, sanitation, health care waste management, hygiene and environmental cleaning infrastructure, and services – are often unavailable.

There is a real risk that attempts to sustain livelihoods will rely on non-locally tailored approaches, shaped for Northern-type cities, and sold under a credo of being 'pandemic-resilient' (Andres et al. 2020a). Planning for sustainable and healthy livelihoods requires the development of local solutions based on contextualised spatial planning; this is not about land use, but rather about a vision of development that is both sustainable and resilient. Local knowledge is key to ensuring that interventions and their enforcement contribute to sustainable livelihoods rather than creating perverse outcomes. It is estimated that the standardised and even stricter lockdown mechanisms that were applied in South Africa during the 2020 pandemic led to an increase in mortality and morbidity greater than that caused by COVID-19 (Denoon-Stevens and du Toit, 2021). These interventions ignored the livelihoods and food strategies of the poor. The strategies intended to limit the impacts of COVID-19 needed to include a focus on minimising related impacts on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable (ibid). Such a localised and inclusive approach to sustainable livelihoods relies on considering spatial planning as a flexible process that can respond and adapt to predictable and unpredictable events.

3.4 Political commitment

Finally, whatever shifts occur, the reality is that planning for sustainable livelihoods is by essence highly political and requires political commitment. Planning operates through a variety of institutional arrangements, which in the African context and in many other policy fields are

affected by patronage and clientelism. This contributes to concerns related to shadow governance coupled with extortion, corruption, and patronage across Africa (Olver, 2017). Urban planners must navigate these power dynamics, and situations differ from one country to another. South African planners have managed to secure considerable power to reshape the built environment, particularly in major urban centres (Andres et al. 2020b). In contrast, the situation in Ghana is very different (Cobbinah and Darkwah, 2017), as urban planning outcomes are dominated by political elites with little understanding of the role planning can play in supporting the development of sustainable livelihoods.

Community needs, and hence any attempts to provide for sustainable livelihoods, are not accounted for and decisions are driven by political strategies. Planners, in many African countries, still have very little influence, or power, in shaping the built environment; influence is constrained by a lack of knowledge, mapping tools (for example regarding land uses), data, and political support including implementation (ibid). This is a significant constraint with very few solutions.

Conclusion

Planning for sustainable livelihoods across Africa must consider the distinction between universal or more generic approaches to planning and the experience of particular places and people, including informal needs and practices and lower-income livelihoods. It must distinguish between living and the material structures that support life and different forms of life. It must also engage with the question posed by Fassin (2018) regarding forms of life, namely, "Are forms of life shared by the whole human species or is it inscribed in a given space and time?" (2018: 20). The concept of 'forms of life' highlights the distinction between "the universal and the particular" and the "tension between the biological and the biographical" (Fassin, 2018: 41-42).

Across Africa, livelihoods are constrained with extant forms of life forcing people to focus on survival rather than providing opportunities to shape biographies that also reflect sustainable and resilient livelihoods and lifestyles. Thus, the form of life of African urban residents is founded upon the constraints and possibilities provided by their external environment. Planning has been part of the problem and it is time for an alternative approach to planning in Africa to emerge that emphasises planning cities to support forms of life that encourage the formation of inclusive sustainable livelihoods. Planning must create the conditions that enable smaller-

scale and highly contextualised initiatives to flourish (Dittmar, 2020). This is about balancing the tensions between structures imposed by planning and enabling opportunities for alternative substitute place-making or localised improvisation to occur. The focus must be on planning as a policy tool to support the formation of sustainable urban livelihoods across Africa.

List of key points:

- Planning can deliver both positive and negative impacts and must be crafted very carefully to develop sustainable and resilient livelihoods, especially when dealing with informality.
- Localised and contextualised approaches are critical, and planning must be clearly delivered on behalf of or for all people rather than reflecting the interests of advantaged cohorts above the most vulnerable.
- The issue of resource scarcity – financial and human capacity – needs to be addressed, as it hinders the development and implementation of an integrated and inclusive approach towards facilitating sustainable urban livelihoods.
- Planning must recognise the diversity of forms of life (livelihoods and liveability), land use, and management systems; urban livelihoods differ significantly from rural livelihoods and lower-income livelihoods are distinct from any other forms of life.

Further Reading:

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