



Trans-disciplinary research and strategic urban expansion planning in a context of weak institutional capacity: Case study of Huambo, Angola



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ABSTRACT

Increasingly online public access to satellite imagery and the development of qualitative GIS have, in principle, the potential to provide action- and strategic planning approaches with more economical spatial information to monitor and plan physical urban transformation. This is of particular use in rapidly urbanising contexts in the global South, where lack of resources prompted the development of rapid and participatory urban appraisal techniques since the 1990s. However, in such contexts weak institutional capacity, unclear responsibilities and poor integration among key actors may still be major barriers to effective decision-making and implementation of strategic land use plans. In addition, as most urban expansion is driven by popular demand, understanding the nature of this demand has to be the basis for effective supply of urban land etc. This means exploring change in important core social and cultural values, as well as participatory engagement with key stakeholders on immediate and mid-term strategic objectives.

This paper reflects on the experience of an Urban Development Priority Action Strategy being developed for the city of Huambo, Angola, by the city administration in partnership with local NGO Development Workshop (DW), with support from a European academic institution, the Centre for Environment & Human Settlements (CEHS). This initiative seeks to embed trans-disciplinarity in a meaningful manner at the local level to permit the identification and implementation of a realistic set of priority actions. This paper reports on the type of information and understanding that is generated through this approach, as well as on the *de facto* constraints and boundaries that are created by the relationships between the key stakeholders, their capacities and interests. It also illustrates the more immediate and short-term results that can be achieved through this approach in comparison with traditional master planning approaches – including key stakeholder engagement with identified actions and proposal of new organisational and financial models for urban land development and management – as well as highlighting the advantages of mutual knowledge exchange between praxis and research.

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Introduction

In 2013 the Centre for Environment & Human Settlements (CEHS) at Heriot-Watt University, UK, was invited to assist Angolan-based NGO Development Workshop (DW) in identifying key physical areas and sectoral issues in the current rapid urban development of the city of Huambo, Angola, thus permitting the NGO to develop an emerging partnership with the City Administration, focused on selection and design of priority urban interventions based on partnership working, as well as to engage other interested and relevant stakeholder organisations. This collaboration was developed in the context of a long-standing

Abbreviations: CEHS, Centre for Environment & Human Settlements; DW, Development Workshop; DEPTUA, Provincial Government's Planning Department; INOTU, Instituto Nacional de Ordenamento do Território e Urbanismo – National Institute for Territorial Planning; ROTUA, Repartição do Ordenamento do Território, Urbanismo e Ambiente – Municipal Department of Planning and Environment.

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relationship between CEHS and DW, whereby for over a decade the former has provided strategic analysis and planning of urban activities undertaken by DW; urban land and planning research and advocacy *vis-à-vis* legislation and government policy, strategy and practice; advice and training on informal and social housing activities; and partnership arrangements for scaling up impact. In this particular collaboration full engagement with the City Administration of Huambo was considered essential in order to elicit information on urban development trends and governance, identify the potential for meaningful strategic action and establish mechanisms within the City Administration to implement the identified strategies. This approach thus is embedded within a long-term approach to knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners on strategic urban development in Angola.

Huambo is a second-tier city in central Angola, in size far behind the primacy of the capital city Luanda, but growing fast nevertheless, reflecting the rapid urban growth that is taking place across the country.¹ Despite some moves towards decentralisation since the end of civil war in 2002, local government in Angola remains very limited in its powers and weak in terms of capacity. Huambo was particularly badly affected by over 25 years of civil war, during which the city was taken and retaken by the two warring factions – the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The city was subjected to several periods of intense siege and bombardment, and witnessed both depopulation and inflow of internally displaced people due to the fighting. By the end of the war, the city was not only extremely damaged physically but also bereft of institutional capacity, and politically on the 'wrong' side, as it was at that point still perceived as a UNITA stronghold.

Ten years after the end of the war, external consultants were commissioned to prepare a Municipal Master Plan to guide future development of the city. By 2013 this master plan was on deposit with central government, but lack of opportunity for involvement of the City Administration in the process of the master plan preparation and approval, and uncertainty over when (and if) such a plan may be approved, contributed to a situation in which it was necessary for the local administration to identify actions it could take to manage ongoing urban growth.

A 'traditional' planning approach would require the collection of extensive data and its interpretation by the relevant professional experts (planners, economists, housing experts, etc.) with inputs from identified stakeholders – something specifically ignored by the master planners. In a context of weak institutional capacity, and of very limited sets of conventional 'data' and resources to conduct primary data collection, what innovative approaches to local planning and design could improve the quality of urban life? What are the 'state of the art' tools for collaborative spatial planning that would be relevant to such a context? How can uncertainty be accommodated in local design processes and practices? It was obvious to the partners in this project that an alternative approach was not only more appropriate but also necessary. This drew on practices developed through participatory and rapid urban appraisal as well as action-planning, but also on a proactive trans-disciplinary approach to the generation, interpretation and exchange of knowledge.

This paper first describes the characteristics of a trans-disciplinary approach. It sets out key arguments supporting the relevance of such approach in urban management in the contexts of rapid urbanisation and weak institutional capacity that are so prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, drawing on the growing literature

on trans-disciplinarity. It then describes the process that was followed in Huambo, and presents the key findings and strategic actions that were identified through such process. The paper concludes with a reflection on the potential results of this trans-disciplinary approach in comparison with a traditional master planning approach, and on the scope for such trans-disciplinary approaches elsewhere. The paper thus aims both to contribute to the academic debate on trans-disciplinarity, and to explore the practical issues involved in its implementation and its potential impact in urban development practice. Its conclusions on trans-disciplinary research should be of interest to researchers more generally, and its implications for urban planning and management are relevant to urban development practitioners, particularly those working in contexts of weak institutional capacity.

The relevance of trans-disciplinarity to urban studies and action in contexts of rapid urbanisation and weak institutional capacity

Trans-disciplinarity as a concept has been around since the 1970s, but there is no consensus on its meaning (Balsiger, 2004; Lawrence & Després, 2004). However, Lawrence and Després (2004) identify several characteristics as forms of definition: (1) it tackles complexity in science and knowledge fragmentation, addressing complex domains; (2) it accepts local context and uncertainty, thus becoming a context-specific negotiation of knowledge; (3) it implies intercommunicative action, thus requiring continuous collaboration between trans-disciplinary research and practice; and (4) it is action-oriented, so requires linkages not only across disciplines but also between theory and professional practice including between researchers and practitioners. Much of this is encapsulated in Thompson Klein's description of trans-disciplinarity as "a generative form of communicative action that is context-specific" (cited in Lawrence & Després, 2004: 403). In the field of urban planning this resonates with interpretations of Habermas's concept of 'communicative action' in Healey's promotion of 'intercommunicative planning' (Healey, 1996, 1997, 1999) and Forester's exploration of deliberative practices and collaborative planning to overcome conflict (Forester, 1999, 2009).

Ramadier (2004) argues that trans-disciplinarity therefore goes beyond multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. According to Ramadier (2004: 433), 'multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity do not break with disciplinary thinking', the latter being based on approaching the complexity of reality through simplification and focus on a specific aspect. In Ramadier's view, multi-disciplinary approaches juxtapose theoretical models from different disciplines, taking parts from each model – this highlights the different dimensions of the object of study, with different disciplines been considered as complementary in its understanding. Inter-disciplinarity, on the other hand, aims to construct a common model often adapting concepts from one (or more) disciplines to others. A key limitation of both approaches according to Ramadier (2004) is that they both avoid paradoxes and therefore remain fragmented (i.e. still anchored in disciplines). Trans-disciplinarity, however, recognises the superposition of realities and tries to confront them, i.e. it specifically focuses on complexity with the paradoxes this brings, and aims to reach an articulation of the understandings of such complexity rather than seek consensus, which in the case of inter-disciplinarity often leads to seeking the lowest common denominator among disciplines. This understanding of trans-disciplinarity is shown in diagrammatic form in Fig. 1.

Trans-disciplinarity has emerged as part of the drive to understand complexity. According to Pinson (2004), with its focus on the complexity of the city, urban planning emerged as an inter-

¹ In the absence of any national census for some four decades, estimates put Luanda's population at perhaps 6 million, and Huambo at around 1 million.

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