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Reality check: Planning education in the African urban century

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ABSTRACT

Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa owes much to the colonial legacies that inform the shape and composition of African urban spaces and places. This applies to legislation, institutional systems and planning education. In 2008, the Association of African Planning Schools AAPSs embarked on a 3-year initiative on the revitalisation of planning education in Africa, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The aim of the project was to propose ways through which the training of urban planners can be more responsive to the special circumstances of African urbanisation. This paper reflects on this initiative.

An initial outline is presented on the main challenges facing planners in urban Africa and is positioned within debates regarding the role of planning and planners more generally. A special case is made for the importance of planning in addressing these issues. It does, however, require a departure from the traditional approaches to planners' training. There are constraints to this. The circumstances that inform planning education in AAPS member schools and the challenges that underpin this endeavour are outlined, based upon information gathered on visits to, and input from member schools and associated publications on planning education in Africa. Findings inform a number of recommendations made on the shifts required if urban planning is to be relevant and effective in the face of current and future urbanisation challenges on the continent.

Introduction

The Ibadan–Lagos expressway in Nigeria is host to an interesting spectacle of West African urbanity. Between charismatic churches, loudly claiming their spiritual allegiances in bright and colourful signage, are small shops and clusters of footloose traders selling their wares to the many truckers and busloads of people making the journey between these two important urban centres. Ibadan is a low-density sprawling urban village, until 1970 the largest city in Sub-Saharan Africa, established on the ruins of the ancient settlement of Eba Odan in 1829 (Lloyd, Mabogunje, & Awe, 1967). Lagos is a teeming metropolis of 10.5 million people, where 40% of residents live in overcrowded shelter and only 25% have access to adequate sanitation (UN Habitat, 2008), conditions that contribute to its showcase as the apocalyptic future of African mega cities. The journey between these two cities is 150 km but can take up to 4 h by car. Congestion is not just a frustrating traffic feature of this road; it robs commuters of many hours in urban sprawl ill equipped for the conditions that define early 21st century urban life.

The spectre of urban poverty in African countries is a familiar image in the popular and academic media. Unlike the conditions that underpinned early industrialisation in the North, urbanisation in Africa is hard to predict and overwhelming for many under capacitated city governments. The contextual elements that made state-led, systematic and linear urban planning processes possible in the North are simply not applicable in many of these places. In practice, what African demographic transitions mean is not just many more millions of people, but a very different social, economic and spatial or settlement structure. It requires solutions that depart from the traditions that inform Modernist urban planning. It requires a 'reality check'; understanding *what is*, rather than constantly striving for *what should be*.

The UN-Habitat's *Global Report on Human Settlements*: *Planning Sustainable Cities* (2009) provides an elaborate framing of this ineffective internal management of cities in Africa, a view that is widely reflected in the academic literature. It emphasises the role of urban planning in addressing this and many of the other more substantive and overt challenges facing cities. It also stresses the unpreparedness of many urban planning systems and the graduates that work within them in addressing these challenges. African planning schools operate in a context in which urban planning practices, national planning legislation and planning curricula remain largely inherited from their older colonial pasts, and continue to promote ideas and policies transferred from the global north. As such, many of these ideas and practices are inappropriate in contexts characterised by rapid growth, poverty and informality. In order to confront the urbanisation pressures on the continent in all its unique dimensions, fundamental shifts are needed in

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the materials covered in urban training programs and in the methods used to prepare practitioners.

There are 69 planning schools in Africa according to the *Global Report on Human Settlements* (2009).[1] Forty-three of these are members of the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPSs), a peer-to-peer network of universities that teach urban planning degrees in 15 countries in mainly Anglophone Africa.[2] The network was established in 2002 but began functioning effectively in 2008 when it had its first meeting in South Africa. Addressing the relevance and efficacy of planning education in relation to contemporary urban trends in Africa is a core part of its operational activities. From 2008 to 2010, the Rockefeller Foundation funded two AAPS initiatives in this regard.[3] The first project, entitled 'Revitalising Planning Education' sought to address curricula reform and resource access. The second concerned case research. At the AAPS's first meeting in 2008, it was decided that the case method provided opportunity gaining valuable and qualitative insights into urban processes, whilst also carrying pedagogical opportunities. Regional case method workshops were held, material collected for publication and teaching resources generated.

Two dimensions to the projects relate to the theme of this paper. The first concerns curricula content. Is the material currently covered and used in planning schools relevant to the challenges of African urbanisation? The literature on African cities informed much of the collaborative work done by planning schools on this whilst members were given the opportunity to reflect on this at the two workshops convened as part of the project. The material generated in this process informs this paper. The case research initiative related to a more epistemological dimension of the curriculum content issue: what counts as knowledge in gaining insights into the functioning and quality of African urban spaces?

The second dimension of the two initiatives focuses on resource access in African planning schools. Access to educational and research resources such as journals, the Internet and teaching inputs are uneven. In the case of computer resources, where funds are available, infrastructure purchase and network upgrade are often implemented in an ad hoc piecemeal approach (Adam, 2003). This uneven landscape owes much to the standing of universities in government policy and education budgets. In addition to perceptions that higher education is an elitist endeavour, cuts in public spending informed by structural adjustment policy in the 1980s and 1990s severely limited resources in African universities. Spending was often transferred to secondary and primary education regarded as yielding more social benefit (Adam, 2003). This has a direct impact on the quality and extent of educational resources in African universities today. Thus, the second aspect of the AAPS initiative deals with resource access.

This paper reflects on these project processes in view of the relationship between planning education and urbanisation in Africa. It draws on publications generated for the two AAPS workshops held in 2008 and 2010, general project documentation as well as information gathered during on-site visits to 24 AAPS member schools in 12 countries. The project focused on five thematic areas agreed as conceptual anchors in addressing content gaps in curricula. These themes are argued and explored together with an outline of the resource constraints that constrain planning education. Implications for African cities are concluded upon answering the central question of this paper: how can planning education contribute to more meaningful intervention in African cities?

The relationship between planning education and African urbanisation

A continent as vast as Africa naturally displays uneven patterns of urban growth and economic development. Generalising about urban conditions without considering regional distinctions undermines much of the work that has been done by African scholars. Diversity is informed by cultural distinctions, histories, colonial legacies and the usual considerations of demographics and physical character. Addressing planning education in this regard is informed by what *does not* work. The qualities that frustrate intervention in the urban arena in developing countries share some commonalities and urgency. UN Habitat predicts that the increase in urban population in developing nations between 2007 and 2025 is to be 53 million, compared to 3 million in the developed world; 70% of the world's population will live in cities by 2050, most of them in the Global South (UN Habitat, 2009). Intervention in urban spaces in these regions not only needs to contend with the backlogs reflected in inadequate service infrastructure and housing backlogs, but also rapid urbanisation within a context of climate change and global disparities in economic distribution.

Planning has traditionally assumed strong intervention and, more recently in the north, decentralisation of planning functions to local government. Many African countries share a legacy of limited decentralisation (mainly implemented under pressure from bilateral and donor agencies), limited autonomy in local government and generally a weak state bureaucracy (UN Habitat, 2009). Limited human and financial resources are put to managing outdated and ineffective Master Plans, inherited from colonial regimes (Watson, 2009). The mismatch between plans and reality is not unique to the African context of course. What makes this chasm particularly acute are a number of interrelated issues: resource inequality, corruption, unimplemented plans and the limited efficacy of the planning system.

The disparities between rich and poor are vast in many circumstances, underpinned by infrastructure failure where privatised enclaves of wealth deeply contrast the slum conditions that typify large tracts of urban space. Where cost recovery measures are in place, service payment is often absent or limited. Whilst there is some recognition that the strong state and capacitated bureaucracy assumed by the Master Planning is absent in many cases, many of the preconditions for the more recent Urban Management approach cannot be assumed either. Inadequate capacity and little consultation with the private sector and civil society impede efforts to implement more strategic approaches (Post, 1996). The 'cultures' that inform both these approaches contrast, and sometimes contradict, political cultures, value systems and social norms. In northern Sudan for example, clearly delineated hierarchies, prescribed social codes together with what Post refers to as "...widespread and time-honoured practice of clientalism" (1996, p. 125) simply do not fit with the bottom-up approaches advocated by contemporary planning.

The Urban Management approach's neoliberal base is reflected in recognition of the importance of cities as economic growth engines. Yet urban policy in many African countries is simply absent or blatantly anti-urban (Pieterse, 2010). Consequently, the precarious living conditions that define slums and informal work continue in a policy vacuum. Furthermore, the data and analysis necessary to inform policy at country and city scales are inadequate or simply do not exist (Pieterse, 2010).

[1] Since 2009, planning degrees have been established at two African universities; Bondo University College in Maseno, Kenya and the University of Development Studies in Wa, Ghana. Both are AAPS members. The known total of planning schools is now 71.

[2] The National University of Rwanda and the Catholic University of Mozambique are exceptions; both are however using bilingual instruction; French and English in the former; English and Portuguese with the latter.

[3] The author, then a full-time employee of the African Centre for Cities, was coordinator of these projects from 2009 to 2010.