



Urban land contestations, challenges and planning strategies in Malawi's main urban centres

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ABSTRACT

The paper commences with a brief reflection on some examples of urban strategies and challenges encountered by the state authorities in their effort to impose the abstract space of modernity as envisioned in urban master plans. The focus then shifts to urban challenges faced by authorities in Malawian urban centres, and concludes with the strategies adopted to deal with these challenges. The research relied on primary sources of data and interviews conducted with 19 key informants working in the planning environment in Malawi. These multiple sets of information were subjected to multiple analysis techniques by using Atlas.ti (qualitative data analysis software) to analyse the key informant responses and data from electronic and print media. The analysis focuses on the institution of urban planning as a state mechanism in the production of urban space in Malawi. Challenges in this regard range from the institutional and administrative framework of urban planning, legal challenges and contradictions, land rights and inherent spatial planning contradictions to political factors vis-à-vis democracy and economic factors. The study observes that the nature of conceived space and how the very apparatus that it uses to impose abstract space turns against itself when dealing with institutional challenges and incapacities. The foregoing challenges suggest that urban planning in Malawi faces a set of constraints in pursuance of its modernist ambitions of creating a planned city.

1. Introduction

“Conflicts over land in contested political spaces embody competition over public authority. They are about defending or gaining sovereignty, and manifest in the continual construction and reproduction of political narratives in order to legitimate access” (Chinigò, 2016: 283). Lefebvre (1991) argues that planning is inherently ideological in its discourses and practices. In our context, planning in the developing cities of the world has the power to create and trigger conflicts in cities in at least four ways (Andersen et al., 2015; Silva, 2015; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014; Watson, 2009a, 2009b; Jabareen, 2006; Chome and McCall, 2005). First, by excluding minorities from the decision-making process, it fails to recognise the right of urban inhabitants to the city. Second, the state is incapacitated to regulate urban space, as was the case in the colonial era. Third, the hegemony of global forces and neo-liberal agendas over the locale, with their attendant policies, undermines the primacy of the local circumstances to inform urban planning. Fourth, local politics triggers conflicts in the sense that, in their efforts to amass votes during elections, politicians use space to advance their agendas. Contestations over urban space seem to emanate from the

contradictions between planners' conceptions of the place and the way inhabitants conceive and experience it in their daily life practices (Lefebvre, 1991). A critical question remains: How does contemporary urban planning trigger and fail to resolve contestations over urban space?

Although the current crisis and contestations over urban land in Malawi can be laid on the doorstep of its British colonial history, the post-colonial failure to deal with land policy is also contributing to the situation (Chome and McCall, 2005). Whilst modernist planning has proven viable “in parts of the world where the coordination of urban space and form was and is dominated by state-led political economies”, in the rapidly urbanised regions of the world, with minimal state capacities, it has proven to be ineffective (Andersen et al., 2015: 346). In this paper, conceived spaces and their representations of space as experienced in Malawi's urban centres are analysed with specific reference to laws and policies, urban strategies, structure plans and layout plans. The paper commences with a brief reflection on the literature on some examples of urban strategies, and the challenges state authorities in the developing world encounter in their effort to impose the abstract space of modernity. The focus then shifts to urban challenges faced by

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authorities in Malawian urban centres, followed by examples of strategies adopted by local state authorities to deal with these challenges.

2. Conceived spaces of modernity

Contestations over urban space are basically a result of contradictions between abstract space and the lived spaces of the users of space (Jabareen, 2006; Zhang, 2006; Kezer, 1998). First, cities should not be solely moulded by planners and plans only, but also by spatial practices. In other words, plans and documents should not be understood as the only mechanisms to shape and organise urban space, but the changing experiences of the city and everyday life and ambiguities should also be included (Lefebvre, 1991). Everyday life is a site of revolution, resistance and everyday transformation. Planners therefore have to reconcile the contradictions between planners' visions and the experiences of those who live in the city. Urban planning, as it is conceived and practised as the main mechanism of producing urban space, is to blame for the escalating levels of contestation. From the colonial and post-colonial to the neoliberal era, planning has emphasised the production of abstract spaces as its end product. The imposition of this conceived space and its ideology of modernity tends to generate or escalate contestations over urban space, leading to the appropriation and production of urban spaces described as the informalisation of urban spaces (Schoon and Altrick, 2014; Myers, 2011; Roy, 2005).

The literature has captured a wide range of issues in order to understand the roots of the contestations over urban spaces in the developing cities of the world (Nygren, 2017; Steel et al., 2017; Zoomers et al., 2017; Zhang and Li, 2016; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). Our current conceptions of urban land-use control are largely based on the legal and institutional forms imported during the colonial period and maintained afterwards. These conceptions, as revealed in this paper, are imbued with the traditions of capitalist modernity, which have never been fully absorbed in the global South (see, for example, the book edited by Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). Yet these imported conceptions have been used to suppress notions and understandings of urban space. In this paper it is demonstrated that planning policies, as conceived, constituted part of a meticulous and complex agenda by colonialists to assert their perceived social, cultural and technological superiority over Africans. Indeed, the planner was not only free, but also urged, to use expertise – a critical source of power – to assist colonial governments in their bid to attain important overt and covert goals. Accordingly, urban and regional development policies were enacted and executed to facilitate the accomplishment of praiseworthy goals such as ensuring sound architectural standards and enhancing the functioning of the built environment. At the same time, plans were also crafted to enable colonial powers to accomplish less popular or contemptuous goals, such as maintaining racial residential segregation, controlling the movement and other activities of members of the indigenous population, and bolstering the economic power of the colonial government (Vainer, 2014; Myers, 2011; Njoh, 2007). State authority and urban regulation, from the colonial to the post-colonial era, have continued to assert their legal right and superior claim to regulate and impose order on urban spaces and residents (Silva, 2015). The various ways through which these state authorities exercised control over urban spaces included: their use of the law, police and prisons to control and punish non-cooperating urban residents; their capacity to determine people's movements and access to streets and other amenities; their determination of the location and even the dimensions of private and public buildings; and, finally, their ability to reward those who cooperated with them (Njoh, 2009; Watson, 2009a).

The ideas and behaviours of urban dwellers were not only determined from the outside, as reflected by the limits of state control on the one hand, but also the limits of control and the efficacy of urban dwellers' actions and ideas on the other hand (Myers, 2011; Njoh, 2007). Contestations over urban space and their resultant informal urban spaces emanate from the superimposition of abstract space and

its representations of space in the lived and spatial practices of everyday life (Mwachunga, 2014, 2012). For Lefebvre (1991), contestations are a manifestation of the failure by the formal authority to impose its spatial practices of modernisation, homogenisation, centrality and segregation on the lived and perceived spaces. In this research, the shifting conception of the state – from distributive to market-based mechanisms – with the emergence of neo-liberal policies and their attendant structural adjustment policies has amplified the scope for urban residents who are disenfranchised by the formal state mechanism to produce their own spaces, otherwise deemed informal by state authorities. However, the formal authorities often frustrate the grassroots initiatives by clinging to existing representations of space, especially legal frameworks, which are sometimes outdated or at least inappropriate, to assert their authority over the production of urban space according to the heart's desire of its users (Harvey, 2003). From the contradiction between spaces as conceived, lived and perceived stems contestation and struggle over urban space, especially between formal and the so-called informal mechanisms. In some cases, accommodating answers are found; in others, confrontation results. In other words, planning as an instrument in the production of urban space, instead of focusing on what is actually done, focuses on what should be done. Yet, in the case of Malawi's urban centres, this paper finds that the state is unable to impose its representations of space, primarily due to a set of constraints and challenges to delivering plans for urban development and service provision.

3. Methods

The research relied on primary sources of data and in-depth interviews conducted with 19 key informants in the Malawian planning fraternity, which included principal planning officers, directors and managers working at physical planning departments in Lilongwe and Blantyre and in the Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC); district commissioners in the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development; university researchers; and traditional leaders. Primary sources included archival data, in the form of print media (Malawian newspapers); cadastral maps from the Surveys Department; urban structure plans for Blantyre and Lilongwe; and perimeter surveys and layout plans obtained from the MHC. A qualitative approach was followed in analysing information obtained from the key informants on the (1) nature of urban land conflicts in Malawi; (2) actors in urban land management (production of urban space); (3) driving mechanisms of urban land conflicts; (4) role of Malawi's planning system in urban land conflicts; (5) strategies to claim back urban land; and (6) consequences of urban land conflicts. These multiple sets of data were subjected to multiple analysis techniques. Atlas.ti (qualitative data analysis software) was used to analyse key informant responses and data from electronic and print media.

4. Survey results and discussion: Malawi urban planning constraints and challenges

4.1. Background context

At a rate of 5.2% per annum, Malawi is one of the fastest urbanising countries in the world, yet in the period from 1998 to 2008 a mere 16% of Malawi's population was classified as urban (Ryser and Franchini, 2015; Malawi Government, 2013). As in most cities in the global South, Malawi's urbanisation is characterised by the 'urbanisation of poverty' in that most of the migrants to the cities are the rural poor (Watson, 2009b). After attaining independence in 1964, land reforms were carried out under Dr Banda's one-party rule in 1967, but these reforms perpetuated the unequal distribution of land by converting customary land into leasehold (Chirwa and Chinsinga, 2008). At the time, Malawi was one of the few African countries to develop a wider role for physical planning through the implementation of the National Physical

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