

Special Issue of African Review of Economics and Finance Editorial: Urbanity, Urbanism, and Urbanisation in Africa

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1. Introduction

Fifty years ago, less than 20 per cent of the people in Africa lived in urban areas. Now, 40 per cent of them do so. Africa now has megacities (cities inhabited by more than 10 million people) in Egypt (Cairo) and Nigeria (Lagos). Soon, Kinshasa in Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly, Zaire) will join the league of megacities. Today, there are both city regions and urban corridors that cut across several cities (such as the Suez-Cairo-Alexandria area) and borders (such as Luanda-N'Djamena) in Africa. These developments are significant by both African and global standards. The Brazzaville-Kinshasa regional urban corridor is simultaneously the most populous in the world and the fastest growing globally (UN-HABITAT, 2008; 2010).

While rural-urban migration has slowed in Africa (Potts, 2009), there is considerable movement within, between, and across cities (Simone, 2011). Of course, urbanity in Africa differs greatly – between cities in Southern (59 per cent urban), Northern (51 per cent urban), Western (45 per cent urban), Central (43 per cent urban) and Eastern (24 per cent urban) African countries (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2010).

Alongside urban growth in Africa is the increase in the use of technology, especially mobile telephony, information and communication technology, and flight connectivity. The proportion of urban population living within range of a GSM mobile network increased from about 16 per cent in 1999 to 90 per cent in 2008 (Williams *et al.*, 2010, p. 151). The use of the internet has also increased exponentially. Mostly concentrated in urban areas, internet usage in Africa grew by an average of 2,843 per cent between 2000 and 2008 (Hinson and Adjasi, 2009). Airline connectivity between different cities in Africa and the world has soared, particularly in Nairobi, Cassablanca, and Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, and Cairo (Otiso *et al.*, 2011). These developments, in turn, have led to the ‘annihilation of space through time’, to borrow a phrase from Marx.

Global integration of cities in Africa is not a recent phenomenon, as some commentators suggest. Cities in Africa have always been, as peripheries which are part of the global system, supporting and adjusting to the dictates of the global core (Amin, 1998). However, the tendency of capital to accumulate is making cities in Africa ‘globalise’ in similar ways as those in advanced capitalist countries, as we see in cities such as Accra (Grant, 2009).

Cities in Africa matter in the sense that significant developments are making them a focus for world attention. Recent events in Tunis, Cairo, and Tripoli, Seattle,

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Benghazi, and Alexandria demonstrate that cities in Africa can offer cities elsewhere lessons in radical democratic governance. There are also lessons in participatory solid waste management – similar to experiences in Porto Alegre in Brazil and Karachi in Pakistan – in Lusaka. The successful hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in cities in South Africa, and the positioning of Durban, in particular, to become a ‘sport city’ to host future Pan-African, Olympic, or Commonwealth games after the World Cup, also put cities in Africa in a global spotlight (UN-HABITAT, 2010, p. 15; Myers, 2011, pp.103-104).

It is not for nothing that I am consistently using the descriptor, ‘cities in Africa’, rather than ‘African cities’. I wish to stress that, despite their shared geographical location on the African continent, the cities whose dynamics this special issue of the journal is exploring and analysing have different pre, colonial, and post colonial experiences that make them unique (Amin, 1972; Simone, 2001). Indeed, even that reading of urbanity does not capture the diverse nature of urbanism in Africa. Growing up in Africa, I lived in Hohoe, Kumasi, Cape Coast, Koforidua, Takoradi, and Tema. I lived or stayed in Ondo, Lagos, and Kampala; and professionally, I have studied many other cities in Africa (e.g., Obeng-Odoom, 2009; Obeng-Odoom, 2010; Obeng-Odoom, 2011). From these personal and professional experiences, I can attest that these cities are substantially different, although all of them have a shared experience of British colonialism. Urbanism in Africa is not simply a function of tradition, colonialism, and globalism, but it is also differentiated internally and across time (Pellow, 2001).

Yet, stereotypes of ‘African cities’ abound: they are parasitic; abnormal; runaway; over urbanised; and so on (Fay and Opal, 2000). The sources of the stereotypes of the urban milieu in Africa are as many as the stereotypes themselves, ranging from ignorance, through malice to prejudice, or their different permutations. One pervasive source of the claims of an ‘African urban exceptionalism’ (Simone, 2001, p.105; Myers, 2011, p.103) is how cities are seen, analysed, and understood. A primary culprit is the neoclassical economics approach to urban analysis – which is underpinned by the assumption of methodological individualism. It is an approach - influential in urban economics and new economic geography – that has produced unsatisfactory, contradictory, and incomplete answers to urban problems, as evident in *Reshaping Economic Geography, World Development Report of 2009* (see Bryceson *et al.*, 2009; Scott, 2009; Harvey, 2009).

Orthodox economic analyses tend to separate the economic from the social and the environmental as part of a grand tendency to simplify, generalise, and mathematise. So-called multidisciplinary orthodox economic approaches exist, but these are often rehashed ‘economic science’ ideas that are repackaged under the guise of ‘political economy’. They posit an expanding ‘economy’ as the sole pre-requisite of the good city. In turn, the sustainable city is simply understood as one in which the economy is on a sustainable path to expand. The environment is of only secondary consideration and manageable only by appealing to price signals (Pieterse, 2011) or papering over the cracks in a deeply wounded biota by using more ‘efficient’ modern machinery that further oils the wheels of capital accumulation (Salleh, 2011). That is, sustainable urbanity entails ‘selling the environment to save it’ (Stilwell, 2008), rather than rescuing the planet to save the urban economy.

Neoclassical economic framework is based on the use of the individual as the unit of analysis, restrictive assumptions such as perfect information, an emphasis on the price mechanism as the best means of allocating resources and a methodology of modelling and formal statistical analysis. In turn, orthodox economics analysis avoids the real

questions in capitalist urban development and instead analyses an imaginary capitalist system characterised by power-neutral and class-blind market relations whose only diagnosis of urban problems is the notion of policy failure, technological backwardness, or population pressures, inadequate monetary resources, blips in the function of the market, and extensive government intervention (Rosewarne, 2003; Amin, 2004; Stilwell, 2006, pp.4-5; Butler *et al.*, 2009, pp.112-114).

From this perspective, ‘African cities’ are seen as trees separate and independent of the forest in which they are embedded, independent of their national economies, and independent of their colonial past. In these neoclassical economics approaches to studying cities, history, class, and evolution of socio economic phenomenon count for little or nothing. Yet, backed by powerful interest groups and telling stories that are pleasing to the ears of the rich and mighty and conservative policy makers, they are ‘imperialising economic geography’ and other approaches to studying cities (Mäki and Marchionni, 2011). Their influence has been unstoppable – on policy makers, on urban administrators, and on professional planners (Sager, 2011). Paul Krugman (2010, see p.2) recently mocked economic geographers to come on board the geographical economics train or forget about having any influence on policy makers, such as those on the White House Council of Economic Advisors and those who work at the World Bank.

Even the experienced United Nations Human Settlement Programme, UN-HABITAT, was caught in this imperial cross fire when it declared that ‘African cities’ are abnormal and poverty driven (UN-HABITAT, 2008, pp.7-9). It is an effect that should remind African urbanists of Julius Caesar’s famous question, *Etu tu, Brute?* – when Marcus Brutus, his bosom friend, stabbed him in the back. The UN-HABITAT report had other problems, as I pointed out in my review for *African Affairs* (Obeng-Odoom, 2009), but the verdict that African cities are nebulous is the one that makes many African urbanists cringe (see Njoh, 2003; Tetteh, 2005; Kessides, 2006).

Fortunately, in the second *State of African Cities Report* (UN-HABITAT, 2010), UN-HABITAT has recanted. Its position now is that ‘urbanisation [in Africa] is jump-starting industrialisation’ (p. ii) and cities in Africa ‘can be major assets for political, social and economic development’ (p.6). Although a welcome development, the stricture of being a ‘United Nations’ agency prevents UN-HABITAT from taking radical positions that may alienate its friends in the realm of economics. A case in point is its ‘economistic’ stance on land tenure and advocacy of the extension of propertied relations into land management in Africa (UN-HABITAT, 2010), contrary to the established principle – theoretically and empirically – that the dynamics of land cannot be reduced to impersonal forces of demand and supply. That is, following the prescription of economic science, the UN forgets that ‘land’, in Polanyian terms, ‘is a fictitious commodity’. Land has a prior existence to market forces, such that its use, both in urban and rural contexts, cannot be left to the fluctuating effects of demand and supply without doing damage to social and environmental concerns.

2. The Papers

The special issue of *African Review of Economics and Finance* rejects the narrow version of orthodox economic analyses - what Steve Keen (2001) calls the ‘naked emperor’ of the social sciences. The subjects, analysis, and geographical focus of the papers differ, but they all adopt pluralist and heterodox ways of thinking, such as dependency, neo-Marxian and institutional political economy frameworks. The authors explain their particular methods in more detail, so I shall only highlight their broad characteristics.

The common elements in the methods are their emphasis on class, the relations between the economy and the state, the influence of economic forces on changes in urbanism, and the analysis of the state as an arena for contest. The methodology is eclectic, engaging qualitative fieldwork, quantitative analysis, institutional analysis and development, and theoretical reinterpretation of existing findings.

The political economic approaches adopted by the papers in this issue emphasise evolution in historical time, distributive equity and analysis of how institutions of varying degrees of power interact with the economic system to produce different social, political, economic and environmental outcomes in cities. Questions of what to produce, how to produce, and for whom to produce are broadened with who gets what and at what socio-economic cost?

The papers in this issue focus on three main themes, namely work, housing, and food. The papers are drawn from Western, Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. All of them have been rigorously refereed by the finest scholars in the field from all over the world – Africa, America, Australasia, and Europe, including Scandinavia - and from different disciplines (see appendix 1). The referees provided timely and thorough reports and their feedback has helped to enhance the quality of the papers in this issue.

The papers on work come from Nathanael Ojong (Bameda, Cameroon), and Moses Kindiki (Arthi River city, Kenya). They move our understanding of informality in cities in Africa forward by questioning the conventional thinking that informality is only transient in the process of economic development. More importantly, they reveal that the informal economy is an arena of considerable heterogeneity, a space where the poor, the not so poor, and middle income earners make a living. This emphasis on the informal economy is particularly important because of its large size in urban economies in Africa.

However, Moses Kindiki's work on labour conditions in the apparel industry in urban Kenya is a warning that the contradictions in capitalist urbanism are not only in the informal, but also in the formal economy. Contrary to the romantic visions of free trade and its importance for Africa's economic development, as partly captured in the African Growth Opportunities Act (AGOA), Kindiki's research reveals that the formal sector is characterised by poor labour conditions, ranging from wage to health inadequacies.

Urban housing is the focus of analysis by Linda Magwaro-Ndiweni's paper which examines the contestation in the use of residential space in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. There, we learn that the city authorities are caught in a dilemma of choosing between a housing development model which is low-rise, but not sustainable because of possibilities of sprawl, and the development of high-rise buildings that are not sustainable in monetary terms for the majority of urban residents. She argues that public finance and intelligent intervention can ameliorate the latter, so the city authorities should prioritise sustainable land management.

Related to land, Lebailly and Muteba, and Andres and Lebailly engage with food security in Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Niamey (Niger) respectively. They explore deep problems of food insecurity in terms of inequitable access and malnutrition. Whether market gardening, a posited panacea, has been successful in providing adequate, quality food to all urban citizens requires further political economic analysis.

A recurring theme in the papers in this special issue is that deep problems underpin the urban milieu in Africa. However, rather than see the tensions as 'African problems', they must be understood in terms of a variety of contradictions (including

the so-called ‘policy failures’) in capitalist urbanism which play out differently in various cities and change over time. Whether the suggestions to ameliorate these problems go far enough only time and future studies, including those papers published in this journal, will tell.

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