Introduction - Governing Cities in Africa

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1 Introduction

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Half the world's population lives in cities. In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of urban dwellers will have doubled from 2007 to 2030. In 2007 there were 373 million, and demographic projections suggest that there will be around 770 million in 2030, more than the total number of city dwellers in the entire western hemisphere today (UN-Habitat 2008: 4). This phenomenal growth is powered by the most rapid, and most recent, process of urbanisation on the globe and has led to renewed interest in Africa's cities. Several key issues are being explored: the problems and opportunities posed by this avalanche of immigrants and new residents; the extent to which city government resources are draining away; whether service delivery is being taken over by self-help groups; and whether cities are becoming polarised into large, impoverished majorities and small elites. For millions of rural-born Africans, urban Africa has emerged as a new place to live and work, as well as a primary developmental focus and a major field of study. It is within this general context that we would like to situate this book.

At a general level, there have been two competing and divergent approaches to the subject of urbanisation. One characterises this process as poverty-driven; the other views urban places as centres of economic opportunity.

The first approach conceptualises African cities as ungovernable and powerless in the face of massive in-migration, and with shrinking formal economic activity. When placed on a linear trajectory of modernisation, these cities are viewed at best as stragglers, at worst as failures. Africa is often perceived by policy analysts as different from the rest of the world. For instance, although the World Bank has recognised that the urban economies of countries of the South contribute a large proportion of gross domestic product, recent reports describe the African continent's urban growth as 'pathological' or 'dysfunctional', suggesting that, unlike in the rest of the world, urbanisation in Africa has not been accompanied by sustained economic growth or reduced poverty (Kessides 2006).

Similarly, in the words of a UN-Habitat report (UN-Habitat 2008: 7), 'African urbanization is a poverty-driven process and not the industrialization-induced socio-economic transition it represented in the world's other major regions.' One consequence of this approach is that poverty, which used to be perceived in Africa as a largely rural phenomenon, now appears to have migrated to the city. This view, which runs the risk of overlooking the large remaining poverty-stricken rural areas, is reinforced by the prioritisation of the Millennium Development Goals aimed at reducing urban poverty, and by the dissemination of well-publicised key reports and well-marketed academic books on the pervasiveness of slums in Africa (Davis 2006; UN-Habitat 2003).

The 'opportunity' approach conceptualises African cities as cosmopolitan and global, as cities that work – and that work partially by virtue of the creativity and innovative activities of their residents. A body of literature critical of the 'poverty' approach began by contesting global city research paradigms that situated Africa off the global city map (Robinson 2002). A second argument suggested that globalisation should not be reduced to mere economic processes, but should be understood more widely in terms of cultural, social and political processes, in which Africa evidently plays a part (Malaquais 2006; Nuttall & Mbembe 2008; Simone 2004). Others have contested the assumption that Africa's cities have been excluded from the global economy by pointing to uneven globalisation processes that connect large metropoles in Africa (and elsewhere), while bypassing other regions of the continent (Ferguson 2006; Grant 2009). Moreover, despite the fact that Africa is seen to be off the global city map, the notion of a world-class city is being used more and more by city managers and politicians in the continent. In a number of Africa's larger cities, recent city government interventions to regulate revenue collection, taxation, spatial planning and trade have led to claims of world-class status by certain city administrations (Lindell 2008).

This shifting image of a number of Africa's cities – from urban poverty to places of economic opportunity – is also changing the perceptions international investors and policy makers have of urban Africa. The shift from cursed territory ('*terre maudite*') to economic Eldorado ('*d'Eldorado économique*') (Otayek 2011) may appear to be an exaggeration, but consider the following, taken from an article in *Foreign Affairs*:

> Not so long ago, the world lamented its broken continent. 'The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world,' declared British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2001 – and his was a common refrain … A decade later, Africa has outgrown the gloom and doom. Today [it] is alive with rising urban centers, a growing consumer class, and sizzling business deals. It's a land of opportunity [and] now one of the world's fastest-growing economic regions. (Dorr et al. 2010: 80)

We will look beyond these contrasting approaches in this book, for two reasons: both tend to focus on macroeconomic trends and play down the role of power and politics at city level, and both tend to employ only superficially three important common-wisdom notions, namely urban governance, urban identities and urban informality. First, the poverty and opportunity approaches both tend to depoliticise the local – to underestimate or ignore the role that politics and power play at the city level and the importance of city–state and city–party relationships, which remain central to the ways cities are governed, or not governed. The poverty approach conceives of poor urban residents as essentially powerless (particularly with regard to local institutions), and having little, if any, involvement in the wider city and its structures. The opportunity approach focuses essentially on the emergent urban economy and labour market, with equally little focus on urban politics, and urban party politics in particular. We will attempt to correct this omission by introducing a continuous political dimension: by analysing urban issues at different scales – geographic scopes that are meaningful to residents, such as neighbourhood, residential area, town, city, province or country – and by focusing on intra-urban party-political struggles and

compromises, thereby revealing the micro realities and conflicts that characterise the everyday lives of residents, officials and local leaders.

The second reason brings us back to the issue of urbanisation and urban growth in Africa. The general characteristics of these processes are well known: urban sprawl becomes ubiquitous and haphazard, and service delivery – the provision of water, sewerage, waste removal and, critically, urban transport – is taken over by self-help groups or members of resident households. Perhaps the most visible consequence of this process is that housing construction becomes 'informal', with homes built with locally available materials by self-help contractors or residents themselves, and located to improve access to work opportunities (Bekker & Therborn 2012). In such a context, the notions of urban governance (or the absence thereof), urban identities and urban informality have been universally, and unproblematically, employed by commentators and researchers alike.

Although governance is recognised as a useful concept in political analyses (Le Galès 2002; Rosenau 2002), in the case of Africa it has been applied primarily at a national level (Hyden & Court 2002; Joseph 1999), often leading to a depoliticised vision of power relationships by focusing on formal manifestations of power (Engel & Olsen 2005). Moreover, at city level governance has been viewed within a widely publicised normative context, where it is understood to refer to participatory, transparent and accountable government (UNDP 1997).

Urban identities – widely considered to reflect national patterns of affiliations – have typically been viewed simply in ethnic (Chabal 2005), religious (Baumann 1999) or, in the case of South Africa, racial versus class terms (Marks & Trapido 1987). Little attention has been given to the micro, or neighbourhood scale, to the continually shifting allegiances and local constructions of identity, or interactions 'from below' (self-identification and identification by other city dwellers) and 'from above' (by agents such as authorities, mass media and international organisations assigning identities) that typify cities in Africa (Bekker & Leildé 2006).

The notion of informality was originally coined by the International Labour Organization (ILO 1972) and Keith Hart (Hart 1973) in order to address the question of why the dearth of formal-sector employment had not led to unsustainable levels of unemployment. Academics, policy makers and bankers took rapidly to this notion in their analyses of (especially urban) labour-market dynamics in developing countries. Several competing meanings have subsequently emerged from the works of academics and international institutions (such as the International Labour Organization and the World Bank), and subsequently today there is no consensus on what informality means. Among the many definitions, two seem to be widespread: one in which informality includes all economic activities that escape taxation or state registration, and a second definition – one that is more commonly applied, as it helps international institutions measure the contribution of the informal sector to gross domestic product – which is mainly based on non-wage salaries and self-employment enterprises (ILO 2004). After the 1970s, the term 'informality' was used to suggest that the cities of Africa had entered a new era marked by a general

informalisation of the urban economy (Hansen & Vaa 2004; Lindell 2010; Zeleza 1999). However, not only were such economic activities common during the colonial periods of many African countries (Fourchard 2011), but the increasingly explicit use of the informal/formal distinction to describe a wide range of activities has also led to a dangerously simplified binary classification of urban activities, which, upon closer analysis, often emerge as distinctly more complex (Elyachar 2005; Roitman 2007). By problematising the assumptions underlying these definitions, the authors of this book intend to reveal a number of pitfalls encountered in such analyses.

Urban studies in Africa

Until recently, urban studies of sub-Saharan Africa have kept to a number of visible trajectories. Strong urbanist traditions were found in both anglophone and francophone Africa – first from the urban anthropological work of the Rhodes-Livingstone schools of sociology and anthropology (for an excellent review, see Ferguson 2006), and thereafter in the pioneering works of what has come to be called the new social and urban history (Cooper 1983; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991; Van Onselen 1982). These works nevertheless followed different tracks, partly because of historical differences in colonial policies that influenced Africa's cities and partly because of language barriers – although important exceptions must be noted (Gervais-Lambony 1994; Goerg 1997; Gondola 1996; Simone 2004). Few studies are available on the ways the cities of lusophone Africa are governed (see, however, Cahen 1989, Jenkins 2000, 2012; Lachartre 2000), and these have rarely been translated.

Studies of urban South Africa proliferated during the last two decades of apartheid South Africa (Maylam 1995; Parnell & Mabin 1995; Van Onselen 1982) and work continued during the first decade thereafter (Seekings 2000). Analysis of the apartheid and post-apartheid city, however, often ran the risk of exceptionalism, implying that South Africa's cities were fundamentally different from others on the continent (Humphries et al. 1991). Writing soon after the demise of apartheid, Maylam (1995), in his review of urban research over the previous two decades, appeared obliged by virtue of the focus of the works he reviewed to treat South Africa as a 'social isolate', a unique island disconnected from its continent. In a later review of urban studies after apartheid, Seekings (2000) used a similar focus: the only reference to Africa beyond South Africa's borders is a closing remark regarding swelling African migration streams into the country and its cities. It is no surprise then that it was during this period that Mamdani (1998) recommended that

> [we] have to take head on the notion of South African exceptionalism
> and the widely shared prejudice that while South Africa is a part of Africa
> geographically, it is not quite culturally and politically, and certainly
> not economically [a part]. It is a point of view that I have found to be
> a hallmark of much of the South African intelligentsia, shared across
> divides: white or black, left or right, male or female.

After the turn of the century, the focus of urban studies broadened. Scholars from other African countries collaborated with South African scholars on comparative

urban work (Simone 2004), and urban scholars began to treat South African cities as examples of cities from the global south (Watson 2009). Notwithstanding this shift in focus, Nuttall and Mbembe (2008) have criticised South African scholars for their continued obsession with the segregated nature of the country's cities while paying insufficient attention to the integration of South Africa into world social and political trends.

At the continental level, studies in North Africa, in the Maghreb region and Egypt, are perceived to belong – at least in institutional research terms – to a different region, to the arabophone Mediterranean rim. As far as urban studies are concerned, there have been few examples that bridge the Saharan gap (see, however, an attempt at synthesis in Freund 2007). The fact that North Africa, the anglophone and francophone countries, and southern Africa are bounded by different languages that need to be accessible to the researcher has limited the attempts to build a comparative analysis of Africa's cities. In this book, we have decided to restrict our attention to the cities of sub-Saharan Africa largely for practical reasons. African studies in Europe and Africa typically share this geographical focus.

There are three challenges we believe are worth identifying in the search for clarification of Africa's urban past and urban present. Although these may not be original insights, they are nonetheless significant and have influenced the way in which we have planned this book.

The first challenge involves a critical analysis – a deconstruction, if you will – of the categories commonly used by scholars and policy makers in their characterisation of Africa's cities (Fourchard 2011). These include terms such as 'colonial', 'postcolonial', 'cosmopolitan' and 'informal'. The use of such terms poses a number of dangers:
- When Africa's cities are considered to be dysfunctional, chaotic or informal, it is typically by comparison with the Western city – a paradigmatic model or benchmark.
- Each of these categorisations may have its advantages, in particular that of comparison with cities within, and categories of cities outside, the selected group. Simultaneously, there are disadvantages. In the first place, the category tends to frame the nature of a city's relationship with other cities and accordingly usually determines this relationship. This may well lead not only to simplification of a complex set of relations, but also to a distortion of priorities (Davis & Kingsbury 2011).
- Associated with this point, all cities may be visualised as forms of living geology, shaped by and functioning through historical layers of ambitions, efforts and constructions of meaning, set in natural environments of topography and climate, and subject to change (Bekker & Therborn 2012). Africa's cities are no different, but many of the categories used to classify them appear to ignore these processes.

The second challenge is to demonstrate that the history of African cities is important, but not in a simple linear way. Conventional analyses of urban change in Africa have tended, rather too simply, to divide its chronology into discrete phases:

an ahistorical and often forgotten pre-colonial past; a supposedly orderly and racially informed colonial period (often reduced to urban planning, technologies of control and associated civilising missions); and a postcolonial period, perceived as a more fluid and complex era, shaped by pervasive conflicts (see Demissie 2007; Enwezor et al. 2002; Myers & Murray 2006). Such an approach often falls into the trap of introducing binary categories whereby colonial and postcolonial cities are treated as fundamentally different, and crosscutting historical influences are ignored. There is, however, a small but growing body of research on Africa's urban past that relates to more general urban studies, and these works are opening up new theoretical partnerships between history and the social sciences (Ferguson 1999; Rakodi 1997; Simone 2004). We would like to situate this book within this area of literature.

The third challenge is to move beyond one of the major biases found in many works in the fields of African urban history and African urban studies. In a nutshell, the issue is an exclusive focus on the local – on local urban strategies, local urban regulations and local urban actors in a single urban place (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991; Fourchard 2004; Le Galès 2002; Saunders 1992). These studies typically become monographs trimmed of comparative dimensions and located somewhat superficially in regional or global contexts.

In our ambition to eliminate this bias and locate this book squarely within a comparative framework, we are aware that we will not be the first. Others have already started to study Africa's cities in such contexts (Bekker & Therborn 2012; Freund 2007; Gervais-Lambony 1994, Simone 2004). And some comparative work has also been undertaken regarding public policies implemented in cities in Africa and other regions of the South (Durand-Lasserve & Royston 2002; Huchzermeyer 2004; Jaglin 2005). The aim, however, is to position our book neither as a series of monographic studies of various cities in Africa nor as a history of these cities in a linear context, but rather as a series of comparative studies that put party politics, policies and history at the centre of an analysis of processes shaping urban Africa, and interrogate a number of the conceptual tools widely used in such analyses.

Exploring urban Africa

In order to guard against exclusive attention to a single city, we have decided in this book to study urban issues across several cities. And in order to move beyond language constraints, geographical segregation and a binary approach to colonial and postcolonial events, we have decided deliberately to select cities from different regions and with divergent colonial histories.

Our point of departure was to select a number of contested issues and themes, and to assemble teams of scholars to research them. Some 36 researchers (including doctoral students) from six countries (Ethiopia, France, Kenya, Nigeria, Portugal and South Africa) were approached. Their work was conducted in three languages. The teams collaborated over a four-year period. The research programme was planned and launched at conferences held in Johannesburg and Bordeaux, and culminated in a conference in Stellenbosch in December 2009. The individual teams met a number

of times during this period to discuss issues relating to the preparation of their chapters, each of which was written by a number of authors. Each team approached their selected subject from a range of disciplines and assembled data from between four and six cities. A last team meeting (dubbed a 'writing workshop') to finalise draft chapters took place immediately before the Stellenbosch conference. This methodological approach, we believe, offers the reader comparative chapters that provide more than just case studies of different cities – something commonly found in most edited books on urban Africa. In so doing, the book draws together and reorganises our understanding of the various urbanisation processes in East, West and southern Africa.

The subjects selected by the research teams for separate treatment fall into two parts in the book. The first part, 'Party politics and the politics of identity', starts from the premise that party politics – typically conceived as fundamental to national politics – is pertinent to the understanding of urban politics. Next, the various ways in which groupings of urban residents construct collective identities in the urban political arena are addressed. The imposition 'from above' of a collective identity intended for a specific urban grouping is mediated by various influences brought to bear by the urban population. Members of this grouping may accept and internalise – often under duress – such a collective identity; or, conversely, they may reject – overtly or covertly – this imposition. Given the rapidly changing nature of urban political arenas, it is evident that many such collective identities themselves rarely endure as dominant, whereas others may remain more deeply rooted.

The second part, 'Urban public policies: Problematising informality', starts from the premise that the notion of informality – originally conceived as urban activities beyond and invisible to formal urban political authority, and subsequently concretised into a binary of (visible) formal and (invisible) informal – is losing its analytic edge and is becoming a blunt conceptual tool. This notion is interrogated through the lenses of four public policies: housing delivery, street trading, solid-waste management and security. In each case, the scope and nature of the activities of the various urban stakeholders reveal the complexity and mix of these urban activities, which are less or more visible to different state authorities.

We have aimed to produce a book characterised as much by its innovative methodology – chapters exploring urban themes across a number of cities, authored by a team of researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds who have completed research in one or more of these urban places – as by its knowledge production. Each chapter has been designed to stand alone, in that the analysis of urban residents' activities is confined both to the context of the selected theme and to a specific historical period. Each chapter therefore draws its own conclusion.

The arrangement of the book into two parts is intended to gather together themes that illustrate empirically the utility of commonly employed conceptual notions in urban research in Africa. To this end, each part begins with a concise introduction that identifies and problematises these notions.

In addition to the seven stand-alone chapters examining separate urban-based themes and the introductions to the two parts of the book, we have included at the front of the book, in an appendix, abridged profiles of each city in which the research took place. This is both to familiarise the reader with these urban places and to avoid duplication, as a number of the cities provide research sites in more than one chapter. Nine of the researched urban places are in West Africa, two each in East and southern Africa, and the remaining five in South Africa. The profiles were written by authors familiar with each specific city and offer a historical overview, a demographic profile, a sense of the politics and government of the city, as well as information about the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic character of each city.

Concluding remarks

We believe that the production of this book has been valuable in a number of ways.

Methodologically, it brought together authors from different disciplinary and language backgrounds, each with their own specific urban research site, in a series of exchanges with a view to writing chapters with a common theme. The fact that a significant number of these authors were graduate students undoubtedly added value to their thesis preparation, particularly as they participated in discussions of a historical and comparative (intercity) as well as multidisciplinary nature.

Conceptually, the emphasis on urban analysis at different scales (discussed earlier) enabled a shift away from both a focus on the national context and a preoccupation with the local as a unique site of research. A prime example is Chapter 2, where the notion of governance is replaced by a comparative study of contested politics in the urban environment and its influence on city government. With regard to the disputed notion of informality, moreover, this use of different scales permitted the demonstration in different urban policy environments of the entanglement of urban activities involving self-help groups, neighbourhood associations, businesses and state bodies. In the case of urban security (Chapter 8), the authors decided – wisely in our opinion – to avoid the use of the formal/informal in favour of the state/non-state distinction. In other chapters, the terms continue to be used, albeit carefully and critically. This exploration at different scales, both from below and from above, has also revealed that urban policies imported from the global north as 'best practice', when implemented without attention to local practice, often fail or result in unintended consequences (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Geographically, the themes researched drew on comparisons made among cities with different colonial and postcolonial histories. Where the themes focused on urban-policy issues, the fact that the municipal governments of these cities, together with their legal and administrative systems, differ substantially underlines the importance of the convergence found in different cities in terms of urban activities relating to security, street trading, solid-waste removal and housing delivery (see Part 2).

Comparisons of this nature do not make for easy research. Authors of the thematic chapters were aware of the need to respect differences in historical eras and to avoid –

or carefully contextualise – shifts from colonial to postcolonial periods. Comparisons between South African and other African urban research sites proved particularly challenging: although the gap between policy and practice remains wide in South Africa's metropolitan administrations, these metropolitan councils have succeeded in making substantial progress in terms of poorer urban dwellers' material quality of life (see Chapter 5). This cannot be said for most of the cities further north. In short, while the authors do not subscribe to South African exceptionalism, differences in material well-being need to be factored into comparisons.

We conclude by identifying three issues that we believe need further work.

The term 'informal' is well-nigh universal within discourses on development, in developing and developed societies alike. The chapters in this book reveal that its use as a single standard category is widely contested, not least because the meaning that state and external agencies assign to it differs from that which local people understand by it. Moreover, informality takes on different forms at different times and in different places, making each interpretation of the term highly specific. By implication, the authors of this work argue that this terminological status quo is inadequate. Alternative ways of framing these developmental challenges are called for.

The second issue relates to the choice we made to restrict our work to sub-Saharan Africa. The selection of sites was a practical one. Researchers we approached had been trained in African studies that did not address the Saharan gap. This group of researchers, moreover, were conversant with research literature in English, French and Portuguese. None had satisfactory instruction in Arabic, a language and associated literature required to bridge this gap. The need to move beyond this barrier, established by European research institutions, and its language divides, and to encompass continent-wide research in Africa is clear, and has recently been recognised by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), which recently established the African-Arab Advanced Institute.

The third issue relates to the fact that the research programme that produced this book was conceptualised, managed and financed by French and South African researchers and academic institutions. We are deeply grateful for this support, without which the programme could not have evolved. Simultaneously, it is self-evident that the programme has introduced an inevitable bias: all meetings of researchers during the four-year programme took place either in South Africa or France; most researchers were drawn from the academic communities of these two countries; and the number of researchers from African countries other than South Africa was small. Though it is no easy task to involve senior researchers and academic institutions from other African countries as equals, future research programmes similar to this one ought to make this issue a priority, and ought to raise funds with this goal in mind.

A final word on theory: notwithstanding the different disciplinary backgrounds of the authors and their divergent anglophone, francophone and lusophone intellectual traditions, all chapters are located within an economic and political framework, encompassing labour and subsistence, shelter and security, and organisation and

communication, under conditions of rising urban competition and conflict. Within this context, colonial cities are presented as reflecting their conquerors' legitimacy, and postcolonial cities their new elites' spirit of nationalism. In both cases, during both historical periods, these chapters bear witness to the extraordinary resilience of urban residents confronted with the need to survive with little support from either the colonial authorities or the new regimes. The ways in which they do so is revealed through agency within the confines of structure and through constructivist analysis within the economic and political framework.

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