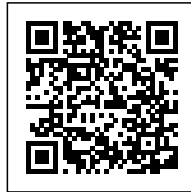# urbanNext Lexicon

Participation and Place-making in Dissonant Times
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PARTICIPATION AND PLACE-MAKING IN DISSONANT TIMES

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Dissonance is the overwhelming condition of the current era. At a time when formal politics in multiparty democracies seem interminably stuck, over the past few years a supposedly ineffectual United Nations has been able to broker a series of path-breaking development agreements, of which the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda adopted in 2016 are the most ambitious. These agreements represent a fundamentally different political landscape within which tough social justice questions can be confronted more easily. It also means that the opportunity for the pursuit of urban justice is unprecedented, even if not always activated. Yet, even a cursory review of dominant political processes and priorities across the OECD and Global South is enough to deflate hope.

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Why is participatory development so damn hard?

There is remarkable convergence of policy thinking and prescription on participatory development in the knowledge fields of urban development. The New Urban Agenda is emblematic of what is currently considered normative when it asserts a vision for cities that:

Are participatory, promote civic engagement, engender a sense of belonging and ownership among all their inhabitants, prioritise safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces that are

friendly for families, enhance social and intergenerational interactions, cultural expressions and political participation, as appropriate, and foster social cohesion, inclusion and safety in peaceful and pluralistic societies, where the needs of all inhabitants are met, recognising the specific needs of those in vulnerable situations.

According to the New Urban Agenda, there are four drivers that can activate this vision. One, multilevel urban policies that are consistent between the local and national levels. Two, strong urban governance institutions that consistently act in a democratic, accountable and inclusionary manner. Three, an embracing of long-term and integrated territorial planning and design to ensure that the spatial dimensions of urban form – compact and complex – are optimised. Lastly, effective finance policy frameworks to ensure dedicated revenue streams for a new approach to infrastructure investment priorities. Such priorities should be underpinned by a prescriptive spatial (land use) agenda to ensure that the economic, social and environmental benefits of density are realised.

It is hard to fault the principles and aspirations. However, it is critical to interrogate these frameworks to understand whether they are able to be deployed for transformative purposes, or whether they will merely keep the status quo in place. The 'drivers of change' postulated by the New Urban Agenda are of particular relevance because they are regarded as prerequisites for the establishment of participatory governance and rights-based citizenship. In sub-Saharan Africa, where decentralisation has effectively stalled and national governments are determined to retain control of countries and cities, it is hard to see how 'consistent' multilevel urban policies might be formulated. Specifically, opposition parties tend to first get a foothold in cities, which establishes a dynamic whereby national governments resist decentralisation. In such contexts, National Urban Policies can easily become mechanisms to starve cities of power and resources in the name of retaining national coherence and economic development. If multilevel urban policies cannot be developed in an inclusive manner, it reduces the influence of cities on key policies that shape urban investments. Limited power at the local level erodes the value of participatory processes since decisions are consolidated somewhere else. In most sub-Saharan African countries democratic decentralisation remains a distant ideal.

The evidence from many African cities suggests that democratically elected local government institutions are not necessarily accountable or inclusionary. They are more likely to opt for chauvinistic populist policies that reinforce certain portions of the electorate at the expense of others, fuelling conflict and sometimes violence. These practices are incorporated into the ways in

which political parties are embedded at the grassroots and associated systems of clientalism and patronage. The undemocratic stranglehold political parties exercise at the community level undermines the quality and utility of public participation.

Furthermore, there is simply no guarantee that the institutional adoption of long-term and territorial planning is necessarily going to lead to decisions that have a positive impact on urban form, social inclusion and environmental sustainability, as the New Urban Agenda suggests. Long-term planning is equated with anticipatory planning on greenfield sites to accommodate future growth – a policy aggressively promoted by UN-Habitat. Often associated with private mega-projects, this condition leaves the existing city in a state of utter neglect and exclusion, even though this is where the majority of the urban population lives. Private sector mega-projects create conditions for rent-seeking at a scale that far exceeds the typical scenario in existing cities. Most African cities are characterised by limited tax-raising powers and small tax bases. In this context, it is common for local political leaders to negotiate 'facilitation fees' outside of the formal tax system to ensure major development projects are approved and connected to existing urban infrastructure networks. Such projects create an even stronger incentive for encrusted elites to want to stay in power, and for cosy business relations to keep them there in order to mitigate risks associated with long-term capital-intensive investments. In other words, mainstream discourses on participatory urban planning and management can come across as naive about how the real (estate) world of urban reproduction operates, and about what is required from a democratic oversight perspective to reorient the incentives of urban management and governance away from rent-seeking towards radical inclusion.

Port Harcourt: Grounding participatory urban development

Insisting on a realistic account of institutional and political constraints on the ideals of participatory development does not amount to an argument for abandoning the ideal. On the contrary, it is an assertion that we ground political ideals in real-world contexts and emergent experiments.

The Port Harcourt, Nigeria case study illustrates instances of advocacy and alternative experiments as forms of critical opposition to state neglect. However, both kinds of democratic actions – cooperation and opposition – are vital for a vibrant democracy that can attend to the structural drivers of inequality and social injustice.

Founded just over a century ago as a key trading node, the city has experienced rapid urbanisation

since 1958 when crude oil was discovered, swelling to 1,450,000 inhabitants today. The economy remains entirely reliant on the extraction of crude oil. In 2009, modernisation ambitions of the then-governor of the state resulted in violent evictions. Up to 19,000 people were displaced in one particularly violent weekend.

The first political action of an NGO, Collaborative Media Advocacy Platform's (CMAP), was to expose the violence through documentary photography and recorded testimonies of waterfront slum communities. This work engaged with those most affected, telling their stories and equipping them to tell their own. One of the most striking symbolic actions was to produce large-scale billboards that projected high-quality portrait images of the residents of these communities, simply saying who they were and that they belonged in the city. An important technique for repressive states is to render their subjects invisible and therefore inconsequential. By installing assertive portraits of ordinary residents in public sight lines, the oppressive power of the state is questioned and rendered a little less absolute.

After a couple of years, CMAP's work moved on to help communities formulate their own visions and plans for the future. At the core of this phase was a radical deployment of participatory planning processes to develop a detailed spatial account of the waterfront communities, which in turn formed the basis for identifying and prioritising needs. The design quality of the maps is striking. This is clearly attributable to the insider/outsider roles of CMAP initiators, Michael Uwemedimo and Ana Bonaldo, who worked for London-based institutions and were therefore able to navigate the international humanitarian and development donor communities. They were able to provide the necessary administrative and financial controls to attract funding and communicate effectively. However, this always went hand in hand with building elected grassroots organisations and focusing on skills development.

Through a collaboration with architectural firm NLÉ, CMAP embarked on the design of Chicoco Space/Our Place. This hub aims to consolidate existing community projects and programmes into a series of public-focused activities including recording studios, meeting rooms and a cinema. The project offers a literal and imaginative bridge between the host neighbourhood and the city at large.

On the back of this evolving practice of participatory planning, mapping and cultural production, CMAP were able to escalate their impact by joining forces with a United States-based research company, and successfully tendered to produce a faecal-sludge-management-based strategy to tackle the sanitation crisis in Port Harcourt. This was premised on the experience and reputation of CMAP to train community members and produce rigorous work. Most importantly, it allowed CMAP

and the various community organisations to move from a deep focus on a few of the 49 waterfront communities to the whole city. They are now engaging directly with various state-level and local government departments, enabling them to combine alternative experiments with forms of partnership towards service delivery collaborations down the line.

In conclusion

There is nothing inevitable about the kinds of outcomes that participatory development processes produce. On the contrary, participation rhetoric and techniques can be deployed by powerful interests to reinforce their legitimacy and stymie sustained critique. Yet, in formal policy pronouncements the mantra remains as confident as ever. The CMAP example reflects that participatory techniques linked to the problematisation of space, with an eye on redefining use and cultural value, can prove to be potent in substantiating urban citizenship even when the state demonstrates disinterest or has a proclivity for exclusionary practices.

However, it is important to confront a wicked irony in attempts that seek to reconfigure and democratise power in African polities and cities. In classic leftist thinking the stranglehold of elite power is unlikely to be resolved without a radical displacement of the status quo, which implies a sustained politics of protest, mobilisation, occupation and eventually the gain of electoral power through an effective party that is rooted in a broad-based coalition of insurgent interests. Unfortunately, this scenario is unforeseeable in most African polities (and much of the North, for that matter) because of the difficulty associated with sustaining such coalitions. Moreover, since the state has limited reach in controlling the drivers of urban reproduction, electoral gains are often no guarantee of being able to pursue transformative strategies.

Economic and spatial reproduction are co-constituted by a plurality of actors, not least traditional authorities, religious leaders and other local strongmen that regulate daily life. Since urban reproduction in terms of basic services, livelihoods, economic transactions and public space are rarely fully public actions, but rather hybrid institutional configurations of formal, informal, makeshift practices, the work of participatory policies must target these fluid and often opaque knots of regulation. This is a big political ask, but unavoidable. This condition also undermines the prospects of a classic left-styled politics of critique, opposition and counter-power that can generate displacement or replacement.

In the end one is left with a canvas of micropolitical experiments that could be articulated through strategic coalitions of citywide importance that, hopefully, confront the intractable questions of spatial justice. The emerging experiences in Port Harcourt demonstrate the immense power that can be unleashed through carefully curated and deployed participatory techniques that are embodied in cultural and artistic sensibilities to animate democratic passions, while fostering a space for thinking and acting propositionally.

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