

# COMPARATIVE URBAN STUDIES PROJECT

## Global Urban Poverty Research Agenda

THE AFRICAN CASE

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For many developing countries particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa the pervasive nature of urban poverty constitutes an enormous challenge to their development effort. The burgeoning streams of rural-urban migrations arising partly from failure to significantly improve on agricultural productivity and living conditions in rural areas and partly from the relative attractions of urban centers have tended to fuel the growth and expansion of poverty regimes within urban areas. Two decades of research on poverty, however, indicate that we are still far from fully understanding the many strands of issues that condemn individuals and communities especially in urban and metropolitan areas of developed and developing countries to being mired in the web of poverty or being unable to pull themselves out of poverty. The situation in sub-Saharan Africa deserves special attention both because the region presently has the fastest rate of

of why attempts at urban poverty reduction all over the continent have been relatively unimpressive especially in the context of a continuing and sustained heavy surge of rural-urban migration. The fifth part then articulates an urban poverty research agenda emphasizing the policy and practical implications of the conjunctural situation of poor municipalities confronting the challenges of urban poverty. A concluding section notes the importance for state, multilateral banks and international development agencies of paying greater attention to not only state-based strategies for poverty reduction but also the emerging institutions within civil society

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(1) *Income* which gives rise to inadequate consumption of necessities including food and safe and sufficient water, problems of indebtedness with debt repayments significantly reducing income available for necessities; (2) *Assets* both material and non-material including educational attainment and housing for individuals, households or communities; (3) *Quality of housing* which is typically of poor quality, overcrowded and insecure; (4) *Infrastructure* comprising piped water, sanitation, drainage, roads, footpaths, and so on which increases health burden and often work burden; (5) *Services* such as daycare centers, schools, vocational training centers, health-care clinics, emergency services units, public transport, communications and law enforcement; (6) *Income security* to ensure that basic consumption can be maintained when income falls as well as to ensure access to shelter and health care when these can no longer be paid for; (7) *Legal and regulatory framework* including laws and regulations regarding civil and political rights, occupational health and safety, pollution control, environmental health, protection from violence and other crimes, protection from discrimination and exploitation; and (8) *Political and bureaucratic structures* within political systems and bureaucratic structures, leading to little or no possibility of receiving entitlements; organizing; making demands; and getting a fair response. No means of ensuring accountability from aid agencies, NGOs, public agencies and private utilities.

The acuteness of the incidence of these various attributes of urban poverty can be expected to vary positively with the size of urban centers and are more likely to be extreme in metropolitan areas than in smaller cities. The importance of price levels following the commoditization of goods and services in urban areas can be particularly troublesome to the urban poor and compels them to seek measures such as urban agriculture to minimize their dependence on the market for their basic food needs. High density of settlement increases health risks and vulnerabilities which are further compounded by the location of settlements in marginal areas such as floodplains or mountainsides.

In the last quarter of the last century, many African countries have had to submit to the structural adjustment program promoted by Bretton Woods institutions

as the only way to restore the health of their economies. The operation of the program has meant cutting down on many social services and the retrenchment of many workers. This has pushed many marginal urban workers into poverty and requires that poverty 3 T Tw[(as the onlfi29 T60.02

and on the east African coastland where there are examples of pre-colonial and pre-industrial towns and cities, urbanization in most of sub-Saharan Africa has been a novel colonial development. In many countries, during the colonial period, urban centers were the exclusive residence of white colonialists. The Africans, who provided menial labor for running these cities, were often





In such a situation, it is no wonder that poverty trends, among other negative features of the various countries, deepened further. Efforts to turn around the general depressing conditions in many of these countries saw emphasis being put on decentralization and democratization as well as on the promotion of a free market economy and the greater involvement of the private sector in the economy of the countries. However, all over Africa, almost without exception these early efforts at decentralization came to grief (Laley and Olowu, 1989). Part of the reason for this was that what was being decentralized was often not power or resources but mainly governmental activities, a process which is now more correctly referred to as deconcentration. The people involved in the so-called “decentralization” process were invariably lower level bureaucrats. Where an elected council is involved, it is usually made responsible to a higher authority and not to the people who elected it. Consequently, where poverty alleviation is concerned, the failure or success of such bureaucrats or assembly, cannot be anything different from the performance of the national government itself.

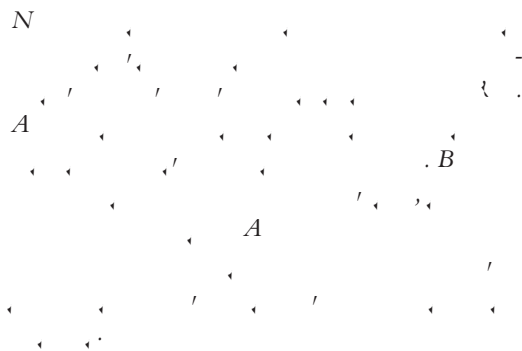
**POSITING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR AFRICA**

Given these pre-dominant state-society relations, how does one proceed to elucidate the urban poverty situation in sub-Saharan Africa? How does one explain how and why African cities present a situation so contrary to the general global trend of declining urban poverty? How does one attempt an explanation of a situation in which in spite of efforts in recent years by multilateral organizations, bilateral donor agencies, central and even local governments, and foreign and local non-governmental and community-based organizations, relative and absolute incidence of chronic poverty continues to rise whilst poverty reduction remains a formidable challenge to development efforts in most countries?

In positing a conceptual framework for understanding urban poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, it is necessary to begin again by situating the phenomenon within a pre-colonial historical and political economy context so as to recognize where these countries are coming from and how far and how well they have come. At the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884, which heralded the era of European colonization of the continent, the mode of production over most of Africa was largely

pre-capitalist. Societal progress had been disrupted during the preceding four centuries due to the Arab and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The pre-capitalist economies of most of the countries were essentially peasant-based. Unlike elsewhere in the world, the feudal mode of organization was poorly developed except in a few areas such as in Uganda, Ethiopia and part of northern Nigeria. The fundamental point to remember about the various colonial economies which the colonial powers tried to integrate into the global capitalist economy at the beginning of the 20th century was the fact that they were essentially pre-feudal, peasant-based economies.

Nonetheless, Moore (1966) observed that the road to modern society everywhere had been completed at the expense of the peasantry. In the industrialized world, other social classes have taken control of the instruments of state and used these to curtail the freedom of the peasants and to reform, ‘marginalize’ or ‘proletarianize’ their claims to primordial societal assets especially of land and labor. In Africa, however, the peasant has remained virtually independent not only by his position as producer with direct access to land and the labor of his family members but also by his ability to secure his own reproduction without significant dependence on other social classes. This has provoked the argument that there can be no serious understanding and resolution of the development crisis in Africa without recognition of the historical uniqueness of the African peasantry. According to Hyden (1980: 9)



Such recognition of the fundamental peasant-base foundation of much of the economies of sub-Saharan Africa compels a better understanding of the basis of the prevailing developmental crisis of the continent as well as of the daunting nature of the pervasive

poverty of the majority of the population. It underscores the necessity to examine whether the “institutions in which the thinking of the majority of Africans finds expression” are compatible with the present aspirations for democratic governance and participation in a free market economy.

A first step in such an examination is to recognize the dominance and persistence of kinship relations as a major coordinating principle of socio-economic life in such a social formation. Kinship determined for the majority their access to all the critical factors of production, namely land, labor, capital and entrepreneurship. It governed access to productive land as well as to residential sites especially in the rural areas where the majority lived. It controlled access to labor of both family members and other kinsmen and women; whether in urban or rural areas, it facilitated access to capital and credit and determined what crafts or skills a person could acquire or what enterprise he could engage in. Given this emphasis on kinship, it is no wonder that there was in most sub-Saharan African countries no formal or organized market for each of these factors of production until very recently. Except in those areas where Europeans have settled in significant numbers, there are no effective markets even today for land and labour and, to some extent, for capital and entrepreneurship. Indeed, outside of these countries of eastern and southern Africa, the colonial attempts to institute formal land registries or labor exchanges have since fallen into disuse. The result is that these production factors, critical for economic progress, have remained largely untransformed, uncanceled and outside the main stream of economic aggregates in various African countries.

Kinship relationship as a coordinating principle of the pre-capitalist social formation is complemented by social values that are not easily aligned to the needs of a free market economy. On the ethical side, for instance, the values discount individual competitiveness and emphasize collective survival and cooperation. They ensure that no one is without access to the critical means of sustenance, notably land. This is fostered through an inheritance system (known as partible inheritance) whereby all the children or sons of a man on his death have a share of his movable and immovable property. On the philosophical side, the values regard life as a passage in which the living are no more than

the link between past and future generations. Consequently, with regard to societal resources such as land, the living are no more than trustees with rights only of beneficial use (or usufruct) but with no power to alienate the land out of the ownership of the family or the community at large. This philosophy not to alienate land to non-kinsmen was also bound up with notions of allegiance to one's community in an era of frequent communal hostilities.

Within such a social formation, apart from the kinship principle, the need for community-wide coordination and cooperation as well as some degree of group competition gave rise to the emergence of





The economic disjuncture is compounded by the spatial disjuncture in which poor migrants quickly discover that location is equally an important cost variable of life in cities. Irrespective of what one gets to do in the city, the issue of whether this relates to location in central or peripheral areas becomes critical. Transportation cost is a daily expenditure item and soon determines where one seeks to eke out one's existence in the city. If in the blighted areas close to the city center, the poor immigrant soon discovers that with the high density of buildings, opportunities for securing additional income through urban agriculture is greatly constrained. These are options he could explore if he succeeded in locating in peri-urban areas although then he has to incur considerable transport costs if eventually the search for employment takes him to the inner city.

The third disjuncture is social and arises from the loss of the social networks and solidarity that used to buoy up the migrant in the rural area. There are no age-grades or craft organizations in the urban area to which he can readily relate. Although when he arrives in the city he is probably housed by a relation, he soon discovers that to find employment, he has little relevant skills and is not entitled to the types and range of benefits afforded to workers in a free market economy. He can only expect to secure employment through informal channels or, if he wants to acquire some skills, by being taken on as an apprentice in the informal economy. This economy provides no fringe benefits of transportation, accommodation or medical care and no safety net. This social disjuncture becomes more noticeable where issues of justice are concerned, for example, when evicted by a rapacious landlord. Access to the courts for civil or criminal matters is a formidable challenge and intensifies the feeling of voicelessness and powerlessness of the poor in the urban environment.

Thus, the social disjuncture is aggravated by the absence or breakdown of the family support system within the urban environment. Compound-type accommodation housing for an extended family of a man, his wives, his grown-up children and other male relations and their wives as well as all of their children cannot be maintained within the urban setting and has to be replaced with accommodation for the single adult or his nuclear family in rental rooming houses with non-related nuclear families. This means, for instance, that the collective responsibility for childcare or for the

care of the elderly characteristic of rural areas can no longer be expected within the urban setting. This disjuncture impacts differentially on family members. The husband is left almost on his own to fend for his family; the wife has to find some income-earning employment to augment family resources whilst having to look after the home and the children; the children usually suffer neglect in this process and some become caught up in crime and the network of street children; the elderly, especially if left without the care of family members, could end up in destitution or constrained to return to the village after many years of urban living.



where there is little transparency and accountability in transactions. The second is an historically-developed 'primordial' public of one's community or ethnic group where trust and accountability are strongly articulated and valued. The result is an increasingly palpable distinction between the corruption and malfeasance that often surround the state realm and the relative probity and integrity that are found among those who choose to provide leadership in the "informal" or "community" realm. Removing or reducing this poignant dualism or parallelism especially in governance at the local level could be the beginning of a more people-centered, poverty-reducing and development-oriented administration in most African countries.

Another institution of trust that the poor in African cities had to use as a means of pulling themselves out of poverty is the "rotating credit" scheme. In a situation in which Africans cannot approach any modern financial institution because there has been no land reform and individuals have no collateral to secure their credit needs, the urban poor have resorted to this traditional method of providing themselves with credit to invest in activities to improve their conditions. There have been many variations on the "rotating credit" system, some operations evolving in quite impressive directions. Haggblade (1978), for instance, reports from Cameroon that this indigenous credit system was so successful in mobilizing large deposits that the risk of default was becoming a source of growing concern. Consequently, in 1975 the associations proceeded to register as a formal bank—the *Banque Communautaire*—thus becoming the sixth bank in the country. The success story, however, turned sour four years later (Miracle, Miracle, and Cohen, 1980) because the government, which saw the new institution as simply another opportunity for rent-seeking or reaping where it had not sowed, insisted on appointing the managing director of the bank. Rather than give up their autonomy and capacity for enforcing accountability, the association decided to close the bank and revert to their previous "informal" status.

Indeed, "informality" became the means wherebw.8( )120.9.8(o)39.8(wing concer)-39.5(0.11(v)39..226 0 TDm)rg(v)39..226

organizing role in such community efforts and are critical for mobilizing resources from individual households. For some services, awareness raising and capacity building for participation in the execution of the projects may be important preparatory activities. Nonetheless, it must be emphasized that community participation in service provision does not always evolve into sustainable forms of service management since they are carried out in a non-formal manner, reacting to immediate needs with varying degrees of success.

More recently, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has revealed the inadequacy of leaving matters to community resolution. Although there is evidence that even among the urban poor, reproductive health services are being accessed in many African cities, the fertility rates of poor urban women are still not very different from those of rural women and are well above those of urban women in other regions. This means that the lower levels of fertility found in cities by comparison with rural areas and higher levels of contraceptive use may not be reliable indicators of the urban state of reproductive health services among the poor, even in the family planning dimension. Significant differences have also been noticed in fertility levels of small and large cities. Similarly, the HIV/AIDS seroprevalence rates are higher in the capital or major cities of most countries especially in eastern and southern Africa due largely to the fact that these are the destinations of many migration streams with more than average numbers living in conditions of chronic poverty.

Consequently, for most African countries, it is at the level of the informal shanty settlements that the incapacity of the municipal authorities is most obvious. In African countries, one has to recognize the problems of not only the urban poor but also poor municipal authorities or local governments. Most municipal authorities will agree that they have a special role in ensuring that all residents within their jurisdictions including the urban poor are well serviced, that the quality of the services provided meet appropriate standards, that they monitor and supervise the supply of these services and plan for their sustainable growth. But to live up to all of these responsibilities, they are expected to mobilize ample financial resources. However, for many reasons not unconnected to corruption and the lack of transparency, most of them have not been able to mobilize internal financial resources from their citizens

through taxes, rates and fees and have had to concentrate only on statutory subventions from higher levels of government. This, of course, impairs their capacity to effectively promote local economic development and inhibits them from being able to deliver much needed services to their citizens especially the poor.

## AFRICAN URBAN POVERTY RESEARCH AGENDA

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Conventional wisdom suggests that the proportion of the urban poor determined on this basis may be an underestimation. Such a position, however, needs not be taken on its face value. There is indeed much that global research still needs to do to authenticate the validity of the US\$1.00 per day as a realistic basis for identifying the poor in a context in which the low-income and the poor in most of Africa do not accurately declare their earnings or depend solely on cash income for their subsistence. Instructive in this regard is the wide margin of error in the MTN telecommunications calculations of the effective market for its product, based on the fact that 70 per cent of Nigerians were said to live below the US\$1.00 per day poverty line.

Moreover, the multi-faceted nature of urban poverty has encouraged attempts at other more comprehensive indicators of urban poverty such as the standard of living/welfare measure. Part of the issue of measurement is to be able, among other things, to distinguish between chronic and transitory urban poverty. These measures place the unit of estimation of poverty at the household rather than the individual level and use for analysis real total household expenditure per adult-equivalent (Kedir, 2005: 46). They, of course, have to be adjusted for price changes over time to differentiate the effects between households in chronic and transitory poverty.

Of increasing significance, however, is the decomposing of individual households to identify the differential impact of poverty on its vulnerable members on the basis of age and sex. The children are perhaps the









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