NATIONAL URBAN POLICIES: LINKING GLOBAL AGENDAS WITH LOCAL SPECIFICITIES

- EMBEDDING NATIONAL URBAN POLICIES IN AFRICA

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- NATIONAL AND LOCAL APPROACHES TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA IN ARGENTINA

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EMBEDDING NATIONAL URBAN POLICIES IN AFRICA

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U ntil recently most African governments were in denial about urbanisation. This stemmed from at least two factors. One, most political parties who come from a tradition of fighting an anti-colonial struggle for political independence hold a deep-seated attachment to the belief that "liberation" means a return to the land dispossessed from them by colonial powers. Two, the second green revolution and connective infrastructure (ports, roads, airports) were at the heart of the African renaissance discourse of the 1990s popularised by former presidents Thabo Mbeki and Olusegun Obesanjo. This dovetailed with the nostalgic ideological currents about land and placed all focus on Africa achieving its rightful place on the global (economic) stage through agricultural productivity and mineral beneficiation. And there was a critical political consideration as well: most opposition political forces were gaining support and influence in urban areas where democratic elections were being held, often displacing the ruling party from running municipalities in cities and towns. The most visceral expression of this deep-seated anti-urban bias was the commitment to stem rural-to-urban migration (Smit and Pieterse, 2014).

However, two decades later there has been a sea change in African public policy. Africa's urban transition is seen as an opportunity to achieve the lofty goals the African Union (AU) set out in its long-term strategic vision, Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2015), which can be read as Africa's contribution to and lens on various global policy processes. Specifically, the African region and individual countries have had to formulate responses to the various international UN summits convened in 2015 and 2016, for example, on disaster risk reduction (Sendai), on finance for development (Addis Ababa), on the sustainable development goals for 2030 (New York), the climate summit (Paris), and Habitat III (Quito). The discursive shift in Agenda 2063 can be seen as a result of multiple pressures stemming from social movements in civil society, academic critique, policy prescription from development agencies, policy advocacy from organised local government and, importantly, the growing influence of international management consultancy firms in shaping national and regional policy agendas (Swilling and Hajer, 2017). Strategic policy officers working in key pan-African institutions such as the African

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Union, African Development Bank, UN Economic Commission for Africa, UN-Habitat Africa and NEPAD among others were able to use these pressures to drive a political shift to not only address the urban transition but also to ensure a raft of new policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms to oversee them (Pieterse et al., 2018). To illustrate the argument, I will trace the emergence and focus of a number of pan-African policy artefacts. The intention is to demonstrate the importance and lineage of National Urban Policies (NUPs) as a tool to fully embed the urban turn in multi-level policy processes across the African continent.

I. An abbreviated history of policy milestones

It is useful to go back in history to 1998 when the African Renaissance conference was convened. This event marked a decisive moment in African political affairs when a number of key leaders sought to establish a fresh political discourse to galvanise democratic and economic reforms across the African continent in an attempt to navigate the pressures of globalisation more effectively (Malagapuru, 1999). The event was marked by three policy priorities: agricultural development, science and technology, and a reaffirmation of so-called African values such as Ubuntu (social interdependence and solidarity) that stem from indigenous knowledge systems and practices. The focus on indigenous knowledge signalled a commitment to building cultural confidence and pride in order to assert Africa's unique contribution to the world and capacity to take control of her destiny (Malagapuru, 1999).

Practically, the African renaissance discourse found expression in a pan-African agenda to coordinate desperately needed economic infrastructure such as energy plants, roads, airports, harbours, ICT connectivity and so forth. These infrastructures were seen as crucial to support the agricultural production focus alongside greater beneficiation around the mineral economy. Science and technology was seen as key to generating the local expertise to drive greater beneficiation in African countries before commodities were exported to international markets. The African renaissance discourse and Nepad seemed to be vindicated from 2000 onwards when GDP growth rates surged upwards across most of Sub-Saharan Africa, instilling greater political and policy confidence to push harder along the same policy lines.

However, for our purposes it is noteworthy that an Africa Union summit held in Maputo in 2003 generated a resolution to seek formal collaboration with UN-Habitat to prepare an African perspective and policy response to urbanisation. This collaboration resulted in the establishment of the African Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development (AMCHUD), which had its first convening in February 2005. Given the close working relationship with UN-Habitat, their staple urban development discourse featured prominently in the declarations of the various AMCHUD meetings over the years. This forum was an important start to addressing urbanisation but had very little influence over the central policy formulation aspects of the African Union. However, in 2008, at an AU finance ministers' meeting in Abidjan, it was agreed that an urbanisation strategy was called for. This work was completed by 2010 and tabled at a members' meeting but

it was effectively stillborn. There was no discernible institutionalisation or implementation of the strategy by the operational arm of the AU. Furthermore, it had equally limited influence over the policy thinking and priorities of the African Development Bank (AfDB), which takes policy direction from the AU.

Despite these formal limitations, the discourse of sustainable urbanisation did pop up in various AU documents and processes. The most significant was Agenda 2063, which was first published in draft form in 2013 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Organisation for African Unity (the forerunner to the AU) and finalised after consultations in 2015 as a direct input into the SDG Summit. Tellingly, Agenda 2063 marks an important policy turning point in how urbanisation is perceived as a critical dimension of a prosperous and sustainable future for the African continent. It asserts that:

> We aspire that by 2063, Africa shall be a prosperous continent, with the means and resources to drive its own development, and where: African people have a high standard of living, and quality of life, sound health and well-being; Well educated citizens and skills revolution underpinned by science, technology and innovation for a knowledge society; *Cities and other settlements are hubs of cultural and economic activities, with modernized infrastructure, and people have access to all the basic necessities of life including shelter, water, sanitation, energy, public transport and ICT*; Economies are structurally transformed to create shared growth, decent jobs and economic opportunities for all (African Union, 2015, emphasis added).

This shift in policy understanding of the role of urbanisation in sustainable development can be attributed to the efforts at the margins of the African Union to move this issue up the policy ladder, which found little apparent success in the early years. However, the combination of a formal AU strategy and the efforts of other pan-African actors such as UN-Habitat Africa, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, Cities Alliance, and academic networks and institutions such as the Association of African Planning Schools and the African Centre for Cities, all created momentum around the importance of sustainable urbanisation in Africa. In fact, a uniquely African perspective was developed by the Africa desk of UN-Habitat in its efforts to generate discussion and preparation for Habitat III. They published *Towards an African Urban Agenda* in 2015 and this fed into another critical policy statement published by the African Union and OECD: *African Economic Outlook 2016, Sustainable Cities and Structural Transformation* (OECD et al., 2016). This weighty policy intervention made the economic case for sustainable cities, destabilising the conventional neo-classical prescripts that are typically rehashed in the macro-economic analysis of the AfDB and the AU.

The really decisive development was the championing of the urban cause by Africa's foremost development economists at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Under the leadership of Carlos Lopes, UNECA sought to foreground the imperative of the structural transformation of African economies. This concerned the need to interrupt the trend whereby most African economies were failing to create a large enough industrial component to their economies, which in turn was

Agenda 2063 marks an important policy turning point in how urbanisation is perceived.

detrimental to achieving job-generating growth. Moreover, UNECA was developing an argument that connected the imperatives of sustainable growth (the green economy) with labour-intensive economic policies and identifying the territorial dimensions of achieving green and inclusive industrialisation. It also allowed them to argue rather boldly about the risks of ignoring urbanisation. In their 2017 flagship report they put it as follows:

> African cities thus face low productivity, tepid job creation, high informality, huge infrastructure and service gaps, weak linkages with rural areas, high levels of informality, increasing inequalities, growing environmental damage and vulnerability to climate change and weak institutional systems and capacities. Unless resolved, these impediments will undermine Africa's urban potential for structural transformation. […] The challenge confronting Africa is thus to accelerate structural transformation by harnessing the rapid urban transition to promote economic diversification, with a special focus on industrialization that will create jobs, enhance access to basic services and reduce inequality and poverty (UNECA et al., 2017: 20)

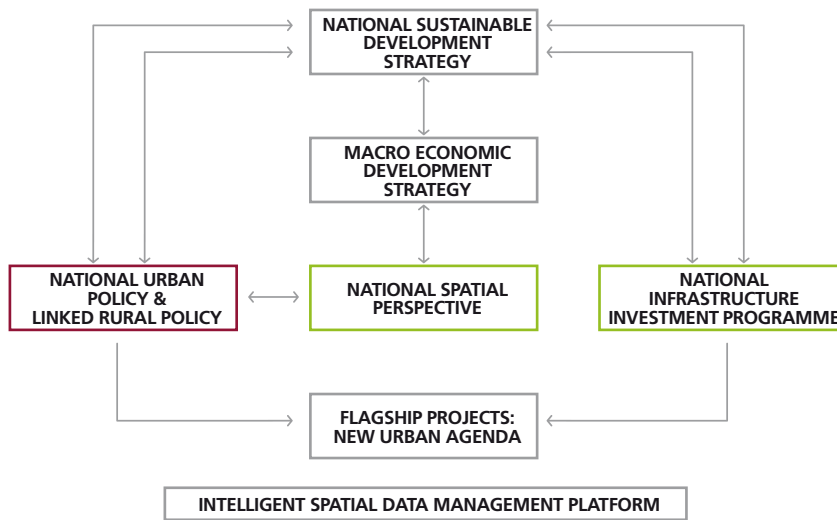## II. Global policy approach to mainstream urban policy

In parallel to global efforts to prepare for the SDG Summit and the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP21) in 2015, preparations were also afoot for Habitat III – convened by the UN every 20 years to reflect on human settlements and territorial development.[1] In concert with UN-Habitat, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), as the international political voice of organised local government, established a multi-agency global taskforce to push for a practical institutional mechanism to address urban development issues in national policy processes. They were also keen for such a mechanism to reconfigure multi-level governance arrangements premised on the belief that the sustainable development goals (SDGs) can only be achieved if they are effectively localised, that is, if implementation is driven by local government in concert with citizens and civil society. The preferred mechanism was National Urban Policies (NUPs). Through an international policy design process, UN-Habitat and UCLG defined a NUP as: "[a] coherent set of decisions derived through a deliberate, government-led process of coordinating and rallying various actors for a common vision and goal that will promote more transformative, productive, inclusive and resilient urban development for the long term" (UN-Habitat, 2014). This policy advocacy agenda must be understood against a backdrop of limited and inadequate democratic decentralisation in most parts of the Global South despite the formal policy commitments established at the Rio Summit in 1991 (Local Agenda 21) and the Habitat II declaration in 1996.

In their flagship GOLD IV report, UCLG presented a strong perspective on what the ideal-type macro policy frameworks should be and where national and rural policies fit in. Figure 1 is adapted from this report and summarises the importance of a national development strategy as an apex framework which is informed by and guides a number of

1. UN-Habitat established a number of Policy Units on a range of topics to feed into the Habitat III process. One of these, comprised of diverse stakeholders, developed a perspective and guidelines on NUPs. For more information, see: United Nations (2016).

evidence-based pieces of planning to enable effective coordination and alignment, so that the SDGs can progressively be realised.

Figure 1: Enabling national institutional mechanisms

Source: UCLG, 2016.

In this approach, the National Sustainable Development Strategy will provide an account of how the SDGs and Agenda 2063 are local-ised in given African countries. The macroeconomic policy flows from that perspective and must be subservient to it. It is also important to explicitly address the spatial aspects of these overarching macro policy frameworks. An understanding of the differential nature of the nation-al, regional and local space economy informs economic development thinking, and most importantly, a *coordinated* approach to infrastruc-ture investment. This is why it sits between the territorial policies, the macro-economic strategy and the infrastructure investment framework. Despite the importance of a national spatial perspective, it is remarkably absent from most planning systems in Africa. However, what is especial-ly novel in the UCLG approach is the insistence on identifying a select number of catalytic investments to demonstrate an alternative approach is possible, and keep the change management agenda manageable (Scoones et al., 2015). Thus, it is important that each country and major city has a limited number of catalytic projects that can set the direction for long-term transformation.[2] Against this backdrop it is worthwhile briefly exploring the state of National Urban Policies in Africa and the politics that surround their implementation.
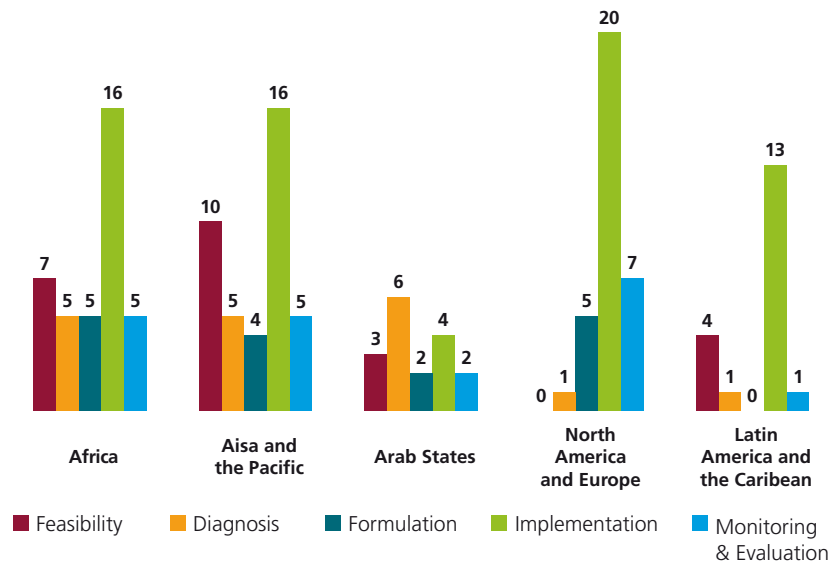
III. NUPs in Africa

According to a recent report sponsored by UN-Habitat and the OECD (2018), since Habitat III, up to 180 countries have been pursuing NUPs. Figure 2 provides a regional breakdown of this statistic and reflects the stages of policy development. Significantly, 38 African countries can be identified as being engaged with developing or implementing NUPs.

2. This policy approach is echoed in the recent report published by various UN agencies on how best to implement the urban SDG. See: United Nations (2019).

21 African countries have explicit NUPs and 17 countries are in pre-implementation stages.

Figure 2: Distribution and stage of NUPs across the world

Legend: ■ Feasibility ■ Diagnosis ■ Formulation ■ Implementation ■ Monitoring & Evaluation

Source: UN-Habitat and OECD, 2018.

This figure demonstrates that 21 African countries have explicit NUPs, in other words, they are at the point of implementation or monitoring and evaluation, whereas 17 countries are still in pre-implementation stages. The same study reports that the majority of African countries prioritise a thematic focus centred on the relationship between spatial structure and economic development, which suggests that there is indeed a recognition that a national spatial perspective is critical. However, very few focus on environmental sustainability and climate change resilience, which is striking since most African urban systems are dominated by coastal cities that manifest a high degree of vulnerability to climate change impacts. Nonetheless, in light of the earlier analysis demonstrating the anti-urban policy sentiment that dominated pan-African policy until recently, it is impressive that there has been such a significant uptake of NUPs. The final section of this chapter will turn to the political dynamics that surround NUPs and conclude with a number of pointed recommendations to ensure that the developmental potential of NUPs are truly realised in Africa.

IV. Political context of NUPs in Africa

Most African countries are in the midst of experimenting with and trying to fully embed multi-party democratic political systems. However, these relatively new democratic institutions often struggle to cope with the enormous ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political differences that flourish in societies with deep histories of colonial occupation and regulation which bled into postcolonial episodes of civil conflict and authoritarian rule. Moreover, modern bureaucratic institutions were first established during colonial rule and though there is great pliability to accommodate the sectarian interests of political leaders their founding administrative and professional logics often remain intact. Practically, this means that many African countries suffer from the worst impacts of classic Weberian top-down administrative control and intransigence

which raises the transaction costs of daily life for citizens and businesses. Consequently, many African bureaucracies are notoriously inefficient, which in turn creates a market for parallel systems of access, permission and turning a blind eye. As a result, there is often limited administrative capacity to deal effectively with the scale and scope of development challenges that are typically found in developing societies with limited infrastructural networks and highly unequal patterns of access to services. Poorly managed urbanisation is one of the most complex challenges.

This postcolonial institutional legacy usually goes hand in hand with highly centralised governance systems to ensure that political control and power is kept in relatively few hands at the executive core of central government. It is therefore unsurprising that democratic decentralisation reforms have long been a mantra of many African governments but very seldom met with consistent policy and legislative follow-through (Smit and Pieterse, 2014). This reality became even more entrenched during the last two decades as new opposition political parties started to win municipal and regional elections representing a threat to entrenched national political leaders. In this context there is little incentive to devolve powers and fiscal resources to local government or create the legal framework to enable that. However, complex urban challenges such as slum upgrading, public transport management, local economic development, and so forth cannot be done effectively through long-distance rule and governance. This institutional dynamic is a recipe for poor urban management and ineffectual governance. It creates fertile ground for numerous informal, illicit and traditional forms of authority and power to fill the vacuum in the regulation of everyday life, frustrating the potential for effective, holistic and integrated urban development.

It is noteworthy that despite the obvious humanitarian and development costs of these dynamics, there is little evidence of effective civil society coordination and response. In fact, in most African countries civil society organisations tend to be very active but in a highly fragmented fashion, often focussed on hyperlocal issues, and inappropriately allied to political parties. Deep and meaningful political and policy reforms are few and far between in most African countries because of the absence of strategic, effective and sustained activism that can inject transparency and accountability. Difficult and risky policy reforms do not happen without democratic pressure and as long as urban movements are unable to connect sectoral and localised issues into a broader "right to the city" platform, it is hard to imagine an enabling political context for impactful NUPs to emerge.

It is against this backdrop that the Coalition for Urban Transitions is working on the promotion and embedding of substantial NUPs that can advance a clear national understanding about how to pursue sustainable and inclusive growth through a climate-aware urbanisation strategy.[3] This work is underway in Ghana and Tanzania with support from the African Centre for Cities in concert with a spectrum of local actors from the government, civil society, academia and the private sector. By working iteratively through carefully curated deliberative processes, a series of policy recommendations on NUPs in Africa have been developed.

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3. "The Coalition for Urban Transitions is a global initiative to support national governments to address pressing economic, inequality and climate challenges by making their cities livable and sustainable. It is a major collaboration between over 40 research institutes, intergovernmental organizations, investors, infrastructure providers, strategic advisory companies, NGOs and city networks." For more, see: https://newclimateeconomy.net/urban-transitions/about. [Accessed on 11 April 2019].

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V. Recommendations for embedding transformational NUPs[4]

This is a unique time to build a broad-based alliance between international actors championing the implementation of the SDGs (especially goal 11 on sustainable human settlements) and African organisations at all levels. They should focus their energies on deepening the quality of NUPs that are currently in development or in their first iteration of implementation. Despite the profound political and economic differences across the African continent, it is possible to identify a number of broad policy priorities around which such a coalition could cohere.

1. *Increase the capacities of and resources allocated to urban governments, and codify those commitments in law*. This recommendation allows new urban policy coalitions to tap into established work to give effect to democratic decentralisation, which has effectively stalled.

2. *Create a culture of rights and social justice that manages inevitable competition for space, markets and services*. This recommendation is critical because there is a real danger that once urbanisation is on the policy map, completely inappropriate and exclusionary urban investments are promoted. This usually happens when elitist real estate ambitions drive urban policies. The proliferation of unsuitable new town developments across the African continent is one example of this danger.

3. *Collect data and evidence that demystify all aspects of African cities, including the informal sector*. One of the greatest risks associated with NUPs is that they respond to an idealised reality instead of the real urban system and condition in a given country. Often, policy frameworks only draw on formal statistics and as a result miss out on the actual economic practices, processes and flows that anchor the majority of urban livelihoods. Perpetuating this is obviously a recipe for policy failure.

4. *Adopt a spatial strategy that curtails sprawl and creates sufficient population density to make public transport and other services financially viable, as well as a tenure system that improves both revenue collection and household security*. Equitable access is at the core of fostering sustainable and inclusive cities. Public policies that promote the common good for the largest number of urban dwellers whilst creating a more sustainable spatial form are likely to have the greatest developmental impacts. This is why a spatial strategy must be at the core of the NUPs.

5. *Adopt an infrastructure strategy that reinforces the spatial strategy and draws on community-led innovations to ensure universal access to basic services and economic opportunities.* It is essential that an NUP directly influences the national and regional infrastructure investment priorities and approaches of the country. This is not just about installing network infrastructure systems but figuring out how large state-driven investments can be done in ways that recognise the makeshift systems poor citizens devise to compensate for the absence of infrastructure. Beyond recognition, new

4. This section is a summary of a more developed argument set out in: Cartwright, et al., 2018.

hybrid systems need to be devised that are affordable and culturally appropriate in a given context, as well as being as sustainable as possible. The "how" of this agenda is a critical issue that the NUP should provide guidance on.

6. *Adopt a fiscal and financing strategy that increases public budgets across all levels of government and mobilises the resources needed to fill the chronic shortfall in investment in urban infrastructure*. This recommendation is self-evident since no reforms are possible without adequate budgets. However, it is worth stressing because of the propensity to proliferate policy frameworks that regurgitate all the right discourses and keywords but actually have no impact because they are too abstract and divorced from budgetary processes. Since it is a precondition for urban reform, it is crucial that a sound NUP drives intergovernmental fiscal reform and budgeting processes.

These recommendations are clearly still at a high level of abstraction and generality. NUPs will only be effective and impactful if they are premised on sound comprehensive data that can offer a realist account of various urban systems and dynamics. However, sound data is just a starting point. For NUPs to fulfil their potential, they need to be anchored by various urban development research and development nodes across a given country that are linked up into a national system of deliberation and strategy formulation and review. It is best to think of these R&D nodes as local innovation hubs that conduct the detailed work of figuring out how key cities and regions can be transformed as part of developing a bottom-up strategy to transform national urban systems. It is too soon to assess what the prospects are of embedding NUPs in this manner but a number of experiments across the African continent may prove promising for the future.

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