Participatory Approaches to Slum Upgrading and Poverty Reduction in African Cities

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Abstract

Many of Africa's cities have been neglected for decades in an environment of rapid urbanisation. In particular, the inadequate housing conditions within slum areas increasingly do not match the needs of slum dwellers and have contributed to increased levels of poverty. Not only are improvements required to address the 'backlog of urban neglect' experienced by the majority of cities, but they are also required to meet the needs of the millions of newcomers expected to arrive over the next few decades. As such, there has been an increasing realisation that urgent solutions are required, especially through participatory programmes. This paper attempts to make a strong argument for these programmes by comparing the effects on poverty of a recent participatory project in Kenya, the BIB:PUP project, with one that has been non-participatory, the KENSUP programme. However, the evidence suggests that participatory programmes currently do not contribute meaningfully to poverty reduction in African cities as they are still implemented on too small a scale. They also face numerous challenges and limitations. Nonetheless, this paper argues that participatory programmes do result in improvements for communities and that there is a large potential for poverty reduction through scaling these up to city level.

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Introduction

Many of Africa's cities have been neglected for decades in an environment of rapid urbanisation. Alongside failed policies and often a lack of political will, this has resulted in deterioration and recent mushrooming of slum areas where over 60% of sub-Saharan Africa's urban residents now live (UN-HABITAT, 2010a). The inadequate housing conditions within the slums increasingly do not match the hopes or needs of slum dwellers and have contributed to increased levels of poverty (Gilbert, 2008: 257). Not only are improvements required to address the 'backlog of urban neglect' (UN-HABITAT, 2003: xxxii) experienced by the majority of cities, but they are also required to meet the needs of the millions of newcomers expected to arrive over the next few decades. It is anticipated that the housing situation is only going to worsen, with denser living conditions in city centres and radial expansion of cities outwards as the demand for housing increases (UN-HABITAT, 2003).

Many Africans migrate from rural areas to the cities in search of employment and, in turn, a better life for themselves and their families. However, when they arrive, most are faced with the ubiquitous problems of basic, crowded and poorly constructed shelter, and a lack of services such as water provision and sanitation facilities. Further to these physical issues, the majority of city dwellers face difficulties in paying their rent, have insecure tenure, are excluded from economic opportunities, and rent their houses instead of owning them despite common desires for ownership (Gilbert, 2008: 257). Most migrants expect to leave the slum areas soon after earning enough to afford better accommodation; however, many do not due to high levels of formal unemployment and low incomes in the informal sector which only cover basic needs (UN-HABITAT, 2003). In sum, the housing problem is a manifestation of a recent phenomenon - the urbanisation of poverty.

There has been an increasing realisation that urgent solutions are required, especially through participatory programmes (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). This paper attempts to make a strong argument for these programmes by comparing a participatory and a non-participatory project in Kenya and examining their effects on poverty. Following this, some of the challenges and limitations to participatory slum upgrading, which need to be overcome, are considered.

Poverty and slum upgrading

Poverty exists in many forms in urban Africa and the question of how it should be defined, measured, and in turn mitigated within its unique context is a complicated one. One aspect, however, is clear: that virtually all manifestations of poverty in urban Africa, including overcrowding, environmental hazards, commoditisation, crime and violence, and social fragmentation (Baker & Schuler, 2004), are intrinsically linked to issues of housing. This phenomenon results from the exclusive structures and urban planning which have prevailed since colonial rule, in which the poorest households of all African cities are generally isolated on a spatial level from their richer counterparts (Locatelli

& Nugent, 2009: 5; Home, 1997: 220). As such, almost exclusively, those living in the slum areas experience acute poverty.

Most housing projects in the postcolonial era followed one of two traditions: the building of subsidised housing and slum clearance programmes (Buckley & Kalarickal, 2005). The former was very expensive to implement on a big scale, and rents proved to be unaffordable, despite subsidies, for the majority of slum dwellers (ibid.). These dwellers were displaced and, therefore, little to no poverty reduction was achieved. The latter had many negative consequences, ranging from the emotional impact on slum residents, to the rebuilding of slums by the residents elsewhere, rendering the activity largely pointless (ibid.). Slum clearance is, therefore, widely unpopular today, and is now rarely pursued (ibid.). If anything, it further entrenched the poverty of the residents by removing their homes and destroying the frameworks they had worked to establish there.

Instead, over the last twenty years, slum upgrading has increasingly been regarded as the most effective method for mitigating the problems faced by slum dwellers (UN-HABITAT, 2010a). It is actualised in various forms, including the regularisation of tenure security, provision of or improvements to infrastructure and the construction of communal facilities (Majale, 2008). In all, upgrading so far appears to be the best solution for relieving poverty in Africa's slums, especially considering that residents often defend their environments when faced with the alternatives of displacement or eviction (Huchzermeyer, 2008).

The participatory approach to upgrading is a relatively new methodology. Within the last 15 years it has increasingly taken form at the decision-making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and maintenance levels, and has become the favoured practice. The approach allows for local communities to no longer be 'subjects' of development projects, but to be active participants at all stages, thereby acknowledging the importance of their needs, knowledge and opinions. This approach also complements the recent discourse on good governance and poverty reduction, while acknowledging the limited ability of many African governments to provide necessary urban services and infrastructure (Myers, 2005: 6).

Slum upgrading in Kenya

This paper addresses whether upgrading in a participatory form contributes meaningfully to poverty reduction by comparing two projects implemented in Kenya. The first is a participatory upgrading project located in Kitale, and the second is a non-participatory project based in the capital, Nairobi. Kenyan projects have been chosen based on the relative abundance of literature that exists on the issues of urbanisation in Kenya.

Despite this 'literature bias', Kenya's cities share the common problems witnessed in other African cities (Archambault et al., 2012). In fact, a study of Kenyan cities is well suited for the purposes of this paper for two reasons. Firstly, like many African cities, its population is growing very fast, at a rate of an extra one million people every year (UN-HABITAT, 2010b: 145). This is leading to significant backlogs, especially within its cities, in the need for housing and services (ibid.). Secondly, this rapid population growth is resulting in a large informal employment sector in which many young adults are now employed. This problem is a survival strategy that does not pay above subsistence wages and keeps these individuals from moving from the inadequate living conditions of the slums.

Building in Partnership: Participatory Urban Planning Project (BIB:PUP)

The BIB:PUP project, which ran from 2001 to 2004, was funded by the UK's Department for International Development. It aimed to reduce poverty within three slums located in the rapidly growing secondary town of Kitale by addressing some of the existing frameworks' deficiencies (Majale, 2009). Particularly, the formal supply of housing and services was being increasingly outmatched by a population growth rate of 12% per annum as a result of high levels of rural-urban migration (ibid.). This paper looks at the project's work in one of the slums, Kipsongo, which housed some 4,000 residents in 2001, and demonstrates why participation enabled a reduction in poverty within the community.

In the initial decision-making stage, the BIB:PUP committee, comprising representatives of all stakeholders (local government, development practitioners and the Kipsongo community) identified two major problems facing residents which were to be addressed by the project. Firstly, infrastructure was very poor, and in turn was posing an array of problems including restrictions on enterprise productivity, and the limiting of employment creation (Majale, 2008). In particular, the committee identified two services in need of improvement: sanitation and water facilities. Before the project began, the community had to use polluted water from a local stream for domestic purposes which resulted in numerous outbreaks of disease. There were also no sanitation facilities of which to speak (ibid.). Secondly, youth unemployment in the slum was very high due to the low levels of education and skills possessed by the residents (ibid.).

The identification of these problems was accomplished primarily through a 'scan' survey of community respondents, including many from local institutions such as NGOs, CBOs, FBOs and a range of private businesses (Majale, 2009). The survey allowed for the respondents to state their needs with regards to a range of issues including access to land, infrastructure and housing, social services and amenities, funding for development interventions, and governance. This form of inclusive decision-making highlights why participation in the first instance is crucial as a means to poverty reduction. Particularly, it enables partnerships between all stakeholders within the public, private and civil society sectors. This is vital for improving living conditions in poor communities because there is otherwise a limited flow of information, and at times limited trust, between governments and communities (Majale, 2008). Poor communities tend to be excluded from normal social and economic networks, and so their voices rarely inform government policies (ibid.). Participation fills this information gap, and allows for residents to be included in decision-making processes. Another advantage includes the alleviation of "individual sectorial weaknesses by taking advantage of other sectors' strengths", an example being the weakness of the private sector, which shuns unprofitable services (Otiso, 2003). Partnerships, therefore, foster efficiency and allow for resources to be distributed rationally in the decision-making process in a way that finds common ground between all shareholders (ibid.).

Participation also allows for the local human capital of residents to contribute to decision-making. Many residents are likely to have developed resilient, unique or sustainable forms of survival, and therefore, reduced poverty in their economically constrained environments. Their (context appropriate) methods can be shared with development practitioners and local government who most likely have the resources to scale up or advocate these methods at neighbourhood or city levels. Or, at the very least, their human capital could be able to shed light on community issues that were previously ignored or unknown to development practitioners and government officials.

This idea has been suggested by a number of academics (Locatelli & Nugent, 2009: 4; Pretty & Scoones, 1995: 157). Pretty and Scoones, for example, acknowledge that the beginning of planning requires input from those who know most about their own livelihoods. Easterly (2006) more fully deliberates this idea through his distinction of 'Planners' and 'Searchers'. The former, he argues, use top-down methods of intervention, set large goals and do not have enough local information to hold their promises of change. In the context of participatory upgrading, 'Planners' reflect local governments that implement inadequate housing policies (i.e. subsidised housing). 'Searchers', however, understand realities on the ground, have the incentives to succeed, and discover what works in order to be rewarded. They represent the primary stakeholders, the residents, in participatory upgrading. As Easterly summarises, "it is easier to search for solutions to your own problems than to those of others" (2006: 303).

At the implementation stage, the BIB:PUP committee realised that the problems of poor infrastructure and high unemployment were intrinsic and that they could be resolved simultaneously through a "pro-poor, pro-employment urban development strategy" (Majale, 2008). This entailed utilising improvements to the infrastructure directly for employment creation. They constructed two protected springs, which were to provide the community with safe water for domestic use and five sanitation blocks, using local labour (ibid.). All groups within the community undertook construction, including young workers aged 15-24 who were most in need of employment, and women (ibid.). This provided various poverty reducing measures, including employment for all groups and the expansion of their skill sets. And, as both implementers and beneficiaries of the project, the community likely took greater care in the construction of the facilities than would have outsiders (ibid.). In addition to these benefits it can also be argued that this form of participation enabled the development of self-reliance among residents in order for future housing issues to be solved independently at the community level (Lizzaralde & Massyn, 2008).

This approach to upgrading, through which residents were able to provide meaningful input into the project, may also have led to the empowerment of the residents (Majale, 2008). As Sen (1999) explains, participation allows people to expand their capabilities, and in turn, their freedom. If so, participation is not only a means to poverty reduction but also an end in itself. However, empowerment is difficult to measure (Cleaver, 1999), and so further study into whether and to what extent participatory slum upgrading empowers residents is required.

Further to direct community outcomes, this project demonstrates that the resources required for participatory projects are primarily human (knowledge and labour) as opposed to economic (expensive building materials). Therefore, participation is a relatively low-cost option for poverty reduction, and in turn, is a realistic, achievable methodology for upgrading especially in the many African countries where resources are limited.

The literature certainly addresses the many benefits to participation. However, this paper goes further and posits that the decision-making and implementation stages of participatory upgrading have the potential to stimulate a cycle of participation (Figure 1). Firstly, poverty reduction and empowerment is achieved following the initial stages, as outlined above. In particular the poverty manifestations of social fragmentation, environmental hazards, and commoditisation can be directly targeted through these stages in the cycle. It is anticipated that in turn, economic growth can be stimulated, at least at a local level, and as the community develops further reductions in
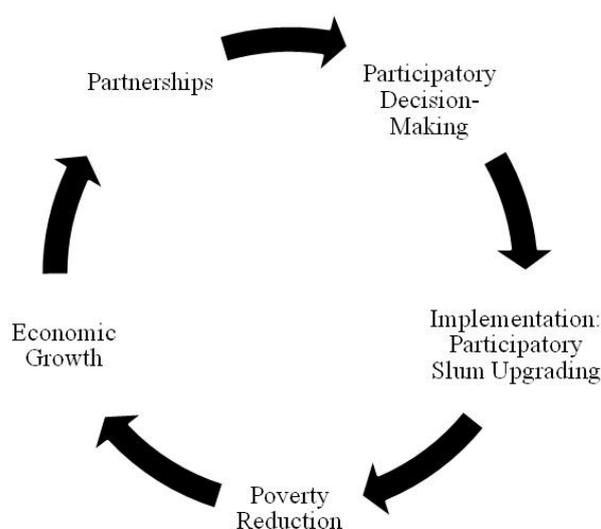
Figure 1. The Participatory Cycle. Author's own image

other manifestations of poverty, such as crime and violence, can be observed in time. This increases the legitimacy of the community, allowing further partnerships to be nurtured, and in turn, the participatory cycle to continue. This has happened in Kipsongo where the community is now included in processes of municipal planning (Majale, 2009). However, participatory upgrading is still in its infancy and so whether sustainable cycles in this form will come to fruition is yet to be seen.

In sum, participation at all project levels is crucial both as a means and an end to poverty reduction (Nelson & Wright, 1995: 1) and may in fact be a sustainable, enduring process. Top-down government planning, unfortunately, is not privy to the intricacies and unique qualities of each community, and therefore, does not have the same advantages in order to promote prolonged poverty reduction.

Kenyan Slum Upgrading Program (KENSUP)

The KENSUP program is a joint initiative that was launched in 2004 by the Kenyan government and UN-HABITAT in the large Soweto 'village' of Nairobi's Kibera slum. On commencement of the project the village housed 60,000 residents, of which most were tenants (Huchzermeyer, 2008). This program, therefore, targeted a much greater number of residents than the BIB:PUP project. This may mean that the successful implementation of the program was more challenging, and thus, that comparison between the two is slightly biased. Nevertheless, the difference in impact between them has been great, making for good comparison for the purposes of this essay.

Following a situation analysis, the main issue identified by the programme coordinators was poor quality rented accommodation, which had seen years of minimal maintenance by the illegal landowners (ibid.). Therefore, the plan has been to redevelop the slum with housing units that are

50m2 and comprised of two bedrooms (ibid.). The important difference between this project and that of BIB:PUP is that it is non-participatory. Residents were not part of the planning committee and did not voice their need for new housing. Instead, at the very most, UN-HABITAT informed stakeholders of aspects of the programme and arranged "Social Mobilization activities" which "sensitise communities on slum upgrading" (UN-HABITAT, 2012). This appears to violate, or at least manipulate, human rights law that states that national housing strategies "should reflect extensive genuine consultation with, and participation by, all of those affected including the homeless, the inadequately housed and their representatives" (CESCR, 1991).

A significant negative consequence of the project has been the fear of displacement among residents, due to worries that the upgraded housing would be unaffordable, and that corruption would affect unit allocation (Huchzermeyer, 2008). Residents are aware of this having happened in the past through other redevelopment projects. Unfortunately, the strict government building codes in Kenya, which include high minimum, middle-class standards for housing and which have been in place for decades, mean residents' fears could be realised (ibid.; Dafe, 2009). In previous projects, units were traded to the middle class who wished to live in the newly improved area and the cash offers given to the original residents rarely allowed them to find appropriate serviced accommodation elsewhere (ibid.). This means no funds spent through KENSUP are likely to contribute to poverty reduction within the community and that this may only result in gentrification. Had participation been a key aspect of the KENSUP project from the beginning, these concerns would have been addressed from the outset. In fact, participation would have allowed other stakeholders to learn whether or not the residents even desired new housing. If so, they would have been able to learn exactly how much the average slum household could afford and build new housing accordingly. Similar projects implemented in Nairobi, such as the Mathare 4A Slum Upgrading Project, have avoided displacement through the relaxation of these strict minimum standards (Otiso, 2003). Houses built were smaller, with higher densities, and were built with cheaper, nonconventional materials, which all contributed to keeping the prices low and affordable for the residents and ultimately prevented displacement (ibid.).

Outwith the KENSUP project, a further example of the inability for top-down planners to foresee all important consequences of their projects is their indiscriminate provision of free access to water (Huchzermeyer, 2008), which is assumed to benefit everyone within all communities. Instead, this has often resulted in the unemployment of local water sellers in past projects and furthering the poverty of these significant groups (ibid.). In sum, meaningful reductions in poverty through more appropriate, secure housing, better access to services, and empowerment have not been achieved by KENSUP to date and are unlikely to ever be achieved through any other non-participatory projects.

Challenges

Unfortunately participatory upgrading has its challenges and the three most significant are addressed here. These need to be addressed; otherwise the result of participation will invariably be the underachievement of poverty reduction. Firstly, participation itself is unlikely to be able to guarantee, and in turn sustain, poverty reduction (Lizzaralde & Massyn, 2008). In addition to the essentials of employment creation and finance schemes (Yeboah, 2005), complementary government reform and decentralisation of decision-making is also required in order to make a lasting impact on poverty reduction (Shah, 1995; Buckley & Kalarickal, 2005; UN-HABITAT,

2009). Top-down planning often leads to a restricted understanding of poverty in the slum areas of sub-Saharan Africa today (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Importantly, this does not take into account the fact that the housing problem is multifaceted. It is political, economic and social. Therefore, appropriate government reform, which would allow for communities to voice their opinions and to make their own decisions, would result in a more sustainable poverty reduction process (UN-HABITAT, 2009). In other words, a more far-reaching, holistic approach, which involves socio-economic and political considerations, to support sustained poverty reduction in the slums of African cities is required. What is lacking among some states is political will, either due to a lack of common interest among government officials or the existence of opportunities for rent-seeking, which limit the efforts made by government officials toward public goals (ibid.; Leftwich, 2000: 126). Realistically, however, governments that lack political will do not reform overnight (Cox & Negi, 2010). Government reform is a huge challenge, and is perhaps the largest barrier to poverty reduction through participatory upgrading.

Secondly, at the local level, members of the community are not homogeneous (Emmett, 2000; Arandel & Wetterberg, 2012). They may have different desires, interests and capabilities, and therefore all participatory projects need to take these heterogeneities into account. In particular, funding for participatory upgrading is likely to be exposed to elite capture where strong local organisations are absent or a local elite is dominant within the community (Platteau & Gaspart, 2003; Conning & Kevane, 2002). A local elite is more able to appropriate external funding than the average community group, leading to only a fraction of the funds being allocated to participatory upgrading (Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). Interestingly, communities are found to support these elites when they experience only a modest improvement to their livelihoods and yet are aware that the elite has benefited disproportionately. They believe their modest improvements would not have been possible without the work of the elite (ibid.). This difficult situation did not happen in Kipsongo, most likely due to the presence of many local organisations, such as NGOs and churches, which were able to keep checks on the development of the BIB:PUP project (Majale, 2008). Therefore, in implementing participatory upgrading programmes, strong local organisations must already be in place. Alternatively, appropriate measures that counteract the local elite, such as social mediation that addresses community power relations by tackling social issues and resolving conflict, are required to ensure funds are distributed to their intended use (Arandel & Wetterberg, 2012).

Lastly, a related challenge is that participation may only be able to address the poverty of women and other marginalised groups to a limited extent within some communities (Kothari, 2005). Having women who were previously excluded from decision-making participate in upgrading committees may not feel able to make their voices heard in such contexts. As a result, their presence within committees may only have the impact of legitimising the suggestions made by male members, instead of actually being able to express their own needs and concerns (ibid.). This is likely to have large negative consequences for women as their needs are likely to differ to those of men. Studies have shown that indeed women experience poverty on a greater scale in slums than men (McEwan, 2003). Therefore, it is essential that the decisions made throughout account for all previously excluded groups. In practice, this limitation should be relatively easy to mitigate so long as project participants carefully analyse the dynamics of each neighbourhood to ensure the requirements of those most at need are always taken into account.

In addition to these challenges, all forms of upgrading, participatory or otherwise, can only

improve the existing housing 'stock', and therefore, further interventions are required to address the future 'flow' of new residents to urban areas (Gulyani & Bassett, 2007). In particular, additional projects and appropriate policies are required alongside upgrading projects for this purpose (UN-HABITAT, 2010a). However, this does not necessarily remove from the large reductions in (absolute) levels of poverty as a result of participatory slum upgrading.

In sum, reductions in poverty through participatory slum upgrading face significant challenges. But, as the BIB:PUP project demonstrates, this is not to say participation cannot achieve poverty reduction. Instead, its impact on poverty is potentially limited by the above challenges in practice and these need to be mitigated. The success of participation largely lies in complementary government reform, the presence of strong local organisations and the full inclusion of all stakeholders, all of which are to some extent achievable.

Conclusion

Solutions to the inadequate housing conditions that exist within Africa's slums are urgently required. This paper has attempted to make a strong argument for the use of participatory slum upgrading programmes as a possible solution by comparing the effects on poverty of a participatory project in Kenya with one that has been non-participatory. However, the evidence suggests that these programmes currently do not contribute meaningfully to poverty reduction in African cities. While a number of individuals have benefited from them, they are still implemented on too small a scale to have large poverty-reducing impacts at the city level. Nonetheless, this paper has argued that participatory programmes do result in improvements for communities and that there is a large potential for poverty reduction through scaling these up to city level. This has certainly been shown by the BIB:PUP project in Kenya, which stimulated job creation, improved service provision and potentially empowered slum residents. There are, however, challenges to participatory projects that can undermine their success in poverty reduction. A holistic approach, combining government reform, the presence of strong local organisations and the full inclusion of all stakeholders is required in order to mitigate the challenges faced.

Participatory projects and the relevant literature are still in their infancy, and the full extent of poverty reduction through these projects is yet to be seen. A broader literature base is required for a more nuanced understanding of the unique dynamics of poverty experienced in different African cities, and of the unique relationships between participatory slum upgrading and poverty reduction. A good place to start would be further contributions out with those focused on the urban experiences of Kenya and South Africa, which dominate the academic literature to date. African cities do not exist in a homogeneous form and, therefore, much can be learnt from further study into their specificities.

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