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Handle with care: navigating the pluriformity of power to enable actionable knowledge for transitions in informal settlements in the global south

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Abstract

This Perspective positions urban challenges in informal settlements in the Global South as a question of how to coproduce actionable knowledge for sustainability transitions, and how this relates to power issues. The aim is to inform those who are actively working on sustainability transitions in practice how to navigate the pluriform ways power matters in transitions. Also as a way to reflect on one's doings and as a starting point to develop research and/or policy programs that enable alternative solutions. This Perspective is based on fieldwork in three informal settlements in Kampala and focusses specifically on sustainability issues related to gaining access to, maintenance and control of water services. We highlight the importance of challenging dominant frames of places and communities, coproducing dynamic maps of power relations and interdependencies related to a specific urban challenge and taking into account the contextualized understanding of power relations within a political system.

Keywords: Sustainability transitions, Power, Informal settlements, Access to water, Global south, Kampala, Uganda, Actionable knowledge

Policy and practice recommendations

- Engaging in sustainability transitions requires building actionable knowledge that is power sensitive.
- Challenging hegemonic frames is a starting point to develop alternative solution options.
- In-depth understanding of urban challenges should build upon coproduced maps of related power relations.
- Local challenges are embedded in a broader political system and require innovations that expand the political space for action.

Introduction

In Kampala only 45 to 70% of the residents of informal settlements have access to clean water.[1] Fresh water sources are highly polluted, and piped water and ground water are unaffordable for many households. Water has been identified as the main driver of vulnerability in informal settlements in Kampala. Water vulnerability has been related to access to clean water, sanitation facilities and waste management (Richmond, Myers & Namuli, 2018). These issues are exemplary for many megacities in the Global South where the development of basic infrastructure, including water infrastructure, cannot keep up with the pace of urbanization. As both the state and the market fail to meet demands, especially poor communities in informal settlements have limited access to clean and safe (drinking) water. The unsustainability of urban challenges related to water is thus embedded in existing governance structures and social inequalities. This issue is captured by the nexus between Sustainability Development Goals 6 on clean water and sanitation, and 11 on sustainable cities and communities (UN Water, 2018). The improvement of water management in informal settlements, including the access, control and maintenance of water services, is not a simple question of reform but asks for a transformation of the urban. It is thus not a question of optimizing the existing situation but a question of structural and radical change (cf. Grin, Rotmans & Schot, 2010). In line with Acuto, Parnell & Seto (2018) we contend that this requires building different types of knowledge that support structural change.

Our choice to take power as a starting point to think of and work on sustainability transitions emerges from the realization that changing power relations are an inevitable dimension of social change and sustainability transitions (Avelino, 2016). In a similar vein, others working in the Global South point to the possible implications of power dynamics for (the governance of) transitions (Ramos-Mejia, Franco-Garcia & Jauregui-Becker, 2018) and the extent to which a process of change empowers only those actors that are already resourceful and powerful (Nastar et al., 2018). Ahlborg (2017) emphasizes that the implications of power destabilizations are ambiguous because they might at the same time increase and decrease social inequality. Therefore, a very important aspect of transitions in the Global South is the reconfiguration of power balances and social inequalities (Swilling & Annecke, 2012; Wieczorek, 2018). Such a reconfiguration also implies that we need to go beyond the limited observation that certain groups 'have or not have power' (Ahlborg, 2017; Avelino, 2011, 2016) that prevails in certain debates.

However, in the Global South power has rarely been studied from a sustainability transitions perspective (Wieczorek, 2018). Nastar and Ramasar (2012) attribute this to the multiplicity of understandings of power and the highly abstract nature of power debates. In empirical studies power often remains a side note and studying power a recommendation for future studies (cf. Hansen et al., 2018). This asks for a closer look at how power actually works in the context of the Global South as to build actionable knowledge for transitions. Hence, this calls for learning about how to intervene to make systemic change happen (Wiek et al., 2012).

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[1] LWF,DRT, ACT (2014) Baseline Survey. Kampala Slum Settlements: Where Access to Safe Water and Sanitation is Still a Challenge, Fact Sheet 002. Kansanga: Kampala, Uganda

This Perspective joins together the need to contextualize power in relation to sustainability transitions in the Global South and the need for actionable knowledge related to urban challenges such as the access, control and maintenance of water services. By reflecting on the diverse manifestations of power that we encountered during our action-oriented research in informal settlements in Kampala, we arrive at recommendations on how to handle power with care when addressing urban challenges. We aim to instigate critical reflection on how to navigate the pluriform ways power matters in actual research and/or policy programs and interventions. While for some, especially those sensitive to issues of justice, social exclusion and inequality, much of what we discuss will sound familiar, we hope to reach those who are in the process of 'muddling through'. Including engineers, policymakers, trained scientists and development workers who are addressing urban sustainability challenges in the 'real world'. Since the many well-intended programs and interventions may well have unintended and undesirable power implications. Therefore it is important for all those actively engaging in sustainability transitions to be reflexive regarding their doings and to build power sensitive actionable knowledge. For them and us, we have distilled three questions from empirical and theoretical works on power as entry points to navigate how power matters in addressing sustainability challenges in cities in the Global South.

Theoretical entry points

Power is a contested concept that is particularly difficult to grasp due to its multiple manifestations. Therefore a sensitive attitude towards these different manifestations and contestations is needed when formulating research questions and designing research and/or policy programs and interventions (Avelino 2016, 2017). At the same time, building actionable knowledge that supports sustainability transitions requires selecting those power dimensions that are relevant for this purpose and the context (Cf. Ahlborg, 2017). Based on theoretical work discussing power in sustainability transitions (Avelino 2016, 2017, Ahlborg 2017) and our experience in informal settlements in Kampala, we suggest the following entry points for unravelling power empirically that might increase the potential for coproducing actionable knowledge.

First of all, power is a structural pressure encoded in discourse, institutions and infrastructures that produce certain effects or instruct specific behaviour beyond individual actors (Ahlborg, 2017). Such as stories, planning regulations and the design of water supply services. For example Ahlborg (2017) showed, in the case of Tanzania, how the introduction of electricity that is perceived as a symbol of modernity intensified the gap between the poor who could not afford to connect to the grid and the rich who could. Taking into account the fact that infrastructures and services are not 'power neutral' and have potential destabilizing effects increases the potential of coproducing actionable knowledge. In our case, this dimension of power became apparent in the negative associations people attached to informal settlements and its inhabitants. Second, power is not something that an agent possesses, but relational and exercised differently by different actors. This actor-based approach is central to how, for example, Nastar and Ramasar (2012) describe the way different actors exercised power related to the change in service delivery in two former townships in Johannesburg, South Africa. In our case, this dimension manifested in the power relations between community members and

their interdependencies related to the access to water. For example the relation between landowners and tenants. Thirdly, developing a context specific 'power language' is a condition for coproducing actionable knowledge. Muchadenyika and Williams (2016) studied, for example, how power relations between political actors had changed in cities in Zimbabwe. As a result they depicted a contested political reality in which service delivery had become a source and resource for political agency. Accordingly they argued that this resulted in the failure of the improvement of urban service delivery. In a like manner we observed how the local power language related to local water issues in informal settlements was shaped by the political situation and power dynamics within the political system.

From these entry points, we formulated three empirical questions that guide the analysis of this Perspective: 1) what are the dominant frames about informal settlements and their inhabitants? 2) How do actors relate and how do they depend on each other? 3) What are the power dynamics within the political system?

Methodology

This Perspective stems from work as part of the T-GroUP project (2015–2020). The project revolves around better understanding the relationship between above-ground and below-ground water systems, and exploring the applicability of transition management in the context of informal settlements in Sub-Saharan Africa. The research was carried out in Arusha (Tanzania), Dodowa (Ghana), and Kampala (Uganda).[2] Transition management is a systematic and action-oriented research approach that can be implemented in coproduction between different societal actors (Wittmayer et al., 2014). The approach is aimed at influencing dynamics of change by stimulating multi-actor learning and fostering alternative ideas, practices, and social relations towards sustainable futures (Loorbach et al., 2016). With this Perspective we endeavour to structure our reflections on the issues of power we encountered when applying transition management and understanding the unsustainability related to the access to, control and maintenance of water sources and services in three informal settlements in the North-West of Kampala. The illustrations of our argument draws freely on numerous field visits, including informal and semi-structured (group) interviews and coproduction sessions that were part of the transition management approach.

Navigating the entry points of power in practice

What are the dominant frames about informal settlements and their inhabitants?

The words we use describe, and in doing so construct, reality and are therefore an exercise of power (cf. Bourdieu in Avelino, 2016). The same mechanism is at work when describing informal settlements as 'informal', 'disorganized' and 'transient', and thereby labelling these spaces as dysfunctional, and its inhabitants as deviant and inferior (Varley, 2013). These frames and stigmas are often mobilized to exclude and control people (Tyler and Slater, 2018). For example, as a legitimization of not delivering

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[2]The T-GroUP project http://t-group.science/ Accessed 03 June 2019

services to informal settlements or evicting residents from their homes to open up urban areas for gentrification.[3]

To arrive at actionable knowledge about the collective management of water services and sources we need to question existing frames and understand the diverse ways in which informal settlement are organized beyond the informal. Like a spokesperson of a local NGO put it during a meeting: "People and communities are not dis-organized, they are organized differently". Indeed, in the areas we worked with in Kampala, social life and access to basic services was organized around many (in)formal institutions such as community meetings, water committees, church groups and neighbourhood security teams. Moreover, while informal settlements might be illegal from an urban planning perspective, in fact 70% of Kampala is said to be 'illegally' built, these areas do have officially elected political representatives. These local councils are the elected governmental body at the lowest tier consisting of the local council chairperson, the vice chairperson and several thematic representatives. The councils connected the informal settlement to formal city politics by interacting – albeit sparingly – with other levels of city governance such as Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA),[4] parastatals like the National Water and Sewage Company (NWSC) and international donors. The success of the interaction of council members with other actors depended on their capacities and political connections.

In Kampala, the power of framing and the stigmatization of spaces and people also plays into the social divides within the informal settlements. For example, during the coproduction sessions, landowners expressed their concerns about the high turnover of tenants who tend to move frequently in search for employment and cheap housing. In turn tenants didn't feel the urge to invest time in the community because of the uncertainty and presumed temporality of their stay in the community. Therefore the landowners regarded them as untrustworthy. This transient character and its implications for the relations between different social groups was pointed out to, for example during the co-production sessions, as one of the challenges for developing stable practices and structures to maintain the water sources collectively.

Constructing and repeating the characteristics of informal settlements is a symbolic act of power and needs to be met with critical questions. Where, by whom and for what purpose are these ideas produced? Post-colonial theorist have long been critical on the formal/informal binary characterising Western thought. They have argued that the binary thinking neglects the connections between formal and informal services and practices and results in the classification of some neighbourhoods and people as inferior to others (Varley 2013). Interestingly, some researchers have turned the tables around by showing the myth of formality in the Global North and the rebranding of informality as innovation (Jaffe & Koster, 2019). Some sustainability transitions studies regarding the Global South nevertheless have identified the notion of informality as the

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[3]Agora (2018) Understanding the needs of urban refugees and host communities residing in vulnerable neighborhoods of Kampala. A multisector analysis of the dynamics of supply and access to basic services in nine vulnerable urban settlements http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/agora_kampala_all_in_one_report_26072018_vf.pdf Accessed 01 March 2019

[4]The KCCA is the governing body of the Kampala and administers the city on behalf of the central government. According to political observers, the creation of KCCA as a replacement of the Kampala City council by act of parliament was an attempt by the ruling party to rebrand itself in an effort to gain political support.

main context characteristic that differentiates transitions in the Global South from those in the Global North (cf. Hansen et al. 2018). This might inhibit the potential of developing actionable knowledge, because it remains confined within existing frames that might be at the root of the persistency of urban challenges.

To conclude, power manifests discursively and is at play in the framing of places and social groups. To handle this with care means being attentive to the intertwinement of knowledge and power, and the way (re)producing knowledge, including frames, is an act of power itself (cf. Avelino, 2016). We encourage those who are addressing urban sustainability challenges in the 'real world' to defamiliarize themselves with existing framings and dominant characteristics of places and people. For example by asking who benefits from these frames and what are the political implications of reproducing them. This all to the end of challenging these hegemonic frames as one of the import-ant starting points of action-oriented research in sustainability transitions studies (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018).

How do actors relate and how do they depend on each other?

A second entry point to unravel power dynamics empirically is to analyse the relations between actors, the ways they depend on each other and, how these dependencies intersect. Such an intersectional perspective is integrative in that it helps to understand how multiple and different intersections produce the social position of an actor (Yuval-Davis 2015). An important element herein is the resources actors mobilize in order to gain access to, maintain and control water services. For example, a female renter and a male landowner have different strategies to gain access to water and different oppor-tunities for participating in decision-making processes with regard to the maintenance and control.

Within informal settlements in Kampala, we recognized power dynamics in gaining access to water as being related to at least three social relations: the relations between tenants and landowners, local council members and community members, and men and women. Moreover, the social position of a community member is shaped by how long s/he lives in community, the level of engagement, age, sexual orientation, level of education and type of employment, tribal relations, and political affiliation. The social position of a person defines for example the extent to which s/he earns respect or has a voice. For example, community members shared that during these meetings 'the chief', who is the local representative of the kingdom,[5] had the honour to speak last. This was due to his tight relation with the kingdom, his seniority in terms of age, his length of residence in the informal settlement and his active engagement with the community. This example clearly shows how power relations intersect and constitute each other creating a mesh of dependencies that are imbued with power or through which power is exercised.

In Kampala, landowners were generally better off. Therefore they could afford to connect to the piped water system of the NWSC. Some wealthier families even had invested in buying a water tank that could provide for water in times of cut-off. Other community members considered having such facilities in place a 'luxurious good' and a

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[5]The Kingdom of Buganda is one of the subnational Kingdoms of Uganda. Kampala is located in this kingdom.

sign of a higher social-economic status. These landowners often sold water to other community members at self-determined prices. The fact that most water wells that could be accessed at no charge were contaminated, had put considerable power over the access to water in the hands of landowners. Mainly tenants thus depended on landowners for accessing safe water. Although some landowners also depended on the tenants, because they relied on the income they generated through selling the water. As this example shows, owning land and water facilities are valuable resources within an informal settlement.

Furthermore, the way decision-making works at the local level and the extent to which the local council meets the needs of residents tends to favour landowners over tenants. The local councils formally had the task to organise a monthly community meeting in which the community members convene to collectively discuss public issues. Whether these meetings took place differed per area and depended on the effectiveness of the local council. In one of the areas where the local council consistently organised community meetings, we were told that these were mostly frequented by landowners. Furthermore, the attendance to the meetings was tracked with stamps in a personal notebook. This notebook functioned as informal proof of the level of engagement with the community and subsequently as proof of being a legitimate and trustworthy member. For example, the notebook was also told to be helpful when residents needed the signature of the chairperson for (official) documents such as recommendation letters for employment, application for passports etc. In this way, the attendees of community meetings, mainly landowners, built a more powerful position vis-à-vis others, mainly tenants, who did not attend. These notebooks were a resource very specific for the local context of these informal settlements and the power dynamics within the community.

While many local councils in Kampala's informal settlements seemed to lack the (financial) capacity or the support (from the KCCA) to enforce or implement policies or services, they still occupied a powerful position locally. This power manifested mainly in their capacity to mobilize community members for certain causes. One of the chairpersons we met during the coproduction sessions clearly functioned as a gatekeeper. He had the capacity to turn conflict in consensus and had political connections with city officials, and even officials at the national level, which he could capitalize to improve the living conditions in the area. Very concrete his role as a gatekeeper also implied that it was important for us as researchers to have his approval and commitment before entering the community. This showed that our presence as researchers was part of the power dynamics and inevitably reproduced certain power imbalances while we tried to address others. Rather than from a principled position, action researchers have navigated this tension by carefully negotiating challenges in practice by what they call 'soft resistance' (Arrona and Larrea, 2018) or 'mild interventions' (Paredis and Block, 2018).

To sum up, another entry point to coproduce actionable knowledge from a power perspective is by analysing relations between actors and their intersecting dependencies. This taught us to be open towards new or 'unfamiliar' material manifestations of power and the importance of being attentive to how some resources are engrained in long historical inequalities such as ownership of land. In-depth understanding of the challenge at hand should inform actionable knowledge that challenges the power imbalances.

This should build upon dynamic maps of the social resources, intersections and inter-dependencies in the urban setting. When done in a participatory way, these maps could thereby challenge the engrained framing of who has or does not have what kind of power. This type of knowledge should foster the capacity of actors to 'stretch and transform' instead of 'fit and conform' (Smith and Raven, 2012) the unsustainable power dynamics that inhibit urban transitions (cf. Ramos-Mejía, Franco-Garcia, Jauregui-Becker, 2018).

What are the power dynamics within the political system?

The third entry point to navigate power in the context of informal settlements is to develop a contextualised power language with regard to the political system and service delivery such as water. For example who is considered to have the ability to exercise power to direct change related to access to safe water within the community (Avelino, 2017). When we informally asked local residents in informal settlements about their associations with 'power' most people would immediately respond that 'power' is the main cause of the persistent problems in the city. They associated power with a political system that is being dominated by a political elite who misuses 'power', at the costs of the community who is 'powerless', to enrich themselves and hamper change.

Since Uganda turned into a multiparty system in 2005 the opposition has gained control over the political leadership of the KCCA at the expense of the party that rules at the national level. The fact that support for the opposition in Kampala has been growing stronger, has been argued to be the prime reason why local council elections were suspended for approximately 10 years. As a local council member put it in an interview: "If these local leaders are not supporting the existing government it is very hard for the government to maintain power (…) they have been blocking the elections and they have been telling us: 'we do not have the money to organize [elections]'". Recently, the political regime has been challenged by the 'People Power Freedom Movement', resulting in political tensions. The movement and its leader tapped into the dissatisfaction of the young and urban poor in the informal settlements. Moreover, they introduced a notion of power that is said to be 'new' in the context of Uganda: power to the people. Also at the level of informal settlements pressure groups, such as Kawempe Republic who informally declared their community independent from KCCA, expressed their dissatisfaction with the local government and targeted the uneven distribution of power. Mobile phones and social media campaigning were important resources and strategies for these grassroots political movements to mobilize people. Consequently, it was argued that the social media tax that the national government introduced in 2018 was actually a strategy to oppress dissent voices.[6]

Furthermore, due to the political situation the provision of basic services had become a political instrument. Residents argued that partisan politics at city and local level, have been hampering service delivery and effective water governance. For example city level politicians who installed, or promised to install, new water facilities as an instrument to win votes. An example was the pre-paid water meter that gave access to piped water with credit based tokens. While the goal of the pre-paid meter was to eliminate

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[6]This tax on social media can't prevent Ugandans taunting their leaders https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/14/uganda-tax-social-media-museveni-internet-dissent Accessed 01 March 2019

the role of the middlemen, who made profit out of distributing the water, and thus in theory provided equal access to water, a whole new informal system developed which reproduced existing inequalities. In some cases residents reclaimed ownership over the facility or informally took over control over the distribution of the tokens.

Also on the local level of informal settlements political power seemed to be concentrated and personalized. In one of our cases political rule was embodied by the local council chairperson. On the one hand, the community as a whole benefited from his leadership, because he was effective in exercising power. For example by successfully lobbying with city officials in favour of development of the settlement. On the other hand, the fact that political power was concentrated in his hands had a constraining effect on some other active community members who felt they had little or less space to exercise (other types of) power. As one active community member stated during a walk through the informal settlement: "Also here the power is top-down, we have to wait for orders from the local council chairperson to give instructions". However, this did not mean that people living in informal settlements were deprived of their agency or mere recipients of services. Rather, they would make the best of what they were offered. They made interventions work or used them as leverage within their existing institutional structures and power relations.

To sum up, the third entry point to analyse power and to arrive at actionable knowledge is by developing a contextualised understanding of power. In our case this was related to a hierarchical notion of power and the concentration of political power in the hands of a small group of people. Co-production process that aim to arrive at actionable knowledge and alternative solutions should build upon the understanding that these efforts are embedded within a political system in which basic services are part of (partisan) political struggle. Making those working on sustainability transitions in practise feel like they have limited strategies to change the status quo. Therefore research and/or policy efforts aimed at structural change related to the provision of basic services, such as water, should combine the implementation of innovations with the explicit aim of creating alternative strategies to exercise power for the disempowered and expand the space for collective action (cf. Ahlborg, 2016).

Concluding remarks

The aim of this Perspective was to navigate the pluriform ways power matters in urban transitions. We brought together the conceptual need to contextualize power, the democratic need to study power in the context of Global South and the practical need for different types of knowledge that enable systemic change in cities. In this Perspective, we proposed that from a transitions perspective, research on and solutions for urban challenges are inseparable from understanding and addressing power dynamics. To alleviate some of the unintended and undesirable consequences of both research and/or policy programs and interventions aiming to further urban sustainability transitions, it is important to be reflexive regarding one's doings and to build power sensitive actionable knowledge. Although we concentrated on access to water, this approach is also valuable for other issues such as energy, sanitation, health and mobility.

Three questions that stemmed from empirical and theoretical works on power served as entry points to our analysis: 1) what are the dominant frames about informal

settlements and their inhabitants? 2) How do actors relate and how do they depend on each other? 3) What are the power dynamics within the political system? Based on our analysis, we formulated a number of recommendations. To start with, those who address urban sustainability challenges in the 'real world' should first defamiliarise themselves with existing framings and dominant characteristics of places and people. In doing so, they can start challenging hegemonic frames in practice and thereby generate the possibility to develop alternative solutions that correspond better with the urban realities of people living in informal settlements. Second, an in-depth systematic understanding of the challenge at hand should serve to inform solution options. Such an understanding should build upon coproduced dynamic maps of power relations, intersections, and interdependencies related to a specific urban challenge within a community. Additionally, this can be strengthened by understanding how urban challenges are engrained in the historical distribution of access to resources such as land. Third, the in-depth understanding should also take into account the power dynamics within the broader political system and how these affect the (interventions related to) water challenges. We reckon this supports the development of alternative solutions that expand the space for people who feel disempowered to exercise power differently and direct change in their own community.

Obviously, working on urban challenges such as water in informal settlements in the Global South prompts different power questions, and begs for different types of knowledge and interventions then 'uptown' or in the Global North. At the same time, we need to be aware that these different places are not essentially distinct or unrelated categories. In a similar vein, we hope to have contributed to a diversification of starting points for developing contextualized understandings and actionable knowledge of urban challenges. Understandings that avoid to speak of 'the urban' and 'power' in a monolithic, singular way and embrace the many contextualised meanings and applications that allow to 'handle power with care'.

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