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Planning and managing urbanization in the twenty-first century: content analysis of selected African countries' national urban policies

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, African governments have been adopting explicit National Urban Policies (NUPs). The adoption of NUPs is a sharp contrast to the past when some governments were ambivalent to it.

Focusing on eight (8) African countries—South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, we undertook systematic content analysis of the written policy documents for each country. African governments recognise the need for coordinated policy responses to enhance sustainable urban growth in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG #11) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). The paper cautions against adopting 'silver bullet' solutions to avoid jeopardising the creation of local policy innovations that are more suitable to national and local contexts.

KEYWORDS

National urban policy; urbanization; sustainable urban growth; new urban agenda; sustainable development goals; Africa

Introduction

Africa has become one of the fastest urbanizing continents. Estimates suggest that Africa's urban population will increase by nearly a billion between 2015 and 2050 (UNDESA 2018). Africa's rapid urbanization is perpetuating existing problems as well as creating new challenges and opportunities. At the moment, however, urbanization in many African countries is creating more challenges than opportunities (Cartwright et al. 2018). Most of the urban growth on the continent is largely concentrated in unplanned settlements with acute shortage of critical infrastructure and services (Turok and Parnell 2009; UNDP 2017). It is estimated that about 60% of urban residents in Africa live in slums without requisite infrastructure and basic services making them highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Taylor and Peter 2014). Additionally, African cities are struggling to promote and maintain environmental sustainability (Chirisa et al. 2016; Chirisa, Muzenda, and Bandauko 2016). Other effects of rapid urbanization in Africa include high rates of urban poverty, ever-growing spatial inequalities, and increase pressure on services (Okeke 2014).

These problems are compounded by the fact that local governments across Africa have limited financial, human, and institutional capacity to plan and manage urban areas, including investment in key infrastructure. This limits the ability of African

countries to manage the transitions required to meet the urban SDG (SDG # 11); which seeks to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. Presently, ‘most African countries are faced with the dilemma of developing more functionally integrated, spatially coherent, economically competitive and socially inclusive urban environments’ (Cobbinah and Darkwah 2017, 263).

These urbanization challenges require African governments to respond with coherent policies. For many years, African governments were reluctant to address urbanization explicitly; having no plan of action beyond piecemeal responses to specific urban challenges when they emerge (Arku 2009; Turok and Parnell 2009). However, the attitudes of African governments are changing and a more positive response to urban problems is emerging. The post-Habitat III era saw the emergence of National Urban Policies (NUPs) to provide a coherent and enabling framework to manage urbanization in a coordinated manner. NUPs are broad statements of what governments intend to do within cities and make them function better (Turok 2015). The adoption of the NUA has created a new momentum to take action towards sustainable urban futures (Caprotti et al. 2017). Indeed, the NUA strongly supports the development of NUPs as frameworks to manage urbanization, especially given the emerging challenges such as the climate change threat.

Since 2015, countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, and Malawi have adopted NUPs while others are in the process of developing such policies (e.g. Liberia). Common justifications for NUPs are that they: (i) act as a conduit through which cities in Africa can contribute to the realization of SDGs; and (ii) serve as a guiding framework to enable urban growth to occur in ways that improve human well-being, ecological sustainability and shared prosperity (Turok and Parnell 2009). The competitiveness of cities can only be realized and sustained when policy interventions are coordinated and aligned (UNDP 2017).

However, some reservations on NUPs have been highlighted. Cartwright et al. (2018) argue that unless NUPs are rooted in national contexts, they will struggle to achieve the desired outcomes. Further, there is no one single approach to national urban policy making; that is, the NUP process needs to be sensitive to the socio-economic and political contexts of respective countries (UN-Habitat 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to undertake a systematic content analysis of NUPs of eight African countries. First, the paper identifies the characteristics of these documents, their strategic focus against the backdrop of ongoing urbanization challenges in Africa. Second, it examines the extent to which NUPs are properly framed to adequately address recommendations in the NUA and SDGs. Third, it analyses the gaps in NUPs and the extent of their real impact on the ground. Fourth, it suggests policy pointers for next steps. Overall, examining these documents helps to identify the major themes in them, and draw some conclusions about the current urbanization landscape and the accompanying policies, considering the countries’ ongoing urban struggles.

Methodology: data sources and analysis

The information in this paper is based on a comprehensive review and analysis of selected NUPs. We started off by searching through the government websites of all English Speaking African Countries to see if they have a NUP. We downloaded the

most recent NUPs that were publicly available. Next, we emailed government ministries for copies of NUPs that were not publicly available online. Based on these two steps, we were able to retrieve eight NUPs (Table 1). We focused only on explicit NUPs. Explicit NUPs are observed where a policy has a title of ‘National Urban Policy’ or a variant such as ‘National Urbanization Policy’ or ‘National Urban Development Policy’. After gathering all the eight NUPs, we conducted a detailed qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). In doing the content analysis, we used the framework outlined by Hsieh and Shannon: the documents were first read to ‘achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole’ (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1279), to develop a broad understanding of the documents and paying attention to urban issues, being emphasized by various countries.

Results

General characteristics of the NUPs

The NUPs analysed were developed and adopted in different years. Ghana and Nigeria’s NUPs are the oldest having been adopted in 2012, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Malawi’s NUPs were adopted in the post-2015 era (Table 1). This is the period when the SDG urban goal (SDG #11) and the NUA were adopted as new global policy frameworks for urban development. Six (6) of the NUPs were developed through the support of international agencies. The NUPs developed through the support of UN-Habitat are Rwanda, Malawi, Nigeria and Kenya. The World Bank also supported NUP development in Kenya, Malawi, and Ghana. Uganda’s NUP development process was supported by Cities Alliance. South Africa’s Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) process was internally led by the Department of Cooperative Governance, in collaboration with various partners. There is no evidence to suggest whether Ethiopia’s NUP process was internally or externally driven.

Emerging themes of national urban policies

Theme 1: economic development

NUPs put a strong emphasis on the economic development theme. The phrase ‘economic development’ appears a combined 159 times in all the 8 NUPs. Each

Table 1. Summary of NUPs Analysed.

Sub-Region	Country	Name of Policy	Year of Adoption
Southern Africa	Malawi	National Urban Policy	2019
	South Africa	Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF)	2016
East Africa	Uganda	National Urban Policy	2017
	Rwanda	National Urbanization Policy	2015
	Ethiopia	Urban Development Policy	2013
	Kenya	National Urban Development Policy	2016
West Africa	Ghana	National Urban Policy Framework	2012
	Nigeria	National Urban Development Policy	2012

NUP highlights the need to harness urbanization for socio-economic growth. There is a high level of uniformity among the policies with regards to strategies for stimulating economic development. The most common strategies include promotion of local economic development, improvement of urban competitiveness and adoption of place-based strategies (e.g. special economic zones, industrial clusters). Another interesting feature is the positive approaches NUPs take in managing informality. For instance, Ghana's NUP recognises the informal sector, including 'changing the official attitude towards informal enterprises from neglect to recognition and policy support' (Government of Ghana 2012, 26). It is not surprising that all the NUPs prioritise economic development, because it is widely recognised that cities are engines of national economic growth (Arku 2006; Arku and Harris 2005; Glaeser and Joshi-Ghani 2015; Turok 2010, 2016). The linkage between urbanization and economic development is an important policy issue in various African countries. Thus, maximizing the economic benefits is a major rationale for countries to sustainably manage urban growth using NUPs. The focus on economic development is aligned with transformative commitments in the NUA and the urban SDG (SDG#11); which call for urban actors to contribute to sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all.

Theme 2: integrated urban planning

Another dominant theme in the NUPs is integrated urban planning. The phrase 'integrated planning' appears a combined 274 times in the policy documents. This demonstrates the centrality of integrated urban planning in the creation of sustainable and spatially coherent urban environments (Government of Kenya 2016). The policy documents highlight the need to integrate social, economic and physical aspects of planning; recognizing that urban development in Africa is not only shaped by spatial variables. In fact, spatial integration is a vital concept in urban development as it culminates in well-planned cities that are more efficient and sustainably managed in light of growing urban population. The NUPs also recognize the need to strengthen rural-urban linkages as a way to deliver sustainable urban development in rapidly growing cities.

The theme of integrated urban planning is particularly emphasised in South Africa's NUP, and this can be attributed to the historical planning practices that promoted spatial fragmentation at the expense of urban integration. South Africa's Policy highlights that integrated urban planning is essential for coherent development that redresses apartheid urban geographies. The need to transform the spatial structure and morphology of South African cities has been on the policy agenda since the end of the apartheid system in 1994.

Theme 3: urban governance

The NUPs strongly emphasise the theme of urban governance; the phrase 'urban governance' appears a combined 122 times in the documents. Seven (7) NUPs-Uganda, South Africa, Malawi, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and Ghana include urban governance as one of their policy priorities. Common across the NUPs is the need to

strengthen multilevel governance systems, in order to promote collaboration and coordination both horizontally and vertically. African governments are beginning to recognize the limitations of fragmented approaches to urban development and management. There is a notable policy shift towards institutional frameworks that allow for the coordination and collaboration of urban actors. Strengthened institutional collaboration is a pre-requisite for sustainable urban development, as clearly expressed in Malawi's NUP:

“Effective urban governance and management system is a prerequisite for regulated and coordinated urban growth and development. This policy will promote collaborative efforts, in urban development which will contribute to well-functioning urban governance structures that are accountable, transparent, and responsive to citizenry. Good urban governance will enhance inclusiveness and efficiency in urban land administration and management. Consequently, this will promote sustainable physical, social and economic development” (Government of Malawi 2019, 11).

Similarly, Ethiopia's NUP recognises the link between good urban governance and urban development:

“Urban development is unthinkable without good governance. In the absence of democracy, widespread public participation and use, reliable peace and stability as well as rule of law, urban development will be truncated” (Government of Ethiopia, 2013: 6).

The above aspirations are in sync with principles of the NUA, which highlight the need to focus on ‘strengthening urban governance, with sound institutions and mechanisms that empower and include urban stakeholders, as well as appropriate checks and balances, providing predictability and coherence in urban development plans’ (NUA: 8). Another common policy intention under the urban governance is the need to promote the participation of different stakeholders in the planning and management of cities, thereby enhancing local democracy and inclusion. These policy priorities are rooted in contextual realities, where most African cities are operating with poorly developed urban governance systems.

Theme 4: social inclusion

Social inclusion is another dominant theme emanating from the NUPs; appearing a combined 57 times in the documents. For example, one of the principles underpinning Uganda' NUP is ‘social equity and inclusion; urban areas and cities should support the equitable distribution and access to resources and opportunities in urban areas. All stakeholders are to be accorded the opportunity to share responsibilities and benefits of urbanization’ (Government of Uganda 2017, 15). Similarly, Rwanda's NUP seeks ‘a people centered urbanization by enhancing socially inclusive societies, gender sensitive communities and child friendly cities’ (Government of Rwanda 2015, 19). Similarly, one of South Africa's IUDF guiding principles is ‘inclusion and access to urban opportunities’.

Broadly, the NUPs express social inclusion in two dimensions. First, enhancing the participation of marginalized groups in urban planning. This is to ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups are mainstreamed in all strategies and urban development programmes. Second, taking into account the needs of different social groups in the

design of urban development programmes. In this respect, all the NUPs highlight the need for ‘gender responsive urban development’, recognizing the fact that men and women experience cities differently. The NUPs also highlight the need to make cities disability and age-friendly; in line with the ‘leaving no one behind’ principle of the NUA.

Theme 5: urban housing

There is a strong emphasis on urban housing in all the NUPs; the word ‘housing’ appears a combined 438 times in the documents. This is not surprising given the severe housing challenges facing cities in Africa; about 60% of urban residents live in slum conditions. One of the common strategies is upgrading of slums to enhance tenure security and improve access to services. Nigeria has a stand-alone policy priority on ‘urban renewal and slum upgrading; as 69% of urban dwellers reside in slums, characterised by sub-standard housing (Government of Nigeria 2012). The focus on slum upgrading is a reflection that improving the lives of slum dwellers is a major pressing development challenges of the twenty-first century. These policy intentions are consistent with the target 11.1 of SDG #11; which emphasizes access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services. Additionally, policy strategies on urban housing seek to enhance the right to adequate housing, including for those living in slums. The fact that even NUPs adopted during the pre-Habitat III era put a strong emphasis on housing is a confirmation that urban housing has always been viewed as a policy challenge and catalyst of urban development.

Theme 6: climate change and environment

Climate change and environment is another dominant theme in the NUPs. The phrases ‘climate change’ and ‘environment’ appear a combined 97 and 210 times in the documents, respectively. Surprisingly, the phrase ‘climate change’ does not appear in Ethiopia’s NUP; a gap given the increased international concern on climate-resilient cities. In terms of the environment, common strategies identified include adoption of clean energy, energy-efficient buildings, protection of ecosystems and green infrastructure. Climate sensitive urban planning is identified as a key strategy in majority of the documents, except in Ethiopia. However, climate resilience is particularly emphasized in South Africa and Malawi’s NUPs. For instance, South Africa’s IUDF highlights that ‘South Africa needs to build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations, and reduce their exposure to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters’ (Government of South Africa 2016, 31), in sync with recommendations 9 and 10 of the NUA.

The strong emphasis on climate change and environment is testimony that cities are ‘pathways’ of global environmental change for two reasons. First, cities are main centres to address climate change, as they are primary contributors to greenhouse emissions. Second, cities are vulnerable to climate shocks and disasters; making coordinated responses through NUPs inevitable. Proposals on climate change and environment in the NUPs resonate with NUA’s transformative commitments on ‘environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development’ (NUA: 18).

Discussion and conclusions

It is refreshing to note that many African governments are beginning to realise the importance of coordinated approaches to managing urbanization through NUPs. Overall, the policy environment in Africa is drastically changing and more favourable attitudes are evolving towards cities, especially the economic justification for urban policies (Turok 2016). In the past, responses to urbanization were done without explicit plans, adopting a ‘fire-fighting’ approach to dealing with urban challenges (Turok and Parnell 2009). The increased appetite for NUPs is important considering the daunting urbanization challenges of increased spatial inequalities, increased slum proliferation, infrastructure deficits and the growing demand for creating more productive and liveable places. All the eight NUPs give a detailed overview of urban problems that have triggered policy development; demonstrating that African governments are becoming more sensitive to the threats and opportunities posed by rapid urbanization process.

Mapping the policy contents of the eight NUPs reveals that these policies represent African governments’ commitment towards fostering social and economic advancement. At a theoretical level, NUPs can be seen as appropriate policy umbrellas speaking to a wide range of themes that have been pitched in normative commitments of the NUA and the urban SDG (Hohmann 2017). Our analysis confirms basic complementarity of the main intentions of the NUA and policy contents of NUPs, especially those adopted in the post-Habitat III era. These policies recognize the need to localize SGD #11 and the NUA. For instance, Uganda’s NUP highlights that:

“The SDGs provide an opportunity for Uganda to bring all stakeholders together to decide and embark on new paths to improve the lives of people in urban areas, and to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by creating mechanisms to ensure good urban governance” (Government of Uganda 2017, 20).

However, actions speak louder than words, so the questions to ask about the governments’ real commitment are, therefore: in practice, what actions have these governments actually taken towards the sustainable planning and management of urban areas? What changes have occurred in their practical approach to urbanization in the wake of emerging NUPs? These questions are critical because it is often common to find a huge gap between policy and practice in African countries. Indeed, as Turok (2015) rightly observes the dilemma with formal NUPs is that they may remain high-level policy expressions, with little impact in practice due to neglect of the implementation process. Thus, developing NUPs is commendable, but merely the starting point. African governments should not take the formal adoption of NUPs as an end in itself; rather, the process should evolve beyond the explicit policy document. To be meaningful, NUPs must be accompanied by concrete action plans and tools to aid practical actions. Of all the eight countries analysed, only Ghana has a detailed and publicly available action plan, though the commitment towards implementation remains unclear.

The practical actions should also be backed by viable and innovative financing mechanisms that can be used to fund costly urban infrastructure investments. At the moment, the NUPs reviewed are not linked to national and local budgets and investment plans, hence are barely executed leading to a huge urban infrastructure gap.

Estimates suggest that between 2018 and 2040 the infrastructure investment gap on the continent will be around 1.59 USD trillion. Additionally, the required amount of infrastructure investment needed will be 39% higher than under current trends (Metcalf and Valeri 2019). Meeting this gap will require policy commitment backed by concrete domestic financial mobilization efforts. It requires the creation of a diverse portfolio of revenue sources and move away from excessive dependence on external financing. Not only are external sources unpredictable as seen in the aftermath of the 2008/2009 financial crisis when there was a significant drop but it has several challenges associated with it.

In recent times, China has become a key player in Africa's urbanization push, as a huge proportion of the continent's infrastructure investment programs are being championed by Chinese companies and/or supported by Chinese funding. Forbes (2019) notes that since 2011, China has been the largest player in Africa's infrastructure investment drive, claiming about 40% share, and that is expected to keep rising. The overreliance on Chinese funding will have significant repercussions in the long run; African countries will likely be thrown into a 'debt trap'. Currently, there are already warning signs in some African countries. In 2019, the debt owed to China by African countries was estimated at 142 USD billion, with Angola holding the largest proportion at 42.8 USD billion. In Kenya, the Chinese funded Mombasa to Nairobi railway project has already gone four times over budget, which has costed the country over 6% of its Gross Domestic Product (Forbes 2019). With a mounting debt, African governments will be trapped between loan repayments and financing urban infrastructure in their own cities. Another dilemma is that these Chinese investments are driven by private corporations and may not reflect urban infrastructure priorities in African cities. Investments such as large-scale shopping malls may not have immediate transformative effects on the lives of ordinary urban residents on the continent. They are likely to continue deepening socio-economic and spatial exclusion.

At the moment, the process of developing NUPs in Africa is not backed by comprehensive institutional reforms. In most African countries, political interference has incapacitated state institutions. Corruption in most Africa has become 'institutionalized' and is another endemic issue that has huge implications on the achievement or non-achievement of policy aspirations promoted by NUPs. For example, the urban land sector is marred with corrupt land transactions, sometimes driven by the political elites who use their political power to subvert formal processes. Corruption in land management hits the poor the hardest, creating situations that threaten their rights and livelihoods. To address this, African governments need to implement wholesome institutional reforms to address market failures and other systemic bottlenecks that undermine coherent urban development such as inefficient and fragmented urban land markets. All these processes require political will; which is usually ill-developed at the onset and may take long to establish.

Next, it is commendable that NUPs recognize climate change as a key challenge that must be mainstreamed into urban development plans. However, the policies are silent on climate change compatible development interventions, especially in urban slums; where there is an acute lack of requisite infrastructure to cope with and adapt to climate change. Slum upgrading interventions are important but not enough; they must be

complemented with investments in high-quality infrastructure that strengthen livelihoods and ability of slum dwellers to withstand climate change impacts.

There is an observable variance between NUPs developed by international consultants and a few that were entirely developed by local institutions. NUPs developed by international consultants reflect global norms that underpin the work of international agencies. They contain ‘flowery’ policy ideas such as urban resilience building, despite the fact that more than 60% of the urban residents live in slums without resilient infrastructure. On the other hand, NUPs developed largely through locally led processes are embedded in domestic realities. A good example of an NUP with local embeddedness is South Africa’s IUDF, which strongly emphasizes the need to make cities inclusive and spatially integrated because of the country’s apartheid history which has continued to shape urban space till now.

The use of a global standard template for NUP processes may be detrimental to local innovation. It often leads to ‘fast’ and ‘high-sounding’ policies that are detached from urban realities in Africa. Criticizing policy ideas pushed by international Peck and Theodore (2001, 2015) argue that local contexts have the potential to alter the trajectory of policies. Policy makers and development partners need to be aware of the dangers of promoting ‘silver bullet’ solutions to avoid jeopardizing the creation of local policy innovations that are more suitable to national and local contexts (Hohmann 2017, 42). In short, a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not produce desired policy outcomes since urbanization in Africa is shaped by different political economies. Attempts to adopt, formalize and implement NUPs need to reflect contextual realities as well as the political culture and appetite for such policies. That is, there is the question of whether the language and policy prescriptions are being tailored to the urban realities on the continent?

From the foregoing, it is clear that the awareness to manage urbanization in a comprehensive, coordinated and holistic manner is rife among African governments. This is contrary to the previous haphazard and reactionary ways urbanization was managed (Arku 2009; Turok and Parnell 2009). However, it is one thing to have a policy and another to implement it. There is the need to avoid NUPs simply becoming ‘symbolic’ high-level policy expressions with very little or no impact on the ground due to neglect of the implementation process. Going forward, what is needed is a commitment to put these policy intentions into practice by investing in infrastructure development, institutional capacity building and the use of appropriate policy instruments that are sensitive to national and local contexts. These measures will go a long way in strengthening the sustainable planning and management of urbanization in Africa, in light of the urban SDG (SDG #11) and the NUA.

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