

Concept note

Second meeting of the African Urban Research Initiative (AURI)

18–19 February 2014
Southern Sun Hotel, Nairobi, Kenya

Theme: Institutional models of co-production in the African city



Introduction to AURI

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the fastest urbanizing regions in the world, yet it is the least prepared institutionally to deal with the pressures that will be associated with this process. Available data shows out that sub-Saharan Africa is undergoing an urban transition: almost 40% of the continent (314 million people) is presently urbanized and this proportion is anticipated to swell to 48% (744 million people) by 2030.¹ In absolute terms this represents more than a doubling of the urban population in a context where the majority of urban dwellers are presently unable to access decent shelter or economic opportunities due to limited resources and state incapacity.

In this context, there is an urgent need to build broad policy agreements between governments, civil society organisations, universities, the private sector and international development agencies to address this situation at regional, national and local levels. A key pre-condition for this to happen is that the capacity of knowledge institutions located on the continent is significantly up-scaled. A sense of urgency and purpose is required.

In 2011 the African Centre for Cities (based at the University of Cape Town, South Africa) received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to pursue a project to scale-up applied urban research and practice on the African continent. The project has been driven by the premise that unless an active network of durable knowledge institutions, focused on applied urban research and capacity-building, is urgently established, most African cities will not be in a position to understand their urban development dynamics, let alone address them effectively. We need to support existing and future homegrown applied research centres to inform and enhance the policy actors and networks in each African country responsible for urban policy and management. These research centres in turn need to be networked together to exchange knowledge, know-how, and expertise to foster a layer of credible and resilient institutions rooted in local realities but engaged with broader trends.

The first step in initiating this project was the organisation of a workshop meeting of some of the continent's most innovative and productive applied urban research centres, held in Addis Ababa in March 2013. Co-hosted with Cities Alliance, this workshop sought to raise the debate and foster action amongst key research and donor stakeholders in the urban field, whilst establishing a shared understanding of the scope and implications (for research and knowledge management) of the urban transition in Africa.

Discussions at the Addis Ababa meeting highlighted the fact that African research centres face a number of profound challenges, including that:

- African political and state officials remain predominantly 'rural' in their development outlook. They have not been confronted with a convincing case for pro-urbanization strategies.

¹ UN-DESA [United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division] (2012) *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2011 Revision*. New York.

- Policy- and decision-makers do not have access to data in a form that is useful for developing urban development strategies and interventions. There is a general disconnect between the urban research produced by university research centres and the knowledge required for policy-making and practice.
- Research centres often battle to secure sustainable sources of finance and other resources for research, and to balance the production of 'pure' and 'applied' research.

At the same time, research centres can play an important strategic role in three areas. Firstly, research centres can help to either develop new qualitative and quantitative data sets, or enhance the usefulness of existing data for decision-makers. Secondly, research centres are often well placed to link processes of bottom-up data generation with functions in the public sector and wider development sector. And thirdly, research centres can provide and train 'strategic intermediaries' to interact with and read across different institutional languages and logics to promote innovation in urban governance.

Beyond individual research centres, a continental network of research centres can play a strategic role by providing:

- A platform for the exchange of research ideas, practices and outputs between its members, as well as other networks and initiatives, in order to improve the quality and impact of urban research on the continent and to drive the emergence of alternative paradigms for the future of African cities
- An institutional framework for joint and comparative urban research along consistent paradigmatic and methodological lines
- A common voice of academic and NGO researchers to promote the cause of progressive urban development policy in Africa
- Assistance to individual members by organising meetings and developing resources for networking and capacity-building, focusing on sustainable institutional and financial management, and methodologies of institutional engagement (with state and civil society).

In light of these points and discussions, participants agreed to form the African Urban Research Initiative (AURI), with a view to future formalisation, and with a Secretariat temporarily based at the African Centre for Cities (ACC). AURI partners agreed to undertake a number of future activities, including:

- To organise a follow-up meeting in 2014 to update on the progress of activities, make further plans for collaborative work, discuss institutional arrangements for AURI and the development of a strategy for future activity
- To commission a series of expert 'think pieces' on a number of topics, such as new approaches to data generation and management; funding models for durable urban knowledge centres, and how to operate as a 'strategic intermediary'.
- To develop an initial work programme leading to 2017, and eventual formalisation of AURI

Since March 2013 the AURI Secretariat has worked on a number of activities drawing upon AURI partners. Firstly, AURI partners participated in a peer review of the Cities Alliance 'City Enabling Environment' assessment project. Secondly, AURI partners contributed discussion papers to the Cities Alliance Africa Strategy meeting held in Johannesburg in October 2013. Thirdly, the Secretariat prepared a proposal for the Ford Foundation to fund the AURI activities slated at the Addis Ababa meeting.

In line with these objectives, the second meeting of AURI partners will take place in Nairobi on 18 and 19 February 2014.

Rationale of the Workshop

The theme of the workshop, 'institutional models of knowledge co-production in the African city', is drawn from the discussions at the inaugural Addis meeting. We wish to probe the notion of 'co-production' from an African perspective, and to identify the different models and practices of knowledge co-production that exist and are possible in the African context.

However, recently 'co-production' has come to mean many different things in different contexts, and therefore it is necessary to clarify what we mean by the term. To do so, it is worth reflecting on some of the origins and uses of 'co-production' as an idea. The term originated in the 1970s and early 1980s primarily within the discipline of public administration, in the context of discussions of how local residents in US cities could be involved in service provision as a means of reducing state expenditure. This early work regarded co-production as "the joint production of public services between citizen and state, with any one or more elements of the production process being shared" (Mitlin, 2008). Watson (2014, forthcoming) describes this work as employing 'state-initiated concepts of co-production', distinguishing it from more recent cases of and writings on co-production, more closely aligned with the discipline of development studies, which she refers to as 'social movement-initiated co-production'. Diana Mitlin (2008) has discussed the characteristics and benefits of the latter approach, noting that co-productive methodologies are increasingly and explicitly used by grassroots organizations and federations as a kind of political strategy, designed "to consolidate their local organizational base and augment their capacity to negotiate successfully with the state" (2008: 340). Here co-production is regarded as a political process, with community empowerment seen as an end-in-itself, rather than simply seeking to improve the outcomes of state-led service provision. This notion of co-production has attracted significant interest in context of development debates surrounding the global South, primarily due to the 'incompleteness' of Southern states, which in turn is linked to both governance and logistical factors. This has given rise to the conviction that citizen involvement in state activities can improve accountability of the state and address governance issues, and can further lead to system transformation.

Beyond state-initiated and social movement-initiated concepts, a third kind of co-production can also be distinguished. This is where co-production is used as an institutional strategy for the production of knowledge, and for engaging and linking both 'official' and 'bottom-up' processes of data collection and learning. A number of global and African institutions have adopted co-productive methodologies in recent their work, and these applications have taken many different forms.

As one example, the African Centre for Cities (ACC) has hosted a series of collaborative research programmes (including thematic urban laboratories or 'CityLabs' as well as international networks such as the Association of African Planning Schools) involving interactions between academic researchers from various disciplines, and practitioners (from both government and civil society, including social movements organisations) from a range of sectors (Anderson et al., 2013; Brown-Luthango, 2013). These projects have been driven by the assumption that academic knowledge is inadequate to understand and 'solve' a variety of tough urban problems such as structural poverty, environmental vulnerability to flooding, sprawl, climate change impacts, and so on. Instead hybridized forms of knowledge are required that emerge through structured processes of co-production, sustained over a substantial length of time (Pieterse, 2013).

However, these projects are but several examples of emerging co-productive methodologies in the African context. In this meeting we will promote the sharing of experiences between different African research centres on the topic of knowledge co-production. Apart from issues of researcher-state-civil society engagement, another issue we will pursue is how co-production methodologies can be employed as part of efforts to ensure the sustainable financing of both 'pure' and 'applied' forms of urban research.

Objectives of the Workshop

- Update AURI partners on recent Cities Alliance work to develop an African urban agenda
- Discuss different institutional models for the co-production of urban knowledge and identify key issues affecting the implementation of these approaches
- Identify key issues and topics for future research work to be commissioned by the AURI Secretariat
- Discuss the proposed AURI conference linked to the UCLGA Africities conference in December 2015
- Discuss institutional arrangements for AURI and the development of a strategy for future activity
- Elect a formal Steering Committee to oversee the exploratory phase of work until 2017

Workshop Preparation

Participants are expected to do the following as preparation for the workshop:

- Prepare a brief update on your centre's recent research activities and plans for future research, according to the attached template document. This is to be presented during Session 2 of Day 1, which should not take more than 6 minutes.
- Read the five discussion papers prepared by AURI members for the Cities Alliance Africa Strategy process.
- Think about how each centre engages with 'co-production' methodologies on the course of their work, and the challenges and opportunities this provides.

References

- Anderson, P.M.L., Brown-Luthango, M., Cartwright, A., Farouk, I. and Smit, W. (2013) 'Brokering communities of knowledge and practice: Reflections on the African Centre for Cities' CityLab programme', *Cities*, 32, pp. 1-10.
- Brown-Luthango, M. (2013) 'Community-university engagement: the Philippi CityLab in Cape Town and the challenge of collaboration across boundaries', *Higher Education*, 65, pp. 309-324.
- Mitlin, D. (2008) 'With and beyond the state – co-production as a route to political influence, power and transformation for grassroots organizations', *Environment and Urbanization*, 20(2), pp. 339-360.
- Pieterse, E. (2013) 'City/University interplays amidst complexity', *Territorio*, 66, pp. 26-32.
- Watson, V. (2014 forthcoming) 'Co-production and collaboration in planning – the difference', *Planning Theory and Practice*.

Template for Research Centre Updates

Please complete the following template prior to the workshop, and bear in mind that we will ask you to please present this update in no longer than 10 minutes.

Please list the 4 to 5 main thematic focus areas of your research centre (e.g. urban culture, decentralization, climate change, migration):

Please list any current or planned research projects that specifically seek to engage with governments or local communities:

Has your research centre changed its focus or undertaken new research projects since the Addis Ababa meeting in March 2013?