An Urbanizing Africa, and its Potential Urban Futures - Dr. Wangui Kimari

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The Nokoko journal is committed to a world where people are free from all forms of oppression and exploitation, where respect for individuals' varied differences is maintained, and where everyone can realise their full potentials. NokokoPod is a companion to the journal, covering current African issues. It aims to bring forth new perspectives that broaden, trouble, complicate and enrich current discourses. Edited and annotated versions of the conversations will be made available on the journal website.

This issue of NokokoPod presents a discussion on an urbanizing Africa and its potential urban futures. The audio connection was not strong and as a result an audio podcast is not available for this discussion, however the annotated PDF is available on the Nokoko journal website. This conversation took place on March 18th, with Logan Cochrane in Canada and Wangui Kimari in Kenya. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Wangui Kimari. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.

Logan: Welcome to NokokoPod. Today we are discussing cities, urbanization and planning trends as governments respond to larger urban populations. To discuss this, we are joined by Dr. Kimari, a lecturer in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Kenyatta University.[1] Dr. Kimari is also affiliated with the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town[2] and the Mathare Social Justice Centre in Nairobi.[3] Thanks for joining us.

Dr. Kimari: Thank you, Logan.

Logan: Before we move into specific responses that cities have taken and specific plans that cities are proposing for their future, can you first reflect on the diversity of rates of urbanization and levels of urbanization across the continent? For example, there are countries that have lower rates of urbanization and have lower percentages of urban populations, such as Burundi and Ethiopia, as well as those that have much higher rates and percentages, such as Libya, Gabon and Tunisia.[4] About a decade ago we started hearing that half of the world's population, for the first time, was living in urban centers[5] and that by 2050 the UN was projecting that two thirds of the world's population would be living in urban areas.[6] Without

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1 For some of her works, see: https://uct.academia.edu/WanguiKimari
2 https://www.africancentreforcities.net/
3 https://www.matharesocialjustice.org/
4 See World Bank (2020); the population in Burundi is 13% urban, Ethiopia is 21% urban, Libya is 80% urban, Gabon in 89% urban, and Tunisia is 69% urban.

5 This narrative started in the early 2000s, such as Brunn et al (2003), although this had been projected much earlier, such as by Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1986). It has since become a dominant narrative, despite the fact that the definitions of urban areas vary by country, and change over time, suggesting that these figures may not be concrete, or reflective of realities, as might be assumed. In many ways, these urban population figures are a construction of a varied and dynamic set of metrics. The United Nations Statistics Division offers a recommendation on classifications (https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/densurb/densurbmethods.htm), but recognizes national differences and that countries can establish metrics relevant to their own needs. As a result, the actual metrics used by nations when submitted to the UN varies significantly and change over time.

6 UN (2018).

contesting these macro-narratives per se, can you reflect on the diversity that we see across the continent with different countries having different rates of urbanization and different levels of urbanization?

Dr. Kimari: We hear a lot about the urban space. This is not only because it is seen as a vector for economic growth, and the principal engine for economic growth, but also because these rates have increased. However, that is not everywhere. In Kenya, only 27% of the population is urban[7] (although that may also be because there have been devolution efforts since 2013, where other spaces are being created that have various economic activities happening in them that can keep people in certain locales).[8] In other places, such as Luanda in Angola, which was one of the safe havens during the war, there are larger urban populations (65% of Angola's population is urban).[9] Whereas in Rwanda, which has a high population density, the urban population is lower, around 17%.[10] One aspect that stands out for me, as I am always trying to think about that situation generally, is that there is a narrative, an urban agenda, which has been promoted in previous UN documents, about rural-urban migration. I think in the case of Kenya that this is overestimated because we forget that there have been large, significant populations of people living in the city for a long time but who were uncounted. For example, in the poor urban settlement that I have been working in for the last 13 years, there are about four generations of families who have been there in Nairobi, even when Nairobi was not welcoming Africans. They have been there since the late 1930s and early 1940s. Even if we are talking a lot about the high rates of urbanization, which are often considered new, we always forget that these generations of

7 World Bank (2020).

8 For more on devolution in Kenya, see: Boone et al (2019), Cornell and D'Arcy (2016), Lind (2018), Orr (2019), amongst others.

9 World Bank (2020).

10 World Bank (2020).

families are there, and have been there, even if they are not counted for various reasons. Maybe they are thought of as slum dwellers without tenure rights. These are people who still do not have tenure rights to be in the city.

Logan: Would this take us to a bigger question about who counts and who is counted? You mentioned those who are living in these so-called slums that may not be counted, but there are also questions about peri-urban areas not being included, where people are increasingly having their land expropriated and brought into the city, if you like, as this city expands vertically and horizontally.

Dr. Kimari: Yes. I sometimes worry that accompanying urbanization are the vision plans for large-scale urban infrastructure that are particularly hazardous for people who live in peri-urban locations, or in poor urban settlements where they do not count. I think it is also important to think about how these rates of urbanization that we are given are ahistorical because they do not see how people have been a part of the city for a long time. Rather, they focus on people who have fixed, recognized residency in the city. Accompanying the focus on urbanization is a focus on large scale infrastructure. The African Union, since at least 2012, has been putting out documents, like the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA),[11] which emphasizes infrastructure as a way to support urbanization as well as broad economic development agenda, whatever that means in particular contexts. I think it is important to read these two themes or these two occurrences simultaneously because they then allow for a focus on big strategies without looking at things and issues in urban spaces that are longstanding and that have not yet been resolved. This focus on urbanization is taking the focus away from populations who have been there, and people who

11 See: https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/programme-for-infrastructure-development-in-africa-pida

have been a part of cities in different ways. When we talk about urbanization and infrastructure, we may forget to talk about tenure rights and other issues that have been plaguing the city for many years, even before there was this increase in urbanization or the rate at which cities are urbanizing in Africa.

   Logan: One of the issues that you have been speaking about is linking this question to social justice.[12] What we see in many countries is that if you live in an "informal settlement" or you have not been granted rights to your land for a number of reasons, that when that land is taken for an infrastructure development or as part of these larger master plans for urban development more generally, such individuals do not receive compensation because they do not have formal tenure or they do not have other means to show that this was their land and therefore it is expropriated and people are forced to relocate with very little support.[13]

   Dr. Kimari: These are not issues that have been resolved. For example, consider the new urban agenda.[14] There are no references to tenure rights. There are also no references to hyper-policing in cities, that those same people without tenure rights are being increasingly surveilled and policed. Unfortunately, these issues are not dealt with in the new urban agenda from 2016, or even in local vision plans. Consider the case of Nairobi wherein the most recent master plan says very little about what would happen to over 70% of the people who live on 6% of the land. There is a lot of focus on big infrastructure projects, which would require that land is taken away from people. Yet, there is no discussion in the plan about how

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12 See: Jones and Kimari (2019), Kimari and Ernston (2020), Kimari (2019).

13 For a range of country experiences, see: Adekoye (2019), Admasu et al (2019), Akinola (2020), Bosman and Kimani (2018), Kinfu and Cochrane (2020), amongst others.

14 See: http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/

people will be compensated. More importantly, there is no discussion about granting them tenure rights to a city that they have lived in for a long time. You can see these hyper modern visions, and the proliferation of them across Africa, whether it is in Luanda or in Kigali or in Nairobi, these visions are not speaking to, in my opinion, the grave realities of the city and the everyday problems that people face. That might be access to water. In some cases, there are token references to social housing, but in the case of housing in Kenya not much has happened to make social housing available to people. Related, if people were actually given rights to their land that they live on, this would reduce the need for the government to spend money on social housing because people then could build their houses incrementally. These vision plans are, in my opinion, allowing for more delegitimization of people's rights to the city and are fueling this inordinate focus on large scale infrastructure, without looking at the basic needs of people in African cities.

Logan: Earlier this year, at the World Urban Forum,[15] there was much said about inclusive cities and cities for all and so on. When you do research in cities and see how people are actually living, how these master plans are actually being implemented, what do you see in terms of the reality of that inclusive city? Is that a nice message at these annual forums or is there anything that is actually materializing?

Dr. Kimari: I can speak principally about Nairobi. The problem originates from history. From the outset, this city was not meant to be inclusive. Nairobi was a colonial railway town.[16] It was not meant to be inclusive. Undoing this history requires recognizing that it was not meant to be an inclusive city. We can still see how this

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15 See: https://wuf.unhabitat.org/node/145
16 For more history of the city, see Mundia (2017), amongst others.

segregation endures. Unfortunately, inclusivity becomes this bromide that travels extensively. What does it mean to have an inclusive city instead of just perpetuating this bromide? It means that we need to connect and correct all of the different violences that people face in the city. In these documents, there is also a negation of the many violences that are part of a continuum that people face, from a lack of water to excessive policing and hyper militarization of spaces. If we are really focused on inclusivity, then we need to think about really sitting in and considering, from the ground, all of the different exclusions people face. If we take inclusion as something given by the UN or given by then the Nairobi County, because they have a narrow vision of inclusion, then we will not negate these exclusions and will not subsequently make the city inclusive for all. I love Nairobi, but I am also very critical of Nairobi's operations. I have a lot of circumspection for how inclusivity is used as a bromide because I do not think there has been enough effort to see all the ways that the city excludes people. Considering that from the outset, that Nairobi started as a colonial railway town, and that is was never intended to be inclusive, we can see that it is not easy to undo these segregatory grids, but we really need to think about that if we are going to focus on inclusion.

Logan: Looking at the master plans themselves, would you say that the real beneficiaries are urban elite and global capital at the expense of the poor who are often being pushed out? Or, is it more nuanced? Are there actual attempts at inclusion that just need to be bettered within these large-scale master plans, within Nairobi or Luanda or elsewhere that you have looked?

Dr. Kimari: Nairobi has officially had three master plans. We have had a master plan for the colonial city, which was the first official master plan of 1948. Then there was a post-independence master plan of 1973. Now we have the 2014 plan. The 1973 plan is

critiqued by various scholars for moving from a racially segregated city to more class-based city, or the class-based organization of space. The 2014 plan, coming from this history, discursively tried, implicitly and explicitly, to move away from this by talking about how participation was key to assembling this new plan. In reality, if we look at the projects that it focuses on, a lot of it is large scale infrastructure. It is a 600-page document, I cannot capture all of it, but there is a focus on light rail or satellite cities and things like that.[17] In my opinion, even if there were there were these claims to participation, it does not capture nor does it seem keen to capture the basic needs and problems that people are facing. That is not to say that people in the County administration are not cognizant of this. This most recent plan was supported by JICA, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency.[18] From my conversations with planners, there was a fear that JICA was trying to emphasize projects that Japan or the Japanese could come and develop in Kenya. There are these various dynamics that are at play. As a consequence, they allow for what one scholar calls a 'jaundiced optimism,' in that you are told that the city is growing and people will gain access to particular kinds of infrastructure.[19] Yet, there is a recognition that these hyper modern visions or these visions of large-scale infrastructure consistently work to jeopardize the people who are most at risk in this city. I would say that the master plans are not there for large sections of the city. This is further compounded by challenges related to the fact that the administration changes every five years, which makes it hard for consistency. There is also the recognition that plans are made without a

17 Available here: http://www.kpda.or.ke/documents/Nairobi%20Integarted%20Urban%20Development%20Master%20Plan.pdf

18 JICA also hosts a copy of the Master Plan on its website: https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2015/c8h0vm0000966zqy-att/c8h0vm0000966zvu.pdf and promotes its involvement in supporting the development of the plan: https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/field/2015/150415_01.html

19 Myers (2015).

realistic assessment of the public purse. All of these various dynamics are at play.

Logan: As you look across different master plans and different cities, maybe on a more positive perspective, are you seeing examples of how cities can do this better? How they can have a more inclusive, participatory process in arriving at the master plan? Or, in their thinking about future cities that are more inclusive?

Wangui: Yes. I hope it does not sound like all gloom and doom because on the ground people are doing amazing things to keep their communities alive. Whether it is trying to harness water for all or having small biogas shops or having community gardens near the largest dump site, people are doing amazing things and keeping their city thriving. That gives me a lot of hope. The bureaucracy does not give me a lot of hope, but peoples movements on the ground give me a lot of hope. I am also inspired by movements elsewhere. For example, when the statute of the city was passed in Brazil in 2001 it said that the city must have a social function.[20] Whereas, the tagline of Nairobi is the city to work, invest and live. That order, in itself, shows you the priorities of the city. There are various things happening across the globe that are inspiring, like in Brazil with participatory budgeting in cities or the recognition that the city should have a social function.[21] In Kenya, there are communities that are keeping the city alive, even with an intentional neglect by the government, which is really very inspiring.

Logan: Would you consider the alternative forms, what some might consider as forms of resistance, where people and communities are creating their own pathways (e.g. community gardens,

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20 For more on this, see Friendly (2017).

21 For more on this, see Franco and Assis (2019).

alternative forms of energy and food) as tenuous in the sense that they have yet to be recognized by what you were saying earlier with tenure rights or other forms of protection? Is it the case that they could be easily be overwhelmed and expropriated by these larger processes for infrastructure or investment and development?

Dr. Kimari: As much as they give me hope, I would not say that these enterprises are perfect. For example, many poor urban settlements have their own informal electricity network. It is much cheaper and it is much more accessible, but it also can be quite dangerous. I would not say that they are perfect, but I would say at least they are providing a service that has not been given to people who live in places with no rights. There is a recognition of them, by the government, it is a recognition that understands that this is a service that is being provided, which the government has not tried to provide or is not able to provide. There are negotiations about the arrangements and relationships. It is important what communities are doing, and the government recognizes it, but it is also not perfect and devoid of issues. Take, for example, water provision in poor urban settlements. Even if it is there, it is also more expensive and less safe and sometimes can be run by cartels. I do not want to make it seem as though it is perfect. There is definitely a recognition by the government that this will continue until basic services are made more accessible to all. I was at a forum recently where I suggested the need to recognize the importance of these informal service providers without romanticizing them, and it was discussed. Although, even if there is that recognition and that recognition offers some form of legitimacy, these are public goods. These are things that the government should work towards providing to all Kenyans.

Logan: Maybe the root of that challenge is the question of public or private goods. If we look at water provision or electricity provision, there has been lots of research on this so-called 'poverty

penalty',[22] whereby if you are not recognized in the city as being a formal title holder and therefore have access to water in an official sense or electricity in an official sense, you have to go through these alternative channels. These informal services may be 5, 10, or even 50 times more expensive. The questions that we started with (of informality, the lack of recognition, and the lack of being counted) connect to the public-private question in the sense that we are now asking who public services are for? Who is benefiting by public services and who is being excluded?

Dr. Kimari: That is really important to think about because there is a production of who the ideal consumer or the ideal customer of water and electricity are. By virtue of long-term stigma, people in poor urban settlements are not considered the ideal customers or the ideal consumers of basic services. This framing hinders the willingness of the government to provide these services. In my capacity as the Participatory Action Research Coordinator of Mathare Social Justice Centre, which is a small community-based organization in Mathare (located in the second largest poor urban settlement in Nairobi), we did research on water access in this poor urban settlement. In a community of 300,000 people, at least, we counted 117 informal watch points. If you do the math, that is about one water point for 2,000-2,500 people, which does not have consistent water and the safety of that water is not guaranteed. In relation to all the local or international metrics, that is a really big violation. Tied to that, in our research, we saw that water that is provided informally, even if it is provided by someone in the neighborhood, costs at least four times as much as what I would pay in my in my nice little house in the west of the city. It is also not safe or guaranteed. In thinking about who gets these services, which should be a public

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22 See, for example: AMT (2020), Braimah et al (2018), Ochungo et al (2019), amongst others.

good, we can see the production of who is the ideal consumer or the ideal customer and who is not the ideal customer and consumer. As you were saying, those who are not conceived of as ideal recipients suffer the poverty penalty because they are paying a lot more for water, the safety of which is not guaranteed. We actually did a test of the water we use in our small centre, and in other communities; we took a sample of that water to a government water testing agency. We were told that it is highly, highly contaminated. This is the same water that we use to wash dishes for the kids who come to our space. This poverty penalty is a grave reality. It is also a part of the production or the conjuring of who is an ideal recipient and who is not. That is an unfortunate reality that persists even if Kenya is a signatory to all of the relevant conventions, even if Kenya sends people to all the World Urban Forums. This is something we need to think about.

Logan: In an earlier episode, I was speaking with someone about the Cape Town drought and one of the interesting discussions that emerged out of that was that while there were a lot of policies, regulations and details that matter, but there are also some high level questions about the ideological underpinning of these systems.[23] If we think about the provision of water or electricity as a public good, they are often sold on a for-profit, private sector model where revenue generation is the basis of sustainability. In those models, providers want to sell more electricity or more water to increase revenue. This runs into a contradiction with other objectives that the city might have, such as becoming more energy efficient or more water efficient in its utilization of these resources. It requires us to rethink the ideology that underpins the operation of these services, either as public or as private, because they are often run in a

23 Cochrane and Ziervogel (2020).

similar corporate model. Do you have any reflections on that, in and of itself, and then maybe what a future could look like?

Dr. Kimari: I feel that sometimes we blame everything on structural adjustment, but I still think there is a direct correlation between that and Nairobi water provision becoming channelled through a private company, which is now the Nairobi City Water and Sewage Company.[24] This has a direct relation to the structural adjustment policies of the late 90s. Based on testimonies of experiences before that period, people say that they could just drink water directly from the tap and they did not pay for water. However, now people receive bills even when they have not had water. Even some of the terminology used, for example, for water in poor urban settlements tapped "illegally." We can see this fixation on receiving profits from water. For example, the Nairobi City Water and Sewage Company call water supposedly "lost" in poor urban settlements, water networks that have been tapped into apparently illegally, they call it non-revenue water. Instead of framing it in another way, such as water that has been tapped into by people who do not have water. Instead, they call it non-revenue water. As you are saying, this reflects the ideological underpinnings of water provision. This is completely against the Bill of Rights in Kenya and this conception is completely against any consideration of water as a public good. These are the dynamics that plague our city. It is these that are shaping an urban governance that aims to, for example, build many satellite cities or wants to have smart cities, but does not focus on the many basic issues that people are facing. We saw the grave articulation of this in the Cape Town water crisis. In Luanda as well, where I have done research, there are new settlements called new centralities, we can see

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24 For more on this, see: Chege (2017), Molabo (2018), Mwikya and Muturi (2019), amongst others.

the cost of water increasing in these spaces.[25] Unfortunately, in these new spaces in Luanda, the cost of water has a direct relationship to how accessible water is. In those new settlements or those new centralities that are seen to have better infrastructure and better water provision, water costs a lot more and that makes it completely inaccessible for people who cannot pay. No one has the same pocket even if they live in the same area. We can see the deep ideological underpinnings of the city, and how it is consistently moving away from being a public service. We cannot talk about inclusion in this regard, if these ideological underpinnings consistently scaffold the city.

Logan: For those who would like to build on the work that you are doing or take advantage of the different insights that you have offered, are there areas of research or questions that have not been asked that you think require more attention from research moving forward? Or, maybe require a different perspective on research questions that have already been asked? Anything that you would like to draw research attention towards?

Dr. Kimari: There are countless things, many of which I probably will not be able to think of. As we are in a context where large scale infrastructure is heavily emphasized, we need to think about the human impact of these large-scale infrastructures. Further, we need to keep asking why governments are focusing on these large constructions, whether it is a railway, highway or superhighway and why they are moving away from basic needs. Basic needs have not been consolidated. Even Rwanda, which reported to be performing well in all the possible metrics, has still not been able to eradicate extreme poverty. Why are we focusing on these projects that are not dealing with the real issues at hand? In coming back to your focus

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25 For more, see: Cardoso (2016).

on what the future of the city is, we have all these new master plans, which become hegemonic, that are considered the sole documents that should reflect what our city future should be. More attention should be directed to people who have been living in the city for close to a hundred years but do not have tenure rights or still don't have water. How do they think about the future of the city or what the future of the city should be? It should not be limited to master plans or other bromides about leaving no one behind. These are good in a way, but they do not make explicit what people actually want. Unpacking these terms and trying to ground them in the realities of people, the everyday life of people, would be particularly useful and something that researchers should definitely take up.

Logan: Building on that, as climate change continues to have impacts on cities, I think there is a potential opportunity to rethink the future. If we look at urban planning of the present, many of these master plans replicate cities of the last century. Maybe we need to be more creative and innovative and think about futures that are more sustainable and resilient not for 2030, but 2100?

Dr. Kimari: I completely agree with you. That would require a lot of things. For example, construction takes up a lot of water, this should make us then rethink this consistent narrative and dominant norm about the importance of building. In cities like Nairobi, Luanda, Addis Ababa and every other city on the continent, they seem to always be in a construction boom. However, if we were to really think about the reality at hand and about climate change, it would cause us to reconsider how we build, how we prepare, what ecology we need to re-introduce to the city; completely different plans. City elites as well as county and city administrations appear reluctant to consider this. It would help us rethink our cities in ways that our master plans are reluctant to do.

Logan: Thank you. I think that is a good point to end on. A moment for everyone to think more innovatively, creatively, out of the box, to help us re-envision more resilient cities of the future. Thank you for joining us today and thank you for taking the time to share your experience, your research and your ideas on where we are up until now with urban centers and where we may be into the future.

Dr. Kimari: Thank you for the opportunity, Logan.

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