



Sustainable Environment and the built Space: Integrating Ecology, Planning and Human Well-being

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**ATTAINING SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHLY
INFORMALIZED SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COMMUNITIES: AN INCLUSIVE
URBAN PLANNER'S PERSPECTIVE**

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Greetings

Abstract

Less controlled urbanisation and exclusionary nature of urban management approach, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa have continued to aggravate the problem of environmental management, hinder sustainable development and promote inequalities. As the trajectory continues to show the widening gaps between the haves and the haves-not, it portrays the increasing vulnerabilities especially of the less privileged communities and households. This has been a concern of stakeholders in urban development and sustainable urbanization for long. Against that background, this paper appraises the existing levels of urbanisation, explores various concepts and dimensions of sustainable urbanisation/development, inclusive city/planning, alternative/informal urbanism, and interconnections between them, all in African context, with examples of some select countries. It reviews perspectives and theoretical postulates around informality as a way of life in the region. Having unveiled the inefficiencies in the traditional or 'received' urban planning system and practices and the need for a more pragmatic inclusive urban development planning approach, the paper proposes a comprehensive, multidimensional, multidisciplinary, and multi-sectoral inclusive urban development planning model as a way of achieving sustainable urbanisation and development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

That cities are engines of growth is not debatable (Jelili, 2012). The same holds for the fact of growth as a prerequisite to development. At the local, urban, supra urban, regional or national level, such growth or development must be sustainable for it to be considered meaningful, positive and have an overarching effect on each of the sectors of the real, financial and spatial economy, as well as segments of the population. Unfortunately, cities of most of the Third World countries, particularly of the Global South, and more importantly, of the sub-Saharan Africa, have their growth and development unsustainable. This is manifest not just in environmental management challenges and overstretched housing and infrastructure, but also in the increasing dimensions of inequalities, lopsided distribution of the proceeds of the cities' growth, widening gaps between the haves and the have-nots, the negative consequences of all of which continue to be borne by the helpless poor who constitute the majority of the urban population.

Hence, rather than having highly performing, economically buoyant, industrially viable and environmentally sustainable towns and cities, the experience has been that described by Egunjobi (1999) as "Our Gasping Cities" which continues to define the births, the lives, and the survival of most urban agglomerations in the region. As environmental problems continue to mount due to the dwindling urban infrastructure capacities of cities, the gaps between the poor and the rich continue to expand, as the former seek solace in the growing informality as a way of life, and bear the brunt of inefficient urban growth process in all respects, while the latter face such insecurity challenges as urban violence, kidnapping, and assassination, among other vices, some of which may be by the 'helpless' poor, who may resort to 'helping themselves, legally or illegally. That is never the envisaged city from a sustainable urbanisation process nor that opined by an inclusive urban planning process being orchestrated in this presentation.

Of particular interest to this presentation is the problem of increasing informality which is manifest in such issues as informal urbanisation, informal settlements/housing, informal transportation, informal land use, informal sector, among other dimensions of informality (Jelili, 2023), which are different ways of exhibiting resilience to poverty impact and of eking out a livelihood by the poor majority of the urban population. This is an important issue for any meaningful urban development planning process in sub-Saharan Africa, which unfortunately is underplayed or even criminalised by the traditional urban development planners (Wahab, 2018). Urban development planners, in this context, and in line with Jelili (2023) and Jelili, et al (2024), refers to all those involved in the planning of physical, economic and socio-political development of the city and its people - including all categories of planners in all relevant sectors of the urban economy. I shall return to this later.

Unfortunately, urban development planning in this region, in all intent and purpose, is exclusionary in nature. It has less recognition for, or pays little attention to, the contribution of the informal sector of the economy, and criminalises informal land use, housing and other components. This problem, which culminates into a less inclusive city, has been a concern for some time now,

especially of the national and international workshops, seminars and conferences largely by the academia, public servants, professionals and civil society organisations, whose outcries are audible mainly as academic exercises. Regrettably, the exclusion of the less recognized sector and/or human activities, their participants, and the implications for urban economy, urbanization processes and sustainable development still remain a serious challenge in towns and cities of the developing countries, which stick to the colonial planning instruments many decades after political independence. How to address the peculiar challenges of African urban communities, especially the question of informality, therefore, reoccurs in most public and academic debates, and continues to beg for adequate attention.

For example, the World Bank in one of its reports titled “The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies”, observes that informal economy accounts for more than two thirds of employments in developing and emerging economies, and for 80.4 percent of Nigerian employments (World Bank, 2022). Yet, the sector, in most of its dimensions, is not getting its due recognition in the scheme of things (Jelili, 2023). This perhaps was the gap which the UN-Habitat identified for the theme of the 2022 World Habitat Day as: “Mind the Gap, Leave No One and Place Behind” (UN-Habitat, 2022). I doubt it if the gap has been shrinking since that time. Ladies and gentlemen, this global thought, which is in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 (to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) may also have informed the main theme of this international conference which is centred on sustainable environment. And I want to say that the theme cannot be better coined, especially now that the plan period for attaining the SDGs is over two-third-spent (2015-2026-2030), which necessitates the need for appraisal of all efforts towards attaining the laudable goals, especially SDG 11, among others, in our own sphere of human endeavours - planning, design and management of the built environment.

Urbanisation Challenges and Need for Effective Development Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa

There is no gainsaying the fact that there is an increasing urbanization level globally, and it is expected to reach 57 percent by 2050 from 47 percent at the wake of the new millennium in 2000. Future increases are, however, projected to concentrate far more in Africa, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, than elsewhere in the world! With 3.5 percent per year, Africa has experienced the highest urban growth in the last two decades, and this will continue till at least 2050 when African population is expected to double from about 704 million around 2020 to about 1.4 billion, with a share of Africa urban population increasing from 36 percent in 2010 to 45 percent in 2023-2025 and will continue rising till 50 percent in 2030. The estimates for 2023 indicate that Nigeria, for example, was about 54 percent urban (as against the continental average of over 45%), translating to about 130 million urban dwellers in the country (Statista, 2024a)! The trajectory continues without a commensurate increase in the infrastructural capacities of most cities in the region. The trend above has multidimensional implications for sustainable development of the region, especially as manifested in the consequences of uncontrolled urbanization which have been

reported to be increasingly negative in sub-Saharan African countries, because of their relatively less capacities to cope with such unprepared-for consequences.

For example, while countries of a similar status (developing countries) in about six decades ago such as India, Malaysia and even China, have drastically advanced in all facets of positive urbanization, urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa to a large extent, remains synonymous with 'slummization', with the proportion of urban households living in slums estimated to be as high as 53.9 in Nigeria, while that in informal settlements in the country is higher! While the problems of inadequate infrastructure, increasing traffic congestion and other dimensions of environmental management issues are still phenomenal, those of political unrest, insurgencies, kidnappings and the concomitant urban stress and dwindling livabilities are mounting, and unfortunately leading to relatively low life expectancies. For example, the 2023 Africa life expectancy (LE) average of 63 (which is far lower for sub-Saharan Africa) was about the least among continents of the world, and this varied from country to country. It was relatively high (far higher than African average) in most North African countries such as Algeria (77.3), Tunisia (76.9), Morocco (75.2), and Egypt (70.8), among others. While the 2023 LE estimates of 53.7 and 53.9, respectively, for Chad and Nigeria were the lowest in Africa, that of Lesotho (with sparse population) for the same year (54.9) was not significantly higher (Statista, 2024b)! While there is a slight increase in African LE average from 63 in 2023 to 64 in 2026, the estimate for Nigeria insignificantly increased from 53.9 in 2023 to 54.8 in 2026, but regrettably overtaken by Chad and became the country with the least LE on the continent (IMF, 2026). The top 10 African countries in terms of LE as of April 2026 in descending order are: Tunisia (76.9), Algeria (76.7), Cabo Verde (76.4), Morocco (75.7), Mauritius (75.3), Libya (73.2), Seychelles (73.1), Egypt (72), Western Sahara (71.8), and Sao Tome & Principe (70.1). Regrettably, none of the mainland countries of sub-Saharan Africa, comprising West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa, is included! Not even the 'giant of Africa' (Nigeria) or South Africa, is included!

In spite of some policy interventions and reforms in Nigeria, the situation in the country is growing worse, especially in recent times when unprecedentedly huge depreciation of the naira value was experienced, and it has never been quite stable. This has seriously affected the national economic performance and the purchasing power in the country in the last couple of years. For example, in 2016, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of USD 405.1 billion, Nigeria was the largest economy in Africa, with Egypt (336.3) and South Africa (294.8) trailing far behind as the second and third largest economies, respectively, on the continent (CBN, 2016). But, by 2024, and according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) record, with a GDP of USD 252.74 billion, Nigeria had dropped drastically to the 4th largest, trailing behind South Africa (373.233), Egypt (347.60) and Algeria (266.78) (IMF, 2024a), which had improved their GDPs significantly over time. Sadly, out of the top ten countries with highest GDPs in Africa in 2024, including South Africa, Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Morocco, Kenya, Angola, Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania, in that descending order, Nigeria had the least per capita income of USD 1110. And the situation would be worse if we factored the high level of inequality in the country into it. Thus, the country had the highest proportion of people living below the extreme poverty level (11.3%) among the

top seven countries with largest economies in sub-Saharan Africa (i.e excluding the north African countries of Egypt, Algeria and Morocco). The recent projections by the IMF in its October, 2024 data categorizing Nigeria, alongside South Africa, as one of the ‘emerging markets and developing economies’ with an annual percentage increase in GDP from 2.9 percent in 2024 to 3.2 percent in 2025 (IMF, 2024b) may not have significantly altered the trajectory within a short time, either. And it is worrisome to observe that, in spite of the recent oil subsidy removal (since 2023), the most recently released IMF April 2026 data, using 2025 Nominal GDP projections below still have Nigeria maintaining its discouraging position as the fourth largest economy in Africa.

Table: 10 Largest Economies in Africa (2025 Nominal GDP Projections released in April, 2026), their Per Capita Incomes and Life Expectancy Estimates

S/n	Country	GDP (in billions of dollars)	GDP Capita Income (in dollars)	Life Expectancy
1.	South Africa	479.96	7,503	66.5
2.	Egypt	429.64	3,904	72
3.	Nigeria	377.37	1,556	54.8
4.	Algeria	317.17	6,628	76.7
5.	Morocco	194.33	5,107	75.7
6.	Angola	152.35	3,754	65
7.	Kenya	147.26	2,714	64
8.	DR Congo	123.41	1,122	62.2
9.	Ethiopia	121.53	1,081	67.9
10	Ghana	118.29	3,314	65.9

Source: IMF April 2026 World Economic Outlook Data and 2025 Projections

GDP, GDP per Capita and Life Expectancy Estimates for African countries (2026)

Country	GDP	GDP per Capita	Life Expectancy
North Africa			
Algeria	317.17	6628	76.7
Egypt	429.64	3904	72.0
Libya	52.45	6962	73.2
Tunisia	60.74	4893	76.9
Morocco	194.33	5107	75.7

Sudan	44.69	864	66.7
West Africa	GDP	GDP per Capita	Life Expectancy
Guinea Bissau	2.98	1449	64.4
Guinea	29.93	1848	61.1
Gambia	2.79	953	66.3
Cote d'Ivoire	112.11	3313	62.3
Nigeria	377.37	1556	54.8
Sierra Leone	8.27	919	62.2
Ghana	118.29	3314	65.9
Togo	13.44	1341	63.1
Benin	27.79	1809	61.1
Liberia	5.64	964	62.5
Niger	24.81	822	61.7
Mali	33.85	1301	60.9
Burkina Faso	32.51	1319	61.5
Chad	25.63	1315	67.3
Senegal	40.47	2054	69.5
Mauritania	14.35	3033	68.9
Cabo Verde	3.45	6670	76.4
Country	GDP	GDP per Capita	Life Expectancy
Kenya	147.26	2714	64.0
Tanzania	94.59	1362	67.4
Rwanda	17.34	1198	68.2
Ethiopia	121.53	1081	67.9
Burundi	8.14	546	64.0
Comoros	1.81	1951	67.3
Djibouti	4.72	4421	66.4
Eritrea	2.28	656	69.2
Madagascar	21.18	656	64.0
Malawi	18.15	733	67.7
Mozambique	23.27	632	64.0
Seychelles	2.25	17675	73.1
Somalia	14.17	813	59.1
South Sudan	6.07	488	57.9
Uganda	73.37	1476	68.7
Country	GDP	GDP per Capita	Life Expectancy
CAR	3.49	613	57.9
DR Congo	123.41	1122	62.2
Congo	17.03	2554	66.2
Cameroon	65.14	2125	64.3

Gabon	23.36	9918	68.7
Equitorial Guinea	13.72	8152	64.1
Mauritius	17.12	13812	75.3
Sao Tome & Precipe	1.16	4739	70.1
Country	GDP	GDP per Capita	Life Expectancy
South Africa	479.96	7503	66.5
Lesotho	2.97	1241	58.2
Eswatini	5.79	4927	64.4
Namibia	17.31	5573	67.7
Botswana	21.94	8490	69.4
Zimbabwe	56.71	3199	63.4
Angola	152.35	2714	65.0
Zambia	41.24	1831	66.7

Source: IMF, 2026

Although, some exaggerations and/or inadequacies may be noticed in the regularly released statistics of urbanization, economic indices, and their consequences as presented for African countries, as argued by Potts (2012) and Jelili (2020), the need for a more realistic sustainable development planning framework and process in Africa, especially in Nigeria with the highest concentration of black race in the world, is not controvertible. As a development planning analyst, and for the purpose of this presentation, I suggest inclusive development planning approach, which is distinct from the traditional planning approach and methodology. Before then, may we explore the global approach to development and what it promises for Africa's urbanism.

Sustainable Urban Development: To what extent does the global approach benefit Africa's urbanism?

I detest distinguishing between development and sustainable development; when there is development, it should be sustainable. In other words, no form of urban growth and development - economic, physical, social, industrial, etc - is qualified to be described as development if it is not sustainable, because development itself connotes all forms of positivity that should accompany urban spatial, economic, industrial, etc, expansion. For the purpose of convention, however, we shall re-examine the concept of sustainable development, relevant global agendas, and the implications for Africa's urbanism.

Sustainable urban development refers to the process of designing and managing cities in a manner that meets the needs of the current population without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their own needs (Basiago, 1999). This concept encompasses three main pillars: economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability. Economic sustainability involves creating jobs and fostering economic growth while ensuring that resources

are used effectively and efficiently. Social sustainability focuses on improving the quality of life for all citizens, promoting social equity, and fostering inclusive communities. Environmental sustainability, on the other hand, aims to minimize the environmental footprint of urban development, conserving resources, reducing pollution, and protecting natural ecosystems (Basiago, 1999). The footprint of any form of physical development or project refers to its total impact on different aspects of the environment (natural resources and ecological services), while that of a town or city is the collective impacts of all land use or human activities on the physical or natural environment. It is usually measured in global hectare (gha), and expressed as urban ecological footprints, defined as an area-based measure designed to account for the burden a given metropolis or city's life style has on the biosphere (Ortega-Montoya and Johari, 2020). This is one of the complex areas of environmental sustainability due to the complexity of its measurement and the fact that it has not been adequately explored or researched into, especially in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. That is not the focus here either.

The principles of sustainable urban development were further elaborated and integrated into international policy frameworks. Preparatory to the new millennium, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro produced Agenda 21, a comprehensive plan for global sustainable development, which included a strong emphasis on sustainable urbanization. At the wake of the millennium in the year 2000, another global development agenda was formulated as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), most of which were not achieved at the end of the plan period in 2015, leading to its review same year. In that same year (2015), the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted and made to encapsulate 17 goals and 135 targets. The goals can be summarized as: zero poverty and hunger (1&2); good health, wellbeing and education (3&4); gender equality (5); clean water, sanitation and affordable energy (6&7); decent work, economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure (8&9); reduced inequalities and sustainable/inclusive communities (10&11); responsible production, consumption and climate action (12&13); life below water and on land (14&15); peace, justice and strong institutions (16); and partnerships for the goals (17) (United Nations, 2015).

These development goals and frameworks underscore the global recognition of the importance of sustainable urban development and guide local and national efforts to create more sustainable cities. Since the beginning of the plan period in 2015, there has been an annual report to cover the level of achievement of the goals and targets for each of the years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024. Although, while our special emphasis, as built environment professionals, is on Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), which explicitly aims to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" (United Nations, 2015), it is disheartening to observe from the 2024 annual report (released in 2025) that:

“...the world is severely off-track to achieve the 2030 Agenda....out of 135 targets with trend data and additional insights from custodian agencies, only 17% are progressing as expected to be achieved by 2030. Nearly half (48%) exhibit moderate to severe deviations from the desired trajectory, with 30% showing marginal progress and 18% indicating

moderate progress. Alarmingly, 18% have stagnated, and 17% have regressed below the 2015 baseline levels” (United Nations, 2024, p.3)’.

The ugly situation above is a pointer to the fact that, for each of the member nations, something is wrong with development planning and implementation processes at the national and subnational levels where local actions are expected to be taken to meet up with the requirements of SDGs and their targets across the globe. Being a member nation of the United Nations, Nigeria, like many other African countries, has been part of the process, and of course, in support of the agenda as a way of charting the course of growth and development of towns and cities in the country. The situation in terms of achievement of the goals in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, is not better, if not worse, than the average global situation depicted above. The challenge and concern, has remained how to achieve the goals and targets, given the informal nature of most part of our urbanisation process. How have our cities been fairing in this regard, especially with respect to urban development and management? The poser has been a recurring question, especially on how to make the city work not just for the aggregate economic expansion and urban development, but how to accommodate the interest of every category of urban residents who also have the right to the city as 'urban citizens'. An urban citizen in this context is any taxpayer who legally lives or resides in the city irrespective of their gender, socioeconomic status, religion, nationality, physical ability, class or creed. It refers to anyone legally residing in the city and has the right to remain so.

Peculiarities of Cities of sub-Saharan Africa: Alternative or Informal Urbanism

The Context

There has been overwhelming literature on the inadequacy and inefficiency of the 'borrowed' so-called traditional planning approach to urban development planning, which is largely patterned to address urbanisation and city planning challenges of the European and American cities. From subtle deviations from the norms by general radical postmodernist planners such as Faludi (1973), Andreas, Davidoff (1965), Hall and Tewdr-Jones (2011), who are largely of similar orientations with the core rational planners of the modernist era, to the lamentations and outcries of the later pan-Africanist planning theorists such as Watson, Agbola (2013), Harrison (), Jelili (2013, 2020, 2023), and Cobbinah (2023), among many others, the gap between the imaginary utopianism being orchestrated by the planning orthodoxy of the rational comprehensive approach and the realities of the sub-Saharan African communities and urban areas are becoming wider and more visible. And the need for more appropriate planning approach, methodologies and instruments have become more established than ever before, especially since the wake of the new millennium in 2000, the time when concepts such as sustainable development, sustainable urbanisation, good urban governance, inclusive cities, informality, etc, became phenomenally popular, gained widespread attention and culminated into the recognition of what is now describe as alternative urbanism, which is a radical departure from a one-size-fits-all approach of the modernist planning . While it is true that the emerging issues have attracted efforts such as national and international conferences, workshops, and debates, the outcomes of such efforts have always raised more

questions than answers, especially on the question of how best to plan Africa's towns and cities (Watson and Agbola, 2013), and one of the main concepts or issues in the context of Africa has been informality or informal urbanisation as a manifestation of the African urbanism as a variant of alternative urbanism.

Thus, alternative urbanism refers to a way of life in cities that is outside the confines of the expected norms of the 'received knowledge' on how humans should interact with the urban built environment, or how cities should look like, behave and grow. Informal Urbanism is not the opposite of urbanism; it is what I choose to describe here as a popular variant of alternative urbanism, at least in sub-Saharan African communities. It is a way of life in cities, which according to Jelili (2023), defines the nature and process of city formation, expansion and human interaction with the built environment which is less guided by formal institutions, regulations and frameworks (Jelili, 2023).

Urban informality as an alternative urbanism is a central feature of cities in Sub-Saharan Africa and encompasses a wide range of activities and spatial practices, including informal housing, unregulated land markets, and informal economic activities (Charmes, 2012; Obeng-Odoom, 2011). Traditionally, informality has been conceptualized as a deviation from formal systems—a residual category representing illegality or non-compliance with planning regulations. However, contemporary scholarship challenges this narrow interpretation, emphasizing that informality is deeply embedded in the functioning of urban systems (Jelili, 2023; Watson, 2009).

Rather than labelling it illegal or disorderly, informality often represents adaptive strategies adopted by urban residents in response to structural constraints such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to formal housing and services. As Watson (2009a) argues, informality reflects the inability of formal planning systems to accommodate the needs of the majority, rather than the failure of urban residents themselves. In this sense, informality is both a product of systemic exclusion or failure, and a mechanism of survival.

Thus, in African cities, informal land use practices frequently operate alongside formal systems, creating hybrid urban landscapes where legality and illegality are blurred. This hybridity challenges conventional planning approaches that rely on rigid zoning and regulatory enforcement. It also raises important questions about the legitimacy of planning systems that exclude large segments of the population. Understanding the plight of the poor and less privileged and informality as an integral component of the urbanization process, rather than an anomaly, is therefore essential for developing effective and inclusive planning responses, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dimensions of Informality and Informal Urbanism

It should be reiterated that one of the surest ways of promoting inclusive cities in sub-Saharan Africa is by addressing the question of informality or informal urbanism (Jelili and Adedibu, 2006). According to Jelili (2023), terms such as urban informality, informal urbanization, informal settlement, informal land use, informal sector activities, informal housing, informal transportation, etc, are central to understanding informal urbanism in the African context. He proceeds further to

say, while ‘urban informality’ may be synonymous with ‘informal urbanism’ as the totality of urban way of life that is largely independent of the formally established frameworks and control, informal urbanization is the process of evolving an informal urban setting or settlement, where, according to Watson (2009), all manner of income generation, forms of settlement and housing, and forms of negotiating life take place (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Dimensions of Informal Urbanism (Adapted from Jelili and Ogunkan, 2017; Jelili, 2023)

All these have been divided by Dovey (2012) into two broad groups: (i) informal practices within public space such as street trading, parking, hawking, street-begging, and advertising, and (ii) informal urban morphologies of construction and settlement, whether on public or private land. The spatial expression of all (economic) activities and practices that define an informal urban settlement, neighbourhood or housing area is described by Jelili and Ogunkan (2017), as informal land use. The latter (informal land use) is an emerging concept in urban planning, and how to integrate it into formal urban land use planning is one of the reasons for this conference, I presume.

How to Proceed: The Popular Slogan

Beyond the concepts of sustainable development and informal urbanism, among others, the concept of inclusive cities is about a pro-poor approach to addressing urban challenges. Thus, the

popular slogan now should be “let the poor breathe”, because this is the category of the people that bear the brunt of inefficient and poor governance. And unless something is done to recognise their rights to the city and to the urban space, and protect same in whatever form of urban development planning being done, we may be sitting on the keg of gun powder, as the poor, the common people, the so-called disadvantaged and voiceless, which are the majority, may revolt to claim their rights, if not attended to on time. The process and outcome of such preventable crisis is better imagined than experienced. For example, we had witnessed how preventable minor issues, occasioned by the corruption and desperate looting of the treasury by the corrupt political leaders, which devastated and frustrated the masses, had led to big crises and full-fledged wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia and other places, as well as fuelled insurgencies and other forms of uprisings in Nigeria. Ladies and gentlemen, we already have seen how the poor reacted to support the military intervention (take-over) by General Abdourahamani Tchiani against the sacked democratically elected government of President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger Republic in July, 2023, celebrating the ouster of the latter. While my position here is not to take side with either the military guys or the ousted President of Niger, all the scenarios above are a pointer to the fact that if we failed to take care of the masses and everyone who has the right to live, to breathe, to work, to recreate, to move, to travel, to enjoy all rights and privileges the city offers, they may revolt, and the results may be multidimensionally devastating. This conference is a right step in a right direction, and my product here is Inclusive Planning for Inclusive Cities. What do I mean?

Inclusive Cities, Inclusive Planning and Interrelated Concepts

Central to the discourse here are the concepts of inclusive cities, **inclusive urbanization, informal urbanism and inclusive planning**. Inclusive urbanism is an important feature of an inclusive city; it is defined, according to Espino (2015), as a city system in which different social groups mix and have equal opportunities to participate. It embraces diversity and flexibility, understanding that everyone has different needs, and those needs are constantly changing (Asian Development Bank, 2017, 2022). Inclusive urbanization seeks to address issues in access to urban services and equitability of the urban socioeconomic structure through ensuring that all participants have access to the same level of services and opportunities as one another (Lemaire and Kerr, 2017). An inclusive city, according to Cities for All programme, cited in Jelili (2023) is a place where everyone, independent of their economic circumstances, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, nationality or religion, can, and is allowed to, participate fully in the social, economic, cultural and political opportunities that cities offer. Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I make bold to say that, as appealing as it may be to the progressives and democrats, there cannot be an inclusive city without inclusive planning.

Inclusive planning incorporates plan-making and implementation processes where all community members feel welcome to participate and are confident that their participation can positively affect outcomes (Albizo et al., 2019). Inclusiveness is generally the idea that the opportunities and benefits of economic growth and urban development should be widely and equitably shared by all

segments of the society irrespective of their socioeconomic and other conditions. Most cities however fall short of this ideal. This brings to the fore the stakeholders or targets most evident in the discourse of inclusive urbanism viz: persons with disabilities; women; children and young people; elders or aged people and the lower-income residents (Belausteguigoitia, 2019; Asian Development Bank, 2022). These are the predominant participants in the informal sector and practices, as well as dwellers of the informal settlements who also have the right to be in the city, and whose rights need to be protected.

However, modern urban planning practices may adversely affect the lives of city inhabitants who are marginalized, either through identity or economic status. Construction of transport infrastructure designed for private transport (e.g. highways), housing complex development, the provision of new secondary and tertiary industrial spaces in urban centres etc. can all lead to the exclusion of citizens who cannot meet the requirements of participating in the city as it exists (Lemaire and Kerr, 2017). As noted by Espino (2015), the socially exclusionary nature of urban development is evident all over the world: in low-income countries, where the poor are excluded in the name of ‘modernization’, as well as in high-income countries, where the poor are excluded in the name of ‘order’.

Inclusive planning is meant to forestall the skewed exposure of the lower class to ill-effects left in the wake of the privileged class reaping the dividends of urbanization. It seeks to optimize the welfare of the poor alongside the privileged in the built environment (Jelili, 2023). The fact is that poor people and their settlements are an indispensable narrative of today's urbanism. They both drive the city's economic growth and are equally entitled to all its services and opportunities. Hence, Khosla (2016) rightly affirms that the idea of a sustainable, prosperous and vibrant city is hard to imagine where the commixture of different categories of stakeholders, both in the formal and informal settings, has not happened. Inclusion is thus about right urbanism. A common approach to defining inclusivity is to consider citizen's rights to the city, and the rights and services that citizens can expect from an urban space. Organizations such as Slum Dwellers International, for example, use this rights-based approach to plan their support and interventions in improving the living conditions of the urban poor (Lemaire and Kerr, 2017).

Inclusive planning is, however, more than taking into consideration or involving all categories of stakeholders (professionals, city managers, urban residents, the less privileged, and low-income people, among others). It is not confined to mere economic opportunities and physical planning. It embraces all facets of urban development planning, which include strategic, economic, industrial, infrastructure and other development plans for cities, which the physical development plan must be in harmony with. In other words, inclusive planning, in this context, is a development planning approach, which is integrated in nature by embracing all forms of development planning and involving all categories of stakeholders (Jelili, 2023). How do we ensure inclusive planning for inclusive cities as urban planners?

What to Include: Inclusion and Integration

When people talk about inclusive cities or problem of exclusion generally, they always refer to sub-populations or segments of the population, categories of stakeholders and spatial units, which need be involved or covered in the process of planning and managing cities. No doubt, this is an essential component of analyzing the issue of inclusiveness whether in cities or otherwise. While this view should be upheld in urban planning and management process, there cannot be effective and efficient inclusive cities, if the aspatial dimension of the inclusiveness is not taken to include all types of (development) plans for different sectors of the city economy and for all categories of stakeholders. The concept of inclusive cities, thus portrays the process and outcomes of an inclusive planning. It presupposes the idea of holistic planning approach to addressing urban management challenges.

In specific terms, urban (development) planning for inclusive cities will include the following dimensions and variables:

- **All segments of the population**, including the rich and the poor, the haves and haves-not, the privileged and the less privileged, the political class and their subjects, etc
- **All categories of stakeholders**, including the city managers or government agencies, the professionals in different sectors, the populace (including the original residents and migrants), community-based organizations, landlords' associations, etc
- **All parts of the city**, including the planned and less planned neighbourhoods or informal settlements, indigenous areas, intermediate and new areas such as government reserved areas for the rich or political class, refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps, among others
- **All types of physical urban development plans**, including overall physical development plans, infrastructure plans, urban renewal plans, housing development plans, structure plans, etc
- **All types of the city economic plans**, including overall city development strategy or urban development plan, regional development plans, industrial, education, health and other subject plans for all other sectors
- An holistic urban development planning framework or regulation within which all other types of plans are formulated and implemented, and in which all interests are protected

Case Studies

Examples abound regarding attempts in the past to domesticate the concept of inclusive cities or inclusive planning approach, it is their degrees of success that vary. The Lagos, Ghana and Senegal examples are hereby explored.

Accra, Ghana

Accra provides a useful example of how rapidly growing African cities is beginning to shift toward more inclusive and resilience-oriented planning frameworks. The Accra Resilience Strategy developed by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (2019) represents a structured attempt to respond to the challenges of rapid urbanization, widespread informality, and increasing climate-related risks.

A key feature of the Accra strategy is its emphasis on participatory governance and stakeholder engagement. Rather than treating informal settlements as illegal spaces to be removed or ignored, the strategy recognizes them as integral parts of the urban system. Informal communities are increasingly involved in consultations aimed at identifying vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to flooding, waste management, and inadequate drainage infrastructure. This participatory approach reflects a broader shift from top-down planning to more collaborative urban governance models.

In practical terms, the strategy focuses on improving infrastructure systems such as drainage, solid waste management, and sanitation, all of which are critical challenges in low-income and informal settlements. Accra is highly vulnerable to recurrent flooding, especially in densely populated informal areas where poor drainage systems and uncontrolled development exacerbate environmental risks. The resilience strategy therefore, rather than clearing them, prioritizes upgrading critical infrastructure while also enhancing disaster preparedness and response mechanisms.

However, while the Accra case demonstrates clear progress toward inclusive planning, implementation challenges remain. Institutional fragmentation, limited funding, and enforcement difficulties continue to constrain the full integration of informal settlements into formal planning systems. Nevertheless, Accra provides an important example of how Africa's cities can begin to reframe informality not as a problem to eliminate but as a condition to be managed through adaptive and participatory planning.

Dakar, Senegal

Dakar represents another significant case of resilience-oriented urban transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through its participation in the 100 Resilient Cities Initiative, coordinated locally by the Ville de Dakar in partnership with 100 Resilient Cities (2016), Dakar has developed strategies aimed at strengthening urban resilience while addressing deep-rooted socio-spatial inequalities.

The Dakar Resilience Strategy places strong emphasis on social inclusion, climate adaptation, and improved urban governance. A key objective is to better integrate informal settlements into formal planning systems by recognizing their socioeconomic importance and reducing their vulnerability to environmental risks (Ville de Dakar & 100 Resilient Cities, 2016). Unlike conventional planning approaches that often seek to eliminate informality, the strategy acknowledges the

permanence of informal urbanization and adopts a more pragmatic approach that works with existing urban realities rather than against them (Watson, 2009b; Cobbinah & Finn, 2022).

Community engagement is central to the Dakar model. Local residents, including those in informal settlements, are actively involved in identifying priority risks and proposing solutions. This participatory process ensures that interventions are grounded in lived realities rather than abstract planning assumptions, aligning with broader principles of inclusive and collaborative planning (Hall & Tewdwr-Jones, 2020; Lawson, 2016). Key areas of intervention include coastal flooding management, waste disposal systems, and access to basic services, all of which had disproportionately affected low-income and informal communities (IPCC, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2014).

Dakar's approach also highlights the importance of multi-level governance and international partnerships in addressing urban challenges. Collaboration between local authorities, international organizations, and development partners has facilitated access to technical expertise and funding for resilience projects (Ville de Dakar & 100 Resilient Cities, 2016; UNISDR, 2012). However, similar to other African cities, challenges persist in scaling up interventions and ensuring long-term institutional sustainability, particularly in contexts where planning systems remain constrained by institutional and financial limitations (Berrisford, 2011; Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2017).

Isale Igangan, Lagos, Nigeria

This is another important case of operationalising inclusive planning to accommodate informality component of the urban spatial economy. Using inclusive planning approach, and land pooling planning methodology, Lagos State Urban Renewal Authority (LASURA) in conjunction with other development agencies, as reported in Jelili, et al (2020), embarked upon redevelopment of Isale-gangan, which was an informal urban neighbourhood in Lagos. The project, which started and proceeded with a participatory approach, in which all stakeholders put their resources (lands) together for a common goal of having an improved and better urban neighbourhood was a great success. It involved land pooling and issuance of a joint title document having names of all initial house owners, a temporary relocation of existing occupants, demolition of the entire residential buildings, construction of a new multi-unit modern highrise building with necessary facilities (with the first wing having 24 flats), and returning of the original occupants/land owners to the newly developed property on terms and conditions jointly agreed to by all stakeholders. The hitherto informal area with multiple informal housing units was, in the process, getting formalised, recognised and provided for.

Comparative Insights and Implications

Taken together, the cases of Accra, Dakar and Isalegangan, Lagos, illustrate an emerging paradigm shift in urban planning across Sub-Saharan Africa. The three cases demonstrate that sustainable

urban development in highly informalized contexts is possible, and being increasingly pursued through resilience thinking, participatory governance, and inclusive planning frameworks. A key lesson from the three cases is that informality cannot be effectively addressed through exclusionary or purely regulatory approaches. Instead, sustainable outcomes are more likely when informal settlements are recognized as legitimate components of the urban fabric and are integrated into the planning process. This includes improving infrastructure in situ, enhancing service delivery, and involving residents at every stage of decision-making processes.

Another important insight is the central role of climate resilience in shaping contemporary urban policy. Both Accra and Dakar show how environmental risks particularly flooding are closely intertwined with informality and inadequate infrastructure. As such, climate adaptation and inclusive planning are increasingly becoming mutually reinforcing objectives.

However, both cases also reveal persistent structural constraints, including limited financial resources, weak institutional coordination, and political challenges in implementing inclusive policies at scale. These limitations suggest that while inclusive and resilience-based planning represents a promising direction, its success depends on sustained institutional reform and long-term political commitment.

Discussion/Lessons

Inclusive planning has increasingly been recognized as a transformative approach for addressing the challenges associated with urban informality. Rather than treating informal settlements as illegal or temporary anomalies, inclusive planning reframes them as integral parts of the urban system. This shift enables cities to upgrade informal areas into more resilient, livable, and socially integrated urban spaces. In many rapidly urbanizing regions, particularly in the Global South, informal settlements house more than two thirds of employments, and contribute substantially to local economies. Therefore, planning approaches that exclude this sector risk deepening inequality and urban fragmentation, and are bound to fail.

A central pillar of inclusive planning is participatory governance. This approach emphasizes that residents of informal settlements and operators of the informal economy should not merely be passive recipients of planning decisions but active contributors to them. Community participation enhances legitimacy, improves local knowledge integration, and increases the likelihood of successful implementation of development interventions. When residents are involved in identifying priorities—such as water access, sanitation, housing upgrades, or mobility improvements—planning outcomes tend to be more responsive and sustainable. Participatory mechanisms such as community forums, settlement upgrading committees, and co-design workshops help bridge the gap between formal planning institutions and lived realities.

Another critical consideration is regulatory flexibility. Conventional planning frameworks often rely on rigid zoning laws, building codes, and land tenure systems that do not reflect the realities of incremental housing development and informal economic activity. Inclusive planning advocates

for adaptive regulations that recognize incremental upgrading processes rather than demanding immediate compliance with formal standards. For example, allowing phased housing improvements, flexible plot sizes, and recognition of informal businesses can reduce displacement pressures and support gradual formalization. Such flexibility helps cities avoid forced evictions while still guiding long-term spatial order and safety improvements.

The integration of climate adaptation strategies is also essential, especially given the disproportionate vulnerability of informal settlements to climate-related risks such as flooding, heat stress, and landslides. Many informal settlements are located in environmentally fragile or high-risk areas due to land availability constraints, especially in countries like Lesotho. Inclusive planning therefore requires embedding resilience thinking into upgrading initiatives. This includes improving drainage systems, promoting climate-resilient building materials, enhancing green infrastructure, and developing early warning systems. Strengthening environmental resilience in informal areas not only protects vulnerable populations but also contributes to overall urban sustainability.

Finally, cross-sector, trans-disciplinary, and cross-professional collaborations are indispensable for effective implementation of inclusive urban interventions. Governments alone often lack the resources, technical capacity, and community reach required for large-scale upgrading programs. Collaboration between public agencies, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, academic institutions, and private sector actors can significantly enhance planning outcomes. NGOs often play a crucial role in community mobilization, while private actors may contribute financing or technical innovation. Coordinated action ensures that interventions are not fragmented but aligned with broader urban development goals, including poverty reduction, housing improvement, and sustainable infrastructure provision (Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2017; Lawson, 2016).

Conclusions

Of particular concern in this analysis is the fact that the city economy world over is getting more and more capitalistic in nature and in deed, shedding at a fast rate all the hitherto socialistic tendencies. Except there are direct interventions of the state, the poor informal sector participants and less privileged will be priced or taxed out of the city system or mainstream urban economy, yet they constitute the largest proportion of the urban population. Most direct interventions, however, are not sustainable either, and may not even be an option in the capitalist world. How then does a pro-poor government or state overcome the challenge of marrying the opposing requirements of the capitalist world with those of the inclusive-city or human-face urban governance approach? The seemingly difficult poser can be answered by a well thought-out and established process of inclusive planning which is a multidimensional and all-encompassing framework for making city not only profitable, but livable for all categories of urban residents.

Borrowing from the words of Jelili (2023), one can conclude on the situations of cities in sub-Saharan Africa that:

- The demonstrated ‘received’ knowledge of planning, in form of comprehensive physical development plans for cities and other forms of physical plans, may just be a ‘fantasy’, not capable of addressing the peculiar challenges of African urban communities, which are not just physical, but also have economic and social dimensions.
- Over exaggeration of planning orthodoxy in addressing urban development planning problems has not been working effectively as a planning instrument in Africa
- African urbanism and/or urbanization process is informal in nature and requires special consideration and tools which may not be envisaged by the orthodoxy of the modern planning science which is based mainly on the study of European and North American cities.
- Less-inclusive, less-coordinated national/state economic and urban development planning framework in which physical development planning is done in isolation of economic and other facets of development planning is a serious aberration in development planning process at the national and sub-national levels.
- Given their inability to compete favourably with other components of the urbanisation process, and the need to not criminalise it, informal land use and/or economy, and its participants need to be assisted by the state, with each state, municipal government and other national or subnational government determining the extent and dimension of intervention necessary for each case or situation.
- So, to improve the capacity of the state or municipal government for them to be able to help achieve sustainable development and inclusive city, there is a need for it to embrace an effective urban development planning approach, which must be multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, multi-sectoral, and interconnected for economic, industrial, social, and physical planning processes to take place in synergies, as suggested by Jelili (2023).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study revealed the urgent need for policy reform and institutional innovation to address the realities of urban informality in Sub-Saharan Africa. Rapid urban growth, coupled with limited formal housing provision, has resulted in the proliferation of informal settlements that are often excluded from official planning systems. To address these challenges effectively, urban policy must shift from exclusionary and reactive approaches to proactive, inclusive, and adaptive frameworks that recognize informality as a structural feature of the urbanization process rather than a deviation from it.

i. Reform Planning Laws to recognize informal settlements and enable legal land tenure

A fundamental policy shift is required in urban land administration and planning legislation. Many existing planning laws in African cities are outdated, rigid, and rooted in colonial-era frameworks that do not reflect current urban realities. Reforming these laws should involve formally recognizing informal settlements and creating pathways for legal land tenure security.

Secure tenure encourages household investment in housing improvements and infrastructure, reduces the risk of forced evictions, and strengthens residents' long-term attachment to their communities. Land regularization programs, simplified registration processes, and community-based cadastral systems can help bridge the gap between informal occupation and formal recognition.

ii. **Promote Slum Upgrading that enhances infrastructure without mass displacement**

Rather than pursuing demolition or relocation strategies, governments should prioritize in-situ slum upgrading. This approach focuses on improving existing settlements through incremental provision of basic infrastructure such as water supply, sanitation, drainage, electricity, and road networks. Upgrading should be designed in a way that minimizes displacement and protects social networks, livelihoods, and community cohesion. Experience from various urban contexts shows that forced evictions often exacerbate poverty and homelessness, whereas participatory upgrading fosters inclusion and long-term sustainability. And when redevelopment may be the only option, the idea of land pooling with only temporary relocation, as demonstrated in the Igangan, Lagos project can be embarked upon. Funding mechanisms, including public-private partnerships and international development support, can be mobilized to scale upgrading initiatives.

iii. **Institutionalize Community Participation in urban decision-making**

For inclusive planning to be effective, community participation must move beyond ad hoc consultation to become a formalized component of the planning process and governance structures. This requires establishing institutional mechanisms that ensure residents of informal settlements are represented and have their voices heard in planning committees, local councils, and development boards as equal development partners. Participatory budgeting, community mapping, and co-production of urban services are practical tools that can strengthen trust between residents and authorities. Institutionalizing participation also improves accountability, reduces conflict, and ensures that interventions reflect local needs and priorities.

On a final note, Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I consider my position here as one of the major responses to a poser by two pan-Africanist planning icons, Professors Vanessa Watson (late) and Tunde Agbola in their publication "Who will plan Africa's cities?" (Watson and Agbola, 2013). And I wish to submit that cities in sub-Saharan Africa can be planned effectively by urban planners of the school of thought who understands the possessive connotation of "Africa's cities", as against "African cities", and who appreciates informal urbanism as a basic characteristic of the urbanization process in sub-Saharan Africa and the need for its integration into state planning process towards achieving inclusive cities.

Thank you.

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