Critical reflections on urban and local development in Africa

Introduction

Africa and its development challenges have received significant attention in recent years. The Report of the Commission for Africa (2005), the ‘Making Poverty History’ campaign (BOND, 2005; MacDonald, 2005), and the attention of Bob Geldof and other musicians have placed African issues and more specifically African poverty back on both the policy and the popular agenda (DfID, no date). Africa is often regarded as the most marginalised continent, a claim for which not insignificant evidence can be produced (Gibson, 2004). Following the ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s, the theoretical challenges of the ‘development impasse’, the insightful critiques of the postdevelopment writers (Binns and Nel, 1999; Matthews, 2004), and a wave of Afropessimism associated with the AIDS pandemic, war in the Great Lakes region, genocide in Rwanda, and indications that poverty levels, contrary to global trends are actually increasing (United Nations, 2005), the situation does appear rather bleak. Significantly, the Commission for Africa stated “African poverty and stagnation is the greatest tragedy of our time” (2005, page 15). Despite this and the horror statistics, ordinary people must and do survive through combinations of self-reliance, informal activities, and with the help of NGOs, external agencies, and, where resources allow, local institutional support. Perhaps it is time to move beyond Western interpretations and biases of what development ‘should’ look like and pay closer attention to what is actually happening on the ground. Cheru’s (2002) persuasive arguments about the ‘silent revolution in Africa’, the United Nations Centre for Regional Development’s earlier support for ‘self-reliance’ (in Gooneratne and Mbilinyi, 1992), the increasingly recognised role of local ‘social movements’ and associated resistance to dominant processes (Gibson, 2004) and the elusive ideal of the ‘African Renaissance’ call for the reconceptualisation of just what is, and what should be, taking place in the continent at the level of the ordinary citizen.

Africa’s people are not passively accepting their fate of not all attaining the ‘ideal’ Western standards of living; instead there are vibrant forms of coping and survival activities which need to be more fully understood and interpreted. The groundbreaking work from the 1970s of Hart and the International Labour Organization (Drakakis-Smith, 1987) into the critical role of the informal sector needs to be extended to reflect contemporary realities and challenges and responses to globalisation and changing market opportunities. At a broader level, it is appropriate that one reflects on just what ‘new’ approaches people are adopting—both urban and rural—to survive in the most ‘marginal continent’ in the 21st century. What coping measures do they pursue? How significant are they and what can institutions, both local and external, do to unblock the trajectory of self-reliance and locally appropriate and locally determined development? This paper and the set of papers which follow do not pretend to aspire on their own to answer all of these questions. Rather, what this collection makes is a small contribution to extending debates on Africa and perhaps laying a basis for more Afrocentric research which acknowledges both postdevelopment and postcolonial critiques and tries to reconceptualise how ordinary Africans are struggling to survive, in spite of the negative statistical indicators, in what can be a hostile global economic environment. Ultimately what is both called for and what is needed is reflected in the
statement from the Commission for Africa (2005, page 1) “Our starting point is the recommendation that Africa must drive its own development.” This calls for new ways of thinking, it calls for an improved understanding of the challenges which Africa faces and support for local initiatives from both internal and external sources. According to Stock (2004, page 5):

“future development will depend primarily on the mobilization of African resources and know-how.... The possibility of supporting and ultimately building upon what ordinary Africans already know and do represents an exciting alternative to development strategies that rely exclusively on the state and ignore what people themselves can contribute to the development process”.

This is not to argue that Africa is unique, nor that it needs an ‘inferior’ form of development. It is rather an argument which states that in much the same way that newly industrialised country growth in South-East Asia in the 1970s was linked to key internal variables and the prevailing historical context of the time, so too should that of Africa’s now. As the paper by Gibb in this collection shows, aspects of locally driven urban development in Africa can start to emulate those of the West, albeit in urbanised South Africa. By contrast, other papers make the point that within cities and rural areas locally determined and locally appropriate development innovations and strategies play a key role in coping, survival, and market exchange, in much the same way as they do in the rest of the world. Africa is not exceptional; it has very real needs and the solutions to them share much in common with international best practice.

Reconceptualising African development in the 21st century

Development—particularly as it pertains to the poorer countries and to Africa—has been significantly reformulated in recent years. The publication of the Millennium Development Goals, the UN Millennium Project (Sachs, 2005a), active support for pro-poor development/pro-poor growth, the release of the Commission for Africa report, the motivations of Bono, Geldof, Sachs (2005b), and DFID (no date), to name some of the most obvious, endorse the theoretical validity of both new ways of thinking about development and the established ‘reflexive development’ construct (Pieterse, 1998), and also place the needs of the poor and the poorest continent firmly on the centre stage of development discourse. What is taking place is “a reorientation of development policy away from the old orthodoxy towards emphasis on global partnerships, pro-poor and inclusive growth and enhanced social spending” (Cleeve and Ndhlouv, 2004, page 9). These new approaches enjoy support from international organisations which recognise the central role which well-managed urban areas can play in poverty reduction and urban growth (DFID, 2001). However, in saying this, one must also acknowledge that development remains a contested arena as do the effects of globalisation on peoples’ lives in Africa (Gibson, 2004; Matthews, 2004).

New thinking also pervades internal discourse within Africa—the reconstitution of the African Union, the initiation of the ‘African Renaissance’, and the New Partnership for African Development herald the emergence of a vibrant, dynamic, and significant pan-African development discourse for the first time in nearly three decades. In parallel, proactive support from the Municipal Development Programme and the Club du Sahel (Club du Sahel and OECD, 2001) represents a concerted effort to help support localised development in an era of decentralisation. In practice, however, urban development issues in Africa have clearly not received the degree of attention which they deserve in both practice and debate (Cheru, 2002), while the reality that poverty levels have actually increased since 1990 are cause for concern, requiring concerted responses (United Nations, 2005).
While thinking on development has changed in terms of greatly enhanced recognition of the need to address poverty, to encourage development through participatory and empowering mechanisms, to unblock delivery channels, and to encourage partnerships, ultimately improvements in mass welfare will only occur when the means and encouragement to pursue individual and collective self-improvement, within the constraints and opportunities provided by the market and the global economy are actively facilitated by Africans for Africans, with external support and encouragement as appropriate. One of the key challenges in this regard will be that of breaking the ‘dependency’ mindset which has come to characterise many African governments and communities, namely the expectation and hope of continual foreign support and assistance.

A key facet of contemporary development thinking globally is the enhanced importance associated with ‘local’ places and locally driven development responses, be they community or local authority driven (Nel, 2001; Pike et al, 2006; Rogerson, 1995). In the African context specifically, Binns and Nel (1999) have argued the need to recognise the importance of locally driven and what are often community-based development initiatives which can play a key role as local coping and survival mechanisms. The reduced role of the state, the negative outcomes of economic changes, and what can be a hostile global environment help to drive such processes. The significance of locally based economic development or local economic development (LED) has clear links with the widespread encouragement of decentralisation and the devolution of decision-making powers taking place in Africa (Egziabher and Helmsing, 2005). LED cannot realistically be regarded a development panacea on its own, but it is one mechanism which can contribute to development through the strengthening of locally appropriate and locally driven solutions to Africa’s development needs; however, its limitations must also be anticipated and acknowledged (Berry, 2004).

Key African development concerns
In terms of contemporary thinking about applied development in Africa, several key themes emerge, over and above the long-standing concerns with poverty. These include:

- very real concerns about the pace of urbanisation and its associated impacts and implications in the context of limited urban economic and housing opportunities;
- associated questions of economic survival within both the urban and rural contexts in the light of globalisation, persistent poverty, and internal constraints, and the associated role which ‘local’ development/survival strategies can play;
- in the context of the new-found focus on democracy and decentralisation, what the role and potential of these considerations are in the broadening of development.

The papers in this collection variously explore some of these considerations and challenges; they identify various urban and local development options and actions and, in certain aspects, challenge some of the prevailing negative stereotypes. There are six papers in this theme issue. The first two draw on extensive, continent-wide reviews of available data over an extended period and discuss, in the first instance, rapid urbanisation in Africa and its implications, while the second paper examines actions to deal with the most obvious result of rapid urbanisation—namely burgeoning slums. In both cases conventional perceptions about urban processes in Africa are challenged and locally appropriate solutions are discussed. Then follows a paper by Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmstra which explores the relevance of LED in Sub-Saharan Africa as a response to development backlogs. The last three papers all explore local development and survival processes in Africa in the context of prevailing economic and institutional settings. Gibb in his study of Cape Town examines how this city, through proactive local engagement is taking on features of Western global cities as part of its local development response. Hampwaye et al reexamine the well-accepted
practice of urban agriculture, and while confirming its importance find that significant local and institutional barriers still impede its success. The last paper, by Hill et al, presents the case of successful local development from rural Malawi and examines how locally appropriate interventions, with NGO support and working within the market, can significantly improve local well-being. The six papers raise certain key issues that endorse the need to reevaluate what is happening in Africa and argue strongly for local solutions to local problems, making the point that Africa is not a special case and does share similarities with many other parts of the world.

Urban and local development as explored in the papers
The collection starts with a paper by Kessides (2007) who reflects on the nature of the urbanisation process in Africa, which so often is portrayed as one of exceptionalism and negativity. Based on extensive continent-wide research she finds that, while the urban demographic picture in Africa is one of rapid and dramatic change, what is happening is not a situation that is out of line with trends in other regions. She goes on to establish the positive benefits which urban development can in fact offer in terms of both economic growth and poverty relief and argues that in order to promote more sustainable growth and poverty reduction, more attention needs to be spent unblocking the productivity and welfare-enhancing potential of urban areas. At a broader level, it can be argued that what she is proposing is part of a wider process which recognises the increasing importance of African cities in global urban hierarchies in terms of their contribution to our understanding of “modernity, urban governance and the interactions between global capital flows and the material conditions of actually existing cities in the global South” (Gandy, 2006, page 374).

The reconceptualisation challenge posed by Kessides is further explored by Gulyani and Basset (2007) who discuss one of the key facets of responding to rapid urbanisation—namely that of responses to slums. Slums have come to feature prominently on the development agenda of numerous organisations, and their elimination is a key strategic focus of the Cities Alliance (2001) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2003) and also features in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2005). The authors reflect on thirty years' experience of responding to slum conditions and promoting urban upgrading in Africa. They find that microinnovations and project learning can inform and guide interventions, helping to improve chances of success. In addition, one of their key contributions is that of establishing that difficulties in securing tenure security for upgrading projects, which have become a major barrier to initiating such projects, can be partially overcome through undertaking infrastructural interventions in anticipation of future tenure. This is because capital investment appears to confirm de facto security which seems to be widely respected. The authors further lay a basis for future thinking in terms of developing linkages between slum development and broader citywide development.

LED enjoys not insignificant international appeal as a local development response in an era of globalisation and reduced state control and decentralisation. LED is equally relevant in Africa as is reflected in the arguments of two books published on the topic in 2005 (Egziabher and Helmsing, 2005; Nel and Rogerson, 2005) which discuss the opportunities and constraints which face LED in the continent. Rodr|¨guez-Pose and Tijmstra (2007) explore the relevance of LED in Africa and establish that, while Africa should not be regarded as exceptional, LED’s success will depend on locally specific conditions. The authors find that, although in many places the necessary conditions for LED are in place, in others support may well be needed to initiate the process. In an era characterised by the widespread implementation of decentralisation, the role of local development actions has been enhanced.
Expanding on the theme of the indicated importance of LED, particularly in an era of decentralisation and globalisation, Gibb's (2007) paper on Cape Town's emerging role as a global city is instructive. Although Cape Town and South Africa have a more sophisticated economy than other parts of the continent, what is happening there reinforces the point that Africa does share similarities with international experience and can compete on the global stage. While Gibb points out that currently only the minority of the city's residents benefit from the global city initiatives, the establishment of strong public–private partnerships, urban renewal, and business and recreational tourism will hopefully benefit more of the city’s residents in the long term. Developments in the city reflect the strengths of local institutional capacity and drive in an era of decentralisation and the city’s ability to engage with the world market on an equal footing, reinforce the relevance of LED in Africa.

Cape Town is a case where a strong, proactive local government has recognised and responded to local development needs. The same cannot be said, however, about Lusaka in Zambia. Hampwaye et al (2007) explore community survival in the city, primarily through urban agriculture (UA). They establish that, while UA clearly reflects a significant local self-reliance response to development and income needs, local institutional barriers remain. UA enjoys tacit policy support, but legal restrictions remain and the local authority could be more supportive, given the prevailing levels of poverty in the city. The paper reflects the importance of independent community-based LED (as discussed by Egziabher and Helmsing, 2005) and the need for enhanced, proactive, local government support.

The final paper in the set, that by Hill et al (2007), continues the community LED theme, which in this case is explored in the context of rural Malawi. The community development scheme described may be unique, but its success is instructive in terms of the nature of a locally based intervention which has drawn on local resources and skills, the support of an NGO, and, to a lesser degree, government extension support. The particular community in question proactively identified a formal sector market niche for their products and, in a noteworthy case of success, now operates in the formal market economy. The case reemphasises the importance of locally appropriate and locally driven development initiatives in a context of economic hardship.

The six papers in this collection encourage a reassessment of urban and local development responses and processes in Africa in an era of rapid urbanisation, growing slums, economic hardship, globalisation, and decentralisation. Kessides (2007) and Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmstra (2007) make the point that Africa is not unique and that both international trends and interventions find their equivalents in the continent. However, within this context, as all of the papers endorse, locally identified solutions and responses, which mesh to varying degrees with market and institutional forces, are a way forward, albeit not necessarily one available to all communities. Hill et al (2007) indicate that even in the poorest countries, communities can engage with the market, albeit relying on NGO support in this instance. However, Hampaye et al (2007) and Gulyani and Basset (2007) indicate that real institutional barriers to development remain and these need to be addressed and responded to at the local level. Gibb’s (2007) Cape Town case possibly reflects the most dramatic local response to changed economic and global circumstances. While pointing out that not all of the city’s residents have benefited, it is apparent that local institutions have found a niche market for the city within the global economy which capitalises on local assets. It can be argued that, while cases such as Cape Town and Malawi are unique, they are both indicative of the reality and the potential of contemporary, locally based and driven development interventions in Africa.
Conclusion
The papers in this collection make the point that, although Africa is the poorest continent and its development backlogs are enormous, it should not be regarded as inherently different from other parts of the world. Globally recognised interventions such as LED, global city campaigns, slum upgrading, and reliance on NGOs are as relevant in Africa as they are elsewhere. The nature of the interventions may not be different, but, in the end, there is a need for Africa to increasingly drive its own development, drawing on external support as appropriate (Commission for Africa, 2005). The urban and local development experiences discussed here reflect both institutional-level and local-level responses to prevailing economic, social, and infrastructural challenges, and while there is much to commend the principle of local action and initiative, particularly at the community-level, as Gandy (2006) argues, the state must still try and play a role in articulating public interests. At a broader level, contemporary African development experiences such as those detailed here are of real value in academic discourse, since as Matthews (2004, page 382) alludes, “Africa too can be a valuable source of insights for those committed to considering alternatives to the post-World War Two development project.”

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