GOLD VI

Case-Based Contribution
to Chapter 9: Democratizing
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to urban and territorial equality

Participatory Planning:

The role of Community and City

Learning Platforms in Freetown

Participatory Planning: The role of Community and City Learning Platforms in Freetown

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CHAPTER

9: Democratizing

SUMMARY

Participatory planning has been on the periphery of urban development since the 1960s. However, in Freetown, the existing planning legislation and practices provides limited space for interactions between different urban stakeholders and actors, such as politicians, policy makers, researchers, civil society organisations, and people living with disabilities, and community residents to co-create a shared vision to resolve the intractable urban development challenges. The paper covers the Community Action Area Plan (CAAP) that aims to complement current planning procedures that improve neighbourhoods through a localised, participatory approach. The findings show that the CAAP have promoted capabilities of the urban poor and enhanced relations with city authorities, in turn leading to feelings of empowerment when co-creating plans to enhance social, spatial, and political integration of marginalised neighbourhoods.

The paper also highlights the strategic value and potentials of participatory processes through the community and city learning platforms in expanding the democratic space for collectives of the urban stakeholders to strategically engage with urban development challenges. At the same time, the paper reflects on the key lessons that municipalities and regional governments can take into consideration in exploring the impacts of CAAP in expanding the participatory capabilities of urban stakeholders and their residents to decide on the kinds of social and economic transformations to carry out in the communities and thereby, reduce poverty and inequality at city-scale. This marks a significant juncture in democratising urban governance and planning discourse.

1. Introduction

Participatory planning has been on the periphery of urban development since the 1960s. In the last four decades, Freetown has seen a rapid urban population growth, unregulated patterns of sporadic infrastructural investments and a sprawl of informal settlements in areas that are devoid of affordable quality neighbourhoods and related services. Consequently 35 per cent of urban dwellers live in overcrowded and under-serviced informal settlements, and local or national governments do not have any specific policy focused on informal settlement upgrading.[1] Issues of inadequate access to secure land for housing, inadequate and overburdened infrastructure, poor access to basic services, and insecure livelihoods are all prevalent. Although the local municipal authority has shown the willingness to improve the situation, in many cases, they are under-resourced and under-capacitated to implement changes. Also, existing planning legislation and practices provides limited space for interactions between politicians and policy makers on the one hand and researchers, civil society and community residents on the other hand, to co-create a shared vision to resolve the intractable urban development challenges. Their efforts are, however, fragmented and localised and in most cases are not able to cope, plan and manage the city's development to achieve sustainable urbanisation.[2]

Therefore, **improving community-led planning comes with the recognition and expansion of spaces of participation for communities**. However, building shared spaces in a city like Freetown comes with several challenges and in different forms. This includes the consolidation of institutional spaces of encounters, where different knowledge claims co-exist. Arguably, the institutionalisation

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of informal modalities in the form of 'Community and City Learning Platforms'[3] in Freetown, a space for learning and sharing in which different actors gather to discuss experiences and share knowledge, coordinate, and proposed solutions to urban development challenges, with a strong focus on participatory and inclusive practices, is seeing as a novelty for making cities work for the urban poor. And this has been demonstrated through the successful development of Community Area Action Plans[4] (CAAP). This paper focused on how CAAP have become a mechanism for democratising informal settlement planning through the engagement and co-production of participatory tools involving a broad range of stakeholders from government and city officials, civil society and NGOs as well as residents. It also explores the strategic use of community and city learning platforms and identifies lessons for consideration by municipal and regional governments.

1. Macarthy et al., 2019.

2. GoSL, 2015; Lynch et al., 2019.

3. City and Community Learning Platform brings together key actors in government, community-based organisations and other NGOs for regular dialogue on city planning.

4. The Community Area Action Plans (CAAPs) were developed as a response to the recognition of Action Area Plans within the Freetown structure Plan (FSP) for 2013-2028, as a mechanism that can enable planning processes that improve neighbourhoods in Freetown. The CAAP process is designed as a community-led participatory action research and design.

1.1 Community Action Area Plan as a participatory planning tool

The Freetown Structure Plan (2013-2028) recognises the role of action plan in bringing together a broad range of people to the planning process, generating new ideas about space and place. The Freetown Structure Plan assumes that these planning instruments can be used as a mechanism to synchronise local development with city-wide planning principles and processes.[5] However, in the current policy, it does not indicate the processes through which plans are supposed to be implemented by whom. This limits space for local participation.

In 2017, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre recognised the low levels of planning capacity and the failure of government to address the challenges of informality. As a consequence, SLURC together with University College London and ASF-UK worked with communities to build participatory planning capacity as a viable alternative to 'necessary but absent' urban planning and policy framework.[6] The Community Action Area Plan explores approaches to inclusive city-making with a broad range of stakeholders from government, city officials, civil society and NGOs to provide lessons for integrating multi-sectoral needs as well as responding to the aspirations of informal settlement dwellers within the wider policy and planning environment that contribute to the long-term transformation of cities into more inclusive and equitable spaces. In this way **the CAAP play a crucial role in expanding the participatory capabilities of Freetown's urban poor, as well as democratising urban governance more widely in Sierra Leone**.[7] This enabled forming and strengthening social bonds among residents developing

capacity to 'gather evidence and experiences living in the city, with a view of integrating this evidence into a city-wide scale that could involve the development of spatial data platforms for increasing resilience and development'.[8]

During its formulation, the CAAP identifies key development principles and potential actions in the process of reimagining public spaces in Freetown. Cockle Bay and Dwarzarck were the first informal settlements to engage in this process, and its development aimed to **recognise the capacity of local residents to respond to the settlement's development challenges, supporting efforts to avoid evictions, and promote community-led *in-situ* upgrading initiatives**.[9] The outcome was a blend of local knowledge with professional expertise in a co-deigned neighbourhood plan that articulates goals and design solutions for their neighbourhood. A governance structure to the implementation of the CAAP was set up, which aimed to build community ownership of the process, as well as institutional avenues to ensure that the outputs would be endorsed by Freetown City Council and relevant national ministries (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Country Planning). This resulted in the setting-up of a community learning platform (involving key representatives from the settlement) and a city learning platform (composed by key urban stakeholders).

1.2 The strategic use of community and city learning platform

In an attempt to consolidate the coordinated efforts around urban development challenges in the city of Freetown, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) together with the Municipal Authority (Freetown City Council) and other development partners and

5. Macarthy et al., 2019.

6. Macarthy et al., 2019.

7. Macarthy et al., 2019.

8. Borie et al., 2019 cited in Lynch et al., 2020.

9. Cocina et al., 2019.

organisations led the process of setting up a City Learning Platform (CiLP) and a series of Community Learning Platforms (CoLPs) in several informal settlements. These governance structures were established specifically to build partnerships to better address urban challenges impacting the city and its informal settlements residents in a participatory and sustained manner. Both the CiLP and CoLP draw representation from intersecting social identities of the community that ensure diversity and inclusivity in the development decision-making process. This city-wide initiative operates through periodic meetings representing a variety of voices from several organisations and authorities, in constant collaboration with Community Learning Platforms, which includes elected and diverse representation (attuned to gender, tenure status, disability, among other identities), set up at the settlement level. These gatherings allow to discuss experiences related to current urban issues such as resilience, livelihoods, health, and housing. The meetings also seek to identify solutions, coordinate, and develop proposals for the upgrading of informal settlements in the city of Freetown. These platforms are in strong dialogue with the 'Transform Freetown Initiatives' (2019-2022) of the Mayor which aims at delivering an integrated approach to the city's development, as well as the Medium-Term National Development Plan of Sierra Leone (2019-2023). In doing so, **they have established a democratic space of learning and sharing across diverse forms of knowledge from policy experts, academic researchers, to the lived and experiential knowledge of informal settlements.**[10] Importantly, the CiLP is based on a dynamic feedback loop closely linked with representatives from the Community Learning Platforms, to ensure that discussions and decisions are closely aligned with the priorities within these neighbourhoods.[11]

These platforms have supported the exchange of knowledge in the city and have been leveraged during the Covid-19 response to support local communities.

Therefore, **the platform offered a fruitful juncture to invigorate the urban stakeholders to expand their scope and articulate their role with other collectives of the urban poor.** It expanded political space for collectives of the urban poor to strategically engage with urban development challenges, highlighting the value and potential of participatory processes and community generated data. The outcome of such an engagement promises to deliver more inclusive urban development and sensitive interventions at city scale and marks a significant juncture in urban governance and planning discourse in the city.

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Source: Alexandre Apsan Frediani

10. Butcher et al., 2020.

11. CiLP, 2019.

2. Key lessons for municipalities seeking to develop community-led planning initiatives

This study has generated a few lessons for consideration by both local and regional governments in developing community led planning initiatives. These include:

Firstly, **participatory planning processes both in top-down and bottom-up models, can activate urban regeneration, foster community engagement and generate social inclusion involving stakeholders and make them feel 'actors of change' across scale**. This creates a positive atmosphere with the feeling of solidarity to work towards a common agenda which inspires everyone to freely participate and are able to address key urban issues more creatively and effectively than any single actor could have done by working independently.

Secondly, **the ability of civil society and other local networks to participate in meaningful development depends on the level of trusted relationships, their capacity for collective action and the level of development of key democratic institutions**. Participatory planning has created the opportunities for them to negotiate mismatch between city government interest in engaging communities and processes that enabled participation that is meaningful to community organisation.

Thirdly, **institutionalising spaces of encounters for urban stakeholders to share their reflection of, and integrate the best available knowledge about the city can help build equity in both process and outcomes**. Intersecting factors – such as income, age, gender, disability and other identities – contributes to inequalities in the planning processes and outcomes. Therefore,

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engaging people will help support interventions by the municipal government and other local level actors working towards improving the well-being of informal settlement dwellers.

Finally, **community-led processes of social mobilisation are influenced by the production and management of city-making in a participatory way**. That is participatory planning makes community engagement accessible, and allows residents to develop social connections and build planning literacy in informal settlements.

2.1 Participatory Planning: Towards building pathways to urban equality

The participatory planning process has enabled transformative change and actions in knowledge and policy landscape in the city grounded through democratic spaces in advancing social identities, diversity and inclusive urban development. It is argued that the

participatory approach, built on collective learning and actions between communities, governments, research institutions, NGOs etc. has demonstrated its potential as a tool for unlocking possibilities by seeking to design more responsive interventions that explores new options for addressing urban complexities that affect the living conditions of the urban poor, along with associated learnings. This, in turn, helps consolidate knowledge and promote independent voices and perspectives, where new spaces of participation and democratic involvement in decision-making is at a premium on Freetown's urban development that responds to the actual and changing needs of both local communities and urban stakeholders as well as capitalises on the dynamics of informality. Thus, **formalising these informal democratic spaces at the local authorities, which has 'begun a tight engagement with the city of Freetown',[12] is imperative in promoting urban equality and inclusive city-making.**

12. Dickey et al., 2021.

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DEMOCRATIZING

This paper has been produced as a Case-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create ¨Pathways to urban and territorial equality¨. The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the *Pathways to Equality Cases Repository*, which collects the over 60 Case-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI report.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 9 on ¨Democratizing¨, which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for local and regional governments in implementing meaningful participatory processes, and democratizing decision-making, unpacking asymmetries of power and the underpinning trends affecting processes of democratization. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote more egalitarian, participatory and democratic processes, giving voice to marginalized groups of society, minorities and other groups, and thus contribute to urban and territorial equality.