

Keynote Lecture // Wed. 22.05
18:00–20:00 @CRC 1265 (Hybrid)

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Generating (new) concepts in urban studies, starting from Africa?

To start urban studies in African contexts, some alternative grounds for thinking are needed. This talk activates the potential for generating new concepts from the complexity and diversity of urban life, developed in Comparative Urbanism. The shape of engagements with urbanisation processes across the African continent has largely been set by formulations which bear the marks of exceptionalism. Informality, which started as a term to discuss the different forms of (undocumented, untaxed, illegal) economic activity in west Africa, evolved to characterise the multiple ways in which, in many different contexts, urbanism is emergent, associational, self-provided. Closely related to this, in many African situations, the flexibility associated with a common duality of land tenure afforded space for settlement and urban expansion flowing from rapid urbanisation across the continent. Traditional, communal or opaque land titles enabled residents to find a foothold. But they have also created challenges for regularisation of settlements and effective planning, which can be lethal. Developmentalism has concretised a motivation for theorisation in urban studies to emerge on grounds which might facilitate addressing the many challenges of poverty and material lack – basic infrastructure saves lives. Through the generous funding associated with development practice, many outstanding African-based scholars in cash-strapped institutions find themselves working on these terms. Ideas about some shared predicaments across the “global South” have framed thinking across axes such as these – informality, developmentalism, exceptionalism. Connecting insights and experiences across “most of the (urban) world” opens up directions of thinking which seek to bypass northern theories, historical trajectories and current trends.

Each of these grounds for framing concepts – informality, developmentalism, the global South – holds potential, but also pitfalls, notably those of exceptionalism and disconnection from framing wider critical theoretical insights, from contributing to and shaping conversations about urbanism and urbanisation. This talk will explore these and, drawing on perspectives on concept generation from Comparative Urbanism, reflect on the possibility for alternative grounds for

opening conversations about urbanisation from African contexts. How might the distinctive (and pressing) experiences of African urbanisation be considered not as exceptions which need segmented theorisation, but as starting points for theorising global urbanisation, prioritising the voices and insights of African scholars? The presentation will take as an example a current collective research project which has drawn us to propose to refocus analyses of urban development politics around the concept of transcalarity. Our analysis starts from an African context but is relevant to, and in conversation with, experiences on other continents.

Accounts of the politics of urban development have not benefitted from the experiences of African urban settings. Characterised by relatively weakly resourced municipalities, informality of planning and the state, and highly transnationalised forms of governance, African experiences may seem to stand out as profoundly different from those which have informed dominant theorisations of urban development politics. And yet, it is across the African continent that a substantial portion of the world's new, future urban areas are being made. So, there are strong grounds for theorising urban development politics starting from the diversity of experiences across the African continent. Evidence from current research and long-term observations in three African urban contexts (Lilongwe, Accra and Dar es Salaam) indicate the need for revising inherited conceptualisations which vastly overestimate the resources and agency of municipal government in many urban contexts and omit the enhanced institutional interests of national actors in urban development. These experiences also suggest it is inappropriate to assume that "circulating" processes and actors are external as, especially in relation to developmental and sovereign circuits, these are often embedded and emergent in different contexts. The range of international actors considered in accounts of urban development politics has also been analytically restricted or mischaracterised, as sovereign and developmental actors play a powerful role in many cities and significant private sector interests may not be very international. Both developmentalism and informality draw attention away from the highly contested, power laden and transcalar nature of the politics of urban development. Rather, starting from Africa, new conceptualisations of urban politics can initiate and expand conversations on stateness and the diversity of power relations shaping urban development.