Editorial: Urban (in)security and social justice in post-colonies

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Urban (in)security and social justice in post-colonies

The articles in this collection draw on local experiences and practices to conceptualize and unpack the multi-dimensional nature of urban insecurity and injustice in Africa's post-colonies. They deepen the understanding of urban informality, infrastructure violence, and the enduring presence of coloniality. In these articles, insecurity is best understood from a vulnerability point of view. Following UN-HABITAT (2007), vulnerability is the likelihood that an entity (individual, household, community, firm, city, or country) will suffer negative consequences as a result of an occurrence (risk event) and the inability to cope effectively with such a risk event and its consequences. The nature of risk events or shocks and the associated vulnerabilities can be distinguished into either natural (climatic, environmental, and diseases) or human-made (economic crisis, socio-political conflicts, and wars). Articles in this collection focus on human-made or constructed vulnerabilities and insecurities.

Eyita-Okon argues that urban insecurities should be understood in the context of Africa's failure to plan, invest, and capture the benefits of rapid urbanization. Despite its best efforts and aspirations as illustrated in initiatives, such as the New Partnership for Africa (NEPAD), African Union Agenda 2063, and commitments to SDGs, the continent remains a global economic periphery where the transformative role of cities is yet to materialize. Living in slums and informality characterizes the everyday lives of many urban residents. Illustrated with the Zimbabwe case, informality is considered a manifestation of the mainstream economy's failure to accommodate all those who need decent work or employment (Ndawana), housing (Matamanda and Mphambukeli), and services. To address their livelihoods predicament, marginalized and poor urban residents resort to illegal/informal street trading or vending. Ndawana re-confirms how political parties ab(use) informal street traders/vendors for political gain. The study argues that elites and the ruling party particularly take a vacillating or ambivalent approach that treats the vendors as political assets or liabilities depending on prevailing circumstances. Consequently, there is no investment in lasting solutions with such ambivalence reinforcing spatial injustices and insecurity of livelihoods.

Matamanda and Mphambukeli take an informal settlement-wide approach to deepen our understanding of infrastructure violence. Following Rodgers and O'Neill (2012) and Desai (2018), infrastructure violence occurs when the design and provision of infrastructure and services are absent, inadequate, or reproduce and replicates inadequacies, everyday injustices, burdens, inequalities, tensions, and conflicts. The lack of water and sanitation, transport services, police stations street lighting, and health and education infrastructure

exposes residents to harm. Ironically, the conditions force some residents to engage in further criminal activities to survive. A vicious cycle sets in where an atmosphere of fear dominates these neighborhoods due to perceptions and experiences of crime, robbery, rapes, thefts, domestic violence, etc. The gendered nature of insecurity runs through these experiences.

A total of five studies focus on South Africa where infrastructure injustice and a climate of urban fear and organized crimes are more pronounced. COVID-19 exacerbated the structural inequities and infrastructure violence in urban South Africa. Separately, Mongale and Check argue that under conditions of structural poverty and resultant frustration, urban community violence, rioting, and looting take place at the slightest provocation. Moreover, as illustrated in the July 2021 urban riots, there is a conflation of issues and actors, combining criminality and genuine political protest. Unfortunately, the major victims of this violence and looting are the very poor. The burden of this on poor migrants is exhibited in xenophobic attacks often aided by national political leaders. Sempijja and Mongale explore this "blaming the other" to underline similarities between the Ugandan–Asian debacle of 1972 and ongoing xenophobia against African immigrants in South Africa.

Muswede refocusses the debate on how the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable illegal African immigrants have used social media technologies to mitigate xenophobic attacks, to also offer each other post-violence emotional and psychological support, share adaptive strategies, and mobilize resources to support victims. These actions underscore the role of agency and social capital in the context of vulnerability. However, this agency offers no long-term relief. Only by addressing the structural factors, will it become possible to deal comprehensively with these challenges. In contrast Muswede and Chakwizira focuses on how the upper classes reconfigure their spaces and craft community structures to respond to real and perceived crime and insecurities in a small new town. As with the poor African immigrants, the positive outcomes of reconfigured landscapes are considered limited. Long-term and comprehensive security will require restructuring of the political economy overall.

States in Africa are aware of the infrastructure violence and the need to invest in critical economic infrastructure (roads and rail, dams, and electricity generation) (AfDB, 2018) to grow their economies. However, the informal livelihoods and tenure of the poor are at risk of the development impacts of state initiatives to address the infrastructure deficits. In the last study, Mbiba suggests a combined livelihood model for a social–spatial and historical comparative understanding of the impacts and opportunities these initiatives can bring.

Collectively, the articles provide rich empirical insights into the gravity of urban insecurity facing Southern Africa in particular.

This is a region where humans rather than natural shocks have an overbearing impact on the security of persons and livelihoods. The articles are written with a "post-colony" label. However, the nature and meaning of this post-colony were not examined explicitly. Doing so would add the vital critique and activism currently epitomized in the Economic Freedom Fighters of South Africa. It seems the prevailing systemic economic relations of colonial times have not gone away but have been entrenched. There is also a political history debate that can extend from these articles. To what extent is the failure to address urban insecurity linked to the dominantly rural-focused ideologies of Africa's liberation movements? Put differently, regarding urban areas, what was the vision of the liberation movements and torch bearers (such as Julius Nyerere, Samara Machel, Robert Sobukwe, and Steve Biko)? And what would they say about the urban insecurity in Africa today? Moreover, there is a plethora of "smart city" approaches coming on board. What is their efficacy given the enduring structural inequalities in urban Africa and unequal socioeconomic pathways worldwide? Finally, the articles have extended the use of concepts of informality and inequality, infrastructural violence, space reconfiguration, livelihoods, and vulnerability. In this respect, they offer material for any pointers to avenues for further comparative research globally.

Author contributions

Conflict of interest

Publisher's note

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