Networked City Life in Africa: Introduction

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Informality is pervasive in many cities in Africa and beyond. It has become “an organizing urban logic” (Roy and Alsayyad 2004). Informal modes of urban living require that urbanites develop forms of social organization in order to deal with most aspects of urban life. What appears to outsiders as chaotic informal urban activity is usually structured by webs of relationships that lend life in highly uncertain urban settings a degree of predictability.

This thematic issue addresses the varied forms of social organization that permeate the expanding informality in urban Africa. Such forms may range from networks of personal connections to more structured forms of association (Lindell 2010; Lourenço-Lindell 2002).¹ The articles draw upon primary data and in-depth studies of various sectors and facets of informal life in such diverse urban settings as Accra, Addis Ababa, Bamenda, Goma, Koforidua, Kaduna, and Nairobi. Taken together, they expose the great diversity and complexity of such forms of social organization, thus defying one-sided views and simplistic assumptions about the nature of urban networks. The explored forms of social collaboration reveal varying degrees of permanence or fluidity and institutionalization. They may link together individuals of similar or otherwise varied background and social standing in the city. As the character and contours of networks and associational forms are highly varied, the articles provide carefully situated accounts of collaborative forms in particular contexts.

The articles examine how social networks are important for sustaining life in the city as well as sources of power. Webs of social relationships constitute in themselves the very resources through which urbanites access a range of opportunities in the city—whereby connections to other people become a social infrastructure of critical importance for making it in the city (Simone 2004, 2010). They provide a critical

¹Herein, the term “networks” is used in a broad sense, to encompass more and less structured forms of social collaboration.

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means through which the vulnerable realize incomes and attain a measure of social and economic security as well as the means through which the powerful secure profits and control (see Adama and Büscher). For marginalized groups, participation in networks and associations may also constitute channels for the creation and assertion of social identities and for attaining a sense of respect and dignity (see Di Nunzio and Fuh). Through such participation, they create alternative forms of sociality, conquer physical space in the city, and seek inclusion in urban society (see Fuh, Di Nunzio, Rasmussen, and Afenah). In some cases, such collaborative efforts attain considerable strength, as in the case of Nairobi where strikes organized by networks of informal “matatu” drivers at times succeed in paralyzing the city or as in Accra, where networked associations have repeatedly halted evictions and contested discourses that classify residents of unrecognized settlements as polluting and illegal. Motivations for engaging in (as well as for disengaging from) networks and associations are thus multiple and varied. These motivations cannot be guessed or assumed *a priori*. Rather, the articles in this thematic issue give priority to participants' own experiences and the meanings they attach to social forms of organization and to the webs of social connections in which they are involved.

Network perspectives have become increasingly popular in examining the complexities of urban life in Africa. They are seen as fruitful approaches for grasping the world of relations and interactions that occur beyond readily identifiable urban formal institutions and for uncovering how cities operate in practice and the ways in which a range of critical urban functions are maintained. More generally, such network approaches are appealing for holding the potential for disturbing well-defined categories and conceptual dichotomies. The articles in this thematic issue unsettle several often taken-for-granted classifications and distinctions as they go about uncovering the intricacy and messiness of the relations at work. The Accra study for example uncovers how urban authorities, in their attempts to mask dominant representations of the city, make use of classifications such as “illegal” and “informal” as the basis for defining residents of a squatter area as not belonging in the city and shows how a myriad networks link the area with the rest of Accra, eventually subverting such categorizations (Afenah). Several of the papers show how formality and informality are closely connected rather than distinct realms (Jennische, Rasmussen, and Büscher). The two spheres are straddled by both regular citizens and state actors and linked through mediation and brokerage. Notions of legality and illegality are equally blurred by the transgressive practices of both types of actors. The boundaries between what is considered state and non-state become fogged as a result of how political processes work on the ground and of the workings of “hybrid institutions” (Bücher and Rasmussen).

As insinuated above, informal networks are thus not without political significance. Nevertheless, the ways they matter for urban politics are more complex and diverse than is often acknowledged. For example, they are not always subversive, alternative, or independent spaces nor always coopted or hijacked by powerful political interests. As a whole, this thematic issue exposes some of this diversity and complexity.

The ways in which urban residents' informal ways of living and collaborative initiatives interact with urban political elites cannot easily be predicted nor reduced to one particular modality of political practice (Pieterse 2008; Lindell 2010). Frequently, many informal activities stand in contradiction to urban planners' visions for the

city—a conflict of rationalities (Watson 2007) that sometimes has severe effects for urban dwellers. In fact, many associations have emerged to deal with these tensions, as channels through which informal actors claim their place in the city and eventually elaborate and communicate alternative city visions (Lindell 2010). As the Nairobi and Accra cases illustrate in this thematic issue, informal actors' associations and networks may bring about highly visible forms of concerted action, through which they contest state regulations and interventions and challenge pathologizing and criminalizing discourses that categorize them as a menace to urban public order (Rasmussen and Afenah). But informal actors may also choose to keep their actions and connections “below the radar” (Bayat 2004) and through avoidance and invisibility render themselves illegible to governing powers in the city. Other times they make themselves accessible to, or actively seek engagement with, the state. Jennische shows for example how local networks and organizations in Takoradi function as a social infrastructure that enables the penetration of an ambitious state scheme into informal economic spheres and potentially facilitates the process of state consolidation. The ways in which urban grassroots networks interweave with powerful political interests are also evident in the Nairobi case, where well-organized transport operators strike deals with certain political factions and in the process learn how to navigate the state.

In many cases, associations and well-structured informal urban networks more or less replace the state in critical urban governance functions. As this collection of articles uncovers, this may occur with the tacit tolerance (or even blessing) of urban authorities or in direct competition with them, laying bare their limited regulatory power and eventually undermining their legitimacy (Lindell 2008). The authors describe how such networks and associations not only provide some social security, infrastructure, protection, etc., but also have come to occupy a prominent role in regulating whole sectors of urban activity—such as the transport sectors in Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Takoradi, waste recycling in Kaduna, and much of Goma's trade economy. Different participants in such networks perform well-defined roles and are required to abide by clear rules of operation, the infringement of which may have serious consequences. Influential actors in these networks may be able to collect “tax” within the jurisdictions they have carved out. They also engage in order-making activities in what appears to be unruly and ungoverned urban spheres (Jennische and Rasmussen). In the light of their ordering practices and their capacities to tax, control, and monitor other actors' activities, they can be said to acquire qualities of stateness and to become state-like or “twilight institutions” (Lund 2007). But as Jennische and Rasmussen note, they also sometimes mimic the state in its less progressive practices, such as lack of transparency, extortion, and violent forms of control. Violence and conflict may also arise from competition for resources and legitimacy among various non-state regulatory actors and among different urban powerful groups in the city (Büscher). While for Rasmussen informal regulatory networks are what make the unplanned city work, Büscher warns about how the conflicting interests and agendas that they represent stand in the way of a long-term and integrated vision for the city that is inclusive of the majority. As the city is governed through fragmented and temporary arrangements, and as contests over regulatory authority never cease, urban governance becomes highly unstable and unpredictable, potentially amplifying urban dwellers' feelings of uncertainty (Lindell 2008; Büscher).

Influential figures play a central role in the above informal regulatory networks (Utas 2012). They may act as gatekeepers who control access to valuable urban resources and elites. Brokers in a position to find income opportunities for others or to mediate relations between regular urbanites and politicians may be able to accumulate considerable power (Rasmussen and Di Nunzio). Bigmen commanding symbolic power and controlling resourceful networks may be capable of influencing urban development in line with their interests (Büscher). Young people may be kept out or occupy subservient roles in these “Bigmanity” networks. But they may also create alternative networks through which they seek to chart their own life trajectories (Utas 2012). Fuh illustrates how young men in Bamenda elaborate new forms of sociality and through their associations come to reposition themselves in the city as accomplished “social veterans” and new Bigmen.

The flat ontologies that inspire much contemporary writing about networks can hardly capture hierarchical social relations as the ones described above. Nor can apolitical readings of social capital grasp the inequalities and power dynamics at play within networks (Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Meagher 2010; Utas 2012). For while power may be diffused throughout the network, as argued above, certain actors within it may command considerable influence over others. As Adama shows, different actors occupied different positions within networks in the recycling sector in Kaduna, reflecting differences in age, sex, and access to capital. The higher echelons of these networks were characterized by a greater capacity to organize into associations and to articulate their interests to the state. Informal networks thus may contain their own internal boundaries and be segmented in terms of access to the state. Unequal relations within networks and associations may however be subverted or challenged by participants.

Urban residents' access to social networks and associations is not to be taken for granted either (Lourenço-Lindell 2002). Rather, disconnections are as important as connections in understanding urban life. Several authors in this thematic issue comment on how networks and associations are not accessible to all. Such exclusions result from a variety of processes—such as the high entrance fees charged by the local union in Takoradi, the ways in which stronger and well-organized operators squeeze out smaller ones in Kaduna, Nairobi, and Addis Ababa, or how the benefits of economic opportunities in Goma circulate among a limited number of well-positioned individuals in local networks. So while many social networks have social security functions, they are not always inclusive. In this respect, Di Nunzio even concludes, in his analysis of street hustling in Addis Ababa, that the networks and connections that make cities work may also (re)produce exclusion and marginality. Blocked from more resourceful networks, he argues, many street hustlers tend to get more or less stuck in the lower layers of urban society.

The above considerations point to the importance of understanding social networks as embedded in their broader societal context, rather than as free-floating urban connections. Gender and generational divisions and roles within networks, for example, reflect particular socio-cultural contexts and histories (Fuh and Adama). Indeed, several of the authors also indicate that solidarity and redistributive networks are not immune to broader dynamics that deepen the economic insecurity of many urbanites (Lourenço-Lindell 2002; Meagher 2010). The sustainability of the networks and associational ties on which they rely is thus at stake.

The articles also hint at issues that call for a greater consideration of the diverse spatialities and temporalities at work in informality networks. Such networks vary considerably in their spatial reach, from highly localized to the transnationally connected associations as described in the Accra case. It is often emphasized how networks transgress spatial boundaries and are capable of integrating different parts of the city. Indeed, networks may span the city and connect disparate quarters. But they may also become instruments for controlling particular neighborhoods and reflect geographies of power and exclusion in the city (Büscher and Adama). Proliferating gated communities in many cities for example potentially makes these areas and their residents impenetrable to other urban dwellers.

There are also reasons to contemplate the varied and multiple temporalities of urban residents' networks. Life in uncertain urban environments requires a great deal of improvisation and the ability to navigate a multiplicity of connections and to swiftly seize unexpected opportunities that may arise. Unsurprisingly therefore, writing on social networks in urban Africa has come to emphasize the provisionality and fluidity of such networks and connections. But while the more transient features of social collaboration have captured the research imagination, there are also endeavors that seek to attain a degree of permanence. These include the great efforts put into setting up and maintaining durable network rules and the cemented positions that mediators and brokers may attain over time. Young people may also subvert categorizations of them as being in perpetual transition and, through their networks and associations, try to "fix" and stabilize lifestyles and communities and "establish a stable socio-political, economic and cultural order" of their own (Fuh). As Di Nunzio describes, participants themselves often strive for stability and cultivate long-term goals and aspirations. Indeed, they may invest in lasting relationships and more durable forms of social organization that can see beyond the here and now and the emergencies of urban life. Their enduring aspirations and the networks and associational ties they engage in to that end may well become an important ingredient for societal change.

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