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Governance trends in large-scale informal urban settlements in Africa

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Street scene in Old Fadama. Photo: Paul A. Stacey

Governance trends in large-scale informal urban settlements in Africa

Introduction

This policy brief contributes to understandings of the governance of large-scale informal settlements in the Global South. It takes the informal settlement of Old Fadama in Accra (Stacey & Lund 2016) as a case study. Old Fadama has grown steadily over the last 40 years or so and is currently home to approximately 80,000 people.¹ The near-absence of statutory institutions in the area has greatly influenced the emergence of informal providers of public services whose operations defy dominant perceptions of such areas as inherently chaotic or subversive. This brief is grounded in approximately six months' qualitative data collection in Old Fadama focusing on the informal provision of public services and organisation of informal governance. The brief contributes to critical urban studies by highlighting the emergence of relatively successful informal governance arrangements and arguing against monochromatic views of such sites. In Ghana, rural–urban migration means that approximately 5 million people, or 20 per cent of the total population, currently live in slum conditions. The

government expects this to increase by about 1.8 per cent per annum (Government of Ghana 2005, quoted in Owusu et al. 2008, p.183). In Accra alone, city authorities have identified some 78 slums and informal settlements of varying size and quality, with nearly 300,000 people living in squatter settlements (UN-Habitat 2011).²

Background

Old Fadama, a high-density, marginalised informal settlement, was served with an eviction notice in 2002 by the immediate government authority, the Accra Metropolitan Authority. This means that the flow of resources to the area is limited and the whole site visibly lacks quotidian symbols of statehood such as government schools, health clinics, a post office, and public infrastructure. Since the eviction order, public gestures and political discourse have included: demands to enforce it; promises by political parties to upgrade the site in return for electoral support; plans for partial relocation and clearance; partial upgrading; and a long-planned but ultimately delayed movement of the whole sprawling

1 The context for the research was the broader project, Property and Citizenship in Developing Countries (ProCit).
2 'Slum' refers to generally poor standards of material and physical features in residential areas, or 'the visual expressions of urban poverty' (Obeng-Odoom 2011, p.358). In contrast, 'informal settlement' means 'areas where groups of housing units have been constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to, or occupy illegally' (UN 1997). Thus, slum areas need not be illegal or informal although it is common for the terms to be used interchangeably.

agricultural market, or parts thereof. A sense of limbo and permanent interim status hangs over the site, and relations between residents and city authorities are often strained and confrontational. In the absence of statutory institutions, alternative public authorities have emerged in the marginalised socio-political environment.

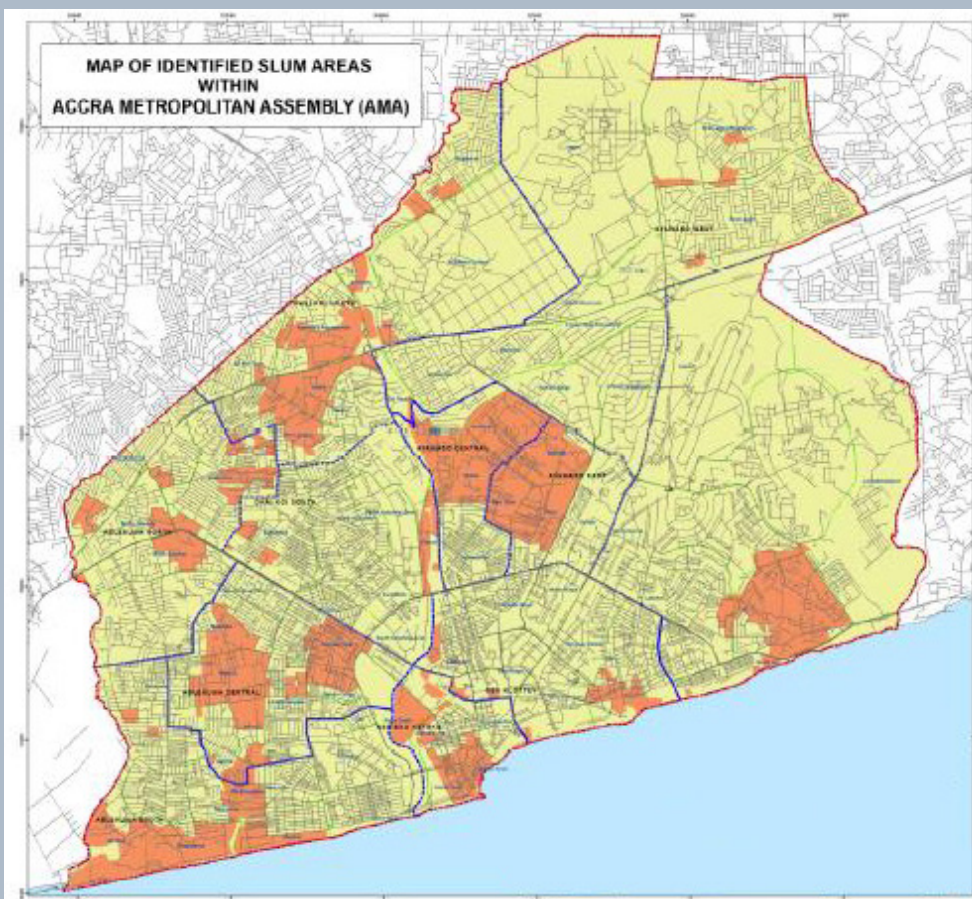
The most notable actor is the Old Fadama Development Association (OFADA) which provides the area with a range of public services. Most physical and social infrastructure in Old Fadama, including water supply, sanitation, building regulation, schooling, health, and law and order, would not function if they were not operated and regulated by OFADA, and other individuals and groups that also have only tentative and fleeting relations with statutory institutions. A whole range of developmental challenges are addressed by informal institutional configurations. These configurations make up a fragmented system of governance and *de facto* local government institutions that is largely independent of statutory institutions. OFADA's resource capacity is weak and its level of accountability, legitimacy, and transparency is context-specific and formally unregulated. But this does not mean the organisation lacks recognition and representation although OFADA has been criticised for excluding people on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and political affiliation (Paller 2015). Nevertheless, OFADA undertakes several functions of government relatively successfully that might otherwise not be carried out in the area, and enjoys backing from a range of ordinary residents. The tasks OFADA carries out include: clearing constructions that are deemed unsafe; keeping broader access roads clear of containers and vehicles; organising the repair of leaky water pipes; identifying fire hazards; monitoring recurring domestic disputes; following



OFADA member and informal service provider, Old Fadama. Photo: Paul A. Stacey

up on complaints of theft and damage to property; pursuing disagreements over rental payments; giving newcomers advice on building; checking up on low-lying areas after heavy rainfall; and rallying communal labour to clear blocked waterways.

In recent years the approach of the Ghanaian government vis-à-vis Old Fadama has shifted from the explicit aim of eviction to tacit acceptance and the formulation of ambitions to upgrade the area in line with broader urban development policies. However, the position of the immediate government authority, the Accra Metropolitan Authority, shifts indecisively between tacit support and acceptance on the one hand and confrontation on the other. Public officials and media alike frequently shun this area, which they see as chaotic, inherently criminal, and an eyesore (Gillespie 2015; Obeng-Odoom 2011).



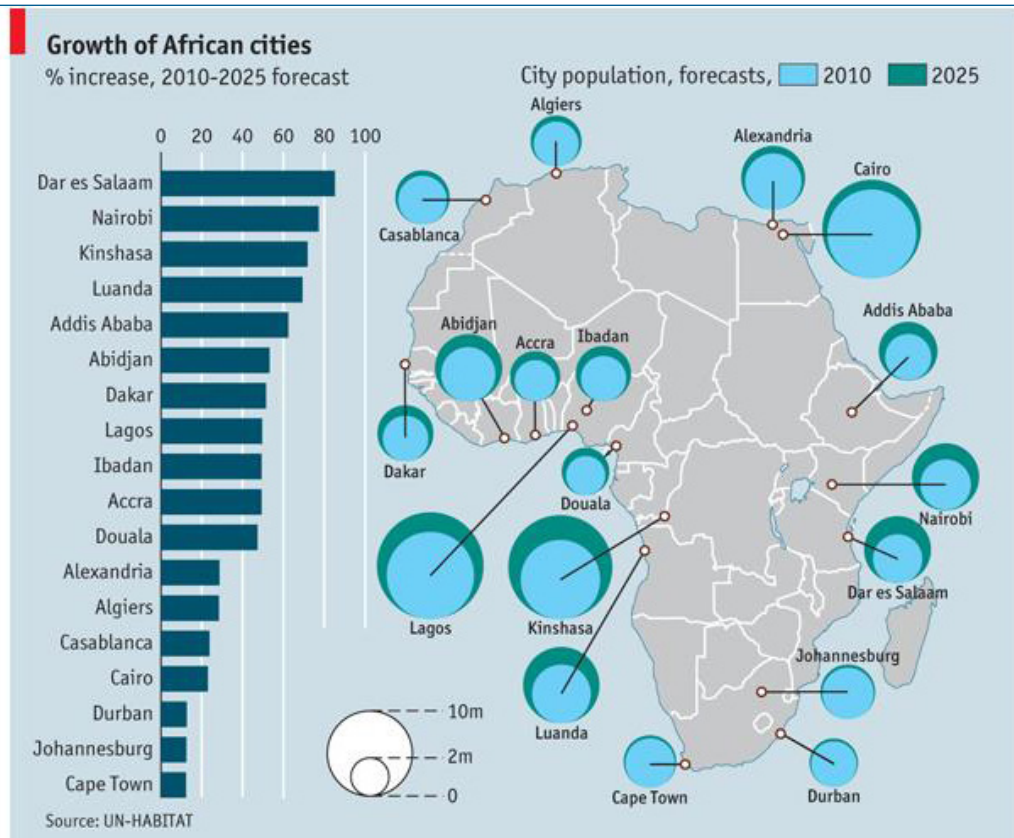
Conclusion: Old Fadama in the wider African context

Old Fadama is an example of how governance of a large-scale urban space emerges as community-based organisations and residents rough out an enabling social contract. These findings exemplify the inaccuracy of dominant understandings and monochrome images of informal settlements: as arenas of institutional decay, deprived of authority, occupied by the losers of globalisation, and set adrift from wider power relations. Although such areas are often very poor, they are not ungoverned, and reductive descriptions prevent recognition of the key role that informal institutions play in the provision of public services. This includes public revenue in the form of tax or labour, public services such as schools and health amenities, and public authority such as policing, building regulation, and recognition of property transfers, which are evident in the area.

But they have a sporadic, sometimes episodic, character. Nonetheless, the local organisation, OFADA, has emerged as a significant political authority and provider of such services with community backing. Although support is not universal, opposition is directed more against unjust proportions of influence than against the principle as such. Old Fadama thus instantiates a sharp contrast between locally produced institutions that govern but do not have the legal backing to exercise authority, and statutory institutions that are assigned the formal authority to rule but have limited influence.

Old Fadama is the largest informal settlement in Ghana and has some of the poorest living standards based on access to sanitation, water, population density, housing quality, and security of tenure (UN-Habitat 2011). Yet, both the hardship and the institutional resourcefulness therein resonate with a much wider context.

Nearly three quarters of Africa's urban populations live in slum conditions that express the worst of urban poverty. Slum areas are expected to increase, both in quantity and density, as urban populations in African cities double to some 1.3 billion by 2050 (UN-Habitat 2010: 1). A significant number of urban migrants end up living in informal settlements, where 'housing units have been constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to, or occupy illegally' (UN 1997). In attempts to stem the growth of informal settlements, many African governments undertake evictions, often forced, with violent repercussions (du Plessis 2005: 24). Such bulldozing operations directly undermine several Sustainable Development Goals, including; 'No Poverty', 'Good Health and Well-being', and 'Sustainable Cities and



The Economist: The urbanisation of Africa. Growth areas. 13 December 2010. (Accessed 18 November 2016)

Communities' and to which many African governments, including Ghana's, are signatories. With regard to slums and informal settlements, all African governments face the very difficult task of striking a balance between (1) providing a basic level of services to the very poorest segments of the urban population who reside in such areas; (2) discouraging the movement of migrants to such areas and halting their spread; and (3) following the rule of law and punishing squatters who settle on land that legally belongs to others. The visibility of urban poverty reflects governmental inability and unwillingness to formulate and execute viable and coherent policy directives concerning informal settlements. This means that such areas are prone to a wide range of serious, seemingly perennial developmental challenges, and are frequently stigmatised as disorderly.

The close and detailed study of the actual governance in Old Fadama suggests that the legalisation of illegal settlements, and the provision of services that integrate citizens of modest means into the city, alongside government engagement with local self-generated institutions, present a better way to address the problems of urban slums as opposed to simply denying their existence.

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