

Developing Cities in between the Formal and Informal

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The binary of formal and informal is both misleading and often leads to greater inequality. The key element of definition of ‘formality’ as used in urban development discourse is that of state regulation. However where states are weak and/or other forms of governance poor, as is often the case in Sub-Saharan Africa SSA, defining ‘formality’ in these terms more often than not excludes the majority. In addition this then is used to exploit the majority by the minority which dominates regulation or those which implement it. The reality of SSA urban areas displays an enormous variety of intervening grey levels between ‘formality’ and ‘informality’. In addition the tendency of Northern institutions is to assume ‘good governance’ is based on discourses embedded with values of late capitalist modernity such as *individualism*, *citizenship* and *utilitarian rationality* in social, political and economic realms – which is far from the case in much of this reality.

In these conditions the discourse of ‘good governance’ for ‘informal settlements’ is overlaid with a series of values which have limited resonance with SSA urban dwellers perceptions of their reality and their priorities. As so-called ‘informal settlements’ already dominate many SSA cities and are projected to grow by all accounts, understanding how such realities are perceived and priorities developed within a socio-cultural context which *de facto* if not *de jure* governs the urban milieu is of increasing importance. Such forms of understanding arguably need to be inductive rather than deductive and empirical more than normative – i.e. contextually grounded and not based on existing understandings from other places and times. Importing ‘good practice’ – in usually non-critical export terms – is little more than a cargo cult in this situation.

This paper will provide some initial insights into such an emerging understanding from the international and inter-disciplinary research programme Home Space in the African City (2009-11) being implemented in Maputo, Mozambique. One early finding of the programme is the extent of ‘unofficial planning’ which is going on in the city as people try to mimic the state to try to avoid future loss of land rights – but also reflecting deep perceptions of what is considered ‘urban’. Potentially, the impact of such bottom-up initiatives - a form of everyday planning and architecture – is based on what is seen as socially legitimate, economically possible and cultural appropriate, but is firmly within that large grey band between ‘formality’ and ‘informality’.