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International Perspectives on Community-University Partnerships

University/City Partnerships: Creating Policy Networks for Urban Transformation in Nairobi

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Abstract

This paper describes an innovative collaboration between the Center for Sustainable Urban Development at Columbia University and the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Nairobi. By bringing universities into urban policy networks, this partnership aims to re-shape pedagogy, policy and research action for sustainable urban development. The strategy underlying this partnership is to foster meaningful local university/municipality partnerships aimed at improving the social and physical sustainability of cities in the global South as well as transform how and what urban planning students learn in order to manage power and complexity. The paper raises questions about international collaborations that bring universities together with cities and their residents and how those collaborations can be designed to better ensure their success.

Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, like many rapidly growing cities in the global South is confronting massive inter-related problems of slum expansion, violence, ethnic segregation, poor service delivery, public health hazards, and environmental degradation. These problems, in turn, are deep reflections of a long history of inequitable power relations at both local and global levels, repression, democratic institutional failure, and skewed, exclusive urban policy and planning processes. How can a foreign university like Columbia University play a constructive role in this exceptionally challenging context? We argue that part of the answer involves fostering a research and teaching agenda that directly addresses the complexity inherent in the problems of simultaneous urbanization and democratization in places like Nairobi. However, this is not enough. All too often, research by external universities fails to circulate or have any impact on urgently needed policy change.

We argue that a key role for Columbia University is not just providing research, technical advice or "technology transfer," rather it is also most critically about nurturing a sustained authentic partnership with local universities to enhance their role in urban transformation. By an authentic partnership, we mean a collaboration that produces relationships of trust, honesty, transparency, respect, and equity and results in the genuine coproduction or facilitation of knowledge for positive local change (Community Partner Summit 2006). Fowler (141) succinctly characterizes "authentic partners" versus relations involving "clients" or "counterparts" as involving "equality in ways of working and mutuality in respect for identity, position and role." This paper explores the dynamics and importance of one such a partnership in the field of urban planning. This partnership, which started in April 2005, involves the Centre for

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Sustainable Urban Development (CSUD) at Columbia University and the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP) at the University of Nairobi.

Although in many ways, we are still at the beginning of our joint work and are in the process of initiating a formal evaluation, from our viewpoint, this partnership has already been remarkably fruitful. In particular, it has led to a more engaged and more effective approach to urban research at both institutions. In this approach, we deliberately attempt to bring new ideas and local expertise into broader urban policy-networks in the city to affect needed change. We conceptualize the local university—the University of Nairobi—as not only an institution of learning, training, and research but also as a potential key player in urban policy dialogues. To fashion such a role for DURP in turn also involves fostering closer university/municipality partnerships and altered forms of pedagogy in urban planning. In this process, CSUD at Columbia University plays a facilitating role and works to explicitly empower DURP as a local knowledge producer and a key player in policy networks for change at local and global levels.

Sustainable Urbanization and the Role of the University

To many familiar with action research and the movements in the United States and elsewhere, the vision to engage universities, especially planning schools, in urban revitalization and community partnerships may not seem particularly new. (Columbia University, for example, encouraged local initiatives in New York City as early as the Nineteenth Century. However, much of the reflection on the university's role in urban development in the United States is focused on real estate development in contrast to our discussion here. See Harkavy and Wiewel 1995.) However, applying this vision to many places in the Global South is more complex. Nairobi, for example, faces simultaneously a massive urbanization and a difficult democratization process as well as climate change and intense poverty with more than 50 percent of the population under the World Bank defined poverty line of earning $1.25/day.

Despite the dire need for engagement on these inter-related processes of urbanization and democratization, and despite the fact that the professional urban planners who will face them are trained in universities across the country, the universities themselves have remained aloof from policy processes. (Six major urban planning departments exist in different Kenyan universities. While we have primarily worked with DURP at the University of Nairobi, we have plans to replicate this at Maseno University in Western Kenya and also bring the departments together for a broader discussion.) In part, this is because Kenya has only just started to emerge out of highly repressive rule. Expanded political and policy space for broader engagement by the university is new. In the recent past, universities were policed spaces, under constant surveillance by the government (Amutabi 2002). This caused an exodus of professionals to other countries and into the private sector. It also influenced pedagogical approaches, which tend to reinforce obedience to hierarchical order, rather than foster questioning and creativity (Chege 2006). In brief, students were typically prepared to be subjects, not active citizens.

Another set of issues stems from the problematic nature of global linkages to the university system. In particular, faculty members typically engage directly in urban policy as consultants for the international donor community or as secondary partners in research projects of foreign universities. This raises two main problems. First, it means faculty have been confined and constrained by external logics and priorities that do not always correspond to key local needs and demands. In fact, externally driven technical assistance has a very poor record of success. As one first hand observer of this process in Afghanistan notes, one reason for this failure is that "tailoring . . . guidance to context and the patient process of nurturing growth of local institutions through firsthand familiarity are not usually part of the culture of technical assistance" (Ghani and Lockhart 2008). Secondly, while consultancy work can enrich the classroom, it also draws faculty away from locally formulated research agendas, the university and teaching. The net result is that this kind of North-South linkage, especially when resources between the local university and donor agencies are so unequal, can diminish the critical role of the local university as producers of contextually specific and new knowledge on urbanization, its consequences and politics. It can also detract from high quality teaching of the next generation of thinkers and policy-makers needed to solve the myriad problems facing the city.

Yet local universities produce from its students and faculty national experts who understand local political context and can more easily and skillfully insert themselves into local policy dialogues. This means that they more readily create a conduit for technical expertise and research to become part of dialogues and policy. Further, as we have noted, the university students in urban planning become the planners and urban policy experts of tomorrow. They have the potential to create a constantly growing network for change and a community of altered practice. To play this role effectively, these students need new tools and education to be prepared for the sheer magnitude of the problems they will face in a context like Nairobi.

The CSUD-DURP collaboration aims to utilize the under-valued potential of the local university as a critical node in policy networks, as a source and producer of local expertise and knowledge and as a strategic partner to cities and their residents. CSUD largely sees its role as facilitating DURP's efforts to become a dynamic centre of new research, pedagogy and national expert voice. (Recently the Rockefeller Foundation gave CSUD and DURP separate grants to continuation of this collaboration, which includes building a centre at DURP for sustainable urban development.) Key to the new approach within DURP in turn is active partnerships with local municipal stakeholders from city departments to NGOs and the media. This helps DURP to generate locally relevant research but also position itself as an expert within existing policy networks. External factors then can build upon these existing networks and locally generated research agendas, rather than displacing them. In essence, DURP serves as a node where global researchers connect into policy relevant work and agendas and avoid diverting research, resources and attention away from local knowledge production. CSUD is working to generate legitimacy for such a process, insert comparative perspective and send students and researchers to directly build upon

the centre's work. Overall, this idea is that this should facilitate more focused and efficient knowledge production that is inserted directly into policy processes.

CSUD and DURP are still in the early phases of evaluating the concrete impacts of this partnership and approach. However, in the next section, we review the basic narrative of how the collaboration and thinking about strategy and approach evolved within the context of concrete work in the Municipality of Ruiru, a small satellite town, Northeast of Nairobi that is rapidly becoming part of metropolitan Nairobi.

The University as Part of Urban Policy Networks: CSUD/DURP and the Municipality of Ruiru

In 1971, the University of Nairobi established the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP) with a mandate to train physical planners. Since that time, it has produced most of the urban and regional planners in Kenya including those in key government positions. DURP now administers a four-year undergraduate program as well as post-graduate program. The Masters in Planning consists of four main components: 1) an introduction to planning and planning theory; 2) techniques: economy, engineering, etc.; 3) a studio, which involves choosing a site, developing a plan, analysis, formulation, and presentation; and 4) research project.

Although this training produces technically sound young professionals, once in the workplace they face highly complex problems that demand inter-disciplinary collaboration and attention to problems of politics and governance. In particular an enormous gap exists between the classroom and the reality on the ground. Within a context of repressive politics, "urban planning" in Kenya is typically manifested as either a theoretical exercise with very little link to conditions on the ground (hence the massive "informality" of slums) or as a means to mask irregular appropriation of land by elites. Beginning with Nairobi's colonial birth, "planning" has often justified a process of privatization of critically important land for public planning and use. Most often such privatized land is used in counter-productive speculation and uncontrolled development contributing to the problems of urbanization, rather than solving them (Davis 2006; Klopp 2000, 2008; Republic of Kenya 2002; Shivji 1998). Yet urban planning requires some public control of land-use to even make sense as an exercise.

Edgar Pieterse (2008) notes that the massive informality in African cities where the majority of the employment generating economy is not in the officially recognized and regulated realm presents unique challenges. Further, most of the residents in many cities live in informal settlements or slums with no recognition of their rights and very little security.

Until recent innovations, the existing curriculum at DURP, which is shortly to undergo review, did not explicitly prepare students for the magnitude of these challenges. Similarly, young planners at Columbia University hoping to work in the global South are not typically exposed to the complexity of the politics that determines urban policy

in places like Nairobi. Further, they also need training on how to properly engage with networks of partners in the South, to avoid the kinds of problems discussed earlier and to learn how to nurture and foster authentic partnerships.

Beginning in April 2005, DURP and CSUD began a dialogue of how they might work together and the most obvious intersection was in the planning "studio." Typically, studios on both ends are practical and research oriented. Students travel to a site, gather information and devise plans that they then present to their university community. The report then would be part of a university archive. This model does not allow for a deeper partnership with local institutions or for circulation and exchange of information with the relevant policy actors and stakeholders. Finally, the question of how to actually affect policy changes was not typically part of the analysis and theoretical approach.

A DURP-CSUD dialogue gave birth to collaboration that is leading to a reformulated model of pedagogy and university-municipality engagement. In an earlier dialogue, Kabando-wa-Kabando the then CEO of the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company, and Patrick Kinyori of the Athi Water Services Board and resident of Ruiru asked us to look into working with the municipality of Ruiru, a small satellite town Northeast of Nairobi. They gave three reasons: 1) Ruiru has serious water and sanitation problems that involve both the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company and the Athi Water Services Board as stakeholders and hence they could facilitate; 2) Ruiru would be open to a collaboration, and there was space to plan before more expansive slums emerged from massive subdivision of agricultural land without services; 3) a need existed to work on the broader metropolitan area to deal with Nairobi's expanding problems.

A few days later, on April 8, 2005, we arranged a joint CSUD-DURP visit to the municipality of Ruiru to talk directly to the town clerk, elected councilors and key staff about their concerns. (The town clerk is the chief administrator appointed by the Ministry of Local Government. As a legacy of colonial rule, the Ministry of Local Government has enormous powers over local authorities. For example, even to pass a simple by-law requires ministry approval.) Out of this visit, we learned that Ruiru had no current plan. Yet, according to council officials Ruiru faced serious problems of rapid population increases, uncontrolled growth, mushrooming slums, environmental hazards and inadequate resources and service delivery. Another central issue, linked to the absence of land reform and Ruiru's history, as a town embedded in settler owned coffee farms, is the lack of affordable land for public use and planning. At the time, the council members were especially concerned with uncontrolled dumping of sewage from septic tanks, water contamination and the threat of diseases like typhoid.

Out of this dialogue, we agreed to work directly with Ruiru municipal council and community stakeholders on the problems they identified as most urgent. DURP would become the key link to the municipality, facilitating stakeholder meetings, a participatory planning process and the drawing up of a new physical development plan as well as advising on the broader metropolitan planning process under way in

Nairobi. CSUD would provide key research support for DURP's efforts and also assist in expanding DURP's global and even local networks.

The pedagogical and research mode naturally shifted in response to the challenge. In the past, DURP had conducted studies in Ruiru but typically after initial approval from the council, the study would ensue with limited engagement from stakeholders. The research report would be given at the university and then archived. In the new approach, the University of Nairobi, with CSUD as a partner, would now engage its faculty and students in a close partnership with the council community organizations, private sector, civil society, and relevant national government institutions.

This approach also involved teaching through practice, participatory and collaborative planning which aims to help transform relations of power and produce better policy through inclusion of new players in numerous complex interactive, public processes (Healy 2003). Planning was now explicitly re-conceptualized as a way to empower local residents to gain control over land use for the public interest and also support processes and institutions leading to what Appadurai has called "deep democracy" as well as the more mundane but critical institutions of procedural planning (Appadurai 2002).

Most importantly, through research that directly involved local residents, engagement with the media, as well as broader stakeholder meetings to widely disseminate findings, technical work flows back to the municipality and its residents. Infusing more detailed technical knowledge into these interactions creates alternative ways of viewing and prioritizing problems, challenging simplistic narratives that too often reinforce the status quo. (For instance, a team that worked on a household water and sanitation survey worked closely with FORCUS, a local youth group to conduct the survey.) In brief, collaborative planning could actually help catalyze and build some level of public vision and consensus on key issues and hence help build constituencies for targeted changes.

This conceptual shift was already in circulation in the broader development and planning academy and community of practice. Particularly, at the time DURP was collaborating with a Kenyan NGO called Practical Action (formerly ITDG) on a "Building in Partnerships-Participatory Urban Planning Project" in a city called Kitale. This approach involved a direct partnership with the Kitale Municipal Council and an inclusive participatory planning exercise that aimed to involve the poor in informal settlements. However, it focused primarily on one sector. This model became the methodology for the broader participatory planning process in Ruiru. However, while much has been written about "action research" and participatory approaches, many of these insights have not translated into practical pedagogical approaches that stress the importance of co-production of research knowledge as constituency building for change. Few approaches emphasize "strategic awareness about power and networks" and give students tools to manage complexity (Schweitzer, Howard, and Doran2008). This is particularly true in areas typically seen as more technical like engineering and urban planning and design.

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It took time to develop a relationship with the Municipal Council of Ruiru and its various actors, as well as local stakeholders, but the ongoing action research work and stakeholder meetings helped create more solid relationships and trust and also useful materials for the council and its work. Specifically, CSUD/DURP and the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation conducted a studio in January–May 2006 with the council as the direct client. In addition with CSUD/DURP tutelage, the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University conducted three successive policy workshops addressing the initial water, sanitation and solid waste concerns (Columbia University 2006). DURP also conducted further studios including a careful study of the local market that brought traders and the council into dialogue.

During this interaction, a joint learning process was taking place. At one memorable point, a year after discussing the plan, the mayor and councilors felt comfortable enough to ask Professor Peter Ngau of DURP to explain what an urban plan really entailed. All of these elected officials never had an opportunity to get higher education or study urban planning even though they needed this understanding and knowledge. In turn, we were beginning to see the sheer scale of the problems faced by municipalities like Ruiru and the detailed nature of some of the constraints that needed addressing. These included the fact that Ruiru had no planning office and faced unusually high land prices, and often lacked central government support for needed action. We discovered many of the interactions with key Ministries were punitive without offering technical help. For example, the Ministry of Health sued the Municipality because of its unhygienic dumpsite. However, to move the site and manage it properly required sophisticated technical assistance. It also cost a lot of money since land was expensive and a landfill site requires proper construction and management. Attempts at relocating the site were blocked by the National Environmental Management Agency, often for good reasons, but there was little assistance in the way of helping find a proper site. This led to some very unpleasant problems that exacerbated the public health problem, including dispersed illegal dumping that led to protests. On the positive side, water analyses and careful studies on the need for water/sanitation and solid waste upgrading in conjunction with the Athi water Services Board may have facilitated the recent approval of an infrastructure upgrading project in Ruiru and neighboring Juju.

Regardless of the magnitude of the problems, some municipal officials were also learning about the value of planning and research as part of a strategic approach to finding solutions and accepted in principle the notion of stakeholder consultation. As a sign of this, the council offered to fund the participatory planning process. From October 12–19, 2006, DURP facilitated stakeholder planning meetings and focus group discussions in all five wards (electoral units) in the municipality. This was followed by a joint Stakeholder Planning Meeting, which took place at the Ruiru Catholic Hall on November 25, 2006. In December 2006, DURP, the councilors and senior officials discussed the input from these meetings. Based on both the consultations and accumulated research, DURP put together a Local Physical Development Plan for Ruiru and is currently working with the council to get final approval from the Ministry of Lands.

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faculty with solid networks and adequate information and resources including the time to dedicate to a more intensive process of engagement. This is turn requires resources. Assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation is helping to build a center of excellence within DURP, which will review the curriculum and conduct "city labs" on pressing policy issues. With this additional support the University will enhance its capacity to carefully nurture community-university partnerships. CSUD with support from both the Volvo Research and Education Foundations and Rockefeller Foundations is working closely with DURP to realize this vision. We are exceptionally fortunate that these foundations recognize the critical importance of local institutional building, especially to create metropolitan universities in the global south. The Volvo Research and Educational Foundations has also generously funded an African Centre of Excellence in Public and Non-Motorized Transport at the Universities of Cape Town, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. The Rockefeller Foundation generously funded the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town to deepen institutional links and research throughout Africa. Our collaborations with these centers facilitate networks and circulation of knowledge beyond Kenya itself.

Collaborative planning based on sustained community-university partnerships allows students and faculty (whether Nairobi or New York based) to develop skills at navigating the complex relations between many important policy actors. Part of the planning process also explicitly involves thinking about using public consultations and research to help develop a policy network supporting a plan and the changes it proposes. The question of how to impact broader policy-making and the role of technical knowledge in this are now more explicit and central to the theory and practice of the collaborative planning process within the university and among future planners. As students move out into the world of work, we hope they see themselves not just as technically proficient graduates but also as part of a broader network for change and as vectors for collaborative and inclusive notions of urban planning at local and global levels. We are currently conducting a study of former students involved in this work to evaluate how well this might be working and how students look back on their studio/workshop training.

Conclusion
Globalization, rapid urbanization, poor governance, climate change, and poverty combine to make a toxic set of problems for the citizens of cities in the Global South. Increased research, technical capacity, and resources for universities working on urban issues are necessary but insufficient for grappling with complex urban conditions and problems facing our current moment in history. We must be able to think more deeply and act more strategically about how to foster inclusive policy processes that bring expertise into public debates and impact decision-making and resource allocation to address these problems. This is even more urgent in countries like Kenya that are emerging from severe repression and are struggling to replace uncontrolled development and rampant irregular privatization of land with a form of urban planning that benefits the broader public.

The CSUD-DURP-Ruiru collaboration so far provides some evidence for the critical importance of developing authentic partnerships between universities in the global North and universities in the global South (South-South linkages are also important). It also speaks to the need to move towards collaborative urban planning and policy dialogue, even though such engagement faces strong challenges in the face of repression and fragile and uncertain ongoing struggles to institutionalize a democratic constitutional order. Still, we have clearly seen that local university-city partnerships can facilitate the creation of a new more engaged pedagogy that in turn can bolster and foster democratization and improved policy practice. Through reformed "studios" or "workshops" this learning can provide guidance for managing actual policy complexity not only for students in Nairobi but in New York as well, the policy-makers and community-organizers of the future. All of this moves us closer to a needed change in thinking and agenda with respect to global urbanization both in the academy as well as on the ground in places like Nairobi and beyond where it desperately matters now.

Acknowledgment

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