

Can African urbanisation be a starting point for urban theory? Or, how to avoid the pitfalls of informality, global south and developmentalism.

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To start urban studies in African contexts, some alternative grounds for thinking are needed. This talk activates the potential for generating new concepts from the complexity and diversity of urban life, developed in Comparative Urbanism. The shape of engagements with urbanisation processes across the African continent has largely been set by formulations which, while productive, bear the marks of exceptionalism. Informality, which started as a term to discuss the different forms of (undocumented, untaxed, illegal) economic activity in west Africa, evolved to characterise the multiple ways in which, in many different contexts, urbanism is emergent, associational, self-provided. Developmentalism has provided a motivation for theorisation in urban studies to emerge on grounds which might facilitate addressing the many challenges of poverty and material lack – basic infrastructure saves lives. Through the generous funding associated with development practice, many outstanding African-based scholars in cash-strapped institutions find themselves working on these terms. Ideas about some shared predicaments across the “global South” have framed thinking in a wide range of contexts along axes such as these – informality, developmentalism. Connecting insights and experiences across “most of the (urban) world” opens up directions of thinking which seek to bypass northern theories, historical trajectories and current trends.

Each of these grounds for framing concepts – informality, developmentalism, the global South – holds potential, but also pitfalls, notably disconnection from framing wider critical theoretical insights, from contributing to and shaping conversations about urbanism and urbanisation, and from gaining traction in critical analyses of power. This talk will reflect on the possibility for alternative grounds for opening conversations about urbanisation from African contexts. How might the distinctive (and pressing) experiences of African urbanisation be considered not as exceptions which need segmented theorisation, but as starting points for theorising global urbanisation, prioritising the voices and insights of African scholars? The presentation will take as an example a current collective research project which has drawn us to propose to refocus analyses of urban development politics around the concept of transcalarity. Our analysis starts from an African context but is relevant to, and in conversation with, experiences on other continents.