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Incumbent upgrading in Nairobi's slums: How young people contribute to local spatial transformation

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Andreas Eberth

INCUMBENT UPGRADING IN NAIROBI'S SLUMS: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE TO LOCAL SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract
This article summarises the results and findings of a study of young people in the slums of Nairobi based on participatory research methods. The study investigated the engagement of these young people, as a civil society that is growing in strength, and their contribution to a spatial transformation of the district in question.

Keywords
Slum upgrading – governance – civil society – spatial transformation – Nairobi

1 Introduction

This article, which is based on the results of an empirical study, considers the extent to which young people in the slums[1] of Nairobi contribute as active civil society stakeholders to the development of their urban district. It shows, on the one hand, that they compensate for the frequent lack of top-down measures on the part of policymakers and urban planning through bottom-up projects. On the other hand, it clearly illustrates that planning must take local initiatives seriously and integrate them in a participatory manner into slum upgrading programmes. If the slum is understood as a space of opportunity for stakeholders in civil society, the planning instruments for upgrading the building structures in these areas can achieve a considerably more sustainable effect (cf. Reicher 2017: 235; *WBGU* [German Advisory Council on Global Change] 2016: 348).

1 On the concept of the 'slum', see Nuissl/Heinrichs 2015; Wehrhahn 2014.

2 Methodology

A study was carried out with 15 youth groups (so-called community-based organisations) in the slum area of Korogocho in north-east Nairobi (Kenya).

> The study was based on the following research questions:

> How do young people living in Korogocho construct the area they live in as a *place*?

For more details, see Hernandez/Hidalgo/Ruiz (2014); Rudersdorf (2016). All the study participants were 15 to 24 years old at the time of the study, and all were born and raised in Korogocho.

Based on a method known as reflexive photography (see Dirksmeier 2013; Eberth 2018; Rose 2016: 324 et seq.), they were given the following task: take up to three photos of things, places or people that are important in your everyday life. The participants then took photos over the course of one hour, and were not accompanied by the researcher during the task. This was followed by a reflexive, quasi-narrative interview, during which they explained the significance of their chosen images. According to this method, discussion arises not from predetermined key questions, but purely from the subjects of the photographs. The data in the form of images and text generated in this way were then structured according to their contents and evaluated by means of qualitative content analysis (see Kuckartz 2016). A detailed account of the research design and evaluation can be found in Eberth (2019).

3 Results and findings of the empirical study

The appropriation and construction of space by the young participants in the study in Korogocho can be summarised by the following key points: Community and identification with the spatial environment as a place prove to be important factors. From the sense of place arises an engagement with the community and the social space, which can be described as *incumbent upgrading*, a 'development from within' (Wehrhahn 2014: 11). Such phenomena are not specific to Korogocho, but are occurring more and more in the cities of Sub-Saharan Africa: 'Cities in Africa are full of initiatives that create, despite all obstacles, social spaces that emancipate from all the constraints of an oppressive political climate' (Förster 2013: 246). Such initiatives allow people to react constructively to challenges such as unemployment. 'What is surprising, however, is the ability of unemployed youth to cope with the crisis through innovation and creativity' (Sana 2016: 150). This empirical study illustrates some of the strategies that young people develop in order to deal in a solution-oriented manner with their life circumstances, described by Olang Sana as a 'crisis' (ibid.) (see Eberth 2017a).

3.1 Identification and a *sense of place*

Various studies indicate that identification with the spatial environment – a *sense of place* – is often more pronounced in urban districts characterised by a relatively low average income than in other urban neighbourhoods (Hartshorn 1980: 198). Everyday 'geography-making' is characterised by certain actions resulting from intentions (Werlen 2010: 256). In this process, even though the surrounding space does not directly determine people's actions, the intention that triggers those actions sometimes arises from a sense of place : 'The places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care, settings in which we have had a multiplicity of experiences and which call forth an entire complex of affections and responses. But to care for a place involves more than having a concern for it that is based on certain past experiences and future expectations – there is also a real responsibility and respect for that place, both for itself and for what it is to yourself and to others. There is, in fact, a complete commitment to that place, a commitment that is as profound as any that a person can make' (Relph 1976: 38). It is also clear, then, that the social space of Korogocho is constructed as a *place* . The principles of social space orientation are thus clearly apparent in the results of this survey (Thiesen 2016: 34).

3.2 Significance and influence of the neighbourhood as a social group or *community*

The surveys show that social networks among the residents of Korogocho can be considered extremely significant and make an essential contribution to a sense of identity with the place as a home. Given the spatial relevance of groups formed particularly by young people, they can also be described as social geographical groups, since they 'establish similar behavioural patterns and represent similar spaces for action as they carry out the basic functions of their existence, and thus develop similar spatial relevance. In other words they are – as an aggregate – spatially relevant in a group- and function-specific manner' (Broll/Egner/Leser et al. 2017: 856). David Ley points out the significance of 'minority groups [because they] substantiate the importance of informal sources in dealing with varied urban problems' (1983: 193). As shown by the results of this empirical study, that statement is certainly true, since the local youth groups are indeed able to develop constructive solutions to existing grievances. What is interesting is that, compared with the overall population of Nairobi, the slum population cannot actually be defined as a 'minority group', since it accounts for considerably more than half of the total population and therefore forms the majority of the urban population (UN Habitat 2014: 165). According to David Ley, it is the specific characteristics of urban life that explain how communities are able to develop the corresponding skills: 'Because of the social nature of urban life, it is not surprising that problems are often solved in community. Social networks are often the most important single channel for resolving typical urban problems, such as finding employment or accommodation, and the most important source of support in difficulty and crisis' (1983: 204; see also Lourenco-Lindell 2002: 30). Peter Dirksmeier emphasises similar aspects as contemporary features of urbanity in countries of the so-called Global South. He sees an economic importance in the place where people live, describing it as a source 'for generating information and

associated possibilities for earning money' (2018: 12). The high population density is not at all a negative factor here; on the contrary, it is to be understood precisely as a potential that can be used constructively: 'People in the Global South are so attracted to the big cities precisely because the presence of millions of other people generates possibilities, despite increased competition, for their own life and even survival' (ibid.). He describes the associated multitude of options as '[...] an essential reference point for the urban' (ibid.). This phenomenon, whereby the residents of cities in the so-called Global South shape their own living environment or urban district, can be described as 'peripheral urbanisation' (ibid.). The fact that these *bottom-up* strategies really can have a major impact, and that transformation processes can be shaped in a constructive manner, is also emphasised by Doreen Massey, who explains that the shaping of cities is particularly dependent on the resourcefulness of their residents (1999: 164). In this context, the actions of the Korogocho youth groups presented here can be defined as a *bottom-up* strategy. As such, it is a development strategy that hinges on the active participation of people on the ground. The fact that this is not a phenomenon specific to Korogocho, and that the results also apply to the slums of Nairobi in general, is borne out by comparable studies showing that only two out of ten young people in the slums of Nairobi are *not* involved in youth groups or income-generating activities (Sana 2016: 151). Hence, these bottom-up projects clearly do lead to an empowerment of the civil population, and enable people to participate in and contribute to the shaping process: the '[...] empowerment paradigm argues that the biggest asset a poor community has is its stock of social capital, which allows it to carry out collective actions on the basis of solidarity. Social capital is best enhanced through collective actions that address the physical well-being of the participating individuals (and households)' (Pieterse 2014: 206 et seq.). The German Advisory Council on Global Change even goes as far as to describe such civil-society groups in slum areas as 'change agents' (2016: 312), and sees them as a transformative power. Achille Mbembe perceives the relatively young metropolises on the African continent as the source of 'unprecedented forms of a new African urban culture' (2016: 223).

The results presented here suggest a need to analyse the importance of the relationship between the individual and the household. In terms of livelihood strategies, the household is defined as a decisive category. As practised by Malte Steinbrink and Hannah Niedenführ (2017: 53) in connection with translocal phenomena, it may be necessary to modify the definition of the household as a result of the research findings presented here. It is as if the term needs to be set free from the confines of its own 'four walls' (ibid.). In the context of translocal households, this refers in particular to its disconnection from a specific place; what it means for this study is that the function of a household is ascribed to the youth groups. Hence, the household is to be understood as comprising not (only) the members of a family or relatives. Rather, it can also include other social attachments and networks, in this case the youth groups. Malte Steinbrink and Hannah Niedenführ (ibid.) refer to interaction, cooperation and sharing as important characteristics of a household, which is much better defined as a 'householding' community, whose members coordinate their activities of consumption, reproduction and use of resources over a long period of time. Accordingly, the members of a household do not necessarily have to live together' (ibid.). In an expanded sense, household functions are carried out not only by the

youth group, but also by the community , since the youth groups are very closely integrated into the network of the community and thus also into the network with other youth groups. All in all, it is clear that there are strong local social networks in the form of 'informal social safety nets, which can be relied on as a coping strategy in times of crisis' (ibid.: 65). Close social relationships can thus be seen as the most important coping strategy, proving indispensable for survival in a difficult economic environment with a challenging infrastructure.

Seen in a critical light, the results may also indicate the rise of 'soft' neoliberalism. This is associated with a shift in the 'responsibility for services and facilities of the welfare state onto citizens, and is generally not accompanied by an increase in resources, influence or power. Moreover, contrary to the widely touted guiding principle of cooperation, there is actually increased competition between groups in civil society, for example for government subsidies' (Rosol/Dzudzek 2014: 214). Although the results of the study clearly point to the potential of the youth's own initiative and bottom-up engagement, local forms of governance must always be critically assessed, so that the cooperation of local stakeholder groups really does evolve 'for the good of the city' (Sack 2014: 92) and so that social conflicts are mediated rather than exacerbated (ibid.).

4 Critical excursus: Urbanity as a manifestation of capitalism?

'Only the proletariat can invest its social and political activity in realising an urban society. Only it can revive the meaning of productive and creative activity by destroying the ideology of consumption. It is able to spawn a new form of humanism, which differs from the old, liberal form of humanism that is coming to an end: namely that of the urban dweller, through whom and for whom the city and living in the city has come to mean creation, appropriation and use value (*as opposed to exchange value*)*, and who thus takes advantage of all the resources provided by science, art, technology and the domination of the materials of nature for this purpose'* (Lefebvre 2016: 198).

It may be open to debate whether and to what extent the population of Korogocho can be described as a 'proletariat'. Even so, there are clear parallels between this section of the population and the historical definition of the concept. As shown by this study, spatial appropriation by young people leads to the emergence of a certain form of urban everyday culture. With reference to the debate on the significance of slums as areas of squalor with few prospects (e.g. Davis 2011) or, on the contrary, as places of arrival offering opportunities (e.g. Saunders 2011), this study highlights the potential of these urban districts, which are more than just places of arrival, having now become home to whole generations of people. If one takes a systematically critical look, however, it must also be stated that in the wake of this urbanisation of lifestyle, a capitalist economic and societal model seems to be manifesting and imposing itself. While a subsistence economy and trade by barter are still conceivable in rural areas, these options no longer exist in the city. This is borne out by the examples of activities of young people in Korogocho, as described in this article: even if a community aspect is clearly identifiable and the importance of social net-

works is noteworthy, the focus is always on generating a monetary income too. This is not in itself objectionable – for young people it is simply necessary for their own survival – but it also goes to show that 'urbanisation', by definition, means that capitalism can scarcely be evaded in an urban context. Achille Mbembe comments on this as follows: 'Systems of solidarity now coexist with often brutal market conditions' (2016: 267). Timothy J. Clark, a British art historian, examined the relevance of this observation for Paris in the late 19th century, commenting: 'The city was the *sign* of capital' (1984: 69, emphasis in original).[2] He reduces culture to a mere side effect and describes the power of material values, capital and social status. Although he concentrates on more affluent sections of the population, whereas this article focuses on low-income groups, there is still a discernible connection. Even so, it remains to be seen – and will need to be researched over the coming years – how the residents of Korogocho will deal with the potentials and risks of their situation. An orientation towards material values is counteracted by a civil society that is strong or growing in strength, and stands up for common interests (Eberth 2016).

5 Implications for spatial planning and urban development

As underlined by Henri Lefebvre, planning must be oriented towards the needs of society (2016: 199). He states that for this to happen, there has to be a 'science of the city' (ibid.: 196) to research 'relationships and connections in urban life' (ibid). There is a risk that growing institutionalisation will eliminate the truly urban, he says. In his view, the urban is notably 'the creation of authentic social groups' (ibid.: 141). This phenomenon can be clearly observed in Korogocho. In what was initially an unplanned, informal settled area, it is precisely the activity of social groups that accounts for the special value of this slum as a social space and, in this sense, it can be seen as a form of true urbanity, since: 'the*urban* is [...] the creation of the urban dwellers, without it being imposed on them as a system, like a book that has already been written' (Lefebvre 2016: 105; emphasis in original). Projects planned on a top-down basis for slum upgrading in Nairobi, as practised in Kibera and Mathare North 4A in particular, are the clearest possible example of a loss of urban life (see Konukiewitz/Djafari 2001; Schramm 2009; Eberth 2017b: 176 et seq.). In order to avoid failure and to implement constructive urban (district) development processes, Jennifer Robinson (2006: 256) calls for new forms of governance that make use of existing dynamics. Birgit Obrist firms up this idea, and also associates it with the participation of *communities*: 'Planned change means creating awareness of the need for coherent and effective policy, adaptive management, efficient implementation, as well as an array of other interventions to respond to challenges in urban development, including community initiatives' (2013: 10). Accordingly, it is precisely with respect to urban development processes and slum-dwelling communities, that she notes: 'The demand – and the solution – must come from the bottom. The squatters [...] are the change agents of

2 The risk of an excessive influence of capitalism on African societies is also underlined by Achille Mbembe: 'Money has become much more than before a factor that separates individuals from each other and the subject of intense conflict. A new economy of people has emerged based on the commodification of relationships, which have hitherto at least partially avoided the commodity form. An attachment to things and goods has taken root at the same time as the idea that everything can be bought and sold' (2016: 232).

the cities“ (Neuwirth 2007: 79). In order for this to be achievable, a change of perspective is now required, and a reassessment of what is desirable in terms of urban structure. If the ‘city of short distances’ or a ‘life between houses’ (Gehl 2015: 32) are taken as the guiding principles for a sustainable and viable city (or urban development), then the structure of Korogocho and other slums in Nairobi can no longer be classified as problematic and ‘underdeveloped’ per se. On the contrary, some of the features of public life there can be seen as best practice examples of urban life. If there is to be an improvement in the wretched conditions, especially when it comes to sanitary facilities, it is particularly important to initiate sensitive urban renewal processes, which do not aim to remove all the structures that have evolved, but which instead build on the positive developments. This is the only way to avoid repeating the mistakes made in the cities of the so-called industrialised countries, particularly during the course of the 20th century. It is absolutely imperative, therefore, that active outdoor life, which contributes to the revitalisation of entire urban districts, be maintained and not determined or supressed by passive building structures (ibid.: 251). This approach is in keeping with current observations, which praise the innovation-friendly milieu in Nairobi and the potential of its creative start-up scene (Kleis 2016). When structures that have evolved over time are destroyed, when corrugated iron huts are torn down and replaced by large apartment blocks, the result is that these measures determine not only established networks and market structures, but can also have a negative impact on creative milieus. The upgrading of infrastructure and improvements in the condition of buildings must therefore proceed with caution, so that the result is not a deterioration of the situation and exclusion.

6 Conclusions

It is clear that the younger generations living in the slums of Nairobi can be seen as creative and engaged stakeholders who contribute to the spatial transformation of their urban district. According to Ingrid Laurien, this is also significant for Nairobi as a whole: ‘The future of Nairobi lies in the slums and emerges from the slums’ (2018: 93). To conclude, this research project clearly illustrates the added value of participatory methods (see Unger 2014) and the potential of questions that are kept relatively open. In this respect, the spatial sciences should focus much more on carrying out interdisciplinary research projects and applying participatory methods in this context.

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