Traditional Institutions and Sustainability of African Cities and Communities

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Abstract

The future of Africa is widely said to be urban in extant studies, and by 2050, the continent's urban population will have doubled to about 2.5 billion. However, the Smart City Index Report for 2024, produced by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), shows that only nine of these African cities are sustainable. The factors for the unsustainability of the other African cities and communities include disproportionate population growth rate, poor planning, inadequate infrastructure and resources, traffic congestion, poor waste management, limited access to essential services, youth bulge, crimes and criminality, gender inequities, and vulnerability of the environment to climate change. Addressing these challenges requires a sustainable urban development approach, prioritising inclusive growth, environmental resilience, and innovative solutions as recommended by the global Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030), the African Union's Agenda 1963 ("The Africa We Want), and even the African Union's Charter on Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development (2014). This paper focuses on the traditional institutions' roles in making these African cities and communities sustainable beyond the modern and predominantly Western methods of urban governance across the continent today. The paper problematises traditional institutions as those structures and knowledge systems that the African peoples depended upon before coming in contact with modernity but still find relevance today, having been transmitted across many generations. These institutions are increasingly brought to cities from rural communities by streams

of urban migrants. They help people to build resilience against the social, economic, political and environmental challenges of urban living. The paper advocates for African urban communities to more actionably integrate these traditional institutions into urban management regimes. Four critical areas of attention were identified to show how this could be done: (i) giving traditional title holders more official roles in urban governance, (ii) deploring the resources of traditional African institutions for dealing with emergent social, economic, political and environmental problems in cities and communities, (iii) injecting more African values into the urban management protocols, and (iv) mainstreaming gender in the application of African traditional institutions in urban governance. The paper argues that COVID-19 in 2020 left behind some lessons that could be built upon. Unable to get help outside their immediate communities, many turned to traditional institutions for support services and became counted among those who survived the pandemic. In the post-COVID years, life has become too expensive in many African cities. This has forced many urban dwellers to rely more on the indigenous African knowledge system for sustainability and to calm their ruffled urban constituencies. What is left now is for African urban managers to factor the lessons of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) into their governance systems equally by injecting more ideas from traditional African institutions into their governance processes. However, urban managers and city dwellers need better education on integrating modern and traditional institutions to promote the sustainability of African cities and communities. Development agencies must support these capacity-building efforts to ensure that more African cities achieve sustainability.

Keywords: Traditional institutions, Urbanisation, African cities and communities, Sustainability, Smart city

Introduction

Africa is the most rapidly urbanising continent in the world. What is witnessed today is child's play compared to what is yet to come as it is projected that in the next 20 years or thereabouts, the urban population on the continent will double to an estimated 1.5 billion people. It is argued that

around half of the global population growth between now and 2050 will occur in nine countries, with four of them—Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Tanzania—being in Africa. How sustainable are these cities likely to be? This question becomes necessary given the finding of the Smart City Index Report for 2024, produced by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD), that only nine African cities (out of the 142 so rated globally) are sustainable. These are Cairo, Egypt (ranked 114th globally); Algiers, Algeria (124th); Raba, Morocco (126th); Cape Town, South Africa (124th); Nairobi, Kenya (131st); Abuja, Nigeria (135th); Lagos, Nigeria (136th), Tunis, Tunisia, (137th), and Accra, Ghana (138th) (Michael 2024). The cities are considered sustainable because they provide their citizens a high quality of life while driving sustainable and socially inclusive economic growth. Their other qualities include technological innovativeness, a healthy physical environment, inclusiveness, social cohesiveness, and quality service delivery. The scores of these cities out of the 142 sustainable cities globally show that they rank too far behind the best.

The foregoing shows that cities' rating is based more on quality (sustainability) than quantity (density). To understand the challenges of urbanisation in Africa, two interesting books were produced in 2019 (Albert and Lawason 2019a, 2019b) in honour of one of the fathers of urban studies in the continent, Professor Akin Mabogunje. One of the objectives of the two publications was to gauge the extent to which the reasons for and impact of urbanisation in Africa had changed since some earlier studies done in the 1990s by the same set of academic networks (most especially Albert, Adisa, Agbola, and Herault, 1994; Osaghae, Toure, Koumane, Albert, and Adisa 1994). The first volume of the 2019 publications covers issues of urbanisation across Africa, while the second focuses on Nigerian problems. The studies returned the damning submission that the majority of African cities are not sustainable and not much is being done to make them do better. They show that the population of African cities is still growing due to natural causes (such as uncontrolled birth rate) and migration from rural areas. More rural people are also forced to move to cities because of climate change, violent rural conflicts tied to competition for land resources, insurgency and terrorism. All these people flee to the city, thinking their sufferings will be alleviated. Edward Glaeser, a Professor of Economics at Harvard University, like several other scholars, endorsed the expectations of these rural/urban migrants when he said at a conference convened by the World Bank in June 2017 that "Cities are the best path we know out of poverty. They are the best

transformers of civilisations". However, it observed that "there are also demons that come with density[1]." In other words, the more these migrants in African urban centres, the more problems the communities face. Many African cities and communities are at breaking point; they can no longer sustain healthy human living.

These problems of ill-coordinated urban growth make it necessary to take a more nuanced look at the nature of African cities and communities. Many of the skyscrapers in many of the cities overlook sprawling informal settlements and slums (Bradlow 2012:7). In other words, not all parts of the nine cities identified above are sustainable; only the small part housing the rich do. To explain this conjecture, it is necessary to observe, at the risk of oversimplification, that a typical African city (including the smart ones named above) has four interesting landscapes to be critically considered by students of sustainability studies. The first is often the "city centre", typified by glassy skyscrapers, Western type shopping malls, and bustling tree-lined streets. The novo rich in the society have their businesses and residences here. Closely following such well-policed and sometimes gated neighbourhoods are the areas where the rising or struggling middle class and those working for the novo rich are residents. They are often well provided with social amenities which the poor are often denied. Those who conducted the smart city surveys to identify the above-named nine sustainable African cities in Africa must have focused their attention on these high-brow areas. The surveys may not have captured the rather poorly planned or even unplanned overpopulated sections of the cities, with clusters of small buildings haphazardly concentrated along dusty roads and a poor sewage and refuse management system. It may not have covered the slums subordinated to some of these "commoners' settlements".

The marked distinction between the rich and poor people settlements in African cities negates the central aim of the global sustainable development goals which is to ensure that no one is left behind in enjoying the best of the world in the year 2030 and beyond. In this respect, Goal 11 of the Agenda targets "Sustainable cities and communities." The specific objectives of this particular goal include *making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable; ensuring access to adequate housing, transportation, and urban planning; protecting cultural heritage and natural habitats; supporting local economic development and innovation; and, reducing*

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37O58T4Jyx4&t=607s

urban sprawl and environmental impact. The intention of Agenda 2030 is supported by Aspiration 14 of the Agenda 2063, the African Union's strategic framework for delivering inclusive and sustainable development in Africa by 2063. The Africa Agenda is otherwise known as "The Africa We Want". This particular Aspiration seeks to "Make cities and human settlement inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable".

The foregoing poses several policy-relevant challenges to sustainability studies. How do the nine sustainable cities above get stronger by addressing the problems faced by their seemingly abandoned fringes denied quality of life? How do we ensure the sustainability of the cities not included in the nine above? How do we ensure the sustainability of what factors are now considered in giving the "sustainable cities" good marks? In other words, how do we ensure that sustainable cities do not become unsustainable in the future? How do we get more African cities to join the nine already said to be sustainable?

Answering these questions requires taking some cursory lessons from what was considered when tagging some African cities sustainable and the others not. The sustainable ones were so rated based on the evidence of modernity seen in them: public transportation, energy, economy, environmental impact and management. The paper argues that the traditional African institutions could as well be considered or appropriated for strengthening these sustainable cities and making those still struggling for sustainability to improve their status. This position is significant in an age when it is becoming increasingly expensive for Africans to consume external technologies. It is also increasingly realised that external solutions to African problems may not be sustainable as they may not align with local needs and priorities. Solutions from within are more likely to be culturally and contextually relevant, increasing their effectiveness. In all, it is increasingly realised that African states can unlock their potential by pursuing development alternatives from within, achieving sustainable development, and reducing their dependence on external actors.

Traditional institutions refer to social, economic, and political structures that have existed in a society since time immemorial and are often resistant to modernity on the account of being venerated by the people (see Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon 2024, Ali, Ayoade, and Agbaje, 1989; Cohen and Middleton, 1967). In a postcolonial society, they refer to the institutions that existed before the society came in contact with foreign

traditions but are still held by the people because of their utilitarian values. In other words, they are transmitted across generations. As the name implies, the traditional institution is built upon or based on the history, ancestry, culture, custom, religion and values of the people, and the institution principally revolves around the traditional ruler who serves as the head and chief custodian of the culture of the people. They are based on native laws and customs.

Existing studies show that traditional institutions can be broken into different categories. Attention is called to seven types here. These are (i) the political – Kings, lesser traditional title holders, elders, etc. (ii) the social - family and kinship systems, age grade associations, social clubs and societies etc, (iii) the economic – most especially trade guilds, (iv) the religious and spiritual – traditional and modern, (v) the cultural and artistic – musical, dance and theatre groups, (vi) the educational - traditional apprenticeships, mentorship programs, oral history and storytelling, cultural and language schools, and (vii) the judicial - traditional courts and tribunals, councils of elders, mediation and arbitration bodies known to and respected by the people. Interestingly, the categories often overlap, and traditional institutions may serve multiple purposes and functions. Those committed to these institutions are often edged out of the modernised urban systems and have to make a living on the fringes of the society. This probably contributes to the unsustainability of many cities in Africa (see Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon 2024, Mengisteab and Hagg, 2017; Ali, Ayoade, and Agbaje, 1989; Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

To ensure that traditional institutions benefit from the sustainability of urban communities in Africa, the African Union in 2014 adopted the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development, which outlines some principles and values for ensuring the sustainability of local communities. The issues raised by the Charter include the need to transfer more power and resources to local governments for building a higher capacity of dealing with human development issues, including management of migrants, promoting economic growth and social welfare at the local level, involving citizens in local decision-making; respecting and protecting human rights at the local level; promoting gender equality in local governance and development; ensuring that local governments are accountable to their citizens; and, respecting and celebrating cultural, linguistic and geographic diversity (African Union 2014). The Charter came into force on 13 January 2019. But

not many African city managers are aware of them not to mention applying them to the ways they operate. The effective implementation of the Charter, along with the other existing instruments, would help to promote sustainable cities and communities.

Appropriating Traditional Institutions

The next step is to deal with the agency issues in appropriating the traditional institutions and then state how the work could be done. Three models for appropriating traditional institutions in urban management are proposed here given the general outlooks across Africa and building on the existing trajectories. These are (i) the political, (ii) the programmatic, (iii) and value-based. These are further explained below.

The Political: The political window has to do with political leaders, including holders of traditional authority, and city managers working together in managing the cities in a manner that would enable them to inject more indigenous knowledge into decision-making and problem-solving processes. This collaborative or "power-sharing model" model requires the government to give more actionable constitutionally recognised powers to those holding traditional political titles. This is the situation across Africa, but the system is not strong enough to ensure the sustainability of cities and communities on the continent. The colonial authority in various parts of Africa provided models that could be cited here. The administrators took off by recognising the traditional rulers as being the closest to the hearts and minds of the people. Working directly with them would make it easier for the people to comply with appropriate rules and regulations to ensure the sustainability of the colonial enterprise. It worked very well. There are some lessons to learn in this respect, especially from the practice of the "Indirect Rule" system of the British in Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria. Under the system, the British colonial administrators relied on traditional rulers to govern their subjects, using existing power structures to maintain order and collect taxes. The traditional rulers were appointed as Native Authorities, responsible for administering colonial policies at the local level. Traditional rulers were appointed as Urban Chiefs in urban areas, responsible for maintaining order and resolving community disputes. They also served as advisors to colonial administrators, providing insight into local customs and facilitating communication with the local population. They collected taxes and levies from their subjects, which were then passed on to the colonial authorities. These traditional rulers helped maintain law and order by settling disputes and punishing criminals according to customary law. They served as cultural

ambassadors, promoting African culture and traditions to the colonial powers (Crowder and Ikime 1970; Vaughan 2000).

Yet, the traditional rulers posed no threat to the colonial administrations as today's political leaders probably fear. They restricted themselves to what they were legally asked to do, and the system benefitted immensely. Calling attention to this fact of the close working relationship between the kings and the political administration in Ghana a colonial official commenting on what he saw of the political administration in Dagomba (Ghana) in 1902, "In reality, the administration is a direct one; the chiefs … have tended to become mere sergeant-majors, through whom the administration can address the rank and file" (cited by Ferguson and Wilks 1970:332). The point he was trying to make here is that the partnership between the chiefs and the colonial administrators benefitted the latter more. The situation may not differ across Africa today if traditional rulers are given the right constitutional recognition for contributing to urban sustainability. There are too many "rank and file" that the managers of contemporary African cities and communities need to address through traditional rulers. Unfortunately, the resources are not used as they should be. In Nigeria, traditional rulers are not given any constitutional roles. Politicians come to them only when seeking the votes of their constituents.

The Programmatic: This relates to the occasional adaptation or adaptation of indigenous approaches for dealing with emergent social, economic, political and environmental problems. In this case, city managers merge modern and traditional knowledge systems to confront societal problems. It could also involve modern city managers calling for the assistance of those versed in indigenous knowledge systems when dealing with problems. A lot of this was seen during the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The third model on how to appropriate traditional institutions for ensuring the sustainability of African cities and communities is to identify and adopt some African value systems as the philosophical framework for decision-making, problem-solving, communication, relationship-building, personal and group growth, and organisational culture. Such values include those embedded in the Yoruba "omoluabi" principle which requires members of a lineage to invest heavily in preserving its good name; those encapsulate in South Africans' "ubuntu" often translated as "humanity towards others", or "Ujamaa", a Swahili tradition popularised by President Julius Nyerere in the 1969s meaning "familyhood" or "brotherhood". African communities are rich in these value systems that hold the people together.

One programmatic area in which traditional African institutions can promote the sustainability of cities and communities in Africa is tourism. African cities have all it takes to be big players in this sector, but there do not seem to be coordinated efforts to achieve this. Many of the rural migrants coming to African cities come with knowledge of different shades of cultural traditions and practices that could be harnessed for building big tourism industries – songs, dances, folktales, architectural practices, etc. The modern African states hardly see the need for weaving all these together to make the stakeholders that own them contribute meaningfully to making the cities more sustainable. In this way, it is argued that tourists can generate income and create jobs, reduce urban poverty and inequality, and incentivise the preservation of cultural heritage sites, traditions, and practices. Tourism can facilitate cultural exchange and understanding between visitors and locals. Ecotourism, especially systems built around the physical structures in cities and communities can promote conservation efforts and support protected areas. On a broader level, tourism can drive investment in infrastructure, such as hotels, roads, and utilities and catalyse urban renewal and regeneration efforts.

The Value-Based: The value-based model needs a more nuanced explanation, given that it could easily affect the two other models regarding urban sustainability. "Values" means the principles, beliefs, and standards that guide an individual's or organisation's behaviour, decision-making, and interactions. The core assumptions and convictions shape our attitudes, actions, and choices. These could be personal (related to individual beliefs and principles), organisational (defined by an organisation's mission and vision), cultural (shaped by cultural norms and traditions), or social (influenced by social norms and expectations). The values needed for ensuring the sustainability of any society, including urban communities, include moral principles (e.g., honesty, fairness), ethical standards (e.g., respect, responsibility), aesthetic judgments (e.g., beauty, creativity), spiritual beliefs (e.g., faith, compassion), life goals (e.g., health, happiness) and social norms (e.g., respect for authority, tradition).

Cross-cutting Lessons of COVID-19

In responding to COVID-19 in 2020, the urban environment in different parts of Africa witnessed how the three models of appropriating traditional African institutions in promoting sustainable cities and communities could be done. By leveraging traditional institutions, African cities responded to the pandemic in a culturally sensitive and effective

manner, promoting resilience and community cohesion. Unable to get help from outside, the continent's peoples fell back on their indigenous knowledge system. In this respect, traditional institutions support the African urban population in many ways. Traditional leaders and institutions played a crucial role in mobilising communities to adhere to public health measures, provided emotional and financial support to vulnerable members of the communities, facilitated community engagement and participation in public health initiatives, and helped monitor and report COVID-19 cases, facilitating contact tracing and testing.

Traditional healers and herbalists offered alternative healthcare options, often more accessible and affordable than conventional healthcare. Traditional religious leaders provided spiritual guidance and comfort, helping mitigate the pandemic's psychological impact. Traditional practices and beliefs were leveraged to promote hygiene and prevention, such as using traditional clothing and textiles as face masks. Traditional funeral practices were adapted to ensure safe burial practices, reducing the risk of transmission (Maseland 2020; Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2020, Dullah Omar Institute 2020).

Many urban dwellers in Africa still carry through some of the lessons learned during COVID-19 on the kind of support that traditional African institutions can provide them. What more? The economy of many of the African cities and communities in which they live collapsed in the aftermath of the pandemic. A major manifestation of this is the rising cost of food, housing, health care and other means of sustenance in many of these communities. This makes many to increasingly turn in the direction of traditional institutions for building personal and group resilience (Mareia 2022).

Conclusion

Making African cities sustainable involves both modern and traditional strategies. Existing studies only emphasise the role of modernity: world-class roads, economic centres, recreational facilities, and the like. The point made by this paper is that the role of traditional institutions has not been properly factored into the discourse. Consequently, many urban dwellers in Africa today are not only deprived of access to the benefit of city life but also discourses on how to make the cities sustainable. The issues are well dealt with in this paper, and some recommendations are made on what

to do. These include the need for policymakers to properly acknowledge traditional leaders' and institutions' legitimacy and influence; involve traditional institutions in decision-making processes to ensure inclusive and representative governance; collaborate with traditional institutions to leverage their expertise and community trust; incorporate indigenous knowledge and practices into modern decision-making processes; preserve and promote cultural traditions, customs, and values; and, encourage local communities to take ownership of development projects and programs. These issues have both academic and policy relevance on the future of Africa.

It is necessary to mainstream gender in all of the issues raised above. How traditional gender roles and thoughts can contribute to sustainable cities and communities include taking into cognisance the complementary strengths of men and women, which can foster collaborative approaches to sustainability, particularly women's caregiving roles that promote community cohesion and social support networks. These traditional gender roles can inform urban planning, prioritising safety, accessibility, inclusivity, and better-informed management of children and youth. In other words, African cities and communities can harness men's and women's strengths to achieve sustainability and development goals by recognising and valuing traditional gender roles and thoughts.

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