



African Urban Research Initiative

African Centre for Cities

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Proceedings of Second AURI Workshop

Theme: Institutional models of co-production in the African city

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Introduction

In 2011 the African Centre for Cities (based at the University of Cape Town, South Africa) received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to pursue a project to scale-up applied urban research and practice on the African continent. The project has been driven by the premise that unless an active network of durable knowledge institutions, focused on applied urban research and capacity-building, is urgently established, most African cities will not be in a position to understand their urban development dynamics, let alone address them effectively. We need to support existing and future homegrown applied research centres to inform and enhance the policy actors and networks in each African country responsible for urban policy and management. These research centres in turn need to be networked together to exchange knowledge, know-how, and expertise to foster a layer of credible and resilient institutions rooted in local realities but engaged with broader trends.

The first step in initiating this project was the organisation of a workshop meeting of some of the continent's most innovative and productive applied urban research centres, held in Addis Ababa in March 2013. Co-hosted with Cities Alliance, this workshop sought to raise the debate and foster action amongst key research and donor stakeholders in the urban field, whilst establishing a shared understanding of the scope and implications (for research and knowledge management) of the urban transition in Africa. Participants at the Addis meeting agreed to form the African Urban Research Initiative (AURI), with a view to future formalisation, and with a Secretariat temporarily based at the African Centre for Cities (ACC).

In particular, the Addis meeting saw broad agreement that, on one hand, research centres are often well placed to link processes of bottom-up data generation with functions in the public sector and wider development sector. On the other hand, participants in Addis also emphasised that AURI can play a strategic role by providing a platform for the exchange of research ideas, practices and outputs between its members in order to improve the quality and impact of urban research on the continent, and to drive the emergence of alternative paradigms for the future of African cities.

Building upon these ideas and convictions, the second meeting of AURI was organised in February 2014 with the theme, 'institutional models of knowledge co-production in the African city'. This short report has been developed from the proceedings of this workshop, held in Nairobi.

The broad objectives of the workshop were as follows:

- Update AURI partners on recent Cities Alliance work to develop an African urban agenda
- Discuss different institutional models for the co-production of urban knowledge and identify key issues affecting the implementation of these approaches

- Identify key issues and topics for future research work to be commissioned by the AURI Secretariat
- Discuss the proposed AURI conference linked to the UCLGA Africities conference in December 2015
- Discuss institutional arrangements for AURI and the development of a strategy for future activity
- Elect a Steering Committee to oversee the exploratory phase of work until 2017

The outcomes of the workshop discussions are presented below, in chronological order.

Day One: 18 February 2014

Proceedings began with a welcome from Prof Edgar Pieterse, Director of the African Centre for Cities (ACC).

In the opening presentation, Prof Pieterse gave some background to the formation of AURI and the agreements reached at the 2013 Addis Ababa meeting, and updated partners on the activities of the AURI Steering Committee and Secretariat undertaken since then. He further captured some of the key changes and developments associated with the African urban policy landscape, emphasising that AURI must calibrate according to these changes, while responding to various emerging conceptual imperatives. Some of these changes include ongoing, high-level efforts to develop a dedicated urban Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and to devise a new African urban agenda in line with the wider emerging post-2015 development agenda.

Serge Allou of Cities Alliance (CA) then presented on the CA Africa Strategy process, indicating key points of intersection with the AURI agenda. He outlined CA's intention to establish a think tank to: deliver pro-urban arguments that are convincing to different African governments and that help to validate the CA Africa Strategy; develop appropriate strategies for CA to apply going forward; and help to mobilise private sector interest in African urban development policy issues. He further identified several major challenges facing the CA Africa Strategy process, including: how to link community-based knowledge production with sophisticated systems of urban data generation and knowledge management; and how to capacitate the institutional environment for urban planning and management in different African localities. He suggested that AURI can play a key role in stabilising and capacitating urban research centres across the continent to make these centres more effective at producing data and knowledge to influence urban policies.

Responses to M. Allou's presentation focused on the relationship or interface between researchers and governments, and the difficulties in linking knowledge generation with policymaking. Specific points raised included the following:

- The local production of useful knowledge for urban management is a key area of strategic action, and therefore investment in research and

development and decentralised knowledge management systems for cities should be a priority. Filling knowledge gaps through externally driven research in a piecemeal way will not help cities to overcome their persistent development issues.

- Instrumental housing finance and incremental housing are two key strategic areas of policy development with the capacity to go to scale.
- The dissemination and communication of existing urban research to key development actors remains an important challenge. Currently, research may have little impact on policy development. Researchers and government officials generally see development issues from different points of view, and academic research may not be valued by policymakers (especially if it presents what are perceived as ‘difficult’ results that run counter to political discourse). AURI and individual research centres have a major role to play in making the data and knowledge they produce more accessible and credible to policymakers and decision makers, and in finding new ways to link up with these actors (along with others, such as local communities) in a synergistic manner. The nexus between research and policy has to be further developed and enhanced.
- Related to the perceived gap between research and government (as described above), understanding the logics and practices of statecraft and institutional systems (i.e. bureaucracy) emerge as key research challenges in themselves. This relates not only to how the institutional systems of government are structured and function, but also how politics and ideology impact upon state processes and decisions. Researchers need to better understand the nature of institutions and state power in order to see how their research can intervene in policy and political processes in a more effective way. But what conceptual language do we need to build this better understanding, and to ‘theorise the state’ in an appropriate way?
- Scholars and researchers also need to carefully interrogate their own practices. One of the reasons for the existence of a research-policy gap could be related to the nature of the research work itself. Researchers cannot afford to overemphasise their own importance in the realm of policy and implementation, and assume that their work will have an impact. Instead, they have to be reflexive and able to identify the right ‘entry points’ for the research. For example, a need for research may arise from within different sectors of government, and this is often an ideal window for researchers to make an impact on policy and practice. Researchers cannot be involved in the entire process of problem identification and policymaking, but can act to make their research products more ‘sellable’ when it is needed.
- Creating platforms for engagement and dialogue between different groupings of actors (government, private sector, informal residents, researchers) can help to generate mutual changes in perspective as well as new strategies for local intervention.
- Engaging civil society in the communication of urban research is a key challenge and opportunity. This shift in mood in African civil societies – demonstrated by the growth of the media, the growth of associations representing the youth, and the rise of social media – provides an

important point of engagement for co-produced knowledge. In addition to co-production, research centres need to think about advocacy as a means to shift policy.

- Researchers can take on a range of different roles when engaging with other actors and institutions. These roles can include: working independently to produce foundational or original research according to the traditional academic model, primarily concerned with addressing diagnostic questions (i.e. ‘what has gone wrong?’); working in a co-productive way with governments, civil society and the private sector; as well as working as a consultant.

For the remainder of the morning session, AURI partners were then invited to give updates on their respective research centre’s activities undertaken since the AURI Addis meeting in 2013.

In the afternoon session, Dr Zarina Patel (ACC) gave an introductory presentation on co-production as an approach to the production of knowledge. Dr Patel reflected on why co-production has emerged globally as a strategic approach for many communities, government and research institutions. Co-production research can serve to expand local expertise around particular development issues, enabling evidence-based policymaking while providing a counterpoint to the dominant ‘best practice’ approach. The presentation further highlighted some of the opportunities gained and challenges faced by one example of a project employing a co-production approach: the Knowledge Transfer Project (KTP) of the Mistra Urban Futures Programme, located at the ACC.

Responses to Dr Patel’s presentation included the following questions and points:

- The communication of research findings is a key issue. Disseminating research information in an understandable language is very important. However, this does not mean compromising the academic integrity and rigour of the research, or setting up a dichotomy between high-quality academic and simplified, politically accessible research. In order to communicate to different types of audiences in an accessible way, one first needs to have something to say. Without a degree of background research rigour, delivering the ‘accessible’ message by itself can be dangerous.
- How can the individual gains of particular projects or initiatives be converted into institutional memory and long-term gains?
- While the KTP of the Mistra Urban Futures Programme provides a good example of how research institutions can engage with municipal civil servants, the issue of how to engage with other elected and political decision makers (i.e. those with time-based mandates) remains a challenge. Policy and political processes are not the same, and new political leadership can often lead to new policies. One way of dealing with this issue would be to create a research system that integrates political authority into the analysis and findings of the research, to promote the sustainability of the work as well as its efficacy.

The final session of Day 1 was initiated with a presentation by Prof Peter Ngau (University of Nairobi) on the work of the Centre for Urban Research and Innovations (CURI). His presentation and the various responses raised key points including the following:

- Many institutions employ research approaches that are similar to co-production methodologies, aiming to bridge the gap between theory and practice, but may be termed different things, including 'collaboration'.
- A co-production or collaborative approach is based on dialogue between different partners. But certain methodological and management questions remain. How long can or should this dialogue take? And how much can one talk about inclusiveness within the dialogue process, considering that inevitably some actors will be marginalised or left out?
- In many contexts co-production researchers face the challenge of engaging with 'double-edged policymaking'. For example, governments may talk about accepting and accommodating informality, but at the same time will create policies that are highly intolerant of informal realities.
- There are clearly opportunities for research institutions to be involved in policymaking, but this remains a challenging environment in which to work. Often policy ideas (even those based on dialogue between multiple actors) will not gain traction in policy or decision making without a 'champion' to carry them forward. How is it possible to identify and develop champions for ideas developed through co-productive research?
- Policymakers may be shocked or displeased by the evidence emerging from research, and thus the mode by which that evidence is communicated becomes particularly important. One approach could be to link the research findings to the interests and goals of local governments. The media and civil society also offer a powerful tool with which to persuade and mobilise politicians to accept and respond to research findings. In sum, it is important to consider the dissemination or communication of research results as part of the overall co-production of knowledge, rather than as a separate or additional activity performed after the research has been completed.

Responses to Prof Ngau's presentation highlighted the issue of compromise in relation to co-production engagements. To what extent should researchers be willing to compromise to the interests of other actors in the research process? In any co-production relationship there is a need for flexibility, and an ability to adapt to accommodate the imperatives facing other actors. But how do we differentiate between co-production and co-option of research? What is the threshold that determines where we should 'hold the line' to avoid compromising our research ethics and individual politics? Co-option can result in the production of bad policies, which means that a co-production approach will sometimes need to move into a mode of conflict with other actors to preserve the integrity of the research and policymaking process.

Prof Edgar Pieterse closed the final session with a few reflections on the day's discussions, focusing on the following five points:

1. It would be a powerful exercise for different AURI partners to choose one urban policy from their respective local or national context, and perform an analysis of how that policy was produced; what knowledge it was based on; how this knowledge was produced; and what effects this knowledge has generated in the real world. This work would also seek to answer the question: if we knew (what we know now) about the opportunities and benefits of co-production as a research approach, how would these processes have been performed differently?
2. It is important to have a clear and grounded ethical position when undertaking co-production research. The better we understand what our principles are as researchers, the better we can be strategic, flexible and adaptive in relation to other actors.
3. We require a much more fine-grained understanding of the pressures facing officials and practitioners whom are responsible for implementing policies. At present, this kind of nuanced view of state power and institutional systems is not available to researchers. Gaining this perspective, however, presupposes that the research is of an 'embedded' nature.
4. To have more of an effect on policymaking, we need to learn to communicate our findings more simply, and to understand the 'pain' felt by officials in the state. A certain degree of 'cleverness' is required of co-production researchers, as well as a capacity to engage in different forms of communication, beyond traditional academic publications.
5. A degree of modesty and self-critical reflection is required of researchers, and this raises the question of who will teach researchers to work more effectively. Many researchers work from the premise that they have the capacity to 'teach' the state or civil society about how things should be organised and run. But what learning processes do researchers themselves need to engage in, to place them in the position to influence policy, politics and practice more effectively?

Day Two: 19 February 2014

The second day began with a brief recap on the previous day's proceedings. Allan Cain then presented on the recent work of the Development Workshop (DW) Angola. He highlighted the innovative co-productive practices employed in DW's research, including the use of remote sensing technologies in conjunction with participatory diagnostics at the community level, and emphasised that co-production between NGOs, communities and government can lead to the co-ownership of data and information, and thereby the establishment of trust and partnership between parties. Mr Cain's presentation picked up on several of the advocacy challenges faced by DW, including the challenge of moving to scale and influencing policy at the national level in Angola. He also described the social media strategy targeting the Angolan youth developed by DW, arguing that politicians are usually sensitive to media discourse and issues of youth unrest.

Questions and responses to Mr Cain's presentation included the following:

- How is it possible to consider and engage with issues of political ideology, corruption, and so on, in the course of research and influencing policy? One way that DW deals with this is by conducting attitude surveys, as often decisions may be made based on prevalent social attitudes. When undertaking new research projects, DW can then devise research questions that seek to debunk these attitudes. Ultimately, research institutions have to think about how to conduct evidence-based advocacy, as most often the truth by itself will not be enough.
- Having a track record, and degree of status or a reputation with government, is often an important factor. Increasingly, DW is undertaking research that has been requested by government, and is finding that this often has a significant policy impact. It is important to secure government buy-in from the start of the research process.

In the second session of Day 2, Prof Winnie Mitullah (Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi) presented her reflections on the issue of engagement within research. In particular, she emphasised that there are many different routes for researchers to influence policy, and different models of engagement, which may involve researchers working with practitioners, policymakers, development partners, civil society or a combination of these actors. Different models may be more or less effective in influencing policy, but Prof Mitullah suggested that researchers can be particularly effective when they work with both development partners (defined widely to include professionals, donor agencies, etc.) and civil society. She outlined how this model had been applied to an IDS project to develop a small and microenterprise policy for Kenya. It was found that a lack of organisational capacity was a major issue preventing street traders from engaging with policymakers, so working with both development partners and civil society was critical to the success of the project.

| Knowledge Generation | Strands of Researcher Engagement in Co-production |
|--|--|
| Researcher | Practitioner (Prac) |
| Researcher | Policymaker (PM) |
| Researcher | Prac/PM |
| Researcher/development partner(s) | Prac |
| Researcher/development partner(s) | PM |
| Researcher/development partner(s) | Prac/PM |
| Researcher/civil society | Prac |
| Researcher/civil society | (1) PM (2) Prac/PM |
| Researcher/development partner/civil society | (1) Prac (2) PM (3) Prac/PM |

Different Models of Co-production, as Presented by Prof Winnie Mitullah (IDS)

Various issues and questions were raised in response to Prof Mitullah's presentation, including:

- How can co-production gain traction? What conditions enable this traction, or create challenges for co-production? How is it possible to deal with 'reversals' in the co-production process, whereby some gains are reversed (e.g. through the election of new politicians and decision makers) to ensure sustainability?
- Co-production entails a different way of thinking about knowledge. In this frame of reference, thinking of research and the generation of knowledge as a distinct field of activity, separate from policy development or civil society, is controversial. Co-production implies that other actors are intimately involved in the research process and the definition of research problems. For example, if a project is interested in studying street traders, why should civil society organisations not be involved in the definition of the research problem? This, in turn, raises questions about who can actually claim to be the producer of knowledge, and what constitutes knowledge in the first place (e.g. does a research question constitute knowledge, or findings, or otherwise?).
- In relation to the question of advocacy and activism, is it possible to think about a mode of co-production whereby a researcher works with civil society and enters into a more conflictual engagement with the state over specific issues (e.g. challenging municipal efforts to clear informal traders from streets)? Ultimately, some activities (e.g. protest) cannot be considered co-production. But this does not mean that co-production implies that all actors have to agree and harmonise their interests – co-production can also function in conflicted societies.
- There is a long tradition of research approaches that seek to remove the academic from the centre of the knowledge producing process (e.g. livelihoods approaches, participatory action research, subaltern studies), and which understand that the subjects of the research should be involved in the process of iterating and refining research questions. Co-production as a research approach needs to be located within this history.
- Co-production does not imply that the academic is not involved in the research process. Traditional, long-range academic work involves a process whereby the researcher assembles material, locates this in a pre-existing literature, and presents this to an academic audience. Alternatively, an activist academic would see their academic work primarily as a means to bring about radical change into the world. Co-production, however, is about bringing together different actors who are interested in a problem, and coordinating their involvement throughout the research process. There is no reason why co-production cannot include the role of the traditional academic.
- Co-production introduces several new concepts to the field of research. One relates to theories of learning: co-production assumes that new knowledge is generated when various actors understand why things fail. Another relates to the emergence of new technologies (e.g. crowdsourcing), which are changing the material basis for research, and have profound implications for knowledge production in general.

In the second session, Ntombini Marrengane presented on the opportunities and challenges faced by the State of Cities in Africa (SOCA) project operated by the African Centre for Cities (ACC). When the SOCA project was conceived a decade ago, it represented a radical approach, seeking to use the project as a way of building capacity for urban knowledge management in African countries, and to create knowledge networks that targeted practitioners in each respective national context. In contrast to pre-existing, externally driven urban research projects (usually tailored towards the funder's interest in a particular area of developmental intervention), the SOCA project was demand-driven (it was felt there needed to be a cohort of partners on the ground who wanted it to happen) and challenged various urban development actors to engage as a network rather than on a one-on-one basis. Ms Marrengane emphasised that co-production projects such as SOCA face many challenges, including: establishing and maintaining dialogue (and thereby trust) with the different project partners; responding to the various policy and implementation imperatives and political dynamics of the partners; and dealing with different institutional academic cultures and their expectations for research. Co-production takes time to implement, and this can often run against the fact that officials usually seek quick results from such projects. But the SOCA project also generated important opportunities and synergies, with lasting results. Ultimately, the project raised important questions of the way we do and should communicate urban research; of the need to incorporate "the official's" perspective in project design; and of how we can integrate flexibility into research methodologies.

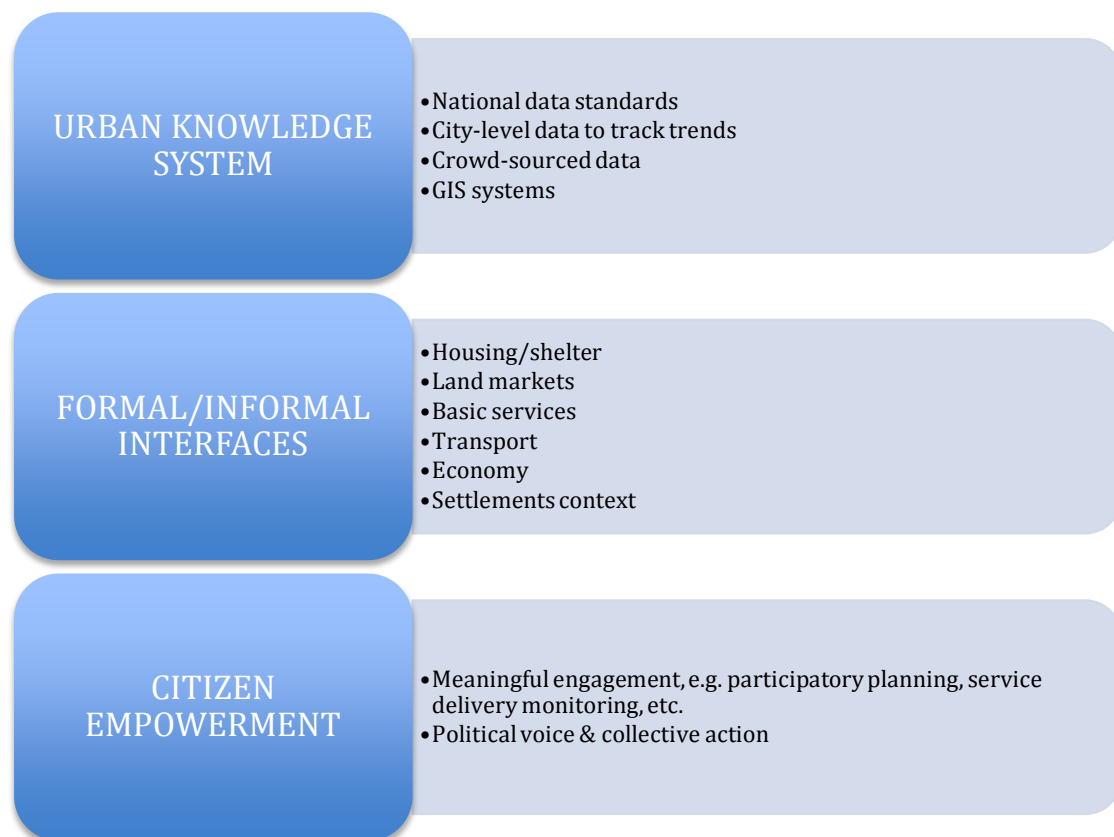
One question raised following Ms Marrengane's presentation related to whether we should regard co-production a research philosophy, or an approach to the management of research. Originally, co-production was largely depicted and understood as a philosophy, but arguably it is increasingly interpreted as an organising principle for the process of managing research. Ultimately, it may be necessary to return to a philosophical understanding of co-production in order to come to terms with the question of 'impact', or how to devise, assess and enhance the impact of research.

The final workshop session began with a presentation by Prof Edgar Pieterse (ACC) on some of the ideas emerging from the workshop proceedings, and how these could be incorporated into future AURI activities and commissioned research. He proposed several broad research questions flowing from the discussions:

- Why do cities matter to achieving the SDGs and the African Agenda 2063?
- What are the predominant logics and power dynamics that drive the urban policy landscape at national, local and regional levels?
- What are the appropriate (most developmental and affordable) investments that need to be made into the built environment? What does the answer mean for urban management systems?
- Can National Urban Policies be 'given teeth' to have a real effect?

Addressing these questions assumes some ability to explain the role of urban economies in effecting transition pathways for different categories of African countries.

In addition, Prof Pieterse proposed that AURI activities and commissioned research could seek to address three broad areas or themes: urban knowledge systems, formal-informal interfaces, and citizen empowerment (see the figure below).



Themes or Focus Areas for Future AURI Activity and Research, as Proposed by Prof Edgar Pieterse (ACC)

Based on the foregoing questions and focus areas, Prof Pieterse proposed that the AURI Secretariat commission several expert think pieces for AURI partners to review and discuss at future meetings. These think pieces will provoke the production of papers by AURI members towards the 2015 AURI conference (to run parallel to the 2015 Africities conference). AURI will organise another workshop in early 2015 to assist with the production of these papers. This meeting will also provide support to AURI partners to translate these and other papers into multiple forms including book chapters, policy briefs, policy fact sheets, and so on, to ensure their relevance for academics, practitioners, civil society and development partners.

Finally, AURI partners agreed that the provisional Steering Committee (elected at the Addis Ababa meeting in 2013) would remain in place until the availability of further project funds is confirmed. The Committee consists of:

- Jocelyne Vokouma (Laboratoire Citoyennetés, Burkina Faso)
- Divine K. Ahadzie (Centre for Settlement Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana)
- Allan Cain (Development Workshop, Angola)
- Edgar Pieterse/Vanessa Watson (African Centre for Cities, South Africa)

Conclusion

The presentations delivered at the second AURI workshop provided lively grounds for discussion and debate on the meanings, origin, scale, scope and effectiveness of co-production activities. Questions that raised much discussion included: When does co-production become co-option? What is the role of conflict in co-production? Is co-production a research philosophy or an approach to research management? Most co-production activities occur at the technical level of policy development, however, understanding decision-making requires an astute understanding of the politics and tactics of the state. There was consensus that targeting the state at the political level is critical for effective policy implementation, and that the media and social media are key areas for intervention to effect behavioural and attitudinal changes at this level. These tools were also identified as effective for engaging the youth bulge on the African continent.

Although the funding landscape to support the ambition of the network remains unclear at present, the Nairobi workshop certainly served to strengthen the network through an exchange of ideas and experiences. The debate and discussion demonstrated the need for creating further opportunities to develop a shared research agenda that reflects the diverse, divergent and similar forces shaping cities in Africa.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: List and Contact Details of Participants

Representatives of research centres attending and not attending

| Participant name | Centre name | Institution | Location | Contact |
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