

Will the urban middle class save African Cities? Or just itself?

Morten Nielsen

Summary

As cities across the Global South continue to grow at an explosive rate, a major challenge is how to ensure socially sustainable development for the many urban residents in need of basic services and viable housing. Over the last two decades, the middle class has consistently been promoted by urban analysts, researchers and practitioners as the probable vanguard of sustainable urban development: With their improved economic capacities and attention to civic rights and transparent governance, the argument goes, members of the urban middle class will ensure that cities across the Global South will provide sustainable living conditions for all. Based on recent research from Maputo, Mozambique, in this Policy Brief, this widespread understanding regarding the expected positive societal effects of a strengthened urban middle class is challenged. It is documented how recent urban developments focusing on the growing middle class have aggravated rather than alleviated entrenched social and economic inequalities. Rather than focusing on the assumed but uncorroborated productive effects of a growing middle class, recom-

mendations are made for (1) implementing stronger regulations on speculative land investments and (2) formalizing existing land occupations on the urban periphery.

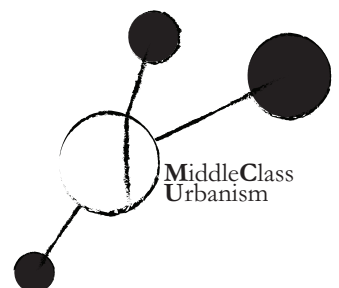
IT IS A MILD UNDERSTATEMENT TO ARGUE THAT THE SCALE AND SPEED AT WHICH THE AFRICAN POPULATION IS BEING URBANIZED PUTS THE CONTINENT'S CITIES UNDER PRESSURE.

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With a growth at 3,31% per year, sub-Saharan Africa manifests the fastest annual rate of urbanisation in the world. According to the United Nations, the continent's cities currently contain 472 million people and are expected to double in less than 25 years.¹ In 2010, the global share of African urban residents was 11.3%, and if current projections are accurate, this will grow to a staggering 20.2% or a total of 1.6 billion urbanites by 2050.

It is a mild understatement to argue that the scale and speed at which the African population is being urbanized puts the continent's cities under pressure. In many cities across the region, new residents are forced to live under insecure social and physical housing conditions without access to running water, sanitation and electricity and often with few possibilities for acquiring and enacting basic civil rights. These predictions indicate that the explosive urbanization of the region may thus lead to the gradual collapse of social and material infrastructures, networks of resource distribution and regimes of administration and governance – unless these already fragile African cities manage to effectively harness the productivity of their growing populations as a source for increased social cohesion. And according to a growing number of analysts, academics and development practitioners, many African cities may already contain the hidden treasure, which will allow them to thrive and prosper also beyond the imminent doubling of their population size. The hidden treasure is, the argument goes, the growing middle class.

If middle class is defined in absolute terms based on daily consumption between \$2 and \$20, then, by 2012, the African middle class had risen to 34.3% of the population from 26.2% in 1980.² According to a recent study from the Brookings Institution, given the explosive



growth of the African middle class, by the end of 2020, total consumer expenditure for the region is expected to double.³ The reason why this rapidly growing urban middle class is considered as the ideal driver for change is intimately tied to the pragmatic assumption that



New high-rise under construction in the inner city of Maputo (2016).

with improved financial capacities comes also a demand for viable social and physical conditions. Hence, as more and more African urbanites gain middle class status, the expectation is that they will also use their greater economic capacity as catalyst for demanding better-quality public services, transparent governance and an educational system that is globally competitive.⁴

Maputo's building boom

Up until a few years ago, Mozambique was often depicted as a developmental 'success story' with the national middle class as its main protagonist. While it is one of the poorest countries in the world, a yearly growth rate between 7-8% and a political willingness to unconditionally implement successive economic structural adjustment programs, the former socialist nation-state was considered by analysts, researchers and urban practitioners to be moving in the right direction. Following the global recession of 2008 and a recent debt crisis, however, Mozambique's donor star has waned considerably and the prospective role for the country urban middle class seems less clear. The expected macro-economic growth has not yet materialized (3.4% in 2018) and it is doubtful whether an expanding middle class does, in fact, lead to better governance and reduced poverty.

At the face of it, the recent building boom in Maputo, Mozambique's worn-out capital, seems to indicate that local policy makers are taking seriously the need to consolidate a national urban middle-class.

Driving through the inner city, it is impossible not to notice the many new construction projects that are being initiated mainly by local entrepreneurs or through state-private collaborations with international building consortia. To take one prominent example: there are now more than 80 gated compounds in and around the city center with around 30 complexes of 5-10 hectares concentrated along the picturesque Costa do Sol road bordering the coastline. Our research shows that only within the last five years, at least 20 new complexes have been built in the same area.⁵

The crucial question is therefore whether these and other recent urban developments do, in fact, represent a serious and concerted attempt at consolidating the growing but still extremely fragile floating and lower middle-class? Even before the 2016 debt scandal,⁶ when the national economy was steadily growing at an annual average of 7.5%, the Mozambican government was extremely inefficient in providing a viable conditions for the population as a whole. In 2014 80.3% of the 8,7 million urban Mozambicans were living in slum areas with 49.1% (of the entire population) living below the poverty line. Hence, rather than benefitting the poorest segments of the Mozambican society, the relatively long period of stable economic growth instead intensified a process of accumulation by a national capitalist class that continues to feed on the privatization of public assets, such as urban housing, without encountering political conditionalities or serious popular resistance.

Enclave investments: Urban development for the fortunate few

Our research shows that the increasing number of large-scale construction projects that are currently being initiated in and around Maputo continue to privilege the interests of a small elite with little or no rippling effects for the broader Mozambican society. Whereas the middle class may continue to be referred to as the harbinger of a viable urban future, this is little more than political rhetorics, which



Gateway to the Intaka Community, which is the biggest condominium ever built in Maputo (2018).

rarely serves other purposes than deepening entrenched social and economic inequalities. In Maputo and many other major cities in sub-Saharan Africa, urban development is increasingly organised as

“enclave investments” that are ring-fenced against the surrounding social and economic society with its assumed governmental weaknesses and administrative inefficiencies. The result is a widening divide between the fortunate few who can withdraw to sequestered urban ‘islands’ that offer well-functioning infrastructure, privacy and, most importantly, safety and the growing number of urban poor who are pushed even further away from the city center when the land that they have been occupying is prioritized for new construction projects. During the last decade, the urban middle class has been cast as the crucial ingredient for the making of socially sustainable cities throughout the Global South. But as our research from the frontlines



Row of houses in the Intaka Community (2016).

of urban development in sub-Saharan Africa shows, there is little evidence to confirm that the middle class has positively affected the functioning or social sustainability of major cities, such as Maputo. In fact, over the last five years, social and economic differences have been significantly aggravated while political and economic attention is aimed at large-scale and highly visible infrastructure projects. An example is the recently opened suspension bridge that connects the Maputo city center with the Catembe peninsula across the Maputo Bay, which has rapidly turned the area into a new economic investment hub for the fortunate few. Rather than serving as the harbinger of new and viable urban futures, in such instances, middle class urbanism has come to chart new fault lines, which are fracturing an already unstable social and economic terrain.

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Based on this analysis of the middle class urbanism, we have two recommendations:

- First, national legislation must be strengthened in order to better regulate and control speculative land investments. This can be done by specifying in greater detail than what is currently the case the specific purposes for which urban land can be used and by considerably reducing the timeframe before acquired land must be developed.
- Second, the large majority of existing land occupations must be formalized. More than 60% of Maputo's population live in informal settlements. In order to create viable housing conditions for the majority of the population, it is crucial that the informality of these settlements is eliminated. Our research shows that when hitherto informal urban land occupations are formalized, household economies are equally strengthened.

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About the author

Morten Nielsen is currently a senior researcher at the National Museum of Denmark and head of the interdisciplinary research project 'Middle Class Urbanism: An interdisciplinary study of the physical reordering of urban sub-Saharan Africa'. Based on his fieldwork in Mozambique, Scotland, and USA, he has published on issues such as urban citizenship, time and temporality, urban aesthetics, materiality, infrastructure, and political cosmologies. Recent publications include articles in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Social Analysis, and Social Anthropology.

Middle Class Urbanism

Middle Class Urbanism. An interdisciplinary study of the physical reordering of urban sub-Saharan Africa is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research (FKK). The aim with the project is to investigate rapid urbanization processes in sub-Saharan Africa with a special focus on the radical transformations of the built environment caused by middle class urbanism.

Funded by:



Nationalmuseet

 National Museum of Denmark

FKK

Forskningsrådet for Kultur og Kommunikation

