5.5 USING THE CASE STUDY APPROACH TO INFORM PLANNING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH IN AFRICA

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Introduction

This chapter describes one attempt to influence planning practice in Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa through a project to promote case study research methodology in African planning education. The project was operated by the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS) from 2009 to 2010 and was driven by the conviction that African planning occurs in a context characterized by a shortage of data on urbanization, outdated planning systems – often more or less unchanged from the systems put in place by colonial legislation – and a lack of political and professional will to deal with urbanization in any sort of sustained and progressive manner (Watson and Odendaal, 2012). In this context, AAPS identified the case study research methodology as a strategic approach to enhancing and shifting planning practice.

The argument for such an approach rests on an assumption that there are at least three links between the promotion of case study research methodology in planning education, and the development of practical competencies in the profession. The first link is that case study research outputs can provide practitioners with data and insights to help them understand in greater detail the dynamics and needs of urban contexts and communities. The second point is that the process of undertaking in-depth case study research, or participating in a case study–based teaching project (especially those involving real communities and development problems), can foster the development of skills and competencies that are closely aligned to those required for effective and inclusive planning practice in contemporary African urban contexts. These include the capacity to communicate and collaborate with a wide range of local actors, to analyse and understand complex urban processes, and to translate theoretical knowledge into action through the enhanced ‘practical common-sense’ or ‘know-how’ termed *phronesis* by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001). It follows that training in case study research methodology conducted as part of university curricula can be of lasting benefit to planning practitioners in their daily activities, as they seek to intervene in highly complex urban problems. Finally, and of particular importance in the African context, the experience of engaging closely with local communities in the course of a case study research or educational project has the capacity to change student values.
and mindsets towards poor urban groups living ‘informally’. As future practitioners, it is essential that planning students enter the workplace with the skills and values suited for inclusive and context-relevant planning practice.

This chapter is arranged in two main parts. Firstly, it describes the background and rationale leading AAPS to identify case study research as a key means of shifting planning pedagogy and research in Africa, focusing on how the benefits of this methodological approach were viewed in relation to the complex substantive trends and issues framing African urbanization and potential planning responses. With current thought about African urban spaces and societies highlighting their fluid, mobile and ephemeral character, case study research offers a robust methodological approach to study and conceptualize urban phenomena, through both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Secondly, the chapter describes the projects through which AAPS sought to promote case study research, before identifying and discussing some of the key outputs from this process, and reflecting upon its potential to inform future planning practice in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Why shift planning education and research in Africa?**

**Trends and challenges for African urban practice**

The pace and consequences with which African urban transitions are unfolding are difficult to pinpoint and predict (see Potts, 2012). While there is general consensus that African primary and secondary cities are growing rapidly (UN-HABITAT, 2009), a major impediment to developing an adequate understanding of African urbanization is a lack of data on the rate, scale and trajectories of these processes (Pieterse, 2010a). In most cases, these data simply do not exist. In others, national survey instruments are not calibrated to provide useful or in-depth information on complex urban changes in different places (ibid.). Local governments seldom have access to reliable data collected on a city-wide scale. When it is available, it is rarely consistent enough to allow for comparative urban analysis across national or regional boundaries.

Hard data on key African urban demographic and economic trends is therefore a critical area in need of development (ibid.). But planners, policymakers and decision makers on the continent also urgently require detailed, substantive knowledge of how people live, identify and survive in the city, and how various systems and practices of settlement, land management, economic production and service provision relate to and produce one another. A growing corpus of scholars has called for African urban research to engage with the various and specific rationalities that frame the decisions and actions of ordinary urban actors (e.g. Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004; Simone 2004; Pieterse, 2008). The quest to “understand and appreciate the terms on which they seek to make viable lives for themselves” is increasingly seen as a prerequisite for developing more effective ways of conceptualizing and responding to African urban dynamics (Beall et al., 2010: 198). As such, even if up-to-date and reliable census and survey information was ubiquitously available, qualitative methods are still key to developing a nuanced understanding of African ‘cityness’.

To pick one of the many challenges facing African planners, with few exceptions future graduate professionals will be required to work in urban contexts marked by various practices of ‘informality’. Originating in the 1970s to describe forms of autonomous, unregulated, small-scale and often illegal forms of urban employment, ‘informality’ increasingly refers to a variety of activities relating to settlement, self-employment and service provision, as well as collective political organization and action. Probably the most obvious manifestation of
this process in recent years is the growth of various forms of informal settlement and the ongoing “informalization of formal settlements” (Myers, 2011: 73). It is also demonstrated in the course of everyday urban social life through the “apparently rising importance of unregistered social networks in the built environment, livelihood strategies, social reproduction, cultural organization, or political mobilization” (ibid.). As African cities grapple with their political-economic marginality and legacy of structural adjustment, all kinds of relations, including those between state and civil society actors, become sites for informal negotiations and exchanges (Beall et al., 2010).

These observations relating to modes of settlement and livelihood have their parallels in ideas surrounding the emerging political subjectivities of African urbanisms. For AbdouMaliq Simone (2010), the experiences and objective realities of structural peripherality and urban marginality lay the platform for ‘anticipatory urban politics’. Here he is interested in how the city becomes the site of various ‘practices of anticipation’, or “the art of staying one step ahead of what might come, of being prepared to make a move” (Simone, 2010: 62). Maintaining the possibility of movement and mobility becomes a key practice within the experimental engagements that constitute the ‘wording’ of African cities, as urban residents seek to dissolve or tap into larger circuits of migration and exchange (Simone, 2011).

Planning as a professional activity faces severe challenges in addressing issues of poverty in complex urban spaces involving a broad range of highly mobile, anticipatory acts and actors. However, developing effective systems and practices of intervention is problematic in contexts where general shortages of data on urbanization is compounded by a lack of political will to accept and deal with the realities of urbanization. Policy inertia is fostered by a “widespread denial” of the realities of urbanization amongst African political leaders, creating a “policy vacuum” that leads to unmanaged urban processes (Pieterse, 2010b: 8). One side effect is that planning in many anglophone African contexts operates within legislative systems that have been inherited, more or less unchanged, from earlier colonial governments. Colonial-era planning law has proved to be particularly resilient and difficult to change in many African countries (see Watson, 2011; Berrisford, 2011). Changes to African planning systems, which often operate in a highly exclusionary way, have thus failed to keep pace with changes in the rate, scale and nature of urbanization on the continent.

In line with this policy and legislative inaction, planning education in sub-Saharan Africa typically follows a vision of planning practice as a technical and value-neutral affair (Diaw et al., 2002). Many planning departments remain largely unaffected by the waves of postmodern, feminist and radical critiques that have profoundly affected the way that the purpose and process of planning are conceptualized and executed elsewhere. Conventional training in research methods for planners tends to concentrate on survey-based data gathering and analysis or, more recently (and if the facilities are available), GIS analysis. But in most cases qualitative research skills, including in-depth interviewing or document analysis, are not addressed. Neither are oral or written communications skills. The majority of planning researchers and practitioners, with some notable exceptions, therefore rely extensively upon survey-based methods and statistical techniques.

**The role of case study research in revitalizing planning practice in Africa**

In this context, there is an urgent need to produce African urban and regional planning graduates with a greater capacity for more effective and inclusive planning practice. Planners working in African cities need particular types of skill sets and competencies – especially those relating
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to the capacity to work with and resolve the interests of many different actors and institutions – alongside a more general critical capacity to define, analyse and intervene in complex urban problems. The imperative of engaging with, understanding and reacting productively to ‘informal’ systems and actors, in all their various guises, remains a significant challenge to ensuring the future relevance and effectiveness of planning practice on the continent. Yet shifting planning thought and practice in Africa towards an advocacy-based upgrading agenda is not simply a matter of introducing new content into existing planning curricula. It demands a shift in the sensibilities, values and techniques carried by practitioners in Africa: a shift from the planner as an apolitical, expert technician to the planner as a technically proficient, critical intermediary between many different formal and semi-formal actors and institutions.

Case study research methodology, as a broad set of ideas, theories and methods, is one means of changing the course of planning practice in Africa through the dual media of research and education. The argument presented here has been influenced by that of Flyvbjerg, who sees case study research as a way of reorienting planning towards a pragmatic, rather than normative or utopian, position and of challenging the ‘rationalist’ approach inherent in most dominant schools of planning thought. His argument for a ‘phronetic planning research’ agenda is, therefore, an argument for a disciplinary refocus on issues of practical judgement, the values that drive practice, and especially on issues of power (Flyvbjerg, 2004). In this view the real practical value of the case study is its capacity to show what has actually happened in a given setting, and how. Given this close attention to empirical detail and process, case study research is well suited for the analysis of complex causality and power relations, as well as the practical ethics and judgements that inform real-world planning outcomes. Flyvbjerg himself has shown how case study research can be used as part of planning practice and public advocacy, contributing to the budgeting and management practice of large-scale infrastructure projects, for example (Flyvbjerg, 2009). Often, the biggest benefit of the well-chosen and well-constructed case study is its capacity to challenge or ‘falsify’ a taken-for-granted principle or understanding of a problem in the public domain (also see Flyvbjerg, 2001). From the perspective of learning, a good case study enables “the development of a nuanced view of reality”, and produces the concrete, context-dependent knowledge and experience, which lie “at the very heart of expert activity” (Flyvbjerg, 2011: 303). Such ideas constituted the starting point for a series of projects operated by the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS), designed to promote case study research and teaching amongst African planning academics.

The AAPS case study research and publication project

Founded in 1999, the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS) is a voluntary, peer-to-peer network of African institutions of higher education that educate and train urban and regional planners. At the time of writing, its fifty members are drawn from nineteen countries, located in all regions of Africa. As a knowledge network, it aims to facilitate the exchange of information between African planning schools, primarily through digital communication and social networking tools. In 2007, AAPS secured a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to pursue a project entitled ‘Revitalising Planning Education in Africa’. The project sought to address a perceived disconnect or ‘gap’ between the skills, knowledge and values that are taught in African universities and the actual issues that planners face in practice (also see Watson and Odendaal 2012). AAPS hosted its first meeting of planning schools in 2008 in Cape Town, where this disconnection or ‘gap’ was once again emphasized. Case study research was proposed as one means of bridging this gap. This led AAPS to embark on a project aimed at advancing
the use of the case study method in teaching and research. Starting in 2009, again with financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the project had a number of objectives, fitting within the larger AAPS agenda of promoting relevant and contextualized curricular reform within African planning schools (see Odendaal 2012). The first main objective was to enhance the research skills and methodological knowledge of planning academics and future practitioners (in the form of students). The second objective was to promote the production and distribution of published research on urban planning in Africa.

Generally speaking, AAPS saw case study research as beneficial on at least two levels. The first concerned the type of knowledge produced by case study research and its relationship to questions of learning and praxis. Case study research has the potential to generate the concrete, contextual data that is necessary for enhanced practice, by fostering a nuanced understanding of why certain phenomena exist, and ‘how it came to be that way’. This sort of knowledge is well suited to feed back into education and teaching courses, where it can be used to develop skills in complex problem analysis and creative decision making (Barnes et al., 1987). The second set of benefits concerned the process of doing case study research, specifically that which encourages the researcher to engage with many different actors, especially local communities and low-income urban groups (see Peattie, 1994). This means that, firstly, methodological training for case study research can provide the graduate planner with a set of intersubjective competencies (including communication skills) directly related to those required in the workplace and, secondly, undertaking case study research provides planners with the opportunity to engage with daily urban realities, and thereby reassess their attitudes towards informal urban practices.

AAPS organized three regional workshops on case study research and teaching methodology (in Western, Eastern and Southern Africa), each three days in length. They emphasized the development of qualitative research skills, while maintaining that the case study generally offers opportunities for mixed-method research approaches. Skills in in-depth interviewing, narrative writing and the use of direct quotations of actors were specifically targeted. The facilitators argued the need for planning researchers to ‘get their shoes dirty’ through in-depth field research, and highlighted the situated, bodily practice of research. The case studies written by Flyvbjerg (1998) on Aalborg in Denmark, Watson (2002) on Cape Town in South Africa, Lerise (2005) on Chekereni and Nnkya (2008) on Moshi Town, both in Tanzania, were used as methodological exemplars. All four had used the narrative writing approach to explain complex processes of planning change and ‘failure’, and specifically sought to capture the often overlooked roles played by ideas, values and power relations within the local breakdown of policy intentions. Furthermore, they all employed a sophisticated case study research design, such that the narrative of real-world events and actors could speak to more general theoretical ideas about planning, power and values of professional practice.

Outcomes of the AAPS projects

The AAPS projects surrounding curricular reform and case study publication resulted in various outputs, all informed by the idea that current and future African planners require an acute, experience-based understanding of the complexities of the institutional and urban contexts in which they are expected to operate. One set of outputs took the form of online thematic ‘toolkits’ to assist planning schools with revision of their curricula to be more attuned to the realities of contemporary African urbanization, and appropriate planning responses thereto. Each toolkit consisted of an overview of the key concepts pertaining to a particular subject, suggested syllabi and a set of case studies to be used in the course of teaching to illustrate various issues and
problems relating to the subject matter. For example, the ‘actor collaboration’ toolkit emphasized the growing disjuncture between approaches to planning developed in the global North, largely based on positivism and communicative action theory, and the messy realities of contestation, poverty, inequality, informality and spatial fragmentation that characterize the cities of the global South. Three teaching case studies were included in this toolkit. One sought to demonstrate the immense complexity and potential for conflict associated with state attempts to engage with and formalize ‘the informal’ within the African city (based on the experiences of the Joe Slovo informal settlement in Cape Town). Another discussed how rational, technocratic and rules-based planning may become joined in the service of state oppression, as with Operation Restore Order/Musumbatsvina in Harare. The third looked at the opportunities of incremental informal settlement upgrading through community organization, as illustrated by the activities of Pamoja Trust and the slum dwellers movement known as Muungano wa Wanvijiji in Huruma, Nairobi.

AAPS also produced a toolkit specifically aimed at developing capacity in case study research and teaching. This was designed as a flexible resource, consisting of a series of modules that could be combined in various ways to build different teaching or training products. It was primarily aimed at urban planning postgraduate students and academic researchers interested in conducting case study research, but could equally be useful for practitioners interested in developing their methodological skills through the conduct of a short workshop. The toolkit was intended to enhance both theoretical and practical understanding of the case study research method. It included many of the practical insights offered by the AAPS workshop facilitators, as well as various responses to issues and questions commonly raised by participants. Copies of the toolkit were widely distributed to AAPS member schools, and an electronic version is freely available for download on the AAPS website. To date, the toolkit has proven to be popular amongst postgraduate students undertaking their dissertation research design.

Workshop participants themselves produced an impressive array of case studies, many focusing on ‘informal’ modes of economic activity, revealing the harsh punitive means by which street traders, recyclers and others are dealt with by government agencies, and the subtle ways by which informal operators engage flexibly and strategically with government and civil society actors. For the facilitators, working with the participants to refine their research ideas and writing techniques was a learning process, offering insights into the institutional challenges and skill shortages affecting the research intentions of planning educators on the continent. Grounded, qualitative research and narrative writing techniques are skills that need to be practised, yet in many cases the economic and infrastructural constraints of professional life at many African planning schools make research-oriented initiatives, such as the AAPS project, difficult to effect. These constraints include low staff salaries (meaning academic incomes often have to be supplemented by consultancy work), limited access to standard books and journals, and, where it does exist, very poor access to the Internet. Research and writing skills may simply not be in place or, following training in the empiricist tradition at the master’s or doctoral degree level, they may have been left aside in favour of well-funded consultancy projects and other research opportunities. The AAPS workshop facilitators-turned-editors therefore worked closely with the authors and texts, providing successive rounds of detailed comments concerning the structure and writing style necessary to create case study research with enhanced relevance to practical knowledge in planning.

Several workshop participants chose to reflect on their experiences with case study teaching, rather than produce empirical case studies. The ‘live’ case study or studio was identified as a particularly rewarding teaching approach, in contrast to what is more commonly recognized as the ‘case teaching method’, as exemplified by the Harvard Business School (Barnes et al.,
1987). Whilst the Harvard method is recognized globally as an effective educational approach, the fact remains that it depends upon simulation – the classroom situation is used to simulate real business cases, prepared beforehand by the class facilitator. A ‘live case’ approach, however, encourages learners to engage with real planning problems in the field, and work with local communities and residents to produce planning analyses and solutions. Such projects enable students and teachers to conduct in-depth fieldwork and thereby to develop skills in negotiation, facilitation and conflict resolution – skills that are undoubtedly essential for effective practice in informalandizing urban contexts.

The idea that planning students should engage with local communities through case study research was a primary motivation leading AAPS to sign a memorandum of understanding with the international advocacy organization Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) in 2010. Over the past two years, this agreement has sought to establish collaborative partnerships between particular SDI country-based affiliates and AAPS member schools, whereby planning students, as part of their curricular requirements, work with local SDI federations and community representatives in performing community enumerations and local planning procedures. To date, these collaborative community-based upgrading studios, running for approximately one month each, have proven relatively effective in co-producing local planning strategies, according to the needs and interests voiced by informal communities, and in leveraging support from local governments. Encouraging signs are emerging that the studio projects provide a platform for a transformation of skills and mindsets on the part of students and practitioners. For example, a studio project implemented by Makerere University in Uganda saw students work in partnership with National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda (NSDFU) to produce informal settlement enumeration reports, as part of a national slum upgrading agenda operated by the Ugandan Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development through a country programme funded by Cities Alliance. The project has subsequently led to the creation of a formal partnership between the university and NSDFU to promote joint project work in the future. One student reflected on their learning experience as follows:

I came to understand that the current teaching curriculum is not practical to current planning problem solving in most of the African countries and it is estimated that it might be this teaching curriculum that is causing the rampant development slums in these cities, since the approaches are not applicable to the problems; for example a top-down approach which should change to a bottom-up approach if the problem of slums is to be solved.\footnote{5}

This student will graduate from Makerere University within the next two years, and will most likely work in a local or national government department in Uganda. Clearly, the studio experience will have imparted a set of competencies enabling him or her to communicate with and work effectively alongside those people most affected by planning intervention – groups of the urban poor. The student will be disposed towards engaging with local informal communities, seeking to understand, accommodate and empower the dynamics and needs of the latter. It is precisely these sorts of reflexive changes in the skills and mindsets of planners that AAPS sought to achieve in the course of its project work.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has described an attempt by AAPS to inform and reorientate planning practice in Africa by promoting the use of case study research methodology in planning education on
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the continent. The project, operated from 2009 to 2010, was motivated by the conviction that processes of African urbanization are poorly understood, and that as a first step to responding to the continent’s significant developmental challenges, planners require detailed, contextualized knowledge of how contemporary African cities actually grow and change. Case study research not only offers the possibility of generating substantive theoretical knowledge of urban phenomena but also can inform planners’ capacity to intervene in complex developmental processes, by promoting a phronetic mode of learning and imparting sets of skills and competencies relevant for inclusive and innovative planning practice. AAPS also sought to explore the potential of case study teaching approaches for the training of ethically reflexive planning practitioners, committed to bringing about sustainable urban development through inclusive practice.

The various outputs of the AAPS projects have straddled these research and educational agendas, seeing both the process and products of case study work as key to driving a reorientation of planning practice on the continent, which often sustains a value-neutral, apolitical and sometimes outright anti-urban professional identity. The Association has come to see the case study methodology as a vehicle to address conceptual, advocacy and learning concerns hand-in-hand. Although the project has faced challenges, it has also revealed the profound transformative effect that in-depth learning experiences, based on researching real-world development problems, can have on the mindsets and practical skills of planners. It is hoped that this chapter provides a basis for further reflection on the critical skills required for effective practice in urban processes of Africa and the global South.

Notes

1 Here I wish to refer to ‘case study research methodology’ as a particular methodological approach, specifically that developed by authors such as Robert Yin (1994) and Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, 2011). It is an approach that is associated with narratology as a way of presenting the research. I am not referring to the more common and general understanding of ‘case study research’, which can refer to any study employing a bounded unit of analysis, and would therefore include the majority of African master’s and PhD studies produced by students in disciplines including planning, development studies and geography.

2 Case study research was recommended in particular largely due to the fact that several key individuals involved in the founding of AAPS had applied the method extensively in the course of their own research. This ensured a disposition towards the benefits of case study research when AAPS members conducted their early discussions on educational reform.

3 The facilitators for the first workshop were Bent Flyvbjerg (University of Oxford), Jørgen Andreasen (retired, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts) and Fred Lerise (former of Ardhi University). Using material prepared by Flyvbjerg, the second and third workshops were facilitated by Andreasen, Lerise and AAPS staff.

4 These resources are all freely available on the official AAPS website, at www.africanplanningschools.org.za.

5 Extracted from a report submitted (unrequested) to the SDI and AAPS secretariats by Sam Nuwagira in 2012.

References


James Duminy