SARA INSIGHTS BRIEF | DECEMBER 2023

Informality and Equitable Urban Resilience

This insights brief is intended for city managers and urban planners working towards building urban resilience in southern Africa, across the so-called "Global South", and beyond. The authors of this brief are an interdisciplinary team of scholars and practitioners, collectively committed to urban resilience and planning for equity.

Over the last two years, supported by the Southern African Resilience Academy (SARA), we have reviewed academic and practice literature and drawn upon real-world examples to show how cities can leverage informality to enhance resilience in equitable ways.

Urban Growth: Challenges and Opportunities

African cities are facing the dual challenge of rapid urbanization and climate change. In the last half century, the sub-Saharan population living in cities has increased from 19% to 42%[1]. The United Nations projects a faster urbanization rate for Africa than any other continent, expecting 60% of its population to live in cities by 2030 - even surpassing Asia[2]. Climate change is exacerbating this trend and putting more people at risk. Even in an optimistic scenario of 1.7°C global warming, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change expects sub-Saharan Africa to have up to 40 million climate migrants. If the planet warms by 2.5°C, this number could more than double[3].

A majority of migrants will end up in Africa's growing cities, many of which are already facing challenges in meeting the needs of their current populations. The expansion of settlements into areas unplanned for urban growth – and often in areas of higher exposure to climate extremes – is a likely result. Already, urban populations are growing fastest in coastal areas, where poorly planned development is more likely to be vulnerable to future sea level rise[4]. Despite these challenges, Global South cities are concentrated sites of creativity and innovation, with great potential for sustainability solutions[5,6]. **Urban dynamics, including those involving informal settlements, economic activities, and institutions, can bring unique mixtures of knowledge, capacities and energy that - when harnessed equitably – can be an engine of urban resilience[7].**

The Reality of Southern African Cities

Southern African cities – like most cities of the Global South (and, arguably, an increasing number of cities in the Global North) – are characterized by informality in many different manifestations. From informal settlements to informal economic activities, and informal institutions governing everyday life, informality is part of the urban fabric.

City governments in southern Africa face complex challenges in meeting the demands of urbanization in a changing climate. Their action is often hampered by narrow mandates, as well as restricted and siloed responsibilities of public agencies, despite a will and desire to affect positive change and provide services for all urban residents.

As southern Africa's cities turn to resilience planning and strategic climate action, thoughtful efforts to engage with informality can create new opportunities to meet emerging needs for growing populations and expanding urban footprints. Informal solutions can provide benefits, support, and livelihoods in situations where formal systems cannot.

Although informality in settlements, economic activities, and livelihoods is everywhere in Africa's cities, informality is also often invisible and politically challenging for cities to engage with. This can be particularly difficult in highly inequitable societies, where diverse living conditions make it hard for formal systems to offer services that match all residents' needs.

What is urban informality?

Urban informality is often thought of in terms of unplanned and unserviced human settlements, typically lacking land tenure security and government oversight. Informality is also used to describe economic activities that are unregistered, unincorporated, and may lack measures of social protection and safety. Informality can also be used to describe processes of social interaction and governance, unrecognized or considered illegitimate by government agencies and institutions. However, informality plays an important role in cities, cities, providing livelihoods, services, crisis support, and structure across many dimensions of urban life.

Informal waste pickers face high risk with low economic returns, yet perform a useful service for cities

Informal labour such as domestic work provides livelihoods and supports the formal economy, but can also entrench inequality through low wages and limited protection

Informal activities are not just practiced by the poor. Wealthy households engage in informality, too, such as installing unregulated boreholes in response to drought.

Informal governance and decision-making may help address local challenges

Informal markets support livelihoods and provide access to affordable food and goods

Informal responses to urban emergencies play critical roles in humanitarian assistance

Informal resource extraction provides income but can undermine urban ecosystem resilience

What are effective and equitable ways to work with informality in urban resilience?

1 Work with bridging organizations and individuals

Bridging organizations and individuals can be NGOs, academic institutions, registered community groups, or even individual community leaders who are able to connect formal and informal systems: they have a foot in both worlds. They understand the constraints and challenges of urban managers and planners, and the reality of living in contexts of informality. They have the legitimacy of being part of the formal system, while enjoying the respect and trust of communities engaging in informal activities. These organizations and individuals often provide capacities and skills that are under-represented in municipal departments, and, as mediators between formal and informal actors, they can help negotiate equitable and sustainable solutions.

### Slum Dwellers International and CCODE

Slum Dwellers International (SDI) is an internationally recognized and formal non-profit organization that works in over 18 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In 2023, SDI supported the Centre for Community Organization and Development (CCODE) and The Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor, both "bridging organizations," to help people living in informal settlements in such cities as Lilongwe, Mzuzu, and Blantyre in Malawi to develop strategies to withstand and mitigate the effects of disasters. The cities had experienced recurrent floods over the last four rainy seasons, and 90% of the people affected were people living in informal settlements. The project leveraged the social and political capital of people living in informal settlements to help them enhance their resilience and, through the work of the partner organizations, helped encourage local governments to contribute to a community-managed fund and supply other resources to support resilience efforts[16].

2 Create spaces for innovative governance to build equitable resilience

Formal government structures have the power to affect change. To embrace the opportunities presented by informality, city governments can create inclusive and participatory spaces where diverse stakeholders can create and test innovative and creative processes of collaboration. These spaces can be multi-stakeholder planning forums, participatory visioning processes, or structured engagement activities that allow all actors to feel comfortable in expressing their concerns and articulating their needs. Stakeholders include NGOs, academic institutions, private sector organizations, as well as communities and government representatives. Such processes need not be led by the city, but city government can ensure that spaces exist for effective engagement to build more resilient and equitable futures.
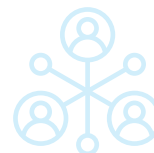
Cape Town's food security response during the pandemic

Cape Town Together, a network of self-organizing neighbourhood-level groups known as Community Action Networks (CANs), emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers from the Health Policy and Systems Division began working with a team of community organizers, social activists, and public health practitioners who sought to catalyze a community-led response to Covid-19 and its socio-economic impacts. From sharing information and resources, to setting up community kitchens, the network became an important part of the overall societal response. The CANs were not based in formally registered and recognized non-profit organizations. They were organized on WhatsApp and other social media, and largely run by volunteers who connected households and community needs to formal and informal supply chains for medical services, water, food, and information for community organization and well-being. The success of the CANs motivated the actors involved to set up the Western Cape Food Forum, a formal process in which civil society actors, representing diverse informal partners, together with academics and government officials meet to plan sustainable and equitable food system policy[15].

3   Recognize and address the inequities of informality

Once the opportunities and challenges presented by informality have been acknowledged by resilience planners, it is equally as important to recognize that neither benefits nor burdens of informality are equitably shared. Populations living in informal spaces and engaging in informal activities are among the most at risk from failures in urban resilience. While unregulated informal activities often generate social and environmental costs to cities, many informal actors also contribute to urban system resilience by investing their time and labor in actions that protect their communities from extreme events, that provide critical urban services, or that manage urban ecological resources. These complex and often unjust distributions of burdens and benefits require transparent evaluation and urgent attention. Mutually beneficial partnerships among cities and representatives of informal groups are proliferating globally, as cities find creative ways to address injustices while building urban resilience. Such strategies build trust, reduce the potential for conflict, and open opportunities for continued negotiation of collective solutions to the emerging challenges faced by growing cities.

Community-Managed Savings Funds and Urban Resilience

Residents in informal settlements typically bear the burden of preparing for, coping with, and responding to urban shocks and stressors, whether these are economic, environmental, or political. In Harare, Zimbabwe, rural to urban migration fueled by economic and political instability has led to forced evictions, arising from inequitable access to land. Two local organizations, Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless in Zimbabwe Trust (DSHZT) and the Zimbabwe Homeless People's Federation (ZHPF) conducted a comprehensive inventory of informal settlements to make the number of families requiring assistance and the nature of their needs visible to authorities. They also negotiated the donation of land from the municipality for settlement upgrading, creating a space for more equitable negotiation of burdens and benefits with the City of Harare. Community members agreed to contribute their labor and time to building housing and establishing services, but needed funding. Building on successful examples of women-run savings groups, DSHZT and ZHPF acquired contributions to a revolving savings fund from the City and external donors to support community-led upgrading projects[8]. The Gungano Urban Poor Loan Fund is now recognized for enhancing urban resilience, equitably, by providing flexible finance to help communities cope with both climate shocks[9] and COVID-19[10]. Through this innovative finance mechanism, residents in informal settlements receive recognition, compensation, and support for their efforts in urban service improvement, while alleviating stresses on municipal infrastructure and resources.

4   Accept the limits of formality and build on what works

Governments face real constraints in meeting the diverse and growing economic, social, infrastructural, and environmental needs of burgeoning cities. Despite these constraints, cities have essential leadership roles to play in planning for and addressing the issues associated with informality. Partnerships are thus critical for getting the work of urban resilience done. Informal arrangements and institutions often do important work to fill critical gaps in urban services and infrastructure, and to address urgent social-environmental needs. Yet, they require formal recognition and support. Through partnerships with organizations deeply familiar with the ins-and-outs of what is working in informal spaces, and what is not, city governments can create alliances to support effective and equitable urban resilience.

Waste pickers

Globally, around 85% of people working in waste management and recycling are informally employed[11]. In South Africa, it is estimated that upwards of 200,000 people rely on waste picking to earn a living[12]. Waste pickers or reclaimers recycle up to 90% of post-consumer plastics and packaging, which is a significant contribution to South Africa's waste management and recycling system[13]. However, waste pickers are not paid by public funds for this contribution, nor do they receive protections or compensations for hazardous working conditions. To provide capacity building and negotiation support to waste pickers, the Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) network established the Waste Integration in South Africa (WISA) project[14]. Between 2016 and 2020, WISA operated in Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Sasolburg, with the aim of helping waste picker associations alter public policy and ensure the recognition of informal workers as contributors to public welfare in waste management.

Endnotes

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INFORMALITY AND COLLABORATION

A STORY OF SAND, LAND AND FLOODING

M has been struggling to find some way of amaking ends meet. Her neighbor invited her to help with the sand excavation enterprise he runs on the river bank. /Together with nearly 20 others from her settlement, M bags sand that her neighbor then sells to various construction businesses.

1

2 T, a salaried worker in the municipal government, is excited about building his first home. He purchased land from a land broker with a lovely view of the river.

The broker assures him the land title is formal and legal, but T was surprised to learn that the local Chief also had claims to the land. T therefore has to make an extra payment to compensate the Chief.

3 One day, M goes to work by the river but it is raining heavily and she is forced to turn back. The whole area where she was working the day before is flooded.

4 M learns that she will no longer be able to work in sand mining; the area has been completely eroded away. She is worried about having enough money to buy food for her family.

T also is frustrated. His contractor tells him that sand is increasingly scarce and he'll need to pay more.

5 Downstream, a team of City officials is surveying the damage caused by the flood. The expense of cleaning up the devastation and restoring the river will be high; it isn't clear how they will pay for it.

6 After many complaints from impacted residents, the City decides to change the way the river is managed. A local NGO helps mediate a new agreement between the City, former sand mining community, and local chiefs to restore the river. A new self-governing community group is formed, and former sand miners are paid by the NGO to rehabilitate and maintain the natural river corridor based on traditional ecological knowledge. This provides livelihoods and enhances flood resilience for the city as a whole.

https://www.centroidpm.com/lilongwe-malawi-urban-projectization/

SARA's work towards building equitable resilience in Southern Africa

Since 2022, the Southern African Resilience Academy (SARA) has supported collaborative working groups to pursue inter- or transdisciplinary synthesis research under the guiding theme of "**Building equitable resilience in Southern Africa**".

This is in line with SARA's role as a convening and support space for researchers and practitioners working across Southern Africa to engage around pressing resilience and development challenges in the region.

SARA is an initiative of the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP), with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The academy's goals are to strengthen existing expert networks, expand collaboration, and facilitate the co-production of policy and practice-relevant knowledge.

Through its links with other regional networks, SARA aims to contribute directly and meaningfully to regional and global policy discussions around resilience and development, and elevate the Southern African voice in international fora.

SARA is coordinated by the Centre for Sustainability Transitions (CST) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. It is co-funded by the South African Research Chair in Social-Ecological Systems and Resilience.

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WORKING GROUP:
Informality and Equitable Urban Resilience

Informality is a pervasive and defining aspect of urban life in the Global South, shaping the experience of millions in southern Africa. From informal settlements to informal trade and institutions, its influence on urban dynamics is undeniable. However, the link between informality, urban inequality, and resilience is often overlooked in contemporary urban planning. This oversight risks perpetuating existing disparities and hampering effective responses to crises and climate-related shocks. Recognising this gap, the "Informality and Equitable Urban Resilience" working group, formed under the SARA working group initiative, seeks to explore and address the critical role of informality in urban resilience and equity of rapidly growing cities in the Global South.

Our goal is to synthesise research and practice from southern Africa and other Global South contexts to comprehensively examine how informality influences urban resilience. By leveraging interdisciplinary expertise in climate change adaptation, social-ecological resilience, urban governance, social movements, and environmental justice, we aim to develop recommendations for improved urban planning and governance for cities in southern Africa and beyond.

The inclusion of representatives from ICLEI Africa and Slum Dwellers International, two organisations that work closely with urban communities and decision-makers across southern Africa, enhances the practical relevance of our insights, bridging the gap between research and on-the-ground experience.

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Suggested Citation

SARA 2023. Informality and Equitable Urban Resilience. Insights Brief. Informality and Equitable Urban Resilience Working Group. Southern African Resilience Academy.

For more information about the Informality and Equitable Urban Resilience working group

Convened and funded by:

GLOBAL RESILIENCE PARTNERSHIP

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