

Constraints on Neighbourhood Activism: Experiences with Services Upgrading in Nakuru, Kenya

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[Paper first received, March 2007; in final form, January 2008]

Abstract

This paper tries to explain why community action and partnering in services upgrading in Nakuru, Kenya, has only produced very modest results. Although inhabitants feel connected to their neighbourhood, they do not automatically translate their attachment into concrete action to improve liveability. This is due to a range of reasons, including competing loyalties of citizens, antagonism between local leaders, pervasive influence of patronage and cronyism, chronic weaknesses of local government and tendencies of CBOs to become more exclusionary. These findings somewhat temper the general optimism in the Habitat literature about the potentials of communities in spurring local development processes. Nakuru is a good place to investigate this issue since it is often portrayed as an example of best practice in local-government–community interaction, especially because of its commitment to the LA-21 process.

Introduction

Involving citizens in the design and implementation of projects to improve the liveability of cities has become the default strategy of urban development in the South (World Bank, 2000; UNCHS, 2002; UN-HABITAT and DFID, 2002). This is summed up in the concept of participatory governance, which refers to the inclusion of citizen

groups, especially the poor, in governing processes (Mitlin, 2004, p. 4). Many experts are enthusiastic about the potentials of participatory governance in bringing about meaningful advances in services delivery in the South. Academic journals such as *Environment and Urbanisation* and *Habitat International* provide well-known and robust outlets for research with this basically optimist connotation. However, we contend that the

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strategy does not always sit comfortably with the actual dynamism of 'African' urban life. It is sensible, therefore, not to engage too much in wishful thinking, but rather to examine critically, in our case, the actual process of neighbourhood services upgrading, the possibilities and constraints that actors face in their collective efforts and how they respond to these.

Throughout this paper, we will use the concept of 'community action' rather than the more encompassing concept of 'collective action' to indicate that our focus is on neighbourhood services upgrading—i.e. actions undertaken in a specific territorial unit. Similarly, the neighbourhood is conceived here primarily as a "community of space" (Konings *et al.*, 2006, p. 2). By sharing their habitat, inhabitants have a common social identity, albeit that the significance of this identity will vary. The spatial focus is also inherent in the concept 'community-based organisation' (CBO), which commonly refers to arrangements and associations formed and located within the local space, or immediate residential surrounding of the actor (Akin; in Shatkin, 2003, p. 223).

The selection of Nakuru for this case was deliberate. It was the first town in Kenya to have developed a Local Agenda 21 (LA 21, the UN programme that provides a framework for implementing sustainable development at the local level) through a consultative process which emphasised the use of participatory planning. During the process—financially supported by UNCHS and other donors—officials, community groups and NGOs worked closely together developing a joint vision on the city's key problems and suggesting ways to address these through collaboration between public and private actors. It helped to establish at least a minimum of mutual understanding and respect between the local government and (some of the) citizens. Furthermore,

the Municipal Council of Nakuru (MCN) is among the few municipalities that have developed and approved several by-laws using a participatory approach, including the Environmental Management by-laws, the Urban-Agriculture by-laws and the Building by-laws. Due to these favourable conditions we expected to find a comparatively vibrant civil society and that at least some of the community groups formed to implement these activities would still be active.

Empirical data for this study were collected during two field periods. A short mission was organised in 2004 to conduct about 20 open interviews with local government officials, councillors, CBO leaders, NGO managers and university staff members. Respondents were all knowledgeable on the subject either through direct involvement in the design and execution of community projects, or by virtue of their research interests. One year later—April–May 2005—a survey was carried out in four neighbourhoods in Nakuru: Freehold, Free Area, Bondeni and London (Figure 1). We deliberately confined ourselves to low- and low-to-middle-income areas. Earlier investigations (Mwangi, 2003) had shown that neighbourhood groups were entirely absent in high-income areas, while several such groups were actively involved in services provision in the poorer areas of Nakuru. Not only are services deficits much less pronounced in the former, better-off residents are also able to solve possible shortcomings individually. Furthermore, in the choice of neighbourhoods we have avoided areas that were already overinvestigated because of several well-known donor projects. By way of a pretested questionnaire, 160 randomly chosen respondents were interviewed, equally divided over the 4 neighbourhoods. In addition, another round of 40 open interviews with key actors was organised (Post and Mwangi, 2006).

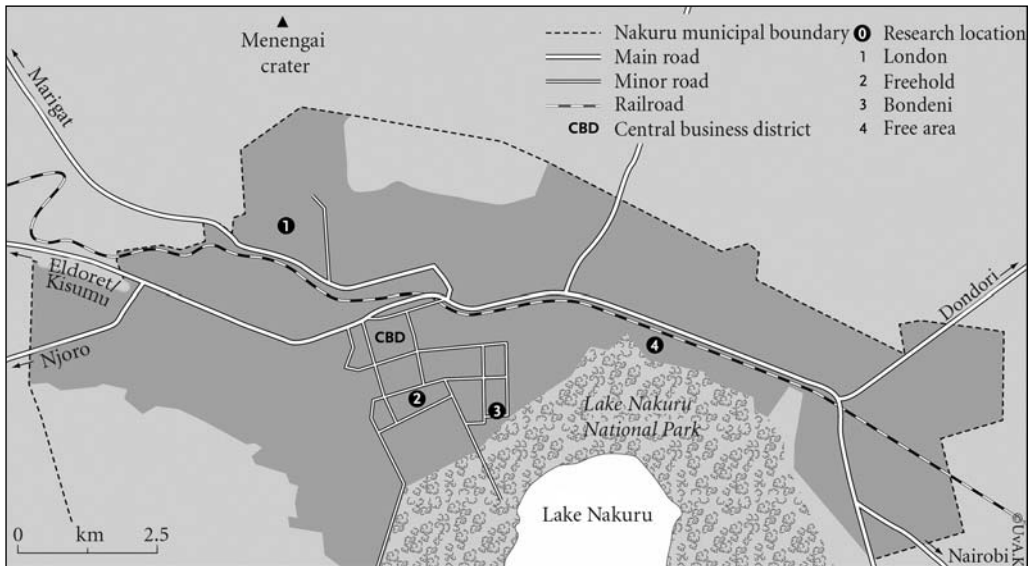


Figure 1. Research locations in Nakuru

Neighbourhoods, Public Management and Community Action

Since the end of the 1990s, the neighbourhood has been back in vogue as an area of scholarly attention and a major arena for policy intervention. The revival of the neighbourhood is closely related to the recognition of the continued importance of the local in the era of globalisation. Despite the fact that dominant economic and technological processes are organised largely in global networks, “day-to-day work, private life, and political participation are essentially local and territorial” (Castells, 2002, p. 552). However, to understand today’s localities, it is important to acknowledge that they are constituted both by things directly manifested within these places and by cross-scale relations. In such a relational approach, boundaries are interfaces and larger entities do not only contain smaller ones, but are also themselves contained in the smaller entities (Bebbington, 2003). This also applies to neighbourhoods. Although capitalism, modernity and globalisation

are powerful forces that work everywhere, neighbourhoods simultaneously have their own place-specific qualities that co-shape their development. Due to the specific conjunction of built environments, cultures, institutions and peoples, they provide a unique setting for daily life. At the same time, they share basic characteristics because they are connected to wider society (Swyngedouw, 1997; Martin, 2003; Castree, 2003; Mamadouh *et al.*, 2004; Shatkin, 2007). It is the specific, place-based interplay of forces that provides the process of neighbourhood services upgrading in Nakuru with a distinct pattern that distinguishes it from similar processes elsewhere.

Although it would be naïve to conceive the development of neighbourhoods primarily as a social engineering process, premeditated action does constitute a major force. Planned interventions *vis-à-vis* neighbourhoods are designed in either a top-down and state-directed manner (the public management perspective) or in a bottom-up and people-centred manner (the community action perspective). Within the first perspective, the desire to solve problems locally and to avoid

them spreading and affecting the overall urban social fabric is paramount (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Whitehead, 2003; Konings *et al.*, 2006). A major objection to this approach is that it depoliticises problems by ignoring the institutionalised patterns of inequality that underlie social reality. The second approach is about people's organisations trying to voice their needs and wants, and engaging in collective action to improve the quality of life in their areas. Although it can boast significant positive results at the community level, its weakness lies in its preoccupation with the local. Community action often fails to connect to broader societal issues and, hence, to develop meaningful countervailing power (Smith, 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

The public management perspective is closely connected to the global striving towards decentralisation. Usually, decentralisation is seen as the transfer of power (functions and finances) from central to local governments. The basic idea is that local governments are empowered and capacitated to respond to the restructuring of the global economy, maximising their ability to capitalise on their specific comparative advantages (Schuurman, 1997). At the same time, however, decentralisation is expected to be instrumental to the (neo-liberal) desire to roll back the state and create a lean and efficient kind of government that will make optimal use of private-sector and community potentials (Smoke, 2003). In the current era, therefore, decentralisation is not only about strengthening local governments, but is also about having these governments concentrate on creating the institutional framework that enables non-state actors directly to provide housing and urban services.

Not surprisingly, partnerships are the favoured instrument within the public management perspective (Helmsing, 2000; Plummer, 2002). Partnerships can be defined as more or less enduring, mutually beneficial relationships between two or more actors

(usually called 'stakeholders') based on a written or verbal agreement, targeted to the realisation of a public goal. In principle, partnerships provide each of the actors involved with benefits, but this does not imply equality among them due to power differentials (Baud and Post, 2002, p. 220). The partnership idea is important to the discussion on neighbourhood improvement because the available resources and local base of communities usually do not allow them to do much unless they engage with external actors. To improve service levels requires legal recognition, permits, connections to trunk networks and/or financial and technical support. In actual fact, however, there is often reluctance on the part of local authorities to deal with citizen organisations because they are perceived as a threat to the government's legitimacy and power base, are not considered to represent all residents or involving them is seen as costly, time-consuming or simply irrelevant. At the same time, attitudes on the part of citizens towards the state, at least in many African countries, often range from indifference to outright hostility. Deep-seated frustrations stemming from a history of economic mismanagement, authoritarian rule, nepotism and embezzlement have fed civic dissatisfaction towards the state. Besides, African state power is structurally weak, while the impact of customary arrangements (patron-client networks, ethnic associations, self-help groups, etc.)—and people's trust in and reliance on these—continues to be profound (Herbst, 2000; Orvis, 2001; Lewis, 2002). A major worry is that official partnerships are mostly biased towards 'modern' components of civil society, in our case formally recognised CBOs and supportive NGOs (Hearn, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2005). In our study, some of the ramifications of this predisposition will be shown.

The community action perspective puts its trust primarily in people's participation. It fits the global campaign to strengthen (local)

democracy and involve citizens more directly in processes of governance. Participation entails more than just exercising voice through the ballot box. The World Bank (1996, p. ix) defines it "as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them". It is important to note that we are talking about *community* participation, since it is not about the promotion of individual interests, but rather about the articulation of collective interests in (local) development (Mitlin, 2004, p. 5). Obviously, this ideal comes against considerable odds, notably because it aims to transform existing power relations. There are many difficulties, for example, in including women, youngsters and minority groups on an equal footing, in moving beyond simple consultation of citizens, in overcoming the deep-seated mentality of obedience towards authority and in making the state bureaucracy adapt to the idea of participation (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Cornwall, 2002). These problems also surface in our study.

Within the community action perspective, the neighbourhood is conceived as a social entity having some sense of group identity and interest. Neighbourhoods matter to people basically because most of everyday life, certainly that of children and the elderly, unfolds in a specific locality. This is assumed to translate in a strong feeling of connectedness and belonging among inhabitants, as well as a willingness to join in community action. It brings us to the concept of social capital, which is almost impossible to ignore when discussing neighbourhood activism. The term tries to capture the idea that social bonds and social norms are important in understanding development processes (Mitlin, 2001). Social capital is based on a common understanding between a group of people that has evolved over time and eases collaboration between them. It assumes relations of trust to exist, as well as reciprocity, a common set of rules and

norms and a direct connection or network of contacts (Pretty and Ward, 2001, p. 211). Although the concept has generated a lot of criticism (Fine, 2003; Schuurman, 2003) it has risen to prominence in the development debate at various scale levels (Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995; Rakodi, 2002; Bebbington, 2004). Here, it is utilised to reflect on the internal and external aspects of community action. A useful distinction is made between communal (bonding) and collaborative (bridging) social capital. The first refers to the level of community integration and the accountability of community leaders towards their supporters. The idea is that strong community ties have spin-offs in trust so that everyone benefits. The bridging type of social capital relates to the ability of community members or their leaders to link to important players outside the community, including local authorities, banks and donor agencies. (Purdue, 2001, p. 2214). It facilitates access to resources that communities themselves do not have.

Assuming that each neighbourhood has a stock of social capital, using it requires residents to get organised. This is where CBOs come in. People have established CBOs for the betterment of their area, or for protection of that area against threats coming from outside. Although CBOs have often been very instrumental in improving urban habitats (UNCHS, 2001, 2003), some drawbacks need to be mentioned that are relevant to our study. First, neighbourhood ties are usually comparatively weak and, consequently, turning the neighbourhood into an effective social force involves high transaction costs (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Konings *et al.*, 2006). Besides, neighbourhood community relations are often characterised by antagonism, mistrust or indifference. In situations of profound social schism, co-operative arrangements are unlikely to emerge. Likewise, it would be unrealistic automatically to consider CBOs to be truly representative of

the local population, especially of the poor (Nelson and Wright, 1995). In an empirical analysis of community action, therefore, due attention needs to be given to the social map of the neighbourhood.

Finally, the role of local leaders has to be included in the analysis. A distinction can be made between transactional and transformational leadership models in discussing their involvement in neighbourhood governance. While the former's role is primarily concerned with building and maintaining good relationships with followers (emphasising trust, reliability and accountability), the latter's role is more that of a social entrepreneur (stressing the charismatic qualities of the leader and the ability to acquire and manage resources; Purdue, 2001, pp. 2215–2219). To understand the process of neighbourhood improvement, it is essential to find out how leaders manipulate their social networks both within and beyond the local community. Furthermore, one should be alert to the hidden motives of these key persons—seeking to strengthen their power base, to consolidate their status, to enrich themselves, to favour their followers, etc.—in order to discover possible frictions and trade-offs between collective and personal concerns (Mitlin, 2001).

Setting

With about 360 000 inhabitants, Nakuru is the fourth-largest urban centre in Kenya situated about 160 km north-west of Nairobi. It is the headquarters of Rift Valley province. The city's spatial development is severely constrained by natural factors. It is sandwiched between Menengai crater and its associated volcanic landscapes to the north, and Lake Nakuru to the south. The latter is one of the country's National Parks famous for its wildlife and, therefore, the major tourist attraction of the city and the region.

The population of Nakuru has been growing at a dramatic rate of 5.6 per cent per annum

leading to a projected size of 760 000 by 2015. Growth is predominantly occurring in the outskirts of town, especially in a westward direction. Here, agricultural lands are rapidly being sub-divided to accommodate new city-dwellers. Most of the growth is unplanned and residents lack municipal services. The capacity of existing services is stretched to the limit and the quality of the urban environment is steadily deteriorating.

Despite concerted efforts to strengthen the role of local government, the shortage of resources has remained crippling. Together with persisting governance problems, this explains why the MCN fails to deliver desperately needed services, notably in deprived and peripheral areas (Mwangi, 2003). The city suffers, for example, from a serious water supply deficit, running up to more than half the projected demand.

Accepting that the authorities are incapable of solving the problems of inadequate services all by themselves, the question is what other actors have done to help upgrade provision either on their own or in collaboration with others. This question was taken up in our survey.

The State of Public Services and Community Action

It was deemed important first to find out how residents appreciated the level of servicing. One can only expect community action to arise when there is enough dissatisfaction to build on (Table 1). In general, people were most distressed about the state of garbage collection, their sanitary facilities, water provisioning during the dry season and protection against crime. For the other services, the problems were less pronounced and more specific—for example, complaints about frequent power cuts, lack of medicine or overcrowding of classrooms. Sometimes, we could observe a relationship between the neighbourhood and the level of services.

Table 1. Levels of satisfaction *vis-à-vis* various public services

<i>Service</i>	<i>Satisfied (percentage)</i>	<i>Neutral (percentage)</i>	<i>Dissatisfied (percentage)</i>	<i>Valid cases (number)</i>
Public elementary school	42.2	25.0	32.8	64
Electricity	84.7	5.9	9.3	118
Garbage disposal	24.4	4.4	71.3	160
Public dispensary	42.7	47.6	9.8	82
Toilet facilities				
Private	68.1	12.5	19.4	72
Shared	37.9	17.2	44.8	88
Drinking water				
Rainy season	50.0	11.3	37.6	157
Dry season	26.3	16.0	57.7	156

Bondeni, being the poorest area, stood out worst, with significantly lower scores on the quality of public primary education and numbers of connections to the power grid. On the other hand, and somewhat remarkably, Bondeni was also the area having least trouble with mugging and theft. The relationship between income class and quality of services was not very prominent and could largely be explained by differences in neighbourhood. The level of dissatisfaction among respondents dependent on shared toilet facilities—usually poorer families—was significantly higher than among those having a private toilet. Gender, finally, was never a variable explaining difference, except for the participation in clean-ups. Contrary to our expectation, however, the percentage of women was significantly lower than that of men in these campaigns.

Although residents in the investigated neighbourhoods are confronted with a range of shortcomings in public services, community efforts to address these ills are the exception rather than the rule. We did not observe any such action in the domain of schooling, electricity, health, sanitation and water. The only form of community action in garbage disposal concerns participation in clean-ups. Over the past 3 years, 32 per cent

of all respondents had joined such campaigns, usually by contributing labour. Furthermore, our inquiries about community initiatives to reduce security problems showed that 29 per cent of the sample said they themselves had participated in actions to alleviate such problems. While Free Area lagged somewhat behind the other neighbourhoods in terms of security initiatives, people in the London neighbourhood, which is notorious for its crime rate, seemed to be very assertive. As far as the other services are concerned, people do occasionally donate small sums of money. Part of the explanation for low levels of community activism is that several of the service drawbacks hardly lend themselves to collective initiatives (shortage of medicines, scarcity of water supply or reduction of power cuts, for example). Nevertheless, the situation seems to be slightly at odds with the popular idea that communities are increasingly stepping in to correct public-sector failure in services delivery.

Neighbourhood Ties and Community Organisation

To check if these observations are related to the strength of social bonds within the communities, we have investigated people's

attitudes towards their neighbourhood using various indicators. In rating the relationship with their nextdoor neighbours, over 85 per cent think these are (very) good, while less than 1 per cent indicate living in disharmony. No significant differences between the four neighbourhoods were found.

Subsequently, people responded to a number of statements concerning internal social bonds (Table 2). On average, residents seem to have a positive attitude towards their neighbourhood and their neighbours. The majority also comment favourably on the spirit of mutual help and the willingness to get organised if the neighbourhood faces a problem. Residents were slightly less positive about the degree of civic responsibility, which was tested with the statement on their commitment to the general welfare.

Based on their answers, we constructed a new variable indicating how they perceive social bonds within the neighbourhood. Generally speaking, neighbourhood ties are considered to be strong (39 per cent) or average (41 per cent). Apparently, most residents do not experience their areas as socially disrupted and divided. The two poorest areas (Bondeni and London) demonstrated comparatively strong neighbourhood ties, while social cohesion was somewhat less in Free Area. Further analysis shows that neither religious

background nor income level significantly affects people's views.

Due to the limited number of valid cases, it was difficult to detect a clear relationship between residents' ties to the neighbourhood and their participation in actions for services upgrading. However, the group with strong ties to the neighbourhood did contribute significantly more to the improvement of schools in terms of gifts than those with weaker ties.

Since community action is often sparked by neighbourhood organisations, we asked respondents whether they were participating in such an organisation (broadly defined as any membership organisation with a predominantly local scope). About half indicated that they and/or their partner were involved. However, only 8 per cent of this group was a member of an organisation specifically dealing with services improvement (usually organising for clean-ups or security). The most common type of organisation by far is the welfare organisation: 49 per cent take part in such a group, usually a merry-go-round. People join the latter largely for private, financial reasons. Although people in Bondeni display a slightly higher involvement in neighbourhood organisations (62 per cent), the variation across neighbourhoods is not significant.

Table 2. Resident views on neighbourhood social qualities ($n = 160$) (percentages)

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>No answer</i>	<i>Total</i>
In this neighbourhood people know each other very well	58.2	15.0	23.8	3.0	100
People in this neighbourhood feel committed to the general welfare	43.8	13.8	35.1	7.5	100
If we have a problem in this neighbourhood, we organise ourselves to do something about it	60.6	11.9	23.2	4.4	100
I can rely on my neighbours in times of need	61.2	13.1	25.1	0.6	100
I feel I belong in this neighbourhood	81.2	8.8	10.1	—	100
I trust the leadership of my local councillor	36.2	6.9	40.0	16.9	100

Note: the answer categories strongly (dis)agree and (dis)agree were merged.

Delicate Relations: CBOs, NGOs and Leaders

In addition to the large number of community groups in Nakuru directed at personal welfare, there are also various groups that pursue a broader public agenda. The subsequent analysis is confined to the latter. Most of these are officially registered as CBOs since this is a prerequisite for doing business with government institutions and NGOs. Such organisations are especially active in low-income areas. Obviously, the need for community action is felt most there. More important, however, is that donor organisations usually target the poor. According to a respondent: “many official CBOs have not arisen spontaneously, but rather in response to the desire of NGOs to have a community counterpart”.

The CBOs concerned commonly consist of a small group of local activists. Although they try to serve the community interest and their internal functioning may be democratic, they can nevertheless not be regarded as truly representative organs. They do not have a mandate from the population and, therefore, residents do not automatically feel committed to their endeavours. Benevolent indifference is perhaps the best way to describe the general attitude towards these CBOs.

The amount of local support CBOs are able to generate largely depends on their reputation which, in turn, depends on the effectiveness of their actions. Exceptions aside, however, most services CBOs do not manage to achieve a great deal. This is one of the major reasons why most remain tiny or even fall into oblivion after an initial period of energetic activity. However, smallness is also related to internal developments. The mere fact that members have to pay a small fee, however, modest, already puts up a threshold for joining. More important, however, is that the management of the CBO does not applaud just any application: “We do not want more members, because they

only want to join in order to gain credits for our achievements”. Very often, people try to become a member only because of the benefits they expect to receive. Usually, candidates are tested on the sincerity of their motivation. In practice, existing members have to vouch for the credibility of newcomers. The more successful CBOs in particular adopt such selection procedures. They may even require them to pay substantial entrance fees. Rather than genuine community groups, CBOs seem to become closed social networks in the course of time. Exclusionary practices also stem from the sideline activities in which these organisations tend to engage. In order to tie members to the organisation and to keep their enthusiasm alive, CBOs have started taking up welfare activities, especially saving and income-generating activities. Consequently, the trustworthiness of members has become even more crucial. Furthermore, these CBOs spoil some of their reputation within the community because people think that self-sacrifice has given way to personal gain.

The strength of a CBO is also dependent on the merits of its management. Unfortunately, most CBOs in Nakuru do not possess the professional qualities that would enable them to act as serious business partners. Although CBOs have certainly contributed to the occasional successes that have been recorded, these have all come about thanks to intensive counselling on the part of NGOs. Part of this weakness stems from a lack of leadership. Successful leaders combine transactional with transformational qualities. In Nakuru, however, community leaders with this particular combination of assets are virtually absent. Several of our respondents asserted that there are enough people with leadership talents, but few want to ‘spoil’ these on running a CBO. In a country plagued by decades of corruption, patronage and co-optation of civil society organisations, ordinary citizens are inclined to doubt the sincerity

of leaders, in particular when they belong to another social group (Orvis, 2001). It is very well understandable that most qualified people shy away from the situation.

Another factor affecting the potential of CBOs in successfully taking up services upgrading projects has to do with their learning capacity. Two city-wide organisations have been formed to foster collaboration and collective learning: NAHECO (Nakuru Affordable Housing and Environmental Committee) and NAWACOM. These umbrella organisations have a bigger resource base and more power to negotiate with partnering institutions. However, there are also some drawbacks. There is a lot of hostility between the CBOs simply because they are fishing the same pond. Furthermore, some CBOs—such as Naroka and Lakeview CBOs—have become donor darlings arousing envy among their unsuccessful brothers. Finally, NAHECO has also become a savings and credit co-operative society, mobilising members' savings and administering housing and micro-enterprise loans. This part of its work seems to override the objectives for which it was originally established, such as co-ordination of shelter improvement and promoting partnerships in housing and environmental management. NAWACOM has meanwhile moved in a similar direction.

For CBOs active in services upgrading, collaboration with the MCN is indispensable. The MCN, for example, is actively seeking to outsource waste collection services to environmental CBOs and has adapted its by-laws accordingly. Registered local CBOs can apply for a licence that allows them to arrange garbage collection services in their area in exchange for a so-called inspection fee. There was some indignation about the need to pay these dues: "We are doing the work that the MCN is supposed to do, and subsequently we have to pay them for the work we do". In fact, the CBO members we interviewed were all rather sceptical on partnering with the

MCN, claiming that the latter does not deliver its share of the bargain. At the same time, they do not want to blame the officials whom they consider to be victims of the system. On a personal level, relationships between CBOs and officials are mostly fine, especially with the staff of the Department of Environment. This differentiation, however, is also a matter of expediency. CBOs are well aware that any critique they raise could jeopardise their working relationship with officials and reduce chances of getting access to scarce state resources in the future.

NGOs are considered to be the natural allies of CBOs. Usually, their mission is to support and empower such grassroots organisations. Very often, community groups are informal institutions and, hence, the dealings between NGOs and CBOs are largely informal as well. Strictly speaking, the Kenyan authorities do not allow NGOs to engage with unregistered CBOs, but this condition is directly at odds with their focus on the poor. This is a sensitive issue and a major reason for the reserve of the government towards NGOs.

Despite the apparent harmony of interests between NGOs and CBOs, our interviews also produced critical notes. First, there were complaints about NGOs leaning too heavily towards capacity building at the expense of direct investments. NGOs do not always live up to the popular expectation of helping to achieve tangible results, partly because their own financing is erratic. Secondly, NGOs do not always succeed in establishing close ties with communities because they ignore, either unwittingly or on purpose, existing social cleavages. NGOs that are able to reach deep into the community by mobilising important sentiments—this seems to apply especially to religiously based NGOs—are in a better position to achieve results than those that primarily rally on the basis of universal ideals. Thirdly, NGOs themselves do not always work in a truly democratic and participatory manner, casting doubts on their

commitment to such an approach in their aid practices. Several NGOs, especially the smaller and less professional organisations, engage in democratic and participatory window-dressing in order to secure access to foreign funding. Often, the agendas of NGOs primarily reflect donor preferences. Finally, while one of the acclaimed strengths of NGOs is their role as mediator and advocate of the poor *vis-à-vis* the state, the tense relationship between the two hampers the development of effective partnerships that could benefit poor communities.

The Controversial Role of the MCN

The MCN consists of a legislative arm and an executive arm. The council is the key institution of the legislative arm and comprises 20 councillors. Policies are prepared in one of the seven council committees—for example, those on town planning or on public health and the environment (Mwangi, 2003). Officers of the municipality join in the meetings to provide advice on legal, administrative or technical matters, but do not have voting power. Proposals prepared by the committees are referred to the full council for ratification. Finally, the officers of the appropriate departments are expected to implement decisions in collaboration with the office of the Town Clerk.

The discussions with our key informants disclosed several weaknesses that directly bear upon the prospects of community action and partnering. A major field of contestation concerns the actual scope of decentralisation and citizen participation. Over the past 15 years, the government of Kenya has embarked on a road of reform in order to make its administrative structures more transparent, effective, efficient and responsive. However, the actual steps that have been set are still modest. The 1977 Local Government Act, for instance, is still in place today, leaving the

Minister strong powers of oversight. He/she needs to approve local government budgets and revenue sources, and can dissolve a council and appoint a commission if considered justified.

The ultimate test of effective devolution is local government's control over financial resources. Unfortunately, the financial position of most local authorities is rather depressing. Their internal revenue sources are limited, while the most buoyant sources remain under central government jurisdiction. The major structural source of external revenue is the Local Authority Transfer Fund (LATF) that was introduced in 1999/2000 as part of the government's efforts to devolve power. It guarantees the transfer of 5 per cent of national income tax to local authorities through an objective formula. The budget—usually accounting for about 25 per cent of total local government revenues—is intended to support local authorities in meeting their services obligations. Many are indeed making good use of these additional resources, but others, especially the bigger ones, desperately need the funds to cover their operational costs and/or to service their outstanding debts (Devas, 2002).

The lack of financial means translates in low levels of competence trust ascribed to the executive arm of the municipality. In fact, poor local government financing makes all attempts to further participatory planning futile. In 2001, the government introduced the Local Authorities Service Delivery Actions Plans (LASDAP) process as a new tool to facilitate dialogue between local governments and citizens, and to ensure that people's priorities were adequately reflected in the local budget. However, the participatory budgeting process is bound to end in disappointment if the stakes remain that low. The 2004 exercise in the area of Lanet, for example, ended up with a list of over 50 projects, without any certainty that even one of these projects would finally be executed since the available budget

for the entire city amounted to no more than US\$267 000.

The interviews attest to the difficulties in transforming the operation of the (local) state and its workers. The state bureaucracy is still highly centralised and the administrative culture authoritarian and prescriptive. Seniority and professional expertise continue to be highly valued. At the same time, lower-ranking government employees are discouraged from taking the initiative and being enterprising. In the same way, the value of local knowledge is played down. Again, the experience with the participatory budgeting exercise in Lanet is telling. The most important officials arrived two hours late, which demonstrates disrespect towards citizens and suggests that they do not take the LASDAP process very seriously. The session was organised during office hours, for example, at a time convenient to the officers, but not to most inhabitants. The residents were poorly informed about the procedure leading to an endless list of projects without giving due consideration to issues of feasibility. Finally, it was obvious that the local councillor and some well-established local groups dominated the debate. They succeeded in getting their ideas on top of the list and in having their representatives sit in the consultative meeting where final priorities would be set. Many others present in the meeting—including women and young people—were able to speak their minds, but their views were easily put aside. Although it is perhaps too early to judge the process too harshly, it is evident that a great gap still exists between the rhetoric of participatory planning and the reality of selective and marginal involvement of citizens.

Obviously, all these drawbacks shape the prospects of partnering for services upgrading. First, important sections of the MCN may be wary of increased participation, although political expediency may lead to official support for the idea. In addition, many officials continue to believe that it is both their official

duty to deliver services and that their jobs depend on that provisioning role. In fact, the traditional idea that the government should provide is still very much alive among the public, especially among those living in government estates. Secondly, the MCN has proved to be an unreliable partner in many instances. This is partly due to the erratic nature of MCN financing and partly to the lack of continuity in the backing (political support) by the MCN. The latter is related to the perpetual changes at the top of both the legislative (mayor) and the executive wing (town clerk) of the municipality, thus frustrating any continuity in policy and action. Thirdly, the prolonged experience of mismanagement, favouritism and corruption has invoked a deep-seated feeling of popular mistrust towards the authorities. Consequently, many citizens adopt a waiting attitude and are reluctant to do business with the MCN.

In principle, NGOs could mediate between the authorities and local communities. The problem, however, is that NGO–government relationships in Kenya are often strained due to conflicting interests and policies. Most NGOs are actively providing public services that compete with those offered by the state, and often do so at lower cost and with better standards. In other words, NGOs, especially the larger ones with international backing, challenge state legitimacy and make the representatives of the state feel uncomfortable. At the same time, it is virtually impossible for NGOs to circumvent the state. Not only do they need to be officially registered, they usually work in sectors where the state controls major assets (health, education, water, etc.).

Nakuru is no exception to this overall picture. NGOs complain bitterly about ministries that do not stick to their part of an agreement. With regard to the MCN, one NGO respondent claimed that “The MCN has good theoretic propositions, but implementation is not anywhere as good”. Similarly, the MCN is suspicious of NGO activity, blaming

NGOs for poor communication and being self-willed. Obviously, the general feeling of mistrust frustrates co-ordination and collaboration on services projects. Only the more moderate NGOs (Practical Action, WWF and Action Aid) have established constructive relationships with the MCN, partly as a result of the LA 21 campaign. Our findings correspond to those by Otiso (2003, p. 225) who claims "Many African governments, including Kenya's, are using this power to reward apolitical NGOs and to penalise activist ones".

Discussing Internal Dynamics

A first major observation is that neighbourhoods matter to the inhabitants of Nakuru, both as a place of residence and as a place of work. Yet although people clearly feel connected to their neighbourhood, the local community is usually not their most important social grouping (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Owour and Foeken, 2006). Furthermore, given the precariousness of urban life, residents who share a neighbourhood, as Simone puts it "must often find ways of not locking themselves into fixed commitments with each other" (Simone, 2000, p. 36). They have to engage with various social networks, both local and non-local, in their pursuit of livelihoods (Hanson, 2005). In the Kenyan urban setting, people's strongest social ties are with family, ethnic kin and religious groupings, albeit that neighbourhood-based merry-go-round groups have certainly gained importance (Rakodi *et al.*, 2000). Anyway, the Nakuru neighbourhoods are still best seen as communities of limited liability (see Janowitz, 1967). Most people do not translate positive feelings towards their neighbourhoods into action to improve liveability.

Yet there are more reasons to explain low levels of community action. The mobilisation of community for services upgrading depends, among other things, on proper community

organisation. In Nakuru, however, there are various obstacles, notably low degrees of participation in services-oriented CBOs, low levels of trust in the sincerity of CBOs and their leaders, and poor capacity in generating external financial support. The first problem is related to the high opportunity costs for the poor to engage in collective action, also known as the 'middle class' effect of participation (Weinberger and Jütting, 2001). Poor residents seldom have time to join in collective action, nor are they able to contribute financially (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004; Cleaver, 2005; Kyessi, 2005). They simply ask themselves what their participation will bring them in terms of services that are essential for their survival or in terms of additional income opportunities. This corresponds to the more general observation that levels of participation increase when community projects provide income opportunities (Meshack, 2004; Kassim and Ali, 2006; Majale, 2007). Furthermore, most poor residents rent their place and consider services improvement to be the landlord's responsibility. Those that do join services-oriented CBOs are perceived as the 'élite' among the poor, which alienates them somewhat from the rest of the community. Finally, earlier investigations into the membership composition of services-oriented CBOs in Nakuru attest to selective participation. While the young are virtually absent as members, women predominantly participate in subordinate roles (as ordinary members primarily responsible for mobilisation and local fund raising), thereby reconfirming their societal position (Mwangi, 2003). This disempowering impact of women's participation in collective action is also observed elsewhere (Mayoux, 2001; Weinberger and Jütting, 2001; Nchito and Myers, 2004).

The second issue—trust towards CBOs—can be discussed using the social capital concept. It depends on the level of community integration and the accountability of leaders towards their supporters. Most low-income

settlements in Nakuru are relatively young, ethnically mixed and rapidly expanding. This situation is not really conducive to bringing the, basically rural, tradition of community self-help (*harambee*) alive. Besides, having positive attitudes towards neighbours and the neighbourhood is not immediately proof of communal social capital. There may still be more to divide than to unite people who share the same habitat. Anyway, considering the small membership of services CBOs, they do not constitute the type of association that could help to forge common understanding and trust within the neighbourhood at large. Therefore, what Miguel and Gugerty (2005, p. 2325) contend on the basis of an extensive study on ethnic diversity in rural western Kenya—namely, that “the inability to impose social sanctions in diverse communities leads to collective action failures”—is probably true for Nakuru as well. And finally, the *harambee* tradition that is supposed to be a source of inspiration for community action has been discredited during recent decades since it became a major institution for mobilising political support for the ruling regime (Orvis, 2006). Therefore, genuine neighbourhood organisations have to be built from scratch.

On the issue of trust, our study suggests yet another important thing. Apparently, religious and ethnic bonds are major mechanisms for building community trust. The fact that many welfare organisations are based on ethnic or religious affiliations attests to the continued importance of these loyalties, especially when money is involved. Other studies corroborate this claim (Chitere, 1994; Rakodi *et al.*, 2000; Owuor, 2006). These prevailing social mechanisms affect CBOs directed at services upgrading in two ways. If a particular ethnic group dominates the organisation, residents belonging to other groups may prefer to stay aloof, which negatively affects overall levels of confidence and effectiveness. On the other hand, if the CBO is ethnically and/or religiously more heterogeneous, it will

take more time and effort (transaction costs) to develop the internal social capital that will enable joint action. This interpretation, however, warrants more empirical research.

Discussing External Dynamics

The rhetoric on partnerships and creating win–win situations notwithstanding, collaborative arrangements to improve neighbourhood services have hardly got off the ground in Nakuru. In addition to internal constraints, there are also external factors that hamper such co-operation, notably the fundamental lack of trust among potential partners and the chronic shortage of financial means within the system.

Councillors constitute an important link between local communities and the MCN and can, in theory at least, be instrumental in strengthening the community’s asset base (bridging social capital). In actual fact, however, their potential as mediators and facilitators is limited. First of all, they have to try and rectify the bad reputation of an earlier generation of local politicians. One of our respondents asserted: “You become a councillor thanks to your activism as a campaigner for a particular party, not because you are the best to do the job”. It is still quite common for councillors to prioritise having good relationships with their political bosses over loyalty towards their followers. While the first can help to further their political careers, the latter can only help to keep them in office. Furthermore, high expectations are bestowed on them for bringing development to their areas. Despite the change to multiparty rule, Kenyan politics continues to be plagued by patrimonialism, a system based on ‘big men’ extending personal favours to followers who repay by loyalty to the leader (Orvis, 2001). However, considering the chronic scarcity of government resources, few actually manage to deliver. And even if they manage to get ‘their’ project in the budget, this is no

guarantee that anything will happen due to an unrealistic assessment of available resources. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the time-horizon of councillors is short and that many ultimately surrender to the temptation of short-term personal gain.

A further complicating factor in Kenya is that a close connection exists between patrimonialism and political ethnicity, which has even been reinforced in recent years in response to increased poverty (Omolo, 2002). According to Lynch

While many Kenyans denounce tribalism and call for non-ethnic leaders, a general consensus seems to exist that in the main political actors, leaders and supporters think and act social lines actualised as tribal (Lynch, 2006, p. 61).

Consequently, politicians are primarily expected to benefit their own groups and will encounter disbelief from other groups that they will also promote and defend their interests. Obviously, councillors representing ethnically mixed communities are in a near-impossible situation. In view of the limited assets of the MCN, it is extremely difficult to prove their worth. Finally, playing a constructive role as mediators is complicated by the rivalry between councillors and community leaders. Sometimes mutual relations are characterised by envy and prejudice, thereby effectively precluding collaboration on community projects. We have observed similar tensions among CBO leaders and elected councillors in an earlier study in Kumasi, Ghana (Post and Inkoom, 2004).

One of the most pertinent conclusions is undoubtedly that the MCN has a very bad reputation among virtually all local actors. The municipality is considered to be an untrustworthy partner. This accusation is based on its poor performance in services delivery, but also on its apparent inability to honour agreements. Major weaknesses are the lack of continuity in the top levels of the administration and the paralysing effect of

particularistic politics. Among representatives of the state, there is inexperience with and unspoken opposition towards citizen participation (with some notable exceptions, especially the Department of Environment). The entire idea of matching the comparative strengths of the public, private and civil society sectors still sits uncomfortably with many officials accustomed to state monopoly on development (and, of course, the opportunities for patronage that go with it). Furthermore, Kenya is among those African countries suffering from a prolonged history of oppressive rule in combination with pervasive abuse of political office (Rakodi *et al.*, 2000; Njoh, 2003; Brown, 2004; Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). These have rendered avoidance of politics the most sensible way for citizens to ensure safety and survival. In the course of time, most ordinary Kenyans have grown accustomed to organising their lives and livelihoods beyond the state. This legacy of disengagement with the state constitutes a formidable hurdle in getting public-private partnerships off the ground.

Obviously, many of the weaknesses of the MCN have their origin in the half-hearted attempts at devolution in Kenya. The country was among the last in Africa to embark on this reform, essentially when it could no longer resist foreign pressures pursuing the neo-liberal agenda. In actual fact, a system was created in which the prime goal was to consolidate central power through political parties and local élites. This corresponds to experiences elsewhere in Africa where new decentralised systems of government usually continue to value loyalty to the centre over responsiveness to local constituencies. In such situations, local capacities to deliver services, especially to the poor, are hardly improved (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999; Crook, 2003; Golooba-Mutebi, 2003; Pinto, 2004; Steiner, 2007).

The Kenyan administrative system is that of deconcentration, with central ministries

tightly controlled by regime officials. Local authorities always face the danger of being overruled by higher echelons of government in case they deviate from central policies and instructions (Rakodi *et al.*, 2000; Njeru, 2006). Financially, the municipalities are entirely at the mercy of the central government for all major investments. The paucity of local funds makes senior government officials lean heavily towards the capital. Not only are decisions on their personal careers within the civil service determined by their bosses in the centre, so too is their ability to perform locally dependent on having good working relationships with their parent ministries. Since people tend to be loyal primarily to the hands that feed them, downward accountability to the council and the citizenship is subordinate to upward accountability. Besides, attempts to promote the former are futile since the size of the budget available for LASDAP is very low. Consequently, the participatory budgeting process is bound to end in disappointment. The net result of all these drawbacks is that the MCN cannot really act as a principal in partnering processes, although it retains its core responsibilities in public servicing. While CBOs, NGOs and private-sector operators are legally not allowed to by-pass the MCN in matters of services delivery, the added value of the latter's involvement is modest to say the least. This structural weakness may very well lead to the gradual collapse of the entire idea of public-private partnering (Wandeler *et al.*, 2002; Mwangi, 2003). Unfortunately, the inability of local governments appropriately to finance, regulate and monitor new ways of solving public problems is quite common all over Africa (Lusagga Kironde, 1999; Obirih-Opareh and Post, 2002; Golooba-Mutebi, 2004; Awortwi, 2004; Gutierrez, 2006).

Nakuru and Beyond

Attention still needs to be given to the impact of place-specific features on the process of

community action and partnering. Nakuru has certain unique qualities, notably the fragile wetlands of Lake Nakuru, which are of international importance, and the famous Lake Nakuru National Park, which is home to most big game animals. These natural assets have enabled the town to attract a great deal of attention from environmental NGOs. It was certainly no coincidence that the city became the spearhead of the LA 21 campaign in Kenya. This situation has spurred various developments such as massive awareness promotion on environmental issues—for example, the Environmental School Competition “A green Nakuru starts with me”—numerous capacity-building exercises both for municipal officers and CBOs, a pro-active Department of Environment and a proliferation of NGO initiatives. Taken together, the conditions for community action and partnering, especially in those areas where environmental problems are most critical, such as Lakeview and Kwa Ronda, are certainly favourable. Nevertheless, our study shows that even Nakuru cannot boast much success. What, therefore, can we expect to find in all those places that lack similar assets on which to build?

Nakuru has mixed experiences with the LA 21 process. The exposure to participatory planning approaches has certainly been beneficial to the municipality and its citizenry. Nevertheless, the actual performance of the entire LA 21 campaign has been rather disappointing (Mwangi, 2000; Wandeler *et al.*, 2002). A survey among 36 African municipalities showed that a vast majority of interviewed stakeholders considered poverty alleviation and economic development as priority concerns, while actual LA 21 initiatives largely deal with environmental services. Stakeholder groups are included in 78 per cent of the processes reported by municipalities, but there are still groups that generally have been ignored. The INCLEI survey indicated that women's groups and young people are

involved in less than half of the processes and that ethnic minorities are participating in only 3 per cent. Another major worry is that the LA 21 documents hardly pay any attention to the funding of proposed interventions. Furthermore, many local governments have identified inadequate support from national governments and insufficient linkages with international organisations and aid flows as important barriers (ICLEI, 2002). Consequently, many LA 21 plans remain paper tigers. All these downsides have also been observed in Nakuru.

Another place-specific feature relevant to urban Kenya and to our study is the high incidence of crime and the existence of real no-go areas. There is a lot of criticism of the police who are accused of corrupt practices, complicity with criminals and involvement in extra-judicial killings (Ruteere and Pommerolle, 2003). In order to reduce feelings of insecurity, Kenyans started experimenting with community policing. The prominence of community actions to alleviate security problems in Nakuru underscores this general trend. In the London area, which has a particularly bad reputation, residents proved to be most assertive in this respect.

Finally, the impact of cross-scalar arrangements needs to be highlighted. Community projects on public services usually require collaboration between a diversity of actors working at various scale levels: local residents, municipal officers, branch offices of state-owned utility firms, national ministries, international NGOs and/or multinational development banks. Decision-making at the local level, albeit in undetermined ways, must articulate with decision-making framed at other scales. Each actor has its own agenda and brings in its own arguments. Obviously, not all narratives are equally powerful and it is certainly not self-evident that community interests go before extra-local concerns. The Lakeview self-help group USAFI is a case in point. Together with the MCN, it

successfully solicited a World Bank grant for a side-loading truck through the Ministry of Local Government. The truck would be used for solid waste collection purposes in the estate and neighbouring low-income areas. A conflict arose between the MCN and the Lakeview CBO over ownership of the vehicle. Contrary to the original agreement that spoke about joint ownership, the MCN claimed full ownership arguing that the World Bank donation was made to the government rather than to the CBO, and that the MCN had supplemented the money for the purchase of the refuse truck. Behind this quarrel, however, is the government's reluctance to abandon its provider role and to move in the direction of enabler. Anyhow, the dependence on powerful external agents, notably for finance, seriously compromises the autonomy of local communities (Lizarralde and Massyn, 2007).

This finding, however, immediately needs to be put in perspective, since the paucity of community action in services upgrading implies that this drawback is not particularly worrisome. Although the socioeconomic networks of Nakuru residents increasingly jump scale (Owuor, 2006), this does not (yet) manifest itself in current practices of community action. The many 'localised' obstacles encountered by communities—in getting organised, in finding qualified and trustworthy leaders, in establishing good working relations with the MCN, etc.—do not only frustrate collective initiatives, they also seem to preclude teaming up with external partners.

Concluding Remarks

Even though the policy reforms introduced in Kenya are closely linked to global processes, the challenge remains to analyse how these work with and through particular local institutions to impact services provision in urban neighbourhoods. A major conclusion of our study is that collective efforts at

neighbourhood services upgrading in Nakuru are the exception rather than the rule. This is caused by many factors, including the malfunctioning of local government, the whims of local politics and the variegated social map of neighbourhoods. Although advocates of people-centred approaches tend to associate 'localised' development with more democratic and just development, and post-structuralist scholars celebrate the local as the prime seat of resistance against global capitalism and as a basis of empowerment, our analysis provides few grounds to romanticise the local (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Purcell and Brown, 2005). Community action is frustrated because the latent neighbourhood solidarity breaks down on a local power constellation that benefits few and ignores many. Furthermore, surviving amidst scarcity and exclusion encourages people to engage in a multitude of social networks within and beyond the localised community (Simone, 2004; Hanson, 2005; Owour and Foeken, 2006). Investing in community action is simply not a very rewarding option to most residents, especially the poor.

Another pertinent observation from our analysis is that the preoccupation in the development sector with policy reform—either top-down or bottom-up—tends to disguise the huge gap that still exists between idea and reality. Although serious efforts have been made in Kenya to transform the institutional landscape, the new rules of the game have not yet gained a firm footing. In the words of Leach *et al.*

Institutional change in society may be a slow, 'path-dependent' process, even if formal institutions, such as legal frameworks, change quickly (Leach *et al.*, 1999, p. 238).

Obviously, a major reason for slowness is the lack of genuine political commitment to ideas about community participation and partnering. However, the problem is bigger than that. Too often, the designers of reform tend to forget that the approaches they

advocate are embedded in a larger, usually informal and antecedent, system on which the fate of reform ultimately depends (Scott, 1998; Rakodi, 2006). The scant successes in community actions to improve neighbourhood services in Nakuru clearly demonstrate that the process hinges on the mobilisation of a rather nebulous and informal patron–client network both within and beyond the local community. This system is based on hierarchy, inequality and dependence (disempowerment) rather than on the liberal-democratic norms underlying ideas on participation and partnerships. This is perhaps somewhat disappointing, but at least today's clients are no longer entirely at the mercy of particular patrons. The Kenyan democracy, no matter how fragile and contested, does provide citizens with a choice at the ballot (Brown, 2004). Therefore, there is some leeway to direct loyalties to leaders who really deliver.

Obviously, the Nakuru experience is not unique and the institutional mechanisms that were discerned will have wider validity. This is true for the difficulties of neighbourhood communities in getting organised, in finding qualified and trustworthy leaders, in making municipalities think and act more pro-poor, in overcoming the distressing reputation of councillors, etc. However, we should not fall in the trap of assuming that these shortfalls can be overcome by simply imposing participatory governance structures. Due to their fixation on 'modern' civil society, participatory mechanisms tend to aggravate pre-existing divides within and between communities. More important, however, it would boil down to obscuring the strength of the informal social structure that moulds collective efforts at betterment. Rather, our analysis draws attention to the need for Habitat researchers to come to terms with this underlying order and to give politics and culture a more prominent place in their analysis and advice (Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

Finally, the popularity of thinking in terms of global–local linkages, no matter how essential for understanding societal transformation, should not prevent us from paying equal attention to the interrelation between past and present. The ability of the patrimonial state to adapt to the new wisdom on participatory governance, so adequately expressed in the term ‘élite capture’ (Crook, 2003; Platteau, 2004), warns us against ignoring the specific trajectory of local development.

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