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How can Zambia move towards a sustainable urban planning model?

08 September 2016 Author: Derek Roberts



Zambia is one of Africa's urbanising nations. Nearly half of the 15 million residents of this southern African country now live in cities, and this trend is expected to accelerate in the future. Zambia is also a very young nation: approximately half of the Zambian population is 15 years old or younger. In the face of this booming, increasingly urban population, there is an unquestionable need for sustainable urban planning. To date, this need has been painfully unmet. The para-statal electric supply company, which overwhelmingly focuses on providing power to urban areas, failed to expand its capabilities as populations and demand grew from the 1980s to the 2010s. As a result, Zambians have faced daily blackouts for up to 8-12 hours for more than a year. Other infrastructural development is also lacking. Trash piles litter the roadside. Traffic slows near celebrated commercial developments as poorly constructed roads crumble within months, even weeks, of repair. In a country with an ample supply of natural resources and a population that cries out for development, why do such problems persist?



There are many areas for improvement when it comes to urban planning in the Zambian context, but I think the most important of these is land allocation. Free land is a right in Zambia-- under certain conditions. Every citizen living under the reign of any of the dozens upon dozens of chiefs is supposed to be given free land when they ask. In cities, however, land is controlled by district councils. Even though urban land is not guaranteed the same way as tribal land, the expectation for land is part of the Zambian habitus. Local councils, acting under the authority of the Ministry of Local Government and Housing, have failed to meet this expectation. In response to the restricted land distribution, people continue to flock to informal, or illegal, settlements. Across the country, 80% of all urban residents live in informal settlements. In some nations, informal settlements may be less desirable, but they still provide access to important infrastructure. In Zambia, living in an informal settlement typically means there is no running water. There is no electricity. Paved roads, as well as government schools and clinics, are a pipedream. With so many informal settlements across the nation, we have to ask why people continue to move there. We also have to wonder why the government doesn't offer a viable solution.

In recent months, the respective mayor and deputy mayor of Kitwe and Ndola, the nation's second and third largest cities, were arrested for crimes related to land distribution. At the start of the year, the entire Kitwe City Council was suspended for 90 days when the Minister of Local Government and Housing learned about their corrupt land distribution practices. In an attempt to hide a votes-for-plots scheme, one of the councillors successfully pushed for the razing of an informal settlement. The country and press were outraged as dozens of families suddenly became homeless in the middle of the rainy season.

Urban land is clearly at a premium in Zambia, but it isn't because of a dwindling supply. The limited sale of plots is a disturbing practice that prevents many Zambians from gaining legal access to cities. All plots are initially sold by local councils at affordable rates. In Kitwe, plot prices range from 5,000 to 15,000 Zambian kwacha (approximately 350 to 1,000 British pounds), but these plots are rarely sold. When they are sold, they are frequently snapped up by friends and family members of councillors before the public even knows about them. Plots are then flipped for massive profits. A k15,000 plot, for example, can be sold for k90,000, making home ownership in one of the country's formal urban settlements impossible for most.

So what is to be done? How can Zambia move towards a sustainable urban planning model? A small number of NGOs have taken up the cause of land access for the urban poor, but they have had limited success to date. Can local councils with a proven history of corruption be trusted to develop accessible cities? The current Kitwe City Council Development Plan notes that the city's population is expected to grow from 600,00 to 900,00-1,200,000 residents by 2020. With climate change and economic disaster continuing to drive poor Zambians to cities like Kitwe, it is imperative that urban planning allows for a more equitable access to the city. The city's plan to develop riverfront properties may help attract expats and foreign investors, but catering to the economic elite is unlikely to improve or deter life in the city' numerous unplanned settlements. It certainly hasn't worked in the 51 years since independence. The three-tiered plot ranking scheme (low-, medium-, and high-cost) was designed to provide all citizens access to urban land so that Zambians from various backgrounds could benefit from and contribute to sustainably developed cities. Unless corruption is vigorously tackled, Zambian cities will increasingly be home to unplanned settlements with little to no access to vital infrastructures.



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