EDITORIAL

Urban explosion, COVID 19 pandemic and the quest for a resourceful and liveable city

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a. Introduction

This issue of the Ghana Social Science Journal focuses broadly on how Ghana can build a more resourceful and liveable urban future. This focus has little to do with the fact that the editor is an urban geography and much to do with the fact that the future of the world today is urban: in 1950, 30 percent of the world's population lived in cities and towns, and this is projected to reach 68 percent by 2050 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019). Much of this population growth is occurring in the least urbanised, but fastest urbanising regions - Asia and Africa, where the majority of people have lived in the countryside until recently (Saghir & Santoro, 2018). This urban transition is transforming how society lives, works, travels, and builds networks, and is therefore worth considering.

Indeed, the changes in urban populations – as a result of internal demographic increase and exodus from rural areas - have multiple implications and ample dimensions. The rapidly urbanizing regions are compelling governments to confront urban growth in new ways. Governments are being called upon to distribute essential services to growing (informal) populations and build infrastructure on inhabited land. In the long run, these political decisions also shape the prospects of sustainable urban development and growth (Cobbinah et al., 2019). Does the change pose a developmental challenge regarding how governments can successfully manage urban growth and foster equitable development in the 21st century?

Cities today are focal points of innovations, progress, and social transformation. They remain engines of growth and radiate opportunity, encounters, vitality, culture, creativity, and citizenship advantages. If properly planned and managed, cities hold promise for human development and more restrained use of the world's natural resources through their ability to support large numbers of people while limiting their direct impact on the environment (Oteng-Ababio, & van der Velden 2020).

Sigler explains that cities serve as 'strategic nodes within the new global economy' (Sigler, 2016: 392). They are what Sassen famously calls 'highly concentrated command points' (Sassen, 2001: 3) or critical hinges in networks that crisscross the globe. As such, they tie together numerous places involved in the increasingly fragmented production of goods and services, generating impulses for peripheral development through investment in additional activities in specific regions - limiting such prospects by connections to such activities elsewhere.

But the city, particularly in the global south, has always been Janus-faced. The drawbacks and problems of much of city life are multiple and growing: expanding informal settlements,

homelessness, marginalisation, the widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots,' escalating crime and violence, deteriorating infrastructures, inadequate water supply and sanitation, and increased vulnerability to disasters (Paller, 2020).

Current trends and projections make it imperative for the cities' future planning to step out of the box, move away from traditional systems, and adopt inclusive and innovative approaches. The move would efficiently tackle the current and emerging urban realities in these cities rather than sticking to rigid planning standards that ignore facts, generate continuous conflict, and fail to take advantage of the potentials of these urbanization consequences, especially the resilient informal economy (Cobbinah et al., 2019).

This position resonates with the global development agenda, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which calls for making 'cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' by integrating communities into formal planning through participatory and democratic procedures. But the complexities and challenges to making this a reality are vast, as the preferences, interests, and actions of residents and local leaders often contradict bureaucrats' and policymakers' efforts.

Nevertheless, the journal is quite optimistic that in confronting the challenges posed by increasing urbanization, particularly in the developing economies, the daily struggles of all urban residents must be at the front and center of any sustainable development agenda and policy of the city authorities. The provision of essential services such as water, electricity and sanitation must be the immediate priorities for cities, particularly for the urban poor and the marginalised. Residents need affordable housing options that are close to employment or access to work by public transport.

Significantly, the processes that determine these governance outcomes – land-use management, provision of essential services, and devolution of resources – are 'the stuff of politics.' Consequently, in their quest for more resourceful and liveable urban futures, city authorities must genuinely admit the changes that have occurred in the socio-economic and demographic landscape of urban development and incorporate all stakeholders in the planning process. Among other things, people tend to comply with policies that they were involved in designing.

COVID 19 and the crave for normalcy.

Aside from the apparent urbanisation challenge, another critical problem that provided the impetus for the urban focus in this issue of the journal was the COVID-19 pandemic, which had become a global crisis of unprecedented scale, with aftershocks that will be felt in virtually every aspect of life for years or decades to come. By the time this issue was being prepared, the pandemic had become tumultuous when society's ways of living and working have been massively disrupted.

From its origin in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 had spread to become a predominantly urban-focused pandemic. Evidence deduced from the available data indicates that urban areas (which are projected to provide a haven for most of the world's rural population by 2050) have been at the epicenter of the pandemic. The immediate concern is that this urbanization trend may overwhelm the cities' formal sector. In developing economies, the informal, unplanned industry may fester across the formally planned urban cities, distorting the original master plan in its wake.

The neo-liberal thinking that promotes the protection of an individual's right to free enterprise and private property ownership, coupled with limited labour absorptive capacity of the formal sector, will ensure that the informal sector continues to thrive and grow and serve as a catalyst for the spread of the pandemic. As Covid-19 morphed into a global epidemic, most social and physical scientists often found themselves in agreement. The whole world has watched in astonishment the escalation and terrible effects of the pandemic. The unveiling situation shows that a lack of preparedness can quickly overwhelm a country's health care system.

So as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc globally, the dilemma facing many countries is how to sustain measures that slow down the spread of the virus and shield the most vulnerable without imposing high social and economic costs. In sub-Saharan Africa, initial studies show that the challenges of imposing lockdowns are particularly acute. Based on a simple index of lockdown readiness, including access to clean water, sanitation, electricity, and a regular income, it was revealed that just 7% of all households could be classified as 'fully ready' and under one in three are 'partially ready.'

Equally, an important revelation has been that countries with low lockdown readiness also have lower trust levels, particularly in political institutions. Since lower trust also tends to go hand-in-hand with civil unrest, this raises the risk that poorly designed restrictions (of any sort) could quickly degenerate into the protest, weakening the already fragile social contract between the state and its citizens.

Initial studies and data made available so far show that certain groups are affected unequally. If the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted a healthcare crisis in more economically developed contexts, it has also drawn attention to ongoing urban crises in less developed contexts. The poor and the marginalised are particularly vulnerable. Patterns of illness and death reflect urban social and economic geographies. Attention has focused on shielding the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions, defined as being most at risk, but the reality is more complicated.

Inequalities caused by ethnicity, religion, and income often overlap, so that the proportions of elderly and vulnerable people vary by community and neighbourhood. A potential genetic factor in immunity is being investigated. However, the combination of social, economic, and demographic characteristics and the urban environment probably account for many observed infection patterns.

In most urban areas, minority groups are often over-represented among the poor. This means they are more likely to have low diets, get inadequate physical exercise, and be overweight. This exposes them disproportionately to diabetes and other chronic cardiovascular and respiratory conditions, putting them at high risk. They often have the smallest areas of open public spaces.

Thus, this global pandemic is becoming evident with a large population living in the impoverished and precarious neighbourhood, mostly in the Global South. In these contexts, social isolation alone puts local communities in an impossible situation as families rely on daily work to sustain their livelihoods. Quite often, these communities also lack access to running water and sanitation. Households are overcrowded, and neighbourhoods lack facilities such as healthcare centres to support the city in a time of crisis.

Cities are at the centre of the coronavirus pandemic – understanding this can help build a sustainable, equal future. The very nature of plagues is that they are dependent on humans' interactions with

their environment and with each other. These interactions can become intensified in cities, making epidemic control a key consideration in the urban making. Nearly one billion people live and work in informal, under-serviced, and precarious urban conditions worldwide.

illions more living in the cities of lower and middle-income countries can afford homes with formal services such as piped water, electricity, and access to healthcare. Still, these services are patchy and reliant on deteriorating infrastructure. It thus means that responding to the threat of COVID-19 in informal settlements is doubly problematic. Water for basic needs is in short supply – let alone for 20 seconds of hand washing – and living space is severely constrained. Additionally, in an era of anthropogenic climate change, where cities account for 60 percent of carbon dioxide emissions and the number of urban residents exposed to multiple hazards like earthquakes, flooding and fire are set to double from two to four billion, the current heightened threat of health emergencies is of great concern.

There is nothing like a crisis to force society to re-focus and recalibrate how people live their lives. But with more than half of humanity now living in urban areas, some of the world's best minds have to search for the next significant innovation that will leapfrog society from the past into the future. In a context of major social and environmental challenges, it is a "mission-oriented" innovation that propels the required changes in mindset, theoretical frameworks, institutional capacities, and policies. Our communities can seize this opportunity to improve how we build, organise, and use cities.

The journal's issue comes at a pivotal moment as society shifts its attention partly away from emergency response to a spreading pandemic to the question of what the (urban) future might be like, albeit consciously seeing through the looking glass darkly. The editorial team is committed to discerning, as best as we can, the emergent changes, and admitting some responsibility to try and influence, even if modestly, how the future may unfold. The term "building back better" has a clear resonance in present circumstances.

Amidst the terrible legacies of the crisis, what opportunities are there to disrupt the many negative patterns embedded in our spatial organisation, social behaviours, economies, and politics? It is clear that unless technological innovation speaks to, and is understood by, all citizens at these levels, it will eventually fail. We urgently need to course-correct technological innovations to be more people-centered and respond to people's everyday needs and aspirations. We hope that this issue of the journal will kindle some discussions in this direction.

Of course, the immediate pandemic-induced burden of the present should not displace other critical areas of discussion. The challenges of climate change, urban spatial transformation, land reform, informality, urban mobility, urban governance, urban inequalities in multiple dimensions, and many others, remain and must be part of our ongoing dialogue. Resourceful approaches to these challenges call, on the one hand, for creativity, friendliness, and openness in working towards a city for the 21st century, where the culture of peace would take over from the culture of violence.

Approaches to achieving cities fit to live in also require an understanding of natural resources and capacities of ecological systems in the broader national, regional and global context to provide the wherewithal for city living, including the absorption or breakdown of wastes and other urban imprints. Tackling such formidable challenges will often call for a coalition of different social

actors, including local communities and local government institutions, the private sector, research and education communities, the media, and other national and international bodies (Cobinnah et al., 2019).

We believe that focusing on these issues is essential to sustaining the debate, deepening scholarship and broadening the discussion. This issue of the journal also brings together established scholars and a fresh generation of scholars who bring with them new voices. This Journal issue has mainly a Ghanaian focus, but the various articles also connect the scholars to scholarship across Africa and internationally.

Coping with the urban explosion and COVID 19.

Today, proactive and innovative urban eco-development strategies must be sought globally, especially in the global south which is experiencing unprecedented urbanisation. This search must also deal simultaneously with several factors: institutional and managerial models; new forms of partnership between civil society, enterprises, and public authorities; shifting from supply to enabling policies to stimulate people's initiative and resourcefulness; continuous efforts for resource-saving and elimination of wastefulness; and the skillful management of technological pluralism and intensified research for a new technical solution, both affordable and accessible to developing countries.

It is also essential to underscore the fact that cities are ecological systems with resources that are often latent, under-utilized, or misused: inner-city land suitable for cultivation, recyclable waste, the potential to save energy, water, and capital resources, through better maintenance of equipment, infrastructure, and housing stock. Thus, tapping these resources may become both an essential source of employment, financed through resource savings, and a means to improve the environment.

Cities are like humans: they belong to the urban species but have unique personalities. The response to the urban challenge must consider the particular configuration of natural, cultural, and socio-political factors of each city's historical past and tradition. Instead of proposing homogenizing solutions, their diversity should be considered as a cultural value of paramount importance (Acuto et al., 2020)

Tentatively, two conclusions may be drawn from the quest to contain the menace of COVID 19 in the era of unprecedent urban expansion: firstly, urban eco-development strategies cannot be imposed from above but must be designed and implemented with people, facilitated by effective enabling policies; secondly, exchange of experiences between cities should play an essential role in co-operation policies, not so much to find ready-made models but to stimulate the social imagination and use the other's successes and failures as a mirror for one's queries.

With COVID 19 raging indiscriminatory havoc in cities, there is a heightened concern about the situation in informal urban settlements because of the combination of population density and inadequate access to water and sanitation, which makes legal advice about social distancing and washing hands implausible. There are further challenges to do with the lack of reliable data and the social, political, and economic contexts in each setting that will influence vulnerability and possibilities for action.

While so far, the spread of the Coronavirus in Sub-Saharan Africa has been more limited, compared to situations in some developed economies, concerns about the possible effects of isolation on poor and vulnerable communities are growing. Additionally, there is no clear evidence that elements such as the warm weather and a younger population can help lower the rate of critically-ill COVID-19 patients. In all probability, the high rates of tuberculosis, HIV infection, and overcrowding in public transportation systems and at home might overshadow those potential deterrents of the disease in its most critical form.

While the immediate demands of mitigating the effects of the spread of the virus might supersede other imperatives, national policy goals of redistribution and achievement of minimum living standards for all people must not be neglected. In other words, relief efforts now must guarantee that the most vulnerable can have access to minimum living conditions even if they lack the financial means.

Evidence abounds: for example, in response to the crisis, national governments in France and El Salvador declared a moratorium on utility bills. In the US, social movements also demanded a suspension of rent, while in Brazil, free access to water was significant demand for social activities combating the COVID-19 crisis. In Sub-Saharan Africa, governments and their development partners were implored to ensure that these basic needs are provided at no cost to the local communities.

In Ghana specifically, the government on the 5th and 9th of April announced free water supply and a 50 percent waiver on residents' electricity consumption from April-June 2020. Frontline health workers were offered a 50 percent increase in basic salary, a life insurance cover and all other stimuli that the public is enjoying. However, with the average urban household size of 4.6 and 58.8 percent of the urban population using shared inadequate toilet facilities, achieving social isolation and access to proper water and sanitation prove to be a significant challenge (Oteng-Ababio & van der Velden, 2020).

Economic slowdown due to social isolation has a disproportionate effect on informal sector workers. It is estimated that 80 percent of employment is in the informal sector, and about 88 percent of employment growth between 2002 and 2012 was in the informal sector. While official reports state that 87.6 percent of the urban population has access to clean and safe water (Acuto etak, 2020), this information is misleading. It does not clarify that low households have to purchase such clean water from third parties.

An equally important challenge at the neighbourhood level is the lack of understanding about what the Coronavirus is, how it spreads, and how it can be prevented. Often information is not produced in local languages. Visual representations are out of context, describing the spread of the virus at shopping malls and airports, which does not reflect the realities of residents of low-income neighbourhoods. This has led to misinformation and misunderstanding.

Proper handwashing techniques are not widely communicated, nor is the importance of social distancing to avoid transmission from person to person. These are issues that must be explained to people in their local languages. Adequate campaigns must be launched through mass media as well as through grassroots organisers working on the ground. As public, private, not-for-profit, and research organisations have scaled down on their activities in the field, resources can be redirected to designing and disseminating such campaigns.

For workers who rely on daily labour to put food on the table, isolation alone will quickly lead to starvation. Even if sequestration is not imposed, the slowdown in the economy and a decrease in daily foot traffic significantly impact the informal workers' earnings. Hence, in addition to education and water distribution, assistance must also include food distribution. This presents an opportunity to prevent having small producers shut down by facilitating access to credit and grants. If local food delivery systems are well thought out, upcountry farmers and food suppliers, who are now running the risk of their produce rotting or just shutting down operations, can put their products to fair use.

As countries, cities, and communities deal with the local level crisis, other local solutions can and should also be thought out to keep small businesses afloat, local distribution systems running, and low-income families financially secure. For example, affordable, homemade sanitizers can be produced with water, soap, and bleach, and put in recycled bottles to be used at home or distributed. The effort to make and deliver masks and gowns to doctors and nurses working on the frontline is also commendable and imitable. Well-off families have contributed to the preparation of daily meals that are delivered locally to those in need. Local companies can also work towards retrofitting their production. For example, small and even large beer brewers can retrofit their systems to produce hand sanitizers.

These can be very practical in communities that have limited access to clean water. The local-level textile industry that is already suffering from the slowdown in business can also adapt and produce masks and hospital gowns. These adaptations in the production systems require coordination by the central and regional governments and donor organisations, but they could operate independently once in place. Small innovators must have financial support to pivot their production systems. This is where private organisations could also invest in the production and delivery of essential products (such as hand sanitizers and masks) to local populations and local hospitals for free (Oteng-Ababio & van der Velden, 2020; Acuto et al., 2020).

Thus, innovation is required now to combat the virus and simultaneously address some of the systemic issues that perpetuate inequality, poverty, and injustice. Understanding the coronavirus crisis as an urban crisis that disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable population is an essential step in devising systems that mitigate these most detrimental effects and avoid major social, economic, and environmental disruptions in Ghana.

As a centre of possibilities, the city will continue to attract people. To make a city attractive, there should be care for contrast: great industries and small workplaces; big stores and small corner shops; privacy in housing and public spaces; quiet-peaceful inner courts as well as dynamic areas bursting with activity; 'nature and stone' open spaces and closed densely built-up parts; diffusion and focal points. Characteristics of a fair city, full of opportunities, can be summed up as follows:

- Acceptable cities are liveable places where growing old can be a pleasurable experience, where children can live and learn.
- Acceptable cities incorporate nature in simple and complex forms. This contributes to balanced urban climates, wildlife, and habitats. Nature in cities can contribute to food production, organic recycling waste, education, and recreation.
- In acceptable cities, a lot of activity is going on. There are continuous and multiple uses of space.

- Acceptable cities are safe. Pedestrians and cyclists are given priority. Women, children, and disabled people can get around quickly.
- Acceptable cities are clean and healthy. They have good air and water and healthy buildings in which it is pleasant to stay. Materials will last and give a 'patina' to the city.
- Acceptable cities combine centralized infrastructure with decentralised systems. Management of flows of water, materials, and energy is optimal and attuned to natural life cycles.
- Acceptable cities offer valuable experiences. Activities, movement, and flow are visible. This enhances citizens' emotional, behavioural, and cognitive growth and facilitates their urban life and the environment.
- Good cities have a past and a future, identifiable in their built form, their built way, and their social and cultural lives.

Contents of this issue

Given the current realities, this edition of *Ghana Social Science Journal* addresses issues on urbanisation and urban governance, economy and environmental management, and climate change dimensions of human settlements, all of which complement efforts devoted to cities of the future and managing social transformations.

The first article by Yiran presents views on urban growth challenges (specifically urban sprawl) and the contribution that science can make to urban planning and management. The report takes a cue from the global concern about achieving sustainable urban development in developing countries where urban sprawl is rapid.

The second article provides glimpses into the Ghanaian economy. Graham and his colleagues narrate how Ghana discovered oil in June 2007 and commenced commercial production in December 2010 under a democratic political order. The paper examines how oil affects politics and democratic development and argues that though there are efforts to protect Ghana from the 'oil curse' or potential adverse socio-economic effects of oil production, conscious efforts have not been made to check the possible impact on the nation's democratic gains.

The third article provides a historically-based analysis of the decentralisation concept of the local government system. The paper argues that the creation of new administrative districts has become an overriding feature in recent years. Consequently, the number of district assemblies has increased tremendously since the beginning of the decentralisation program in 1988. The paper submits that the creation of new district assemblies is predominantly influenced by two political factors: the government's desire to get more electoral votes in national elections and the redistribution of public resources, with the former being a significant predictor.

The fourth article makes a case for efficient solid waste management (SWM). The paper highlights the uncertainties about SWM methods (formal or informal?) and processes (how to collect?), and the penchant for policymakers to "cut and paste" foreign models without paying heed to local

specific needs, thus giving rise to conflicts between two intrinsic frameworks in SWM: one which was inherited from capitalist society and privileges the formal sector collect process and the other which is related to how local experiences are thought about and mobilized. As a result, attempts to remediate the critical waste management problem using 'best practices' have yielded elusive responses, especially in low-income communities.

Similarly, the article by Ofori and Amankwah-Poku explore why some Ghanaians litter indiscriminately. They argue that those involved in littering are conscious of the adverse consequences of their acts, albeit they feel unconcern for waste disposal. The paper believe targeted education on the dire implications of littering is imperative and urge the authorities to enforce the laws while instituting reward for clean communities.

The final article is on climate change. In this paper, Poku-Boansi and his colleagues argue that in recent times communities along Ghana's coastline have suffered from relatively less predictable hydro-meteorological hazards. Using selected cities around Keta, they explore these communities' vulnerabilities and the effectiveness of their adaptation strategies. The paper argues that despite the construction of the sea defense wall, there is limited state commitment towards local community engagement. Further, any successful state interventions will require a coordinated and sustained effort from national and regional institutions to ensure adaptation resilience to coastal vulnerability.

A new urbanisation induced challenge?

With this issue's publication, an interdisciplinary discussion on the theory and implications of increasing urbanisation has been opened. This is a preliminary step in a much larger process. It resonates with the dimensions embraced by the urban environment and used for understanding it as an artifact, as a process, and as an ecosystem, but seeks a more holistic approach.

Uncontrolled urbanization leads to congestion or what researchers call "road rage" for a reason: few modern experiences are more exasperating than being trapped in a traffic jam. Such congestion inflicts high economic costs (both direct costs like time and fuel wasted combined with indirect ones such as increased consumer prices caused by the elevated shipping prices). The total of such cost for 2017 was $461bn, or $975 per person in Britain, Germany, and the United States.

Other studies also indicate that minority groups are often over-represented among the urban poor and are more likely to have low diets, get inadequate exercise, and be overweight. This exposes them disproportionately to diabetes and other chronic cardiovascular and respiratory conditions, putting them at high risk in this COVID 19 era. The urban poor also inhabit the lowest quality but highest density areas and the city's most cramped accommodation. These conditions and institutions housing large numbers of residents expose them to higher air pollution, low quality or inaccessible utilities and services. They often have the smallest areas of open public spaces and therefore tend to become potential transmission hotspots.

Meanwhile, green spaces such as parks have been recognised as vital for human health. But the people who need such areas most – those without private gardens – have the least access. Since COVID-19 and similar viruses are passed on through contaminated moisture droplets from sneezing, coughing, or heavy breathing, people living in the same household as someone infected with the virus will have a high likelihood of contracting it.

There is a unique opportunity to work towards fairer, more sustainable, and livable cities in the wake of COVID 19. It is urgent to think critically and engage with the underlying issues identified rather than treat superficial symptoms, or our strategies may be misguided. The government emergenc support packages must be used proactively. Global plans such as the New Urban Agenda, endorsed by the United Nations in 2016, can steer a shift to green, circular economies. And we can build robust resilience against diverse disasters and climate change – the long-term crisis we already know is looming. The intention now is to broaden and deepen the discussion, elicit further work, and establish critical feedback. Colleagues are invited to engage with this topic, explore its many dimensions, and assist with its construction.

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