

# Uganda's new urban policy: participation, poverty, and sustainability

**Andrea M. Brown**

Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada

**ABSTRACT:** In response to rapid urbanisation in Uganda, and recognition of the administrative, political, and welfare challenges this poses, the government has embarked on a process of developing a national urban policy for Uganda (UNUP). The aspirations of this policy are broad, with different stakeholders and partners emphasizing competing priorities. For the UNUP to have the capacity to meaningfully respond to the needs of the urban poor it will need to (1) be embedded in a participatory framework, (2) entail government support for a pro-poor focus, and (3) demonstrate sustainability, in terms of financial support and promoting sustainable urban development. These three factors all draw attention to the central relationship between national policy ownership and capacity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although Uganda is a predominantly rural nation this is changing rapidly: Uganda's rate of urban development is now among the world's highest. The urbanisation level is low at 12 percent; by 2030 it is projected to reach 30 percent, with an urban population exceeding 20 million people (Cities Alliance, 2010: 1). Sixty percent of Kampala's residents live in slums, where the informality and insecurity in housing overlaps with informal and insecure sectors of employment, service provision and legality. Following the definition used by the United Nations and within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), "A slum is an area that combines to various extents the following characteristics: inadequate access to safe water; inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructure; poor structural quality of housing; overcrowding; and insecure residential status" (United Nations Human Settlement Programme, 2003: 12). In recognition of the new challenges posed by growing urbanization in Uganda, the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development is engaged in a process of developing a national urban policy for Uganda (UNUP), supported by the World Bank and Cities Alliance, and in partnership with local stakeholders. The UNUP is scheduled for parliamentary approval in December 2012. The aspirations of this policy are broad, with different stakeholders emphasizing competing priorities including: rationalizing responsibilities among different governance bodies; promoting and supporting economic growth in urban areas; managing housing and urban services in newly urbanizing cities; and proactively addressing poverty needs in slums.

Will the UNUP be able to respond to the needs of the urban poor in a sustainable fashion? For this to occur it must be embedded in a participatory framework, have its focus on poverty supported by those within the government, and have a commitment to sustainable financing and a sustainable vision of urban development. All of these factors point to the central relationship, and tensions, between national policy ownership and political capacity.

## 1. THE UNUP POLICY PROCESS: COMPETING AGENDAS

In response to the dramatic and accelerating increase in Uganda's urban population, the Ministry of Local Government initiated a policy response, with support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). A draft policy was created in 2010 (Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Local Government). The Ministry for Lands, Housing, and Urban Development began leading the process of developing a revised and expanded policy document, the UNUP. They are doing so with the financial support of the World Bank and the Gates Foundation, with some sub-components supported by additional donors.

The initial impetus for this policy resonates with that articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) (Republic of Uganda, 2010): concern with the management, administration and economic growth of urban areas, where slums are seen as a problem in need of a solution. However the draft document, created with assistance from the UNDP, includes in its vision, urban areas "that are inclusive and are free from poverty" and in its objectives, "to build urban sector capacity to provide quality services and infrastructure to the population through efficient and effective service delivery for maximum poverty reduction" (Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Local Government, 2010: 27). In terms of actual strategies however this draft document is vague and in places it is clear that proposed tools will not meet stated objectives. For example the goal of reducing fertility rates from 7.1 to 5.8 is to be achieved through public sensitization on family planning, which may be a necessary component of an effective strategy but certainly not sufficient. In terms of poverty reduction, six strategic actions are proposed, in order to attract private and donor investments, expand microfinance opportunities, and improve the institutional

environment for managing social service delivery. This is of course only a draft document and the 2012 UNUP can be expected to be significantly different, not least because many more stakeholders are involved in the process of designing it.

The UNUP is being prepared in tandem and as a part of a wider Uganda Urban Campaign, launched in 2010, to raise the profile of the government's attention to urban planning. The Urban Campaign, under the direction of the Ministry for Lands, Housing, and Urban Development, in addition to formulating the UNUP, advances four additional components.

1. *The Uganda National Urban Forum (UNUF)* was created as a permanent body to represent and draw on the voices of a variety of stakeholders such as NGOs, CBOs, the academic community, the private sector, and different levels of government.

2. *Transforming the Settlements for the Urban Poor in Uganda (TSUPU)* is a program targeting Uganda's secondary cities, "to align urban development efforts at the national government, local government and community levels and include the urban poor into the planning and decision-making processes" (Government of Uganda 2010). TSUPU has begun with pilots in five towns (Arua, Jinja, Kabale, Mbale, and Mbarara) with the plan of expanding into eight additional areas identified as rapidly growing. This focus is a proactive attempt to manage growth while this is still possible. Partners involved include the Urban Authorities Association, municipal governments, Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), ACTogether, the National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda, and students from Makerere University. It is largely managed by Cities Alliance, SDI, and ACTogether, and its insights are brought to bear on the UNUP through participation in the UNUF. The central goals of TSUPU involve local urban management capacity building, initial planning for slum upgrading, and supporting dialogue among stakeholders within these emerging cities. Strategies being used include microcredit, the Urban Sector Profiling Study (USPS) mapping and enumeration of slums (households and businesses), and assisting community groups in applying for upgrade grants and managing them.

3. *The Strategic Urban Development Plan (SUDP)* will outline the specific courses of action to be taken over a 15-year period. This plan will comprise the concrete strategies to implement the UNUP and can be understood as part of the UNUP.

4. *The Urban Sector Profiling Study (USPS)* will function as a housing sector assessment tool, to determine housing and service needs. The study is part of TSUPU's activities and is underway in the initial five cities. Groups of the urban poor, part of the Slum Dwellers Federation, organized with the assistance of SDI and ACTogether, gather the data and conduct the enumeration, which is then verified by local governments.

Funding is disbursed and donor oversight is managed by Cities Alliance, a global partnership based in Washington D.C. with a mandate of meeting the challenges of pro-poor policies and prosperous cities without slums. Cities Alliance has particular interest and expertise with participatory upgrade programs. Cities Alliance has no permanent presence in Uganda, but works through the South African Based network of urban poor federations, Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), who in turn work closely with the Ugandan based NGO, ACTogether. SDI has organized many residents in secondary cities into the National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda. SDI and ACTogether are both represented on the Urban Forum executive, and are the lead partners in TSUPU.

Each of these components – the policy (UNUP), forum (UNUF), program (TSUPU), plan (SUDP) and study (USPS) – are intended to support and complement one another, utilize participatory frameworks, and align with both Uganda's NDP and commitment to the MDGs.

The central focal points of the UNUP as it emerges are twofold. Firstly, it seeks to reform the overlapping bureaucracies at different levels of government currently involved in urban administration in order to make urban governance more efficient and effective, both in terms of cost and performance. In light of growing concerns with urban sprawl, in particular of slum settlements, and the difficulties in managing land rights, service provision, and security concerns, this was the initial impetus to develop the UNUP, and is consistent with the NDP's rationale for developing the policy. Secondly, in line with the priorities of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the international partners (the UNDP, the World Bank, Cities Alliance and SDI) are promoting a policy focus that is centrally pro-poor in its focus. While these two areas of focus are not necessarily incompatible, it is important to note that the first administrative emphasis is best understood of one of control and management, reflecting challenges from the perspective of local and national governments, whereas this second focus is part of the wider global attention to poverty and the needs of marginalized citizens.

## **2. PARTICIPATORY MECHANISMS**

The participatory components of the process must be robust for this policy to be responsive to the needs of the urban poor; this is possible given the significant knowledge and experience base of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) working on urban poverty in Kampala. However, these groups have not been sufficiently integrated into the policy process thus far. Ensuring active participation of stakeholders in the policy process is always challenging, particularly around social policy. Despite a stated intention for widespread and meaningful participation in the policy process this is not occurring. This weak attention to participation is consistent with experiences across Africa with Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. A focus on participation is part of the World Bank's stated goals of increasing national ownership of policy, but is

often at odds with national elite interests, raising the question of whose ownership is being promoted. The difficulty with multilevel policy objectives of bringing in multiple participants is that the poor do not have the skills, time, resources, or clout to fully engage in a context where political elites have competing interests and agendas. Nonetheless, it is not unfeasible that participation could be significantly improved in the case of this policy initiative.

Firstly, more local NGOs need to be brought into the policy process, particularly groups with established roots in urban communities and those with established skills with gender and development. ACTogether is an inadequate representative of Uganda's urban poor or of the NGO expertise in urban poverty. Its membership is small (six staff members); and its assessment of urban needs and grassroots strategies, particularly around gender, are not adequately open to new perspectives or the full multi-dimensionality of experiences of the poor. The National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda is a promising initiative, but with 40,000 members the mechanisms to allow their participation in drafting, implementing, and monitoring this policy are unclear. The Uganda National Urban Forum needs to be better organized and have mechanisms introduced to grant it greater influence. This forum's meetings are sporadic and several key members do not attend regularly. Its importance to the process needs to be more carefully thought out with specific mechanisms that go beyond consultation so that it is relevant to participants. Otherwise the already established priorities of the Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development are unlikely to be modified in light of other stakeholders' and partners' concerns.

### 3. PRO-POOR FOCUS

Although Uganda's urban population is considerably better off, measured by income, than the rural population, and more than 90 percent of Uganda's poor are in rural areas (Mukwaya et al., 2011), urban poverty is widespread, increasing, and severe. Urban income distribution is highly unequal, and the majority of urban residents are impoverished. Poverty in an urban setting is a markedly different experience from that in rural areas. Urban food prices are high and to access to regular income is necessary to secure it. Further, nutritional wellbeing relies on an array of inputs, such as clean water, access to medical services, and a diverse diet, all of which are difficult with insecure incomes and residency in informal housing settlements. While there may be greater proximity to health, education, and legal services, accessing these is challenging due a variety of formal and informal barriers. Unemployment levels are high, with the Uganda's youth (18 - 30 years) unemployment rate estimated at a shocking 83 percent (World Bank, 2007). Most of the urban poor rely on the informal sector, where income is irregular and security risks are widespread. Women and girls often turn to prostitution to secure their livelihoods. In slum communities, substance abuse of alcohol and drugs is widespread, as is violence. Female-headed households in urban centres in Uganda have lower incomes than male-headed ones, in contrast to rural regions where women heads of households are more likely to have urban remittances to draw on as well as land to cultivate (Appleton, 1996). Residents of high-density urban slums face further struggles connected to security, health, environment, and stigmatization.

The framework for the UNUP, as determined with the World Bank, dictates that it needs to comply with the goals and mandates set out in the MDGs and Uganda's NDP. This means that the UNUP will need incorporate a multidimensional understanding of poverty and, as discussed, integrate a participatory framework in its policy development, implementation, and monitoring. The experience of Uganda's Poverty Reduction Strategy however shows that the actual policy process, including measures, consultation, design, implementation, and monitoring, leaves much to be desired. There is a prioritization of rural poverty concerns in national poverty reduction strategies. This includes Uganda's most current PRSP, the NDP (Republic of Uganda, 2010), notwithstanding its attention to some of the long-term implications of Uganda's urbanization trends. As all Ugandan policy needs to align with the priorities set out in the NDP, and as the NDP has the most secure financing revenues for poverty alleviation, this is a serious gap. The NDP is the most recent of Uganda's PRSPs, which began with the 1997 Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), which had a goal of reducing absolute poverty to less than ten percent of the population by 2017. With the NDP Uganda's government has acknowledged that this goal will not be met and has moved to anchor its national development around economic growth and wealth creation instead. While the NDP does have more of an urban focus than Uganda's earlier PRSPs, including a stated objective to accelerate urbanization, this new attention is geared to harnessing the economic potential of urban areas, rather than responding to rising poverty and economic inequality. Economic growth is of course necessary for poverty reduction, however the process is not automatic and revenue from economic growth needs to be invested strategically into public services.

Concrete policy recommendations in the NDP addressing urban areas outline the mandate for the development of a National Urban Policy to "guide urban planning and development" (Republic of Uganda, 2010, 186). This points to the national importance of the UNUP process, but also its designation separate from that of the NDP (and the NDP's secure sources of pro-poor financing). Tellingly in the NDP's overview of the "objectives, strategies and interventions" needed for the urban sector there is no direct mention of poverty. The seven objectives identified are: (1) Create an inclusive policy and regulatory framework for urban development, (2) Ensure well planned and managed, quality, efficient, progressive and sustainable urban centres in Uganda, (3) Improve urban environment and heritage, (4) Develop and strengthen a competitive urban economy, (5) Develop an efficient integrated infrastructure to support urban development (6) Upgrade slums and informal settlements and (7) Increase availability of and access to land for urban expansion and investment. The objective with the least elaboration in terms of strategies and interventions is objective six, slum upgrades, the only one to directly target the urban poor. It is also unclear where priorities would fall when there is conflict between slum upgrading and the final objective to increase land available for urban expansion and investment. As the UNUP needs to align with the NDP, this

section of the NDP provides a good indication of the initial priorities and objectives of the emerging policy. However the UNUP also needs to align itself with the priorities of its donors, who have thematically allocated 50 percent of its support to “urban services and housing for the poor” (World Bank, 2010).

Uganda is running a pilot project of conditional cash transfers, but again this project, initiated by donors, has been centred in rural areas where poverty is severe and particularly unresponsive to the pro-poor growth tools in the PRSPs. In Latin America conditional cash transfers have been shown most effective in urban areas, but urban pilots have not yet considered in Uganda (McCord, 2010). Effective conditional cash transfer programs rely on fairly developed services in education and health, which would need to be strengthened in Uganda for them to work well. Potentially as investments are made to strengthen these services, cash transfer programs to the urban poor would help stimulate and support them. This would require a significant policy commitment towards developing social provisions in Uganda that does not at present exist, and in fact seems to be declining rather than increasing.

Policies addressing urban poverty and housing implemented in the past (for example the 1986 National Human Settlement Policy, the 1992 National Shelter Strategy, and the 2005 National Housing Policy) have suffered from low priority after development and a subsequent weak implementation; a slow approval processes; dependency on external support; and have only benefitted a small proportion of urban slum-dwellers, generally the more affluent (Republic of Uganda, 2008). These problems are typical of similar programs internationally, where the poorest are priced out of improved or new services and housing or else moved to areas far from employment opportunities, shortly after returning to slums. It is critical that the new UNUP identifies the problems with earlier approaches in order to correct them. There is a stated commitment to slum upgrading, rather than construction of new low income housing, but it is not clear how this will play out in practice given the uncertain tenure status of those in informal housing areas and increased demand for land in urban centres for ‘development’. Partners in the policy process, notably Cities Alliance, have considerable experience with upgrading strategies and are likely to offer sound advice in this regard. Whether their expertise is brought to bear in Kampala is uncertain; Cities Alliance’s participation is largely being targeted towards newly urbanizing areas where slums are emergent rather than established.

Poverty, while frequently described in policy documents as multidimensional, is most often measured by income and as such populations within the poor who are not affected by existing ‘pro-poor’ strategies, often poor women, are rendered invisible and there is a lack of targeted attention to the fact that while there has been a steady decrease in poverty as measured by income in Uganda, levels of malnutrition and caloric intake have not responded to the same degree, particularly in urban areas. The recommended daily caloric intake is 2,300 per adult per day. More than 60 percent of Uganda’s households do not meet this, and calorie-deficient households are more prevalent in urban areas, with 72.7 percent calorie deficient as compared to 60 percent of rural households. Food insecurity is “higher in urban areas though the incidence of income poverty is generally higher in rural areas” (Republic of Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Income alone is not an adequate measure of poverty. Awareness of this has led to the development in 2010 of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), by the UNDP, which relies on ten different indicators, several directly associated with nutritional security, such as access to clean water, nutrition, sanitation, and assets. This index serves as a more nuanced measure of poverty, which can allow comparisons across time and regions (including rural/urban divides) to identify aspects of education, health, and standards of living that require more targeted attention. While recognizing this measure of poverty is neither exhaustive nor objective, use of the MPI to develop urban policy in Uganda, and poverty policy more broadly, would allow for significantly improved identification of the most vulnerable and insecure populations, and point in the needed directions. Poverty is multidimensional and Uganda’s urban poor are not homogenous – there are many gradations of poverty and nutritional insecurity among Uganda’s urban poor, structured by factors of gender, age, disability, health, and place of origin.

#### **4. SUSTAINABILITY**

The sustainability of the UNUP can be explored from two angles. Firstly, how will the long-term costs involved with implementing this policy be managed; are they sustainable? Secondly, will the policy promote sustainable urban development? This later question is not just in reference to resilient principles in design and management but also in those developing and supporting a lived environment where residents can realize their capabilities, one where they have access to public services, have housing, and not suffer from environmental and safety hazards.

The costs of implementing the UNUP will not be apparent for some time, and of course may potentially be balanced by its success in meeting some of its objectives, particularly those prioritized by the government, around streamlining administration and management of urban areas and promoting new avenues for economic growth. The Ministry of Finance has indicated that it will not financially support this policy, which will instead rely indefinitely on donor support. Donor support is likely to continue for the initial 15 year plan of the policy; after that, the government may need to seek new donors, increase its financial contributions, or fold this policy into another, potentially a PRSP, with more reliable support. Funding needs for elements of the policy related to public administration and increasing urban economic production may decrease over time, whereas those directed towards poverty reduction are likely to increase with urbanization. While these two areas may be in competition at times, there is also considerable overlap, for example in terms of what choices are made around investments in service provision, slum upgrades, and supporting pro-poor employment.

For sustainable urban development to be achieved, the needs of the urban poor need to be targeted directly, not only in emerging urban centres but also in Kampala, which will continue to be the main destination for both new migrants and the location of natural expansion due to population growth. Unless the government demonstrates and expands its commitment to the more costly projects of poverty reduction, urban development in Uganda will not be sustainable. If the majority of urban residents are not able to access the central services and requirements to live healthy productive lives the consequences will include increased crime, violence, health and environmental hazards, and destitution.

## **5. OWNERSHIP AND CAPACITY**

Uganda faces serious governance limitations, which have become increasingly pronounced in the past decade. The last three rounds of national elections were marred by violence and intimidation; there is widespread patronage-based corruption, which has combined with an increasing use of state power to keep the ruling elite in place. The media is also subject to intimidation and harassment (Tabaire, 2007). Commentators such as Kannyo have argued that political corruption has become a serious concern with “widespread venality at all levels of government and administration” (2004). This perspective is shared by other observers and as the state becomes increasingly centralized and prepares itself for new oil-related revenues higher levels of corruption are likely (Geld and Majerowicz, 2011; Keating, 2011). This puts into question the capacity for national policy to meet its goals. Uganda is gaining more control over its policy agenda, more ownership, as a consequence of its graduation from Highly Indebted Poor Country conditionalities and the World Bank’s commitment to promoting this widely. Whether this will translate into more relevant and effective policy is not clear. This case points to a poverty agenda held more by the international partners than government actors in Uganda. Clearly Uganda is treating the participatory requirements of the policy process lightly; the poverty focus of the UNUP may be similarly low on substance.

In Uganda there is a clear pattern where governance reforms and policies have an immediate degree of success, followed by a subsequent downturn or unravelling (Robinson, 2007). This has been the case with policies addressing HIV/AIDS, education, civil service reform, anti-corruption measures, and of course poverty alleviation. There are explanations specific to each policy or reform area to account for why they lost momentum or failed, but common to all are competition between agencies and ministries responsible for them, pervasive neo-patrimonial politics, and a lack of accountability and follow up after the initial funding has been secured and the process initiated (Robinson, 2007). In this instrumentalist context social policy has little priority, as these investments, will not contribute to short-term political gain.

It is very difficult to gather accurate demographic information of slum populations, particularly in very large urban centres like Kampala: urban populations are continuously moving within urban areas and back and forth between rural areas; there are high levels of distrust towards the government and policy; and legal status related to employment, residency, and land rights is often uncertain. Understanding and planning for accelerating urbanization in Uganda requires attention to rural urban linkages, population growth, land tenure, employment opportunities, international migration patterns, and appropriate mechanisms to provide services and opportunities and extend rights to the growing numbers of urban poor. Policy able to adequately respond to urban poverty must be what Wallace (2008) refers to as “whole systems,” drawing on the cooperation of different branches and levels of government as well as community groups and other non-state actors at all stages of the policy process.

Concerns exist regarding Uganda’s capacity for implementing policies that require extensive multilevel cooperation and skill. Public policy in Uganda is comparatively more effective than in most other sub-Saharan African nations, but its effectiveness may have been overstated, and most observers offer a more cautious and tempered assessment than a decade ago. The experience, institutions, skills and resources necessary for effective policy implementation are weak in nations like Uganda whose political past has been marked by conflict, authoritarianism and single-party rule. There are additional external sources of weak policy capacity, for example the involvement of the donor community in formulating policy may weaken mechanisms for ensuring accountability (Okunzi and Macrae, 1996). While recent emphasis on ‘ownership’ and participatory processes are important for addressing this, the coordination between donors and governments in establishing goals, as the example of the UNUP illustrates, is far from clear.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Uganda is in a unique and advantageous position for developing an innovative UNUP capable of meaningfully addressing the challenges ahead. Uganda is a leader in policy development with an established record of developing policy used as best practice elsewhere. Uganda is also in a strong position because its urbanisation is just beginning to take off; it is happening quickly but there is still time to plan carefully for how this will develop. The current crisis in food prices has made the issue of urban food access politically relevant in Uganda. In addition, the framework for this policy, as determined with the World Bank, dictates that it needs to comply with the goals and mandates set out in the MDGs and Uganda’s NDP (World Bank). The 2012 UNUP needs to incorporate attention to poverty, and a participatory framework. There is an opportunity to push for greater attention on these two fronts and promote sustainable urban development.

Power inequalities among stakeholders and partners influence multilevel policy making. An examination of the policy process behind the UNUP highlights a consistent government prioritization of better urban management, political administration, and more recently supporting investment and economic growth opportunities in urban centres. International actors are driving the poverty agenda. Local domestic actors who also support this agenda

are largely excluded from the process, as participation mechanisms are weak. As the World Bank moves away from imposing policy conditionalities and allows for more country ownership of policy, this may create more space for stronger policy capacity. However, it also may create more space for elite instrumentalisation of the policy agenda for short-term political interests, without attention to the long-term needs of sustainable urban development.

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