

The Implications of COVID-19 on Urban Development Research in Africa

Daniel K.B. Inkoom, FGIP

**Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana and
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa**

19th November 2020

OUTLINE

- Introduction: COVID-19 and key issues
- Cities and COVID-19
- COVID-19 and Urban Development Research
- Future Research Pathways
- Conclusions
- References



What we know about Covid-19

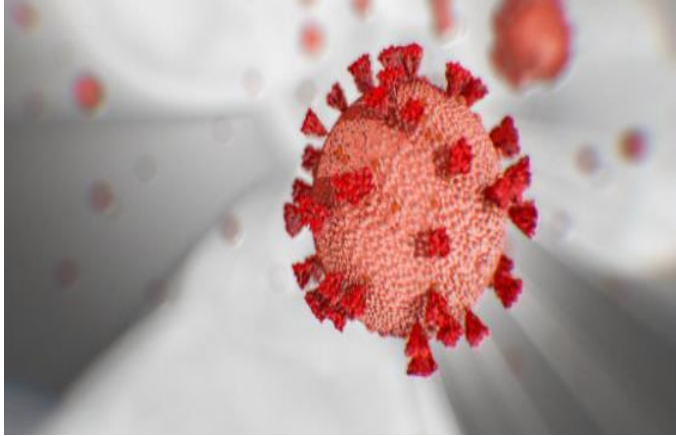
- As at 18th November 2020



- **55, 326,907** Confirmed cases
- **1,333, 742** Confirmed deaths
- **217** Countries, areas or territories with cases



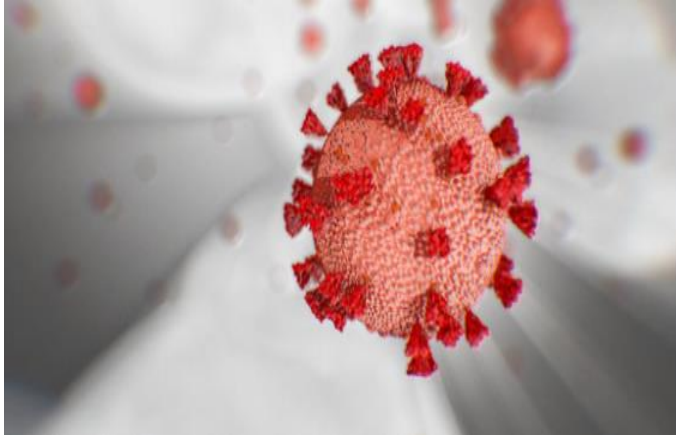
Key issues on COVID-19



- ❑ Uncertainty about the pandemic and the response
- ❑ Disruption of the “normal” way of being and doing
- ❑ Space and densities have become issues especially in the urban landscape
- ❑ Poverty, informality, livelihoods have become centre-stage in global discussions
- ❑ Need for Evidence by the **scientific community** in order to respond



Key issues on COVID-19



- ❑ **Leadership:** Appears to be a co-relation between the leadership and the spread. Leadership is key to resolving the issues associated with the pandemic.
- ❑ **Collaboration:** Should involve public and private sectors, Community groups, Faith Based Organisations, Civil society Organisations, etc.)
- ❑ **Interdisciplinarity:** Is key in responding to the issues posed by the pandemic (medicine, sociology, planning, governance, etc.)
- ❑ **Opportunity:** COVID-19 Provides the world to build back better



Key issues on COVID-19

- ❑ The impacts of the pandemic are very dire on cities of the global south, particularly, in Africa.
- ❑ Brought to the fore the issue of urban vulnerability and resurrected interest in how the COVID-19 has and will affect urban development research in Africa
- ❑ This topic - **The implications of COVID-19 on urban development research in Africa** – to be addressed on two fronts
 - How challenging it is now to conduct the traditional face-to-face interviews for our research works
 - What urban development research should focus on during the pandemic



Cities and COVID-19

- ❑ Cities are home to most of the world population and areas of innovation and growth
- ❑ High concentration of people in cities make them vulnerable to various stressors - **natural and man-made disasters**
- ❑ Several urban research works on impacts of **disasters on cities, and necessary planning, recovery, and adaptation** remain central to the **SDGs and the AU Agenda 2063**
- ❑ COVID-19 is expected to fundamentally alter how cities are managed in the future



Cities and COVID-19

- COVID-19 has varying positive and adverse impacts on African cities in the areas of:
 - Environmental quality - air and water quality,
 - Socioeconomic – inequalities, marginalisation, economic decline. Estimated to push about 49 million people into extreme poverty in 2020
 - Management and governance - absence of proactive planning and emergency plans, techno-driven and smart solutions have been developed to ensure effective and efficient response and recovery measures
 - Transportation and urban design



Urban Development Research Challenges

- ❑ The COVID-19 is far from over and cities are on the front-line of coping with the pandemic and its lasting impacts
- ❑ The ripple effects have greatly been felt by all, particularly researchers who need (primary) data for constructive analysis and research progression
- ❑ Research professionals who were embarking on research projects abroad have been delayed if not halted entirely
- ❑ Urban research in the next few years are crucial to know whether post-COVID cities will be developed and managed in a more sustainable manner

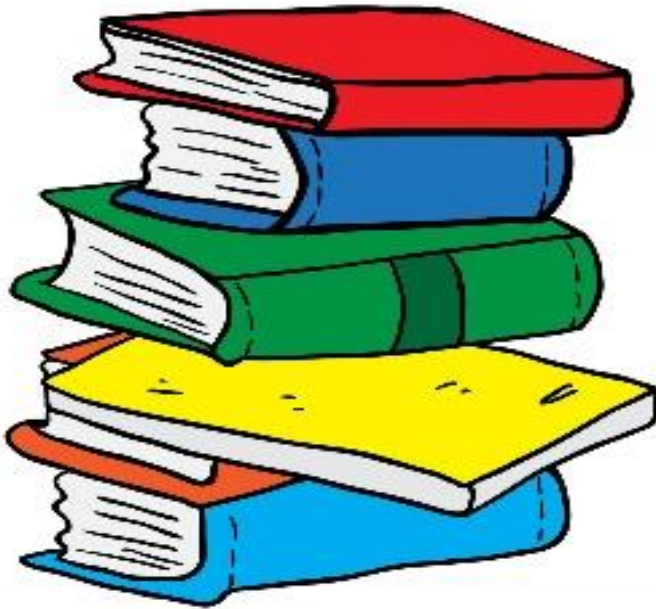


Urban Development Research Challenges

- ❑ Urban research in the global north which can be conducted from comfort of the home due to relatively easy access to wide range of ‘big’ and electronic data
- ❑ Urban researchers in Africa largely rely on face-to-face interviews to get in touch with the ‘reality’ (culture, attitudes, practices, etc.) of issues and people
- ❑ Alternative means (telephone interviews, electronic mails, social media platforms, etc) to conducting our research due to the pandemic has been very challenging compared to the ‘traditional field face-to-face interviews’
- ❑ A “researching-in person-package” is a cost to global health which is hampered by the risk of spreading the virus across people and communities



Urban Development Research Challenges



- ❑ Many African urban researchers are in a dilemma as to whether or not to postpone their research until it is safe to travel to conduct their research
- ❑ Many are resorting to the use of secondary data for research works which has enormous implications on the quality of our urban development research
- ❑ **“Can we guarantee the authenticity, quality and originality of such high research work by relying on secondary data?”**

Urban Development Research Challenges



- Will the use of secondary data for urban development research, reflect the current needs of our societies?
- Will urban development research be tackling issues and priorities of citizens?
- Requires new approaches to conducting research and new areas to look at in our current and future urban development research pathways

Future Research Pathways



- ❑ COVID-19 provides lessons to build back better and change the direction of current and future urban development research in Africa
- ❑ A new push is required to revisit research to better plan, design, build and manage cities amid the pandemic (**UN-Habitat, 2020**)
- ❑ Future urban development research need more reflection to incorporate new dimensions linked to the impacts of the pandemic and the SDGs

Opportunity

1. **Use the pandemic to build back better** : *“A return to the normal will be a failure for Urban Development Research and Planning ”*

Epoch	Actions that were implemented
17 th Century London	To offset the threat of pestilence, London replaced older wooden structures with brick, believed to more impervious to disease carrying vermin
19 th Century Paris	Widened its boulevards and streets to improve sanitation and health
New York	Massive investments in sewer and sanitation systems, expansion of parks and green spaces, development of building codes to fight infectious diseases (TB, cholera)
Spanish Flu	Introduction of “powder rooms” in homes to provide a place to wash hands to avoid carrying germs into the upstairs living quarters.



Future Research Pathways



- ❑ Urban development research should revisit:
 - ❑ housing and urban planning standards, livelihood planning, community interaction and social space
- ❑ Inclusion in development effort to be able to respond better to urban issues



Future Research Pathways

- ❑ Collaborate and increase digital competence and infrastructures to promote online sharing, open data and science and multiply sharing platforms to boost capacity
- ❑ Refocus urban development research on essential issues that have emerged during the COVID-19 crisis such as air quality, water systems and the value of nature to cities
- ❑ Urban research on urban design and environmental factors is not wholly conclusive
 - ❑..... considering the evolving nature of the pandemic, and the in/completeness of our knowledge)



Future Research Pathways

- ❑ The pandemic has exposed socioeconomic inequalities in cities which threaten public health by making it difficult to enforce measures such as social distancing
- ❑ Overcoming such inequalities is critical and should be prioritized in our future research works in Africa as cities recover from the pandemic
- ❑ Urban development research must therefore
 - Be creative in adapting to the immediacy of current dynamics,
 - Devise strategies to enable collective healing and the recovery of confidence in social interaction,
 - Make efficient use of the resources that this "new normal" leaves behind i.e. vacant land or decongested mobility.



Future Research Pathways

- ❑ Smart research solutions to develop more effective and efficient response and recovery measures for future research
- ❑ Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on urban development research in Africa are context-specific and there is no one-size- fits-all solution
- ❑ Adopting context specific urban development research approaches is essential for developing and implementing effective planning, response, recovery, and adaptation actions
- ❑ Urban researchers should rally support for transformative actions towards conducting research to address societal issues of concern amidst the pandemic



Conclusions

- ❑ **“Africa must consolidate the positive turnaround, using the opportunities of demographics, natural resources, urbanization, technology and trade as a springboard to ensure its transformation and renaissance to meet the people’s aspirations”.** (Africa Union Agenda 2063)
- ❑ We do need to make use of existing opportunities to strategically confront and address the barriers of the COVID-19 pandemic to current and future urban research



Conclusions

- ❑ Urban development research must be a vehicle to achieve national and global development agenda goals, in the light of COVID-19 and our own developmental context and exigencies.
- ❑ **“The world is not ours to keep. We hold it in trust for future generations.”**

(Kofi Annan)



References

- Sharifi, A. & Khavarian-Garmsir, A.R. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Impacts on cities and major lessons for urban planning, design, and management. *Science of the Total Environment*, 749 (2020) 142391
- Acuto, M. (2020). Engaging with global urban governance in the midst of a crisis. *Dial. Hum. Geogr.* 10 (2), 221 –224.
- Inkoom, D.K.B. (2017) Getting unstuck: Planning education legacies and urban challenges in the global south. In Monika Grubbauer and Kate Shaw (eds) *Across Theory and Practice: Thinking Through Urban Research*. JOVIS pp 140-148
- Batty, M., 2020. The coronavirus crisis: what will the post-pandemic city look like? *Environ. Plan. B: Urban Anal. City Sci.* 47 (4), 547 –552.

