Postscript

by Professor Akin L. Mabogunje

It has been fascinating to read the preceding chapters, which attempt to encapsulate the diversity and evolution of my intellectual concerns over the many years of my academic career. In providing a postscript to this magnificent effort by Professor Stanley Okafor, I must begin by expressing my very sincere appreciation to him for taking on the challenging task of giving a structure to a maturing process that was as imperceptible as it was transforming.

It is difficult for me not to re-emphasize that my intellectual development was built on two foundations: the training in historical geography at the University College, London, under the late Professor H. C. Darby in the 1950s, and the quantitative and theoretical revolution in geography that was such an important part of my 1963 sabbatical leave at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. During that year, I had the pleasure of working closely with Professors Bill Garrison and Ned Taaffe. Both experiences sharpened my perception of the processes that shape the landscape of countries at different points in their development. They prepared me for a better understanding of Africa's situation as it changes from largely precapitalist and colonial, to a statist and centrally controlled political economy, to a democratic society and political economy.

Toward the end of the 20th century, as globalization increasingly impacted the economic and social lives of people in different parts of the world, I began to appreciate that urbanization was central to the two revolutions that were starting to sweep the African continent. The first revolution was democratic and sought to empower people, especially at the grassroots. It focused serious concern on decentralization, which still has to propel many African countries to give much needed attention to devolving more powers and resources to their local governments and municipalities. The second revolution embraced the free market economy. Following three or four decades during which many African governments attempted to control the so-called commanding heights of their national economies, it became clear by the 1980s that this strategy was failing disastrously under the weight of mismanagement, a disenabling culture of political and bureaucratic impunity, and pervasive corruption.

Urban management and governance, thus, challenged many African countries to confront the extent to which they are willing to democratically empower their citizens at the local government level. As already indicated in the writings reviewed in this book, the issue of decentralization is being canvassed and pursued in many African countries. However, it is clear that they still have a long way to go to return significant decision-making power to people at the local government level. The usual excuses that local governments are riddled with debilitating corruption and lack professional personnel with the necessary qualifications and expertise should no longer be tenable. Such excuses emasculate the robust capacity of citizens to collectively take their fortunes into their hands and make decisions that will impact positively and effectively on their economic well-being and social welfare.

Increasingly, local governance is having to distinguish between representative and participatory democracy. All through the developing world, representative democracy—whereby a few individuals are elected as councilors or representatives of their wards and meet regularly to make decisions that affect the lives of all the citizens—is now regarded as inadequate to ensure effective and efficient management. Instead, with the explosion of information technology and the greater access to information, a participatory democratic culture is more likely to improve conditions in cities and towns and make them more socially inclusive. Participatory democracy pays more attention to neighbourhoods and seeks to encourage representatives of poor and blighted neighbourhoods to participate in discussions and decision-making about priorities for their cities and towns. The role of the elected council in this arrangement becomes almost that of a board of directors, which oversees the development of the city or town. However, the difference is that the council is better informed of its citizens' priorities and there is a forum in which the problems of city management can be discussed by a wide cross-section of residents.

Such participatory democracy is being underpinned in many countries, especially in Latin America, by what is now generally referred to as participatory budgeting. This is a system whereby neighbourhood representatives discuss and agree on funding priorities for infrastructural development and service delivery. Involving so many of the residents in these discussions also makes it possible to gain their commitment that the necessary revenues must be raised to fund the agreed priorities, either through user charges or higher taxes and rates. In many African countries, participatory democracy could facilitate significant improvements in data-base development and enhance planning capacity. Such a participatory democratic culture is not totally strange to the informal governance of many secondary African cities. They have hometown voluntary associations (*associations d'originaires*) that mobilize resources based on levies of all their citizens, both at home and abroad, to implement agreed priorities for infrastructural facilities and services. Extending such practices to the emerging metropolitan centres in African countries would ensure that we are true to our traditional culture and heritage of consultation, transparency, and accountability in governance.

A further trend in promoting greater participatory democracy in the governance of cities and towns is the increasing concern with the idea of city development strategies. An effective city development strategy begins by involving an inclusive cross section of residents in a forum to discuss and articulate their vision of how they want their particular city or town to develop economically, socially, and politically over a given time period. This facilitates agreement on a development path and infrastructural priorities in the context of proposed economic and business development in the city. For African countries, such development strategies would result in greater appreciation of the informal economy's role and how its development and integration with the more formal economy can be promoted.

City development strategies also help to focus attention on the role of the national capital market in urban infrastructure development. Governments in developing countries, especially in Africa, are still reluctant to raise municipal bonds on the capital market to improve infrastructural facilities. This reluctance will have to be replaced by a more proactive stance that prescribes eligibility criteria that must be met to be able to access development funds. Whatever the criteria, promoting the access of urban centres to the capital market is bound to improve the quality of financial management, enhance their data bases, and further consolidate their democratic culture.

If developing countries were to resolve the problems of promoting the infrastructural development of their cities and towns, it would be easier to contain the problems of expanding peri-urban informal settlements and slums. The development of a mortgage system to facilitate home ownership becomes increasingly feasible as a country deepens its capital market and makes it possible to promote secondary mortgages. Deliberate housing policies and programmes enable governments to confront the problems of upgrading slums, provide low income rental housing, and cope with homelessness.

Given the fact that houses are the products of a massive assembly industry, with tremendous backward and forward linkages, programmes to improve mass housing for the urban and rural populations tend to stimulate a wide range of small and medium-scale industries. Backwardly linked industries include those producing the following: bricks and mortar; floor, wall and ceiling tiles; doors and windows; sanitary and kitchen wares; such metal wares as hinges and locks; various electrical fittings; and paints and other decorative wares. Forward linkages include bedroom and sitting room furniture, electrical gadgets, floor coverings, and so on. All of these together with the completed houses themselves ensure that the housing industry accounts for a significant proportion of the annual gross domestic product. Indeed, in some developed countries, the housing industry is said to account for between 25 and 35 percent of the gross domestic product and provide a veritable barometer for assessing the state of the economy at any particular time.

How then do I conclude this postscript? What singular haven of experience has the intellectual voyage of my life led me to? What should we distill about the emerging urban Africa from all of these writings? These are questions that call for continuing reflections by scholars confronted with the daunting challenges of development, particularly urban development in Africa. From my perspective, however, if there is any one issue that has become clear and salient in my thinking, it is that no development can proceed in any country without serious attention to how a relatively large pool of long-term savings can be mobilized to invest in national development. No amount of access to grants and aid from international and bilateral donor agencies, nor loans from multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank, can do more than scratch the surface of the enormous investment in infrastructural facilities needed to put a country on the path of sustainable economic growth and development. Nothing but its own domestically generated and mobilized long-term savings can enable a country to cope effectively with its infrastructural needs on a long-term and sustainable basis.

The most important pool of long-term savings in any country is, of course, what citizens contribute to their pensions, followed by their life insurance. Many African countries still adhere to the colonial practice of making civil service pensions noncontributory. Where this practice persists, and pension liabilities and infrastructural provisioning are met only from annual budgetary appropriations, development is generally stunted and comes to depend heavily on the infrequent grants or loans from bilateral or multilateral organizations. On the other hand, building up long-term savings through contributory pensions or life insurance can only be sustainable if a capital market, credit-rating organizations, trustee institutions and other institutions are established to ensure that pension and insurance funds cannot be accessed directly, even by a prudent government. Pension and insurance fund administrators should operate in the capital market as institutional investors. Any attempts by governments or any other corporate bodies to access these funds must be on the basis of due process and discipline of the capital market.

African countries have to pay particular attention to these factors to ensure their sustained and sustainable growth. There is no short cut to urban development or even to national economic development, except through a process of internal self-reliance. This almost worn-out concept of sustainable development can, however, be realized not in the sense of autarky, or a country closing in on itself to provide all of its needs, but rather as a country puts in place the institutions required to facilitate its effective transition to a full-fledged free market economy and fosters the consolidation of real democratic culture in its society. From my point of view, it is to the extent that significant development is made on these two fronts over the next two decades that emerging urban Africa can stand up to the intense competitiveness of the 21st century and meet the diverse and pervasive challenges of this era of globalization.