


Book Review of Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning in Africa

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Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning in Africa. Case Studies and Solutions
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The book 'Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning in Africa. Case Studies and Solutions' is an attempt to compile and discuss innovative experiences that make use of the notion of smart city in the field of spatial planning in several countries in Africa. In doing this, the book aims to explore how sustainable and smart city policies can reinforce the response to population growth, rapid urbanization and urban sprawl, poor housing, and insufficient urban services in developing countries. The book was motivated by the initiative of the Government of Zimbabwe aiming to promote sustainable and smart cities in the country. In that context, a Conference was organized but due to the pandemic it had to be cancelled. The papers to be presented in that conference were then compiled in this volume.

The book is organized into six sections and 21 chapters, focused on cases located mostly in Zimbabwe, but also in Zambia, and South Africa. It includes comparisons with non African countries, as in chapter 7 with Latin America. It starts in the first section, with one chapter - 'Introduction' - written by the three editors, by examining existing frameworks for planning and the governance of smart human settlements in Africa. This is followed in Section II - 'Theory of Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning' - with five chapters, by an exploration of concepts and theories of smart city and smart growth, in both urban and rural areas, pointing out numerous smart city frameworks that a city can bring in when it decides to implement smart city initiatives, both in developed and in developing countries as well. In the next Section - 'Context and external drivers of sustainable and smart spatial planning' - with three chapters, the book discusses the African context, its technology and data limitations, and the smart solutions that have been applied to specific local contexts. This is followed by Section IV - 'Goals and Practices of Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning' - with five chapters, focused on urban laboratories, spatial justice, among other issues. Finally, in Section V - 'Methods and Tools for Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning' - with six chapters, examines and discusses methods and tools that have been used to apply the smart city notions. In the concluding Section - 'Future of Sustainable and Smart Spatial Planning in Africa' -, with one chapter authored by the three editors, the book offers a synthesis of the prospects and implications of the practices examined in these cases studies included in the book.

Although useful for all those looking for studies focused on experiences of spatial planning in African countries, the book misses to some extent what is implicit in the title. In fact, as explicitly referred in several chapters, the notion of smart planning is closely interlinked with that of Smart City and this is undeniably connected to the extensive use of digital technologies, automation, mobile

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e-tools, and internet-based applications in the planning process. In several of the chapters that make up the book, the notion 'smart' refers to a specific set of principles of how cities should look like, such as those of New Urbanism, more than to the extensive use of digital tools in the planning and governance of the cities. Therefore, there are perhaps two books in this volume, one for each of the two ways on which smart planning and smart governance are understood.

The main contribution of this book and its strength is thus perhaps the empirical evidence on planning in Africa that each chapter offers, a reality that unfortunately is not frequently included in the wider international planning literature. A weak point may possibly be the fluid use of the notions of smart planning and smart city, up to a point in which the reader may even question the appropriateness of its use in some of the case studies that make up the book.

Nonetheless, as several chapters also show, the notion of 'smart planning' ought to be seen as more ample than the simple use of digital tools and should encompass also the principles that inform the planning process, its outcomes, and the impacts on the society. And this wider notion is indeed present in most of the chapters. Even so, for those looking for case studies focused on the use of digital technologies in planning and governance in cities of Africa some of the chapters clearly offer substantive evidence of that, discussed from an informed critical perspective. In sub-Saharan Africa this notion of smart planning and smart urban governance have been mostly applied to water supply, renewable energy, solid waste management and to urban mobility and transport. But in general one would not expect to find a different level of application of the smart city concept in countries without the capacity and technological knowhow to install and run smart infrastructures systems, as is the case in most of the contexts examined in the book, be they in Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa or in any other part of sub-Saharan Africa.

At a time when the debate on the decolonization of planning is at the centre of the research agenda, also in the planning and urban governance related disciplines, I would prefer to see, in Southern countries and cities, a more critical perspective about the application of planning and urban governance concepts imported almost uncritically from the Global North. Since these are still initial attempts to introduce the smart city concepts, imported from the Global North, to planning practices in African countries, all confronted with huge constraints, it seems imperative to follow these developments with further research, now from a de-colonial perspective.

In sum, the book is of interest for the readership of the International Journal of E-Planning Research, graduate students, researchers, and faculty members doing research on smart urban planning and smart urban governance in sub-Saharan African countries, and for planners and local policy makers as well.

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