

**POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

# Collaborative Governance

Use reform coalitions to address complex urban challenges.  
Africa Cities Research Coalition.

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Meeting to discuss water and sanitation upgrades, Oberube, Lagos. Chris Jordan ACRC

This policy note argues that complex urban challenges require inclusive reform coalitions bringing together governments, communities, researchers and businesses. By creating space for dialogue, co-producing knowledge and piloting practical innovations, coalition-building can catalyse scalable, locally owned reform across Commonwealth cities facing rapid urbanisation and institutional fragmentation.

## **Executive Summary**

Most urban challenges are complex in nature, leaving them unlikely to be solved by any single group. By bringing together a range of motivated stakeholders, the urban reform coalitions approach has the potential to build trust, generate new approaches, trial ideas and establish a platform to scale up success. Reform coalitions can be formal or informal, but usually comprise of local community organisations, local authorities, businesses and academics whose expertise complements and bolsters each other. The co-production of solutions that results can ensure buy-in, sustainability, inclusivity and effectiveness, with the broad support needed to maximise the impact of initiatives.

## Policy Problem

Across the Commonwealth, urban development is often contentious and contested. Across Africa and parts of Asia, cities are rapidly growing year on year, but lack the finances, infrastructure and services to effectively cope with their expansion. As a result, in some cities, over 50% of residents live in informal settlements.

Achieving sustainable and inclusive improvements at scale is a huge challenge, particularly where low-income or marginalised communities are concerned. Too often traditional, centralised planning contributes to development failures primarily by ignoring local realities and excluding the very populations it intends to serve. When planners ignore the lived experiences of residents, they can develop solutions that are not fit for purpose or fail to address the actual needs of high-density and informal areas.

Top-down systems often operate through excessive prescription and unreasonable standards. These regulatory frameworks are frequently too slow, costly, and burdensome for small-scale developers or low-income homeowners to follow. As a result, standard municipal rules can effectively criminalise the self-help efforts of low-income residents across many cities of the Global South, forcing them into 'unauthorised' developments that lack legal protection, basic services and access to formal finance.

In many places, centralised, sectoral planning has largely failed to keep pace with rapid urbanisation, which is particularly visible within African cities. This has led to a persistent mismatch where the state is unable to provide affordable, centrally networked public infrastructure - such as water and sanitation - for the majority of the population. These institutional voids leave residents to rely on improvised, fragmented systems that are often inefficient, unsafe and expensive.

By treating residents as passive recipients rather than active participants, top-down planning disregards the agency of marginalised groups. A tokenistic engagement often limits these groups from properly influencing decisions that directly impact their livelihoods and safety.

Inconsistency between government agencies can also undermine urban development. For example, one department may invest in community upgrading while another carries out demolitions in the same area. Trust becomes a central challenge as communities view elites as being more focused on their own professional or political incentives than on addressing complex urban challenges.

In these challenging circumstance, innovative approaches are required that build trust and establish hybrid approaches to link formal and informal systems. Complex challenges are unlikely to be solved by the state alone and bringing together a broader set of stakeholders to co-produce effective solutions has proved to be a useful catalyst of inclusive development. The urban reform coalitions approach is a low cost, locally-led method that allows urban reformers from a wide range of backgrounds and expertise to contribute towards improving their city.



## Objective

Urban reform coalitions provide an approach to catalyse and sustain locally-led, inclusive reform. They have the potential address complex urban challenges in innovative ways, while avoiding the problems associated with traditional planning models.

## Recommendations

Urban reform coalitions provide an approach to catalyse and sustain locally-led, inclusive reform. They have the potential address complex urban challenges in innovative ways, while avoiding the problems associated with traditional planning models.

1. Governments should actively encourage the use of urban reform coalitions, shifting from being a top-down provider of planning decisions, to an enabler of inclusively developed solutions incorporating a range of residents, businesses, officials and researchers.
  - Devolution of power to the lowest levels of government provides a critical opportunity for inclusive coalitions to emerge. When local authorities have the regulatory and budgetary power to make decisions, they are more incentivised to engage with civil society and community organisations to address local needs.
  - Local government should empower strategically positioned bureaucrats who are sympathetic to inclusive urban reform. These internal champions can facilitate constructive interactions between state agencies and external coalition members that might otherwise remain fragmented.
  - While initial reform coalition initiatives might be restricted to a particular location or sector, local governments should be alive to the potential of scaling up successful projects. Smaller scale initial pilots can test innovative approaches that provide bridge the gaps between existing informal and formal systems and processes.
2. Universities can play a central role in convening effective reform coalitions and should support engaged academics in doing so.
  - Universities are well position to provide a politically neutral and evidence led space for discussion that can bring different urban actors together, particularly where the issues are contested and trust may be lacking. Enabling dialogue and understanding to develop may be a vital first step before a coalition can start to actively work together.
  - The research process can play an important role in both generating new evidence that helps to move issues forward. Academics can also play an important role in helping to document and validate the existing knowledge and insights held within communities.

## Rationale

Urban reform coalitions are partnerships or groups of diverse stakeholders—including government agencies, community groups, NGOs, academics, and the private sector—working together to achieve common goals. Urban reform coalitions are specifically aimed at addressing complex, systemic urban challenges to improve living conditions, especially for disadvantaged communities. They can be small and informal, or larger, more formal groups and their composition is likely to change over time. In all cases, the quality of relationships between different parties is critical to their success.

Many academics already operate within urban reform coalitions, but don't always fully recognise the significance of their roll. The reform coalitions approach aims to make the existing efforts of researchers more visible while highlighting its varied potential across a wide range of contexts.

Evidence for the effectiveness of urban reform coalitions has been developed by the African Cities Research Consortium<sup>1</sup> and published in a special issue of *Environment & Urbanization*<sup>2</sup>, edited by Mitlin and Weldeghebrael.

The urban reform coalitions approach is not narrowly defined, providing flexibility for elements to be adopted across a wide range of contexts. However, four key strategies for effective coalitions are present in many case studies: 1) creating space for dialogue, 2) building relational capital, 3) co-producing emancipatory knowledge, and 4) testing innovation. While this sequence isn't a fixed roadmap, it does provide a broad framework for establishing effective reform coalitions.

### 1. Creating neutral spaces for dialogue

In politically contested or polarised environments, urban reform coalitions can use the convening power of universities to lower the stakes of engagement. By framing discussions as learning exercises, university-based dialogues allow officials to discuss contentious issues like land rights and evictions in a more detached, evidence based and constructive manner.

This has been particularly successful in Harare, where the Urban Informality Forum<sup>3</sup> has played a vital role in changing both the policy and practice of City of Harare staff towards both economic and spatial informality. Residents living in informal settlements and those working within informal enterprises had previously been subject to considerable hostility from local government. Though a range of structured dialogues held by the Forum on specific issues, city officials began to acknowledge the perspectives and needs of informal traders and residents, with work-arounds and initiatives subsequently being developed to tackle longstanding problems. The presence of the Forum was particularly useful following a large fire at the main Mbare market in 2024, providing a preexisting and constrictive platform for officials to discuss redevelopment plans with market traders and to establish ways to reduce the likelihood of future fires.

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<sup>1</sup> African. Cities Research Consortium: <https://www.african-cities.org/>

<sup>2</sup> *Environment & Urbanization*, Reform Coalitions: <https://www.environmentandurbanization.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Urban Informality Forum: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09562478251318232>

## 2. Building relational capital and shifting power

Urban reform coalitions can be used to change the balance of relational capital, particularly by providing a platform that amplifies marginalised voices. By aggregating diverse actors, coalitions allow disadvantaged groups to move from the margins of urban development into more active roles as planning partners. In cities with deep social stratification, marginalised groups often lack connections to high-status individuals or state officials. Reform coalitions can build cross-class alliances that provide these residents with the institutional soft power needed to force elites to acknowledge their rights and claims. In addition, coalitions can foster mutual accountability between grassroots organisations, professional NGOs, and state agencies, reducing the risk of "NGO-isation" where organisations become more accountable to donors than to communities.

Reform coalitions can also encourage cooperation. In Cape Town, the Township Developers Forum<sup>4</sup> (TDF) brought together small scale property developers that previously saw themselves as rivals, allowing them to collectively negotiate for policy concessions from the City Council. Through collective action the coalition amplified the voice and capabilities of emerging micro-developers and opened the bureaucracy to outside interests. The process altered the perspectives of senior politicians and officials towards informality, and prompted the City Council to instigate wide-ranging reforms, galvanizing a momentum for change.

## 3. Co-producing emancipatory knowledge

Reform coalitions co-produce emancipatory knowledge by intentionally blending technical expertise with the lived experiences and survival strategies of disadvantaged groups to challenge exclusionary urban practices. This mode of knowledge production is designed to advance the interests of marginalised residents and change how city officials perceive urban challenges. Academics within coalitions act as knowledge brokers, translating community needs into technical formats legible to state authorities, thereby legitimising community-led initiatives.

The Mukuru Special Planning Area<sup>5</sup> (SPA) in Nairobi was established after a consortium of over 40 organisations used community-collected data to prove that in situ upgrading of the informal settlement was feasible and desirable. The Muungano Alliance<sup>6</sup> partnered with several academic institutions, including the Universities of Nairobi, Strathmore and California to conduct a comprehensive situational analysis of Mukuru. Researchers played an important role in validating community-collected data and then working alongside residents to analyse it. This evidence base was critical in securing the commitment of the Nairobi County Government, which led to the official declaration of the SPA in 2017.

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<sup>4</sup> Township Developers Forum: <https://tinyurl.com/3fmrzje7>

<sup>5</sup> Mukuru Special Planning Area: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09562478241300227>

<sup>6</sup> Muungano Alliance: <https://www.muungano.net/>

#### 4. Testing innovations through incremental pilots

Effective coalitions may also use precedent-setting pilots to demonstrate that inclusive reform is possible and affordable. Pilot often focus on addressing a problem in an individual community, in part with the hope that a successful initiative could be scaled at the city level. By providing both government and communities with the confidence that a particular innovation is effective, it reduces the risks associated with any new development initiative, highlighting costs, benefits and alternatives for any groups who may be adversely affected.

Pilots can also incorporate knowledge production. The African Cities Research Consortium has been initiating action research projects across a range of cities, designed to bring together a reform coalition and rigorously test new initiatives. Mukuru, Nairobi again provides a good example. Building on the relationships and policy traction created by the Special Planning Area process, communities, government officials and researchers came together to adapt the city's sewer standards so they could be deployed the dense informal settlement.

The simplified sewer system<sup>7</sup> that resulted has seen 8,000 households gain access to a toilet on their shared plots. The collaborative approach between government and community organisations established new multi-level governance mechanisms to ensure the long-term management and maintenance of facilities. Since the sewers were installed, cholera rates have fallen in the settlement, to the delight of both residents and public health officials. The city government is now planning to roll out the simplified sewer model and new governance system across Nairobi. As sewage is no longer discharged into the neighbouring Ngong river, community groups in Mukuru are turning their attention to regenerating the watercourse and the area around it.

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<sup>7</sup> Mukuru SPA, simplified sewer system: <https://tinyurl.com/m7f3hk5w>

## Expected Outcomes

While the urban reform coalitions approach can be extremely successful in catalysing inclusive and sustainable urban reform, it does not guarantee success. Progress inevitably depends upon the nature of the issue being tackled, the broader political context and history, the commitment and persistence of key individuals with the coalition, the alignment of the coalition and the quality of relationships. While reform coalitions have proved to be an effective way to navigate contentious political contexts, they do not negate them entirely.

In many cases, reform coalitions experience a slow, uneven, non-linear process. Even coalitions that achieve initial success, like the Mukuru SPA in Nairobi, can see their plans weakened by the intervention of higher levels of government or a shift toward top-down implementation. Some coalitions are time-bound and dissolve after a project ends, and those that are enduring must constantly re-formulate themselves to survive political flux.

However, in the right circumstance and with the right ingredients (particularly in terms of committed individuals) urban reform coalitions can generate a longer term cascade of reform momentum within a city. When individual initiatives are scaled up beyond the initial project sites, when communities recognise their agency and collectively identify increasingly ambitious goals, when politicians and officials see the practical benefits of locally-led improvements, and when networks of reformers are strengthened, this provides the longer term basis for more systemic interventions that mutually reinforce each other.

## Implementation Considerations

Implementing urban reform coalitions generally requires the aggregation of diverse institutions across the public, private, and third sectors. While the precise make-up of the coalition can vary significantly, the institutions and organisations that often have a central role to play includes:

- Universities, who can serve as catalyst organization or intermediaries. They can provide neutral spaces for initial dialogue, help to provide new research and evidence designed to solve problems as well as the intuitional longevity to sustain long term activities and relationships.
- Government agencies, who are able to embed successful initiatives into broader city or national urban policies and approaches. They also hold regulatory and budget power and the formal authority to change building codes, regularise settlements, and allocate infrastructure budgets.
- Community based organisations provide the essential lived experience and can generate the political pressure required for pro-poor reform, mobilizing a critical mass that the state cannot ignore. Knowledge and insights held within the community are often critical to establishing priorities and generating innovative solutions that work for the communities themselves.
- NGOs can be important as a professional bridge between community groups and the state, providing technical expertise, funding and advocacy around issues.
- Businesses (which can be closely linked to individuals within the community, or beyond), can also play an important role in demonstrating the economic potential and financial sustainability of some interventions. If providing informal services, they may also lose out and need to be carefully managed so they don't block reform.

In some cities reform platforms like the Urban Action Lab<sup>8</sup> (UAL) at Makerere University in Kampala and the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre<sup>9</sup> (SLURC) help to institutionalise reform coalitions by acting as ongoing brokers that bridge the divide between marginalised communities and state authorities. Unlike transitory NGOs or short-lived projects, these platforms leverage their institutional permanence, research expertise, and perceived neutrality to shift urban policy and practice over the long term.

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<sup>8</sup> Urban Action Lab: <https://ual.mak.ac.ug/>

<sup>9</sup> Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre: <https://tinyurl.com/bdepk547>

## Financing

The gap in financing gap required to meet the growing needs of rapidly expanding cities of the Global South is one of the major impediments to reform. Urban reform coalitions can help the address this challenge by piloting small scale interventions, which are often cost effective and can be scaled more broadly across cities.

While international actors can provide support (both in terms of finance and expertise), the locally-led nature of effective coalitions should focus attention on ensuring local or national government are responsible for longer term implementation and financing. At the current time, with many countries cutting international aid budgets, urban reformers need to focus on securing local financing more than ever, and local coalitions are well suited to do this.

There are also positive examples of where reform coalitions have helped to increase local government revenues. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, a reform coalition played a vital role in implementing property tax reform.<sup>10</sup> Previous attempts at collection had failed because residents believed that services would not improve even if revenue increased. The coalition - comprising the local authority, donor financiers, and international technical experts -successfully built broad-based support by working to gain the support of traditional leaders within communities and by making explicit links between tax collection and the visible improvement of public services.

## Call to Action

Recognise the power and effectiveness of inclusive urban reform coalitions to catalyse locally-led, sustainable change in cities.

**This policy recommendation was written by Chris Jordan from the African Cities Research Consortium<sup>11</sup>, University of Manchester, by way of contribution to the work of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition, March 2026**

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<sup>10</sup> Tax Reform Coalition: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09562478251317993>

<sup>11</sup> African Cities Research Consortium: <https://www.african-cities.org/>



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