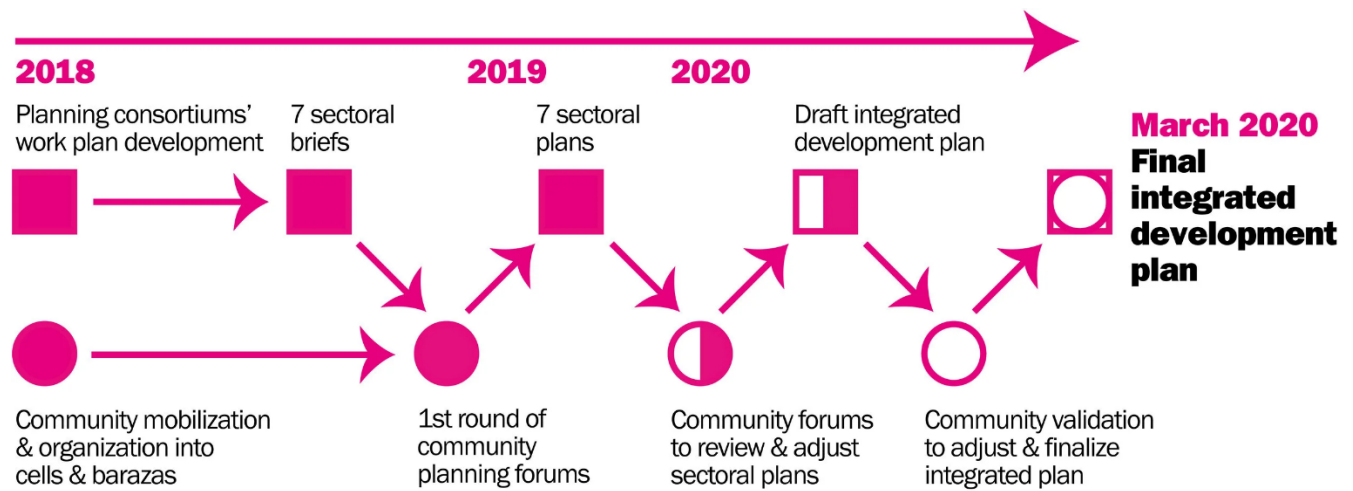


Using reform coalitions to catalyse inclusive reform in Nairobi

Reform coalitions in Nairobi bring communities, researchers and government together to tackle informal settlement challenges and drive inclusive urban reform.



Mukuru Special Planning Area (SPA) Planning Process

1. Overview and Purpose

Like many urban centres across Africa, Nairobi has experienced rapid, unplanned urbanisation that has outpaced the rates of infrastructure development and economic growth. Despite being a national and regional powerhouse, Nairobi has a host of urban development challenges, including inadequate infrastructure networks, limited government responsiveness to citizens and fragmented planning initiatives.

Building on longstanding networks and initiatives to improve Nairobi's informal settlements, the African Cities Research Consortium has nurtured a variety of reform coalitions in the city, using action research to generate new evidence that helps catalyse inclusive urban reform.

This approach is proving effective across several complex urban issues including:

- The city-wide scaling up a simplified sewer initiative in informal settlements, which is already drastically reducing cholera rates in the Mukuru.
- Success in Mukuru has also created a follow up coalition, now focused on regenerating the river that runs through the settlement (where sewage was previously dumped), as part of the Nairobi Rivers Commission.
- In Mathare, careful mapping combined with community engagement is enabling residents to gain land titles and tenure security.

Similar progress is being made within other African cities where this approach is being applied, highlighting a distinctive role for researchers and universities to support urban reform.

2. Urban Context and Structural Challenge

As Kenya's economic and political capital, Nairobi has played a pivotal role in development across several scales. From 2013-2020, Nairobi contributed nearly 28% of the national economy's total Gross Value Added. The city is a major hub for trade and business networks, both in Kenya and East Africa more generally.

As a consequence, the city has expanded rapidly and currently occupies five times more land than it did in 2005. Colonial legacies, exclusionary planning, coupled with opaque land governance and shortfalls in affordable housing delivery, have led to most Nairobians being accommodated in low-quality rental shacks and tenements.

In the face of Nairobi's ongoing spatial and population growth, formal infrastructure networks are often unable to meet residents' growing demand. State provision is often eclipsed by non-state alternatives that are typically tenuous, hazardous and/or unaffordable. For example, the public sewer network only covers 51% of Nairobi's population. In most informal settlements, the gap is filled by pit latrines that fill up quickly and are manually emptied, with the raw faecal waste dumped into local rivers. Residents are charged high fees for accessing the few pay-per-use toilets that exist.

This is a similar situation to many towns and cities across Africa and beyond, where rapid urbanisation is overwhelming the ability of city authorities to provide basic services to the majority of residents – jeopardising progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Project Approach and Delivery Model

While recent activities have been funded via the African Cities Research Consortium, the success of this approach rests on the long term, trusting relationships and networks that have been built over many years.

The upgrading of the Mukuru settlement provides a useful illustration. The local community, organised by Muungano wa wanavijiji (affiliated to Slum Dwellers International) worked closely with several academics based in Nairobi, the UK and US to research a range of critical issues within the settlement. Subsequent engagement with Nairobi City County Government saw Mukuru declared as a special planning area in 2017, enabling upgrading plans to be developed in conjunction with the community and other experts. As a result, services began to be delivered, starting with roads and water kiosks. Work on a simplified sewer system followed and its successful deployment provided a model for the other settlements. Now sewage is no longer dumped in the Ngong river, the community is working with the Nairobi Rivers Commission to regenerate the river corridor.

The progress in Mukuru has been based on an urban reform coalitions approach. Reform coalitions work on bringing together a broad range of motivated urban reformers to identify local priorities. These include community groups, local government, businesses, and researchers. They can be formal or informal and create a space for dialogue between different groups to identify common priorities and solutions. Researchers and academics often play a vital role in compiling data, validating community perspectives, and knowledge and convening local officials and planners.

As part of this coalition, action research has been effective for creating a process that brings different groups together, generating evidence that leads to better decision making, as well as piloting different approaches to contentious issues. In Mukuru, action research was used to test and establish effective local governance mechanisms to oversee the installation and maintenance of sewers. Having created, validated, and documented a robust system, this could then be used as a template for similar interventions across the city.

A reform coalition approach stresses the importance of locally embedded, systemic reform, rather than individual projects delivered by development agencies. The importance of local actors in leading the process results in genuine ownership from both communities and city authorities. While international researchers and organisations can play a useful support role, the aim is to create a more sustainable local network of urban reformers to direct and fund development interventions.

4. Transferable Insights

The urban reform coalition approach has been an effective approach in both Nairobi and across other cities, both north and south.

It plays to the strengths of researchers and universities, enabling them to use their convening power to bring often disparate stakeholders together into productive dialogue. Follow up research can then be focused on the specific needs of the coalition and both the process of conducting it, as well as the final results which can help to secure inclusive urban reform, particularly in informal settlements. It enables communities to use their knowledge and can improve relationships with officials, creating locally led, long term movements for change. Many researchers are already operating in this manner, but don't always recognise, or fully value it themselves.

Despite their potential, mobilising urban reform coalitions isn't straightforward and doesn't guarantee success. Gathering a reform coalition together in the first place can be difficult, often takes time and is unlikely to be a neat,

linear process. Building trust is vital and this can easily be lost by the actions of those within, or beyond the coalition. There's also a tendency to want to formalise coalitions, but this may not always be the most effective path in a particular context. Some seed funding is often useful to bring coalitions together and maintain their momentum.

5. Key Lessons

Key transferable lessons include:

- Urban reform coalitions can provide an effective way for researchers to effectively contribute towards inclusive reform, via convening and producing evidence to move issues forward.
- Reform coalitions can take several forms, from small informal groupings to large, formal networks. Different approaches can be effective for particular issues and depend on political contexts.
- While they can require a significant up-front investment in time and progress isn't guaranteed, they can create the potential for long term, sustainable and embedded reforms.
- They can be particularly useful around contentious political issues in urban areas where dialogue is required to build trust and alignment between a wide variety of stakeholders.

This Case Study was prepared by Mr Chris Jordan, Impact Manager, University of Manchester, United Kingdom, by way of contribution to the work of the CSCC Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group, 10 February 2026.



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