

## **PLANNING THE SUSTAINABLE CITY: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF URBAN GROWTH IN ZANZIBAR**

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### **Summary**

Zanzibar is one of the smallest participants in the United Nations Sustainable Cities Program. As Zanzibar is a relatively compact urban area with just over 200 000 residents and without substantial industrial pollutants, the task of making it “sustainable” would appear at first pass to be fairly uncomplicated. Zanzibar benefits from a significant government commitment to environmental policy and planning. Yet the city’s growth and environmental fallout from it have outpaced the capacity of policy makers and planners. This paper presents findings from a decade of research on planning in Zanzibar. The author’s empirical focus is on one sphere where environmental sustainability and urban growth often clash: peri-urban land control. The sustainability of Africa’s urban future depends upon expanding economic growth in secondary cities like Zanzibar whilst at the same time strengthening environmental planning capacity. This case study provides a valuable lens onto the Sustainable Cities Program as a vehicle for articulating that balance between development and environment.

### **1. Introduction**

Since the environmental summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, an upsurge of interest in relationships between urban development and environmental protection is evident. The implications of many interconnections have yet to be fully scrutinized in contexts of structural adjustment and the struggle for democracy in Africa. On the one (structurally-adjusted) hand, planners are being asked to create and implement urban settlement guidelines which promote development and private investment. On the other (environmentally-sustainable) hand, the Green Agenda of many donor nations means

that these pro-growth policies must respect environmental restrictions on industrial, commercial or residential site development, and environment-friendly land-use plans which include participatory development components.

One weakness of environmental sustainability discourse is that political-economic dimensions of green policies often take a back seat to techno-managerial language. The real struggles of balancing urban development needs with environmental protection—set as they are in the crossfire of two powerful development discourses—are more complex and difficult than the doctrinal language of global directives suggests. Analysis that takes simultaneous account of the political economy and the environment within urban development issues is hard to accomplish, but appears to be urgently needed.

The regional political ecology approach in development geography can be quite useful in providing integrated analysis of interdependent factors. Regional political ecology argues for consideration of environmental degradation within its historical, political and economic context as well as its ecological one. To date, this approach has rarely been applied in urban African settings. Using Zanzibar's Sustainable Cities Program as an empirical backdrop, the author attempts to open up ground for a political-ecological approach to urban development, albeit for the moment concentrating on political economy. The complexities of interrelationships between the global discourses on economic growth, political transition and environmental protection in their national context of Zanzibar are graphically demonstrated in the local relationships within Zanzibar's Sustainable Cities Program.

Zanzibar is quite representative of the urban sustainability challenges faced in the developing world, especially by secondary cities whose problems, though equally daunting, receive much less scholarly or donor attention than those of the developing world's mega-cities. The author argues that the outcomes of ostensibly sustainable urban policies depend on at least three intertwined issues that are more political-economic than environmental. These issues are labeled *flexibility*, *political will* and *public cost effectiveness*. Flexibility here implies a state agency's capacity for adjusting urban environmental policies over time and space to fit diverse circumstances and local forces. Political will rests on that agency's uncertain capacity for, and willingness to take, autonomous actions in the interests of the private sector, the popular majority and the environment at the same time. Public cost effectiveness refers to how the financial costs and benefits, including *indirect* or *hidden* costs and benefits, are distributed amongst the state, aid agencies, the private sector and the general population. Zanzibar's Sustainable Cities Program (known locally as the Zanzibar Sustainable Program, or ZSP) has a mixed result in its early implementation, largely due to the limitations on flexibility, the inconsistency of political will, and the inequity of cost-benefit distribution that adheres to the program and the state around it.

In the section that follows, the author analyzes the meanings imparted to the phrase “environmental sustainability” in urban planning contexts tied to the Sustainable Cities Program, prior to introducing the ZSP. He then presents the land control issue in Urban-West Region of Zanzibar as a question of environmental sustainability to be addressed via the ZSP. This empirical focus evidences the centrality of flexibility, political will and public cost effectiveness in creating workable approaches to environmental

sustainability in developing-world urban planning, and the challenges that face the ZSP due to these three central dynamics.

## **2. The Sustainable Cities Program and Environmental Sustainability**

The phrase “sustainable development” has come to have many meanings since its global emergence with the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. In the development arena, various agencies have interpreted this often politically useful two-word phrase in a manner consistent with what the agencies’ sponsors or constituency groups wish. For instance, donors often speak of a development project as *sustainable* if it is deemed likely to outlive the contracts of expatriates assigned to it. The Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements and its Habitat Agenda declares that the “sustainability of human settlements entails their balanced geographical distribution... promotion of economic and social development, human health and education, and the conservation of biological diversity... and maintenance of cultural diversity.... at standards sufficient to sustain human life and well-being for future generations.”

The assumptions and suppositions in the Habitat Agenda, by no means all of which are to be found in this quotation, are an extremely tall order found in various forms throughout the sustainability literature. Most globally influential texts of sustainable development are, like the Habitat Agenda, not very clear on how these vague notions can be operationalized. This is partly for diplomatic reasons and partly because vagueness reduces the potential sting of commitments. The Habitat Agenda’s “commitments” are notably lacking in commitments to assistance and partnership packages whereby donor countries might be expected actually to deliver on the finances necessary to ensure adequate shelter for all, enable participation, or any number of other worthy Habitat Agenda goals.

The Habitat Agenda declares that sustainable development planning for human settlements should be carried out “as set out in Agenda 21 and related outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.” Agenda 21’s Chapter Seven, which addresses “Environmental Sustainability for Human Settlement Management”, ought therefore to be the lodestar for charting a course toward sustainability. It concentrates on eight categories of objectives, from “providing adequate shelter for all” to “promoting capacity building for human settlements development”. More than forty policy recommendations are included as ideal means for achieving the eight desired objectives. The objectives and policy directives are complexly interwoven, so much so that one can see points that come close to contradicting one another.

Cities which are actually working to enact Agenda 21-type policies evidence the fact that economic factors and the political-bureaucratic cultures implementing the policies have enormous importance to policy outcomes. The Sustainable Cities Program (SCP) begun in 1990 by UNCHS (United Nations Center for Human Settlements) and UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) has worked hard to develop practicable policies in its pilot cities, including Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The SCP is seen by its supporters as a practical means for responding to the desire for sustainability in urban development

whilst working toward inter-agency cooperation. In spite of its pragmatic bent, SCP has in most cities inevitably become caught up in the sweep of local and national political intrigue. Its successes, even its survivability, in many cities seem to depend on the program's own flexibility, whether political will gets behind it, and its cost-effectiveness. All six weaknesses which Halla sees in Dar es Salaam's urban sustainability project, for example, relate to the political and economic contexts of implementation, whether through an erosive bureaucracy, a meager funding base, an absence of popular support or an inability to get the powers that be on board.

Ultimately, the SCP in most African contexts, as an agency of government, will depend upon the degree of what Peter Evans calls "embedded autonomy" that is either afforded to it or it is able to create for itself. To Evans, "embedded autonomy depends on an apparently contradictory combination of Weberian bureaucratic insulation with intense immersion in the surrounding social structure." In such circumstances, a bureaucratic institution is capable of developing the relative autonomy necessary to decision-making whilst at the same time gaining legitimacy via its selective engagement with—indeed its embeddedness in—civil society. Samatar has shown how this embedded autonomy developed for the Botswana state and helped create that country's remarkable economic performance. The Zanzibar state, and its Zanzibar Sustainable Program, are far from the achievement of this embedded autonomy.

Nonetheless, rather than a total retreat of government involvement or decentralization of control, the Sustainable Cities Program in Zanzibar may be seen as an attempt to re-root and re-legitimize the Zanzibar state in the sphere of urban planning via more effective organization and coordination. Although the Government of Zanzibar's Department of Urban Planning and Surveys had initiated discussions with the United Nations as early as 1995 for Sustainable Cities Program affiliation, the Zanzibar Sustainable Program (ZSP) officially began only in 1998. Tiny Zanzibar is already crowded with government agencies with overlapping responsibilities and competing agendas. The ZSP thus declared its chief goal to be to "improve urban planning and management in Zanzibar through better coordination among different organizations and participation of all major stakeholders" in the urban environment.

It is easy and perhaps convenient to dismiss the ZSP, and much of the SCP worldwide, as a discursive tactic in the global game of green development. The author prefers to see much more at work. The ZSP exists as a performance or representation of sustainability planning to would-be donors or investors, and in this sense it is indeed a discursive tactic. Yet it is also an institution-building strategy that is constantly evolving both within the Zanzibar state and in the wider social formation. In keeping with the spirit of the UNCHS Habitat II conference organizers, the ZSP is part of the effort to prioritize urban issues and urban-rural interactions within the national development agenda. This means it seeks a framework for both managing urbanization and improving (the) living environment. Since there is no room in a short essay for complete analysis of how the ZSP might end up addressing all eight Agenda 21 goals for sustainable human settlement management, this paper concentrates on the urbanization of land, arguably the city of Zanzibar's most pressing environmental issue. Land control is also the environmental issue wherein the ZSP and the broader SCP goal of "inter-agency cooperation" come under fire from all sides.

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### Biographical Sketch

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