

## EDITORIAL

# Nonprofits and Social Enterprises as Vehicles for Participation and Resilience in African Megacities

Africa's urban transformation is among the most consequential demographic processes of the twenty-first century. By 2050, the continent's urban population is projected to more than double, and cities such as Lagos, Kinshasa, Nairobi, Cairo, and Johannesburg will absorb hundreds of millions of new residents into landscapes already marked by infrastructural deficit, spatial inequality, and institutional fragility. Yet for all the attention that urbanisation commands in global development discourse, one dimension of this transformation remains remarkably under-researched: the role of nonprofit organisations, social enterprises, and civic engagement as governance resources, service delivery mechanisms, and instruments of community resilience in African megacities. The scholarly literature on civil society and social entrepreneurship has been overwhelmingly generated in and about the countries of the global North, principally the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe, where rich traditions of associational life, stable philanthropic ecosystems, and generous research funding have sustained decades of inquiry. In Africa, this strand of research remains in its infancy, constrained not by a shortage of civic innovation on the ground but by the persistent failure of the established scholarly community and its funders to recognise African civil society as a site of analytical and practical significance.

This special issue of the *International Review of Philanthropy and Social Investment* seeks to redress that imbalance. It presents a curated collection of articles that are the direct outcome of the collaborative African-German project "Resilient Urban Communities: Social Enterprises and Nonprofits as Service Providers and Vehicles for Participation in African Megacities" (RUC). Funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), the RUC project was governed through a consortium of six universities spanning three continents: Münster University, Bauhaus University Weimar, and Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences in Germany; the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and Strathmore University, Nairobi, in Africa; and the American University in Cairo. Within this consortium, the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI) at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Institute for Political Science (IfPol) at Münster University assumed leading and coordinating roles.

The RUC project was deliberately designed as a three-pillar undertaking encompassing empirical research, doctoral education, and scholarly networking. Its research objectives were twofold: first, to identify the key parameters of a supportive ecosystem for nonprofits and social enterprises operating in deprived urban communities; and second, to investigate the specific mechanisms through which these organisations contribute to the resilience of local neighbourhoods in African megacities. The education and networking pillar comprised a series of international conferences and adjunct doctoral seminars held in Johannesburg, Nairobi, and Cairo, which brought together emerging scholars from across the continent, with strong representation from sub-Saharan Africa, alongside established researchers and practitioners

committed to the proposition that civic engagement, nonprofit organisations, and social enterprises constitute the indispensable infrastructure of civil society, and that this infrastructure is a necessary precondition for economic development, social cohesion, and democratic governance in Africa's rapidly growing cities.

We wish to record our gratitude to the RUC partners who made this work possible: Prof. Ateya and Dr. Wachira at Strathmore University, Kenya, and Prof. Awni and Kareman Shoair at the American University in Cairo, whose intellectual commitment and logistical support sustained the project throughout its duration. The conferences and doctoral seminars offered emerging scholars an invaluable opportunity to sharpen their research, exchange ideas across disciplinary and national boundaries, and, most importantly, to contribute to the formation of a self-sustaining community of African scholars and practitioners in civil society and nonprofit studies.

The articles assembled in this special issue were selected and refined through a rigorous three-stage process: an open call for papers and initial screening, an intensive author's workshop hosted by Strathmore University, and a final peer-review cycle. With one exception, each contribution emerged from the intellectual ecosystem of the RUC project, either from its empirical research programme or its doctoral seminar series. Together, the articles demonstrate both the scholarly yield of sustained African-European research collaboration and the analytical richness that African urban contexts offer to the social sciences.

Divine Atinyo and George Tweneboah open the volume with a systematic bibliometric mapping of the global landscape of nonprofit research, with particular attention to nonprofits' role in social service delivery. Analysing approximately 280 articles retrieved from the Scopus database for the period 1990 to mid-2024, the authors lay bare a structural geography of knowledge production that is as unsurprising as it is consequential: research on nonprofits and civil society remains overwhelmingly concentrated in countries with established funding architectures and long traditions of civil society scholarship, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, while Africa features only marginally. This is not a reflection of the continent's civic landscape, which is dynamic, innovative, and deeply embedded in community life, but rather of the distribution of research funding, institutional infrastructure, and publishing gatekeeping. Atinyo and Tweneboah's contribution is valuable precisely because it renders this asymmetry visible and quantifiable. Their concluding recommendations, calling for increased investment in African civil society research, the expansion of international scientific collaboration, and the activation of underused civic potentials as avenues for building community resilience, deserve serious policy attention.

Crespen Ndlovu addresses one of the most pressing yet legally fraught survival strategies in African urban life: the cultivation of food on vacant urban land. His study of guerrilla agro-urbanism in Harare, Zimbabwe, illuminates a paradox at the heart of urban governance across the continent. Millions of residents in African megacities confront chronic food insecurity, yet the informal agricultural practices they devise to feed themselves, growing crops on disused plots, rearing livestock in peri-urban interstices, are overwhelmingly criminalised or at best tolerated in a legal grey zone. Ndlovu demonstrates that these practices are not mere survival improvisation but constitute a form of civic innovation with significant potential for resilient food production, if they can be moved from illegality into a framework of legal recognition, planning integration, and municipal governance. His case for legal reform is compelling and carries implications well beyond Harare: the formalisation of urban agriculture as a legitimate policy instrument could transform food security governance in megacities from Lagos to Lusaka.

The two contributions from the Johannesburg research arm of the RUC project shift the analytical focus to the ecosystem dynamics and resilience capacities of social enterprises in Soweto, one of South Africa's largest and most historically significant townships. Melody Mandevero

and Jacob Mwathi Mati develop a conceptual framework for investigating the social enterprise ecosystem, drawing on an extensive review of the literature on organisational ecology and resource dependence to identify the most significant factors that shape whether social enterprises thrive or founder. Their Soweto case study confirms what the theoretical literature would predict, that ecosystems matter profoundly for social enterprise viability, but goes further by exposing the specific deficiencies of the Soweto ecosystem, above all the absence of a stable, coherent, and sustainable public policy environment. This finding carries implications for policymakers across the continent: without deliberate investment in the institutional conditions that enable social enterprise, the sector's contribution to community welfare will remain contingent and fragile. The authors rightly call for comparative research across African cities and beyond to advance our understanding of how ecosystems shape social enterprise trajectories in different political and institutional settings.

Melody Mandevere, Tsele Moloi, and Roselyne Cheruiyot extend this line of inquiry by investigating a gap in the scholarly literature that is simultaneously obvious and under-explored: the nexus between social enterprise resilience and community resilience. Previous research has tended to treat these as separate domains, examining either how social enterprises navigate adversity or how communities build resilience, without systematically investigating the mutual dependence between the two. Drawing on face-to-face interviews with representatives of social enterprises in Soweto, the authors construct a multi-faceted portrait of this interdependence, showing that the fortunes of social enterprises and the communities they serve are structurally intertwined. The policy lesson is clear: interventions that strengthen social enterprises, through a supportive regulatory environment, access to finance, and hands-on training in management and administration, simultaneously strengthen the communities in which they are embedded. A combined policy approach is not merely desirable; it is a structural necessity.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue yield four overarching insights. First, Africa, with its extraordinary diversity of cultures, languages, governance traditions, and urban forms, provides an exceptionally rich and challenging terrain for comparative research on civil society, nonprofit organisations, social enterprises, and civic engagement. The continent is not a data-poor periphery awaiting Northern frameworks; it is an analytical frontier where new theoretical propositions can and must be generated. Second, Africa's megacities and their surrounding hinterlands offer the social sciences a wealth of material encompassing both long-standing communitarian legacies and rapidly emerging forms of social innovation. Third, social enterprises, as a constituent element of civil society, are not peripheral actors but critical agents on the path toward resilient communities, inclusive economies, and democratic governance in African urban settings. Fourth, the RUC project itself stands as evidence that sustained, equitable African-European research collaboration, built on mutual respect, shared governance, and genuine investment in emerging scholars, produces scholarship of a quality and relevance that neither partner could achieve alone. It has been a privilege to work with the scholars, practitioners, and doctoral candidates who gave life to the RUC project. Against the background of what has been accomplished, a series of productive conferences and doctoral seminars, a fruitful and genuinely collaborative research programme, and the formation of a nascent scholarly community in African civil society studies, it is regrettable that the institutional conditions for extending this cooperation on a more durable footing have not yet materialised. We trust that the quality of the work presented in this volume will itself constitute the strongest argument for the establishment of further African-European research consortia dedicated to advancing empirical knowledge, building scholarly capacity, and strengthening the civic infrastructure upon which the future of Africa's megacities ultimately depends.

**Guest Editors**

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