Ideological traces in Ghana's urban plans: How do traces get worked out in the Agbogbloshie, Accra?

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**ABSTRACT**

Neoliberalism, rights to the city, and sustainable development are systems of ideas competing for the attention of policymakers and citizens worldwide. Analyzing Ghana’s key urban reports, we produce a heat map of the intensity and fragility of ideas concerning the urban poor. We employ the Agbogbloshie informal settlement as a case study to explore conflicts among diverse planning goals: urban entrepreneurialism, environmental protection, formalization of parts of the informal economy, the reframing of citizenship, and settlement upgrading. Decongestion exercises, shack demolitions, and threats of relocation are strategies employed to restore order, but the settlement’s regeneration is beset by transience and piecemeal actions. We introduce hypocrisy as a theoretical analytical perspective to call into question pro-poor urban planning interventions as a way of responding to continuous ambivalent planning measures and framing. Hypocrisy prompts an alternative focus on inconsistencies and contradictions in the planning system.

“We’re awash in information, particularly when we’re undertaking a new initiative... Our job is to cut through the mass of information and make sense of it.” - Congressional Staff Member (quoted in Weiss 1989, p. 429)

1. Introduction

Upgrading slums and informal settlements is a priority for sustainable development. Despite the commonly held conception that informal settlements and the risks they are exposed to should be approached holistically (Meredith and MacDonald, 2017, pp. 1–9) most African countries’ development plans and policies are driven by an economic growth ideology and vision (Afenah, 2009; Carmody & Owusu, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2013a). Premised on “marketing the city to marketize itself” (Obeng-Odoom 2017, p. 7), most plans are underpinned by the philosophy that virtually all societal problems have a market solution (Meredith and MacDonald, 2017; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Against this backdrop, state-supported urban regeneration initiatives also have to contend with ‘the ungovernable’ and emerging structural dynamics of the twenty-first century that resemble ‘creeping urban apartheid’ (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 92) where many residents are regarded as unrecognized, illegal, temporary or severely marginalized in the locales where they live and work (Yiftachel, 2015). In essence, addressing concerns of the urban poor is susceptible to political contestations, requiring strong impartiality to counter such forces (Muchadenyika, 2015). A major challenge is how to embrace urban informality within an urban planning system which “is inherently technocratic, robustly bureaucratized, and manifestly modernist and has not responded adequately to changes over time” (Kamete, 2006 quoted in Muchadenyika, 2015: p.1). Scholars (e.g., Brown, 2006; Huchzermeyer, 2011; Lyons & Snoxell, 2005; Parnell & Pieterse, 2010; Purcell, 2002) have voiced strong criticisms regarding pro-poor planning interventions and tokenism, which are practically grafted onto extant institutional structures albeit highly contingent on local contexts. In the Ghanaian environment specifically, the planning turf is permeated by myriads of strategies, most notebale are neoliberalism (Obeng-Odoom, 2013a); Henri Lefebvre’s Right to the City idea (1968), and United Nations’ (UN) Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015–30) (Cobbinah, Erdiaw-Kwasi, & Amoateng, 2015), but their integration is far from straightforward. Both conceptually and in the formulation and implementation of specific policies, these ideological systems have variously gained traction and provided aspirations for the future city, yet there has been limited exploration to illustrate how various ideologies are distilled into practice. Indeed, their incorporation portends divergent and seemingly
incompatible tenets as efforts at urban planning happen and/or get resisted in particular places.

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap in the existing literature. To do so, we focus on an infamous informal settlement Agbogbloshie in the heart of Accra (discussed in details in subsequent section), the capital of Ghana. We build on planning literature that seek to explore the clash of rationalities between the planned orderly city (the norm in the Global North) and its informal; disorderliness (the norm in the Global South) (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b; Watson, 2009) and how these reflect planners’ creative deliberation and facilitation. Obviously, there are no ready-made solutions for African urban contexts but it is often taken-for-granted that planners and planning resolves this challenge. We consider this assumption as unsettled and explore whether planners manage to be pro-poor focused in all phases of development and concerned with poor stakeholder inclusion, improving the lives of the poor and considerate of social justice objectives such as bettering the lives of the poor. We assess the directionality of pro-poor emphases against the extent to which plans become overtly project-driven linked to neoliberal state policies. In theory, many planners might assume that the planning process can resolve the tensions among different theoretical approaches and produce a mediated outcome but African urban contexts are spatially messy and environments of deep difference where the vast majority are increasing marginalized living under conditions of informalism. We consider whether development interventions that are top-down or imposition adequately maintain a pro-poor focus in such environments and explore whether broader sustainability and equity issues may capture or escape local processes. Indeed, as Watson (2009, p. 151) emphasizes urban planning systems may be part of the problem “they serve to promote social and spatial exclusion, are anti-poor and are doing little to secure environmental sustainability.”

In practice, while plans have an important influence on the overall approach to urban land-use, they repeatedly fail to recognize informality and slums as permanent features in the urban landscape and therefore do not capture their speed and direction of growth (Olibhuis, Benni, Eichwede, and Zevenbergen, 2015). In real instances where these areas have been catered for, their plans are never supported by the level of capital expenditure necessary to implement their infrastructural projections (Cobbina et al., 2015; Obeng-Odoom, 2017). Consequently, most urban planning decisions and strategies implemented mimic the parameters of policy choices and actions that were little more than copies of the existing legislation and bylaws in developed countries. The increasing gap between existing planning approaches and growing problems of inequality, informality and rapid urbanization is especially relevant in African cities (Watson, 2009). Our paper proceeds in six steps. In section 2, we outline our research methodology and study site. We then sketch the contours of each of the policies, following Obeng-Odoom’s (2013b) lead to situate regeneration within an urban Ghanaian poverty context. Section 4 assesses how ideological traces get worked out at the national urban policy scale, and section 5 focuses on Agbogbloshie, shedding light on the paradoxes of regeneration, inclusivity, and sustainability. In section 6, we put forward the notion of policy hypocrisy and call for planners to engage inconsistencies and contradictions within policies instead of focusing on formulating new policies to signal an administration milestone.

2. Methods

We employ an exploratory approach to study the incorporation of traces of three ideologies into key national planning reports. National urban policies have emerged in several African countries in recent years (Turok 2015), Turok (2015) highlights increasing Ghanaian policymakers’ interest in steering urban growth through coordinated actions on land, housing and infrastructure. Such positive developmental arguments seem to be carrying more weight than the threats of disaster if squalar and social unrest are not addressed. Corresponding efforts in governance emphasize a commitment to improve the state of planning and move in the direction toward more multi-level integrated planning. While there is still a considerable gap between the ideal and reality of national urban policy anchored on cities as engine of economic growth and national development, there is now an acknowledgment of cities as arenas where advantage and affluence as well as peripheralization and poverty coexist. Given this new scaffolding, national policy documents provide a reasonable indication of the tilt toward urban policies in Ghana.

To reflect contemporary practice, we focused on documents since 2010, coinciding with Accra’s declaration as a “Millennium City” (a partnership among the Accra Metropolitan Assembly [AMA], government agencies, civil society, and universities to fill critical urban knowledge gaps). We undertook a discourse analysis to assess the operationalization of neoliberal, rights to the city, and sustainable development in major reports. Using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), we mapped the intensity of concepts employed in seven reports with respect to pro-poor emphases, situating and plotting these occurrences within their ideological contexts; that is, whether the pro-poor initiative is linked to neoliberal policy emphasis (e.g., formalization), a sustainable development component (low carbon growth), or a rights to the city emphasis (e.g., collective housing). We determined a priori the list of concepts employed in each of the three ideologies (50 concepts) and assessed their occurrences in urban poor contexts. In instances where could not make a determination of the ideological context we excluded these entries from our analysis. Results showed that neoliberal concepts are employed as the overarching framework throughout the reports (e.g. GOG’s (2015b) National Housing Policy (NHP) GSS’ Housing in Ghana (HIG) (2014); rights to the city principles are most salient in the National Urban Plan (NUP) (GOG, 2012), National Spatial Development Plan (GOG, 2015b), and Ghana Urbanization Review (GUR) (World Bank, 2015); while sustainable development is central to the Ministry of Environment Science, Technology and Innovation’s report (MESTI, 2013) but is not a core focus in other reports.

To shed more light on how ideological traces are translated into practice, we conducted 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants over the course of a year (2016–17): 15 planners in key government agencies (AMA, Town and Country Planning Department, Lands Commission, Ministry of Works and Housing, Ministry of Tourism and Modernization of Capital City, and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development; 15 civil society organizations working in Agbogbloshie (People’s Dialogue [PD], Slum Union of Ghana, Agbogbloshie Scrap Dealers Association, Old Fadama Community Development Association, Ghana Federation of the Urban Poor [GFUP], Informal Hawkers and Vendors Association of Ghana, You Caring, Green Advocates, Good Electronics, Closing the Loop, Agbogbloshie Makerspace, Yam Sellers Group, Tomato Sellers Association, Truck Owners/Operators Association, and Susu Collectors’ Union); and 10 area residents (3 opinion leaders and 7 residents; 5 women and 5 men). The purpose of the interviews was to collect varied and multiple opinions about ideological traces in informing practice and the planning horizon. Using satellite imagery, we also mapped in time and space the boundaries of the study area. We further utilized NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to process the interviews and assess ideological traces, and we draw on representative interviewees to illustrate socio-spatial processes.

2.1. Study area: The Agbogbloshie informal settlement

Situated about 1 km from the central business district (CBD), Agbogbloshie/Old Fadama is one the largest informal settlements in Ghana. It approximates a triangular-shaped area bounded by Abosey Okai Road, the Odaw River, and the Korle Lagoon. Settled illegally by migrants arriving initially from the north in the 1980s, Agbogbloshie has experienced several waves of in-migration, and via a gradual process of appropriation, settlers lay claims to an “urban commons” (Gillespie, 2016, p. 982). Fig. 1 shows the study area and the changing
3. Ideological multiplicity frameworks in time and space

3.1. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is broadly defined as a flexible, constantly changing program to advance capital accumulation (Afenah, 2009). In the globalization era, neoliberalism has increasingly become a hegemonic position in urban policies (Obeng-Odoom, 2013a; Purcell, 2002; Sager, 2014). Its core elements center on free market/trade principles, flexible labor laws, protection of private property, privatization, and deregulation. A market solution is the preferred strategy to handle virtually all economic and social challenges (Peck & Tickell, 2002), whereby the state takes an active role in securing markets and in producing the subjects of and the conditions for markets, but not to intervene in markets (Obeng-Odm, 2017). State marketing targets private capital with an eye to enhancing international competitiveness (Carmody & Owusu, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2017) and tourists (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b). Critics worry that this enables “accumulation through dispossession,” with dire consequences for low-income groups and those lacking political voice (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b; Oteng-Ababio, 2018).

Worldwide, the ways in which urban regeneration has been undertaken is a consummate expression of neoliberalism (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b). In the global north, regeneration typically seeks to improve an area experiencing decline (typically as a consequence of deindustrialization) and/or to improve social exclusion, housing, and the linkages between them. In Africa, however, Obeng-Odoom (2013b, p.189) contends that regeneration typically involves “slum upgrading and housing development” and “connotes a process of land redevelopment, and housing (property) renewal to improve (regenerate) people’s social and economic conditions.” Others (e.g., Gillespie, 2016) view regeneration as a policy instrument to modernize the predominantly customary land tenure system and as a tool to resolve central city urban congestion, largely a consequence of burgeoning informal activities encroaching on vital urban space.

In the Agbogbloshie context, urban regeneration appears to be a normative process producing divergent outcomes (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b). At one level, it promises urban regeneration via decongestion and the addition of more green space principally by relocating markets and residents to a new location at Adjen Kotoku (some 35 km from central Accra). On another level, top-down decision-making masks unequal power relations and magnifies social marginalization. While it is far from evident that Agbogbloshians enjoy full citizenship rights, neoliberal regeneration transforms existing articulations of citizenship to the benefits of global investors. As Afenah (2009, p.4) underscores, “Urban development policy increasingly grants substantive citizenship rights to owners of global capital that lack formal citizenship rights, whilst substantive rights are increasingly withheld from marginalized residents that have de facto formal citizenship rights.” In such circumstances, forced evictions occur in the name of urban regeneration and public benefit and embody one of the most sophisticated forms of marginalization and a clear removal of substantive citizenship rights (Afenah, 2012).

3.2. Rights to the city

The Right to the City ideology can be traced to Henri Lefebvre’s (1968) articulation of the production of space. At the heart of Lefebvre’s contention are two citizens’ rights: 1) the right to appropriate urban space and 2) the right to participate in the production of this space (Purcell, 2002). In essence, the Right to the City concerns the right to participate rather than the right to ownership of property (Lefebvre 1968, p.174). Two distinct rights to the city movements have re-appropriated and reinterpreted Lefebvre’s postulation. The first group incorporates formal top-down institutional approaches largely focused on the (re)establishment and protection of individual rights (in particular, human rights). This movement is spearheaded by the UN system in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and city governments to develop instructional frameworks to safeguard these rights and to increase participatory processes (Afenah, 2009). While the World Charter for the Right to the City was provisionally adopted in 2011 at the United Cities and Local Governments’ (UCLG) World Council, signaling an action plan for making cities more democratic and solidarity based through dialogue with citizens, ensuing debate about the rights to the city in the New Urban Agenda at HABITAT 111 resulted in a watered-down final document pertaining to a select few countries that already embrace the concept (Ghana is not one). Henceforth, rights to the city was demoted in line with other rights, for example, human rights.
The second movement is a broad group of scholars that can be subdivided into rights in developed countries (e.g., Duff, 2017; Harvey, 2008) and those that pertain to African cities (e.g., Huchzermeier, 2011; Gillespie, 2016; Khan, 2016). While Lefebvre's Right to the City was conceived in the 1960s and reflected the way the industrial revolution had transformed European cities spatially and socially, urban scholars have since engaged informal settlements and informality in Africa in the context of neoliberal pressures of competitiveness (Khan, 2016). While many Ghanaian policies espouse aspects of Lefebvre's ideas, it is far from clear how an exploration of a comprehensive Right to the City paradigm would work in practice. Collective self-help and financial inclusion of informal settlements is possible. For example, in Ashaiman, on the outskirts of Accra, Amui Djor Housing Cooperative is a successful, upgraded project that has planned and developed a three-story housing complex (see Gillespie (2018) for a more detailed discussion), illustrating that it is possible for low-income, ethnic minority settlers and civic partners (e.g., PD and GFUP) to bring government, UN-Habitat, and others to table. This pilot project was geared to enhance social inclusion so that skills developed by community workers during the project's construction could later be utilized for project maintenance. Despite Amui Djor's “best practice” (GOG, 2015a), this solution has not been replicated elsewhere in the city. Small expressions of NGO-community-led urban regeneration in Agboblobishie include a children's play center (You Caring, 2014) and an Accra Makerspace Platform seeking to improve know-how among e-waste workers and to elevate their status to “makers” (AMP, 2018). However, comprehensive radical transformation of local governance invoking “deep citizenship” (Appadurai, 2002; Mirafbash, 2017) that goes beyond the “partnership” discourse of the neoliberal urban agenda has not yet transpired (Nunobu, Korah, Cobbinah, & Foku-Boansi, 2018).

Many of the specific rights to the city agenda remain unsettled. Is it a fundamental or an incremental rights agenda? Some scholars (e.g., Duff, 2017) celebrate the license it affords activists, scholars, and policymakers to draw together otherwise disparate social, political, and economic concerns. Its articulation seldom goes beyond an urban critique to illustrate how urban rights are denied in particular places (Kuymulu, 2013). In Ghana, the constitution protects all citizens' human rights and freedoms, including “the right of non-interference with the privacy of one’s home as well as protection from the deprivation of one’s property” (COHRE, 2014, p.2). However, despite the constitutional protection of human rights and the ratification of international housing rights agreements, the AMA makes use of large-scale illegal forced evictions in the name of public benefit (Grant, 2006).

3.3. Sustainable development

After the UN General Assembly adopted the “2030 Agenda” (2015), which committed all member states to achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, sustainable development has become a preeminent development discourse (Caradonna, 2014). Four specific goals underpin the quest for sustainable urban settlements, marking a shift from the pursuit of development at the national level to the pursuit at the urban level. For example, Goal 11 aims to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” while Goal 12 supports “a strong national framework for production and consumption ... and adherence to international norms on the management of hazardous chemicals and wastes” (UN, 2015: 1). The latter is bolstered by targets, including the need to ensure access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services, upgrade slums, and enhance inclusive sustainable urbanization and sustainable human-settlement planning and management. Goal 16 also commits countries to “build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (UN, 2015).

Oteng-Ababio (2018) questions how these just outcomes are to be achieved, especially for cities where the pace of urban change is greatest, resources are most limited, governance arrangements are complex, and formal knowledge and data about how the city works in reality is patchy. Silling and Annecke (2012) contend that the social dimensions of sustainability (equity, participation, empowerment) are difficult to achieve, and when it comes to informal settlers it is very challenging to achieve full empowerment and inclusion. How to support just sustainable development and to assist urban planners facilitate this agenda is fraught with difficulties. How will those at the bottom find greater economic opportunity if pro-poor and environmental protection mandates diminish economic growth? Spontaneous urbanization, coupled with virtually nonexistent urban management, is only exacerbated in the informal settlement of Agboblobishie, where intensified challenges around environmental and social sustainability persist (Cobbinah et al., 2015). Fragile livelihoods and homes, zones that accommodate minority ethnic groups, and a disproportionate number of women participating in the informal economy are acute sustainability challenges (Obeng-Odoom, 2013a). Regeneration is always going to be a contested process: regeneration from some and degeneration for others (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b).

4. Multiple ideologies and planning in Ghana

In terms of scientific investigation, all plans have varying degrees of pro-poor emphases and suggested interventions. One way to illustrate the diverse ideas that target the poor is to map them, illustrate their theoretical origins and highlight the intensity of emphases and unevenness as a way of assessing the shift within the planning process from the phase of scientific inquiry into deliberation and plan production. In terms of the word count, approximately 11% of the total word count of all of the urban policies focused on the poor: the relative share of words for neoliberalism was 61%; rights to the city 23%; sustainable development 11% and 5% is non-classified as the association with an ideological perspective is unclear. Content analysis of the most recurring pro-poor terms is illustrated by a heat map visualization: it represents the intensity and proportion of key pro-poor terms and plots them along graduated ideological axes. Fig. 2 illustrates the neoliberal orientation of pro-poor ideas on the right of the map, and the rights to the city ideas are plotted along the left axis. The northern and southern ends of the heat map indicates the degree of association (high and low) to a sustainable development ideology. For example, a hypothetical neoliberal intervention that also pertains to sustainable development (e.g., a green market intervention such as a formal sustainable recycling center) would be plotted on the north-west portion of the map. We see a large spread of concepts and their associations, with some overlaps among the reports indicated by red shading. The intensity mapping shows a snapshot of the assemblage of key concepts and consistently employed ideas; for example, slum dialogue and improving infrastructure, particularly associated with bottom-up ideas like rights to the city as well as economic growth, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and engagement of the private sector to build low-income housing, all ideas intensely communicated in neoliberal contexts. Slum upgrading is also a highly featured term, but it appears in different contexts. It is mentioned in both rights to the city and neoliberal contexts by connecting upgrading to decongestion and controlling irregular urban development. Sustainable development appears on both edges of the heat map, indicating that the ideology can be associated with all-inclusive sustainable development on the left of the map or sustainable cities associated with neoliberal thinking on the right.

Apart from economic growth, slum upgrading, and slum dialogue, we expected more overlap and consistency among the reports. Several ideas (e.g., recognition of the informal economy, low carbon growth, and informal planning) are mentioned in one or two reports but are noticeably absent in the others. For instance, NUP suggests “mixing rental housing into slum upgrading” and “initiating regular dialogue between informal operators and the city,” but these ideas do not receive any subsequent attention. As Watson (2009) has noted, the failure to come to grips with informality, which is still treated superficially in...
planning reports raises the question as to whether planners are able to situate themselves in fundamental different realities and the nature of difference?

There is continuity of some ideas (capacity building, slum dialogue, participation of community in slum upgrading, infrastructure) as they gain traction, while other ideas receive intermittent attention (e.g., collective housing and private sector involvement in low-income housing). The most comprehensive and nuanced pro-poor emphasis is Ghana’s first-ever National Urban Plan (NUP) (GOG, 2012), which emphasizes attract(ing) and harness(ing) foreign capital support and inward investment and, at the same time, recognizes the role of the informal economy in terms of businesses, markets, and settlements. The NUP mentions “changing the official attitude towards informal enterprises from neglect to recognition and policy support” (18), “urban planning for informal activities” (18), an end to evictions, “support in-situ upgrading, and new forms of housing finance” (28), and the goal to “educate and create awareness for need for slum upgrading” (33). NUP’s official recognition of the informal economy signals an important policy change, reflecting core elements of the rights agenda and specific SDG targets for the informal economy; for example, SDG 8.3, “decent work,” “support for micro enterprises, including access to financial services,” and SDG 10.2, “to reduce inequality” and “empower and promote the social economic and political inclusion of all” (UN, 2015, 2). However, despite a multifaceted pro-poor agenda, the almost non-existent mention of civil society inclusion is surprising and its absence from subsequent consultation processes in preparing the Ghana national urban reports is quite alarming. Only the Ghana Urbanization Review GUR (World Bank, 2015) includes modest civil society participation in its draft report (via Cities Alliance but not homegrown organizations), while other reports do not include representatives of the urban poor at the consultative phase.

Official recognition of the informal economy has been greatly lagging given Hart’s (1973) seminal work on Ghana about the immense contribution of that sector. Mindsets about informal settlements as both illegal and unwelcome are deeply engrained. The NUP document stops short of elaborating how the ambitions of its informal economy will be integrated into existing policies. Its legal basis has been questioned, and some (e.g., Awortwi, 2015) regard the NUP as yet another important document for the shelf. In interviews, planners noted their limited access to coordination tools required to adequately “scan” urban policy terrains and acknowledged the eclectic nature of written plans as a reflection of their requirements to “address multiple constituencies simultaneously.” While many planners expressed a belief in their ability to act as strategic implementers, they also felt incapable of dealing with large informal settlements. One planner likened informal settlement regeneration to a “shell game,” whereby the weight of local responses

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Fig. 2. A heat map of content analysis of the intensity of pro-poor agenda in Ghana urban policies.
Source: Authors’ Own Construct.
and accorded discretions dictate the pace of policy action/inaction rather than the state/planners. Planning efforts proceed in fits and starts, sometimes drawing on neoliberal underpinnings, sometimes initiating a sustainable development initiative that was implemented but not mentioned in any of the planning documents (e.g., establishing the Agbogbloshie Informal Recycling Center). As Vogel (2015, 6) emphasizes “coupling of and striving for growth and environmental sustainability is a powerful discourse. People become enrapped in the propaganda and this seems to allow them ‘to kill two birds with one stone’ so to speak.” As a result, contradictions become subordinated and are revealed in the hypocritical character of goals: supposedly striving for both growth which lifts informals out of poverty and sustainability in the sense of creating more green jobs but what happens to those informals not incorporated into the intervention remains unexamined.

At other times planners react to grassroots activism with dialogue about joint action. The process has disconnected sparks of activity and longer periods of inactivity, so planners reported a weak sense of accomplishment with regards to slum regeneration. A major disconnect between national planning aspirations and planning practices is acknowledged. Although considerable advances in planning knowledge, capacity building (Nunbogu et al., 2018), and urban sustainable planning initiatives are being proposed (e.g., Ningo-Prampram Urban Extension), planners are cognizant that planning actions are inconsistent and sometime bear weak resemblance to legislative/policy frameworks (interviews with senior planners, November 2017). In the area of inclusion (the central tenants in rights to the city and sustainable development), planners worry whether conditions that enable civil society to engage in urban development and planning constructively and coherently exist. It also remains unclear as to whether policy prescriptions of shelter upgrading and/or relocation, poverty reduction and sustainable urbanization areas are as intimately related as prominent bodies such as UN-Habitat would contend.

Therefore, we surmise that the folding of different ideological traces into Ghanaian urban plans and the application of particular aspects to informal settlements produce a relatively amorphous blend whose outcome is both unpredictable and unsatisfactory for all. This reality contradicts Ghana’s President Mahama’s keynote address (Ghana Business News, 2015, p. 1) during his appointment as co-chair for UN SDG, when underscoring “SDGs could not be achieved by business as usual but require a new pathway.” What seems more alluring to officialsdom are shiny new projects (e.g., Airport City and Ningo-Prampram) championed by international development partners as showcase developments to enhance international competitiveness (Arthur, 2018). These kinds of developments incorporate a narrow conception of sustainable development, proposing more resilient, organized environments and arguably mimicking earlier modernization planning endeavors. Though many plans mention affordable housing, plans on paper that sketch nontraditional planning elements (e.g., social equity, informality support) are more difficult to translate into concrete action (Cobbina et al., 2015).

New and innovative ways to engage the active involvement of both the private sector and civil society are increasingly requested (Fuseini & Kemp 2015; Nunbogu et al., 2018). These go beyond earlier debates about whether planners should remain outside of the conflict, act as mediators, or jump into the fray to promote their own visions. Post-colonial scholars (e.g., Todes, 2011) would like to see the reinvention of African planning by treating informal sectors as complex systems, embodying multiple interests and spatial rationalities. Parnell and Pieterse (2010, 158) suggest “building interest-based coalitions across diverse institutional sites, which include the state, professions, NGOs and even selective business interests.” Nunbogu et al. (2018) recommend a complete repositioning of planners in policymaking, shifting roles from development decision-makers to facilitators of community-based initiatives. Calling for deeper change, Miraftab (2017) appeals for insurgent planning to disrupt the status quo and to liberate planning through a comprehensive understanding of social justice. Regardless of the extent of redirection, Watson and Agbola (2013) assert that the planning in African urban poverty contexts will not be reformed until the mindsets of politicians, donors, policymakers, and planning educators are rooted in more sophisticated understandings of marginalized citizens and places.

5. Paradoxes of regeneration, inclusivity, and sustainability—Agbogbloshie in focus

In 2000, a consortium of Arab aid agencies, a Belgian bank, and the government of Ghana attempted to clean up Korle Lagoon through a US $160 million initiative so that within a decade it could be turned into a tourist site (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2017, p. 1). A Ghanaian High Court, in a related but separate decision on May 28, 2002, issued an eviction order (on the grounds of illegality) that appeared to seal the fate of the informal settlement. This ruling went further than previous targeted sweeps that demolished shack but stopped short of widespread demolition; if implemented, however, it would dismantle the settlement. Civil society organizations—for example, Center for Public Interest and Law (CEPIL), PD, and GFUP, with international civil society backing (e.g., Center for Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) and Slum Dwellers International (SDI)—helped organize and channel community resistance and a shift toward dialogue. Eventually, this process led the community to be amenable to proper relocation in 2008. A stalemate has endured, and the trend over 17 years is recurring periods of eviction threats and demolitions followed by resistance and subsequent years of inactivity. Nevertheless, the community has had to survive various eviction episodes and threats (see Fig. 3 for a timeline since 2000).

Despite years of slum dialogue, a bottom-up solution has failed to materialize for Agbogbloshians. Indeed, the subsequent years illustrate that elite aspirations for incorporating the area into a Lagoon green space tourist attraction to augment new beach front real-estate projects (McTernan, 2014) and for undertaking extensive environment clean-up of the entire site (a consequence of settlement expansion, consolidation of informal activities, especially extensive waste accumulations, including food, e-waste, and other waste dumped indiscriminately) become more salient. Local and international myths peddled through the media that Agbogbloshie is one of the world’s biggest and most toxic dump (Blacksmith Institute, 2013)—which it is not—only serve to reinforce the call to clear the area. Civil organizations counter that a properly upgraded settlement could be accomplished to satisfy economic, environmental, and social sustainable objectives (interview, PD, November 2017). Periodic clashes between political party and between ethnic groups in Agbogbloshie have only added to tensions. To damn within-community clashes, the government has on occasion banned social gatherings and paradoxically reiterated “relocation would ensure stability in the area” (Adogla-Bessa, 2017, 1).

The Minister for Tourism and Modernization of Capital City in 2009 described, in strikingly neoliberal parlance, Accra (because of Agbogbloshie) as a defective city in need of “regeneration,” noting that “a modern capital should focus on the core CBD activities and must be safe, secure, and well-organized with attractive historical monuments and tourist sites, and provide adequate social amenities and public space for its residents and have adequate sanitation and waste management facilities” (cited in Afenah, 2009, p. 15). A senior planning officer hinted at a planned upgrading scheme for Agbogbloshie that will enable “private-sector developers [to] build high-rise mixed-use edifices to make the place safer, and secure – more attractive to big investors” (interview, October 2016). This kind of upgrading is not re habilitating by improving in-situ housing but rather state-facilitated regeneration that replaces poor settlers with those who can afford access to hotels, offices, and apartments in the CBD (Gillespie, 2016). Such actions, therefore, entail both private sector regeneration and degeneration by dismissing the poor’s place-making histories and knowledge, which have added value to a once-deferited “wasteland” that
now shelters and enables informal livelihoods, while the state remains incapable of providing for them (Grant & Oteng-Ababio, 2019). In neoliberal times, private interests, politically as well as economically, outbid informal enterprises and other interests.

Despite the NUP (2012) and NHP (2015) reports’ pro-poor assertions about informality, rights to the city, and inclusion, calculations about optimal strategies prioritize what is attractive to private capital to enhance the global competitiveness of the city. Ideas of social sustainability and equity are lost in the translation to policy action. Collective self-help slum upgrading appears unable to move “beyond isolated pilot projects” (Gillespie, 2018, p. 76). Instead, a coy municipality intends to dismantle the settlement by evoking, via media sensationalism, the area as a “nuisance” and “unsanitary, toxic zone” (Gillespie, 2016; Morrison & Davies, 2017). This kind of action epitomizes a Janus-faced state: on the one hand, wanting to save residents from being poisoned but leaving them jobless and placeless; on the other hand, satisfying rising private interests in valorizing centrally located land (Gillespie, 2016; Morrison & Davies, 2017). This kind of action epitomizes a Janus-faced state: on the one hand, wanting to save residents from being poisoned but leaving them jobless and placeless; on the other hand, satisfying rising private interests in valorizing centrally located land (Gillespie, 2016). Other municipal actions have compounded Agbogbloshie’s challenges: CBD decongestion exercises scatter hawkers to the area: a yam market has been relocated there, and the municipality has opened a temporary dump at the site (Grant & Oteng-Ababio, 2019). Efforts to disappear the poor (relocating hawkers, clearing pavements and streets, banning push-carts) engender poor residents’ perceptions that municipal exercises are “as pretext for profit” (McTernan, 2014, p. 1). The government’s policy vacuum on slum regeneration enables piecemeal reactions and inertia to prevail.

Agbogbloshie, therefore, remains intact as a poor, spontaneous sprawling settlement. Its inhabitants refer to it as “New York City, a land of freedom to pursue opportunity.” The settlement accommodates a wide continuum of informal worlds of work, ranging from very low levels of subsistence, such as caring for family/others, to informal entrepreneurs who have ascended into Accra’s middle class (in income terms), to many renting cheap accommodations, some for the purpose of sending remittances “home.” Some of the settlement’s informal activities are connected with both informal and formal industries: it assembles and leads in city-wide e-waste collecting, arguably providing a municipal service at no cost to the city, and recycling valuable metals, some for local industries (e.g., copper for Tema’s smelter), while also creating local ancillary “life-saving” and empowering jobs (Grant & Oteng-Ababio, 2019).

One resident, Ibrahim, a 32-year old male, epitomizes the sense of both belonging and dislocation that many Agbogbloshians straddle. Earning a living from renting property and recycling (middleman), he is also a part-time student at Accra Technical University. During our fieldwork, we were struck by his efforts to belong, having turned the frontage of his property, bequeathed by his parents (early migrants from the north), into a meeting place. At this spot, graffiti transmitted an emotive, democratic message—*Accra belongs to all Ghanaians*. Born and raised in the local Kokomba Market (yam), Ibrahim reflected on the home and place in the city:
Community interviewees elaborated on settler-government, resident-NGOs and resident-group tensions, illustrating complex micro-politics. Various victories are associated with participatory action; for example, the continued postponement of mass evictions, a settlement enumeration, the community and AMA joining forces to agree collectively to demolish makeshift houses, and 5 m from the bank of the Lagoon, as well as initiatives that discourage residents from defecating and dumping refuse in the water. Nevertheless, interviewees expressed dissatisfaction and disconnection from NGOs and their settler members, who pursue narrow agendas (e.g., opposing evictions, securing self and friends’ employment) and who repeatedly churning alarmist scenarios to mobilize the community but otherwise fail in advancing general community concerns (e.g., in-situ upgrading, preserving the informal entrepreneurship hub). Several community interviewees emphasized that there are no group advocates for the “symphony of silenced worker voices” who exist without rights.

Contestations in Agbogbloshie also transcend the environment and economic realms: there is a legitimate claim of a social use value to the land with historical basis. The Ga Traditional Council has made a claim to the land, officially acquired through Ordinance No. 28 of 1956 (Grant, 2006: 9), which also coincides with rising market value of prime land (Oteng-Ababio, 2018). Traditional leadership has openly supported evictions:

Yes, ... We are one spirit with him [the mayor] in his demolition exercise. ... Accra needs a sanitized and clean image that would mirror a true capital. ... If planners of the fifties and sixties found it convenient to zone the area [Agbogbloshie] for recreational purposes, why change it to a residential slum in the 21st century? (Nii Dodoo Nsakii, Acting President, Ga Traditional Council, quoted in GhanaWeb, 2014, 1).

A decade and a half after the eviction ruling, the settlement remains and has grown and consolidated into discrete areas of informal economic activities and residential zones as well as all-purpose mixed areas. Planning in and for Agbogbloshie is beset by transience. Neoliberalists have not created a green space and milieu attractive to investors, but the government collects local taxes (from food market vendors, taxi operators, and other firms), operates the small Agbogbloshie E-Waste Processing Center, and has secured US$15 million of German assistance to formalize e-waste, which was accompanied by a 2016 Ewaste Management Bill that further grants new powers to “search,” “seize,” and “control” to regulate e-waste (Grant & Oteng-Ababio, in press). In terms of rights to the city, the government has moved toward recognizing the employment contributions of the informal economy. Inclusion initiatives gained traction from grassroots action, and considerable civic initiative has been demonstrated as locals become more adept (with NGO support) at self-governance in spatial planning (Nunbogu et al., 2018), but a deeper rights agenda (e.g., right to inhabit) remains in an embryonic state. Groups within the community have registered successes in developing cordial relations with NGOs and various authorities. However, the community is exasperated by the government’s announcement that part of “the cash for area transformation is missing” (cited in Adogla-Bessa, 2017, 1). Moreover, little has been achieved in sustainable development, remaining nascent in the informal arena. In the meantime, residents are caught in a sustainability dilemma, whereby some actions contribute to a greener economy (recycling and reuse), while other actions (illegal dumping, encroachments, pollution) accentuate the urban management and sustainability challenge.

6. Discussion and engagement with hypocrisy

We underscore that it is impossible to disassociate professionals who are unbiased, value-free policy drafters and planning officials from the political regimes in which they are situated (Muchadenyika, 2017; Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2018). Drawing on the theory of organized hypocrisy, Vogel (2015) extrapolates why institutions often pursue contradictory agendas and why there are large gaps in written plans, planning, and actions. The hypocritical character of planning actions occurs because planners believe they are acting in the interests of the poor but specific interventions may actually achieve the opposite result. Organizations in need of external support (financial, sociotechnical, and legitimacy) from international organizations have to contend with aligning planning goals with international trends, thereby creating both opportunities and additional pressures in relation to their goals. Drafted by a process of consultation in Ghana (typically among various ministries, private consultants, and a few university experts, and on occasion with token civic society input), final policy reports are a product of various compromises, whereby priorities may shift according to “expert advice” and input. In addition, planning in Ghana has to be coordinated with traditional authorities (custodians of approximately 80% of all land) and guardians of cultural practices, such as rituals honoring bodies of water like Korle Lagoon, the provider of livelihoods in earlier times when fish were plentiful there (Grant, 2006). At the same time, Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen (2013) make the point that hypocrisy does not always have to be negative. Inclusion or eco-talk talk might be understood as aspirational and in a positive sense of moving the discussion of the poor towards a different framing, a transition that takes time and longer than the lifespan of a single urban plan.

Studies about the planning profession in Ghana reveal a dearth of resources, urban data is spare, human capital, (e.g., Ghana Institute of Planners’ membership is 300 professionals in 2018), and planning professionals trained to respond to complexity with progressive pro-poor approaches (Obeng-Odoom, 2013a), and the political climate to promote urban planning is weak (Cobbinah, 2017). As a consequence, planners react in a piecemeal fashion, often to immediate crises (e.g., floods), instead of acting within a longer-term, people-centered sustainable approach (Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2018). Meanwhile, planners are burdened with reconciling the details arising from various planning ideas. There is, of course, an inherent contradiction of planners’ impossible task of serving a government/municipality seeking to modernize the city with an eye to increasing its international competitiveness to attract investors with corporate-friendly decision-making, while actually pursuing the betterment of cities for their residents and dealing with the messy politics of including marginalized groups (e.g., Who speaks for groups? What is in the interest of the entire community? And, of course, there is the ethical question as to whether planners adequately engage with informal communities, given resource deficiencies compared to organized business interests who speak the language of planning and operate from a formal economy rationality.

There is an undeniable clash of rationalities between techno-managerial and a marketized system of governance and planning and the increasingly marginalized populations and spaces dominated by informality (Watson, 2009). For many, informality is associated with negative underdevelopment, poor aesthetics, and poverty as opposed to a more positive framing as entrepreneurial flexibility, adaptation and creativity. The hegemony of neoliberalism and the hopes that trickle-down policies and economic growth-led development will make the city more internationally competitive and eventually lift people out of poverty keeps pro-poor alternative policies in check. In essence, the ideological competition for framing plans and their substance where neoliberalism is hegemonic means that pro-poor threads are combined and that the plans rest on moveable ground when engaging the poor and informal spaces and commitments to economic, environmental, and social goals are all too often open to interpretation. As Ferguson (2011) contends we need to be skeptical about the facile idea that
problems of poor people can be solved by simply inviting them to participate in markets and enterprise. One-or-two dimensional advances can undermine another with complex feedback loops. Obeng-Odoom (2013, 197–198) reminds us that in urban Ghana contexts market-driven policies have led “to inefficient and inequitarian outcomes” and “it is wrong to assume that state intervention necessarily corresponds to attaining pro-poor outcomes as most state interventions end up opening spaces for formal market extension and thereby further strengthen the position of the elites.” At the same time, we need to guard against dismissing neoliberalism as ‘bad’ and elevating an alternative agenda as ‘good’.

We believe the Foucauldian approach to planning as not a theoretically derived line but a field of empiricism enables planners to engage in a “vast experimentation to decide which taps need turning, which bolts need to be loosed here or there, to get the desired change” for the poor (quoted in Ferguson, 2011, p. 67). However, presently the planning environment concerning Agbogbloshie is not open-ended and/or experimental enough but the neoliberal logic is at odds with the informal logic, and planners are thereby pursuing a hypocritical approach to engaging the poor. Paradoxically, neoliberalism has created an NGO revolution that enables many key government relations and responsibilities to the local poor to be fulfilled by NGO funded and local groups affiliated with international organizations (e.g., Geneva-based Center for Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) and Mumbai-Cape Town originating Slums Dwelling International (SDI) have strong ties to CEPIL and Peoples Dialogue). Battle lines have been drawn based on a pro and anti-neoliberal platform in this community. With the situation at an impasse, we ask, is another sort of pro-poor governance and planning possible?

Campbell (1996) warns against simple synthesis of the three ideologies. He argues that when two elements are combined, for example, the economic growth imperative and sustainability, it typically is manifested in allies consisting of the middle class and various proponents of sustainability against redistributive justice, the core claim from the poor. Urban planners’ multiple priorities (e.g., economic development, inclusion, sustainability) arise out of the complex interests of the contemporary African city, and these ideologies emerge from different historical origins, core values, and methods (Campbell, 1996). The rights to the city ideology draws mainly from labor and equity-planning traditions, community development, social justice, and activists’ movements; sustainability planning draws on environmental science, land-use planning, conservation, urban parks, green belts, and environmental/social justice; and neoliberalism draws on laissez faire, free markets, and an international theory of firms.

Our study illustrates how plans and planning are highly ambivalent and, when applied to informal settlement regeneration, are beset by intransigence and incrementalism. Heat mapping of intensity shows different assemblages of terms and their associations and both continuity and discontinuity. The Agbogbloshie case study and evictions timeline shows that ideas about dialogue have been adopted to some extent, but a panoply of other ideas are also present. The manner in which urban planning ideas, often lacking specificity, are incorporated into policy documents inadvertently produces a conceptual vortex, whereby separate ideas are appropriated by various and rival constituencies, producing an amorphous policy environment with considerable dissonance. Our concluding call is for a deeper appreciation of the inherent tension between urban policy documents that convey the policy process as linear, systematic, and democratic and implementation that is far less democratic, messy, contested, and dynamic. The tension requires planners to engage with multiple constituencies and to establish meaningful heterogeneous relations with informal settlers in socio-spatial initiatives thereafter. Planning in African cities is less transparent and organized than in the Global North and public deliberation and opposition are more unpredictable. Accordingly, a refocus on contradictions, ideological inconsistencies when approaching the poor and informality, and complexity in the planning process might be a more fruitful endeavor instead of continually moving along a plane that adds new opportunistic plans but fails to deal with existing realities. Positively engaging with informality should be the basis for planning.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2018.10.007.

References


