URBAN GEOGRAPHY Volume 45.3 / 2024

Urban Geography

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rurb20

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To cite this article: Austin Dziwornu Ablo (31 Oct 2023): Private cities, land, and the transformation of Africa's urban fringe, Urban Geography, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2023.2271748

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2023.2271748

URBAN GEOGRAPHY
https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2023.2271748

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Private cities, land, and the transformation of Africa's urban fringe

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effects of large-scale land deals for a private city development project in Ghana – the Appolonia City of Light. From the conceptual lens of accumulation by dispossession, the article sheds light on the new forms of urban inequalities that arise from this project. It is argued that land acquisition for urban development has exacerbated existing inequalities and transformed the socioeconomic, spatial, and institutional context of the community. The project is beneficial to multinational corporations who accumulate through "sweet land deals" legitimized by the state. At the community level, there is a centralization of wealth among local elites who brokered such deals to make economic and political gains. Conversely, livelihoods dependent on the environment suffer dispossession in various forms. First, the loss of farmlands creates livelihood uncertainties. Second, the commodification of communal land disrupts social relations and land tenure arrangements and exacerbates chieftaincy disputes in the community.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 18 April 2023
Accepted 9 October 2023

KEYWORDS
Accumulation by dispossession; private cities; urban transformation; land; Ghana; Africa

Introduction

Although African cities are projected to join global megalopolis by 2100 (Max et al., 2021), the patterns and rate of urbanization are often misrepresented and overgeneralized due to data challenges (Potts, 2018). The annual urban growth rate of 3.5% makes Africa the most rapidly urbanizing region globally (UN, 2019). The United Nations has projected that Africa's current population of 1.3 billion will double by 2050, with most people living in cities. Overall, the outward expansion of cities into their hinterlands is transforming the urban fringe. Goldman (2011) argued that peri-urban communities (located on the outskirts of cities) or the urban fringe (the spatial transition area between the built-up area and its rural hinterland) have become centers of world cities.

With some African cities growing at 5% per annum (Laros & Jones, 2014), city authorities struggle to provide housing, stable electricity, water, schools, and health care facilities. In Ghana, the urban population increased from 50.9% in 2010 to 56% in 2021. About 47.8% of this growth occurred in the Ashanti and Greater Accra Regions in the southern

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part of the country. A key character of Ghanaian cities is sprawling – the uncontrolled physical expansion of cities dominated by low-density and car-dependent communities (Ablo et al., 2020; Cobbinah & Aboagye, 2017; Nnaemeka-Okeke, 2016). A consequence of the sprawl of African cities is increased automobile travel, traffic congestion and pollution, loss of farmland, and duplicative infrastructure at high costs to society (Owusu, 2013).

The urban transformation in Africa is driven by multinational developers, businesspeople, urban citizens, and political stakeholders (Ablo, 2023; Ablo & Bertelsen, 2022; Eduful, 2019; Simone, 2020; Van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018). Urban areas have become arenas for capitalization and financialization, particularly real-estate development (Gillespie, 2020; Obeng-Odoom, 2010; Stein, 2019). The real estate sector entails gated communities that provide "serene", prestigious, and controlled residential spaces (Bandauko et al., 2021). They are often targeted at middle to upper-class urban citizens. The development of these gated communities often results in the privatization of public services, privatization of public spaces, spatial fragmentation, and accentuate urban inequalities (Bandauko et al., 2021; Ehwi et al., 2021; Grant & Mittelsteadt, 2004). The cityscape of Africa is also being transformed by the rise of ultra-modern shopping malls and office complexes (Bandauko et al., 2021; Watson, 2014).

Additionally, the urban transformation in Africa is also taking the form of privatized cities (Watson, 2014). Described as "new cities" (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019; Korah, 2020; Van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018) or "urban fantasies" (Bhan, 2014; Cain, 2014; Watson, 2014), private cities are large-scale urban development projects with privatized provision and control of infrastructure, planning, management, and regulation of the built environment. The overarching rationale behind these master-planned, privatized urban developments are partly aspirations to overcome the poor planning and infrastructure deficits in cities (Goldman & Narayan, 2021; Murray, 2016). Underpinned by modernist ideologies and market rationalities, these private cities are envisioned as an opportunity to engineer and properly manage urban spaces devoid of the bureaucracies and poor funding that public institutions face. In the Waterfall City in Johannesburg, Murray (2015, p. 506) observed that "the real estate developers who have planned this satellite city practice a brand of planned and highly regulated real estate capitalism where necessary goods and services are packaged as commodities and bought and sold in noncompetitive markets."

From Chicago (Cronon, 2009) to Dubai (Acuto, 2010), Jakarta (Hogan & Houston, 2002), to Singapore, experimentations with master-planned privatized cities are on the rise, and they represent aspirations toward urban utopia. In Africa, some private cities like Waterfall City in South Africa (Murray, 2015), Konza Technology City and Tatu City in Kenya (Splinter & Van Leynseele, 2019), and the Appolonia City of Light in Ghana (Fält, 2019) have been completed or are in various stages of construction. However, the rationale and impacts of these large-scale urban development projects are contradictory and thus require critical scholarly attention. These urban developments have been exclusionary (Watson, 2014), undermining the right to the city and the drive towards inclusive cities outlined in Goal 11 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). In India, Goldman (2011) noted that three mega projects, i.e. Bangalore–Mysore Infrastructure Corridor (BMIC), the IT corridor, and the Bangalore

International Airport and its surrounding development area (BIAL), are characterized by speculation and dispossession.

Scholarship on privatized cities in Africa has focused on aspirations and their adverse impacts (Bhan, 2014; Watson, 2014). Others explored elite stakeholder rhetoric that informs these projects (Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019), the role of government and global capital (Cain, 2014) as well as the failure of these urban fantasies (Brill & Reboredo, 2019). This paper is part of a series of works (Ablo, 2023; Ablo & Bertelsen, 2022) on privatized cities and contributes to the growing body of research on privatized cities and urban transformation in Africa, focusing on the Appolonia City of Light (ACL), a new private city under development, 20km north of Ghana's capital Accra. Situated on a hitherto communally owned land in the rural community called Appolonia, the ACL project is part of the process transforming the urban fringe. The central questions addressed in this paper are: what socioeconomic and political dynamics are instantiated by private city developments in Africa's urban fringe? How does global capital interact with socio-culturally embedded institutions and actors to produce new forms of urban inequality? From the conceptual lens of accumulation by dispossession, the paper highlights the dynamics of actors, the complex interactions, and the outcomes of private city development in Ghana. It highlights the role of chiefs, local elites, and informal institutions in the processes of dispossession. I draw on interviews with investors and community members, observation, informal discussions, and a review of relevant documents to show that the ACL project has exacerbated existing inequalities and transformed the community's socioeconomic, spatial, and institutional contexts. The unleashing of global capital for urban development commodifies communally owned lands to benefit multinational corporations who accumulate through "sweet land deals" legitimized by the state. There is also the centralization of communal wealth among local elites who broker the land deal for the ACL project. Conversely, community members whose livelihood activities depend on the environment suffer dispossession as they lose their farmlands. The commodification of communal land also disrupted the social relations and existing land tenure arrangements and exacerbated chieftaincy disputes in the community.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: in the next section, I briefly discuss the context of land tenure and chieftaincy in Ghana. This is followed by a discussion of background literature on accumulation by dispossession. I then outline the study area and data for the paper. Thereafter the study results and discussions are presented. The final section of the paper is a concluding reflection by suggesting the direction for future research on private cities in Africa.

Land tenure, chieftaincy, and large-scale land deals: accumulation by dispossession

Land tenure and chieftaincy in Ghana

Land tenure and administration across Africa are characterized by legal pluralism – the coexistence of multiple legal systems in land governance (Denchie et al., 2020; Kansanga et al., 2019; Swenson, 2018). The development of legal frameworks for land administration in Ghana since the colonial period has been piecemeal, ad hoc, and usually in

reaction to specific issues or political dictates. With over 86 overlapping and sometimes conflicting legal instruments (Larbi, 2006) existing alongside customary laws, land administration in Ghana is a quagmire of legal pluralism. Legal pluralism is codified in Article 267(1) and (2), recognizing customary land ownership and administration and setting up the Office of the Administrator of Stool Lands (OASL) to collect and disburse rents, dues, and royalties on stool lands, respectively.

About 78% of land in Ghana is held under customary ownership by stools, skins, clans, and families. The stools and skins are traditional political systems of authority led by a chief and council of elders (Yeboah & Oppong, 2015). The remainder of the lands in Ghana is either privately owned or state lands (Larbi, 2008). Ghana's state lands were compulsorily obtained by the government purposefully for administrative and development activities (Ablo & Asamoah, 2018; Gyamera et al., 2018).

Communal land ownership is grounded in the religious view of land as an ancestral heritage and a community asset. The chief serves as the trustee of stool lands on behalf of his people and can lease parts of the land. Communal land access is enshrined in the allodial title, the superior form of ownership generally managed by a chief, head of a family, or stool. All other rights relating to communal land are derived from allodial rights, and this right is vested in community ownership (Agbosu et al., 2007).

An essential aspect of the allodial title held by the community is the usufructuary interest, a recognized estate that can be transferred under customary law and is potentially perpetual (Boamah, 2014a). The usufructuary or customary freehold interest is the right of community members by first cultivation or allotment from the landowning group. Community members' freehold interest does not have a defined duration. Anyone who occupies a customary freehold land has the right to use it for economic activities but cannot take control of the stool/skin and the state's right to mineral deposits as articulated in Article 20(1) of Ghana's constitution (Gyamera et al., 2018). Custodians of allodial titles, such as a chief, cannot displace the usufruct rights associated with the allodial title as long as the usufruct holder does nothing to prejudice the interest of the allodial titleholder.

According to Article 267 of Ghana's constitution, "All stool lands in Ghana shall vest in the appropriate stool on behalf of, and in trust for the subjects of the stool in accordance with customary law and usage." The chieftaincy institution thus plays a vital role in land administration in Ghana. Chiefs' authority over the land includes how the land resource can be used and managed. Both the Chieftaincy Act of 2008 and the 1992 constitution of Ghana recognize chiefs' crucial roles in resolving disputes, community mobilization, and maintaining law and order within local communities (Knierzinger, 2011). Additionally, chiefs represent their subjects as custodians of the land when receiving royalties. They must be consulted when any land under their jurisdiction is to be used (see Articles 36(8) and 267(10) of the 1992 constitution).

As custodians, chiefs mediate between their communities and investors and, in some instances, take the role of development brokers (Boamah, 2014a; Knierzinger, 2011). Some chiefs act as the doorkeepers of large-scale land acquisitions, assisting investors, while others are sidelined by powerful members of the communities in land deals, often resulting in conflicts (Ahmed et al., 2018; Boamah, 2014a;

Nyantakyi-Frimpong, 2017). In the next session, I discuss the concept of accumulation by dispossession.

Related background literature on accumulation by dispossession

While urban development projects like the ACL can stimulate growth, they are often sites of a complex constellation of actors, mechanisms, struggles, and dispossessions that requires critical analysis. Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession is a useful conceptual lens to deconstruct the dynamics and outcomes of large-scale land deals for urban development. Neoliberalism transforms countries' social and economic spaces (Kashwan et al., 2019; Olajide & Lawanson, 2021). The implementation of neoliberal policies led to the withdrawal of the welfare state and institutional controls. These neoliberal policies increased commodification, reduced organized jobs, and increased the hyper-exploitation of workers with critical economic uncertainty (Yeboah, 2000).

Harvey (2003) contends that the core elements of neoliberal politics – privatization, marketization, and deregulation form the new rounds of accumulation by dispossession. Perelman (2003) and Jou et al. (2011) argued that primitive accumulation, which breaks people from their land and livelihood sources, is the genesis of the capitalist system. Marx (1976) argues that the fundamental aspect of capitalism is separating laborers from their means of production. "The so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it" (Marx, 1976, p. 508). Primitive accumulation involves employing an "extra-economic force" to create the condition for accumulation through transforming communal wealth like land into private capital while generating labor supply by creating a landless proletariat (Gillespie, 2016).

Like Marx, Levien (2015) views extra-economic coercion as the primary attribute of dispossession. However, dispossession is not considered the prehistory of capital but rather capital's ceaseless need for cheap access to land and other resources. Harvey (2005) sees accumulation as a purely economic process – a transaction between the capitalist and the wage-labourer. The central issue here is explaining how ownership changes in the course of accumulation and the process of commodity exchange transforms into exploitation and inequality (Harvey, 2004). Harvey used accumulation by dispossession to describe the altered rebirth of primitive accumulation. It entails alienating the rights of people and concentrating capitalist control over collective properties like land.

Some scholars (Aha & Ayitey, 2017; Boamah, 2014b; Edelman et al., 2013; Hall, 2011; Lavers, 2012; Obeng-Odoom, 2015) describe the large-scale alienation of land as a land grab, while others (Carmody, 2016) viewed it as the new scramble for Africa. Harvey's accumulation by dispossession best explains these large-scale deals often characterized by predation, fraud, and violence. Accumulation by dispossession involves "the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labor-power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption" (Harvey, 2003, p. 145).

Dispossession reflects the deprivation or eviction from rightful possession of property or land (Bennett et al., 2015). It is how land and other resources are enclosed and their previous users dispossessed for capital accumulation (Hall, 2013). The commodification of communal land to develop a private city in Accra will transform resource ownership. It is an economic process – the transaction between the capitalist and local elites.

While the process of accumulation initiates proletarianization by creating a poor mass who depend on wage labor for survival, such an outcome is not the original purpose of dispossession (Levien, 2015). As will be outlined later in this paper, capital only uses the land and resources of the people but does not necessarily require their labor power (Levien, 2015; Li, 2011). The creation of landless people remains a major characteristic of dispossession but has taken a different magnitude with the rapid urbanization (Gürel, 2019; Obeng-Odoom, 2015). The processes of such large-scale land deals entail deception and physical and symbolic violence. But as Harvey (2003) argued, the recent rise of dispossession made way for a "volatile mix of protest movements", which are not integral to the main struggle between capital and labor, rather a struggle against accumulation by dispossession (Freslon & Cooney, 2018).

In large-scale land deals, neither governments nor investors are interested in ameliorating the adverse impacts of dispossession on landowners (Krieger & Leroch, 2016). Consequentially, people's rights to land are often not protected. As Levien (2015, p. 149) notes, "regimes of dispossession are intrinsically linked to a state willingness to dispossess for capital investments that are tied to the interests of local and international elites. Additionally, states, in many ways, also generate compliance to dispossession."

Technically in Ghana, allodial title does not necessarily change but access to and use of land changes. Thus, in large-scale land transactions, people's access to and use of land are affected but not necessarily ownership of the land. Cáceres (2015, p. 117) argues that "dispossession does not necessarily imply changes to property rights; rather, it refers to the ability to gain "access" to certain resources. Access is defined as the "multiplicity of ways people derive benefits from resources, including, but not limited to, property relations", which becomes a key concept for understanding the power relationships existing between dispossessors and dispossessed."

Within the context of neoliberalism, accumulation by dispossession has created a "new wave of enclosure of the commons" through the "commodification" of public goods, changes in social structures, livelihood resources, and economic activities in the urban fringe (Bennett et al., 2015; Bin, 2018). According to Harvey (2012, p. 22), "urbanization has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses and has done so at ever-increasing geographical scales, but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that entail the dispossession of the urban masses of any right to the city whatsoever."

Accumulation by dispossession is the primary strategy for capital accumulation. It operates through a system of centralization and concentration of power, which finds its political, social, and geographical representation in the production of urban space (Moreno & Shin, 2018). Urban areas have therefore become ideal arenas of neoliberalism and entrepreneurial urban politics. Governments have pursued friendly policies toward investors and developers (Jou et al., 2011). The

land deal for the ACL project in Accra is among the increasing cases of people being displaced, mainly for transnational companies to gain access to land for private city development.

Study area and methods

Located 20 km from the central business district of Accra, Appolonia is a rural community off the R40 – the northward road from the Greater Accra Region to the Eastern Region of Ghana (see Figure 2). Currently, 91.7% of the Greater Accra Region is urban, and this growth is northward. Rural communities like Appolonia have become the frontiers of urban development projects in Ghana.

The preliminary report from the 2021 census showed that the population of the Greater Accra Region experienced a 35.5% increase from just over 4 million people in 2010 to over 5.4 million people in 2021. With a land area of just 3,245km^2, the Greater Accra Region has a population density of 1678.3, a 35.8% increase from the 2010 density of 1235.8. Overall, over 54% of Ghana's total population of 30.8million is concentrated in the Ashanti, Eastern, Central, and Greater Accra Regions (GSS, 2021). The growth in Accra's population has increased the demand for land for housing and other urban development projects.

In Figure 1 above, the built environment in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA) – (the functional economic hub of Ghana encompassing Accra, Tema, and

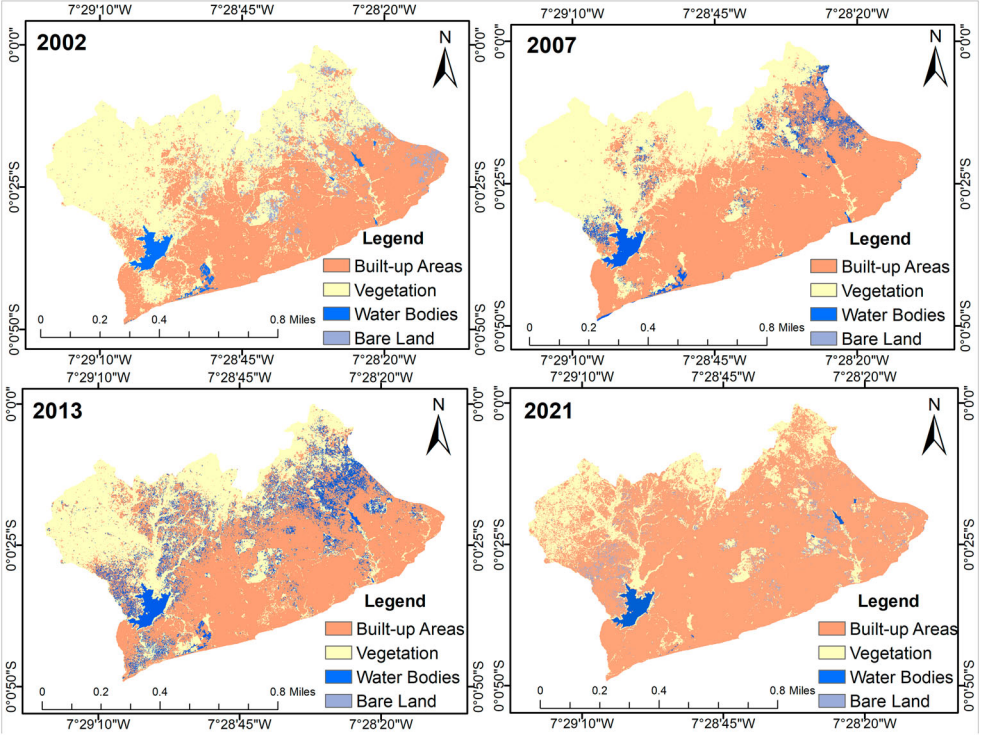

Figure 1. Land use and land cover change in GAMA. *Source*: RS/GIS Lab, University of Ghana.

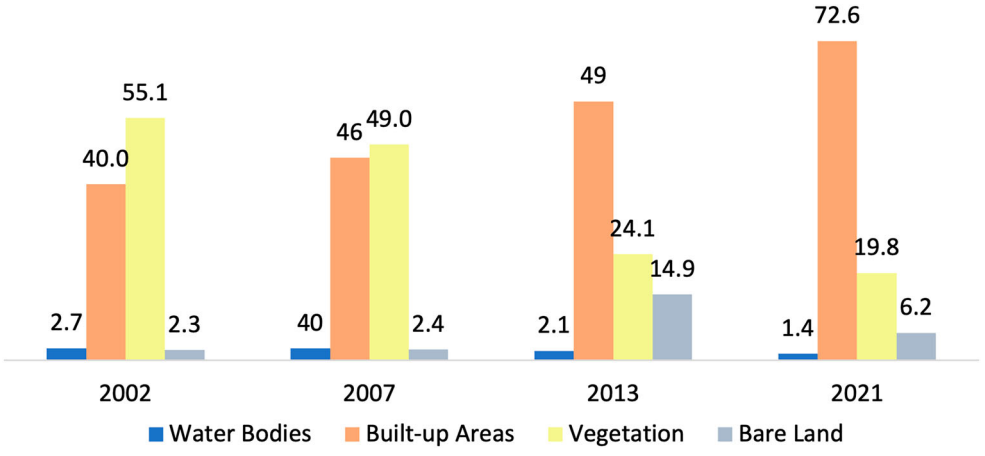

Figure 2. Rate of land cover change in GAMA.

its surroundings) has increased significantly between 2002 and 2021, while vegetation cover saw a significant reduction. From Figure 2 below, the built environment which was just 40% of the land cover in 2002 has increased to 72.6% by 2021. There is a corresponding reduction in vegetative cover from 55.1% in 2002 to 19.8% in 2021.

The 2010 census data showed that the population of Appolonia was 943, while the Kpone-Katamanso Municipal Assembly (KKMA), where the community is located, has a population of 109,864 (GSS, 2010/2014). From the 2021 census, the population of KKMA has increased by over 279% to 417,334, with about 94.6% of the assembly being urban. Agrarian livelihoods in the assembly are under severe pressure from urbanization. Beyond the ACL project, various small to medium-scale real estate developers and individuals are developing housing and other infrastructures in the KKMA.

This paper is based on extensive fieldwork carried out between June 2016 and January 2022. The long fieldwork was useful for identifying the actors and their role in the land acquisition process, peoples' changing views about the project, livelihood changes, and the evolving socio-cultural set-up of the community under neoliberalism. The field observation was conducted at the Appolonia village and the ACL project site. At the ACL project site, the observation focused on land clearing to construct and develop various housing units, warehouses, and commercial and office buildings. Field observation was also done in and around the village particularly sand-winning activities and high volumes of tipper trucks transporting sand to various construction sites (Figure 3).

Fifteen (15) officials of Appolonia Development Company Limited (ADCL), the company executing the ACL project, were interviewed. The officials included project managers, the chief executive officer, estate managers, engineers, and sales representatives. The issues discussed are the motivation to develop a private city, the scope of the ACL project, funding mechanisms, land acquisition process, conflict relating to the land, and compensation payment. Additionally, four officials of KKMA were also interviewed on the role of the assembly in planning the project, permits, and their views on land conflicts. At the community level, key informants such as the assembly member, 15

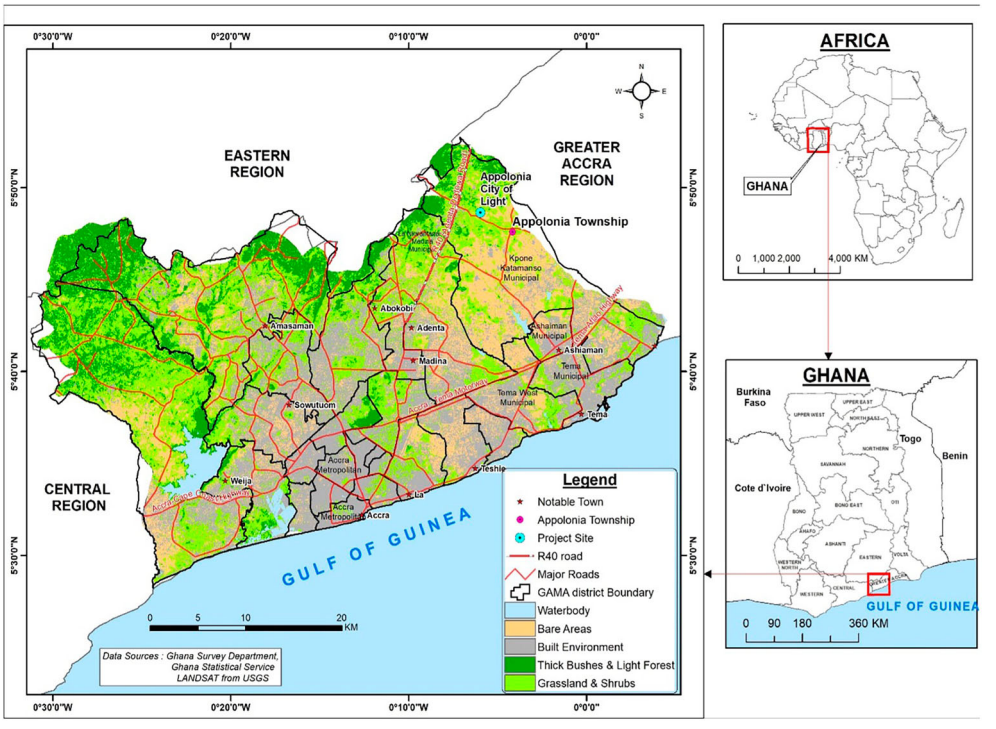

Figure 3. Kpone Katamanso Municipal Area (KKMA). *Source*: RS/GIS Lab, University of Ghana.

community leaders from the various clans, the traditional council and opinion leaders were interviewed. The issues broached are the land acquisition and compensation, distribution of benefits from the lease of land for the ACL project, land disputes, chieftaincy and livelihood changes. Some residents and investors in the ACL were also interviewed on their motivation for investing and their experiences.

Sixty (60) community members consisting of 26 women and 34 men were interviewed. People shared their living experiences with livelihood changes that have taken place due to the ACL project. Other issues discussed are land disputes, chieftaincy, and the uncertainties that have characterized their lives. The discussions also centered on the benefits and implications of the ACL project on the environment and the youth. All the interview data were transcribed verbatim. I read through the transcript to identify and examine patterns and organize the interview data into themes.

Results and discussion

The Appolonia City of Light: an African urban fantasy?

Africa is the new frontier of various forms of urban experimentations, or what Watson (2014), Cain (2014), and Brill and Reboredo (2019) described as urban fantasies in the form of large-scale privately built and managed cities. The ACL project is a privately financed mixed-use urban development project executed by the Appolonia Development Company Limited (ADCL), the local subsidiary of Rendeavour.

According to their website, Rendeavour has over 30,000 acres of land (12,000 ha) under development in Africa. The Chief Executive Officer of Rendeavour is described as the pioneer of capital markets with over $200 billion in investments in Africa, Central, and Eastern Europe. A quote on the company website attributed to the CEO states that "*quite simply, we are building Africa's urban future*". Typically, Rendeavour's urban development projects cover a minimum of 2,500 acres with a 20-year investment horizon. While private sector participation in Africa has traditionally been in the extractive sector, there is increasing private investment in urban development. Multinational corporations like Rendeavour are leading these urban development projects across the continent.

The ACL project in Accra is a mixed-use development anchored on live-work-play – relating to developing a self-sustaining city to provide proximity to work, entertainment, and residence. Rendeavour is a prominent actor transforming the urban landscape in Africa through its mega-private city development projects. But like many such projects across Africa, the ACL project is futuristic, aspirational, and in many ways, fantasies of how African cities should grow (Brill & Reboredo, 2019).

In Ghana, the land acquisition for the ACL project was completed in 2011 when Rendeavour secured 2,325 acres (941 hectares) of land from the Appolonia traditional council. By 2012, the company had completed the registration process, effectively transferring the land from the community to ADCL. The registration of land by ADCL is the state's legitimization of the privatization of communal resources in private control. Land registration in Ghana can take two to five years or even longer due to cumbersome registration processes, high costs, and lethargic administrative processes. Conflicts stemming from multiple ownership claims and litigation (Asafo, 2020; Denchie et al., 2020; Ehwi & Asafo, 2021) make Ghana's land registration process difficult. Thus, the ability of the ADCL to complete the registration of such a large tract of land within a short period shows the level of power and influence global capital has and exerts.

According to a project manager of ADCL, "*We* [Rendeavour] *plan to invest $250 million to provide infrastructure for our clients. As you can see, we invested in roads, water supply network, sewerage and our electricity substation. Our clients must not suffer like the rest of Accra.*" Indeed urban water stress, poor sanitation, poor road networks, and unreliable power supply remain significant challenge in Ghana (Amankwaa & Gough, 2022). The ACL project is conceived as a self-sufficient city, "detached" from Ghana's urban challenges. Indeed in all discussions with project officials, they referenced the need to develop a new city that can project the fantasy (Watson, 2014) of "Western Style" living for those who can afford it. What is missing in these narratives and fantasies is how such an approach of building cities "for those who can afford," it undermines people's right to the city and exacerbates inequality and poverty (Figure 4).

The ACL project has different classes of residential enclaves. Between 2016 and 2022, Phase 1 of their "luxury" residential enclave, the Oxford, has been completed, although only a few property owners have moved in. Bijou, a less costly residential enclave, is also completed with a few residents. A third residential enclave is Nova Ridge which is supposed to provide ultra-luxury villas and has only two property owners living there. The fourth residential development targeted at low-income groups is the Wala (which in Ga means life) enclave situated at the edge of the project site but has not seen any significant development yet.

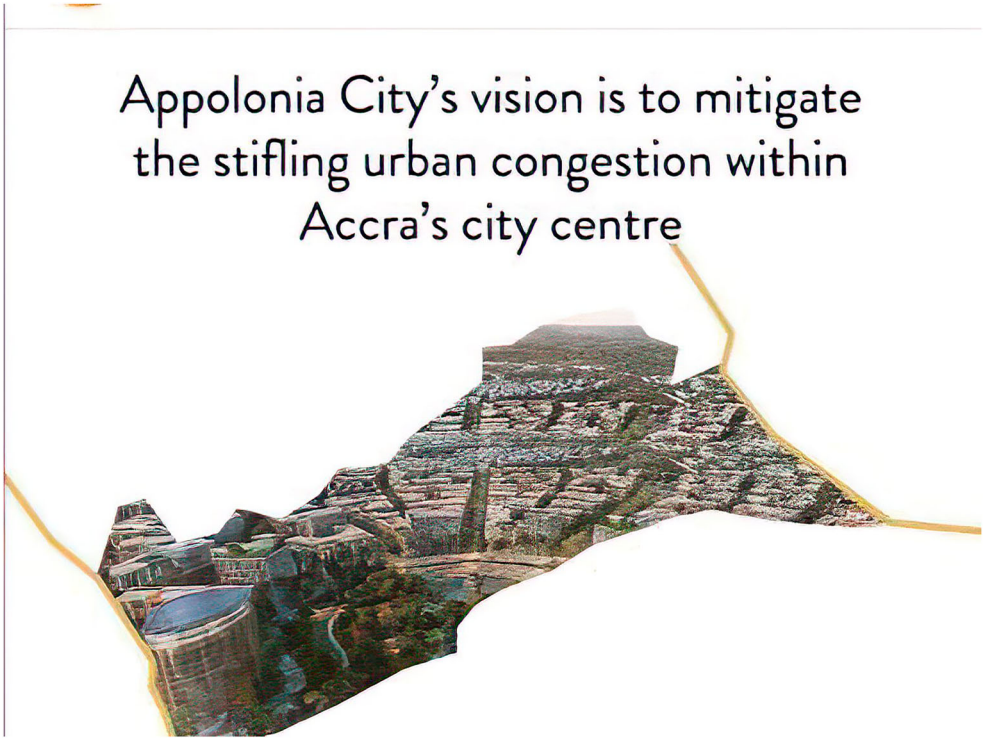

Figure 4. Advertisement of the ACL project.

Like many urban fantasies (Brill & Reboredo, 2019) driven by speculation (Goldman, 2011; Goldman & Narayan, 2021), the ACL project's industrial, commercial, and recreational enclaves remain underdeveloped. Only one demonstration warehouse was built by a British investor who has since 2021 left Ghana. Interviews with him in 2019 and 2020 showed that the ACL project is not developing at a pace that will make further investments in commercial property viable. During the most recent visit in January 2022, a multi-storey office complex, a concrete factory, and a data center is under construction in the industrial park. What is most apparent about the ACL is the fact that the rate of development of the project has stalled.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the ACL project is the provision of conflict-free land. Various studies have shown that land conflict characterized by multiple sale of land by individuals, families, chiefs and real estate companies is a significant problem in Ghana and undermines urban planning (Ablo & Asamoah, 2018; Agbosu et al., 2007; Asafo, 2020; Ehwi & Asafo, 2021; Kansanga et al., 2019). With substantial financial backing, ADCL registered the entire 2,325 acres of land, attracting investors. As a resident in Oxford noted,

> I bought land several times in Accra but lost it. Previously, I bought the land from someone at Dodowa only to realise that the land was sold to two other people. I was not ready to waste money at the court, so I abandoned the land. Later on, I acquired another parcel of land from a [small scale] real estate company, but after completing payment, they kept tossing me, and up to now, I have still not been shown my land. When my friend told me about the Appolonia project, I read about them, visited their office and once I was sure they are genuine, I bought the house here.

After interviews with 15 residents in Oxford, Bijou, and Nova Ridge, conflict-free land and tenure security are the most crucial reason people invested in the ACL. Beyond global capital flows (Goldman & Narayan, 2021), I argue that national and sub-national level institutional dysfunctions such as land conflicts create the spaces and justifications for privatized city projects.

The effects of land commodification and tenure changes in the urban fringe

Like many communities in Accra's fringe, the Appolonia village was agrarian. The livelihoods of the people revolve around farming, fishing, and livestock rearing. Land in Appolonia is a stool land, thus communally owned, with the chief and council of elders as custodians of the land. According to a community leader, "*We* [the people of Appolonia] *have about 14,000 acres of land, managed by the chief and members of the traditional council. The traditional council comprises representatives from* [the three ruling clans] *Kojo-we, Bediako-we and Sanshie-Sackey-we.*" The chief is selected from one of the three clans (known in Ga as "we") that rule Appolonia.

The Appolonia traditional council holds the allodial title, which grants every member of the community usufructuary rites. Every community member has user rights to any parcel of land. As the assembly member of the community observed,

> Land is a gift from our ancestors. It is what feeds us. So, everyone in Appolonia, including immigrants, has the right to use the land to feed themselves. For natives, any unoccupied parcel of land is available for use while non-natives must get permission from the traditional authority.

All interviewees in the community confirmed that historically, the land is freely available for community members. The principle underlining access is first-come-first-serve, an arrangement in which the first person to occupy any unused land has a use right. The use right is transferrable, as indicated by a 70-year-old woman "*Once you occupy any parcel of land, you can give it to your children without any contestation.*" This communal arrangement is not unique to Appolonia but common across Africa (Agbosu et al., 2007; Aha & Ayitey, 2017).

Communal land access in Appolonia was unproblematic as demand for land was mainly for agricultural purposes with a relatively low population. But as Accra expands, the communal land tenure and its accompanying access rights have been transformed. A key driver of this transformation is land commodification (Harvey, 2003), driven by urbanization. The demand for land by private individuals, real estate companies, and the ACL project has dramatically transformed land tenure and access rights. The commodification of communal land has reconfigured the social and economic spaces in Appolonia.

As Appolonia is the frontier of urban expansion in Accra, the demand for land for non-agricultural activities increased. The secretary to the Appolonia traditional council succinctly captured this transformation:

> As more and more people bought land for buildings, many community members started selling land leading to several conflicts. By 2011 the elders decided to allocate land to all community members. Those already occupying parcels of land retained their use rights. People who did not have any land were assigned. Each community member was entitled

> to at least three plots of land [approximately 300ft^2]. Those living in the community must pay US$100, and natives residing outside the community pay US$255 as an allocation fee used to prepare documentation on the land and support infrastructure development in the community.

The attempt by the Appolonia traditional council to regulate land access marked the genesis of land privatization in the community, which are the main feature of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2003; Yeboah, 2000).

As many studies have shown, neoliberal ideologies and their implementation in various forms and across different scales are often fraught with contradictory outcomes (Jou et al., 2011; Kashwan et al., 2019; Oberhauser & Hanson, 2007; Olajide & Lawanson, 2021). The land reallocation by the Appolonia traditional council was undermined by the financial obligation placed on the people. The requirement for people to pay between US $100 and US$255 for land allocation automatically dispossess poor community members who cannot afford these fees. In a group interview with some community youths, many expressed their frustration with this financial requirement that they could not afford. They questioned the logic of paying for land that is supposed to be inherited. Thus, apart from cost, community members opposed the allocation fee because it contradicts the traditional view of land as the "nourisher of the people." The situation in Appolonia illustrates that actors and regimes of dispossession are not always external to the dispossessed. Internal institutional arrangements (land reallocation) and actors (chiefs and elders) play central roles in setting in motion processes of dispossession. Beyond the transformation of the state as land brokers for capital in dispossession (Levien, 2015), there is the need to emphasize micro-level institutional dynamics and actors in analyzing processes of dispossession.

As capital divorces people from land, new social classes emerge as a critical outcome of neoliberalism (Jou et al., 2011). Under pressure from urbanization, the request for community members to pay to be allocated land that previously was freely accessible to them has created several groups of landless people who could not afford these fees. The land-reallocation exercise triggered elite capture and the creation of a landless mass. A 60-year-old farmer who is also a member of the traditional council observed that

> Once we started the reallocation, the rich people in the community were able to pay for more land even though the initial plan was for each person to get three plots. The situation has become chaotic as everyone started selling land indiscriminately, resulting in several conflicts.

Consequentially, two classes of community members – those with land and the landless emerged in Appolonia. As Collins and Rothe (2019) argue, neoliberalism's inherent qualities are violence and harm. What the situation in Appolonia shows is that this violence and dispossession that emerged from the neoliberal process as cities expand can occur at the micro-scale.

The large-scale land lease for the ACL project exacerbated the transition from communally owned land to privatized land. The ACL project has taken over farmlands and grazing areas, completely eroding agricultural livelihoods in the community. All respondents in the community, including members of the traditional council, acknowledged that the ACL project had undermined agricultural activities in the community. A 50-year-old male farmer notes that:

> Farming is the primary source of income in our community. We produce maise, pepper, okro and many other crops for the market. Others also rear animals like goats, sheep and cattle. Cattle rearing was very important because we have large tracts of land on which the animals can freely graze. But since the start of the [ACL] project, agricultural activities have disappeared. Many poor farmers lost their lands to the project and other private developments. The Appolonia City people [ACL project] have also been preventing animals from grazing in and around the project site.

In 2016, while ADCL cleared the land for construction, some locals collected the firewood, and others burnt charcoal from the cleared vegetation. Visits to the ACL project site show several signposts warning "No grazing." Because the ACL project development has stalled, and most of the cleared vegetation has grown, back cattle now graze on the project site and sometimes close to some residential developments (Figure 5). Residents in ACL complained about cattle grazing near their homes.

Beyond the land area under the control of ADCL, the ACL project has triggered a land rush by individuals and real estate developers leveraging the popularity of the ACL to entice potential investors. From radio and television advertisements, giant billboards, newspaper adverts and a heavy presence on social media, the ACL project received a big push in Ghana. During a sod-cutting ceremony at the ACL in 2017, the president of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwah Akuffo Addo, said,

> Appolonia City is a laudable initiative, and I want to encourage others to emulate it. I'm happy to note that the Appolonia community is a shareholder in the project. The government I lead is a national cheerleader of the private sector, and we should do all we can to provide an enabling environment.

Figure 5. Cattle grazing at the ACL project site.

The president's participation in sod-cutting for a private project reflects Levien (2015) view about the transformation of the state into a broker for private capital. The pronouncement by the president is a call for increased private sector control of the urban space in Ghana. The state's role in privatized urban developments and processes of dispossession (Harvey, 2004) cannot be overemphasized. The ACL project and legitimization by the state triggered a rush for land near the project. In the Appolonia village, a 30-year-old male respondent notes that "*today, if you ask about the occupation of the people of Appolonia, I can say the selling of land. Everyone in the community is selling one piece of land or the other.*" The demand for land in Appolonia increased as people who could not afford properties within the ACL tried to acquire one near the project. Overall, land prices in and around Appolonia have risen above the average market price due to the appeal of the ACL project. Ordinary Ghanaians may be dispossessed from the land market because of price hikes driven by these emerging cities.

Land-related conflicts are on the rise, and people who can afford them often use the police and the military to enforce their claims. There is increased police and military presence at the ACL project site, the Appolonia village and other communities in and around the project catchment area. As Krieger and Leroch (2016) contend, neither governments nor investors are interested in alleviating the adverse impacts of dispossession. In the case of Appolonia, the state machinery is deployed to protect the interest of capital and not those dispossessed (Levien, 2015). Between 2016 and 2018, several community members who opposed the ACL project were arrested for trespassing as they attempted to protest the project.

Land acquisition, chieftaincy dispute, and breakdown of community structure

In Ghana, the chieftaincy institution plays a vital role in community cohesion, land administration, and conflict management (Knierzinger, 2011). With most land in Ghana being stool lands, urban planning and development cannot be divorced from chieftaincy. Nyantakyi-Frimpong (2017) observed that chiefs play critical roles in development planning in Ghana as they serve as gatekeepers between the communities and external institutions. In Appolonia, the chieftaincy institution has played an essential role in community planning and development. Interviewees narrated the role of their chief in ensuring community peace and development. Regarding land governance and access, the general view was that the previous chief ensured all community members, both natives, and non-natives had access to land for their livelihood activities.

By 1992, the hitherto peaceful coexistence in the Appolonia village started to change. The three clans that form the stool council began to quarrel when the chief died. The conflict emerged when some individuals wanted to circumvent the succession plan by installing a new chief. The chieftaincy dispute coincided with post-structural adjustment when urbanization in Accra began to accelerate (Quayson, 2014). According to an informant, "*rather than follow the laid down procedures, some community members decided to install a new chief who can help them legitimize their land deals.*" Respondents claim that the current chief is illegitimate and illegally installed since he is not from the paternal bloodline to be installed as such. Although there are varying narratives about the status of the chief, what is undoubted is that many people do not recognize the current chief as a legitimate leader of the community. They view the new chief as an

imposition by local elites to facilitate the ACL project. In addition to the purely economic sense of commodification and privatization of commons (Harvey, 2003; Li, 2011), I argue that the disruption of the socio-cultural set-up of society is another form of dispossession that the case of Appolonia exemplifies.

Land deals require the signatures of allodial titleholders, which are the chiefs and elders in the case of Appolonia. The chieftaincy institution is vital in either facilitating or resisting dispossession. By installing a new chief, some elites from the community could legitimize the land lease. Community members who opposed the ACL project were arrested, which is not surprising. Obeng-Odoom (2015) argued that large-scale land alienation often goes hand in hand with predation, fraud, and violence. The installation of the new chief was characterized by violence in the community. Between 2016 and 2022, during a series of fieldwork in the Appolonia village, all efforts to meet the chief proved futile. Due to the threats of violence, the chief is hiding, and all interview participants had no idea where he lived. As an informant noted, "*our chief is a run-away chief. We have no idea where he is, and no one can reach him.*" While the chieftaincy dispute in Appolonia is not unique in the Ghanaian context (Knierzinger, 2011), it is tied mainly to the rush for land for urban development. It has resulted in the breakdown of a historically significant institution. As the custodian of communal lands, the chief and elders needed to sign off for ACL to be able to register the land. Thus, apart from the state as the enabler and facilitator of accumulation by global multinational companies (Harvey, 2004; Levien, 2015), this paper shows that local-level actors and institutions (chief and community elites) are also critical players in urban development and processes of accumulation.

In October 2021, during a visit to an event in the community, the chief arrived late to the program, accompanied by three fully armed police. Upon seeing the chief, a community member commented, "*here comes our run-away chief.*" Unsurprisingly, the chief left immediately after reading his speech. Informal discussions revealed that the chief left early because of threats to his life. Also present at the event was a person some respondents identified as the broker of the land deal with Rendeavour. He spends most of his time in the US but lives in a first-class residential area in Accra when in Ghana. He also arrived at the event in a convoy of four cars with at least six fully armed military men. He is politically well-connected and protected, and as Levien (2015, p. 149) observed, various regimes of dispossession are intrinsically linked to a state's willingness to protect the interests of local elites and investors. The ability of individuals to mobilize and access Ghana's police and military reflects their level of political connection and perhaps where the interest of the Ghanaian state lies.

Land dispossession and wealth accumulation: who are the winners and losers?

With property prices ranging from US$ 60,000 to over US$150,000, the ACL project promises a big source of wealth to investors. As of December 2021, a 50ft by 70ft parcel of land – the cheapest in the ACL project costs US$10,500. A 100ft by 70ft land costs US$21,300, while a similar piece of land in the ultra-luxury Nova-Ridge enclave costs between US$53,000 and US$85,000. There is a large amount of wealth to be made from the ACL project, but as Gillespie (2016) noted, an outcome of dispossession is the concentration of community wealth in the hands of elites.

The ACL project is a clear example of how communal wealth can be transformed and concentrated through capitalism. The narrative about the nature of the land acquisition and the lease terms for the ACL project is inconsistent. In 2016, for instance, officials of ADCL claimed that the project was a partnership with the Appolonia community. As a partner, the community's share in the project is the land, while Rendeavour provides the capital and develops the project. There is, however, no clarity on the nature of this partnership. Questions of how profit from the project will be disbursed remained unanswered. The default response is that details of the partnership cannot be disclosed. A member of the stool council claimed the community is entitled to 10% of income from the ACL project, but this information could not be corroborated. It has become clear that many people, including community leaders, have no idea of the nature of the land transaction. ADCL claimed that the Appolonia village was required to set up a board of trustees for ADCL to release money from the project to the community. And that the conflict in the community has prevented the constitution of the board of trustees. What has become apparent is that these claims about partnership and trusteeship are mere smokescreens to cover up the fact that some groups of people benefited from the land deal.

Community members have identified some elites from one of the clans who led the lease for the ACL project. These same elites were accused of installing the new chief to sign off on the lease. According to respondents, some of the money gained from the ACL project has been invested in a community member's political career. Assuming a minimum value of US$25,000 per acre of land as a basis for estimation, the 2,325 acres for the ACL project can generate over US$58 million in revenue from the land for the ACL project. Clearly, land tenure changes have dispossessed livelihoods and resulted in the concentration of wealth among a few elites (Aha & Ayitey, 2017; Harvey, 2004).

Conclusion

As the majority of the worlds' population now lives in urban areas, complex economic and political processes emerge in cities. This article highlighted the implications of large-scale land deals on the urban fringe by analyzing the private city development in Accra. Attention is paid to the processes of class-based dispossession and socio-cultural reconfigurations that emerge from urban development projects. It also highlights the role of local-level actors and institutions in processes of accumulation by dispossession. Herbert (2014, p. 200) notes that urban formation is "a complex site of colonial and anti-colonial struggle, postcolonial politics, and neo-imperial economies." In Africa's urban fringe, neo-imperial economies have emerged through large-scale land deals for new cities. These private urban development projects produce complex and contradictory outcomes that will further marginalize and disadvantage many people. The ACL project shows that land deals for urban developments have scourged communities' social, economic, and cultural spheres. This paper has demonstrated that local-level institutions like chieftaincy play a central role in private city development.

In Accra and elsewhere in Africa (Ablo, 2023; Ablo & Bertelsen, 2022; Cain, 2014; Van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018), land commodification and privatization do not only result in land dispossession but also reconfigure the sociocultural context of the urban

fringe. The increasing inequality and poverty in African cities are exacerbated by dispossession stemming from urban fantasies. The desire for an urban utopia (Murray, 2016) which is fundamental to privatized city projects, disrupts communal land ownership, which had hitherto ensured equity in access to resources, as illustrated in the case of Appolonia. Wealth is now concentrated among local elites and powerful interest groups while many people are left with limited opportunities for a living. Crucially, as African cities expand to engulf rural communities, we must interrogate how capitalism can undermine the right to the city. Particularly so at a scale where communal land ownership that fostered collective decision-making is altered.

Climate change and variability already threaten peri-urban communities dependent on agriculture (Paprocki, 2020). This dwindling agriculture output is further exacerbated by land-use change and increasing urban development. Thus, in communities like Appolonia, the largely youthful population face an uncertain future as they struggle for new forms of livelihoods already nonexistent in many growing African cities. Beyond economic and socio-cultural transformations resulting from new city projects, critical environmental issues such as loss of biodiversity, vegetative loss, erosion, and air pollution must become central to academic and policy debates and planning processes. Planning processes must also focus on rural-urban linkages to ensure that developments at the urban fringe can foster equitable, just, and liveable cities. Community-led urban planning processes that leverages existing local institutions can foster the development of land use plans. With active participation in planning, communities in Africa's urban fringe can avoid the current situation where urban planning lags urban development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of support from the Norwegian Research Council-funded project "Enclaving: Patterns of global futures in three African cities" (project no. 274943). The BECHS-Africa project funded the fellowship at the Washington University in St. Louis.

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