P278 / Building Emergence: Urban Development Policies and State Transformation in Africa

Topic : State and Policy Capacity

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Over the past two decades, a growing number of African governments have framed their development strategies through the vocabulary of "emergence". Long-term visions and plans, such as Cameroon's Vision 2035, the Plan Sénégal Émergent, Côte d'Ivoire's national development plans, Rwanda's Vision 2050 or Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plans, share an ambition to turn national territories, and above all cities, into showcases of modernity. This ambition materialises in new towns and satellite cities, stadiums and sports complexes, transport corridors, business districts and urban renewal schemes, often financed through loans, public-private partnerships and contracts with foreign firms, notably Chinese and Turkish. These projects are not merely physical objects: they are instruments through which states claim legitimacy, allocate resources, reorganise authority across levels of government and redefine who belongs in the city.

Critical urban scholarship has described such projects as "urban fantasies" (Watson, 2014), stressing the gap between master-planned visions and the realities of fast-growing, largely informal cities, and the seductive rhetoric that sustains them (van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018; Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019). Political economy approaches have linked them to infrastructure-led development, the return of spatial planning and the developmental state (Mkandawire, 2001; Schindler & Kanai, 2021; Goodfellow, 2022), while the policy mobilities literature has traced the circulation of urban models across borders (McCann & Ward, 2011). Yet these debates remain loosely connected to public policy analysis. Large urban projects are rarely examined as public policies in their own right: through their agenda-setting, their instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007), their implementation chains, the coalitions that carry them and their unintended effects.

The panel therefore asks: how do "emergence" agendas shape the design, governance and implementation of urban development policies in Africa, and what do these policies reveal about the transformation of the state and of public action on the continent?

Contributions may explore several hypotheses. First, emergence may operate less as a coherent programme than as a legitimising narrative that enables exceptional procedures and centralised decision-making. Second, reliance on external financing and contractors may produce hybrid governance arrangements in which policy capacity is negotiated rather than simply transferred. Third, implementation gaps, such as delays, cost overruns or unfinished and underused facilities, may be less mere failures than sites where state priorities and constraints become visible. Fourth, the urban effects of these projects, from displacement to new citizen claims, may feed back into the politics of emergence itself.

By treating African cities as ordinary sites of policy-making (Robinson, 2006) rather than as exceptions, the panel seeks to bring African cases into dialogue with general theories of the policy process, policy instruments and state transformation, and to test their assumptions in contexts marked by strong executive power, external dependence and rapid urban change.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers that analyse urban development policies in African countries pursuing "emergence" or comparable long-term development visions. We welcome empirical case studies, comparative analyses across countries or cities, as well as theoretical and methodological contributions. Papers may address, among others, the following themes:

• the making of emergence visions and their translation into urban plans and flagship projects;

• actors and coalitions: presidencies, ministries, local governments, international donors, foreign contractors and investors, local elites and professional groups;

• implementation, delays, abandonment and the "afterlives" of projects such as stadiums, new towns, transport corridors or renewal schemes;

• social and spatial effects: displacement, compensation, access to services, contestation and citizen claims;

• symbolic policies and urban development;

• the role of mega-events, such as continental football tournaments, in accelerating urban investment and reshaping planning priorities.

Contributions may address any scale, from the neighbourhood to the national level, and any African country. Proposals should clearly state the research question, the empirical material or theoretical framework used, and the expected contribution to public policy analysis. Comparisons with other world regions are welcome when they shed light on African cases. We are open to a wide range of methods, including ethnography, interviews, archival and document analysis, process tracing, spatial analysis and quantitative approaches. We particularly encourage submissions from researchers based in African institutions, from doctoral and early-career scholars, and from practitioners offering a reflexive account of their experience. Depending on the number and quality of proposals, the panel will be organised in one to three two-hour sessions, with papers grouped by theme to foster comparison and discussion. The panel will run in a hybrid format, allowing contributors who cannot travel to Rennes to present online. Abstracts should be submitted through the IPPA platform during the call for papers (16 November 2026 – 29 January 2027).