Locating the Role of Informal Urbanism in Building Sustainable Cities: Insights from Ghana

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Abstract : Informal urbanism is perhaps the most ubiquitous urban phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and Ghana specifically. Estimates suggest that about two-fifths of urban dwellers (37.9%) in Ghana live in informal settlements, while two-thirds of the working labour force are within the informal economy. This makes Ghana invariably an 'informal country.' Informal urbanism involves economic and housing activities that are – in law or in practice – not covered (or insufficiently covered) by formal regulations. Many urban folks rely on informal urbanism as a survival strategy due to limited formal waged employment opportunities or rising home prices in the open market. In an era of globalizing neoliberalism, this struggle to survive in cities resonates with several people globally. For years now, there have been intense debates on the utility of informal urbanism – both its economic and housing dimensions – in developing sustainable cities. While some scholars believe that informal urbanism is beneficial to the sustainable city development agenda, others argue that it generates unbearable negative consequences and it symbolizes lawlessness and squalor. Consequently, the main aim of this research was to dig below the surface of the narratives to locate the role of informal urbanism in the quest for sustainable cities. The research geographically focused on Ghana and its burgeoning informal sector. Also, both primary and secondary data were utilized for the analysis; Secondary data entailed a synthesis of the fragmented literature on informal urbanism in Ghana, while primary data entailed interviews with informal stakeholders (such as informal settlement dwellers), city authorities, and planners. These two data sets were weaved together to discover the nexus between informal urbanism and the tripartite dimensions of sustainable cities – economic, social, and environmental. The results from the research showed a two-pronged relationship between informal urbanism and the three dimensions of sustainable city development. In other words, informal urbanism was identified to both positively and negatively affect the drive for sustainable cities. On the one hand, it provides employment (particularly to women), supplies households' basic needs (shelter, health, water, and waste management), and enhances civic engagement. However, on the other hand, it perpetuates social and gender inequalities, insecurity, congestion, and pollution. The research revealed that a 'black and white' interpretation and policy approach is incapable of capturing the complexities of informal urbanism. Therefore, trying to eradicate or remove it from the urbanscape because it exhibits some negative consequences means cities will lose their positive contributions. The inverse also holds true. A careful balancing act is necessary to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs. Overall, the research presented a de-colonial theorization of informal urbanism and thus followed post-colonial scholars' clarion call to African cities to embrace the paradox of informality and find ways to integrate it into the city-building process.

Keywords : informal urbanism, sustainable city development, economic sustainability, social sustainability, environmental sustainability, Ghana