Governance: Rethinking Paradigms and Urban Research Approach for Sub-Saharan African Urbanism

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Abstract To address the enormous challenges of management and rebalancing of the massive "urbanization of poverty" widespread in many countries of the Global South and particularly in the African continent, international multi-later organizations such as the World Bank and UN-Agencies have long since introduced the notion of *governance*—reformulated as *good governance*—as a sort of "magic formula" to tame unplanned and informal urban growth and enable a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable urban development. The practical application of this new mode of urban government that has been so successful in Western cities—although still debated—has encountered and still encounters many obstacles in contexts where the government, especially at the local level, is weak and poorly equipped, formal resources are very limited, and informal processes predominate. The essay tries to reconstruct this problematic framework, especially with reference to sub-Saharan Africa, drawing on the growing studies on the specificity of African urbanism, which strongly support the need for a "place-based innovation" of planning and urban governance based on specific knowledge production and rooted in a new theory and praxis of urban research in that context. In the end, the case of the action-research "Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!" is argued as a valuable contribution to this perspective.

1 The Concept of Governance in Transition Between Global North and Global South

The African continent, due to the very rapid urbanization of the last decades, is facing severe challenges in the field of urban and territorial management, often without the adequate technical and political-administrative resources—in addition to economic ones—to provide the necessary infrastructures and manage the decision-making and regulatory processes of the "urban revolution" underway (Parnell and Oldfield 2016).

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Therefore, the UN-Habitat Report *The state of African Cities 2014: re-imagining sustainable urban transition* (UN-Habitat 2014) clearly indicated the need, in the face of the profound socio-spatial inequalities and the strong environmental imbalances characterizing African urban transition—tangibly represented by the proliferation of massive urban slums lacking the minimum requirements of habitability and sustainability—to overcome the models of urban development, planning, and management imported from Western countries of which African countries were colonies. The report thus highlighted the need to develop new approaches, methods, and institutional capacities for adapting urban management to the specificities of the African city in its various macro-regional variations.

To support this cultural and institutional change, in the African context as in the rest of the Global South, multi-lateral organizations such as UN-Habitat, the World Bank, etc. have long since introduced the notion of *governance* as a sort of "magic formula" to tame unplanned and informal urban growth and foster a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable urban development.

As Obeng-Odom (2013, 2017) effectively summarizes introducing his studies on governance strategies in Africa: "governance has been used as a political and economic concept for (and certainly as a solution to) all the challenges on the continent", underlining how: "The world development institutions commonly present 'urban governance' as an antidote to the so-called 'urbanization of poverty' and 'parasitic urbanism' in Africa".

But which kind of governance can be exercised in contexts so different from those of the Global North where the concept of urban governance was born and triumphed in a phase of profound economic, political and spatial restructuring connected with globalization?[1]

Let's briefly review this epochal transformation in the history of Western urban and territorial government, before delving into the problems of its application to cities of the Global South and especially to the "rogue urbanism" of the African continent (Pieterse and Simone 2013), taking up a key text by Petrillo (2017) on the possibility of "governing the ungovernable", that is, exercising governance strategies in an urban setting dominated by informality.

Introduced and developed in the 80s/90s in Western countries in relation to the emergence of neoliberal models of government, the concept of governance marked the transition from big government, "the classic form of public administration of the post-war Welfare-Keynesian systems, which was in charge of guaranteeing services and redistributing income using a traditional rational bureaucracy, organized by hierarchies of authority", to "a less defined 'urban governability'" that is meant as "system of government that articulates and associates political institutions, social actors and private organizations, in processes of elaboration and realization of collective choices, capable of provoking an active adhesion of citizens" (Petrillo 2017: 35).[2]

This "historical transition" has deeply marked the modalities of urban management, thus delegated to a plurality of institutional and non-institutional structures,

[1] See Brenner (1999, 2004), Brenner and Theodore (2002), in References.

[2] The quotations from Petrillo (2017) are translated from Italian by the Author of this essay.

to public–private partnerships and networks of collective actors in which the private sector plays a decisive role, but where also bottom-up participation of citizens can play a role, thanks to the reticular-horizontal nature of the decision-making processes configured by governance. More widely, this change has supported a profound reorganization of spaces and of political and economic powers on a global scale and has relocated urban policies in this new scenario of global and multi-scalar development in terms of economic competition between cities and urban regions to attract the most valuable global functions.

The transition "from government to governance" is now a *fait accompli* in Western countries, where it has had impacts generally considered positive in terms of the effectiveness of urban management—thanks also to a relevant innovation in planning tools and practices, reformulated in a strategic and participatory way—but it has induced changes in urban societies that are very controversial and still debated, as effectively underlined by Petrillo (2017: 37–38):

> ... the repercussions if measured at the city level have been enormous and have led to a growing presence of private, a redefinition of balances and powers, a remixing of populations, a redefinition of places of life and local identities. In this sense, the debate on the forms and meaning of urban governance embraces a whole series of issues and retains many ambiguities. Although governance theoretically exercises its action horizontally, through networks of collective actors, in which subjects enter the negotiation processes through mediation and consent procedures, these procedures in most cases appear to be aimed at gaining legitimacy and consensus more than how much they do not open up spaces for real participation[3]

Criticism on the neoliberal orientation and doubts regarding the democratic character of new forms of urban governance in Global North have also accompanied their spread to the rest of the world, including countries of the Global South, where "the concept of governance has been strongly promoted as a policy measure, along with decentralization, local democratization, driven largely by multi-lateral institutions, such as World Bank and UN agencies" (Watson 2009a: 157).

As reconstructed by Watson, one of the most engaged Global South planning theorists, and also by Smit (2018) in a recent review on urban governance studies in Africa, after the sponsorship in the 1980s of "pure" neoliberal economic policies—focused on privatization, deregulation, and decentralization—it is World Bank for first to launch the concept of *good governance* in the report *World Bank Study Sub-Saharan Africa—from Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (World Bank 1989), a concept taken up and expanded in subsequent reports (World Bank 1992, 1994) until the *World Development Report* 1997: *the State in a Changing World* (World Bank 1997), in which the "importance of strong and effective institutions, rather than the rollback of the state, as in the past" was underlined. Thanks to this evolution: "Since the late 1990s, 'good governance' has become the mantra for development in the South and planning has been supported to the extent that it has promoted this ideal" (Watson 2009a: 158).

[3] On the controversial "Janus face" of governance see also Swyngedouw (2005), in References.

A global success once again effectively summarized by Obeng-Odom (2013): "Throughout the world, this is the age of governance, the era of the city and a period of good urban governance".

However, even the pathway of *good governance* in the Global South has encountered differences of interpretation and many obstacles in its implementation. The World Bank approach, which largely focused on efficiency and accountability, has been strongly criticized by other global agencies such as UNDP and UN-Habitat for being "a mainly administrative and managerialist interpretation of good governance" (UN-Habitat 2016: 10).

These agencies have, therefore, promoted a revision of the concept of *good governance* that places the emphasis on democratic practices and human and civil rights, a version spread worldwide through many reports and global campaigns, from the first *UNDP Governance for Sustainable Urban Development* (1997) to the *Global Campaign on Urban Governance* of UN-Habitat in 2002 and so on through many others (UN-Habitat 2002, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2014, 2016), until the maturation of an articulated concept of *inclusive, multi-scale and multi-level governance* in the *New Urban Agenda* adopted at the *United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development* (*Habitat III*) in Quito, Ecuador, on 2016 (United Nations 2017a, b).

The UN-Habitat approach, thus, sought to reorient governance strategies to reduce the profound imbalances between political powers and the enormous socio-spatial inequalities of the urban realities of the Global South, supporting processes of decentralization of the urban government and strengthening the management capacities of local authorities, especially with regard to upgrading programs of slums and informal settlements with the participation of local communities.

Along this way, governance strategies have been enriched with consistent capacity building functions in local institutions and local communities, seeking to assume not only a more democratic character, but also a pedagogical purpose.[4]

The influence of the main international agencies on the urban policies of the Global South countries, especially those for housing, as argued by Chiodelli (2016), has been relevant, even if partial and sometimes contradictory: on the one hand, through the financing and direct promotion of intervention programs and technical-training support functions for the definition of policies and projects of central and local governments, these agencies have given impetus to new guidelines and new operational methods of the urban governance. On the other hand, many southern countries have continued to practice policies other than those supported by international organizations (i.e., eviction and demolition of informal settlements), while

[4] The relevance assigned to these activities to achieve an effective "good urban governance", is clearly underlined in Habitat III Policy Papers: "Capacity building for urban governance needs to be accelerated: improving differentiated capacities linked to urban governance needs to take into account institutional capacities, the technical and professional skills of individuals as well as local leadership skills. Building capacities related to urban planning, budgeting, public asset management, digital era governance, data gathering and engaging with other stakeholders are of particular urgency. Capacity building actions need to go beyond conventional training and stimulate learning in the short, medium and long-term" (United Nations 2017a, b: 4).

the outcome of the structural intervention programs promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in many cases was that, on the contrary, to worsen the housing and living conditions of the slums.

Therefore, even in countries of the South, the spread of governance paradigm in urban strategies, supported by multi-lateral organizations, has been accompanied by many criticisms regarding its effective capacity for innovation of urban government in a democratic way, as well as on the real extent of changes induced by new decision-making methods in expanding urban contexts.[5]

As Watson (2009a, b: 158) finally points out: "In the Global South, as elsewhere, there is a tension between the participative and technocratic dimension of new approaches to governance, as well as between participative and representative democracy", and despite the pressure from international agencies, "actual decentralization, local democratization and shared governance have been uneven processes in the global south and in many parts changes have been limited. Limited capacity, resources and data at the local level have further hindered decentralization" (ibidem). All these critical conditions are still to be found in Africa and above all in the sub-Saharan countries.

2 The Raising of Urban Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa Between Critical and Potentials

The most relevant studies focused on urbanization and urban management in Africa and particularly in Sub-Saharan African countries (Watson 2009a, b; Myers 2011; Jenkins 2013; Pieterse and Simone 2013; Parnell and Pieterse 2014; Obeng-Odom 2017, Smit 2018; Home 2021) highlight, in fact, some "structural" nodes that aggravate all the obstacles encountered in the diffusion of Western urban governance paradigm in the Global South: from state centralism and weakness of local governments to the scarcity of public resources to be allocated to urban and territorial infrastructures; from the overwhelming power of real estate investors and international developers to the predominance of the informal sector in the economy and urban development; from the weakness of organizations of civil society to the ineffectiveness of obsolete planning models inherited from the colonial past; from the inadequacy of technical structures to the scarcity of territorial information, to name only the most cited.

Particularly Jenkins (2013), in the introduction to his in-depth study on the case of Maputo, Mozambique, identifies the main structural problems of sub-Saharan urbanism in the detachment between massive urbanization and economic growth, which is largely concentrated on the extraction and export of natural resources, but limited in general economies:

[5] For a critical review on the neo-liberalism paradigm applied to urban strategies in developing countries see in References: Burgess et al. (1997) and also Helmsing (2002) with specific regard to housing policies.

> The result is thus likely to be a continuation of the past decades of constraints on wider expansion of what is usually termed the 'formal' economy, in other words that with some form of state regulation and engagement, including taxation. (…) This all means that the precondition for possible urban consolidation through economic growth and some form of wealth redistribution is limited. On the other hand global pressures on agricultural production (especially Western government subsidies) mean that development opportunities are also undermined for many rural dwellers and the outcome is effectively the definitive urbanization of poverty. (Jenkins 2013: 19–20)

Jenkins also highlights very effectively the critical issues of governance in this context:

> The limitation on 'formal' economic development is not only due to the nature of global economic interests in the macro-region, but also due to continuing elite nature of the region's governance. This is underpinned by the region's complex political structure of some 50 nation-states in one-fifth of the world's land surface. The relative weakness of these nation-states derives initially from their colonial construction but continues into the fifth or sixth decade of postcolonialism for many countries, due to a range of internal factors (e.g., ethnic competition) as well as external factors (e.g., global economic peripherality). Most governments have relatively weak administrative and technical capacities, and this is particularly the case at local government level, where in many situations local authorities with any form of autonomy and/or democratic political representation are relatively new and still highly depended on the central state. (…) Hence, the capacity to respond to accelerating urbanization from the local government's point of view is extremely limited and highly dependent on central government subsidy and/or foreign investment and international aid. (Jenkins 2013: 19–21)

The weakness of local government is also underlined by Smit (2018) in his overview on the main actors of urban governance in Africa, noting how the impetus given by governments and international agencies toward decentralization from the 1980s onwards has had a very patchy and partial implementation, and in some cases has been overturned. Therefore "it has been argued by some scholar that the rushed and partial decentralization of public authority in Africa has often resulted in local governments that are 'weak, disorganized, inadequately trained and staffed, and often under-resourced relative to the new range of responsibilities they are expected to take on' (Meagher 2011, 51)" (Smit 2018: 6).

Another typical (and critical) feature of African urban governance noted by Smit, concerns the very important role that can play the "traditional leaders", instead of institutional ones, especially as regards the allocation of land in peri-urban areas for the development of informal settlements. Although traditional leaders are controversial figures—due to the "extra-legal" nature of their activities, often marked by corruption—these typical local actors reveal the presence of informal structures of "customary governance"[6] in the management of urbanization processes, which are intertwined with formal governance networks to defend traditional rights and mediate between the two sectors.

[6] The concept of "customary governance" refers to the theory of "customary law", the traditional cultural practices that become "laws" parallel to the official ones, originally formulated by Comaroff and Roberts (1981) with references to studies conducted precisely in an African context.

This problematic and often conflicting dualism in the dynamics of urban governance at the local level generally leaves much room for action of supra-local actors: central government, multi-lateral agencies, development banks, international donor agencies, and large sector organizations—such as real estate development or food production companies—and to other emerging actors from the informal sphere, such as informal business organizations usually "governing" marketplaces and streets traders (Brown et al. 2010).

In addition to government and private actors, other scholars (Devas 2001; Olivier de Sardan 2011; Tostensen et al. 2001) highlight the presence of a vast range of civil society associations -ethnicity-based networks, home-town associations, youth associations, savings groups, funeral groups, religious association, etc.- that often, in practice, "perform roles undertaken by the state in cities in the global North, such as providing basic services, allocating land, ensuring safety, providing social security nets, and so on" (Smit, 2018: 8). Many community-based associations have been also set up by international development agencies to implement programs of slum-upgrading, urban and rural agriculture, food security, etc. The fundamental role of civil society associations, and particularly of collaborative fluid networks between informal actors and marginalized residents of African cities in supporting urban functioning is emphasized by authors such as Bayat (2004) and especially Simone (2004). However, several scholars argue that participation of civil society in urban governance, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, remains marginal and a very problematic issue because "(…) social networks which extend beyond kinship and ethnicity remain largely casual, unstructured, and paternalistic" (Bayat 2004: 85) and "participation is still mediated more typically by patron-client relations, rather than popular activism" (Watson 2009a: 159).

This very concise overview of the main and most typical actors and stakeholders involved in urban governance is however sufficient to highlight, on one hand, the inequality of resources and capacities between public, private, and civil society actors, and, on the other, the relevance of the informal governance actors and processes in remedying this disparity. This condition is a common trait to the main sectors of urban development,[7] where the presence of a vast and pervasive informal system, which supports or integrates the more limited formal systems—of the housing market, production and management of urban services, food production and retail in the markets, for example—create a formal/informal continuum often difficult to disentangle, within which, as argues by Devas (2004): "informal governance processes are, in practice, often more important than formal governance process".

Studies on African urbanism, therefore, converge in highlighting some distinctive features of urbanization processes in Sub-Saharan Africa—urban growth mainly disjointed by industrialization, strong urban–rural interconnection, predominance of

[7] Smit identifies three key areas of urban governance in Africa: land allocation and land use management, the provision and management of basic infrastructure services, such as water, sanitation, and waste management", and transport/accessibility system, although many other areas are gradually becoming the subject of governance, including environmental and disaster risk management, education and socio-cultural development, etc.

informality in business, housing, and services provision—and the particular limitations of "formal action" of government, at the central and, above all, at the local level, which leave room for uncoordinated and fragmented governance in a vast and often opaque network of formal and informal processes. If these ambiguous governance conditions, on the one hand, "leads to a situation where in fact Sub-Saharan African cities function, albeit in ways which seem chaotic and noncontrolled at first sight", as argued by Jenkins (2013: 7), on the other hand, it inevitably tends to favor the agenda and interests of stakeholders with the most skills and resources—"opening the door" to corruption as well—and to exclude problems and needs that concern the lower sector of society, typically the urban poor and their living environment.

In addition to these more structural problems, many scholars have highlighted the significant role, in supporting such unequal and contested governance framework, played by the Western and "modernist" urban planning system inherited from the colonial past, still in use in many of the Sub-Saharan African countries (Njoh 1999, 2003; Devas 2001; Nunes Silva 2015, 2020).

The negative impact of the inherited planning system "in worsening poverty and the environment" is particularly underlined by Watson identifying the different elements that make the ideas and tools of spatial planning inadequate and ineffective in Africa, because widespread "(…) mainly through British, German, French and Portuguese influence, using their home-grown instruments of master planning, zoning, building regulations and the urban models of the time – garden cities, neighborhood units and Radburn layouts, and later urban modernism", and usually applied only in the central areas inhabited by Europeans (Watson 2009a: 172–178). More recently still used for the new towns and "green enclaves" for richer classes and the new emerging middle class (Mazzolini 2016a, b), the modernist and "rational-comprehensive planning" tradition continued to reinforce spatial and social exclusion, as well as the unsustainable urban sprawl.

The recognition of the substantial "diversity" of urban transition in Sub-Saharan Africa, including the peculiar tangle between formal and informal decision-making processes that "govern" such transition, has prompted a growing number of scholars (between many others: Roy 2016; Watson 2014, 2016; de Satgé and Watson 2018; Bolay 2020) to criticize the "idealistic" and largely inapplicable approaches to planning of the past, as well as the uncritical adoption of the "new wave of context-less planning ideas" designed for northern cities in more recent times, because "This new era of planning (using terms such as eco-cities, smart cities and world-class cities) is again imposing a concept of 'good cities' derived from other and very different contexts" (de Satgé and Watson 2018).

To overcome these old and new Western legacies, a "Southern Urbanism" theory is raising, specially tailored on distinctive characteristics of African urbanism, to be considered as opportunities for innovative and more effective forms of planning and urban governance strategies.

3 Toward New Paradigms and Urban Research Approaches for Alternative Urban Governance Framework in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Case of the "Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!" Action-Research

The need to decolonize the urban planning system in Africa, and to develop new approaches, methods, and institutional capacities for urban governance, calibrated to the specificities of the African city in its various regional variations, is therefore long recognized and claimed by a growing number of international and African theorists (in particular: Myers 2011; Pieterse and Simone 2013; Parnell and Olfield 2014; Mabin 2014; Parnell and Pieterse 2015; Hyman and Pieterse 2017; Simone and Pieterse 2017).

However, the process of decolonization and "locationally innovation" of planning and urban governance, argue many of these scholars, require, first of all, a specific knowledge production on African urbanism, rooted in a new theory and praxis of urban research in that context. In other words, it is necessary, as suggested by the title of Parnell and Pieterse (2015), a deep "rethinking of methods and modes of African urban research", that is a new research approach, named by these authors "translational global praxis", which "captures more than the idea of applied research or even co-production, and encompasses integrating the research conception, design, execution, application and reflection - and conceiving of this set of activities as a singular research/practice processes that is by its nature deeply political and locationally embedded". To understand the specificity of African urbanism and therefore "For knowing what can be done to affect the change of the city", it is imperative to adapt the methods and modalities of African urban research to the conditions of the context, "where human needs are great, information is poor, governance conditions are complex, and reality is changing".[8]

More specifically, the "fragile" conditions of local institutions, civil society, and academia that characterize many African countries make it necessary to adopt a strongly engaged action-research approach, that involves all these components in a "translational" process connecting research, policy, and practice to support urban change.

This appeal to the commitment of urban research in the African urban context has been increasingly welcomed by the international scientific community, thanks also to the growing academic cooperation that often integrates cooperation for development, promoting partnerships with universities, institutions and other stakeholders of the African countries (Petrillo and Bellaviti 2018a, b).

Through the blending of the three pillars of academic activity: research, training and know-sharing, universities can, in fact, contribute to develop trans-disciplinary action-research, supported by consistent multi-level capacity building initiatives in

[8] Parnelle and Pieterse's reflection is based on the experience of the African Center for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town (www.africancentreforcities.net), the main research and training hub on Southern urbanism theory and praxis.

academia and local institutions, involving also economic and social realities in these processes of co-production of knowledge and action capacity.

An example of this great potential is represented by the "Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!" action-research reported in this book, carried out through the extensive collaboration between Politecnico di Milano with the Mondlane University of Maputo, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and many other local institutions and NGOs.

Conceived and designed to offer a support of knowledge and guidelines for the promotion of a governance framework of the "unknown Metropolis" that have been shaping in the past decades in the outskirts of the capital of Mozambique, fragmented in terms of administrative boundaries and governance and shaped by a complex tangle of informal or unmapped flows and systems, the study tackles many of the obstacles mentioned above with an approach that "breaks" with the traditional forms of planning still prevailing, to tune in with new conditions, criticalities, and opportunities present in the territory of investigation.

For such a demanding research project, the first problem to be addressed was the lack of information regarding existing cross-scalar patterns that have been shaping this territory, the scarcity and inconsistency of the available statistical data, the lack of cartographies, and the lack of investigations of economic related transformations.

The construction of a broad and updated territorial framework, through a trans-disciplinary research program, which integrates disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, hydraulic, energy, and computer engineering, and combines quantitative analysis with qualitative research and participatory methodologies (infield investigation, interviews, and focus groups with local stakeholders, case-studies), thus represents an essential element to start the construction of a new sustainable development scenario for the area, at the same time intercepting the potential stakeholders of a new territorial "soft governance", released from the limits imposed by the elephantine, compartmentalized and rigid administrative structures of colonial legacy.

The research activities, focused in particular on the Water-Energy-Food Nexus, considering the potential evolution of the agriculture sector, backbone economy of the area, and the whole food cycle and its multiple environmental, economic, social, cultural implications, are at the same time an instrument of knowledge and representation of the territory, and a device for identifying and activating the new structures of territorial governance, built *ad hoc* in relation to the local development plans, which are entrusted with the implementation of the scenario hypotheses. It is inside these plans, and related pilot projects, that the very local specificities of territories and of stakeholders and partners find their place, including the customary informal structures of governance already present in the territory, in search of alternative "hybrid governance" frameworks to guide and facilitate metropolitan growth, through the management of natural resources and large-scale infrastructure as collective assets.

On this innovative platform of updated and trans-disciplinary knowledge, built with the contribution of local stakeholders, a wide action of capacity building at multi-level can be developed:

- Several knowledge-sharing initiatives are developed as academic cooperation initiatives: teaching activities at the FAPF-UEM newly established Master Level Course and Ph.D. program; exchange activities of the researchers; dissemination activities, such as workshops and training events organized at the local level, to reach different audiences.
- New tools for territorial knowledge are made available to local institutions—Assessment analysis and Scenario models—and specific guidelines to support decision-makers dealing with the challenges of sustainable development in fragile contexts of the Global South, such as Mozambique.
- Finally, with the Pilot project method, capacity building action spreads to the widest range of stakeholders involved in the first initiatives for the implementation of development plans, investing in education, and local rural entrepreneurship with the aim of producing measurable impacts.

There is no need here to further investigate the "Boa_Ma_Nhã, Maputo!" action research—amply documented and argued in other essays in this volume—to underline, in conclusion, how university cooperation initiatives such as this one can give a great impetus to the innovation of territorial governance and urban management in contexts such as African countries, unhinging the obsolete systems of the colonial legacy and searching "on the field" more adaptive formulas to local and specific systems.

The Science Diplomacy that universities carry out, with their own prerogatives—research, training, know-sharing, capacity building—can indeed operate across the different sectors and levels of governance—formal and informal, central and very local—and build new networks that are more inclusive and locally rooted, in search of solutions consistent with the ideals of sustainable urban transition (inclusive resource-efficient, affordable and low-carbon) but at the same time compatible with practices and knowledge expressed locally, closer to real possibilities and potential of the territories and cities of Africa—and more generally of the Global South.

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