

An Introduction to the African Cities Research Consortium

This is a written transcription of the Global Development Institute's webinar introducing the African Cities Research Consortium, featuring Professors Diana Mitlin and Sam Hickey, Martin Atela, Chris Jordan and chaired by Dr Admos Chimhowu. You can find a video or audio of the webinar below.

[YouTube video](#)

[Soundcloud audio](#)

Admos: Okay I think we are going to make a start now because we've got quite a packed afternoon and in fact a very packed one hour. Just to introduce myself, my name is Admos, I'm an academic here at the University of Manchester's Global Development Institute. I am going to be chairing this webinar today which is focused on the African Cities Research Consortium and we are going to be discussing how the African Cities Research Consortium and its international partners is planning to tackle the complex political systemic problems in some of Africa's growing urban areas, and your presence here this afternoon will help us to deepen our understanding of the things that we are hoping to investigate.

It's great to see so many of you here today for this introduction and because we've got a lot of ground to cover we have decided on a very simple format. We're going to start things off shortly with a presentation from the African Cities CEO, who is Professor Diana Mitlin, after which we also have inputs on research and uptake from Professor Sam Hickey, who is also from the Global Development Institute, and Martin Atela, who is research programme manager at the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research, based in Nairobi.

After that we will open the discussion up for a question and answer session, so if you have any questions I'm going to ask you this afternoon to put them in the chat because there are many of you and it's often that very few will get to speak, but if we have got the questions in the chat we can capture those and I will put them to the panel afterwards.

I would like now to invite Professor Diana Mitlin to start off this presentation by talking to us about how this African Cities Research Consortium and its international partners is planning to tackle these problems in some of the growing urban areas of Africa. Over to you, Diana.

Diana: Thank you, Admos and thank you, audience. There are not many advantages to Zoom but one is the ease with which we can reach out beyond the specific locality in which we're in; another is very much the chat function where we can pick up, as Admos has already said, the issues that are of concern to you. And also we're interested in your answers not just your issues, and as we start to develop our work going forward you may see in the very near future blogs that pick up some of the things that you've flagged, because I don't anticipate that we will get through everything today so we really just are aspiring to give you a little bit of a flavour for what we hope to achieve.

I'm going to talk a little bit about urban challenges, I'm going to talk about the ambition of DFID – now FCDO – who are providing funding and who catalysed the consortium in a very real way, and I'm going to talk about the urban opportunities as we understand them. I'm then going to pass to Sam Hickey – one of my colleagues in Manchester, Admos has already introduced him – and then Sam will pass on to Martin Atela from PASGR in Nairobi, who as Admos said is interim uptake director.

So the aim of the research consortium as in the bid documentation we responded to was very much to produce new knowledge and evidence on African cities. Let me come back to the detail of this. I think for me the challenges of African cities are really summed up in this picture of tenements from Nairobi – Martin, I'm sure you know them well – and these buildings are really quite extraordinary because they cost about 360,000 dollars to build one block, maybe 9 or 10 storeys, maybe 14 rooms on each floor, communal services, water, sanitation, often poor construction quality.

The payback on these buildings is about four years, so incredibly rapid return on investment. The people who live in there have moved there because they wish to move away from shacks in informal settlements and they pay something like 40% of their income. This particular set of blocks was close to an industrial area, so it has a lot of informal industrial workers. They pay maybe 40% of their income, so there is a real challenge that talks to the quality of life that people are experiencing.

I think part of that challenge goes to long-standing work that my colleagues at the International Institute for Environmental Development have been working on for many years – a challenge to understand the ways in which urban poverty and inequality are being created and being maintained. There has been quite a strong narrative in development studies and the international development community that urban poverty is a less significant issue. I don't want to speak about the relative significance of urban vis-a-vis rural, but it is clear that there are considerable dimensions of disadvantage in urban areas that need to be addressed going forward if African cities are to offer a vibrant, prosperous life for their citizens.

So this particular picture highlights to me the very poor housing conditions and it also highlights the challenges of urban basic services and the high cost of basic services, and more recently we can see agencies such as the World Bank recognising the challenge of high service costs in the African urban centres. But it's more than just the high cost of services, it's also the very poor quality of services. So this diagram relates to some work that I was doing with the World Resources Institute and it really highlights the fact that not only are services poor, but the ways in which we've come to understand those challenges are lacking. So in the case of water, which is highlighted by this graph, the joint monitoring programme don't highlight the intermittency of water supplies. You see here that in two informal settlements in Kampala and Lagos there's no water in this case, no piped water. In those settlements you see in Maputo, another African city, that's six hours for seven days a week. Only now that creates big challenges depending on what sanitation system you're using, depending on who is collecting water, how you're collecting water, how you're integrating the collection of water with your daily life. So we have major challenges there.

I understand that the chat has also picked up the challenge of informal economies. In many African cities we have over 80% of employment being in the informal sector. A lot of that is around services, highlighted here by a cafe advertising football matches from Manchester as well as other urban centres, but also the kind of spaza shops that you see across many informal settlements. So real challenges around employment options and, of course, some of the people who face the most disadvantageous employment options are women living in informal settlements, with very high responsibilities in terms of social reproduction, unable to challenge the gender discrimination they face inside the household and beyond the household. So big challenges around the informal sector and there is already a recognition in the literature that one of the challenges is the very weak links between a very small formal sector and an informal sector, so the kind of triggers that have been important in the Asian context are not present in the context of Africa.

I think one of the other challenges that we will reflect on – I'll say a little bit more about this when I mention our cities – is the challenge of fragility, risk and vulnerability. This is a picture from Dar es

Salaam, it's a few years old now, I think it was taken in 2015, and it shows a woman explaining to me about the recent history of eviction they'd faced. So we recognise the need to reflect on the future of cities, on the development trajectories of cities already in fragile and conflict-affected states, which in many cases have large numbers of citizens who've been displaced from war. We recognise that urban populations include refugees and some of the more vulnerable groups among urban citizens, but we also recognise these long histories of displacement. So conflict and violence is not only present in fragile and conflict-affected states, but many other cities also face those challenges – especially for the most low-income citizens who are unable or have limited capacity to protect themselves. And the new challenges of course relate to the climate emergency, so the rationality for this eviction was to protect a floodplain. People were being moved back to protect a floodplain, but in fact they've been shifted way back beyond the original ambition to create a reserve and in part they were pushed back because of contestation that goes on over land. I don't think I need to say much more about that because we know land is at the heart of wealth asset accumulation and urban opportunities for some, too frequently at the exclusion of opportunities for others.

So the ambition of this research consortium is to produce new knowledge and evidence on African cities as systems, to lead to the development of an investment in economic development and poverty reduction policies and programmes. We have here a bunch of pretty sceptical looking Malawian children from Lilongwe, who clearly are wondering if we can take on the development challenge that they seek in order to address this challenge.

I think for me the objective that I've just read out really reflects FCDO's belief that there is a better way of doing urban development, an ambition that I think we at the Global Development Institute and the partners who joined with us recognised was very timely. So I just want to spend a little bit of time talking about the partnerships that we've got and the cities in which we'll work and then I just want to end, before I pass onto Sam to talk about the research strategy, with a reflection on Covid.

So we've brought together a consortium of agencies that we believe can begin to take on some of these challenges. We have colleagues from the University of Manchester and particularly the Global Development Institute, and a research centre that has focused on using the framework of political settlements to understand the ways in which elites behave, the developmental ambitions they have, and those they don't have. And we're joined particularly in our academic knowledge by UNU-Wider, who add economic expertise, and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.

We've really addressed the need to be very practical, to think about shifting from the academic discourse and research methodologies into policy by drawing expertise from IIED, from ODI (the Overseas Development Institute) and PASGR (the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research). We are trying to be very grounded in the work that we do to make sure that we don't lose sight of the fact that research is not only about pushing forward the frontier of knowledge, but doing that in a way that makes a real difference on the ground, so we're joined by Shack/Slum Dwellers International, by ICLEI's Africa office, and by the International Rescue Committee.

We're planning to work in 13 cities and I don't want to spend so much time talking about those cities, but really to say that we're working in them because we recognise that in those cities, in some shape or form, there are the foundations for urban reform. We recognise that one of the reasons why it is a particularly timely moment to think about doing this research programme is because there has been, in some cases for decades, a group of African-based researchers and research agencies who have wanted to challenge the urban disadvantage, who have recognised that there are big development challenges in urban areas and sought to work on those challenges. So we believe – by we I mean myself, Manchester, our broader partnership – that we have selected cities that really

offer an opportunity to work with really grounded coalitions who are pushing for some kind of positive change in those locations. And we feel that among some of the slightly more grey-haired end of the spectrum, people like me, we now have a younger cadre of professionals, of community leaders, of academics who share that ambition to redefine the trajectory of urban development in Africa.

I think it would be inappropriate to leave without a little bit of reflection on the entirely coincidental moment that we find ourselves in. So what Covid-19 demands is an urban reset. 95% of cases we estimate are in urban areas. The health crisis associated with this has catalysed an economic crisis as lockdowns have prevented people who are already vulnerable because of low pay being unable to work as they worked before. So the challenges are even more clear, and new agencies and individuals who did not previously give attention to urban areas are now very conscious of the need to give attention to the people who are struggling at all levels in cities – either large enterprises or small enterprises in formal settlements, or simply families trying to manage. Those needs have become ever more acute.

I'm sharing a slide from one group working in Mathare, an informal settlement in Nairobi in Kenya, and it gives a little bit of the flavour of what organised citizens have been able to do – to come together to document the situation they face, to identify with local government safe isolation places, and to begin to think about how to build out of that vulnerability to a more secure place with, we hope, lessons for a much broader set of catalytic urban reforms. So I'm going to stop now, having given you hopefully a little bit of a flavour for what we hope to do, and pass over to Sam Hickey.

Sam: Thanks a lot, Diana. I wasn't sure what it meant to be Diana's deputy when taking on this role, but it seems now that Diana gets all the great big picture stuff and I get to bore people with the concepts on it. So this is the way in which we're going to try and generate new and, we hope, compelling insights into the types of problems that you've identified in the chat, and to start to identify ways of working on them that are informed by political economy analysis which underpins this framework. So there's three broad aspects to our conceptual framework, one of which is around power and its interplay with institutions at the national and city level, the second of which is around the failure of these systems to adequately deliver goods and services, and we think the politics and the developmental prospects for African cities really comes to life within what we're calling domains.

What we want to do is to run you through each of these different levels of the framework and suggest how they might interact, and also recognising that there's a lot that matters for African cities that falls outside of this framework. We know that African cities are embedded within transnational contexts that involve forms of geo-economics and geopolitics, that they're affected by shocks – whether environmental, economic or health, as Diana has just pointed out. But what we're hypothesising is that these things become real when they're fed through patterns of power relations within national, city and local level political settlements, and that's the way in which we will explore those broader factors. So it's a new framework but, as Diana's pointed out, we have used some of these concepts before within the Effective States and Inclusive Development research centre, so we have some confidence that the political settlement and domains can give us some traction here.

So, what do we mean by some of these terms? By national political settlements we're referring to a concept which goes beyond the formal institutions of governance, and it helps us to understand the forms of power relations that determines whether or not these institutions work, or the ways in which they function and for which groups they function effectively. Political settlements can be defined by our research director Tim Kelsall as an agreement or common understanding amongst powerful groups about the basic rules of the game, and once these basic rules of the game provide

minimally acceptable benefits to elites, then you can prevent a fall into conflict or disorder. So it's a concept that has traction in relation to both conflict and political order and we have cases in the centre that will be unsettled, such as Somalia, and the lack of safety and security in cities like Mogadishu reflects the lack of a settlement. But we know that elsewhere we'll still find violence and sometimes that's due to the enforcement of the settlements in places like Nairobi, where the lack of security is directly linked to the establishment of broader political orders.

We think that a couple of things matter in particular about political settlements. We want to identify how concentrated power is around the political leadership, that can tell us whether there's a long-term vision, whether governing coalitions are capable or not of delivering on their commitments. We want to understand the social foundations of political settlements – which groups really matter, the social identity of groups around race, ethnicity, gender, class and income, which groups are organised and powerful enough that ruling groups need to listen to them, and shapes their incentives to respond. And we think cities are going to be really important to understand how political settlements function. They play particular roles within maintaining political settlements, they're central to the strategies of political survival and elite accumulation of ruling elites. In terms of accumulation, for example, rent generation around land speculation, and in terms of political survival, cities are key to delivering votes and legitimacy for ruling coalitions – central often in terms of having large oppositional groups, as we've seen recently in Kampala, Addis and other cities within our centre.

But we don't think it's all about incentives, we think that ideas will also matter. In the chat someone said the power of westernised ideas around cities and modernity, and we've seen this in play very powerfully – that the ideas which underpin the rules of the game often position African cities on an unrealistic trajectory of modernity, often in ways that are entwined with interests as we've seen around mega infrastructure investments to achieve Dubai-like status. So the national political settlement won't really matter, but we also recognise that cities have their own logics their own balance of power that we'll need to recognise in terms of how cities are governed, the role of municipal authorities and sub-city authorities, and the relationship between city government and national government. And we'll also need to understand the social foundation of power within cities, around which groups have power, whether or not groups from informal settlements women's groups low-income groups are able to mobilise and make themselves relevant to those in power will matter here. And we'll also be bringing into play some of the literature on the everyday politics of urban life in sub-Saharan Africa, to make sure we can join up our higher level elite analysis with what's happening on the ground.

That's the sort of political economy aspects to it. We also look at city of as systems, and these are the vertical boxes you can see going down your screen, with names like water, land, transport, energy. Now, in the urban studies literature this the term city of systems has usually been used to frame cities as complex integrated human dominated systems with metabolic properties, based on stocks and flows which enable economic activity and social reproduction. And we do want to maintain the significance of the materiality of cities to our analysis, but we want to add to that the importance of social and economic systems as well and non-material as well as material flows of services and goods. So we'll be looking at health and education as well as things like energy, water and sanitation.

And we don't see these as given systems, as technocratic entities, but rather as being highly politically determined and contested, shaped by particular histories – colonialism being the obvious one in terms of the type of spatial planning, for example that exists in cities like Dar and Harare and also particular geographies. Our aim here is not to produce in-depth studies of particular systems

but rather to look at them as being related to wider political settlements, and we'll be particularly interested in how multiple systems come together and how systems failures across multiple systems create particular problems in what we're calling domains.

So domains are our third elements and this is to help us get beyond the problem of thinking about African cities in a very sectoral way, which has limited greatly the relevance of the responses that have been made to urban development challenges in Africa and more broadly. So domains incorporate multiple sectors that can be defined as areas of power, policy and practice that are relevant to the solution of particular problems, and they're constituted by actors – political, bureaucratic, private, professional, popular actors – that seek to claim authority and rights over a particular field, which could be housing or land or informal settlement upgrading.

And they adopt various strategies to ensure that their ideas around governance and how resource allocation should take place within the sector, how rights should be allocated predominates, by forming epistemic communities, by undertaking programmes of direct activism, and programmes of policy reform. And these domains are highly politicised both for the reasons identified, but also because they again play roles in sustaining particular political settlements. Some of these will deliver rents to ruling elites at city level, others will deliver legitimacy. And we've seen our city authorities engage in programmes, for example, Eyob Gebremariam's work in Addis Ababa has shown how youth groups, who can potentially destabilise political settlements, have become new domains of activity around distribution of handouts and employment schemes, have been geared around solving particular or attempting to solve particular political problems.

So our hunch is that the most complex and intractable problems in African cities will be located within these domains, and relate to the ways in which systems function and how both of these relate to wider national political settlements, and that reform efforts will need to be calibrated to the configurations of power at each of these levels. And a good example which leads on to what Martin will be talking about is from work that SDI were involved in in Mukuru, around the recent decision to upgrade an informal area and to improve systems there in 2017, which only took place when the social foundations of the settlement began to shift after the Moi era, before which informal settlements were deeply entrenched in rent-seeking activities, where residents had to deliver rents to local officials and slumland was gifted to powerful clients of the ruling coalition. But once informal settlements become more important politically in the 2000s, and once coalitions of researchers and local activists begin to put together research on life in informal settlements, it becomes possible to put pressure on ruling elites to adapt their approach to informal settlements.

So, moving on to what this means in terms of how we will move forward, we're in stage one and we have three stages to our work. In the inception phase, which has been going on since October we've been trying to put the conceptual framework and the broader partnership together. We hope that from April we'll move into phase two and we will operationalise the framework in all 13 cities, with a view to offering a deeper understanding of complex problems and identifying priority problems to work on in the third phase. And the third phase is where ACRC becomes a very different type of research centre to ones we've previously been involved in at Manchester, I think. We'll narrow down the range of cities to between five and eight and we will undertake in-depth action research with a view to not just identifying solutions, but actively formulating and working with other actors to try and push towards their implementation. Particularly drawing on SDI's theory of change – and we will have Beth Chitekwe-Biti working with us as the implementation director throughout this phase – and drawing on SDI's knowledge of how reform coalitions can be built and enabled at city level, alongside an ongoing programme of uptake that Martin can now talk us through.

Martin: Many thanks, Sam. I hope to take less than five minutes to walk you through our uptake plans, and if Sam was boring with concepts I hope I will not be too boring with the highly technical concepts, because uptake I think is one of the most exciting part of this work. Now I want to do two things, first is to share with you what we think our impact should be with this work, so what we aim to do, and then how we go about doing that. I think as mentioned in the beginning, we hope that our consortium will be able to produce research that can support and galvanise the kind of urban reforms that we aim to get in the cities where we'll be working in the first instance, and then of course that that research can also then speak to other urban reforms across the continent, and can also be borrowed in other cities with a similar context.

And to be able to achieve that, we will be working very strongly to produce robust evidence that can be able to address local research gaps, that can be able to drive urban reforms, and that actually responds to the policy needs in those cities where we'll be working. So we will be employing, as Sam has already explained, highly integrated methodologies that ensures that the evidence can be taken up and applied in the cities where we'll be working in another context. The second level of impact we'll be hoping to achieve is to be able to work with citizens in the cities we'll be working, to mobilise them and equip them with the necessary knowledge, so that they can use this knowledge to drive the reforms agenda in their areas.

So our hope is that our research will be able to speak to the needs of different citizen groups – be they residents associations, be they trade groups, be they networks – and that we will be working very closely with disadvantaged groups, so that they can use our evidence to push through the kind of changes that they want to achieve and to ensure that those changes actually do address their needs and interests. And the third point that we aim to achieve in the level of impact is to leave across the continent reform coalitions that are well and better capacitated, and that are able to organise and in a better way engage with the different professional agencies and government bodies, to be able to address urban reform issues in their cities.

So we'll be working closely with already existing coalitions and in places where there is opportunity to be able to create new coalitions that can drive this agenda forward. Ultimately we hope that by bringing in state agencies and government units or city structures that govern the cities where we will be working, we will enable those cities to grow their capacity, to enhance their capacity, to drive the reform agendas in their cities.

How will we do this? How will we achieve this kind of impact? I think the first point then already really emphasised this, that the consortium brings together organisations that have huge experience – both academic and policy – in terms of working with individuals, in terms of working in cities to address already existing problems. So we think that the way the consortium is structured will allow us to generate the kind of robust evidence needed to address this, but also we'll tap into the kind of experience that organisations already working in the cities bring on board.

Beyond the consortium we will be putting together what I may call a multi-level engagement mechanism that starts with the cities where we will be working. So within the cities where we'll be working, we put together engagement structures that ensures that the interests, the research needs, and the policy needs of the different stakeholders at the city level are addressed, and are taken into consideration to the level possible during our research. And beyond the cities, we hope that we can then build those engagements, moving outwards into the national level and the regional level, and perhaps tapping into the globally available platforms, to try and make sure that our research finds its place in different urban reform discussions and discourses at the global level.

The objective of doing this, providing that multi-level engagement structure, is to be able to see that the knowledge that is generated and the experience of the different groups we'll be working with can actually drive the reforms that we want to see. So in these different cities, as I've already said, we'll be working with community organisations, we'll be tapping into the professional associations, and we will be tapping into political leadership, just to make sure that their contribution actually counts. And I think Sam already gave a good example of the work that SDI is doing in Kenya by putting together what they call special planning in the Mukuru slum, which is one of the biggest slums here in Nairobi. And I think the key thing about the experience SDI or PASGR will be bringing to this is that innovative flexible approach that ensures that vulnerable groups and community members are part and parcel of the process of reforms and research that we will be doing.

And then finally, we will be translating the evidence that we'll be getting into formats that policymakers can use. So across the board we'll be targeting, for instance, academic journals that are high quality but also those that address practical issues, so what I may call "pracademic" journals, where practitioners and researchers come together to not only use robust methodologies, but also to bring in experiences from practitioners on the ground.

Once we've achieved that, then we will be putting together a communication platform that includes a website where different people can have access to the resources and the research that the consortium will be able to produce. And as you can see on that website, you can look onto our Twitter handle – @AfricanCities_ – and also you can reach us through the different platforms that will be made available. So we hope that this is the beginning of eliciting interest so that by joining this conversation, you are able to look for the different products that will be coming and then the engagement process can continue into the future. Thank you, Admos.

Admos: I just wanted to thank our presenters Diana, Sam and Martin for walking us through what this research consortium is trying to do. If you want to an easier way of looking at it, you might say Diana told us what they are trying to do, Sam told us how they're going to do it, and Martin has just told us how will we know that this this knowledge generated is going to be used to change people's lives in Africa. So thank you for walking us through that. We would like to move straight into the questions.

I'm going to maybe ask three questions at a time to the panel. The first one is from Annabelle, who's asking what was the criteria for selecting the 13 mentioned cities – was it based on existing partner networks? The second one from Jen is how are you aiming to facilitate learning between coalitions cities that already have good practice or locally derived solutions and processes of change? The next one from Carol is just a comment, basically just saying as a principal I feel that understanding education opportunities and empowerment play a great part in addressing such challenges, this is such worthwhile research. I'll add a third one. Wendy says thank you for the presentations. Access to reliable localised data on Africa is a challenge – what is the research consortium's plan on sharing data and research to further increase knowledge dissemination of information? And then related to this question, are there partnerships with local universities and research centres in the initial cities that are part of the consortium?

Let's take those three questions for a start and then we'll move on to the other questions. So the first one, Diana, do you want to answer that one? It's saying what was the criteria for choosing the 13 cities.

Diana: Yes, thank you, Admos. So the criteria for the cities, which in a way picks up on some of the themes that have come out of the other questions, the original bid had a list of all cities which the

UN Population Division estimate to have populations of over a million. And the bid documents also challenged the bidders such as ourselves to make sure that half their cities were in fragile and conflict-affected states, so as to be relevant in cases of war, conflict, violence. So that was a starting point. I think we teased around for a long time, the partnership, in terms of selecting the cities, so they are ones for the most part – not entirely – where the partners have good contacts or think that there is really interesting work to draw on, to address the kinds of challenges that we want to be relevant to. So for the most part they're strong partnerships, in some cases the partners recognise that there seems to be something really interesting about that city. There are of course way more than 13 cities with interesting stuff going on in Africa, really we're not trying to say that in any sense.

We wanted to pick those where we felt that there was a level of interest around thinking about urban problems politically, about thinking about urban solutions in a way that was integrated, and about recognising that advancing knowledge that was relevant would include both the best academic thinking, but also new professional practices, engagements with organised communities, reaching out to a wide range of citizens – stakeholders – who wanted something better. So we saw these cities as cities which had some of that potential. We absolutely, I'm sure, will find in maybe three, four years, we'll be kicking ourselves because we missed out on a city where there is really interesting stuff going on. But we did the best that we could.

I would just maybe make a couple of other comments that seem to me to relate also to that choice of cities. So in a sense we see cities where there's some emerging possibility of practices that are absolutely worth sharing and building and learning on, and we see those practices as at least partly embedded in local processes of change. So I think in terms of Jen's question, we saw both things as important. And so we did also see that academic thinking, engagement with the local universities, was indeed going to be a critical thing that we needed to take on going forward.

Admos: Thank you, Diana. Sam and Martin, do you want to add anything to that?

Sam: Just briefly that we also selected the cities to try and reflect a broad range of political settlement types, so somewhere that unsettles, somewhere power is concentrated – Zimbabwe, Uganda – and somewhere power is very dispersed – Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malawi, and so on. And that's not just academic, we wanted to try and understand whether different types of solutions, different types of reform coalition, had more or less traction in different types of political settlement.

Admos: Thank you, Sam. Okay, moving on to the question from Jen. So are you aiming to facilitate learning between coalitions, cities that already have good practice or locally derived solutions and processes of change? I think, Diana, you did touch a little bit in your response to the first one, but can you be more focused on this one and respond more directly?

Diana: Okay so as I was trying to say, I'm sure we will pick up practices that we know about already and practices where there is a real interest in engaging through research in identifying how to sharpen those practices. And the sharpening of those practices will involve comparative research, so will involve learning from one place in another place, will involve researchers and non-researchers, non-academic researchers, in sharing experiences – experiential learning – and really working out what they think is going on and how those solutions can emerge that are going to be stronger than the ones already in place. So we have a very locally embedded strategy. We really don't think in our experience that solutions can be parachuted in from outside – they need to be tested with a local process of change.

But we are also conscious from our experience that those local change processes are often catalysed by useful experiences outside the city, and in some cases they're catalysed because processes are stuck – sometimes for reasons of political contestation, sometimes just because a problem is so overwhelming. And when those problems are stuck, sometimes a good idea from outside can be very useful in unsticking them. Sometimes it's not really that the process is stuck so much as a very strong set of political interests are blocking progress, and in that case, we aspire to produce knowledge that helps unblock that. We will seek to provide evidence from that city or location, but also from elsewhere, that encourages people to think differently about the place that they're at and the options that they're looking at. And we have some experience which has shown how to do that successfully.

Admos: Thank you, Diana. The last question among the first three is to do with your plan for sharing data and research to further increase knowledge dissemination, and are there partnerships with local universities and research centres in the initial cities that are part of the consortium? So I think these are two parts of the question. Maybe the first part I could try and throw it to Martin because it's also related to uptake in some ways. Martin, do you want to have a go first, how do you plan on sharing data and all the findings of your research to increase knowledge dissemination, given the constraints which you know exist in many parts of Africa related to dissemination of information?

Martin: Yes okay, so I'm sure my colleague Chris will also speak to this, but I think one of the things that we intend to do is to provide a platform where the different pieces of evidence generated in this work can be openly accessed across the continent. So the programme will have a programme website, which we hope can be accessible across the board. The second thing is I think the different consortium partners, most of them based across the continent will tap into their networks to be able to share the evidence across these African cities.

So one of the questions which was asked is whether we hope to facilitate coalition learning, and I think this is one of one of the ways we'll be able to do this. For instance, if you look at the work that SDI is doing across the continent or PASGR is doing across the continent, PASGR works with about 16 or 20 African universities, which is part of its network. And therefore by being part of this consortium, we will be in a way opening up the consortium with those 16 African universities, not only to learn from what's going on here, but also to tap into the resources that they already have. But in terms of sharing data I think Chris might be able to speak a little bit more to this.

Chris: Just very quickly, sharing the knowledge, sharing the data is a really critical part of this throughout, both of the process and the issues that we're grappling with as we go along and the final reports, the final evidence. And so we'll be investing in that both through the kind of secretariat that's based in Manchester, which will make it all available digitally. But also as Martin has said, in the cities themselves, having locally embedded people who can do the convening work and the communications work and act as brokers between local community groups and policy actors. And so it's not just about making the data available, it's about doing it in a way that's going to be useful and helpful and push reform coalitions forward.

Admos: Okay, thank you for that. Anything to add, Diana, Sam?

Diana: Not from my side but Sam, I think we'll try and build on ESID's best practice in terms of open access books etc – did you want to briefly reference that?

Sam: Yeah I think we're fully committed to the widest possible sharing of this and I think it's not just because it makes our work more relevant to policy actors, but as part of a wider attempt to democratise knowledge. And Diana and others within HRC are intensely committed to the

democratisation of knowledge production. There's been a number of questions about who should be in charge of work in African cities, that I think are very well taken within the centre. We got the money because of the ways in which development research funding operates, but we very much hope to use ACRC as a means of handing over to the next generation of urban researchers who are obviously based in African cities, so we do see that as being fundamental to our agenda, to go back to a couple of questions in the chat.

Admos: Okay, thank you, Sam, for that. I see we've got quite a lot of questions here, some which are related, but there's one which is the clarification: how do you plan on whittling down the cities from 13 to eight?

Diana: Shall I have a go at that one? We are aware it's going to be intensely political. So we plan to develop the criteria that we will use at an early stage, so we have agreement on the criteria to use. The challenge is to identify cities in which we can really get an interest among the city and potentially national elites. Sam particularly talked a bit about how we recognise the significance of national elites, so we need to get those guys to buy into the reforms which people who are more disadvantaged, and those concerned about economic opportunities, have been excluded from advancing, those reforms that we want to push forward. So it will be I think almost certainly tricky.

I think the advantage still of working with a reasonably large number is that we won't be hostage to any one of those locations, but we can really work with groups that in most cases are already established, and those that we've been able to successfully strengthen, who can manage to negotiate a way through local obstacles to demonstrate new ways of doing things. So we recognise the challenges and that's how we're going to try and crack it.

Admos: Yes, and you've chosen these large cities which you think are more interesting in your words, but there's questions here about a lot of smaller cities, which also have got common problems but are also quite interesting. And you're being challenged there to think outside the box and see value in studying those as well in future.

Diana: Maybe shall I jump in on that one? Admos is smiling because it's a long-standing point of discussion between Admos and myself, so we recognise that there are many smaller cities, we recognise that there are big urban needs in secondary and tertiary cities. We have picked some of our 13 cities that are a little bit smaller than others, but they are all major conurbations we recognise that. We also recognise that just as Sam said that we're going to try and understand systems in cities, that cities are embedded in urban systems, but the way in which a big city functions is related to the functioning of smaller cities on its periphery – or those which it has strong connections to, i.e. important roads.

So we've recognised that one of the constraints of this research consortium is that we are limited in how we are addressing the needs of smaller urban centres. We are not saying in any sense that they are not significant. We are just saying that this opportunity offered an exciting chance to advance knowledge that we are deeply committed to advancing, so we dwelt on the possibilities rather than the constraints in the programme design.

Admos: Yes, thank you, Diana. There's a question here – Sam, what form if any of engagement or impact is envisaged in terms of the national political settlements, or is that just an underlying theoretical lens for understanding more localised phenomena? So, Sam while you're thinking about answering those I want to pick up another one from Tim. I think this question is do you see any connections between the work you're doing and the peri-urban and rural?

Diana: Briefly on that one while Sam is gearing up to the way more tricky one, we are indeed interested in looking at some relationships between the areas immediately outside the city and some of the peri-urban areas. One of the areas that we flagged to do more work on for example is nutrition and food markets related to nutrition, so we do recognise the importance of some of those interconnections.

Admos: Thank you. Sam, do you want to have a go on that?

Sam: I think you know the political settlement is the context – it's a part of the structural context within which these African cities exist. And we don't think that we will be able to shift those. I think the challenge is to craft workable solutions that are politically feasible within them and we think that the best of those will end up changing ideas and potentially building up new capabilities that may progressively shift the broader balance of power, by making previously irrelevant groups more relevant and to which political leads have to respond to. But that's going to be a much longer term process than a six-year research consortium, so we don't presume that we can shift structures here so much as make sure that our work is relevant to them and feasible within them.

Admos: Thank you. I want to pick up the next question from Sue, which is: this is a large world resource programme, how do you plan to interface with existing researchers on African cities who are not part of this project? And while we are thinking of a response to that, I'll also finish with a question from Vincent. This is a great initiative and thanks for the presentations – where is the position of citizens in this research in terms of frameworks and implementations? So I think I'm going to throw that open to you, but part of the last question I think Martin can respond to.

Diana: Let me start on Sue's question. I think the simple answer is that we're working out in part that we wish to reach out to obviously existing researchers who are doing work that we feel is complementary to the work that we are doing. We recognise of course that large this may be, but clearly there's still a lot of other work that needs to be done. So we're looking absolutely at complementarities. We're also looking to particularly support early career researchers and looking at ways in which they can engage with the work that we're doing, the frameworks that we're using, and find ways to both engage with them, but also make them their own – in a sense, build in their own career trajectories to what we're trying to do. And then I think as we've already talked about we're trying to reach out particularly to African researchers within our cities that we hope to work with very closely around some of the more immediate research processes. So we have had some discussions around that and we are still trying to finalise plans at this stage.

Admos: Thank you, Diana, for that response. And the last question – the position of citizens in this research.

Martin: Yes, I was actually going to jump into trying to answer that. I think my immediate thoughts about that is that you know there is so much that a research project can do to involve citizens or everyday “wananchi” as we call them in Kenya in a research process. what we aim to do as a consortium actually is to try and ensure that the voices of citizens and part and parcel of this, and so the kind of methodologies I think that we'll be adopting will be such that the citizens are accompanying the research if I may use that word rather than being sources of just the evidence. now in the engagement processes we hope to be able to use various mechanisms and approaches that it allows the citizens to actually contribute to the research process and it is our hope that by doing that they will be able to start using the evidence generated in our research to begin building the kind of reforms that we hope to achieve. but that said I think I have to emphasise that already some of the organisations will be working with who are part of this project were already engaging

citizens directly in their work and therefore we hope that those platforms will be enhanced in the process.

Admos: Thank you. Sam, do you want to add to that and then we'll probably finish off with, Diana, some last words from you.

Sam: Just briefly in terms of implementation, I think our intention of working with reform coalitions which would have played a strong role for citizen-led organisations is really key, particularly to phase three. In terms of the frameworks I think what political settlements analysis does is maybe gets us a little bit beyond the slightly romantic sense that urban citizens can solve all problems by themselves, and links up citizens to other forms of political subjectivity in terms of often being treated as clients, and also to broader strategies of elite accumulation and survival which actually make it very difficult to enact autonomous forms of citizenship. And so we put that somewhat hopeful world, if you like, of social movements activism into play with a somewhat more realist frame of analysis, and we hope that both benefit from that. But I think it's a really good question and that's how we're starting off – where we land we'll have to see.

Admos: Yes, thank you, Sam. Diana, and then we'll wrap things up.

Diana: I really want to thank you all for your engagement, we will look back at the chat. I would like, I think, to reflect perhaps on the challenge that we face. So, I started by talking a little bit about the opportunity that we saw and I think Sam and Martin gave substance to the opportunity that I framed. I think we're very aware that considerable skills, capabilities, great minds have already thought about the challenges that we aspire to work on, and we have got to be modest because we recognise that that they are not easy challenges. What we will really do along the lines that we've outlined is try and push forward the frontiers of knowledge, sharing whatever we do both because we believe in the democratise and democratisation of knowledge, but also because we are seeking to lay foundations for an emerging generation of scholars and non-academic scholars, knowledge generators that we feel will be in a good position to take forward our work and develop new trajectories of development in urban Africa.

So we have got to end, I think, with a recognition that we have got to be modest. This is very tricky. What is on our side is that we are working with some amazing people. The challenges that we face are considerable for the reasons that the participants have identified. So really I would just like to end I think by saying thank you to all of you, thank you Martin and Sam for your contributions. It's really been wonderful already working with you, I look forward to many years. Admos, I'm only regretful that I could not tempt you more away from your rural interests into the urban sphere, but I live in hope.

Admos: Thank you and on that note, I just want to also say my last words as someone who's been sharing this webinar, just to thank you all for joining us for this discussion. It's been an afternoon where you've really interacted with us – I've just been looking at the chat and seeing that it was quite active. I would like to encourage you to see this as the beginning of a journey of our relationship here at GDI with you, so continue to follow the research as it develops – you've seen it start so you should also try and continue to help this develop and deliver improved lives for people who live in urban Africa.

You can follow us via Twitter, and it's very important that we also know what your thoughts are. We will take a look at the chat and we will also use that to help us to think through the research as it develops. Otherwise on that note, from wherever you are, I would like to thank you for joining us and hope to see you again for our next event which will be advertised. Thank you, everybody.