

Seven Transformative Themes for Researching Freetown's Slum Communities

NA WAN-WɔD KIN PLIT KOLA.
"Unity (agreement) can split a cola nut"

Krio Proverb

Despite the obstacles of slum living in Sierra Leone's capital of Freetown, there thrives dynamic and purposefully-built communities. These communities already hold many of the solutions to the challenges of planning, designing and managing sustainable and productive urban development.

This is a briefing note for The Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) that highlights some key themes I found during 2014-2016 whilst carrying out research as part of a slum relocation project in Freetown. As the in-country Director of an NGO relocating slum communities who were at high risk of environmental disasters or forced evictions,¹ I spent over a year researching informal settlements in order that I might design and implement a sustainable strategy for successful relocation.

During this time, a set of radical and progressive themes emerged as stand-out characteristics of slum living in Freetown. These were important for the relocation project I was running as they steered the relocation strategy towards a more sustainable relocation solution. More importantly, these themes emerged as a significant 'stand-alone' set of values that could become transformational tools if explored further and formalised into strategies for change within Freetown slum communities.

7 Themes that could become Transformational Tools

I propose that SLURC consider the following transformative themes in framing their research agenda. These themes are interlinked and mutually beneficial:

1. Advanced Social Dynamics

The communities are inherently co-dependent and cooperative, holding well-developed support networks and a deep-seated culture of sharing.

2. Governance and Leadership Processes

Research into community's governance processes found existing systems of conflict resolution, and decision-making and an embedded hierarchy of respect towards elders and decision-makers that maintained cohesion and direction within communities.

3. Communication

Sierra Leone has a rich legacy of story-telling. Discussion and communication are encouraged as recognized public ways of dealing with problems.

4. Intentional Communities

Each community has many years' experience of living together intentionally, and sharing a common unity and purpose as members of a particular neighbourhood. There is a high degree of religious

tolerance with a great priority on preserving a sense of community over cultural differences and a strong sense of mutual support that reinforces a core sense of belonging.

5. Support Networks

There is strong female leadership in daily activities that generates significant support networks for childcare, food/cooking, washing, social security (natural surveillance), and fosters an environment of trust and security.

I commonly encountered a strong tendency for openness in discussing 'private' family and community disagreements and problems. This different perception of privacy and shared communal living socially and practically challenges the model of western individualism, and acted as a healthy mechanism for support and accountability.

6. Resilience and adaptability

Local environmental, family and community disasters were commonly dealt with through collective social grieving. Formal recognition of community grief, sharing condolences and practicing a ceremonial sense of support and shared suffering seemed to help communities recover from disaster.

Since few government support systems exist, there is an understanding that the power lies in the collective effort of the community. This understanding must be imbedded within any development strategy for change.

7. Physical layout and Environment

The communities best used available space with each nook holding a purpose. A natural hierarchy of communal, private and semi-private space was already established, and could be usefully studied to inform on potential housing improvement interventions.

There was a strong culture of recycling and reuse of construction materials, as well as a degree of innovation and entrepreneurship in making household goods from waste material. This culture can be used to encourage a green economy and to reduce the impact of waste.

Conclusions

In SLURC's approach therefore, I suggest an exploration of these key themes through an intensely participative process, to build a framework for improving overall resilience, disaster management and housing in the slums of Freetown.

This briefing note proposes that by adopting a humble approach to research and development initiatives, that is, by recognising that most of the solutions are already held within the community rather than within outsider assumptions or ideals, the Development professional (SLURC) can become a researcher and interpreter of the knowledge, resilience and adaptability already held within these communities.

By focusing on these community cultures, laws and practices, through qualitative analysis in the context of dealing with hazards of slum living, environmental risks, preparedness and recovery, poverty, social injustice and lack of political representation, SLURC could rationalize these learnings into formalised

strategies for resilience, improved well-being, community resourcefulness and adaptability. This offers a holistic and valuable response, enabling the design of strategy to be full of community-led values and insights that can deliver relevant and culturally relative solutions.

Without minimising or dishonouring the difficult circumstances faced both practically, infrastructurally and socially in such economically deprived areas, I have found that within such problems also lies many local solutions. Solutions cannot derive from helicoptered-in western ideals. Instead, the remarkable testimony of the resilience of Sierra Leonean people – a nation of the lionhearted – must be heard.

In sum, I recommend an approach to learning that is held within the belief that intelligent practice builds on the collective knowledge and understanding of local people and organisations. This community-led approach can uncover the progressive community structures and practices already there in order to harness them into transformative strategies for change.

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