

Research Briefing Notes

Citizens' Perspectives on Urban Policies in Cairo, Egypt

Summary

This project analyses citizens' perspectives and everyday experiences of recent urban policies implemented in Cairo. These policies include the implementation of infrastructural megaprojects, changes in rent laws, the commercialisation of public spaces, and the relocation of citizens to city peripheries. The research focuses on understanding forms of urban conflict and violence, as well as citizens' coping mechanisms, negotiation tactics and potential pathways for conflict prevention. We ask: **How are citizens' perspectives and everyday experiences impacted by new urban policies in Egypt?** In particular, we investigate new forms of conflict that have developed due to processes of space-making and the potential policy alternatives for conflict prevention. The project used an exploratory qualitative research approach in areas impacted by infrastructural changes to understand new urban realities and their embodied, physical, social, economic and political impacts on local communities. The findings reveal a sense of uprooted disconnect in communities following rapid changes in the built environment, violence resultant of de/construction processes, and the 'hyper-commercialisation' of new spaces. Limited interaction with municipalities and the lack of citizen participation in local decision-making has left communities with a sense of loss of the 'spirit' of their neighbourhoods, but with continued engagement in negotiating their place in the new city.

Research Background

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is one of the fastest urbanising regions globally. In megacities like Cairo the return to state-led development and mega infrastructure projects has led to the complete overhaul of urban policies on rent, construction and privatising utilities, and the eradication of the city's informal areas. This new reality is marred with everyday structural violence-criminalisation, marginalisation resettlement- experienced by citizens in marginalised neighbourhoods, but also recently impacting affluent neighbourhoods with destruction of green spaces and privatisation of public services.

This study was conducted in four Cairene communities based on a qualitative research design of in-depth interviews with local residents, shop owners and urban and civil society experts. Fieldwork was conducted in sites affected by recent infrastructural megaprojects like bridges, the monorail, and highways. Three neighbourhoods represent middle-class and elite neighbourhoods, including gated communities; and the fourth was conducted in a marginalised area threatened with relocation in the near future.

Key Findings

The main themes that have emerged from citizens' experiences of urban and infrastructural policies include:

- The profound impact of physical urban changes labelled as infrastructural violence by communities. Communities were always surprised by de/construction taking place in their

neighbourhoods without prior notice, were forced into negotiations with the state and new stakeholders like privatized parking operators, new wholesaler shops; and increasing disaccord in social networks and new social norms being enacted.

- These increased dominance of infrastructure megaprojects has wrecked land and property values, causing them to fluctuate based on the rumours of de/construction, causing new urban migration movements by the middle-classes and elites.
- Residents were vocal in addressing quality of life. They focused on privacy, safety, air quality and loss of greenery as some of the major concerns of the urban upheaval right at their doorsteps.
- Residents highlighted the ‘hyper-commercialisation’ of neighbourhoods and the infrastructural space new megaprojects were producing. This included new life and space in the under passages and below bridges that became paid parking lots, rented cafes, shops and spaces for unruly activity.
- In the core Cairene neighbourhoods, municipalities were limited in their capacities to allow for citizen participation, as they themselves were sometimes surprised by some of the top-down urban changes and provided little guidance to residents on potential power and water cuts.

Key Explanations for these Findings

These findings coincide and expand the literature on urban violence in rapid expanding cities. First, the fragmentation of national urban policies across several institutions has resulted in chaotic governance regimes that have left out municipalities in the making of megaprojects. Municipalities are expected to make space for infrastructure and are then left to deal with the community fallout. In affluent areas this has become a constant space of conflict and negotiation as residents are rendered powerless to impact their built environment. The lack of local elections since the 2011 uprisings has left a governance vacuum most felt when dealing with urban planning issues. Second, recent changes to urban legislation, such as rent control and formalisation of tenure, has been stipulated, rolled back and debated by policymakers, leaving space for landlords, developers and brokers to change their terms, increase charges and take advantage of a chaotic legislative moment. The consequences have been most felt by residents as the neighbourhoods take on more transient characteristics, leading to a global sense of insecurity and impermanence. Finally, while the state uses infrastructure megaprojects as a spatial fix, new urban actors are emerging to commercialise these new spaces including rising small businesses, wholesale supermarkets and even shisha stores, changing local activity patterns in neighbourhoods unfamiliar with fast consumerism, leading to more disconnectedness and a new social fabric.

Key Implications for Policy Action or for Further Ways to Address Knowledge Gap

Several policy pathways were identified by stakeholders to reduce conflict and adapt to the new built environment:

- Fostering mechanisms for citizen participation beyond social media platforms, and specifically at the local level;
- Developing timely local warning systems to address shortages and cuts to utilities due to the construction of mega-infrastructures;
- Implementing stringent regulation of commercialised public spaces with a repertoire of available spaces for rent in each neighbourhood;

- Developing, investing in, and enabling community-led greening and safety initiatives in neighbourhoods;
- Encouraging national dialogue on impact of urban policies and neighbour-making for all new cities.

This study opens the field for further research on the links between the urban condition and conflict, especially to better understand how the process of space-making results in new forms of violence between urban actors, the embodied and affective dispositions of urban residents in the path of megaprojects, and the forms of community subversion under authoritarian structures. Research on elite space-making and networks of privilege remains limited in both urban and conflict studies.

Key Policy Targets

Municipalities are key in the issue of increased citizen participation and brokering peace in local conflicts. Similarly, municipalities and international organisations are targeted for policy actions on increased neighbourhood cohesion, regulating new spaces, and community-led greening initiatives. National urban policymakers are crucial for evaluating the impact of resettlement policies and future urban policies.

Author's Contract Information

Noura Wahby

Public Policy and Administration Department
American University in Cairo

Email: noura.wahby@aucegypt.edu

More about the Research

This research shows how conflict manifests in the aftermath of contemporary Egyptian urban policies, and its impacts on communities' everyday lives. By centring space, capital and justice, this research contributes to the literature gap on everyday violence in urban milieus and pathways of adaptation and prevention.

Funding Acknowledgment: This project is supported by the Middle East and North Africa Social Policy Network (MENASP) at the University of Birmingham, in the framework of its '[strengthening social welfare and security in the MENA region](#)' research programme, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's Global Challenges Research Fund.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of the Middle East and North Africa Social Policy (MENASP) Network or the University of Birmingham.