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COMMENTARY

On tackling infrastructure: the need to learn from marginal cities and populations in the Global South

Prince K. Guma

Abstract

Due to complex and adverse effects of rapid urbanisation, conventional infrastructure networks in the Global South tend to be stretched in their capacity to deliver. Over the years, different studies have examined how diverse populations manage to operate successfully (albeit with constraints and limitations) despite limits on formal networks. However, most attempts have studied large and central cities at the expense of small and marginal cities. In this article, I make a case for learning from marginal cities and populations in the Global South. I highlight the need to understand better how the urban poor in smaller and marginal cities not only navigate and negotiate the absence and inadequacy of formal infrastructure, but also put together a semblance of viable life through modest, creative and sometimes improvised infrastructural and technological interventions. This, I argue is important for drawing appropriate lessons for tackling infrastructure, particularly in an age where sustainable solutions to urban and infrastructural challenges are bound to emanate not just from technical experts, but also from directly affected populations themselves.

Keywords

Infrastructure, technology, cities, urban poor, marginality, Global South.

Author

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Introduction

Cities are rapidly transforming, and the challenges facing their future are complex and diverse. In the Global South, conventional infrastructure networks are increasingly stretched in their capacity to deliver, due to complex and adverse effects of rapid urbanisation (UN-Habitat 2010; 2013; 2016). Within academia and the policy world, urban infrastructure systems have been shown to possess varying degrees of deficiencies that limit their capacity to provide adequate basic services to all citizens (*ibid.*). While such infrastructural challenges are prevalent in both central and marginal cities, they are more rampant within marginal cities and towns. Yet, as scientific research over the years continues to discern a wide array of concerns for cities in the present phase of global capitalism, it continues to focus on the spurring rise, development and remodelling of the most competitive mega-cities (primarily capitals). Inherent in recent studies is a characteristic indifference in scholarship to the ‘small’ cities.

This article articulates a conceptual mandate to examine potentially diverse and variegated infrastructure landscapes in the context of small and marginal cities in the Global South. Marginal cities are defined as conurbations limited by geographical distance (thus far behind the development of the next large or central city) or by the economic environment (hence synonymous with increased underdeveloped, poverty and unemployment in comparison with larger and central cities in the region). The article identifies the need to tackle infrastructure by drawing lessons from the ways through which the urban poor navigate and negotiate the absence and inadequacy of formal technical infrastructure; and how they put together a semblance of viable life through modest, low-cost, small-scale and sometimes improvised interventions in their everyday lives for survival. While such interventions vary, they may range from community and collective institutions and mechanisms critical in co-providing, supplementing and backing up centralised network grids, to a kind of creative, localised and makeshift improvisations and solutions designed to bypass risks and dangers of dispossession (see e.g. Simone 2004; 2016; 2021; Coutard & Rutherford 2015). Such interventions may also include the use of basic, frugal and low-cost technologies as alternate modes for leapfrogging grid infrastructures or bypassing infrastructural vulnerabilities, inadequacies and absences (Silver 2014; Guma 2020; 2021). I argue that the indifference in wider scholarship to such interventions within the context of small, marginal cities is detrimental and futile, as it serves to further institutionalise existing inequalities between central and marginal cities, between urban regions and their urbanising hinterlands, and between the centre and peripheries of urban studies itself.

Yet, marginal cities and populations in the hinterlands of low-income countries have the potential to provide additional avenues for thinking about infrastructures in transition. They are important for further widening theoretical pluralism in social studies, as they offer different perspectives, lessons and experiences, as well as highlighting the diversity of development patterns and infrastructural configurations. Moreover, as marginal cities and populations encounter extreme challenges from the effects of tectonic upheavals and disruptive deviations, inter-tribal conflicts, electoral tensions, endemic diseases, poverty, and infrastructure disruption and devastation, they have the potential to lead to a better understanding of the situated contexts where socio-spatial dimensions and compositions might differ from large central cities. In an age where sustainable solutions to urban and infrastructural challenges are bound to emanate not just from technical experts, but also from directly affected populations themselves, it becomes important to draw appropriate lessons from the latter as well.

Tackling infrastructure

Interest in ‘infrastructure’ has gradually evolved since the term took on its contemporary meaning in the English language in 1951 (Carse 2017). The understanding of the term itself has evolved from the conventional view—i.e. as ‘the physical components of interrelated systems providing commodities and services essential to enable, sustain, or enhance societal living conditions’ (Fulmer 2009: 30-32)—to one used to describe not just the material structures or physical artefacts (Carse 2017: 28), but also the socio-political and cultural processes. While infrastructure has long been an ideal subject of technical studies, it is only relatively recently that the topic has attracted broader and more dynamic attention not least within the social sciences, including geography, anthropology, philosophy, history, sociology, architecture, and urban studies and planning. In urban studies and planning for instance, interest in infrastructure has provided a focal point for understanding, analysing and theorising the city. Over the years, ensuing studies have examined the multiple social dimensions of infrastructure, focusing not only on the provision of services to urban populations, but also distributions of political power with regard to specific components of infrastructure (Larkin 2013; Rutherford 2020; Simone & Pieterse 2018). Within these disciplines interest in infrastructure has increased, reflecting something of an ‘infrastructural turn’ (Graham 2010; Amin 2014). In these studies, infrastructure is framed as a coupling of the social and the technical – thus as a sociotechnical rather than merely technical reality. As sociotechnical systems, infrastructures are framed as ‘a key political site through which urban futures are negotiated and forged’ (Rutherford 2020: 3; McFarlane & Rutherford 2008).

This framing is particularly evident in studies linked by their dedication to urban contexts. Here, contemporary infrastructure debates have focused on the networked character of cities, and how infrastructures shape and are shaped by the material flows and processes that constitute urban life in the city (Graham 2000; Amin & Thrift 2017). In these studies, the “‘modern infrastructure ideal’” of spatially and socially ubiquitous centrally-governed infrastructures providing exclusive, homogeneous services over extensive areas’ has been critiqued as the standard of reference for the providing of basic essential services, such as water and energy supply (Graham 2010; Coutard & Rutherford 2015). Part of this critique has to do with the idea that the realisation of this ideal requires a highly integrated socio-spatial context in terms of wider social, political, institutional and demographic conditions (Coutard & Rutherford 2015). Scholars who have studied cases in urban contexts where informality and fragmentation are the norm rather than the exception have questioned the universal applicability of this ideal, while demonstrating broad differences, particularly but not entirely, between cities in the Global North and Global South.

Consequently, critical urban scholars have shown how this ideal becomes practically impossible to achieve, particularly in cities that constantly face economic and spatial disintegration (Coutard & Rutherford 2015; McFarlane 2010; McFarlane & Rutherford 2008; Graham 2010; Graham & Marvin 2001). This work examines urban infrastructure beyond what Graham & Marvin (2001) termed the ‘modern infrastructure ideal’ (Kooy & Bakker 2008; Jaglin 2014; Coutard & Rutherford 2015; Monstadt & Schramm 2017; Lawhon *et al.* 2018; Smiley 2020). It demonstrates how hybrid and heterogeneous infrastructures create new modes for access and city-making. Moreover, it examines what Coutard & Rutherford (2015) have referred to as the ‘post-networked city’, a notion that describes the multiplicity of urban infrastructure configurations beyond and complementary to centralised networks. Other studies build on Simone’s (2004; 2021) view of ‘people as infrastructure’,

a view which provokes a way of thinking that directs attention to the infrastructural practices of users who seek to compensate for the splintered nature of networked infrastructures (Graham & Thrift 2007, De Boeck 2013). Fundamentally, this work draws attention to the bounds and limits of universal and standardised coverage by a single, homogeneous network. It demonstrates contexts that, while strongly guided by the network ideal of city planning and policymaking, services are still barely delivered within the framework of a uniform, ubiquitous system but through incremental heterogeneous and hybrid modalities (Silver 2014; Jaglin 2014).

However, while the focus on hybrid and heterogeneous modalities of infrastructure supply and access within the Global South has received increased attention within social studies (Guma 2020; 2022), there is need to gain a better understanding of the modest, low-cost, small-scale and sometimes improvised infrastructural and technological interventions that are important in the everyday lives and survival of marginal populations in small and marginal cities. In particular, there is need to bring to the fore of theorisation the creative infrastructural and technological strategies of resilience to urban challenges of access to basic infrastructures (i.e. energy, water, sanitation, housing, transportation) by the poorest of the poor and most fragile and vulnerable populations in small and marginal cities. While there is plenty of technical literature on the 'urban poor', and particularly on areas of 'slum redevelopment', a lot of this literature is mostly based on challenges and dynamics of large, central cities (see Guma 2021). Although the critical role of such focus is important for highlighting the rather stark inequities in access to basic services that have historically left many populations marginalised and struggling for survival, it still remains important to highlight questions that remain unanswered when it comes to the plight of the poorest population, including the poorest, most fragile and least resourced regions of the Global South.

Thus, future studies need to take a more balanced approach to examining marginal cities and towns as there is still a lack of understanding of more diverse urban, technological and infrastructural patterns of urban development within these contexts (Guma 2021). In other words, studies need to pay attention to marginal cities' segregated territoriality, and as such highlight their different socio-spatial dimensions and different compositions from the large and central cities. Such an effort has the potential to illuminate the peculiarity of experiences within the context of marginal cities beyond simply 'informal' areas in large and central cities which, while sharing similar characteristics of marginality and poverty as marginal cities and towns, might reflect a different image in terms of technological and infrastructural arrangements.

Realising this goal is synonymous with uncovering the varied infrastructures in marginal cities to maximise the participation and integration of poor urban communities in the provisioning of basic infrastructural services in the context of urban crises and urban change. Particularly, there is need to better our understanding of small infrastructure interventions, and the ways in which the urban poor actively integrate themselves into urban systems, how they deploy a range of practices to navigate and negotiate the networks they need to put together the semblance of a viable life (see e.g. Simone 2004; 2016; 2021). Also imperative is the need uncover how residents in such regions use infrastructure to accomplish these tasks, albeit with many constraints and limitations to better understand different diverse communities and local socio-political realities.

Learning from marginal cities and populations

Cities everywhere have begun to assume a far more prominent role within urban theory to the extent that these cities do not represent an anomalous category but rather a fundamental dimension to the global experience of urbanisation (Gandy 2005; Robinson 2002). However, urban studies need to broaden further the spatial scope of the infrastructure analysis beyond the focus on large and central cities. A focus on marginal cities and populations in the Global South is important for raising wider questions about the nature of modernity, urban governance, and the interactions between global capital flows and the material conditions of actually existing development on the ground. Marginal cities and populations have the potential to illuminate the peculiarity of diverse experiences as they tend to face different kinds of challenges from large and central cities. For instance, they endure diverse disruptions, such as increased resource extraction, internecine and violent ethnic conflicts often between native communities, extreme poverty, and other vulnerabilities including strains of pandemic and endemic infectious diseases. Such vulnerabilities cause disruptions and infrastructural devastation that tend to be more severe and profound for cities in the emerging urban contexts of the Global South. Moreover, this form of order and development often tends to be exacerbated by prolonged consequences of colonial inheritances, political instabilities, destabilised systems, and place-based vulnerabilities.

In the Global South, marginal cities and populations remain some of the most socially impoverished and politically contested (Büscher 2018; Urdal & Hoelscher 2012; Wiig & Silver 2019). Even where cities have been the most endowed in terms of natural wealth and resource, these resource wealth and reserves also become reminiscent of what is often referred to as the ‘resource curse’—where natural resources open the conurbations up to diverse forms of strategic speculation and interests, with wealthy foreign investors seeking to shift urban trajectories of the city; private entrepreneurs seeking to create new and expand existing markets; political elites seeking avenues for accumulating wealth through rent-seeking and lucrative deals; individual sojourners seeking opportunities to profit on market speculation; urban planners seeking to restructure the city in the making; strategic politicians seeking to reframe and realign their own political agendas; and dissenters being reminiscent of the destabilising effects of extraction by big corporations (Guma 2021). Moreover, these wealth and reserves tend to spur violent conflict and strife, becoming loci for wide-ranging actions and engagements of foreign and diplomatic missions containing impasses; international humanitarian efforts protecting victims; political elites weaponising ethnic tensions for political gain; armed groups extracting and controlling mineral resources and deposits to finance their operations; and business elites primitively accumulating wealth at all cost.

These processes under-gird the limits and opportunities of least resourced, yet fast urbanising cities in the peripheries. Heightened by the disrepair of conventional grid networks, these processes lead to civilian casualties and displacements to neighbouring regions. They characterise the nature of emerging cities which, while highly endowed with massive wealth and resources, often also tend to be faced with combined pressures of increased resource extraction, violent conflict, extreme poverty, infrastructural devastation, and endemic infectious diseases.

While the global urban studies and policy development discourses have attempted to discern some of these issues for cities in the Global South in the present phase of global capitalism, the challenges and opportunities of inhabiting fragile and marginal contexts remain highly unexplored.

Academic researchers and policymakers—with some exceptions of course—have mostly reflected a preference for the cities and infrastructures perceived to command enormous stature and impact (primarily competitive cities or infrastructures and mega-cities or networked and grid infrastructures). Smaller, marginal cities and infrastructures or technologies in the hinterlands remain peripheral in contemporary processes of urban planning and governance. In some cases, this is worse for cities that are apparently more affected by fragility, conflict and violence, and which remain excluded in mainstream discourse. Intentionally or not, this exclusion has mostly served to heighten, perpetrate and institutionalise inequalities between: (a) central cities and marginal cities, (b) urban regions and their urbanising hinterlands, and (c) the centre and the periphery in policy-design and implementation. Within policy landscapes, practices often appear remote for cities in the margins where central governance often tends to focus on large, central cities even within the context of devolution of local authority.

Therefore, it becomes timely and of the essence to bring the plight of poorer, and more fragile and marginal cities, and particularly those who live within them, to the fore of policy-design and development. It is imperative to provide proper documentation for and theorisation of the alternative technics, politics and strategies of the poorest urban populations constantly negotiating and navigating the most fragile and vulnerable contexts; and as such, to explicate and draw lessons from the creative, innovative and ingenuous ways in which such populations navigate everyday urban challenges triggered by the failures and absences of grid networks.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I set out to make a case for the need to counter the indifference of urban research to marginal areas and urbanising hinterlands. Such areas and hinterlands are increasingly prone to deterioration, collapse and absence of conventional centralised network grids, and they are imperative for drawing alternative lessons aimed at tackling infrastructure and realising sustainable economies and societies. Thus, I make the case for the need to counter the indifference in scholarship to marginality and the ‘smallness’ of cities and as such to pay attention to small, marginal and understudied cities that still remain relatively peripheral in theorising infrastructures and sustainability within urban studies. I argue that it is imperative to advance our understanding of how the urban poor in smaller and marginal cities navigate and negotiate the absence and inadequacy of formal infrastructure, and how they put together a semblance of viable life through modest, low-cost, small-scale and sometimes improvised infrastructures and technologies interventions in their everyday lives. In light of this, it is important to recognise that populations (a) live beyond the network and employ creative manoeuvres shaped by organic processes and practices within their different or specific neighbourhoods, (b) are constantly negotiating different ways of dealing with the network in creative and ingenuous ways often through self- and communally organised formations of governance, and (c) tend to have their own sociotechnical dreams and visions which sometimes transcend standardised forms of networks.

In an age where sustainable solutions to urban and infrastructural challenges are bound to emanate not just from technical experts, but also from directly affected populations themselves, it is imperative to recognise the significance of simpler more cost-effective and sustainable solutions by urban populations in small, marginal cities. Such solutions are important as they inform a series of investment forums bringing different sectors together to think about strategies for larger-scale

developments. Further studies are needed to contribute a better understanding of these kinds of projects, thereby benefiting infrastructural processes and practices in engineering and urban development. As stark inequities and injustices to basic infrastructures have historically left many urban populations marginalised and their residents struggling to survive, such focus is needed to promote narratives of urban resilience and sustainability at the most fundamental levels of urban society.

Thus, this article doubles as a call for opening up our inquiry to new socio-spatial dimensions, and creating more sustainable solutions to 21st-century urban problems. New engagement needs to align with interdisciplinary interests, e.g. by social scientists with particular interest in socio-technical developments, which might have particular potential in triggering the emergence of new viable trajectories for urban development, particularly within the smallest, most fragile, volatile and conflict-affected and conflict-prone areas in the Global South and beyond. Such engagement is important for offering alternative solutions and strategies that relate to the poorest of the poor who must survive in times of fragility, vulnerability, violence and conflict, especially within emerging contexts of the Global South.

Beyond this focus, this article calls for novel ways of how we think, plan, and govern countries, cities and peoples at the interstices of the poorest most fragile, vulnerable, conflict affected and least-resourced cities within the lowest-income countries in the Global South and elsewhere. Creative solutions and social innovations that are unfolding within small, peripheral cities affected by fragility, conflict and violence are imperative for seeking out actionable policy alternatives and concrete proposals that speak to different forms of power. Therefore, it is important, going forward, to instigate conversations that transcend the heightened role of formal and hegemonic institutions, turning attention to informal and heterogeneous structures beyond simply ‘ordinary urban places, knowledges, and needs’ (McFarlane & Söderström 2017). Empirically, this calls for grounding our discourses in Southern perspectives that not only transcend dominant interpretations but also de-territorialise, deprovincialise, and decentre knowledge on tackling infrastructure. It calls for being open to new conceptions and awareness in our outlook, and even more so from the view point of the populations who live in marginal contexts and must employ creative, localised and makeshift improvisations that speak to their subaltern experience.

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