

# Neoliberal urban development and the polarization of urban governance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of neoliberal urban planning on urban governance, using Dar es Salam as a case study. Drawing on planning literature and the concepts of 'state-capitalist,' 'coercive monopoly,' and 'de jure collusion', the paper examines how the desire to spur economic growth has undermined planning practice and city management. By combining literature, observations and interviews with practitioners and academics, the paper reveals that neoliberal planning promotes elite interests, over the needs of the poor, limiting their right to the city. Planning is reduced to a mere exercise of market facilitation, with little to no social impact. Lack of social resonance, the paper notes, suggests a misplaced priority and a parochial preoccupation among city authorities. To create equitable urban spaces and development, the paper argues for a shift toward inclusive planning approaches in the cities of the Global South.

## 1. Introduction

Although urbanization drives economic growth, it presents threatening challenges, including exclusion and inequality, insecurity, and informality (UN-Habitat, 2016). Tackling this complex problem and associated externalities demand a pragmatic and coordinated approach driven by distinct policy instruments (World Bank, 2018). Important to the success of urban policies are planning frameworks, which play a major role in transforming policy visions into implementation while improving impact (Urban Times, 2016). The lack of effective planning instruments, therefore, undermines sustainable city and urban management, and this has been the case of many African cities. High levels of poverty, weak institutions, and patchy service provision are commonplace in African cities, forming a microcosm of the neoliberal world. The current outlook reinforces the existing weaknesses of incremental development of residential and commercial properties, which lack transformative power (van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018). African cities have become fertile grounds for speculation in landed properties for quick profit-making among the few elites. van Noorloos and Kloosterboer (2018) refer to this phenomenon as 'consumption-oriented development'. Such investments are also underscored by the desire of city authorities to be recognized as emerging global centers and as 'world-class cities' (Roy & Ong, 2011; Watson, 2013).

However, the neoliberal model of development has far-reaching consequences, as housing needs, livelihoods and other social elements of life receive little attention. Scholars have strongly criticized the private sector-led master-plan-driven modernization (Cain, 2014; Moser,

2015; Watson, 2013). To van Noorloos and Kloosterboer (2018, p 1225), "the framing of these self-contained urban projects as 'urgent' and 'inevitable' in the context of Africa's rapid urban population growth also means that displacement of poor city dwellers is regarded as a necessary evil". Watson (2013) describes such obsession as a feature of 'speculative urbanism'. The emerging evidence suggests that the desire to effectively manage urbanization with new spatial development in an equitable and inclusive manner has failed due to the lack of long-term planning visions coupled with profit-making mentality (Baffoe, Malonza, Manirakiza, & Mugabe, 2020; Baffoe & Roy, 2022; van Noorloos & Kloosterboer, 2018). van Noorloos and Kloosterboer (2018, p 1226) argued that "many of today's new cities emerge from a neoliberal drive to 'create the next world city' in order to be competitive and attract investment". Thus, the need for a conducive business environment has undermined the effectiveness of planning in many African cities. But the question is, how is this neoliberal model of development impacting urban governance and city management? This paper shares light on this question using Dar es Salam as a case study. The paper employs the concepts of 'state-capitalist' (Stiglich, 2021), 'coercive monopolies' and 'de jure collusion' (Gibson, Legacy, & Rogers, 2023) to advance the argument. The literature insight is supported with observations and interviews with practitioners and academics from Dar es Salam. By exploring the intersection of neoliberal planning and urban governance, the paper provides fresh perspective on the challenges facing rapidly growing cities in Africa, offering valuable insights for policymakers and scholars.

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## 2. Theoretical frameworks

Neoliberalism connects political debates on economization of social life with the reformation of welfare states, and globalization (Sager, 2011). It connotes privatization of public services, reduction of taxes, deregulation of markets, flexible labour laws, and safeguarding of individual assets (Harvey, 2005, 2006; Weaver, 2016). The role of the state in promoting markets, privileging capital, and protecting private property is visible (Weaver, 2016). However, some scholars believe that neoliberalism engenders economic rigging in favour of the few elites and multinational corporations at the expense of the majority poor (Goonewardena, 2007). The state adopts state-capitalist reforms (Stiglich, 2021) to facilitate deal-making with the elites in producing urban spaces that traverse government and cooperate spheres (Gibson et al., 2023; Kuus, 2020). Unsolicited proposals become the medium by which the state facilitates negotiations with private actors (Gibson et al., 2023). The motive is to attract global investments to fund cities under juicy contracts and transfers, allowing for monopolies over monumental public development projects (Gibson et al., 2023).

In an urban development context, neoliberal policies limit urban planning, resulting in grave spatial consequences (Sager, 2011). The narrative that neoliberalism is the best solution to global development problems is, therefore, challenged (Carmody & Owusu, 2016). Addressing pressing challenges demands carefully tailored strategies, rather than romanticized neoliberalism (Afenah, 2009). To Weaver (2016, p 235), 'the degree to which cities have undergone neoliberal transformation can be explained by two mechanisms: neoliberalism by design and neoliberalism by default. While the former entails the process by which national and local elites garner the power of state institutions to impose a neoliberal plan, the latter results from political, institutional, and ideological challenges that force political players to adopt urban policies' that is characteristic of neoliberal ideologies. Both mechanisms are typical in Dar es Salaam. On one hand, powerful individuals use their wealth to influence development plans to their advantage – 'deal-making'. On the other hand, the state continues to import Western plans and ideologies that are planted in neoliberalism.

In planning, neoliberalism 'mobilizes urban space as an arena for market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption practices, and in doing so, transforms the politico-economic setting in which public plans and projects are implemented' (Sager, 2011, p 149). Neoliberalisation of planning, therefore, entails the reconfiguration of core planning functions to improve the built and natural environment by market mechanisms. By positioning itself as a 'capitalist reformist', the state withdraws its role in service provision, but becomes active in introducing market principles to promote private sector-led economic development. Planning, therefore, becomes a driving force for market competition in cities (Beaten, 2012). Significantly, the right of urban dwellers to lay claims on the government to provide critical services is severely undermined. The 'city as a right, as an entitlement, is eroded and replaced with the city as a possibility and opportunity' (Beaten, 2012, p 206). Planning, therefore, is used to establish the policy architecture through which mega 'deal-making' – a manifest of hybrid urban governance – is institutionalised in a form of governance structure (Goldman, 2021; Prince, 2012).

## 3. Does neoliberal planning undermine urban governance?

Creating conducive business environment may be a sound economic policy on the surface, however, such practice not only undermine effective city management but also worsen already deteriorating social conditions, especially among the urban poor. New [physical] developments are always associated with large-scale displacement and expropriations (Sassen, 2014), and this is very common in countries like Ghana, Tanzania, and Rwanda. In Rwanda, for instance, the accumulation of public lands through expropriation has led to homelessness and livelihood disruption, with destitution becoming commonplace in Kigali

(Baffoe, Ahmad, & Bhandari, 2020). In Africa, planning and land management are shrouded in obscure speculation and corruption, favoring the elites and government officials. There is a 'coercive monopoly' – where entry to the market is closed with no opportunity to compete, and 'de jure collusion' – where regulation reforms codify mutually beneficial alliances between an elite group of high-level actors connected across government, corporate and consultancy worlds' (Gibson et al., 2023, p 187). Planning reforms are increasingly planted in de jure collusion (McManus & Haughton, 2021). What exists now is a form of 'hybrid urban governance' architecture that is designed to benefit the elites by consolidating state power, undermining competition and pontificating deal-making (Gibson et al., 2023). This, the study argues, perpetuates inequality while enshrining power relations.

Private sector-led developments are characterized by top-down planning instead of bottom-up approaches. Such investments reduce national and city-level planning instruments and institutions into mere facilitating enterprises, lacking public engagement in planning initiatives (Cirolia, 2014; Grant, 2015). New developments are also detached from social accountability (Murray, 2015a, 2015b; Watson, 2013) and this undermines the effectiveness in controlling their activities. In Waterfall City, Johannesburg, for instance, private property management companies have replaced official institutions mandated to regulate land use planning and development (Murray, 2015b). What this means is that the majority of the people who happen to be poor are rendered voiceless in city management. Given that deal-making is grounded in Unsolicited Proposals, the conventional governance systems which support face-to-face interactions are eroded and replaced by elite networks supported by state power (Ayres, 2019; Gibson et al., 2023). Inclusivity in planning is needed.

## 4. Dar es Salaam as a neoliberal city

Dar es Salaam, a fast-growing city with a population of about 5.6 million, is set to become a megacity by 2030 (URT/National Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Todd, Msuya, Levira, & Moshi, 2019). Its emergence as a neoliberal city date back to the 1980s, largely influenced by shifts in economic policies, including government's withdrawal from directly providing urban services, such as water, housing, waste disposal and transport (Rizzo & Wuyts, 2014). This shift ushered in an era of deregulation and privatization. In the transport sector, reforms to allow for private ownership and control were necessitated in response to both domestic demands and global capitalism wave (Rizzo & Wuyts, 2014). In the mid-2000s, neoliberal land formalization initiatives, which sought to address tenure insecurity and poverty, led to domestic and international investment and strategic partnerships for urban development projects, including the millennium business park, economic development zone (EDZ) projects, and satellite-housing schemes (Peter & Yang, 2019). Other developments include high rise buildings in prime areas, gated communities, and high-end residential areas, such as Kigamboni City. The advent of technology has further transformed the urban landscape, reinforcing Dar es Salaam's neoliberal identity. In the area of healthcare services, although privatization has improved accessibility, the associated high cost implies that the majority poor face a hurdle in accessing proper healthcare.

Despite the policy shifts, however, planning challenges persist, particularly in informal settlements, where over 70 % of the population live with no access to basic services (Gwaleba & Masum, 2018). Presently, over 90 % of people living in the city are involved in vulnerable informal livelihoods. Additionally, more than 50 % of the population survive on less than \$1.90 per day (World Bank, 2020). The current development path of the city presents a complex picture of the neoliberal model of development, where the negative impacts outweigh the positives.

## 5. Neoliberal planning and urban governance in Dar es Salam

Dar es Salaam has been entangled with complex socioeconomic, political, and environmental challenges, which undermine the governance and planning of the city. On paper, planning has shifted from centralization to decentralization, but the reality is different. The needed relationship and coordination between different planning entities is lacking, leading to policy fragmentation, disjointed implementation of projects, and misallocation of resources (Todd et al., 2019). Commenting on the current situation, one scholar highlighted how this has rendered the planning profession redundant.

“It is difficult to know who is doing what because the different departments do not coordinate their activities. It's not the best, the unfinished projects are numerous but unfortunately, there is no proper accountability. How can we progress with this?”

(Interview A, 2023).

In practice, all planning-related decisions are in the hands of the Ministry of Land, Housing, and Human Settlement Development (MLHSD). The MLHSD seems to be doing everything, including land servicing, project formulation and implementation, rendering city and council authorities ineffective (Peter & Yang, 2019). All the interviewees alluded to the centrality of planning activities. A planning official explained the challenge and highlighted how their profession is tagged with political colours.

“The truth is that we don't have the needed power to implement most of the programmes we have on paper. Policies are clear on what we should be doing but the reality is different. You know we are under MLHSD, we simply cannot act independently and that's what is making us look as if we are not doing anything. We have failed in

many areas and that's having a negative toll on our profession. People always say we support government projects because we need favours but that is not the case, I can tell you for a fact”

(Interview B, 2023).

Planning activities are always influenced by private real estate developers, echoing the ‘state-capitalist’ thesis. Government agencies continue to receive ‘Unsolicited Proposals’ for private development, which in most cases are facilitated by elite social networks with bureaucrats. Planning is given little attention as a people-centred activity. The lack of local involvement in planning initiatives coupled with the lack of political will has led to increased inequality and poverty (Todd et al., 2019). Evidence from Baruti informal settlement highlighted the magnitude of weak governance at the local level (Gwaleba & Masum, 2018). Silencing local voices means neglecting the contextual issues which are paramount for the effective identification and prioritization of local needs. The scholars shared the view that governance is understood theoretically in Dar es Salam. One commented:

“People don't participate, especially in private developments. Projects keep springing up everywhere, but no local involvement. Is this governance? We understand governance from books”

(Interview C, 2023).

This view was supported by one of the planners, who remarked that they are not doing enough to involve local people in their activities.

Weak governance transcends planning institutions. Fig. 1 presents the general governance situation in Tanzania in comparison with Ghana and Kenya. Clearly, Tanzania lagged in all areas, particularly in government effectiveness and regulatory quality. Observations reveal that there is an entrenched apathy toward work in many public institutions. Interestingly, this was confirmed by all the interviewees. However, it

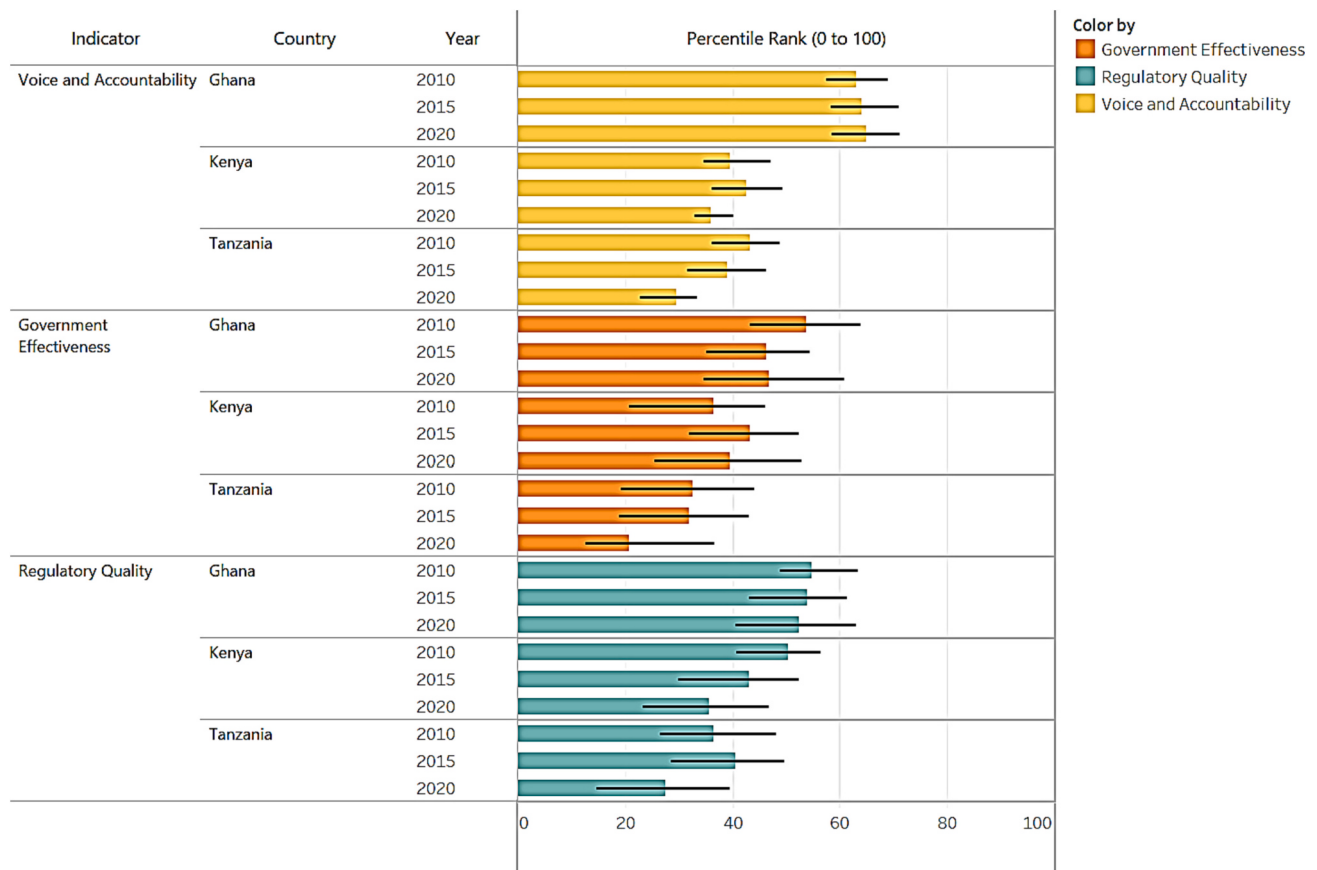


Fig. 1. Trend and dimensions of governance in Tanzania in comparison with other African countries.  
Source: Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2010).

needs to be tackled head-on if planning is to achieve its purpose of serving the people. A planner described the apathy at work as problematic. He argued:

“The motivation is not there to do what we are trained for. We lack the resources, and we are not allowed to practice professionally. Corruption is everywhere; people are induced with money, especially in the area of land transactions and property development. It's a big problem”

(Interview D, 2023).

The net result has been increased corruption in public institutions with a notable example including the 2017 case involving the Dar Rapid Transit (DART) project and the Dar es Salaam Regional Commissioner. The current practices mimic ‘coercive monopolies’ – where entry to, for instance, the housing market remains a mirage to the ordinary citizens, and ‘de jure collusion’ – where the government continues to use its power to facilitate land accumulation for private development. The Bogamoyo Port project and the Kigamboni Bridge projects are good examples. These high-profile projects have been criticized on the grounds of governance as lacking transparency and accountability. There is also a striking corrupt practice in land access, registration, and development. Interview respondents bemoaned the level of corruption in existing institutions. Consequently, the issue of ‘deal-making’ has become entrenched and increasingly seen as a normal practice in most government institutions. The unaccountable posture of these institutions renders governance a mere political rhetoric.

Urban planning in Dar es Salaam has been criticized for being discriminatory, top-down, and lacking foresight. The practice is characterized by ineffective projections, implementation deficiencies, unnecessary bureaucracy, and a lack of appropriate expertise. Public participation remains expensive. Planning has been reduced to a mere exercise of facilitation; a vehicle by state apparatus to accumulate land for private-sector-led developments. Inclusive development remains elusive as the poor and the voiceless continue to be marginalized in decision-making processes. Participatory planning approaches are needed.

## 6. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to share light on how the neoliberal model of planning and development impact urban governance and city management, using Dar es Salaam as a case study. The findings show a limited inclusivity of neoliberal planning, where the voices of the few elites often eclipsed the majority poor, undermining their right to the city as a place of hope and consequently immortalising poverty and vulnerability. The voiceless continue to remain as spectators and strangers to the process of urban development. Interestingly, this problem is not exclusive to the present case, as it mirrors a wider urban issue witnessed in other countries. The neoliberal type of development has made planning a loose exercise, with little to no social impact. Lack of social resonance in spatial planning, therefore, suggests a misplaced priority and a parochial preoccupation among state officials. With the interests of the poor continuously being relegated to the background, efforts in creating planned spaces across African cities will deepen current woes of social exclusion, inequality, poverty, and informality, which are all symptoms of neoliberal planning. It will further entrench ‘coercive monopoly’ and ‘de jure collusion’ while cementing the position of the government as a ‘state-capitalist’. As it has been argued elsewhere, while neoliberal planning minimizes the role of spatial regulation in urban development (Gleeson & Low, 2000), it also undermines governance and social justice in addition to perpetuating inequality (Carmody & Owusu, 2016).

Neoliberal practices render planning political activity, vesting power in the hands of the few elites through mechanisms like ‘Unsolicited Proposals’ and ‘deal-making’. Clearly, these hybrid governance models raise concerns about democracy, corruption, and power dynamics. The

lessons from Dar es Salaam highlight the need for pragmatic spatial planning approaches that prioritize inclusivity. These approaches require local contextualization and effective project management in all levels of urban administration. Effective governance empowers people and drive policies and initiatives that are aligned to their needs. However, these issues extend beyond a single city. To deepen our understanding, additional research is needed to unravel how ‘Unsolicited Proposals’, ‘deal-making’, ‘coercive monopoly’ and ‘de jure collusion’ interact to produce uneven urban spaces across African cities. The broader perspective shows that tackling the puzzle of neoliberal urban planning and governance is a pertinent challenge that requires a rethink of policies and practices in various cities across the Global South.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Gideon Baffoe:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Data and Writing.

## Declaration of competing interest

I confirm that all persons who contributed to the conception of this paper but did not contribute to the writing have been acknowledged. The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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