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Governance for pro-poor urban development: lessons from Ghana [book review]

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Obeng-Odoom, Franklin. 2013. Governance for Pro-Poor Urban Development: Lessons from Ghana. Routledge, Abingdon, and New York. 258 pp. ISBN: 9780415833769 (hbk)

During the last five years, Franklin Obeng-Odoom has produced a considerable body of research on urban Ghana, and emerged as one of the leading scholars in this particular field of study. In light of the author's growing reputation and my own research interests, I approached *'Governance for Pro-Poor Urban Development: Lessons from Ghana'* with genuine curiosity and high expectations, particularly given the aims and approaches claimed to be guiding the book. With regards to the overarching aim, Obeng-Odoom spells out his intentions in the opening chapter. After providing a concise overview of recent debates concerning urban growth rates and urbanization levels in Africa, he makes two interrelated observations. Firstly, data projections and associated depictions of an African continent bedevilled by rapid urbanization are often founded upon contentious and unreliable sources. Secondly, policies that are underpinned by these sources are likely to, and have, resulted in responses that are ill equipped to enact appropriate reforms.

The observation that data projections and associated depictions of urban growth rates and urbanization levels are problematic is unlikely to come as a surprise to those with an interest in African urban studies. However Obeng-Odoom uses this as an entrée point to spell out his real concern, namely pro-poor urban development, and how he aims to use Ghana as case study to 'analyze, explore and evaluate the assumptions and mission, vision, and outcomes of urban governance, a concept that remains difficult to define, measure or evaluate' (2013, pg.4). Two research questions steer this endeavour. Firstly, 'does urban governance lead to the effective provision of urban services'? Secondly, 'do the elements of urban governance that are said to create processes of 'empowerment' serve as a vehicle to hold urban governments to account?' (2013, p.36).

In order to achieve his aim and answer the research questions outlined above, Obeng-Odoom uses a theoretical approach shaped by a political economy perspective, which he claims provides a means to shed much needed light on underlying structural economic processes frequently missing in existing treatments of the Ghanaian urban condition. This political economy perspective is supplemented by data collected in the three key ways; a primary survey conducted with fifty Ghanaian immigrants in Sydney (Australia), national statistical reports, and accounts from newspapers and print media. Obeng-Odoom also draws on his experiences as a consumer of certain services, such as water and waste management.

The book is structured around eleven chapters spread across three parts. Part 1 titled 'Understanding Urban Governance and Cities' contains three chapters, and provides the rationale

for the book and situates the work within contemporary debates over urbanization and urban governance in Ghana, and Africa more broadly. It is here that Obeng-Odoom highlights the merits of understanding urban governance as a three dimensional concept framed around the triumvirate of decentralisation, entrepreneurship and democratisation (DED), and puts forward a theoretical framework for analysing African cities based on the work of David Harvey, Manuel Castells and David Drakakis-Smith.

To the authors' credit, he manages to provide a theoretical discussion that contains enough depth to be intellectually engaging, while avoiding a level of abstraction that may alienate readers unfamiliar with the works being cited. This is true of the book as a whole. Problematically, Obeng-Odoom fails to engage with a growing body of contemporary literature in African urban studies that attempts to generate theories and policy responses based on experiences that emerge from African cities themselves. To be clear, I have no problem with scholars using theories and concepts based on European and North American experiences and then applying them to an African context. My concern is that that by leaving out this strand of literature the author does himself and the reader a disservice. For example, if this literature has been omitted because of its shortcomings or inappropriateness, this book offered a platform for the author to highlight these limitations and thereby speak back to broader debates in the field. Meanwhile the reader is presented with a restricted view of the theoretical landscape currently guiding understandings of urban governance in Africa.

Part 2 'Urban policies and problems in Ghana' consists of 5 individual chapters each dedicated to one of the following topics; Employment and Inequality (4), Water, Waste and Health (5), Transportation (6), Housing (7) and Land (8). For those with an interest in urban Ghana this is likely to be the most thought-provoking section of the manuscript. Obeng-Odoom's threefold data collection strategy enables him to outline several key issues facing urban residents, particularly how these issues are often linked to the distinctive ways in which economic liberalisation policies have taken shape in Ghana e.g. how traditional land customs play out in a context shaped by the triumvirate of DED. The third and final part of the book titled 'Evaluations and prospects of urban governance' consists of three chapters looking at; electoral governance and poverty in Ghana (9), examples of urban governance in South Africa and Uganda (10) and a summary of key arguments and contributions (11).

Given the nature of the subject matter, the author does well to avoid projecting a dystopian vision of Ghana's urban localities and importantly, offers policy recommendations to address the problems identified. Nevertheless, I found it hard to escape a sense that despite the useful insights culled from newspaper articles and the author's personal experiences, this is a book that looks at

pro-poor urban development/governance without actually providing insights from the people at the heart of the matter. National statistics, newspapers and other secondary sources can only tell us so much. Thus as a reader, it was often difficult to conjure a sense of how urban residents develop their own behaviours and logics, and how this feeds into the individual and or collective strategies that ensue in their attempts to access services in the absence of effective urban governance. This has implications for Obeng-Odoom's call for a more democratic and accountable form of urban governance, because I concur with scholars who argue that transformative political change in the sphere of urban governance will necessitate an articulation of struggles underpinning household and neighbourhood drivers of urban reproduction. The author's reference to the work of Armataya Sen suggests he may feel the same way, thus an approach more sensitive to this point may emerge in subsequent works.

As indicated above, *'Governance for Pro-Poor Urban Development: Lessons from Ghana'* is not without its shortcomings, yet I have a feeling it will retain a place on my book shelf for several years to come. This is because those like myself with an interest in urban planning and development in Ghana will find this book to be an excellent repository of facts and figures. It also provides an example of critiquing urban governance in the present, while offering recommendations to create a more just and egalitarian society in the future. Would I recommend the book to those interested in urban governance in Africa more generally? Most definitely. But I would also advise them to read *City Futures* by Edgar Pieterse and *African Cities* by Garth Myers.

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