Exploring how subaltern actions and do-it-yourself strategies are evolving and creating order in new urbanizing areas of developing countries: *Reflection on Urbanisation in Nairobi's peri-urban areas, Kenya*

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Abstract

The process of urbanization is one of the most important dimensions of economic, social and physical changes. It is almost a truism that the planet's future is an urban one and that the largest and fastest growing cities are in developing countries, Kenya is not an exception. Rapid urban population growth means an increasing demand for urban. This land is not available within the city, but in peri-urban areas, for various reasons. Urban growth is already engulfing the surrounding agricultural lands and small villages. The conversion of agricultural land to residential uses is leading to the rapid transformations in the agricultural production, spatial structure, social structure, land ownership and land market in these areas.

This paper focuses on the responses/actions of the communities within Nairobi's peri-urban areas and how they manoeuvre through the consequences of changes occasioned by land conversions. It used Town council of Karuri (TCK) as a case study. The paper based on qualitative research approaches presents evidence on how subaltern' actions and do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies play an important role in creating order in an otherwise chaotic situation as a result of 'poorly planned' residential development. The subalterns' actions do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies, as evidenced by their agency, are manifested in community's contribution and participation in provision of infrastructure and services within the Nairobi's peri-urban areas due to inability of formal provision by planning authorities.

1.0 Introduction

The process of urbanization is one of the most important drivers of economic, social and physical change in developing countries such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa (Pieterse, 2008; Simon, 2007: 301; Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000). Rakodi (1997: 1) argues that it is "almost a truism that the planet's future is an urban one and that the largest and fastest growing cities are primarily in developing countries." Approximately 25 percent of continental Africa's population lived in towns and cities in 1975. And that in the year 2000, due to the combined effects of rural-urban migration and rapid rates of natural increase, 38 percent of the continent's population lived in urban areas and the proportion is expected to increase to 47 percent by 2015 , and to double between by 2050 (Thomas, 2008: 60; Hall and Pfeifer, 2000: 3).

Aguilar and Ward (2003) indicate that rapid urban population growth has thus led not only to an increasing demand for urban land, particularly for housing, but also for other various urban uses. And that in many countries, the increasing demand for land is affecting peri-urban areas, where urban expansion is already encroaching into the agricultural lands and small villages. Peri-urban areas are characterized by a diverse land uses, which often vary in relation to their functional linkages to urban and to rural sectors. They are transitional in nature, that is, they become progressively more agrarian in orientation as one recedes from the urban centre to the rural areas. Due to diverse land uses, most population here comprises of heterogeneous groups including original residents, farmers, migrant residents, recreational land users, industrial users, natural resource users, investors and speculators, developers and builders.

Despite the importance of peri-urban areas, Simon *et al.* (2006: 7), Huchzermeyer and Mbiba (2002) indicate that the area is still understudied. Among the reason given for fewer studies on peri-urban areas is partly due to the divisions on academic disciplines that focus on either entirely on areas that have rural or urban aspects. This rural/urban dichotomy does not give room for a proper description that explains the development occurring in the area where the urban and rural areas meet. Also contributing to the fewer studies is the conceptual and operational separation of urban and rural areas in the planning theory and practice. Additionally, the concept of urban sprawl, which seeks to explain the urban expansions in peri-urban, has also been cited as contributing in obscuring the complexity of cultural, environmental, economic and social forces in work here (Audirac, 1999: 7).

Against little focus on peri-urban areas (Masuda and Gavin, 2006; Mbiba and Huchzermeyer, 2002) indicate that the conversion of agricultural land to urban uses is leading to rapid transformations in the peri-urban areas. Other than fewer studies, the social dynamics at work in these areas has not been easily envisaged until visible physical land conversions actually begin takes place. It is at the rural-urban interface however, being the site for current and future urban growth, that we can better understand the process of today's urbanisation, as well as evolving conflicts over land uses. It is also in the areas where opportunity to manage urban growth pattern before they get imprinted on the landscape exist.

According to (McGregor *et al.,* 2006: 317), managing the urban growth in peri-urban areas is however complex and conflict ridden. It is particularly so in developing nations such as Kenya, where legal and policy framework on land use and ownership is weak. As result land development has occurred in a haphazard manner resulting into the urban sprawl and thus non-optimal use of land within the controlled areas (Mundia and Aniya, 2006).

2.0 Conceptualising urbanisation in peri-urban areas

This paper focuses on the responses/actions of the community (with great emphasis to landholders[1]) within the Nairobi's peri-urban areas and how they manoeuvre through the consequences of changes occasioned by urbanisation. It used Town council of Karuri as a case study. The paper based on qualitative research approaches presents empirical evidence of how subaltern actions (Yeboah, 2005: 51) and do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies play an important role in creating order in an otherwise chaotic situation as a result of 'poorly planned' residential development. The subalterns' actions and do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies, as evidenced by their agency, are manifested in community member's contribution and participation in provision of infrastructure and services within the Nairobi peri-urban areas due to inability of formal provision by the planning authorities. Furthermore these actions are manifested in the way community members are able to manoeuvre their ways to accommodate changes within their midst.

Land use conversions in peri-urban context such as in areas surrounding Nairobi can be thought of being influenced by three sets of conditions that are interrelated and have evolved over time. These

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[1] I acknowledged the presence of diverse actors but I chose to give landholders more prominence than other actors because the decision to convert land or not ultimately depend on them. However, because landholder do not live in isolation, where necessary I have made reference to other actors.

include (i) macro conditions and interactions such as political and economic conditions, agricultural produce markets, corruption, SAPs, national regulations and policies, (ii) micro/local conditions and interactions such as local political affairs, local government regulations, corruption, neighbours, customs, off-farm jobs, pollution, land prices, historical aspects (colonial past), infrastructure and (iii) landholding/ farm/household conditions that influence land use decisions such as values, family labour, clan membership, lifecycle elements, and locational aspects of the land, among others. The three sets of conditions overlap as they are not mutually exclusive (Cark, 2008: 11).

Each landholder has a set of relations that extend across place and scale or both. The context in which landholders are positioned affects their response or adjustment mechanisms (Bathelt, 2006: 225). There are also influences on landholders which emanate from their local communities or local interactions such as social networks, clans, neighbours etc. In this case the locally-based relations have a key role in influencing landholders' decisions which lead to land conversions and may also affect the way they respond to the resultant changes.

Landholders are not universally impacted by the macro, micro and landholding conditions, but at the same time they do not have the ability to act entirely outside these forces. Their actions represent countervailing systems that evolve both in resistance to these forces and also as a way to take advantage of local opportunities. Their actions however reproduce the macro and micro structures. Their actions result in a variety of responses, due to agency (Clark, 2008: 13).

Agency (as the ability to act) shows that landholders may act differently and this is the reason why we do not have a homogenous rural-urban fringe landscape (Clark, 2008). Agency defined as the ability to change the context also means that context affects the amount of agency. In Figure 1 (adapted from Clark, 2008), there is a portion of household/landholder that is overlapped by local/micro and macro contexts and a portion that is not. The portion of landholder that is not overlapped (and therefore not constrained by the context) represents agency or the proactive strategies that result in adaptations or responses (see Figure 1). The portion of the landholder that is within the overlapping context is a part of landholder that is reactive to the context within which he/she operates. The amount of agency thus depends on the level of landholder's subsumption into micro and macro conditions. Therefore, responses by landholders in the rural-urban fringe can be a

reaction and or a realized intention or a combination of the two (Clark, 2008: 13). Their individual responses manifest specific actor-structure relations and are specific expressions of agency.
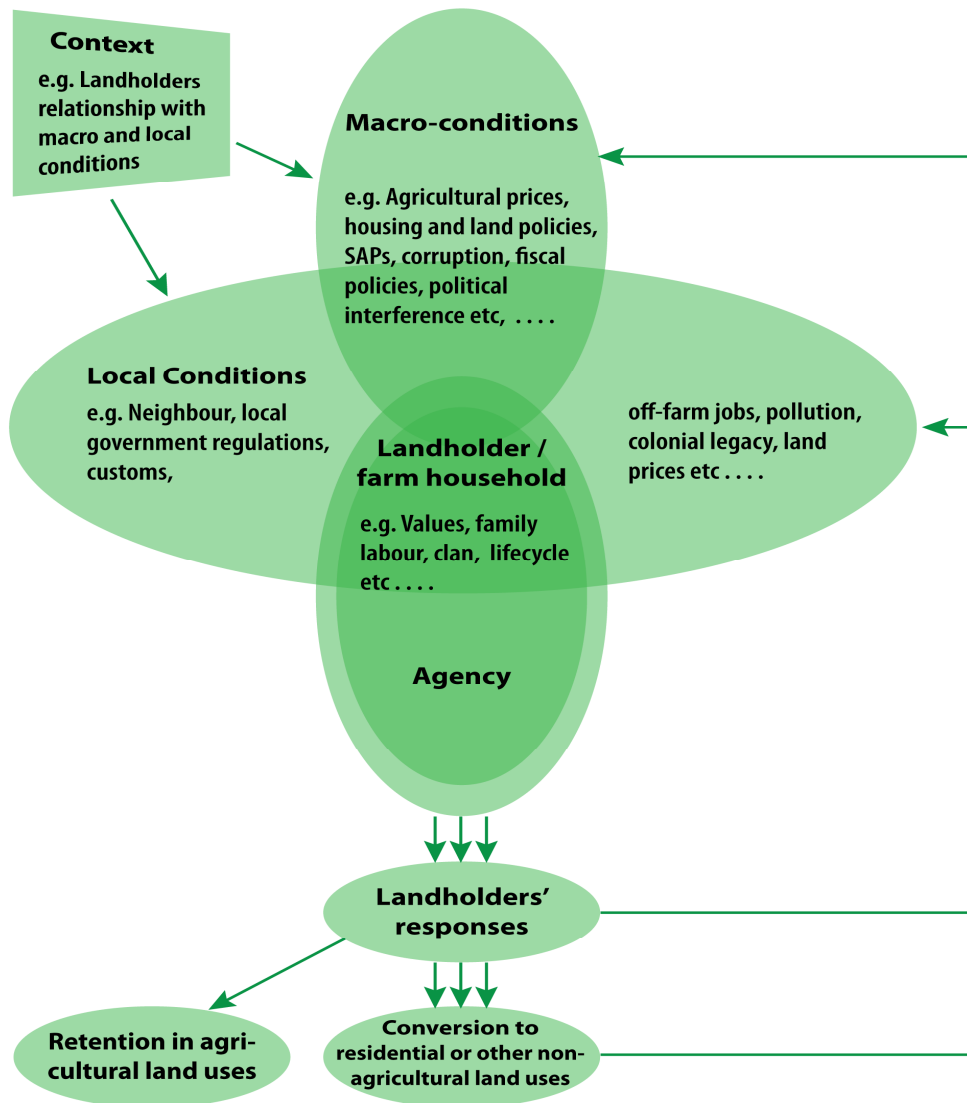
Context
e.g. Landholders relationship with macro and local conditions

Macro-conditions

e.g. Agricultural prices, housing and land policies, SAPs, corruption, fiscal policies, political interference etc, ...

Local Conditions
e.g. Neighbour, local government regulations, customs,

off-farm jobs, pollution, colonial legacy, land prices etc . . . .

Landholder / farm household

e.g. Values, family labour, clan, lifecycle etc . . . .

Agency

Landholders' responses

Retention in agri-cultural land uses

Conversion to residential or other non-agricultural land uses

Figure 1: Showing a structuration process in land use conversions. Source: (Adapted from Clark, 2008: 17).

The amount of agency changes over time or among landholders. Agency enables landholders to move away from the norm if conditions call for change. These deviations lead to a variety of responses, one of which is land conversion. The responses and land conversion consequences are

then fed back into all the three components, that is, micro, macro and landholding. The effects of each of the three components vary over time and space. Variations in these components affect the level of agency and responses among landholders in the rural urban fringe. This is because agency is mediated through relationships among landholders, and micro and macro conditions. A focus on the agency thus allowed this study to explore why landholders have different responses in what may seem to be similar structural circumstances. This perspective lead to an approach Evans (2008) called a modified political economic approach. This approach emphasises the importance of State policies (or lack of policies), social, environmental, cultural and economic conditions in constraining actions of landholders (and other actors), whilst offering scope to acknowledge that actors usually retain a modicum of choice in their actions under such conditions (Evans, 2008: 217).

The paper based on qualitative research approaches and using TCK (see Figure 2 and 3) as a case study shows that subalterns'[2] actions and do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies themselves also are also unintentionally leading to land conversions through the creation of enabling conditions for further agricultural land conversions. Land conversions are also taking place in circumstances where the exercise of agency by farming community to accommodate changes without necessarily selling or converting agricultural land to residential purposes is becoming severely affected by radically evolving new economic, social, cultural, and environmental pressures. These pressures are undermining the local capacities to respond to the changes and thus making some farming community members sell their land without a clear plan on what to do with sale proceeds.

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[2] A term subaltern is used here to mean persons or agents whose voices and actions are ignored by the dominant mode of production narratives. Yeboah (2005: 51) adds that it is possible to locate traces and testimony of subalterns' voices and actions on sites where they inscribe themselves in form of 'unofficial' actions.

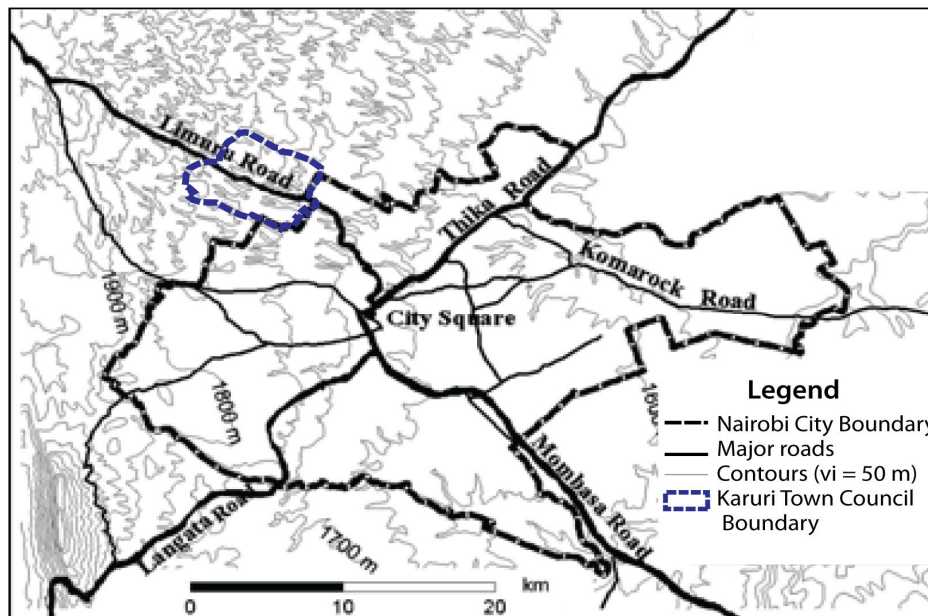**Figure 2: Location of Nairobi in Kenya, also indicating other provinces of Kenya.**

Figure 3: Showing the Town Council of Karuri in the context of Nairobi city. The map also indicates topography and major roads.

3.0 Traces of subaltern actions and do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies in Nairobi's peri-urban area

3.1 Changing modes of agricultural production

Land conversions for residential purposes in the Nairobi's peri-urban area is eating into agricultural land and thus leading to the reduction in the quantity and quality of land for farming. Since most of the land has been sub-divided either due to *in-situ* increasing population or immigration leading to land demand for residential purposes, most families have been left with small portions of land for cultivation. Therefore growing such crops as coffee is becoming economically unviable and thus farmers are switching to demand driven farm produce. This include cultivation of high value crops such as tomatoes, kale, cabbages and other fast moving green food. In addition, other than growing high value crops, farmers are also practicing zero grazing of dairy cows and poultry keeping within their parcels of land. This is being enhanced by the availability of the ready market for the dairy and poultry products in their midst and also in the nearby market in Nairobi city.

There are however some hardships that are encountered in the transition from the traditional farming to other modes of farming or livelihood. These hardships may include lack of money to pay for school fees, medication or for other life support needs. It is at this transition period that some farming community is severely affected and either fully subdivides their land for sale or sell some portion of land to meet the immediate money needs.

3.2 Changing income opportunities

With declining agricultural opportunities due to consequences of land conversions and population increase, most families formerly relying on farm for food and income are turning to looking for non-farm jobs within their locality or elsewhere. Most of them are either doing some business such as small-scale retail shops or are employed by the government or private sector. Also a good number of farmers are also working in the Nairobi city and elsewhere either in formal or informal sectors. The adoption of multiple sources of income is meant to complement the dwindling earnings from the farming. In most of the homesteads, it is likely to find at least one member working in a non-farm job.

3.3 Emergence of 'new spaces' of interaction and cultural practices

The family and kinship networks provide the basic support network for most rural communities. They are also responsible for socialising children, caring for the dependent and provide other kinds

of support to the members of the concerned community. As the newcomers join the indigenous community, several consequences emerges, among them is the breakdown of communal, kinship and familial ties. The intrusion by the newcomers not tied to local customs and norms, has weakened the cohesion among the members of the formerly rural communities. As result, people are losing the ways through which rallying people together for a particular communal cause have always been achieved. This is even more challenging to the elderly members of the indigenous groups given that they are unlikely to move to the Nairobi city or to other areas to look for employment like the young men and women. Breakdown of family ties and loss of communal cohesion has affected the initiation and management of community projects, caring for the dependants such as orphans and elderly and, also increase in crimes and other social vices.

However, as traditional institutions are breaking down, 'new modes' of interactions are emerging among the residents. This has proved to be important in promoting collective action by the various community groups and also in providing necessary support to various members of the community. In this regard, churches have become a new space of communal get-together where members meet to support each other in the times of need such as during bereavements, weddings or sickness. These are the roles that *Mbari* members primarily perform, though still being practised by some of the family/clan members in the area who have continued to stick to their *mbari*.

3.4 Community based initiatives/ controls

The Nairobi's peri-urban areas experience limited presence of governmental institution. This presence is in terms of the adequacy of the governmental institutions given the rates of population increases within these areas. Some of such institutions are Judiciary and the Police Departments. In face of the deficit there has been an evolution of neo-customary modes of dispute resolution or the alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. These mechanisms though referred to as informal have played a key role in the maintenance of order in these areas. Even land ownership/transfers have used the same so called informal land markets transact their businesses.

The alternative mechanisms are being promoted by various governmental and non-governmental entities in these areas, given that the government is not capable of providing most of the services needed, partly due to their informal statuses of these settlements from the beginning. Land related issues form the larger part of the most emerging conflicts and include quarrels over the plot boundaries, non-payment of instalments by the newcomers, multiple sales of the same plot or

earlier transactions being challenged by other family members, among others. Since from the inception such land deals are usually informal, it has been acceptable to let the same mechanism deal with the issues arising from such transaction. However, as have been noted in elsewhere (Thuo and Waswa, 2006: 132), informal initiatives have been found to be discriminatory in conflict resolution especially where some members of the society such as women and other marginalised groups are involved.

3.5 Resigning to fate

The pressure for land conversion is so much that some land buyers have been exerting much pressure on farmers to sell their land to them. Unorthodox means such as tricking farmers have been reported though not as predominant as the system of willing-seller-willing buyer. Most of the people own/hold land parcels which are less than one acre, which are even not sufficient for traditional farming. Since not all farmers are able to adopt new farming techniques and modes, and with problems being experienced n these urbanising areas, the kind of farming taking place in their land is hardly enough for subsistence production. Because most of these people are usually approached by the land buyers when they least expects to sell the land, the money from the sale of the first portion (in case they do not sell the whole parcel) is usually spent in an unplanned manner, and consequently ends up being used for consumptive rather than enhancing the productive purposes.

4.0 Lessons and discussion from Nairobi peri-urban areas

The foregoing points a actions and strategies that are emanating from communities in trying to make do with situation of services and infrastructure deprivation, sometimes being the only source of order and provision. This is in contrast to notion of dualism that has pervaded debates on formal and informal urbanisation, especially in relation to the urban development in developing countries. While commenting on issues of urbanisation in developing countries, Hall and Pfeiffer (2000: 15) argued that the

> urban poor ... have built their own city, without any reference whatsoever to the whole bureaucratic apparatus of planning and control in the formal city next door, and they are rightly proud of what they have achieved.

The above assessment points to the following issues: first, there is a 'city' which has been/is being built by the poor without reference to planning and development control frameworks; secondly, the 'city' is next to a formal city; and thirdly, builders are proud of their achievement. This statement indicates that the 'city' in question is likely to be located in the peri-urban area, that is, a 'formal

city next door.' This paper provides a good basis for interrogating some aspects of this 'city' which is outside the formal city. Key questions that one may ask are why is dual urban development taking place side by side, and are there intersections where these 'cities' meet and what can be learned from such dualism or rather from the 'city' that is outside the planning realms of the formal city?

Commenting on the informal aspects of land transaction, Berner (2000: 5) argued that in most developing countries where the State functions are not fully embedded into society, and State apparatuses are widely perceived to be mere instruments of convenience for a few members of society. In such a system of a weak State, nepotism and corruption behaviours by the dominant group prevails, and thus majority of the people feel/are excluded. This makes those feeling excluded evade or challenge regulations by State departments, thus making the cost of enforcement of such regulations expensive and land transaction rates to be high.

The above observation by Berner to some extent explains the origin of dualism in urban development. However, such observation may seem to equate informality with illegality, which has been a dominant narrative when reference is made to urban development in areas outside the reach of urban planning controls (Okoth-Ogendo, 2007: 5). The importance of norms, values and informal rules (Harrison, 2006: 322) that guide livelihood and land development are ignored when the focus is turned to legal status of land uses in such areas, thus, these areas became targets of planning authorities who try 'to put things right'.

This paper argues that, if the focus is moved away from the notions of the legality or illegality of urban development and the departure from the normative mindset (Harrison, 2006: 325) of 'improving' these areas, we may start to learn something new from the urbanisation that is taking place in undeniably difficult situations of vulnerability and depravity of services and infrastructure as in the Nairobi peri-urban areas. These new 'ways of knowing and doing' are both part of 'informal (traditional)' and 'formal (modernity)' mechanisms (Simon, 1997; Nabudere, 1997). This is a hybrid situation (Harrison, 2006) that indicates ingenuity of the peri-urban areas 'city-builders' in building productive lives under situations of severe constraint.

The notion of hybridity[3] allows us to understand that the processes labelled as informal or re-traditionalisation (Watson, 2002: 42) are not just failed formal sector planning but something which is unique and creatively adapted from formal planning itself (Zein-Elabdin, 2009: 1160-61; Harrison, 2006: 322). This is an indication that, other than hegemonic planning ideals adopted and inherited from Western Europe and North America, there is a mode of urban place making which is present and primordially evolving in other cultures (Harrison, 2006; Sandercock, 2004).   For example, in this paper, there is an indication that although there is a 'legal' land ownership system (modern) that guarantees statutory security to property, there are also local norms and practices (that are neither traditional or modern) that reinforce land rights and relationships outside 'official' legal systems but within a social framework that accepts them as legitimate.

In the face of inability of the State to enforce formal planning (occidental) rules in developing countries, there has been some recalling of the subalternised knowledge (Sharp, 2009: 115; Yeboah, 2006: 50; Harrison, 2006; Ogude, 1997: 106; Spivak, 1988: 298) by communities on managing land transactions and maintaining social order especially in peri-urban areas. The subaltern knowledge has been subjugated in places such as Kenya during the colonial government and by the successive independence governments that have pursued top-down approaches to planning. This knowledge has thus remained latent or categorised as informal or illegal (Harrison, 2006: 325). It, however, provides another 'way of seeing and thinking' along planning issues within local areas such as the Nairobi peri-urban areas. This highlights inadequacies in the uniform application of planning standards (based on 'Western' templates) under different situations, and more so indicating how actors negotiate their lives under hegemonic planning conditions, mostly the legacies of colonial administration (McEwan, 2002: 129; Mignolo, 2000: 100).

Actors in situations where formal planning goals do not reflect their local needs and practices, may adopt hybrid systems. Such systems, for instance in the Nairobi peri-urban areas, foster social order, land tenure security safeguards and provision of services, through an intricate set of relationships with the government (central and local) and community institutions. Theorising about these systems challenges conventional world views in urban planning and development in developing countries in terms of 'formal' and 'informal.' In addition, dichotomists' binaries of illegal/legal, informal/formal, planned/unplanned, secure/insecure need to be further interrogated.

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[3]'Hybridity' is the mixing of two or more separate things to make a new, third thing (Sharp, 2009: 75).

Hybridity is experienced as a place where "…global design meet[s] the local history and in the process become. hybridised" (Mignolo, 2000: 23) and therefore a site where a 'postcolonial city' can be said to be built or is being built, a place in the 'borderland' (Mignolo, 2000: 29) or 'borderline' (Bhabha, 2004: 322). Border thinking places peri-urban areas as sites where a new way of seeing and knowing urbanisation in postcolonial Africa can emerge. Such ways of knowing lie between the formal and informal planning, representing a form of 'double consciousness' on the way urbanisation is conceptualised within and outside dominant representations (Harrison, 2006: 333; Sandercock, 2004: 121; Young, 2003: 14).

Formal planning controls in the Nairobi peri-urban areas are compromised due to lack of explicit policies, programmes and practices that guide land development. For example, enforcement of existing policies and regulations is inconsistent due to jurisdictional overlaps and contradictions between various government departments, and the process of formally acquiring land which is cumbersome. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a flexible and hybrid planning system rather than blueprint plans that ignore daily struggles and negotiations (Simon, 2008: 14; Maconachie, 2007: 166; Harrison, 2006: 322; Roy, 2005: 156).

A hybrid system that recognises land as a part of complex material and symbolic social system and that seeks to incorporate everyday negotiations and practices stands a better chance of being accepted than one that continues to promulgate a dualistic mentality of formal and informal divisions (Simon, 2007: 304; Harrison, 2006: 322). Such a system should balance the desire of landholders (as in the Nairobi peri-urban areas) to remain autonomous (to assure them of their bargaining power and control) and the needs of the central/local government to normatively see people organised, services delivered and planning regulations enforced (Zein-Elabdin, 2009: 1158; Maconachie, 2007: 164-165; Harrison, 2006: 321). What is required in a hybrid system is an arrangement that fosters trust amongst actors who are mutually interdependent (Harrison, 2006; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003: 12).

Questions arise about how to reconcile multiple perspectives and differences that are likely to emerge from actors with diverse interests. Harrison (2006: 322) observed that communities and actors with different traditions and values have historically intersected and continue to do so, and that there are always sufficient points of intersection to support dialogue and collaboration. He further argues that the problem is not an "…inability to see across multiple positions but it is rather

unwillingness to do so…" by researchers and planners. To address the problem, Harrison (2006: 332) advocates "epistemic humility" a strategy that looks for intersections among different positioning and rationalities and enters into a dialogue at such situated moments. This entails going beyond scientific or technical forms of knowledge to involve emotional sensitivity and judgement, practical wisdom, ethics and deliberation that touches on values with reference to praxis (Harrison, 2006: 331; Sandercock, 2004: 123; Flyvbjerg, 2001: 57, 2004; Thompson, 2000: 244-245).

5.0 Conclusion

The paper demonstrates that changing social, cultural, environmental and economic circumstances as a result of land conversions and market forces has dramatically affected local areas of the Nairobi's peri-urban areas. People are however not passively accepting their fate of being victims of these changes but instead they have evolved a variety of local/human-level responses to enable them live in the area.

It is through community's actions that illustrates how agency is exercised within existing structures (formal and informal- representing modern and traditional respectively) to address the changing circumstances that internal and external conditions are creating in their areas. The agency is operating within these existing structures to come up with and do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies to enable people to live in the changing environment and circumstances. These strategies are hybrids of both traditional and modern livelihood strategies. According to Simon (1997: 192) and Nabudere (1997: 214), such hybrids strategies are not postcolonial but are rather post-traditional because they embodies "... indigenous values, social structures and identities that survived –admittedly to differing extents and with differing degree of engagement with or transformation by colonial impositions (Simon, 1997: 192). The hybrid formations are to some extent informed by class status of agency (Yeboah, 2005: 61) and as such differs in distribution and practice within the Nairobi peri-urban areas.

Human agency should not however be over-romanticized. There are situations where new pressures are stronger than the capacity of the local/individual agency to cope with or adapt to the changes. These pressures are undermining the local capacities to respond to the changes and thus for example making some landholders sell their land without a clear plan on what to do with sale proceeds. The inability of some farming community members to cope and adopt to changes in their surrounding by adopting innovative way of farming against pressures in a semi-rural set-up such as

Nairobi peri-urban areas put to question observations by Boserup (1965) and Mortimore (1993) that landholders are able to respond to pressures by use of various forms of innovation. This underlies the need for decision-making capacity building for the communities (especially the indigenous ones) living in rapidly urbanising areas such as Nairobi peri-urban areas.

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