What is incrementalism? — Community-managed utilities in an informal settlement in Nairobi

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The divide between the "informal" and "formal" is commonly understood as that between risk and a sure thing. The "informal" is seen as messy and dangerous. But the story of Kosovo informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, shows that neither side of the divide can bridge the gap working alone.

We have written before about the need to understand incrementalism as a value for building inclusive cities and developing informal settlements in situ. The story of Kosovo shows how — step-by-step — informal communities and formal utility companies can work together to come up with innovative solutions to the provision of water, sewerage, and electricity.

Kosovo is one of 13 settlements that make up the informal Mathare region of the city. There are approximately 6,000 households in Kosovo.

Here, the Kenya slum dwellers federation, known as Muungano wa wanavijiji, has pioneered a solution that marries the ingenuity of the informal with the advantages of formalization. Provision of water in Kosovo had long been controlled by militia groups. In fact, says Irene Karanja, director of the Muungano Support Trust (MuST), "the militias had formed their bases around the services."

For years, the Kenya Water Company had complained that they were not receiving revenue from Kosovo residents who had set up informal water connections. As Kosovo resident and Muungano secretary Jason Waweru describes it, "We said that both us have rights. So who is to say who has a more important right. So we opened a dialogue."

Eventually, Muunagno and Water Company decided on a system for reticulating the water to the community, facilitated by Muungano. "It wasn't easy to come up with a consensus," Waweru says. This "delegated management model" meant that the community in Kosovo would control all the issues surrounding distribution of the water, including communal collection of fees.

Yet doubts remained. "Everyone was scared," Waweru says. "If we approved the delegated management model would it just allow more militias and gangs to step in?"

So Muungano and the Water Company agreed to first build a model kiosk in one lane of the community. This was a tough negotiation. The Water Company only wanted to install water points on the bulk pipes, and did not want to work with individual connections that hooked up to the bulk infrastructure. "We lobbied that every household should have its own connection," says Waweru. "We were thinking of the old mamas that have to walk to get water."

Without waiting for the Water Company, the community started to dig trenches to lay pipes for the individual connections. In doing so, they developed community structures dedicated to managing and maintaining the water supply. After the Water Company saw this work, it indicated its willingness to come on board.

In late May 2010, the community disconnected its informal water supply and installed the formal connections. 180 households now have individual connections, while the rest of Kosovo's 6,000 households fetch water from kiosks, which serve community-determined clusters within the settlements.

For Waweru, this community-managed system was a big breakthrough for both the community and the water company in understanding how to deal with the gap between the way the two sides work. "When we were doing this project, it created its own community structure. You can see it working," he says. "We broke the formal structure of administration, and the informal structure of the militia groups. Now we can see the community owning the process."

A bridge yet to be built — formalizing electrical connections

In early March 2011, Waweru pointed out that the achievements of the community of Kosovo to achieve sustainable access to services were only partial. "Currently the utility company has been arresting people for illegal electricity connections," he says. "We are asking why people have illegal connections when there is a good electricity supply in the area."

At present, the utility company has been uninterested in developing a system for formalizing the connections because the amount used per individual household is perceived to be too little to make the investment worthwhile. Yet, seen from the settlement level, the amount of electricity that the community uses is enough for the company to initiate raids by the police on a regular basis.

Muungano has worked with the community to do a survey of the way that electricity is used at the household level throughout the settlement. This has helped the community to begin negotiating with the electricity company to get enough supply into the settlement legally. The prices are not so high, only KSh 1700 per month (approximately USD 20).

So if the company would be willing to supply more amperes of electricity, community leaders believe larger informal businesses could grow in the settlement. Currently, there are only small businesses, says Waweru. When businesses want to expand they know that they have to go elsewhere in the city in order to grow.

The example of Muungano's work regarding the water connections is serving as a powerful model for building trust between the community and utility companies, which is helping the ongoing negotiations. Before, "whenever the utility company would come to the settlement, people would run away, afraid of being arrested," says Waweru. "Now people run up and ask how they can help."

The challenge of going to scale

Muungano has been surveying the entire zone of Mathare at the rate of 10,000 households every 3 months. This is intended to contribute to a zonal plan, which is a joint exercise between the federation, MuST, and the planning department of the University of Nairobi. This will help figure out how to reticulate services through the whole Mathare valley, explains Karanja.

Although it is making significant breakthroughs in its work with the Kosovo community, the Water Company is realizing that it is not structured to respond to the scale of demand for formal services in informal settlements. Waweru explains that Muungano is employing GIS technology in its ongoing

surveys in order to propose an alternative billing system that addresses the needs of both the communities and the Company.

The zonal plan will allow for a more holistic view of the challenges that exist in this populous region of the city. Step-by-step, the formal and informal worlds are letting go of their preconceived notions, and beginning to implement real, sustainable solutions. When informal settlement communities like that in Kosovo organize around concrete developmental objectives, they show the way forward for a formal world that is too often hoping for top-down silver bullets that never appear. Together they are changing what informal settlements can mean to the development of cities.

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The Malawian Federation's journey to Parliament began almost five years ago through exchange visits that exposed the Malawian Ministry of Lands and Housing to the growing need to support low income housing and shelter initiatives. Now the Ministry is helping the Federation to secure budgetary and institutional support through the national Parliament. Read more here.

A new report from the Portfolio Committee on Housing demonstrates how the patient work of the Federation to translate its struggles to real action on the ground is influencing how shelter issues are understood in the formal political space. Read more here.