



Youth in Port Harcourt, Nigeria Find Their Voice

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In 2012, the Cities Alliance Secretariat issued a Call for Proposals to the Catalytic Fund focused on the theme “Youth and the City”. The choice of theme reflected the urgent need to address what is increasingly one of the most critical development challenges of our times: the burgeoning youth population, and the struggle confronting many African cities to provide voice, opportunity, jobs and services for these youth.

Out of more than 200 applications received, one in particular stood out: the Urban Futures project proposed by Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Its innovative advocacy and communication tools held considerable potential for mobilising young people in a very difficult social context and catalysing processes that could transform the city.

The capital and commercial core of Nigeria’s Rivers State, Port Harcourt has nearly quadrupled in size over the past two decades – growing from 440,399 residents in 1991 to an estimated 1,700,000 in 2006. This rapid growth was especially challenging for Port Harcourt, where 70% of physical development is outside of any formal planning control and 79% of residents live in slum conditions. The city is also growing increasingly younger; by 2050, over 60% of the urban population will be under 19 years of age.

In 2009, the government of Rivers State began a programme to demolish largely informal waterfront settlements that are home to an estimated 480,000 people. These settlements do not appear on the municipal maps used to provide services.

“Many voices make a city. Some people are trying to tear the city down. But we are city builders and this is our rhythm, our right, our voice.” – *Favour from Okrika waterfront*

Project: Urban Futures: Participatory Youth Mapping and Urban Planning Initiative in Nigeria

Partners: Comic Relief, United States Institute for Peace, CMAP

Expected Project Duration: 18 months starting in 2014

Cities Alliance Financing: USD 244,107

Moreover, the waterfront is perceived as a dangerous area by the rest of the city, discouraging investment and limiting employment opportunities for local youth. As a result, many of Port Harcourt’s residents have felt increasingly marginalised.

Putting informal neighbourhoods on the map

The Urban Futures project seeks to share with these communities the technical and strategic skills to pilot participatory mapping process, thus enabling them to participate in shaping their city and identify paths to sustainable urban futures.

The project is being implemented in four phases:

1. **Radio initiative.** The first phase mobilises a network of community correspondents, ranging from state government representatives to young stakeholders, to participate in a local radio initiative to gather information on the city’s development planning.
2. **Mapping.** The second phase trains and mobilises youth to pilot the participatory mapping process in the neighbourhoods, including processing and analysing the data.
3. **Participatory upgrading plan.** In the third phase, youth from the waterfront will work with representatives from the Ministry for Urban

Development and other agencies to produce an upgrading plan for the area based on the new data.

4. **Forum for dialogue.** In the final phase, a high-level policy forum will be developed to establish a space for dialogue for the River State Government, waterfront youth and other city stakeholders.

“Our Right, Our Voice, Our City”

The Urban Futures project is a groundbreaker for Port Harcourt. It is the first activity that actively engages all tiers of government to promote sustainable, pro-poor urban development by prioritising the direct involvement of communities – especially youth – and building local capacity. It also marks the first time that public authorities in Port Harcourt have responded positively to the call for inclusive urban renewal and made a concerted effort to improve the situation for the city’s poorest residents.

And these residents are eager to participate in shaping their city. “Focus group sessions have demonstrated the pride that people have in their community and their dedication to improving it,” notes Isona Shibata, an architect in London involved with the project. “It is clear that the community wishes to be involved in the government’s plan for development – campaigning and advocacy will put their needs and opinions on the Government’s agenda.”

As it progresses, the Urban Futures project aims to increase the political recognition of Port Harcourt’s youth and to improve the State and city government’s responsiveness to community demands. The radio training initiative will facilitate the sharing of information with the goal of gradually changing public perceptions of the waterfront and, in turn, increasing public engagement both in waterfront communities and the broader citizenship on issues of citywide slum upgrading.

Expected Impacts and Results

The Urban Futures initiative is expected to have a significant impact on transforming Port Harcourt. Stakeholders are highly motivated to work together on improving their city and to learn from each other – perhaps the most important part of any successful project.

Residents of Port Harcourt’s waterfront neighbourhoods understand that they can defend their homes and their rights without the fear of eviction. The process of mapping neighbourhoods and working together with local authorities builds networks of solidarity that increase social cohesion, gradually transforming the neighbourhood. Communities are better equipped to undertake small-scale development projects that can improve health and sanitation conditions in waterfront communities, such as toilet facilities or painting a school.

By promoting integration with the rest of the city, the initiative also seeks to foster employment opportunities for the growing number of young people in these neighbourhoods – which in turn can reduce violence among the youth.

For public authorities, the activity facilitates a new collaborative relationship with the city’s poorest residents and the local community organisations. It also encourages more responsive behaviour by public authorities.

On a broader level, the Urban Futures project raises national and international awareness on critical urban issues, such as eviction and marginalisation of the poor. It also encourages policy changes to explore development routes that can help deter escalation of violent conflicts among marginalised youth groups.

Arguably, the most important potential impact of the Urban Futures project is that it offers political recognition for an engaged urban youth in a neglected area – thus serving as a model for how to include youth in decisions about the future of the city they will inherit and have to manage.

