

# **Policy of Decongestion of Ghana's Largest Metropolis, Accra: Another Face of Urban Clearance or Bulldozing Approach?**

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## **Extended Abstract**

Aided by national and city level factors as well as economic globalization, many cities of the developing world include Sub-Saharan Africa are characterized by an unprecedented scale of urban change (Cohen 2004; Owusu 2008). More significant in this instance is the tendency whereby due to national and economic globalization conditions, economic activities, capital and people tend to be concentrated in large metropolitan centres. In the absence of a comprehensive urban and regional development policy framework that takes a critical look at all urban centres (including small and medium-sized towns) across the national urban system, metropolitan centres in many developing countries have tended to attract an over overwhelming proportion of investments and consequently population.

However, due to limited job opportunities and ever-shrinking formal sector, many urbanites in the developing world make a living in the informal sector. Unlike the illegal and 'hidden' activities in advanced economies, informal urban economic activities in Ghana and other developing countries are perfectly legal and serve as important sources of employment and other livelihoods for majority of Ghanaian households. In addition, the informal economy contributes very significantly towards the growth and development of the formal economy. In fact, in Ghana, economic activities in the urban informal sector such as street trading, urban agriculture, small scale manufacturing, services delivery in homes, etc, employ about 90 percent of the active urban labour force (GoG/MLG&RD 2011). In addition, sector provides the bulk of the urban transport services, housing and food (urban agriculture) for the urban poor. Despite its significant contribution to the urban economy, and the broader national economy, informal economic activities lack policies which support these activities and/or protect informal economy operators. The lack of adequate care and attention for the sector has resulted in a situation where many government initiatives have yielded less than optimum results in terms of their impact on the living standards of informal economy operators.

More importantly, the lack of adequate attention has led to a situation whereby spatial planning has failed to consider informal economy activities in urban planning and development of zoning scheme. This promotes a situation whereby informal activities take place in unapproved location of cities. In Accra, for instance, there is a

visible concentration of such enterprises along the major transport arteries or streets in and out of the city and in road and rail reservations; they are concentrated in specific areas usually through squatting on public and private land and they are also found in homes and residential areas, particularly in low-income residential neighbourhoods.

The failure to integrate the needs of the informal economy, particularly in the area of zoning/location within the formal planning process has resulted in a situation where city authorities have largely regarded the presence of informal economic activities in central and other key locations of cities as a nuisance and therefore requiring their removal or clearance. This failure of planning authorities and schemes to consider informal economic activities has resulted in a clash between informal economy operators mainly on the issues of location.

In Ghana, Metropolitan Assemblies (local governments) have implemented the policy of decongestion for the decade. However, nowhere has this policy been implemented vigorously than Ghana's national capital and largest metropolis, Accra. The policy of decongestion has been implemented with the explicit aim of reducing congestion of informality activities and their operators in the central business districts (CBDs) and other key areas of the cities as a way of promoting the beautification of the city of Accra. While the implementation of the policy has been ad hoc in character due to a combination of implementation difficulties such as divided public support and political liability most especially in partisan election years, the policy in both theoretical and practical terms can be described as representing another form of the much criticized classical 'bulldozing or slum clearance' approach. According to the *Draft National Urban Policy 2011*, the implementation of the decongestion policy has resulted in the ejection of informal economic activities in many locations in the city of Accra. It, however, added that policy is associated with the destruction and disruption of livelihoods with serious consequences for poverty reduction and the overall growth of the urban and national economy (GoG/MLG&RD 2011).

This paper argues that city authorities bearing in mind the heavy criticisms of the bulldozing or slum clearance approach as unsustainable means for promoting urban development have only coined the term 'decongestion' as a simplistic approach for clearing areas of the city of Accra they perceived as undesirable. While the policy of urban decongestion has been implemented for the past decade, most especially for the last four years, not enough studies have been undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the policy. This paper attempts to fill this knowledge gap. It questions the policy of decongestion in both theoretical and practical terms as a means of promoting the sustainable development of large Ghanaian cities such as Accra.

As a conclusion, the paper notes that informal economic activities are likely to intensify in large Ghanaian metropolitan areas such as Accra as the pace of urbanization and urban growth intensify. Consequently, there is the need for improved knowledge about issues related to the informal economy- location issues,

growth patterns, environmental effects, problems encountered with location (insecurity of tenure, uncertainty, harassment, etc). The overall goal will be to achieve the twin objective of enhancing the growth and capacity of informal economic sector for employment and income generation while at the same time reducing the negative effects of the sector on the sustainable development of Accra.