NEGOTIATING URBAN GOVERNANCE: GOVERNMENT-GRASSROOTS INTERFACES AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN NAIROBI

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ABSTRACT

Urban transformation in African cities unfolds within dynamic negotiations between state-led interventions and grassroots modes of urban production. This article examines these negotiations in Nairobi's Kibra Soweto-East settlement, where technocratic state agendas epitomized by the Affordable Housing Program intersect with community-driven mobilizations. Grounded in Lefebvre's right to the city, participatory governance theory, and models like Hamdi's incremental development concept, the study interrogates how government-grassroots interfaces shape the politics and praxis of sustainable urban transformation. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research draws on twenty-five in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions with residents, grassroots leaders, and government officials, thematically analyzed with MAXQDA. Findings reveal that state interventions remain primarily infrastructural and politically instrumentalized, while grassroots movements advance alternative logics of co-production rooted in adaptability, inclusivity, and everyday agency. These practices destabilize the state-residents binary and illuminate how residents negotiate urban citizenship through participatory and mobilization strategies. The article argues that sustainable transformation requires reconfiguring urban governance toward resident-centred frameworks that embed Afrocentric epistemologies and indigenous spatial rationalities. By theorizing co-production as a mode of Southern urban governance, the study contributes to ongoing debates in Urban Studies on inclusive urbanism, state-residents' relations, and the epistemic reorientation of urban theory beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

Keywords: Urban Transformation, Grassroots Movements, Housing Policy, Co-production, Sustainable Cities, Informal Settlements, Peoples' Settlements.

INTRODUCTION

Urban transformation in Africa is marked by the persistence of informality alongside ambitious state-driven modernization projects. This paradox is visible in Nairobi, where nearly 60% of the city's population resides in informal settlements that occupy less than 6% of urban land. For residents of Kibra Soweto-East, housing is not merely a physical shelter but a social process deeply intertwined with identity, belonging, and survival. Yet, successive government interventions, such as the Kenya Slum Upgrading Program (KENSUP), the Kenya Informal Settlements Improvement Project (KISIP), and most recently, the Affordable Housing Program (AHP), have been critiqued for privileging technocratic, top-down approaches that marginalize residents' agency. These

interventions are often aligned with global development discourses such as the UN's "Cities Without Slums" initiative and the New Urban Agenda, but in practice they reproduce patterns of exclusion, displacement, and tokenistic participation.

Against this backdrop, grassroots social movements (GSMs) such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji have emerged as critical actors in the struggle for urban justice. Through practices such as community savings, participatory mapping, and advocacy, GSMs create "invented spaces" of participation (Miraftab, 2009) that challenge the state's "invited spaces" of token engagement. Their mobilization demonstrates that sustainable transformation cannot be imposed from above but must be co-produced through genuine collaboration. This resonates with Elinor Ostrom's (1996, 2010) theory of *co-production*, which emphasizes that public goods and services are most effective when designed and delivered jointly by citizens and state actors. In Nairobi's context, co-production highlights the transformative potential of hybrid governance models such as the Mukuru Special Planning Area, where grassroots knowledge directly shaped statutory planning.

Yet, co-production is never neutral. As experiences from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria show, participatory upgrading can either expand insurgent possibilities or be co-opted to legitimate state agendas. In Kenya, participation in KISIP was largely tokenistic, mobilizing communities to endorse predetermined plans without granting them real decision-making power (Enns, 2022). This reflects the contradictory dynamics Ostrom warned against: when institutional arrangements fail to redistribute power, "co-production" risks becoming a hollow concept that legitimizes exclusion.

Complementing Ostrom, Nabeel Hamdi (1995, 2004) offers the framework of the *social production of habitat*, which emphasizes incremental, community-led processes over large-scale technocratic projects. In *Housing without Houses* (1995), Hamdi critiques the state's reliance on standardized units and centralized delivery, arguing instead for an *enablement approach* where governments act as facilitators providing resources, tenure security, and legal frameworks, while residents take the lead in design and implementation. In *Small Change* (2004), he underscores the value of "small, incremental steps" that collectively achieve transformative impact. Seen through Hamdi's lens, Nairobi's housing programs reveal a missed opportunity: instead of supporting grassroots innovations in cooperative savings, self-help building, and Afrocentric design practices, interventions have reinforced dependency on external donors and contractors.

The gap between these theoretical ideals and empirical realities is significant. Residents of Soweto-East repeatedly describe government programs as exclusionary and politically manipulated, where consultation is limited to elite-dominated committees such as Settlement Executive Committees, which often serve to create only an illusion of participation. Grassroots actors, by contrast, mobilize around everyday struggles, linking housing with broader demands for dignity, security, and justice. Their agency reflects

what Lefebvre (1970) termed the *right to the city*, but articulated in distinctly Afrocentric terms: grounded in communal solidarity, spirituality, and indigenous knowledge systems.

The implications are profound. Sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi requires moving beyond modernization discourses that reduce housing to a commodity or a political performance. Instead, it calls for a resident-centered governance framework where state actors and grassroots movements co-produce housing futures in ways that present a house not only as a shelter but carries aspect of belonging, community and dignity. This article therefore builds on Ostrom's model of co-production and Hamdi's social production of habitat to explore the implications of government-grassroots interventions for urban transformation in Nairobi City County.

By situating Nairobi within both global and local debates, this contribution underscores that informal settlements are not aberrations but products of structural exclusion. It argues that genuine transformation depends on recognizing residents not as passive beneficiaries but as central actors in the production of urban space. In doing so, it extends the literature on African urbanism by demonstrating how theories of co-production and social production can be reinterpreted through Afrocentric and phenomenological lenses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within a multi-theoretical framework that combines insights from the *Right to the City*, Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, Social Movement theory, and the Afrocentricity model while drawing substantively on Ostrom's approach of *co-production* and Hamdi's notion of the *social production of habitat*. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for interpreting the implications of government-grassroots interventions for sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi.

Henri Lefebvre's articulation of the *Right to the City* (1970) provides a critical starting point for understanding the politics of housing in Nairobi. The right is not limited to physical access to shelter and services but extends to the collective capacity of urban inhabitants to shape the very processes of city-making. In Nairobi, this right has often been denied through technocratic state housing programs that privilege economic growth and modernization at the expense of marginalized populations. Projects such as KENSUP, KISIP, and the more recent Affordable Housing Program exemplify how modernist discourses of urban renewal have produced exclusions, displacements, and the erasure of informal settlements. Yet, grassroots organizations have consistently articulated their own "right to the city" by mobilizing federated savings groups, engaging in participatory mapping, and resisting forced evictions. Initiatives such as the Mukuru Special Planning Area highlight how recognition of this right can transform informal settlements from stigmatized zones of poverty into legitimate neighborhoods entitled to statutory planning. The framework thus underscores that housing struggles in Nairobi must be understood as claims to dignity, belonging, and citizenship, rather than as mere demands for shelter.

The question of participation in these processes is illuminated by Sherry Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969), which distinguishes between tokenistic and transformative forms of engagement. Nairobi's housing programs often exemplify the middle rungs of Arnstein's ladder, where communities are consulted but rarely empowered to influence outcomes substantively. Mechanisms such as Settlement Executive Committees, created under KENSUP and KISIP, tended to legitimize state-driven agendas while offering only superficial engagement. At best, such arrangements allowed residents to endorse predetermined plans without challenging their structural limitations. However, the Mukuru Special Planning Area demonstrated that it is possible to climb higher on Arnstein's ladder, as grassroots actors partnered with the Nairobi County Government and allied NGOs to co-design land use, service provision, and upgrading strategies. Yet, even here, challenges of elite capture and political manipulation persisted (Edward, Ameet, & Gerard, 2015), demonstrating both the potential and fragility of participatory frameworks. Arnstein's model is therefore crucial for evaluating not only whether participation occurs, but also the extent to which it redistributes power in meaningful ways.

While Lefebvre and Arnstein frame struggles over rights and participation, it is important to use Afrocentric lenses which introduces a critical epistemological dimension to the analysis of housing in Nairobi. Afrocentric perspectives, articulated by scholars such as Asante (2003) and contextualized in Kenyan urban studies by Omenya (2020), challenge the dominance of Eurocentric planning paradigms that reduce housing to standardized, commodified units. Afrocentric thought emphasizes the centrality of African epistemologies, cultural values, and spiritual worldviews in shaping urban development. In Nairobi's informal settlements, housing is produced not only as a technical necessity but as a cultural and social practice tied to identity, belonging, and intergenerational continuity. Cooperative savings schemes, incremental building, and faith-informed practices embody these Afrocentric principles by prioritizing communal solidarity, resilience, and local knowledge. This resonates strongly with Hamdi's (1995, 2004) argument for the *social production of habitat*, which values small-scale, community-led, and incremental approaches to housing transformation. By situating housing within an Afrocentric paradigm, the study reframes government-grassroots interventions as struggles over epistemic justice, where the aspects of belonging, community, and dignity are frequently sidelined in favor of donor-driven modernization agendas.

Finally, Social Movement theory provides a lens for understanding the strategies and agency of grassroots actors in Nairobi's housing sector. Resource mobilization perspectives (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) highlight how movements such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji sustain activism through collective savings schemes, enumerations, and alliances with civil society organizations. Political process model (Tarrow, 2011) illuminates how grassroots groups seize political opportunities, such as the adoption of Special Planning Areas, to advance their demands for recognition and institutional inclusion. These movements embody a dual character: they are pragmatic in collaborating with state actors to achieve incremental gains, while also insurgent in

resisting displacement, staging protests, and pursuing litigation when their rights are threatened. As Horn and Mitlin (2018) have shown, federated savings groups and participatory planning have allowed grassroots actors to scale their influence from neighborhood struggles to citywide negotiations, thereby reshaping the governance of urban space. Social Movement theory thus explains how grassroots organizations serve not only as oppositional forces but also as co-creators of more inclusive urban futures.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting Nairobi's urban transformation. The *Right to the City* highlights the justice claims of marginalized residents; *Arnstein's Ladder* exposes the depth and quality of citizen participation; Afrocentric model situates housing within cultural, spiritual, and epistemic frameworks; and Social Movement theory explains the strategies of grassroots mobilization. Synthesized with Ostrom's (1996, 2010) notion of *co-production*, which emphasizes shared responsibility in governance, and Hamdi's (1995, 2004) concept of the *social production of habitat*, which underscores the transformative potential of incremental, community-led housing, these perspectives reveal that the implications of government-grassroots interventions depend fundamentally on whether residents are positioned as passive recipients or as active co-producers of urban futures.

This theoretical architecture therefore shifts the analysis of housing from a narrow focus on technical delivery to a recognition of its political, cultural, and epistemic dimensions. It underscores that sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi requires frameworks that honor rights, redistribute power, and embed Afrocentric values in planning practice. By situating Nairobi's experience within both global theoretical debates and local cultural logics, this study provides an interpretive lens that not only critiques existing interventions but also offers pathways toward more inclusive and resident-centered urban governance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to foreground the lived experiences of residents, grassroots actors, and government representatives in the context of housing and urban transformation in Nairobi. Phenomenology was chosen because it privileges subjective meanings and enables a deeper understanding of how people experience and interpret social processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Qutoshi, 2018). Urban transformation is not merely technical or policy-driven; it is lived at the level of identity, belonging, community and dignity. A phenomenological lens therefore allowed the research to move beyond descriptive policy analysis and capture how residents themselves make sense of government interventions and grassroots mobilization.

The empirical focus was Soweto-East in Kibra, one of Nairobi's largest informal settlements and a site that epitomizes the interface between state-led housing interventions and grassroots organizing. Soweto-East was purposively selected because it has been the locus of major government programs such as the Kenya Slum Upgrading Program (KENSUP) and the Affordable Housing Program (AHP), alongside sustained mobilizations by federations such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji. This dual presence of government and grassroots activity made the settlement an ideal case for investigating

the dynamics of co-production, contestation, and collaboration (UN-Habitat, 2020; Fernandez & Calas, 2011).

Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observation. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants, including grassroots leaders, structure owners, residents, housing cooperative members, and officials from Nairobi County. To capture group dynamics and collective reflections, three FGDs were organized: two with grassroots members and one with local leaders, including chiefs and elected representatives. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to articulate their perceptions of housing programs and grassroots initiatives while also leaving room for emergent themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). FGDs fostered debate and group reflection, providing insight into both consensus and contestation within the community (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Nyumba et al., 2018). Observations during these interactions were recorded systematically, capturing non-verbal cues, emotions, and contextual details that enriched interpretation.

Prior to the main fieldwork, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview and FGD guides. Feedback from this exercise led to adjustments in language to improve accessibility for participants who were less familiar with policy terminology. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when no new themes emerged from additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to phenomenological analysis following Hycner's (1999) stages: bracketing preconceptions, identifying significant statements, clustering meaning units, and developing themes (Groenewald, 2004). A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was subsequently conducted with the aid of MAXQDA software, enabling systematic coding, retrieval, and visualization of themes. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches: inductive to allow themes to emerge organically from the data, and deductive to reflect the study's theoretical framework. Key themes included participation, exclusion, rights, cultural identity, and grassroots agency.

Researcher Positionality

This study is shaped by the researcher's hybrid position as both an insider and outsider in relation to Kibra's informal settlement. As a Togolese Comboni Missionary with prior pastoral and academic engagement in Nairobi (2011-2014), I established long-standing relationships with grassroots youth groups that emerged after the 2007-2008 post-election violence. These networks, initially centred on peacebuilding, later expanded into socio-economic empowerment and environmental justice initiatives. My subsequent mission service in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2014-2021) provided comparative insights into urban informality, given Kinshasa's high proportion of residents in such settlements. Upon returning to Kenya in 2021 to pursue doctoral research, I reconnected

with grassroots organizations, particularly the Kibra Social Justice Centre, at a time of significant infrastructural change but persistent housing challenges.

This trajectory positioned me in a liminal role (Chavez, 2008; Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009): not a resident of Kibra, but an engaged actor with established trust and access. While these connections facilitated entry into the field, they also introduced potential biases linked to institutional affiliation with religious and academic bodies. Participants occasionally viewed me with caution, underscoring the asymmetries of power that shape qualitative inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

To address these tensions, I adopted reflexive strategies, including memoing and critical self-interrogation, to remain alert to how my positionality influenced interpretation (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003). My standpoint as both African and missionary scholar allowed me to share certain cultural affinities with participants, while simultaneously being marked by privilege and institutional authority. Such dual positioning inevitably shaped how questions of housing, citizenship, and urban transformation were articulated and understood.

By acknowledging positionality as an active component of knowledge production (Rose, 1997; Holmes, 2020), I aim to foreground the partial, situated nature of this research. Rather than claiming neutrality, this approach emphasizes transparency and reflexivity as integral to methodological rigor and ethical responsibility in urban studies research.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

The trustworthiness of the study was reinforced through triangulation of interviews, FGDs, and observations, as well as member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of their contributions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reliability was strengthened through an audit trail and systematic reflexivity. Nonetheless, the reliance on grassroots leaders and more vocal residents risks underrepresenting less engaged or marginalized perspectives, such as tenants or women outside organized groups. Moreover, as a single-case study, the findings are not statistically generalizable; rather, they contribute to analytical generalizability by illuminating dynamics of government-grassroots relations that resonate with wider African urban contexts.

Ethics

Ethical protocols were strictly followed. Approval was obtained from the Tangaza University ethics review board and a NACOSTI research permit, alongside authorization from Nairobi County and Langata Subcounty administrators. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Data management complied with the Kenya Data Protection Act (2019), with all identifiers anonymized and sensitive data securely stored.

RESEARCH FINDINGS / RESULTS

This study set out to examine the implications of government-grassroots interventions for sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi City County, with a focus on Soweto-East, Kibra. The findings reveal a complex interplay of collaboration, contestation, and innovation. Five interrelated themes emerged: (i) participatory governance as a precondition for transformation, (ii) the transformative role of grassroots social movements (GSMs), (iii) persistent juxtapose between government and community priorities, (iv) alternative housing pathways through cooperatives and Afrocentric practices, and (v) systemic challenges that constrain co-production.

Participatory Governance as a Precondition

The findings demonstrate that sustainable transformation cannot be achieved without genuine participatory governance, yet participation in housing interventions has been largely symbolic. The voices reveal a stark gap between procedural participation and substantive co-production. While government officials claim "public participation" occurs, residents describe symbolic participation exercises where decisions are predetermined. James, member of the Settlement Executive Committee (SEC) reported that: *"The Settlement Executive Committee is partially involved in the meetings with the government to see that the houses that are being constructed are as per the requirements of the community. However, at some point the government decides to act without involving the community. The people are not very involved in the planning of the houses to be done. We wish that the government was interested in knowing the design preferences of residents during the enumeration phase."*

James' statement that the SEC is "partially involved" but ultimately powerless exposes institutional lip service. His frustration indicates consultation happens after decisions are made, not before. This inverts citizens' participation principles. Residents at the same time view the SEC, created under the Kenya Slum Upgrading Program (KENSUP), as an instrument of control rather than empowerment. Nancy, a member of the Soweto Forum, captured this narrative: *"The SEC was not for the people; it was for the government's agenda. They created it to show we were engaged, but decisions were already made."* Hinting that the SEC has shifted from bridging mechanism to gatekeeping entity, with some members accused by respondents of complicity in fraudulent enumerations.

Public participation forums were likewise perceived as politicized events. A youth leader reflected: *"These meetings are not about us deciding; they are about politicians showing face. We sit, we clap, but our voices don't change anything. In some of these meetings, fight erupt due to the conflict between the tenants and the structure owners... These meetings often never end well."* Such accounts echo Arnstein's (1969) notion of tokenism, where the appearance of consultation masks exclusion from real power.

The consequence of these practices has been erosion of trust. Many residents disengaged from forums altogether, perceiving them as exercises in legitimation rather than empowerment. This suggests that participation, while enshrined in policy rhetoric,

remains procedural and shallow in practice, undermining both legitimacy and the sustainability of government interventions. The government doesn't reject participation outright, it channels it through co-opted intermediaries who can be silenced through benefits (housing allocations). This creates plausible deniability: public participation forums occur, but critics are simply "not invited."

The Transformative Role of Grassroots Social Movements

In stark contrast, grassroots social movements emerged as critical agents of transformation. The voices demonstrate movements operating across multiple registers: defensive (preventing evictions), constructive (building alternatives), and transformative (reshaping policy). Groups such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji, the Soweto Forum, and the Green Card Movement mobilized residents to resist displacement, claim recognition, and articulate alternative models of housing.

Sara, a Muungano member, highlighted the political labor of these movements: *"Muungano wa Wanavijiji was formed in 1996, due to forceful evictions which were taking place during that time... We started resisting evictions by organizing demonstrations and heading to the areas where forceful evictions were to take place in the city. We have influenced the government to work with us in many ways. We attend all public forums to push for projects in informal settlements. Without our pressure, they ignore us. We championed for a system that will help identify the right beneficiaries of the housing programs. In 2004 we were able to resist eviction everyday via negotiations and writing petitions to the Ministry of Transport in the Railways' until they stopped the eviction."* Sara's narrative also spans decades, connecting 1990s land grabs to current struggles of GSMs. This historical memory prevents each generation from "starting over". movements accumulate knowledge and legitimacy. The formation of Muungano in 1996 wasn't spontaneous but a strategic response to systemic violence.

Joseph leader of the Muungano movement emphasized the activism of GSMs: *"We advocated for the rights of the people to housing by having them recognized for the services they provide in the city... We have been able to push for Policy reforms such as the one on the Community Land Act, targeting the informal areas where people could not manage to have individual title ownership of the spaces. We constructed highly affordable houses, with the community securing the construction materials, reducing the cost of the houses since they were the ones providing labor. People were able to gain skills via the Muungano-Kambi Moto project."* The Community Land Act advocacy shows movements don't just react, they generate legal frameworks. The Kambi Moto project represents radical critique through practice. By demonstrating community-led construction with lower costs, resident labor, and skill-building, Muungano proved government approaches aren't technically necessary they are political choices.

Beyond material interventions, GSMs were shown to reshape subjectivities and citizenship. Women, in particular, described their involvement in savings schemes and cooperatives as transformative, enabling them to claim land rights and influence planning processes. This resonates with wider urban studies literature that identifies grassroots organizing as a pathway to democratizing city-making and advancing the "right to the city."

Grassroots mobilization thus plays a dual role: resisting exclusionary state interventions while simultaneously co-producing knowledge, practices, and pathways toward inclusive transformation.

Juxtapose Between Government and Community Priorities

A recurring theme was the disconnect between state priorities and community aspirations. Government housing programs were premised on large-scale, standardized housing estates, often accompanied by financial conditions that were exclusionary. The requirement of a 10% deposit for affordable housing units was particularly contentious. A resident asked bluntly: *"They call the AHP affordable housing, but affordable to who? How can we raise ten percent when we barely survive each day? Being a domestic worker who does laundry, the daily needs will not allow me to save the 10% of the total cost of a unit, which is a problem for many."* The 10% deposit crystallizes the juxtapose between government and residents. Respondents from government entities interpret survival strategies of residents in people settlements (renting rooms, pooling resources) as hidden wealth rather than desperation. While residents narratives reveal how deposit requirements force impossible choices between present survival and future housing.

For many, affordability was not an abstract policy goal, but an everyday struggle tied to unstable incomes. Government metrics of affordability failed to capture this reality. Abchil, coordinator of the green Card movement highlighted the contrast government's bureaucratic delays with community projects reflecting a low priority focus: *"Government projects are not about us; they are about visibility and politics. The government initiatives are again slow due to bureaucracy and change of leadership unlike grassroots initiatives which are completed in time and fit our needs."*

Design misalignment was also stark. Residents argued that state housing designs disregarded their social and cultural needs. As one elder put it: *"Government houses are boxes. They don't see how we live as families, how we need space for children, for small business, for visitors. They build units that don't fit our life."*

These findings suggest that the juxtapose is structural: while the state emphasizes visibility, modernization, and political credit, communities prioritize tenure security, affordability, and dignity. This divergence limits the transformative potential of government-grassroots engagements.

Alternative Pathways: Cooperatives and Afrocentric Models

Faced with exclusionary policies, residents have crafted alternative pathways rooted in cooperativism and Afrocentric logics rejecting both state paternalism and market fundamentalism. Cooperatives, particularly those linked to the National Cooperative Housing Union (NACHU), offered avenues for collective saving, pooled investment, and incremental construction. Jacob, a cooperative leader, explained: *"When we build through cooperatives, we build homes that reflect our needs and culture. This is different from government houses, which look the same and don't consider our way of life. We also employed an incremental housing concept where we would design a house a three-bedroom bungalow such that you can build it in phases, in that we can start with one room and a toilet, have the client enter the completed phase, and still have the extra rooms being built progressively"*

Joseph's phase-by-phase construction aligns with how informal settlements actually transform progressively, as resources permit. This respects financial reality rather than imposing impossible upfront costs. The one-room entry point with toilet maintains dignity while acknowledging constraint. Such approaches reflect Hamdi's (1995) concept of the *social production of habitat*, where communities take active roles in producing housing that reflects their socio-economic realities. Cooperatives also introduced alternative building technologies that lowered costs and enabled families to construct progressively as resources allowed.

Afrocentric perspectives further enriched these alternatives. Housing was consistently framed not merely as shelter. Resident-led projects have more negotiations unlike the government initiatives which are usually dictated and backed up with policies. Residents engages more in the community-led projects in construction, purchasing materials and sharing their desires on the projects while paying attention to the social meaning of housing for the community. Kimani participant from a Nyumba Kumi initiative emphasized: *"A house is not just walls; it is where we belong, where our children know their roots. Government designs do not see this."*
These insights illustrate how cooperatives and Afrocentric models redefine urban transformation as processes embedded in identity, community, and cultural continuity, dimensions often ignored in technocratic government interventions.

Challenges Limiting Co-production

Despite their potential, government-grassroots collaborations are constrained by entrenched challenges. Corruption and elite capture featured prominently in residents' accounts. Eugene, a Muungano member, revealed: *"Consultants are used by the SEC to add names of non-residents during the enumeration process, while genuine residents are left out."* SEC members planting allies, wealthy Somalis bribing for multiple units describes organized fraud, not isolated incidents. When 10% deposits exclude actual residents, black markets emerge. When enumeration determines access to valuable assets (housing units), fraud becomes profitable. Resource scarcity was another limiting factor. Residents described the struggle of sustaining activities without state or donor

facilitation. As James explained, *"We depend on our small savings to run activities. Without government support, we can't scale our efforts."* This structural barrier means the ability of GSMs to access funding can make great changes and the social process of housing.

Internal divisions also weakened grassroots capacity. Junia, a coordinator of a GSMs observed: *"We as a movement lack a well co-ordination we only come together when there is need. And most of the time, we are very disintegrated... We lack a structure to bring us together; we only come together like the other time when the houses were being demolished."* Such fragmentation diluted collective action and exposed movements to co-optation. Junia's admission about lacking coordination reveals a weakness of GSMs. Governments often exploits this through divide-and-rule: co-opt some leaders, sidelines others. It is a door open to political manipulation transforming urban projects into patronage where for example politicians distribute access to housing in exchange of loyalty. Without unified fronts, movements win tactical battles but lose strategic wars.

Resistance from landlords, who feared losing rental income, further complicated housing interventions. Together, these challenges highlight the fragile and contested nature of co-production, revealing that while grassroots agency is resilient, structural constraints continue to undermine its transformative potential.

Synthesis

The findings illuminate the ambivalence of government-grassroots interventions in Nairobi's informal settlements. On one hand, grassroots organizations have demonstrated innovation, resilience, and a capacity to generate culturally relevant alternatives. On the other hand, state interventions remain largely top-down, exclusionary, and misaligned with community priorities. Residents voices collectively reveal co-production as currently difficult, not because communities lack capacity or government lacks resources, but because fundamental conflicts of interest prevent it:

1. Government prioritizes political control over housing rights evidenced by exclusionary policies, corruption tolerance, and movement suppression.
2. Communities need housing as livelihood base for shelter, belonging to the community, dignity, and economic stability, while government treats it as commodity and political currency.
3. GSMs threaten professionalized development industry by demonstrating cheaper, more responsive alternatives, they expose contractor profits and professional fees as unnecessary extractions.
4. True co-production would require power redistribution from enumeration control to budget allocation to design authority which current stakeholders resist.

The implications for sustainable urban transformation are clear: genuine transformation requires institutionalizing participatory governance, aligning state programs with community-defined priorities, and integrating grassroots-led cooperative and Afrocentric models into policy frameworks. Without addressing structural challenges, corruption, elite capture, and political instrumentalization, co-production risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the implications of government-grassroots interventions for sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi are both generative and contested. While grassroots social movements (GSMs) have demonstrated innovation, resilience, and agency in crafting inclusive housing alternatives, government-led programs remain dominated by political control and technocratic logics that marginalize the urban poor. To interpret these dynamics, it is necessary to situate them within wider theoretical and scholarly debates, particularly Hamdi's notion of the *social production of habitat* and Ostrom's framework of *co-production*, as well as Lefebvre's *Right to the City*, Arnstein's *Ladder of Participation*, and Afrocentric urban theory.

Technocratic Logics Versus Resident-Centered Practices

Government housing programs in Nairobi, such as KENSUP and the Affordable Housing Program, have been marked by large-scale, standardized designs, rigid affordability metrics, and limited inclusion of residents in decision-making. As residents in Soweto-East repeatedly noted, affordability thresholds such as the 10% deposit excludes many households, while housing designs failed to reflect cultural and social practices. This reflects the technocratic orientation of urban governance, where success is measured in terms of units delivered or international visibility, rather than lived affordability and community well-being.

Hamdi's (1995, 2004) principle of the *social production of habitat* provides a critical counterpoint. The findings in Soweto-East show that residents, through cooperatives and grassroots mobilization, continually generate housing solutions incrementally, embedding cultural values and social relations in the process. Housing is thus not only a product but a practice, deeply intertwined with identity, livelihoods, and belonging. The contrast between the state's standardized *"boxes"* and the community's flexible, culturally embedded housing strategies highlights the central tension between technocratic modernism and resident-centered transformation.

The Fragility of Co-production

Ostrom's (1996, 2010) framework of *co-production* emphasizes that effective governance requires shared responsibility between state institutions and citizens. In Nairobi, however, co-production has been fragile and uneven. Mechanisms such as the Settlement Executive Committee (SEC) were intended to foster participation but often functioned as instruments of state control. Residents described them as symbolic participation (tokenistic), confirming Arnstein's (1969) argument that consultation without power reinforces exclusion.

Yet, examples such as the Mukuru Special Planning Area illustrate that co-production can be transformative when institutional trust and accountability are present. Here, residents, NGOs, and government collaborated to design land use and upgrading plans. The study therefore reinforces Ostrom's insight that co-production is not automatic; it

requires enabling conditions, including transparent governance, equitable resource distribution, and recognition of community expertise.

Grassroots Agency and the Right to the City

The transformative role of GSMs in Nairobi reflects Lefebvre's (1970) *Right to the City*, where marginalized residents assert their claim to shape urban life. Movements such as Muungano wa Wanavijiji mobilize savings, mapping, and advocacy to not only secure housing rights but also redefine citizenship itself. Women, in particular, reported how involvement in savings schemes and cooperatives enabled them to influence land tenure and planning processes, shifting their roles from passive beneficiaries to active co-creators.

This finding extends existing scholarship on African urbanism (e.g., Huchzermeyer, 2011; Mitlin, 2018) by showing that grassroots strategies are not merely reactive but constitute proactive innovations in urban governance. GSMs in Soweto-East function simultaneously as insurgent actors, resisting exclusionary projects, and as partners in co-creation, advancing culturally grounded, community-led housing models.

Afrocentric Alternatives and Original Contribution

One of the study's most significant contributions lies in documenting how Afrocentric perspectives reframe housing as a cultural and social institution rather than a purely technical commodity. Residents articulated that *"a house is not just walls; it is where we belong, where our children know their roots."* Such perspectives resonate with Afrocentric scholars (Asante, 2003; Omenya, 2020), who argue that African urban futures must embed indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity, and communal solidarity.

By foregrounding Afrocentric and cooperative pathways, the study advances debates on African urbanism in three ways:

1. It demonstrates that the residents of peoples'settlements are not passive recipients but active producers of housing solutions.
2. It shows that urban transformation requires cultural resonance, not just economic affordability.
3. It reveals that grassroots agency is indispensable for crafting inclusive and just urban futures.

Advancing the Discourse on African Urban Transformation

This study advances the discourse on African urban transformation by framing government-grassroots interventions as ambivalent but productive sites of transformation. Previous scholarships have often presented a dichotomy: state interventions as failures, grassroots initiatives as resistance. By contrast, the Nairobi case shows that the reality is more complex. Government and grassroots are locked in relations of both conflict and collaboration, producing hybrid forms of governance that are uneven, contested, yet potentially transformative.

The originality of this work lies in demonstrating that sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi requires integrating Hamdi's socially produced habitats and Ostrom's co-production frameworks into policy and practice, while simultaneously embracing Afrocentric models of belonging and identity. In doing so, the study highlights that the future of African urban transformation depends not on technocratic state projects but on resident-centered, culturally grounded, and politically inclusive practices.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Contributions

By engaging Hamdi's concept of the *social production of habitat* and Ostrom's framework of *co-production*, the study contributes to theory in three ways. First, it demonstrates that housing is not merely a technical product but a socially produced and culturally embedded process. Second, it shows that co-production in Nairobi is fragile and uneven, requiring institutional trust and shared accountability to move beyond symbolic participation. Third, it illustrates that Afrocentric perspectives enrich these frameworks by grounding urban transformation in indigenous epistemologies, cultural belonging, and communal solidarity.

These insights advance debates in African urban transformation by reframing government-grassroots relations as ambivalent but generative sites of urban governance. Rather than treating state interventions as failures and grassroots practices as resistance, the study shows that both coexist in tension, producing hybrid and contested forms of transformation that reflect the realities of African cities.

Policy Implications

The findings carry several implications for policymakers, grassroots actors, and international partners seeking to advance sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi and beyond.

1. Institutionalize Genuine Participatory Governance
   Participation must move beyond consultation toward power-sharing. Government agencies should institutionalize participatory mechanisms that grant residents decision-making authority over design, implementation, and monitoring of housing projects. Transparent structures, free from political capture, are critical for restoring trust.
2. Support Grassroots Social Movements as Co-creators
   GSMs should be recognized not as peripheral stakeholders but as indispensable partners in co-production. Their innovations, federated savings, participatory mapping, advocacy, demonstrate practical models for inclusive governance. Supporting GSMs through capacity-building, financial facilitation, and institutional recognition would strengthen collaborative transformation.
3. Embed Afrocentric and Cooperative Models in Policy
   Policymakers should embrace Afrocentric perspectives that view housing as a cultural and social institution. Cooperatives such as NACHU demonstrate the feasibility of incremental, community-driven approaches. Formal integration of

these models would expand access to affordable housing while preserving cultural identity and community cohesion.

4. Address Structural Barriers to Co-production
   Tackling corruption, elite capture, and enumeration manipulation is essential for equitable governance. Landlord resistance and intra-community divisions must be addressed through transparent negotiation frameworks and accountability mechanisms. Without structural reforms, co-production risks remaining aspirational rather than operational.
5. Reframe Affordability to Reflect Lived Realities
   Affordability should not be defined through abstract market metrics but through the lived economic realities of peoples' settlements households. Policy frameworks must recognize scarce incomes and support incremental models that align with residents' capacities to pay.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi requires rethinking the relationship between government and grassroots actors. This article examined the implications of government-grassroots interventions for sustainable urban transformation in Nairobi City County, focusing on the case of Soweto-East, Kibra. The study revealed that while government housing programs remain shaped by political control, and technocratic logics of modernization, GSMs mobilize pragmatic alternative practices that foreground participation, cultural identity, and collective agency. The findings underscore five central themes: participatory governance as a precondition, the transformative role of GSMs, juxtapose between government and community priorities, the potential of cooperative and Afrocentric alternatives, and the persistent challenges that constrain co-production. The alternative models illustrated in this study prove co-production is technically feasible. However, the challenges show it's politically thwarted. Resolution requires better participation mechanisms but also confronting who benefits from current dysfunction and who loses from genuine urban transformation. The future of Nairobi's transformation lies in bridging these paradigms: embedding resident voices into governance, recognizing grassroots agency, and institutionalizing culturally resonant models of housing. In doing so, government-grassroots interventions can evolve from contested arenas into collaborative platforms for building just, inclusive, and sustainable African cities.

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