



Urban
Africa
Risk
Knowledge

Briefing

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Looking backwards to reduce future risk in small African cities

The past may reveal local patterns and triggers of urban risk, highlighting the importance of long-term exposure to everyday events and barriers to risk reduction. A historically grounded response to risk will ensure greater legitimacy and enhance effectiveness of local actions to secure urban resilience. This briefing draws on research conducted under the Urban Africa: Risk Knowledge (Urban ARK) project into the histories and trajectories of risk in Karonga, Malawi and Nairobi, Kenya, as well as recent work on urban palimpsests and on accumulation of risk through colonial infrastructure investments.¹

Understanding urban risk is enhanced by a long-term perspective

Mechanisms for avoiding and dealing with risk are embedded in place, practices, people and politics. Disruption by risk events and changing patterns of everyday risk will challenge and transform the social, economic and political organisation of African urban centres, especially towns and small cities which are often growing rapidly. This briefing reflects on key findings from historically informed research undertaken in the small but growing urban centre of Karonga Town in Malawi under the Urban ARK research programme. A core message is that you cannot understand the town without tracking changing patterns of risk, and you cannot understand risk without understanding the evolution of the town.

Responding to risk typically assumes greater forward-looking capacity, but this briefing recommends that policymakers embed historical knowledge and methodologies in approaches to recording, researching and mitigating risk in urban Africa. While a formal concern with issues of risk and resilience is a relatively new framing in urban development

policy and academic circles, the experience of risk and attempts to mitigate are an integral part of household reality, and risk response is also a longstanding task of human settlement leadership. As towns get bigger and as exposure to risks changes, there needs to be a personal and public reconfiguration of risk responses that builds on the ability to learn from past experience.

A historical approach makes visible the sensitive points and interrelationships of these processes, enabling more nuanced and grounded policy than purely present or future-centred approaches that inform the majority of risk and resilience research and action.

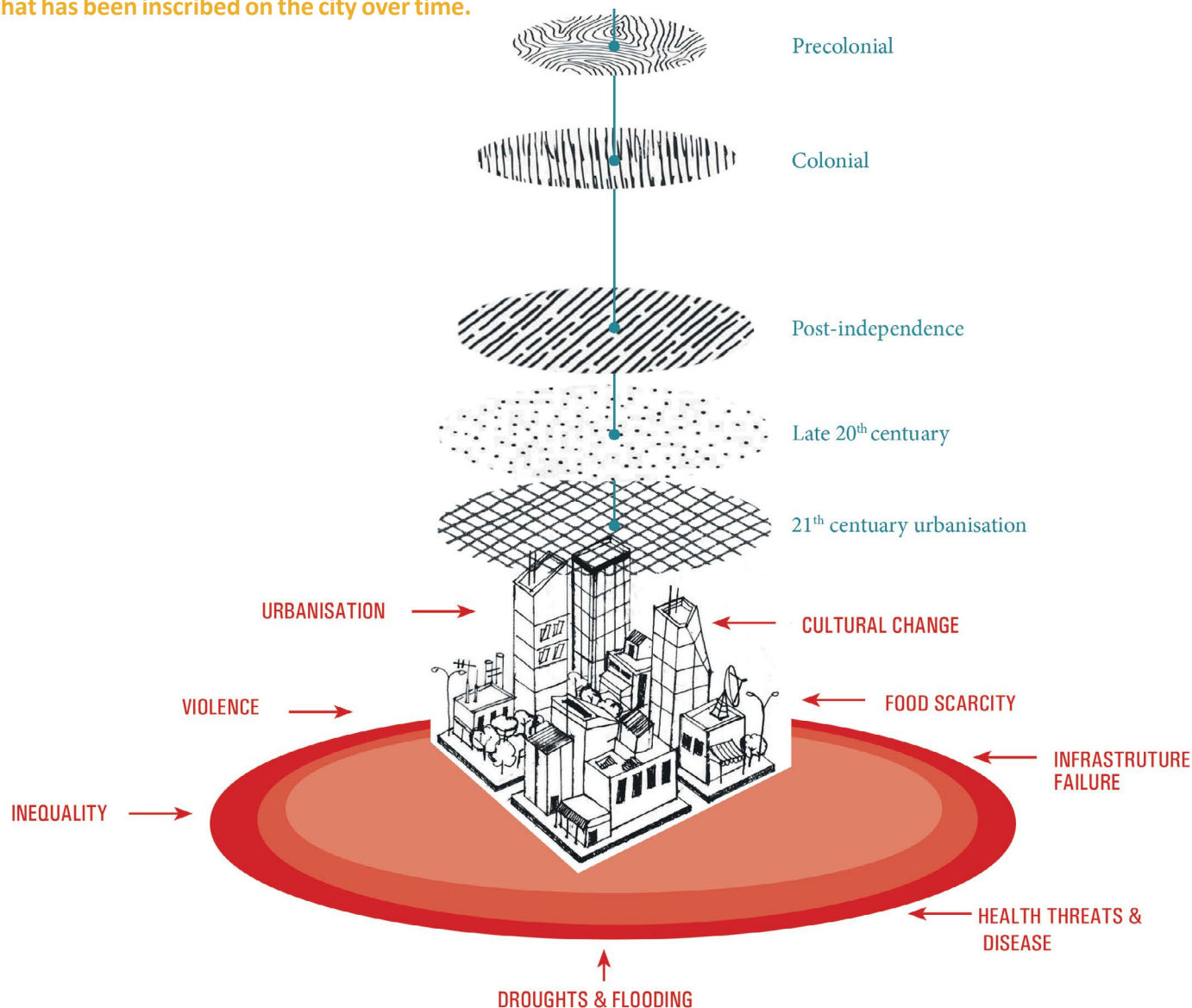
Histories of risk and the everyday

Everyday means of managing risk, and incorporating risk mitigation into patterns of everyday life, are often based on collective experience and social memory. These may include practical skills such as building or re-building methods after a major event, or socially embedded practices of cohesion and collective identity used to warn of risk, and cope with the negative consequences of long-term

Policy Pointers

- **Establish local historical risk patterns.** Tracking evidence over space and time highlights the cumulative impact and weight of conscious policy interventions vs wider social and economic trends on vulnerability, exposure and risk.
- **Use historical enquiry to uncover the politics of risk mitigation.** Who has power and authority to intervene around risk events will shift over time: typically there is always a legacy from previous dispensations of control
- **Create a public record that documents local experiences of risk.** Publically accessible, well-managed local archives provide an evidence-based record that enable future generations to manage their risk, identify new risks and focus on groups who are exposed to enduring risk.
- **Use historical records of risk to make current and future risk reduction more precise, more sensitive, and more relevant.** When formal archival or municipal records of the past don't exist, using both archival and non-archival methods creates a more nuanced account of the past and ensures that historical understandings draw from many different perspectives and interest groups.
- **Use historical evidence to identify institutional barriers to removing risk.** Historical understanding enables us to recognise sites where risk has accumulated via path dependency and provide robust evaluation of the costs incurred because of risk events.

Figure 1. Palimpsest of risk. A city's current exposure to risk has its roots in the uneven, layered palimpsest of risk that has been inscribed on the city over time.



exposure (e.g. to premature death or disability). Understanding these locally constituted patterns and methods of managing risk requires the ability to learn from these and from lived experiences of the past, in order to ensure policy outcomes are socially and historically embedded and not imposed over what may be an extremely sensitive social fabric.

Urban risk palimpsests

The necessity for a historicised understanding of everyday risk is particularly apparent when dealing with institutions arising as a result of past events, which become established as part of everyday risk management and norms. The traditions and systems of risk management that we evolve then become etched onto the landscape (for example by setting housing back from rivers that flood) or in institutions or conventions through which the urban form is managed. A relevant example is implementing building bye-laws that are designed to allow structures to withstand damp or minimise damp to reduce disease exposure.

Risk reduction, like most urban management functions, is not a one-off event or intervention/solution – and it is possible to trace the evolution of different ideas and events through the analysis of the urban form or the history of urban governance. We can think of this as **urban risk palimpsests** – where little parts of previous layers of history remain in place, even as other events and activities overlay them. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how historicised patterns of risk accumulate and shape urban form and experience over time. The urban risk palimpsest highlights how, especially in cities where the physical form is never fully destroyed, new ideas and practices are introduced (often in response to risk) alongside the persistence of older traditions, especially ones that were seen to mitigate risk. Each town will have a locally configured palimpsest, but there are some general patterns that are evident across Africa, and reflecting on the local experience of these forces can help explain the urban risk landscape.

Uneven accumulation of risk

The historicisation of everyday risk and risk accumulation is as important locally as it is within a global geo-political context. Risk accumulates unevenly; particular places face greater levels of risk than others, and both the form of risk and the ability to mitigate is historically and politically determined – often in spatially uneven ways. This has clear impacts on who is most affected by risk, and on which communities are able to muster the resilient practices, as well as which spaces and types of risk are most likely to receive external aid, donor assistance, and government and media attention. A historical view highlights these inequalities and in so doing, enables practitioners and policy makers to address these, beyond a short-term focus on resilience in the face of immediate crisis. In the absence of clear historicisation and a focus on historical memory, we risk repeating and entrenching patterns of power, exclusion, and the denial of agency.

Institutional histories

The institutions governing, mitigating and responding to risk are shaped by historical processes and, in many instances, these must be understood before an evidence-based policy response can be adequately formulated. Understanding institutions as historicized entities enables a nuanced consideration of who governs, which voices and institutions are recognised as legitimate, and who are considered insiders/outside. Institutional histories also often show up vast imbalances in gender representation and consideration of gendered issues, which are intrinsic to the management of risk. An example arising from the Urban ARK research is that of the relationship between local government and customary leadership structures in Karonga, Malawi, where there has effectively been no local government since 2009, but where authority vested in chiefs and village headmen has long had greater legitimacy on the ground than a ward council-based local government system. Consequently, the role of the chiefs and related traditional structures is a vital element in addressing risk and resilience in Karonga, which faces an exceptionally high number of environmental and public health-related everyday risks and disaster events. While institutional strengthening is often touted as a solution to risk, in order to consider this type of change it is imperative to have a deeply rooted historical understanding of how these structures have come to be in place, what they mean for residents' everyday experiences of governance and relationships with the state, and what actions they have been historically equipped to undertake. For positive change to be possible, it is necessary to understand what structures this change needs to build on, and to recognise the ways in which those structures may be vulnerable,

contested, codependent, and in what ways they work effectively and engage the parties that actually hold influence, both formally and informally.

Deep knowledge of a place is also necessary because institutions of governance that may have developed incrementally in response to a range of pressures, including everyday risk, are particularly vulnerable to sudden change or disruption of the type that follows risk events or disasters. This vulnerability of established political constellations and practices, sometimes thought of as a political settlement, cannot be fully understood outside of a historical framework. In this regard risk and disaster cannot only be understood as events that put bodies and households at physical risk, but also as events that impact on hard-won equilibriums and practices. From this perspective, sudden risk events (such as earthquakes or unseasonal floods) expose the accommodation of risk in everyday built environment management, and may destabilise practices that are deeply embedded. Without understanding these histories, policy responses risk causing further destabilisation and damage.

Memory and risk: the primacy of lived experience

One of the major strengths of historical methodologies for understanding risk, such as oral histories, is that they allow for an understanding of the ways in which everyday risk and 'disaster events' are experienced by those who live through them, or who may have lived with them for a long time. In the Urban ARK research undertaken in Karonga, we found that a recurring theme in oral history interviews was a set of anxieties tied to the sense of rapid urbanisation as inherently 'risky'. As a space that is currently on the cusp of the rural-urban population shift that characterises many smaller sub-Saharan African towns and cities, these everyday experiences of change in Karonga appear alongside much longer lived realities of earthquakes, seasonal flooding, and more recent climate-related changes. Comprehending this lived experience suggests a need for enlarged understandings of what is experienced as 'risky', as well as pointing to the ways in which urbanisation itself can pose risks to established political structures, practices and ways of life. These present-day reactions and beliefs are inherently shaped by the past and by collective memory.

Sources of historical knowledge on risk

Official national and city archives are, however, limited in the kinds of knowledge they record and produce. Archives do not record much on informality, and if there was no local government there will be no official local records. Particularly in newly emerging cities such as Karonga where there is limited state involvement, historical knowledge must take account of other sources

Urban Africa: Risk Knowledge (Urban ARK)

breaking cycles of risk accumulation in sub-Saharan Africa

A three-year programme of research and capacity building that seeks to open up an applied research and policy agenda for risk management in urban sub-Saharan Africa. Urban ARK is led by 12 policy and academic organisations* from across sub-Saharan Africa with international partnerships in the United Kingdom.

* Abdou Moumouni University; African Population and Health Research Centre; Arup; International Alert; International Institute for Environment and Development; King's College London; Mzuzu University; Save the Children; UN-Habitat; University of Cape Town; University College London; University of Ibadan

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and innovate methodologically where possible. Colonial archives are steeped in particular power relationships and world views (and in some cases, such as in Kenya, were partially destroyed during decolonisation processes). The archive is a very valuable record, highlighting what was done as much as what was omitted from government attention. Our research reveals what little focus the risk reducing needs of residents in the towns received and how much, even disproportionate, emphasis was placed on large infrastructure investment, such as airports, in ways that distorted budgets for generations and created conditions for increased exposure to everyday risk in poor households without basic services.

By their nature archives, which typically house official records, are also a site of silencing and exclusion. 'Ordinary' voices tend only to appear in the archive when there is a moment of intersection with colonial bureaucracies, or where there has been some form of transgression. While this is valuable, it is only one possible source of knowledge with its own biases and occlusions. Thus, sustained fieldwork, interviews, and oral history methodologies are all important possible ways to expand the archive and to acknowledge and valorise different ways of producing knowledge and 'expertise'. In the Karonga case, this took the form of training locally based research assistants, who had been engaged in the Urban ARK work from the beginning of the project, to undertake oral history research with elderly residents in their own villages regarding memories of risk and lived experiences of resilient practices. This is both a pragmatic approach, and an ethical one, in which people with longstanding and deep experiences of the issue at hand are recognised as experts in their own experience and allowing for this expertise to be recognised and recorded.

Concluding reflections

There are five major areas in which a historicised frame for understanding risk could influence policy and action. First, and perhaps most

obviously, tracking patterns of risk over time demonstrates the extent to which risk may be experienced on the ground as an accumulation of everyday risk, not only one-off disastrous events. Second, a historical approach allows for a deeper understanding of the patterns of power and legitimacy that directly impact how risk is managed on the ground, for example through customary authorities that may have deeper legitimacy than local government structures. These structures may also be destabilised in moments of shock or rupture.

Third, we recommend an expansion of the public record of local experiences of risk, to include both official archives and other forms of remembering and archiving. Public records are typically held by libraries, archives, or municipalities, and putting effort into building these civic facilities will ideally form an integral part of a risk reduction strategy – alongside local action to improve data on risk and populate dedicated risk reduction registers like Desinventar.² Relatedly, there needs to be an acknowledgement of different kinds of information and expertise, including non-official records as valuable sources in places where archival or official records are limited or non-existent. This is important to create a nuanced account of the past that incorporates many different perspectives and alternatives.

Finally, historical evidence allows the identification of institutional barriers to removing or mitigating risk. For example, distortions in the allocation of resources (eg national governments that invest in large-scale over-specified infrastructure projects in order to maintain and protect sunk investments) can drain resources from investments such as drainage or public lighting that might otherwise protect low-income residential developments from risk. The long-term impacts of large-scale investments and their impact on everyday exposure to risk highlight the value of a longitudinal and cross-sectoral analysis.

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Notes

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