

African Cities Magazine

**The potential of digital
technologies for urban
transformation in Africa**



A residents' confederation to empower communities in vulnerable neighborhoods of West Africa

Pauline Leporcq

Olivier Moles

Aminata Baro

The project to structure the Confederation of Inhabitants in West Africa is driven by West African civil society associations and grassroots community organizations from informal settlements, who seek to strengthen their agency and make their voices heard in decision-making bodies at local, national, and international levels. The project emerged from the gathering of community groups into resident federations in each West African country, inspired by the support model of the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) network, which is predominantly present in East and Southern Africa. The objective of the confederation is to bring together within a single sub-regional organization the inhabitants who are agents of change for informal settlements, in order to advocate on a large scale. Collectively, they defend a common vision structured around different pillars: social inclusion to strengthen solidarity among the residents of these neighborhoods and the empowerment of youth and women, economic development to support large-scale economic initiatives in the neighborhoods, and environmental resilience to promote sustainable urban development that is resilient to climate change.





“ Promoting dialogue, sharing tools, and empowering residents through participatory urban planning and community-driven initiatives



Drone photography suburbs of Dakar during floods, Senegal, Ismaila Seye 2022

According to UN Habitat, more than 60% of the urban population in Africa, approximately 285 million people, including 200 million in sub-Saharan Africa, live in slums or informal settlements. In 2018, the UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union) area had 123 million inhabitants, of which 39.8% were urban dwellers. According to a statement by Alioune Badiane, former Executive Director of UN Habitat, at the Bamako forum in February 2017, the African continent has seen an improvement in the living conditions of 24 million slum dwellers. However, the needs remain critical and growing. In sub-Saharan Africa, the total proportion of the urban population living in slums has only decreased by 5%, representing 17 million people during the same period.

Faced with this rapid population growth in a context of increasing urban poverty, public authorities are unable to guarantee access to housing and a decent living environment for the most disadvantaged populations. Urban planning is one of the tools available to authorities to address this gradual crisis.

It allows for a comprehensive approach within an inclusive urban project logic, ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders in the development project and creating a sustainable living environment where access to basic services is guaranteed. In practice, urban planning as a tool for city-making is poorly understood and utilized. Public authorities often lack the financial resources and necessary expertise to carry out these projects, leading to chaotic, uncontrolled urbanization and the rise of informal settlements.

The challenge for the confederation is to encourage a change in the vision and reality of informal settlements by fostering dialogue among actors, developing and sharing operational tools and methods inspired by the realities, traditions, and contexts of each West African country, which strengthen the skills and capacities of residents and enable more just co-planning of informal settlements to concretely improve housing at various scales.

These tools include those for collecting socio-economic and climate vulnerability data and drone mapping implemented by residents as part of the «Know Your City» initiative developed by the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) network. They also include solidarity financing tools by and for residents, developed on the principle of tontine, a community savings system common in most African countries, some of which are now robust enough to support housing renovation and affordable housing production. Finally, there are tools for the management and organization of community groups to enhance overall agency and training tools for the valorization and promotion of local and sustainable materials that reduce environmental impact in the making of African cities.

Status report by the urbaSEN technical team at a beneficiary in Senegal, Bénédicte Hinschberger 2022



“ Advocating for the community’s role as local data experts and strengthening their influence in public decision-making



Income generating activities training, Burkina Faso, Yaam Solidarity Media Team 2023

The approach advocated by the confederation is based on recognizing the resident as an expert in the use of urban spaces, positioned at the heart of city-making with decision-making power. As a key player in improving the living environment, the resident must be heard and recognized as a fundamental link in the decision-making chain in urban planning. The resident is a valuable source of knowledge that needs to be leveraged through precise data collection and dissemination, fueling advocacy efforts with local and institutional authorities.

Data collection is one of the biggest challenges for urbanization actors in West Africa. It is essential to regularly collect detailed data at the local level that reflects the daily realities of the entire population to plan high-quality projects that meet the real needs of the people. However, in West Africa, institutional actors (such as statistical institutes, national banks, and international organizations) are the primary collectors, holders, and disseminators of data on access to housing and basic services. The data these actors possess are often analyzed at too institutional a level to capture local subtleties and are collected infrequently, which quickly makes them obsolete in the face of rapidly and constantly evolving contexts.

The challenge, therefore, is to support the confederation in establishing itself as a key player in collecting local and contextual data that accurately represents the populations of informal settlements. Through structured and guided data collection, residents strengthen their agency and can defend their rights in public decision-making forums.

Training site, school construction in earth, Burkina Faso, Yaam Solidarity media team 2023



Community cleaning, Burkina Faso, Yaam Solidarity media team 2023



Raising awareness meeting with Grdr and FHGB, Guinea Bissau, Grdr 2023



“ The confederation’s capacity-building initiatives strengthen sustainable urban development and empower residents across West Africa



Guinea-Bissau savings group meeting, Grdr 2024

The member federations of residents within the confederation are each at different stages of capacity building. The project «Living Better in Non-Formal Settlements in Boassa,» funded by the French Development Agency and the Abbé Pierre Foundation, and led by CRAterre, urbaMonde, and Yaam Solidarité, has enabled, through an integrated multi-country dynamic, the initiation of support for federations in Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau. This core group, led by urbaSEN, Yaam Solidarité, and the Grdr, has generated a broader movement that has now given rise to the early stages of the confederation.

This support has, through several training and awareness-raising activities, sensitized local actors to the production of sustainable architecture that has positive impacts on housing comfort, the creation of local jobs, and the broad reduction of climate change in the three countries. It has also helped strengthen two urban renewal funds, also known as revolving funds, and create a new one through a grant to support the financing of housing and living environment improvements by and for the residents.

Training on drone mapping and the production of thematic maps has also been conducted, aiming to make these neighborhoods, whose boundaries are often forgotten or non-existent on public maps, visible. Finally, awareness and communication activities led by resident federations have been conducted for the structuring of member groups within the federations, the management of community savings, and the strengthening of agency and advocacy with local authorities.

These peer-to-peer exchanges across West Africa facilitate the implementation of training programs to enhance horizontal African competencies by and for civil society organizations and grassroots community organizations.

To go further, several partnerships are currently being signed, supported by the Center For Affordable Housing Finance (CAHF) and Slum Dwellers International (SDI), in partnership with urbaMonde and urbaSEN, winners of the UN Habitat World Habitat Award in 2023. This agreement aims to support the development of the aforementioned tools and methods over several years.

“ Empowering resident federations in urban planning offers an innovative solution to housing and climate challenges

The approach advocated by these organizations has demonstrated its relevance and added value for several years. The challenges related to the right to housing and living conditions are growing, and climate change exacerbates the needs of populations, particularly in terms of adaptation.

This is why it is crucial to encourage dialogue among all stakeholders to find solutions that promote co-led, co-financed, and co-resilient actions. Recognizing the confederation as a serious, relevant, and high-potential actor is essential to addressing these challenges in innovative ways. The federations represent an opportunity to fill existing gaps in the decision-making chain of urban planning. The genuine redistribution of some of the power in the city-making process to those who live in it is an innovative and relevant solution in the face of the current climate emergency.

Senegal FSH Savings Group Meeting, urbaSEN Media Team 2022

