Migration is changing the world's cities: Why is Africa at the forefront of that change?

Transcript

Rob McNeil

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Migration Oxford Podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Sanna van Oosten

And I'm Sanna van Oosten.

Rob McNeil

So Sanna, can you explain to me a little bit about who we're talking to today and what we're going to be talking about?

Sanna van Oosten

So today we're going to be talking to Lauren Landau and Caroline Wenjiko Chiato. Lauren is a professor of migration and development at the Oxford Department of International Development, ODID. And Caroline is a visiting fellow and they're going to be talking about migration as a city building project. And they built this atlas of uncertainty together with a whole lot of other researchers. And they went into cities and looked at how migration is changing these cities from within. This is an intercontinental recording. So both joined us from different locations. And Lauren was in an echoey room at Harvard where he's currently a visiting fellow. Okay. So welcome to this episode. Seeing that you're both Oxford colleagues, am I okay to call you by your first names or would you rather that I use your full academic titles?

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

Caroline is fine.

Dr Loren Landau

Usually I insist on the full title and everything, but Lauren's fine for today. Yeah, no, I'm just kidding.

Sanna van Oosten

And now, can I ask you about the Atlas of Uncertainty? Where does it come from? What does it look at? And what prompts the title?

Dr Loren Landau

This is a project that goes back more than a decade where we started to look at how African cities were changing and how migration on the African continent was taking place. And a lot of that literature, a lot of that work is about people trying to meet an objective, trying to get somewhere, trying to fulfill a goal. And that's there, but they are doing it in an era in which environment, economics, politics makes it very difficult to know the future. And so we are interested in looking at how cities, which are growing in Africa like nowhere else, are creating futures amidst this uncertainty. They're taking shape. People are moving. They're moving from one place to another. They're interacting in extremely interesting ways, but without the predictability, the guidance from the state or the economy that we've seen in the past. And we wanted to capture that. and find ways of communicating and to think about that with others.

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

And for us, uncertainty wasn't something to judge or that was bad necessarily. We were really trying to understand how in times of uncertainty, what kinds of creative and innovative and adaptive practices emerge as people try to make a life in the city.

Dr Loren Landau

I would just add that's not necessarily to celebrate informality, to say it's better than something I think we'd all like to live in worlds that are secure and prosperous, but it is to say people are doing this and we can't just say this is a byproduct. This is how millions, tens of millions of people are living. And we need to understand that informality, the way in which they address that and the generative things that they're doing.

Sanna van Oosten

And I'm really fascinated by this idea of uncertainty. Why does it seem so central in this context?

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

Uncertainty is a condition that is being experienced across the world, political uncertainty, economic uncertainty, environmental uncertainty and crises. And what we are seeing in African cities is that places like Accra, Nairobi and Johannesburg, they've lived in uncertainty all their lives. These are cities that have experienced uncertainty for a long time. And take informality, for example, the informal sector in 1970, the ILO published a report on the informal sector in Kenya, saying that it had found this very unique way in which the labor interacted in the market. Fast forward to 2018, Their research now talks about how 60% of all people employed in the world, that's 2 billion people, are now working in the informal economy. And what this means is places like Accra, Nairobi and Johannesburg are special because this kind of way of interacting with the economy of surviving has been part of urban life for as long as the cities have

lived, but not only in Africa, but also in other developing contexts. And for us, what we're saying is that Africa and places like that are at the start or at the forefront of what urban futures are going to look like. And one of the ways in which we we think about the Atlas is how these spaces actually offer an insight into where the world is heading to.

Dr Loren Landau

I would just add that uncertainty is unsettling in many ways. You don't know what your family will look like, you don't know what your career will look like, you don't know if you'll be able to be married, if that's what you want to do, but it's also corrosive in the sense that the way that forms of, say, patriarchy or oppression rely on stable systems. And if anything, so what we see is those systems also breaking down. That, for some, can create enormous amounts of freedom. You can have a family or live a life that you might not have been able to live if things were stable, if they were set. Of course, it also comes with enormous risks, and the way in which society reconstitutes itself can be equally discriminatory, racist, homophobic, et cetera. But I think what we also see in these cities is that people are making new lives. That is not necessarily something to celebrate. The way which people have to live is often tiresome. It's often hard. but there are elements of freedom and creativity that are infused in everything that's happening.

Sanna van Oosten

I'm really interested in what's unique about the specific context that you studied, because this research takes place in three cities, Accra, Johannesburg, and Nairobi. So did you look at these cities as a whole, or did you go to specific locations within these cities?

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

We didn't just choose the full city, we selected specific sites. And in each of the cities we selected three sites of what we call gateway cities. These are cities which have a lot of mobility, people moving into the city, people moving out, so there's a lot of churn. But there are spaces where people coming from elsewhere, whether it's across the border or from other parts of the country, coming to try and get a foothold into the city. So where housing is cheap, where jobs in the informal economy might be more available. And so they're very specific in the ways in which the human mobility operates within them and around them.

Dr Loren Landau

Each of these cities is a regional hub. Each of them has been growing almost exponentially through natural increase, people having kids, but also from mass migration primarily from their own countries and of course across borders. And if you look at the footprint, if you could be up in space looking down, these cities have just expanded. And a lot of those cities are those neighborhoods that Caroline was talking

about, the gateways. what we've often called estuaries, where multiple flows of people come and they churn and they create something new. And what we've seen is that the diversity between the cities is often less than the diversity between different neighborhoods. Different neighborhoods have their own stories, different sorts of people settle there, different authority structures, the economies, the relationship to the natural environment. And so each of these neighborhoods in some ways is extraordinarily unique. But what we can see by looking at three neighborhoods in each place is that there are certain types of patterns. There are certain types of things taking shape, which I think, sure, they would look different in other cities, but are part of a broader, at least continental, if not global, phenomenon.

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

It's important for us to remember that most Africans move within the continent and in fact within the regions. And so a lot of what we were trying to do in the Atlas is really put a spotlight on how this sort of intercontinental mobility shapes urban politics, shapes socialities, shapes the environment. And we were intentional about focusing on movement within Africa because much of the global discussion has been on how Africans move across the Mediterranean into Europe and other parts of the world. And so what that conversation does is pull us away from the kinds of mobility that are happening on the continent.

Dr Loren Landau

If I can just add, these sorts of gateways are, for many, a gateway into a different possibility. So it's a very precarious possibility, but staying still for people within the continent is basically condemning yourself to having no future. So you step into these neighborhoods and a range of possibilities open up. What's different as opposed to moving to a city during industrialization or growth period is when you went there, you went to get a job. Now there are no jobs. There is no security provided by the state anyway. So you walk into a space that is now blossomed with possibility, but it's hard to see what those possibilities are. And perhaps even more difficult, it's hard to know how you would get there, what kind of steps you would need to take to grab this thing that you're after. But for many people, they're about getting jobs, a house. For others, it's about getting something that they can take home. And for others, it's about really entering into a global imaginary and possibly even further migration to Minnesota, to the UK or elsewhere. So this is where these gateways are really where new forms of sociality, new politics and new imaginations are taking shape.

Sanna van Oosten

Since your project is called an atlas, I'm interested in your approach to mapping. What does your unique way of mapping show about mobilities, connections, and how people's lives are changing due to migration?

Dr Loren Landau

I think if we look at how people are living in cities, and one of our, we worked with these colleagues at Columbia University who were doing mapping, and we asked people about their households, and they developed these maps. And we start to see that family, for example, doesn't look like what we imagine. Families, households are spread, not just within the city, but in multiple locations, sometimes very far-flung. And that shapes how people live. It shapes how they invest, the ways in which people think about building their future. And that sort of social spread and that imagination, which is connected to all sorts of different places, also affects how they engage politically. When we talk about participation, we talk about a right to the city, we talk about investing in the future of place. For a lot of people, their futures are not where they're living, where they don't want them to be anyway. And that shifts what it means, what kind of representation they want, the kinds of solidarities that they want, the ways in which they want to engage the state or others, in ways that I think are really unusual. And they rub against a lot of development thinking, a lot of the migration studies, which is about people should be incorporated, they should be visible, they should have full rights, they should be recognized. What we're seeing is not that people universally don't want those, but some don't. And in some cases, the kind of things that we think of as progressive, as inclusive, are actually working against the ways in which people are trying to live.

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

Yeah, and to add to that, mobility does not just mean moving bodies across space. It actually entails stretching relationships, connections, obligations, resources, which move across geographies in ways that are new and novel in this time of uncertainty. I mean, in our survey, about two thirds of people in Johannesburg said that they did not that they had family members who lived in other households in other parts of the world. In Accra, it was 60% of people. So the nuclear family as we know it is really being stretched in ways that are changing how families connect, how obligations are met, how resources are shared, and also what it means to be a good parent or a good household member or a good community member. All that is shifting, and geography is playing a huge part in it.

Dr Loren Landau

In some ways, we started with the classic migration maps. How did people get here? Where do they want to go? Where do they send money? How do they receive money? And we mapped some of those things. But we also asked a series of questions about aspiration, about interaction, and those started and family structure. These started to generate maps and connections which reshaped how we thought geographically. So as Caroline was saying, Classic maps, which rely on administrative districts or formal

infrastructure, are useful, but they don't necessarily map on how people are living, how they interact with the city, or how these sort of social, economic, political processes are functioning. And that is something for which we didn't have a real vocabulary. So we used those maps as a provocation to ask our essayists to ask artists to help us capture the kind of hidden geographies that were in the city. And one of our essays, One Goy Kimari, talks about how what you don't see, you see a building. You don't understand that building, which is a church, is also a passageway and might in the evening also be a bar. The ways in which people are reusing and reconfiguring space the kind of boundaries, the social boundaries, the way in which stigma, the way in which especially religion works to create communities which are invisible. Unless you start to ask and think about these things in different ways, and the artists, the essayists, and the cartographers all come together, as Caroline said, to braid this and to help us understand and develop a new vocabulary for thinking about what is happening in these spaces.

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

The Atlas of Uncertainty is multiple things. It's a book, it's an exhibition, and it's a digital platform. And it involves over 60 artists, social scientists, essayists who have come together to talk about how places in Accra, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, how migration and uncertainty are shaping the city. We braid multiple disciplines together, art, social science, mapping data, to really help us see and expand the ways in which we see cities so that we can try and surface some of the things that fall off official maps. So part of our methodology is really trying to figure out, well, what is not mapped? What is missed in official maps in policies? So we really intentionally try to attend to the things that are invisible in official maps and official policies.

Dr Loren Landau

I could just add as another example, one that comes from our Oxford colleague Nicole Stremlau, who was writing about the Somalis and Ethiopians in general. Johannesburg, and her work is on telecommunication, WhatsApp, et cetera, but also on justice systems, on law. And what you start to see is that it's not just families that are being elongated and stretched, whole justice systems where labor disputes, business disputes within Johannesburg are being settled through elders and courts in Mogadishu or in Ethiopia. because they don't engage locally. They don't believe in the local police. The local police want nothing to do with them. But you still need these systems. And so systems of authority, sovereignty, justice are being stretched in ways that you would not see if you didn't have this fine-grained analysis and you didn't start to see These kind of processes is something connected to mobility and imagination.

Sanna van Oosten

Nicole Stremlau's work sounds fascinating, but I just wanted to circle back to Caroline's earlier point and what seems like a very interdisciplinary approach to research. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

There's a phrase in the book that we use, that the atlas moves from the census to the senses. And this was really intentional. because we wanted to move beyond the sort of conventional data survey mapping that we use in urban planning and urban development to really think about how we could join up or braid social sciences together with the humanities and art practices. And our intention was really to use art, not just as an illustrative nice to have, put a pretty picture to what we are finding in the social sciences or in the data, but offer an invitation to artists to really bring their practice to help us think about how they see and how they know the city. And this was important for us because there's been a frustration with the kind of methodologies and tools that we have to address endemic issues in our cities. I mean, we can't avoid or we can't ignore that our cities are highly unequal. We have incredible infrastructure deficits. environmental crises. And 60, 70 years on of urban programs and urban planning have really not helped us address or come ahead of those issues. We are always, with our urban planning tools, always running behind. And so What we wanted was these other epistemologies, other ways of knowing, to rub up against what our conventional ways of seeing cities and see what emerges in that process.

Dr Loren Landau

Caroline, I wonder if you might want to talk a little bit about like Billy McTierran's work as a single piece?

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

Well, you talk about it.

Dr Loren Landau

There's a giant piece, this extraordinary tapestry. And it hangs there and there are certain parts of the piece that are missing, squares that are not there. She accompanies this piece by a soundtrack from a market in Accra, she's a Ghanaian artist, of different voices, of different things that are heard. but in multiple languages that sound familiar, but that you cannot quite understand. And it is powerful. It's a beautiful piece aesthetically when you look at it, but then you look at it and listen to the sounds from the market of people's journeys. You hear chickens, you hear traffic, and you get enveloped in this thing in a way I can tell you I've never felt when I've read even the best social science reports.

Dr Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

My book, Migrant Women of Johannesburg, published more than a decade ago, really try to look and understand how women from other parts of Africa moved into Johannesburg and how in that mobility and movement they changed the city and the city changed them. I partnered with a composer, her name is Claire Loftay, who took some of the testimonies from the women that I had interviewed and had written about and turned that into music. And she then partnered with a pianist who played the music using vocalizing piano. And what was really interesting for me about it is first, hey, as a sociologist, can you really turn words into music and what does that even look like? So when Claire approached me, I didn't want to say no, but I was like, I have never done anything like this before. And I have to say that the first time that I heard this, it was played at the Center for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg, I got goosebumps because I had worked with these women for years. I had sat with them in their homes, in the markets. And I had not felt the way that I did when I heard music put to their testimonies. It was really brought Again, it brought the senses. It just brought the senses alive. And I almost felt like in that rendition, I knew them anew. It was like learning them again. And I feel that that's often what is missing about some of about social science, particularly, you know, the data sciences or the words just and the data doesn't give us the sense and the feeling and the joys and the pains of urban life. And awakening the senses in this way expands not only how we understand and see the city, but also offers us different vocabularies for really understanding what's going on in our cities. And then hopefully, And this is where the normative part comes in. Hopefully, with a greater understanding, we will have policies that might be able to support the richness of urban life.

Dr Loren Landau

Now, I was going to say, Caroline talked a lot about how we rethink the city and all of that is true. I agree with it. I think what we've also seen in the last 15 years is an explosion of data on migration. Part of this is because the European Union has freaked out about migration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa, and has invested heavily in creating migration research centers and projects about movement on the African continent. In some ways that means that we know more than we ever have before about how people move, but in some ways it's hiding almost as much as it reveals. And it naturalizes a certain way of looking at migration. Caroline mentioned before that migration is often seen as point to point. The way in which we've seen these stories is not only that it is more complicated, more securitous, but that it's also deeply social. It's not just about moving. It's not just about economics. It's about relationships, and those relationships are shifting. Perhaps the greatest lesson I have taken from this project as someone who has studied migration and studied cities now for 25, 30 years, is a renewed sense of wonder but also a deep sense of humility. A sense that from opening up to ways of seeing and modes of seeing that I haven't used before, I've realized that many of the things I took for granted methodologically but also politically,

ethically, normatively, deserve to be questioned. And we need to listen and to build anew how we speak and speak about mapping, how we speak about migration, how we speak about cities, but also how we think about what is progressive politics, what is urban development, that these are things that also need to be negotiated. And I think we are fearful at this time to show that we don't have answers. We are fearful because there are forces out there who are anti-poor, who are anti-black, who are anti-African, whatever it might be, anti-Muslim, anti-gay, that we don't want to raise too many questions that gives them fuel for their fire. But those of us who think of ourselves as allies or think of ourselves as working with or for or on behalf of or to amplify the voices of people who are often left out, is to come at it with an openness and a humility in ways that are quite unsettling and quite uncomfortable for someone who is used to being a professor, used to being an authority. And to me, that is perhaps one of the greatest gifts that this project has delivered.

Rob McNeil

Wow, that was a really profound and interesting way of ending that conversation. So there was a bunch of stuff in there that I thought was really, really interesting, one of which was about the degree to which informality is now just a norm in societies, and we have to adjust to new realities that don't relate to the old-fashioned world of tax-paying societies, building armies and police forces and defensive alliances to do X, Y, and Z, but are actually kind of functioning in a place where an awful lot of people just meandering through a complex series of choices that aren't part of those ideas of state making that we've always imagined before, or that I've always imagined before. And I think this is the key is that for me, as somebody who's involved in this area, I mean, I feel like I've learned a lot about parts of the world that I don't deal with and I don't know anything about here. Sana, I know you've come into this with very little sort of background in this sort of area. What do you come away from that conversation with, do you think?

Sanna van Oosten

Yeah, so I went into this podcast knowing very little about their research field and they really taught me how important it is to approach knowledge production in migration studies from all different sides.

Rob McNeil

Which I think is exactly the right way to end this. So I will just say thank you very much. You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Sanna van Oosten

I'm Sonovan Osten.