

Accra: City research brief

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The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative research programme, seeking to tackle complex urban development challenges in the continent's rapidly changing cities. ACRC aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions and urban services for all city residents, especially disadvantaged communities.

Accra is one of 12 African cities in which ACRC is engaging community organisations, researchers, practitioners, key state actors and non-state agencies, to co-produce knowledge and evidence to advance urban transformation.

This briefing report provides a summary of ACRC research in Accra, which focused on the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA). Two overarching studies were conducted: a political economy analysis of the city, drawing insights from political settlement theory, and a city of systems analysis, drawing insights into the state of interrelated infrastructure systems that facilitate material flows and shape social outcomes in Accra.

Research was also conducted in five urban development domains: neighbourhood and district economic development, structural transformation, land and connectivity, housing, and informal settlements. The research investigated urban development issues within each domain and identified potential strategic interventions to address these challenges.

Research highlights

- > Accra's major development challenges include inadequate and inequitable access to services and infrastructure, weak coordination of development planning among the city's numerous local government units, and limited state accountability and responsiveness to citizens.
- > Patterns of structural change in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA) have limited prospects of achieving structural transformation and inclusive growth in the city, as most districts experience transitions from low-productivity agricultural activities to low-productivity services-oriented activities.
- > We identify a set of priority complex problems that undermine the effective governance of the city and propose a range of multisectoral strategies for resolving these problems.

Decisionmakers in Accra should:

1. Prioritise addressing existing inequities in access to services and public infrastructure across districts within the GAMA.
2. Take steps to ensure that the high growth in services across the city is associated with better productivity and structural transformation.
3. Develop and implement affordable rental housing policies that benefit both formal and informal sector workers.
4. Launch multifaceted strategies to enhance property rates collection as a means to mobilise revenue for infrastructure development in the GAMA.
5. Collaborate with national and city-level authorities and existing paratransit operators to design and implement a bus rapid transit project, to help address the weak public transport system in Accra.
6. Prioritise informal settlement upgrading to improve the wellbeing of residents and refrain from the indiscriminate evictions of residents and informal sector traders.



Research summaries

Political settlement

Ghana's political settlement is characterised by broadly dispersed power configurations. Each ruling party has to co-opt a broad range of groups to maintain ruling coalitions. Relations between the city and the national political settlement are principally driven by the president's appointments of the city's mayors. The city's mayors invariably prioritise the interests of the governing party – through both the clientelist distribution of public resources and the capture of rents for funding election campaigns of sitting presidents. While an elected mayoral system has frequently been proposed as the solution to these problems, it may not be the panacea in a city like Accra. Ethnicity is an important determinant of voting patterns in Accra, and the predominant mode of clientelist politics is an obstacle to long-term programmatic policy and planning initiatives. Meanwhile, central governments' frequent redistricting of the GAMA has reduced the fiscal capacity of municipal authorities and contributed to a further dispersal of power, as the city's numerous urban councils operate as autonomous planning and development units. Such institutional fragmentations and power dispersion make citywide coordination efforts arduous, especially given the absence of an effective centralised authority responsible for citywide development.

Our research points to the importance of adopting coalitional approaches to tackling the city's most intractable development challenges. In the absence of sustained multi-stakeholder coalitions around particular reforms, a short-term orientation to urban governance will remain an obstacle to the effective provisioning of public goods and services in the city. Establishing a reform coalition may help build consensus among different powerful urban actors and ensure the continuity of reforms across different political regimes.

City of systems

The city of systems study provides an understanding of the interrelated infrastructure systems that facilitate material flows and shape social outcomes in Accra. The study focused on ten core systems, including water, waste management, energy, transportation, telecommunication, education and healthcare. The systems were examined in the critical areas of ownership and governance, coverage and access, history and record of contestation and how they are related to each other, in terms of functioning and outcomes.

Water and waste management systems are two of the most important systems in Accra, in terms of both how they affect the everyday existence of residents and the attention they have received in the academic literature and policy discourse. An equally important system is transport, which in Accra is characterised by poor service coverage of informal public transport (para-transit) and growing inequality of access to opportunities and vital services, especially in peri-urban areas. The interaction amongst these and other systems determines outcomes in critical areas such as health and wellbeing, livelihoods and household-level poverty and inequality (in terms of how much household income is spent as a result of inefficiencies in these systems).

Across the infrastructure systems studied, problems of coverage, quality and access tend to affect all residents but are often most acute in the city's rapidly growing peri-urban settlements and even worse for residents of informal settlements. Complex configurations of supply systems and governance actors, both "formal" and "informal", typify the water, waste management and transportations systems in particular, but similar arrangements exist around other systems.

Domains

> Neighbourhood and district economic development

The neighbourhood and district economic development domain investigates measures necessary to strengthen city economies and enhance livelihoods. It focuses mainly on household microenterprises (HMEs) operating within GAMA. These HMEs predominantly sell manufactured products such as footwear, clothes, cooking utensils and food items, providing vital income for survival.



Using a qualitative approach, 47 HMEs and ten experts (in relevant areas of interest) were interviewed. Three neighbourhoods were purposively selected: Nima (representing the central business area of Accra), Auntie Korkor at Achimota (representing the middle part of the city with larger, well-established firms) and Ashaiman (representing the periphery).

We find that HMEs tend not to develop into larger businesses because the main motivation for most of the operators is to maintain livelihoods. Operational challenges also contribute to business stagnation, including lack of affordable credit and difficulty in getting spaces for business operations.

Potential neighbourhood and district economic development interventions

Market women are major contributors to Ghana's consumer economy and command respect and cooperation from government and its agencies. Market "queens" influence prices of goods in the city and sometimes through their members, create artificial shortages to create inflationary trends. They have a cabinet and are the heads of the various trade lines in the market, with local authorities inviting them to engagements, town hall meetings and budget hearings. However, market queens are not regulated and there is no mechanism for accountability to their members.

We recommend that the assemblies consider **enacting special by-laws to regulate the activities of market queens**. The government could also **partner with the private sector to build more stores/stalls**, to discourage sales along the streets of Accra.

> Structural transformation

Structural transformation (ST) involves the movement of workers from low-productivity and labour-intensive sectors to high-productivity sectors. We examined the spatial distribution of economic activities, and the pattern of and constraints to structural changes in GAMA. The study identified spatial variation in the establishment of firms in GAMA. We find that some structural changes have occurred in the GAMA since 2000, with movement of labour from the low-productivity agricultural sector to other equally low and moderately productive activities in (non-tradeable) services and manufacturing. This suggests that the structural changes have not significantly transformed the city into an engine of growth and economic transformation. Key constraints include macroeconomic instability, multiple sales of land, poor road network, weak public transport system, and a lack of affordable and long-term credit.



Potential structural transformation interventions

1. **Worker infidelity** – The perceived attitude and insincerity of Ghanaian workers is a key issue, with firm owners complaining that negative attitudes among workers are adversely affecting growth and profitability. This relates to employee infidelity/theft, including the theft of money, time and merchandise from the workplace with the intent of personal gain.

We recommend a **standalone action research project including worker associations** to understand the extent of the problem.

2. **Difficulty accessing space/land for business operations** – Acquiring land for business activities in Ghana is a challenge due to insecurity of land tenure and indiscipline in the land market, causing conflicts, frustrations and anxiety. To protect the land and investments made, some firms have relied on court arbitrations, which are time-consuming and costly. Additionally, acquisition of development permits at the local assemblies and land titles at the lands commissions has become difficult, due to multiple sales of land, court arbitrations, bribe payments to acquire building permits and land titles, and hiring of premises for business operations. This has made acquisition of land prohibitively expensive in GAMA, making it nearly impossible for businesses to expand into new locations.

We recommend that **project implementers partner with landowners, the court and land commission to digitalise landownership in GAMA**. This will eliminate multiple sales of land and promote out of court settlement to move the process faster. In addition, the project implementation team may **form a committee to smooth the acquisition of land titles and building permits**, which will be shared with all land users as a report.



> Land and connectivity

This domain sought to provide an understanding of the state of land administration and management, land taxation and land-based financing and urban transport and mobility, through the lens of political economic analysis. The findings show that the institutional configuration of land administration and management makes state officials and customary landowners powerful actors, as they control all decisions regarding land allocations and registration processes. It also suggests that the city's elites use the planning system for their own advantage, to possess and control prime urban land, sometimes changing public use designations (such as parks) to other uses (such as residential and commercial).

In terms of mobility and accessibility, Accra lacks an operational public transport service system, leading to the dominance of privately owned para-transit mini-buses, called "trotro", which operate inefficiently. The urban transport infrastructure has not kept pace with Accra's physical expansion over the years, leading to inadequate road infrastructure and capacity in most areas. The rate of physical expansion has limited accessibility to valued locations, such as employment, shopping and social services in the city.

On the other hand, land taxation and property rates have potential to generate more revenue than other land-based revenue instruments. However, most local authorities in Accra perform poorly in mobilising revenues through property rates, due to a myriad of challenges, including inadequate administrative and technical capacities and the politics involved in the enforcement of compliance. The government is in the process of introducing a unified collection system for property rate as a means of improving property rate collection at the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) level.

Potential land and connectivity interventions

Two key reform gaps hamper the functioning of the city: the inability of local authorities to mobilise adequate revenues from property rates for improved service delivery to citizens; and the absence of an operational public transport service system. We recommend an **integrated approach that addresses both technical and political aspects of property rate administration**. This includes supporting MMDAs to develop and adopt affordable valuation methods for rateable properties, on a cost-recovery basis; developing unified property collection software for MMDAs; and forming and strengthening Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) coalitions to advocate for social accountability in the effective utilisation of property rates by MMDAs.

We also recommend a **phased approach to the implementation of a bus rapid transit (BRT) system, with the inclusion of existing para-transit operators**. This would require the government to mobilise financial resources from development partners such as the World Bank, Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and private sector, to redesign bus lanes. There is also a need to **build a public transport advocacy coalition**, which can be achieved through CSO activism, bringing political parties to the table and featuring the BRT in political party manifestoes.



> Housing

Compared to other regions in Ghana, a higher percentage of Accra's residential dwellings are made of non-conventional structures, such as metal containers, and wooden and kiosk structures. Evidence suggests that some 16.9% of urban residents in Accra live in these non-conventional housing structures, while almost half (47.6%) of households in the city live in rented accommodation.

Although rental accommodation is key to addressing the housing deficit in the city, it has not been prioritised in housing policies. Rental accommodation is largely provided by private-led informal housing providers, who deliver substandard accommodation under a weak rental regulatory regime.

Access to land for housing low-income households in locations close to their work has been difficult, due to high land prices. Besides, the adoption of improved technology in the use of local building materials – such as clay, sand, stone, timber, grass and thatches – for housing construction has been a long-term challenge, especially in urban areas.

Potential housing interventions

In response to the above challenges, we recommend supporting the **formation of private-led housing cooperatives and providing appropriate housing financing models**, including subsidies, and innovative densification designs to scale up the provision of rental housing units.

Additionally, we recommend the involvement of traditional authority, family landowners and local authority in the use of **land sharing as a tool to create access to land for housing in slums and informal settlements**.



> Informal settlements

The informal settlements domain examined the nexus between power, politics and informality, with a focus on tenure, citizenship and the delivery of basic services. This included investigating how city- and national-level politics manifest in the development of informal settlements, and how such settlements are governed. We found that many of Accra's informal settlements are hosted in highly populated constituencies, and support political activities in return for recognition and favour from the city and political authorities. Informal settlement dwellers have responded to their peculiar condition by creating parallel governance structures within their settlements, which facilitate collective organisation and action. It also emerged that the persistence of informality has provided opportunities for exploitation by politicians (who use residents for electoral purposes), and by private vendors (who make supernormal profits by providing substandard but badly needed services and infrastructure). The youth of Accra's informal settlements serve as a significant recruitment pool for political activities, including sometimes engaging in violence.

The relationship between powerholders and the community is both formal and informal, depending on which actor is involved. Local assembly members have formal and personal relationships with residents of informal settlements. The chiefs, religious leaders, local elites and other opinion leaders have a strong bond with residents in their communities. Most of them draw their power from the residents' recognition and loyalty, which they in turn use to exercise authority and control. The leaders use their authority and influence to lobby city/ governments for some projects.



Potential informal settlement interventions

About 60% of Accra's residents live in poorly planned, overcrowded housing conditions, due to rapid urbanisation, inadequate capacity of the government/city authorities, and weak regulatory frameworks to guide the physical growth of urban areas and to provide essential urban services. Building on past pilot slum upgrading programmes in Ghana, incremental infrastructure improvements could facilitate access to tenure security, housing and improved wellbeing in Accra's informal settlements. Slum upgrading is seen as the most effective response to reducing informality and homelessness in Ghana. This approach is consistent with Ghana's National Housing Policy 2015, with attempts to mainstream the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – especially goal 11 – into national and local government development plans, and with the national slum upgrading and prevention strategy (2022–2030), which is seeking to improve living conditions in slums and to prevent the emergence of new ones.

We recommend **informal settlement upgrading as a strategic entry point**, which requires the provision of basic infrastructure – water, drains, sewers and roads – and sometimes tenure security and housing, **to address issues of spatial inequality and improve the physical and socioeconomic status of residents.**

About this brief

This brief was produced by ACRC's Accra team to outline research findings and potential interventions, in preparation for the final city uptake workshop in the programme's Foundation Phase (2022–23).

Photo information (by order of appearance):

1. Aerial shot of Accra - Virgyl Sowah / Unsplash; 2, 3 and 4. Market traders - KnowYourCity (KYC) TV Ghana; 5, 6 and 7. Informal settlement scenes - KYC TV Ghana; 8. Housing structure - KYC TV Ghana; 9. Aerial shot of informal settlement - Peeterv / iStock.



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