Place of Hope or Despair? Investigating Social Mobility in Harare's Informal Settlements

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Citation of this paper:
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Informal settlements perform many functions including serving as an entry point for economic prospects, supplying (un)skilled labour to the city, promoting viable urban space, and as a conduit for rural poor to become homo Urbanus. Notwithstanding these functions, there is limited empirical scholarship on whether living in these places propel resident’s social mobility or otherwise. From a theoretical perspective, there are mixed views on the functions of informal settlements: on the one hand, they are deemed as having the potential to liberate residents from the quagmire of poverty; on the other hand, it is also seen as confining residents to a perpetual poverty trap. This article employs focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to explore the extent of social mobility among the residents of informal settlement in Harare, Zimbabwe. Our finding reveals that despite differences in sense of place experienced by residents, they feel that their community is neither improving nor creating the requisite changes for their social mobility. Also, the study shows that gender plays a role in residents’ social networks with other communities. We conclude that any support policies from the government of Zimbabwe and international agencies to assist residents of informal settlements of Harare should be cognizant of gender dimension and target women as such.

Keywords: Informal settlements, Harare, social mobility, sense of place, social networks