'SEE, THIS IS A VERY GOOD PLACE; WE ARE DOING MANY THINGS': RESIDENT ACTIVITIES AND SATISFACTION IN ABESE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT, LA.

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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the presence of rarely documented yet enriching residents informal activities and practices and its influence on satisfaction. The study was carried out in Abese, an informal settlement in La, Ghana, using semi-structured interviews. Activities and practices included resident's weekly social deliberations, collaborative house transformation, and use of housing spaces to meet basic local needs. In spite of their awareness of physical problems in the settlement, residents indicated that collective activities to improve their conditions, peaceful environment and sense of community afforded them a satisfied and positive living experience in the settlement. The study concludes that such activities and experiences provide a rich source of knowledge for (re) understanding urban informal settlements and offers hints towards inclusive planning and urban sustainable development within the current global agenda of sustainable cities and communities.

Keywords: Urban Informal Settlements, Housing, Social Deliberation, living experience, Improvisation, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Urban informal settlements continue to remain an important agenda in international development and urban planning circles (Roy 2005, Varley 2013). This is evident in the recently formulated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-Goal 11), which position informal settlements as critical to the global efforts towards Sustainable Development, in addition to the current discussions towards sustainable urbanization—Habitat III agenda (UN Habitat, 2015). This is partly due to notable trends in urbanization and urban growth (often unplanned) in Africa and Asia and its ramifications for urban poverty, environmental sustainability and city performances (UN Habitat, 2009, Okyere and Kita, 2015). The UN Habitat (2008) estimates that about one billion people or almost one-third of the world's urban population resides in informal settlements. Observers have consequently termed this 'a billion squatters' population (Neuwirth 2005, p.9) or even dystopia of 'a planet of slums' (Davis, 2006).

Through decades of theoretical and empirical research on urban informal settlements (see Hart, 1973, Perlman, 1976, AlSayyad, 2004), the dominant narrative of urban informal settlements has been negative (Revell, 2010, Okyere and Kita, 2015). These narratives are often based on over emphasizes on physical conditions, underpinned by concepts and theories that perceive informality as the opposite of formality (Revell, 2010). Thus, a sort of binary compositions (Varley, 2013, AlSayyad, 2004) that disregard their intricate interdependencies (Caldeira, 1996), including the socio-cultural, political and historical factors that influence their formation and consolidation. Urban informal settlements are therefore caught in a theoretical marginalization—in terms of words, images and stories producing powerful meanings— that highlight them as a 'problem' to be addressed than a phenomenon to be understood and engaged (Lombard, 2014 p. 5). Seemingly, in the conventional discourse, there seems to be no positive image for informal settlements in terms of urban competitiveness, sustainable development and planned urban development.

However, this theoretical marginalization has become suspect in postcolonial urban studies (Robinson, 2006, Roy, 2011, Watson, 2009, Obeng-Odoom, 2013a, 2015, Nuthall and Mbembe, 2008). Scholars have criticized such narratives as a generally worrying emphasis on poor conditions and over-simplified universal image of urban informal settlements (Gilbert, 2007, Huchzermeyer, 2007, Myers, 2009). What ought to be done, postcolonial urban scholars argue, is a 'working together' to engage urban informal settlements (Nuthall and Mbembe, 2008) by recognizing that they are complex systems with social practices that outplay in spatial arrangements (Huchzermeyer, 2007). In this way, as implied, urban informal settlements can provide a rich source of documentation—of resident's socio-physical activities and experiences—that offer a better understanding for improving physical conditions, and sustainable urbanization in practice (Gouveneur, 2015).

Within the purview of this emerging paradigm, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on improved understanding of urban informal settlements. It draws on Hardoy and Satterthwaite's (1989) view that informal communities provide a rich source of activities from which we can learn many things often hidden from plain view. Accordingly, the paper provides a descriptive analysis of resident informal practices and activities often hidden from dominant narratives yet are important part of resident experience in urban informal settlements. The first part of this paper provides a theoretical entry to the study by reviewing informality, urban informal settlements and emerging paradigms for a conceptual (re) understanding. Secondly, the paper considers the methodology and context of the study. The final part focuses on results from the study, described in subsections including social activities, housing and residents satisfaction in the settlement.

THEORETICAL POINTS OF ENTRY: URBAN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS, BIASES AND EMERGING PARADIGMS

Urban informality has evolved over the years, beginning in the middle of the 20th century. The concept, according to AlSayyad (2004), emerged through the work of Keith Hart. Hart (1973) in his study on urban employment in Accra-Ghana argued the case of the 'informal economy', where city dwellers are not necessarily unemployed but involved in activities of low and erratic returns. His analysis, primarily from an economic anthropology perspective, is a categorization of activities based on wage earning or self-employment (Okyere and Kita, 2015). This implies a differentiation of the formal and informal sector of the urban economy. Hart's concept was largely popularized through the work of then international Labor Office (ILO) (Jenkins, 2006). In their mission report on Kenya, the ILO (1972) used the term 'informal sector', as a terminology, for classifying activities and designing intervention programs in towns and cities in developing countries. Informality therefore became a two-sided issue reflecting bureaucracy (development administration) and the people (ethnography) (Hart, 2010, Ojong 2011). For the ILO (1972) informality is characterized by (a) ease of entry; (b) dependence on indigenous resources; (c) family ownership; (d) small-scale operations; (e) labor-intensive and adaptive technology; (f) skills acquired outside of the formal sector; and (g) unregulated and competitive markets. Fast forward to the 2000s, even though these features still define urban informality, scholars continue to underscore it as an evolving concept. That it involves complex dynamics and intricate processes which cannot be placed in a definite universally confined conceptual box (see Ojong, 2011, Roy, 2005, 2009). Indeed, traditional conceptualizations neglect fundamental interdependencies and relevance to urban societies (Obeng-Odoom, 2011, Potts, 2007).

The application of informality to human settlements is traced to the Chicago school's description of urbanization in Third World (AlSayyad, 2004). Right from the onset, urban informal settlements were pushed to a 'marginal status' (Abrams, 1964) and painted with a color of poverty (Lewis, 1967). It was geographically positioned in poorer continents and socially associated with 'delinquency, breakdown and general social malaise' (Hall, 2002 in Lombard, 2014 p. 7-8), and even detrimental to environment and sustainable development practices (De Risi, et al, 2013, Napier, 2007). Correspondingly, informal settlements are often used interchangeably with other terms such as slums, squatter and spontaneous settlements. They are commonly identified with characteristics such as irregular land tenure, self-build housing, low level of infrastructure and residents with low incomes (Lombard, 2014, p. 3). The UN Habitat (2003) refers to informal settlements as places built outside the land-use scheme, without planning permission and composed mainly of houses that deviate from the standard building regulations. The terms 'lack' and 'adequacy' runs through several conceptualizations, expressed in terms of inadequate access to safe water and sanitation facilities, road for emergency access and also structural quality of housing, overcrowding and insecure tenure of stay (UN Habitat, 2003, Gilbert, 2007). Generally, informal settlements are constructed as a symptom of dysfunctional urban societies (UN Habitat, 2006, p. ix) with physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and intra-city inequality (UN Habitat, 2003). In terms of sustainable urbanization, they are considered as exerting excessive rate of land consumption (UN Habitat, 2015) with activities and growth patterns detrimental to agricultural and industrial land use. In effect, they hinder sustainable development (De Risi et al, 2013) and more crucially, vulnerable to environmental hazards and climate change (Huq and Reid, 2007, Nchito, 2007).

Nonetheless, some scholars have questioned the intent of such overemphasis on negative features without engaging with other positive social, physical or cultural activities that enrich the understanding of these places (Lombard, 2014; Silver,

2014). Postcolonial urban scholars allude to this as 'attack' on (Obeng-Odoom, 2015, p.558) or 'biases' against (Gouveneur, 2015, p. 2) urban informal settlements. Politicians, scholars, professionals and formal residents have been cited as perpetuating such biases (Watson, 2009, Lombard, 2014, Roy, 2011). Historically, colonial actions of spatial injustice that treated local indigenous areas with contempt have been traced as the roots these negative notions (Watson, 2009, 2007, Njoh, 2003, Myers, 2009). These negative notions, they argue, are reflected in concepts and policy strategies that give little attention to resident activities in urban informal settlements (see Watson, 2009, 2013, Obeng-Odoom, 2013, 2015, Nuthall and Mbembe 2008).

Postcolonial urban scholarship over the years has sought to counter these dominant and influential 'biases' or 'attacks'. For example, Ejigu (2011) reveals positive practices such as rich network of social interaction and deliberation, different layers of negotiation and continuous process of house transformation (flexibility) that makes them suitable to changing life and economic situations. Silver (2014) also mentions incremental interventions in Accra, to indicate urban informal resident's small material and social changes in the home and neighborhood. He claims that activities such as incremental adjustments and improvisation in infrastructure sustain not only resident's survival but bring forth new conditions of possibility (Silver, 2014, p.790). More recently, Gouverneur (2015) has revealed that activities in social collaboration, incremental house transformation and changes to meet local needs suggest the transformative energy, resilience, adaptability, vitality and ingenuity of urban informal settlements. In addition, contrary to the unsustainable perception of informal settlements, Gouverneur (2015) agues that under proper management and planning, they have proven to be environmentally sustainable and supportive of the principles of sustainable development locally.

In effect, it has been noted that resident's informal social and housing activities may also impact living experiences and satisfaction (UN Habitat, n.d., Vasquez et. al, 2015). Together, these examples reiterate post-colonial urban scholars argument for attention to rarely documented resident activities that enrich urban informal settlements.

The need to pay attention to the arguments of postcolonial urban scholarship has been boosted by recent cases of mass evictions from informal settlements in African cities—in Accra, Ghana; Bamenda, Cameroun; and Harare, Zimbabwe (Bob-Millar and Obeng Odoom, 2012, Ojong, 2011, Goveneur, 2015)—one of the so-called hotspots of urban informal settlements. The strategy of mass eviction, for example, obscures important (if not positive) activities of residents that enrich living environments (Hardoy and Satterwaite, 1989, Ejigu, 2011). Fittingly, it has become needful to consider Huchzemeyer's (2004, p.47) suggestion that instead of viewing urban informal settlements as physical environments deficient of basic infrastructure and services, they can be recognized as complex and changing social processes that play out in intricate spatial arrangements. Silver (2014, p. 791) concurs; asserting that inattention to non-formalized activities undertaken by poor urban residents is a consistent gap in research, especially on postcolonial African urbanization. In any case, it is self-evident that a large part of the resolution of the African urban crises—including recent efforts towards sustainable urbanization and urban sustainable development—will come from the urban poor's actions in their living environments (Pieterse, 2008). The focus should therefore not be on a mere rhetorical, concept stretching (Myers, 2009, p. 194), rather, opening up to informal resident's activities and dynamics as part of the process towards a better understanding and eventual improvement in socio-physical conditions (Revell, 2010) and sustainability performances (Muzondi, 2014). To this end, this paper highlights resident's activities and practices in Abese.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Ghana is located in Western Africa, long the Gulf of Guinea and an important economic hub for the sub-region. Ghana represents one of the rapidly urbanizing countries in Africa, with a population of about 25 million people (GSS, 2013). The most recent census, the 2010 Population and Housing Census (PHC), indicates that 51 percent of the country's population resides in urban areas, an increase from 43.8 percent in the year 2000 (GSS, 2013). The World Bank's (2015) recent estimate indicates an annual urban population growth rate of 4.4 percent. The growth of urban informal settlements in Ghana has been ascribed to rapid urbanization of poverty (Silver, 2014, p. 792) and rural-urban migration (Songsore, 2010).

Moreover, Structuring Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and economic restructuring (Okyere et al., 2012), and colonial planning rhetoric, which paid little attention to development indigenous communities (Grant and Yankson, 2002), have been noted to have contributed to the formation of urban informal settlements in Ghana. Today, urban informal settlements in Ghana are defined by local authorities—with direct influence by international agencies—as places with inadequate access to basic facilities and services and lack of durable housing (UN Habitat/AMA, 2011). They have been traditionally seen as the ugly part of the city, frequently subjected to mass evictions and threats of removal from local authorities (Obeng-Odoom, 2015). Informal settlements are therefore by characterized poverty conditions and socio-spatial marginalization manifested in unequal access to services and marked inequality.

In view of the above, Ghana remains a fertile ground to explore issues around urban informal settlements. The capital area, referred to as the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA), has about 38.4 percent of the population residing in urban informal settlements, occupying 15 percent of its land area (UN Habitat/AMA, 2011). One of such urban informal settlements within the GAMA area is Abese quarter, where this research was undertaken. It is an indigenous informal settlement (part of the La Township) in Ladadekotopon Municipality (LADMA, Figure 1). The site, with existing social collaboration and non-formalized housing activities was selected in line with the research aim of documenting and understanding residents rich social and housing activities and how they play out in living experience and satisfaction. Without any official information about the settlement population, local leaders estimate the population at approximately 3000 people. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted in all 18 clan/family houses in the settlement. In each of these 18 houses, one household was selected based on the numbers of years in the settlement and then the head of household was interviewed. Thus 20 household heads were qualitatively surveyed. In addition to this, five key informant interviews were carried out with key individuals due to their role at the local community office or traditional secretariat. These interviews were supported with photography, observation and group discussions. Non-participant observation was adopted by observing family or community meetings and other daily resident activities. Furthermore, the researchers walked around the community from 9am to 5pm daily for a period of 40 days (November-December, 2015); learning about daily dynamics of residents and living experiences in the settlement. This research approach was adopted to offer the opportunity to move beyond official figures and statistics about informal settlements (Hardoy and Satterwhaite, 1989) to understand richness and complexity of resident activities. It also helps to understand the complex connections that people establish with the place they 'inhabit, cultivate, promote, defend, dominate and love' (Herbert, 2000 in Lombard, 2014, p.6-7). This approach also heeds Merrifield (2002 in Silver, 2014, p.793) proposal that truth claims about cities must be conceived from the bottom upward, located and grounded in the street, in urban public space.

Figure 1: Municipal Map of La-Dadekotopon showing study area (LA)
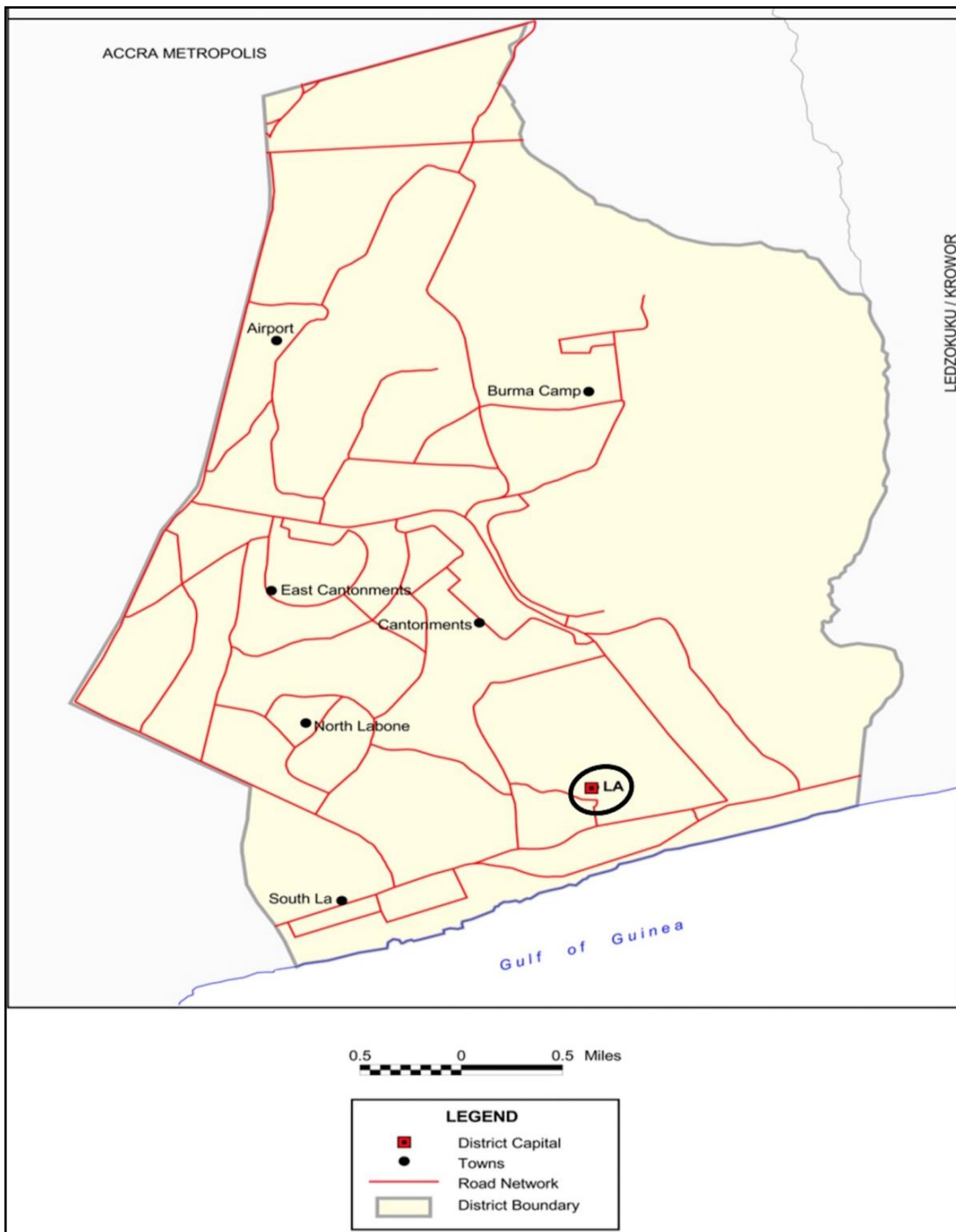
Source: Adapted from Ghana Statistical Service, 2014

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of respondents

The 20 households interviewed from all the 18 family houses had an average household size of 5.7. Eighty percent of interviewed households were above 40 years old. Half of surveyed residents (50 percent) were married and living with their partners. Again, 85 percent of surveyed residents were born in the community, while the rest had moved into the community as a result of marriage. This explains why 95 percent of interviewees indicated they have been living in the settlement for more than 15 years. In other words, most of these residents have spent most of their lifetime living in the Abese.

With respect to the educational attainment, 85 percent of the respondents had attained basic education, which constitutes up to Junior High School level (JHS) in Ghana. None of the respondents had a tertiary level education, while 15 percent had no formal education at all. This suggests that surveyed residents did not have enough qualification for formal sector jobs. Apparently, this explains why 55 percent of household heads have undertaken apprenticeship or training programs to acquire skills in hair dressing, plumbing, carpentry and painting to be able to obtain livelihood that can support their households. Thus, majority of the households were self-employed (85 percent) mainly involved in informal activities such as food selling, tabletop grocery stores, electronic repairing, hairdressing and construction. Women, especially, capitalized on spaces (within or outside house) for small-scale activities such as hairdressing, drinking bars, and cooked food 'joints'.

Surveyed household's mean monthly income was 75 Ghana Cedis (GH¢ equivalent to USD 19, at the time of the survey). The benchmark for the income poverty in Ghana, according to the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS 2013) is GH¢1, 314 (USD 345) or less. Considering this, it can be asserted that the mean annual income of GHS900 (USD236) puts surveyed households in the low-income category. The same result is obtained if the global poverty line of USD1.90 a day benchmark is used.

This recalls Hart's (1973) notion of self-employment and erratic low income in informal settlements, with similar trends identified in other African cities (Ojong, 2011). Such informal small-scale economic activities are often prone to uncertainties in sales and market, symbolized by inconsistencies in daily or monthly incomes. This basic household's socio-economic characteristics enable the appreciation of resident's individual and collective activities and practices that assure a reasonable urban life and experience in Abese. Such activities in terms deliberation, support, housing transformation, space adaptation and service improvisation are subsequently discussed.

Social Activities

Out of the 77 family houses in the La Township, 18 of them are in Abese. Each house represents a particular family and households within that house are usually related. Indeed, 95 percent of interviewed households indicated that they have at least one relative living in the settlement. Moreover, all residents in Abese either lived one of these family houses or an individual house—which is a later extension of the family house.

Local leaders have organized all the 18 family houses as community deliberation points where residents meet every Sunday for discussions concerning current socio-physical conditions and actions for improvement (Table 1). Following the house-based discussions, representatives from every house (family head and assistant) participate in a special community meeting, usually on Thursdays (Figure 2) to harmonize all the house-based deliberations into a common agenda for decision making and planning.

<u>Family house-based deliberations</u>

These meetings are organized and led by appointed leaders: family head, chairman, secretary and treasurer. Residents are required to attend such meetings in one of the family houses based on the specific family to which they belong. Observations revealed that apart from participation from residents living in the community, other relatives who originate from the community but live in other neighborhoods or districts attended the meetings.

Table 1: Common issues in house-based discussions

Meetings	Issues Discussed	Themes
Meeting 1	Library construction	-Community/house improvement
	Funeral contribution, Wedding/Engagement	-Social support
	House reconstruction and improvement	-Attitudinal and behavioral change
	Maintenance of community cemetery	
	Individual behavior and discipline	
Meeting 2	Provision of housing facilities such as toilet, bathroom, etc.	-Community/House improvement
	Sewage construction in the community	-Attitudinal and behavioral change
	Maintaining peace and harmony	
Meeting 3	Maintaining peaceful co-habitation in the community	-Attitudinal and behavioral change
	Community norms and values	
	Actions against attitude of dependency and laziness	
Meeting 4	Funeral contribution	-Social support
	House reconstruction and improvement of house conditions	-Community/House improvement
	Financing house improvement through relatives living abroad	
	Seeking permission and inviting technical experts to guide reconstruction	

Source: Authors' elaboration, Field Survey, 2015.

The discussions (table 1) were categorized into three main themes: community/house improvement, social support and attitudinal or behavioral control.

Community/House improvement: Here, residents main concern includes provision of house facilities such as toilet, which was lacking in several of the houses (discussed in item 4.3.3). Again, improving housing conditions, including the use of suitable building materials such as cement blocks instead current mud walls. In meeting 2, one resident participant noted:

> *'There is no toilet in this house. We cannot rely on the public toilet; it is so uncomfortable, especially at night. It is time to build our own toilet here and connect to the main sewer. I think if we all think of about it, we can plan how to go about things in our meeting next week and invite artisans to check it. Anyway, we need a toilet in this house'—(Mike Sowah, 04.11.2015)[1]*

This discussion demonstrates consciousness on the condition of their houses and their keen interest not in only in terms of future visions but undertaking self-initiatives to improve current conditions.

Social support: Here, residents are required to make contributions to support members' house improvement or social events such as funeral or wedding ceremonies. During a discussion in meeting 1, one elder announced:

> *'We have been notified that the father of our brother Kwei, is deceased. As we all know, when a member is bereaved, contributions are made to support funeral arrangements. Those who have not paid their monthly*

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[1] These accounts are based on semi-structured interviews and discussions with respondents. They are direct translations from the field survey. All names of respondents are pseudonyms.

contributions to the treasury are reminded to do so. It is time to show our love and support to our beloved brother'—(Amarteyfio, 15.11.2015)

The chairman of meeting 4, during a discussion on mobilizing funds to support reconstruction of a house in deplorable state, hinted:

'Some of our brothers, relatives and friends are living abroad in Europe or America. All of us are aware of this. I think they may be willing to contribute to improve the condition of our house and settlement. Some of them have supported us before, especially in times of need. It is time to contact them to provide us funds, to add to what we can generate here to improve the physical conditions of our houses'—(Odoi Lamptey, 20.11.2015)

It is noteworthy to observe the communal pooling of economic resources to support house reconstruction and improvement. Residents utilize several mechanisms, including soliciting support from relatives leaving overseas, usually in developed countries to provide remittances that can support house improvement. As explained in the section on housing transformation, 64 percent of housing improvements were financed by shared contributions from friends or relatives. This brings to fore what Ejigu (2011) refers to as social collaborative support in informal settlements. It denotes residents' ability to collaborate though social ties and bonds to improve conditions under limited economic circumstances. It implies the value of relational bonding, not necessarily as an end, rather a means to achieving common goals.

Attitudinal and Behavioral control: maintaining peaceful co-habitation, adherence to common norms and values through discipline was an important theme of discussion. Regulating individual behavior for the common good of the community is seen as highly important. An observably concerned resident opined in meeting 3:

'Our house and community have common rules. We know that unnecessary noise and loud music is not allowed here, especially at night. Yet, some of the youth act against this common rule. I suggest necessary disciplinary measures are meted out. They cannot do whatever they like here... The attitude of laziness among some of our members is shameful. We know our ancestors were hardworking and brave. If not, we would not be here. We must not sit and chat here doing nothing; everyone must work including coming to meetings early'—(Tettey, 22.11.2015)

The 'call to order' as one resident participant joked at, expresses how members uphold unwritten but spoken community values to main serenity. This corresponds to Myers (2009) claim that informal settlements, though often perceived with contempt and viewed as dysfunctional, can prove to be 'normal' places where residents know how to act and guide individual behaviors for community peace and harmony. Thus, social disorder as an extension of physical disorder (Davis, 2006) may find exceptions in places such as Abese, where deliberations also aim at enriching the settlement in a peaceful, harmonious and controlled manner.

Special Community Representative Meeting (SCRM)

The SCRM is organized on Thursdays to discuss emerging or related issues following the house-based deliberations (Figure 3). In addition to the representatives from the 18 family houses, there are participants who represent different interests such as youth, women and the traditional authority. During this session, family house-based discussions are harmonized into a common agenda for decision-making and planning purposes. The general community meetings are also used as a mechanism for information dissemination to the family houses and residents in general. This may have contributed to residents' deep awareness of issues in the community and their involvement in community improvement

activities. The survey revealed that 83 percent of households indicated that they have participated in communal activities such as community sanitation exercises, providing labor for community projects, cleaning and maintaining community toilet among others.

On the significance of these meetings, one local leader mentioned:

> *'Our community meeting is the avenue for us to show our love and interest in our community, to improve it, to develop it and to change things. We discuss, we argue, sometimes we fight, but we do all this to get a common view about the future our settlement. They call us slum community, but we are organized and we want to improve things in own our way'—(Nii Kwore, 04.11.2015)*

This remark is telling. It reveals how residents contrast the popular perception of disorganization and 'slum-ness' with their view of communal discussion as an organized activity. Moreover, the meetings exemplify a deliberative process, of arguments and counter arguments that together represent resident's decisions, actions and aspirations— to 'improve things' and 'change things'. In addition, it also demonstrates how emotional elements such as 'love' are used to show their attachment to their settlement. That is, participation in discussions about community issues is an evidence of their sense of belonging and desire to foster changes. This anchors what Simone (2004) notes that residents' interaction with others and their improvisation, drives aspirations and new possibilities towards material changes.

If the confines of these social deliberative practices are extended— to consider its value in community cohesion and improvement— the idea of social sustainability becomes eminent in the settlement. Specifically, the informal processes of deliberation or discussions, embedded in local informal family and community structures and relationships enhances prospects for livable communities. These are directly connected to the principles in the framework on social sustainability (WACOSS, 2000)—as a component of sustainable development—for advancing sustainable urban development in low-income communities.

Figure 2: Residents in a house-based deliberation   Figure 3: Special Community Representatives Meeting

Source: Authors' picture, Field Survey, 2015

Social Events and Bonding

As already mentioned, 95 percent of interviewees indicated they have at least one relative in the settlement. This was an incentive for strengthening ties, at it easy for members to relate to each other based on family ties or lineage. Moreover, the study further investigated the kind of events households participated in to deepen ties and bonds. With regards to this, 65 percent of households (Figure 4a) indicated they participated in family meetings. Others mentioned community events

(25 percent) (e.g. festivals, funerals, etc.) and daily work activities (10 percent) as events that strengthen bonds. These events provided members the opportunity to interact with others, strengthen relationships and demonstrate their support. One household respondent remarked:

> *'We participate in social events to meet other people, get acquainted and more importantly support each other. We are brothers and sisters, whether by blood or friendship. If we do not help each other, no one will help us'—(Amartey Linda, 8.11.2015)*

This again demonstrates the motivation to participate in social events and how this is connected to the idea of 'brotherhood' and support in the settlement. It also hints of the social energy within the settlement. An example of resident's deep interest in socio-cultural activities and strengthening social ties and bonds. Furthermore, 90 percent of households described relationship with other residents as cordial. By cordial, residents suggest the lack of personal conflicts, their interests in others welfare and the shared perspectives on issues in the community. Households supported this claim with their frequency of joining other members in the settlement for social events, mainly weekly or monthly (figure 4b), usually through family or community meetings and events (funerals, wedding and communal projects etc.).

Figure 4a: occasions for bonding
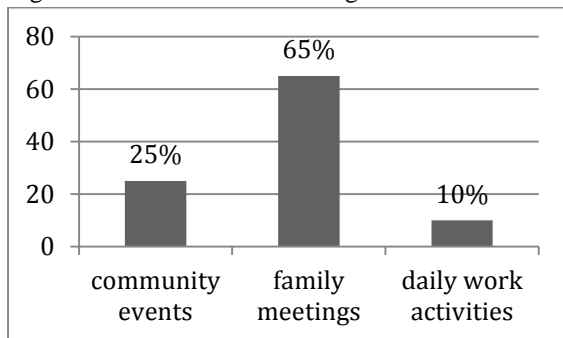
4b: Frequency of meeting other residents
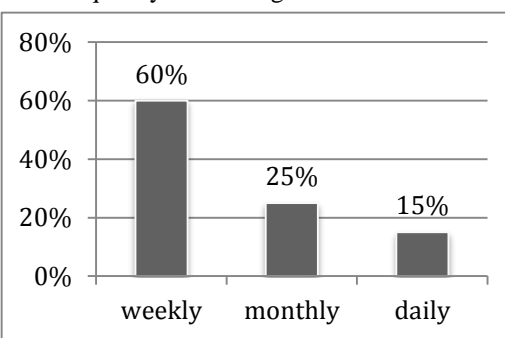
Source: Field Survey, 2015

The above narratives reveal the social activities in the Abese informal settlement, basically in terms of community deliberative activities, ties and bonds. It recalls what Gouverneur (2015) refers to as social 'vitality' in informal settlements. Again, it provides evidence of residents' aspirations and attempts to improve conditions. This, however, contrasts the marginal status (Lombard, 2014, Abrams, 1964) to which resident activities are often classified to suggest informed, enriching actions. It also reveals resident's view of conditions as not static but a process, through which their own discussions and actions can contribute to a better experience in their settlement. It brings to mind Huchzermeyer's (2004) thought on viewing informal areas as fluid, constantly changing places through resident daily actions.

Resident housing and space adaptations

House acquisition and ownership

All household respondents indicated that family members or close relatives built the house they live in. Except for two households who indicated their houses were built in 1737 and 1800, all others could not provide the specific dates for house construction. Rather, households resorted to comments such as 'over hundred years', '1700s' or relate to notable events such as political events (e.g. colonial period) or reign of key personalities (e.g. chiefs) to indicate age of building. This suggests that several of the houses are old, probably over hundred years. In addition, only 10 percent of surveyed

houses had title deeds, which further signifies the inadequate documentation about houses in the settlement. Houses have been acquired through inheritance passed on from one generation to another. The response from one resident is notable:

> *'We obtained this house from my grandfather. I do not know when it was built. Around the 1800s, am told. But I know it is very old. You cannot see from the building because we have modified many times. I think it was built around the time the British colonial authority moved the capital to Accra. That is what I know'—(Naa Shormeh, 18.11.2015)*

In another instance, one family head stated:

> *'We do not have title deed but I know this is our land and house. Everyone knows this. Even the airport area and Cantonments belong to our clan. Our forefathers came here first and fought with other tribes to gain this land. I can show you books about the history of our people and other tribes like Ashanti's which verify this'—(Nii Clottey Sackeyfio, 11.11.2015)*

Residents claim to ownership through historical records and ancestral lineage is hereby observed. Time, history and local knowledge play an important role in household's personal construction of house ownership and displays awareness of settlement origins. In the absence of necessary documentation, it reveals Margolis' (2014) argument that listening to stories (local knowledge) is a key to understanding people and their communities. In this context, respondents do not only rely on anecdotes, but also draw written records to affirm their views. This does not however, remove the element of subjectivity when conflicting stories are told. Yet, it posits that embracing local knowledge through stories and histories is significant in understanding places like Abese. It helps not only to understand the people, but the historico-cultural reasons that undergird resident interest and commitment to distinct activities and practices in their settlement.

Use of Spaces

Three important spaces were identified during the survey: courtyard, alley and sleeping rooms.

Courtyard: the courtyard is the most important space in all the houses surveyed. Since all houses surveyed were courtyard-based houses (i.e. multiple occupation single rooms, Figure 5) without kitchen or storerooms, households adapted the courtyard a shared multi-purpose space. For example, households cook, eat, rest or receive visitors in the courtyard. Moreover, most households claimed that the courtyard within the family house was the main space for family, community meetings or other socio-cultural events (e.g. traditional marriage). Given this situation, the courtyard can be said to be a communal space, which performs a collective function with social significance.

The courtyard also had an economic significance. Some residents were observed using the courtyard as local fast food joints, tabletop grocery stores or drinking bars. As reiterated earlier, without adequate skills to enter the job market, residents, mostly women, used the courtyard for small-scale income generation activities as livelihood support.

Alley: an extensive network of alleys that connect the different parts of community characterizes the entire settlement. These alleys, observably, provides connectivity and promote permeability. Observations revealed residents used it for multiple purposes. The use of alleys for playing games like draft was observed (Figure 6). They were common spaces for gathering, where locals relaxed or discussed sports, politics or petty gossip. In the absence of recreational facilities, the alley served as a recreational space where people relaxed or rested. In addition, and similar to the courtyards, the alleys were also used for small-scale economic activities such tabletop grocery stores. Consequently, it could be inferred

that the alley was both recreational and economic space, which reinforces resident's daily adaptations to meet basic local needs.

Figure 5: Courtyards in the case study area (a. closed and b. open courtyard)

Source: Authors' picture, Field Survey, 2015

Sleeping rooms: All the surveyed houses comprised of single rooms. These single rooms were used as 'bedrooms' for house occupants. It was the main private space in the settlement. In addition, households mentioned that they were also used to receive visitors or holding small meetings, if discussions were about private matters.

Figure 6: Use of Alleys in the Settlement (a. card plays and b. washing in the alley)

Source: Authors' picture, field survey, 2015

Table 2: Use of Spaces

Activities	Spaces Used		
	Courtyard	Alley	Single Room
Cooking	X		
Eating	X	X	
Gathering/reception	X	X	X
Sleeping			X
Resting/games	X	X	X
Washing	X		
Income generating activities	X	X	

Source: Authors' elaboration, Field survey, 2015.

The use of spaces (table 2) illustrates resident's space adaptations to suit varying functions. It shows that residents though living under extreme space limitations, have been able to creatively adapt available space to fit local needs—creating

multipurpose spaces that serve both individual and collective good. Emelia Laryea, a mother, in one of the interviews summarized this. She claimed:

> *'We have no kitchen, so we use the courtyard for cooking. We also sit here and eat, after that we clean up. I receive visitors here as well. As you can see, I have my small drinking bar and grocery store also here. Everyone in this house can use this courtyard. We share the space and everything. We can chat here or sit at the alley. Sometimes we gather at the alley to chat or kids play there. Even my sister sells around there too. We use the space for different things. I only sleep or watch TV in my room [sleeping room]'—(23.11.2015)*

This reiterates the practice of space adaptations and resident's ingenuity in confronting daily challenges as important activities that merit attention (Gouvenuer, 2015, Nguluma, 2003). It also affirms the view that complex intersections of people, space and activities 'provide for and reproduce life' for urban informal residents (Simone, 2004, p. 407) under constrained physical conditions.

Housing Transformation

Interviews with local leaders revealed that all houses in the settlement were originally built with mud (walls) and asbestos or zinc (roofing). Over the years, however, there have been material changes to some of the 18 houses. Household's transformation activities included room extensions (due to the increasing household size), wall or roof material improvements. The main reasons for transformation were to modernize (or improve), repair damages (cracks in walls or ripped roof) and to earn income through rent (Figures 7). These on-going modifications emphasize a 'process of change' (Huchzermeyer, 2004), at least in the physical sense, in Abese. This continuous 'process of change' is revealed in the way houses are transformed to fulfill social, physical and economic needs.

Figure 7a: Reasons for changes   7b: Part of house modified
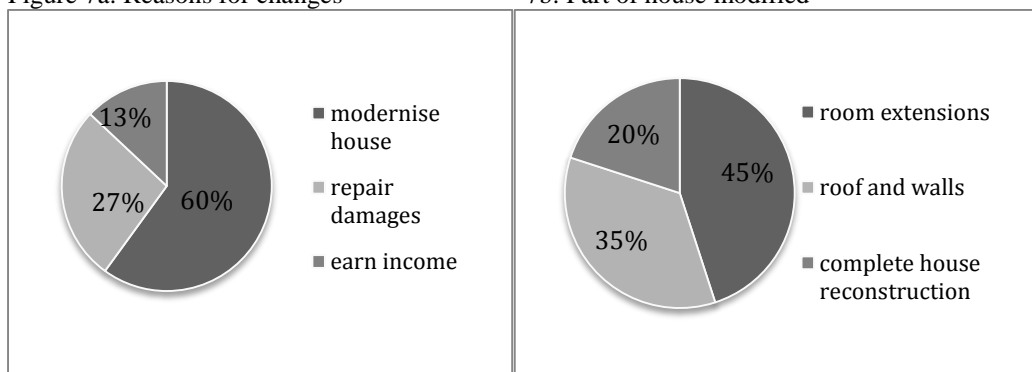
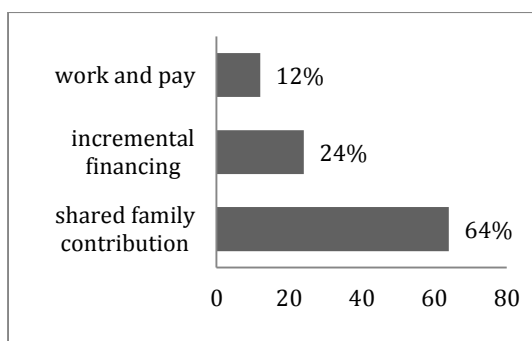Source: Authors' field survey, 2015

However, the most significant issue, in terms of resident's activities, is the mechanism through which financial resources are mobilized for house transformation. That is to say housing transformation in Abese is not simply a matter of shifting house material conditions and space extensions. It is also about social collaboration and support—which mostly undergird such house modifications. Thus, 64 percent of finance for house transformation was through shared contributions from family members or support networks (Figure 8). The remaining 36 percent was through individual funds, in the form of incremental financing (24 percent) or work and pay (12 percent). Though interviewed households were generally low-income earners, the ability to tap into social support systems provided possibilities for house improvement or transformation. The willingness of relatives or friends to contribute towards the house improvement is connected to the social significance of houses in the settlement. This is due to the fact that most socio-cultural events are

organized in the courtyards within the various houses—where occupants are usually related. Thus improvement is seen as a shared responsibility of all. One household head declared:

> *'We cannot watch our house deteriorate. Our name is respected in this community and to see the poor state of our house is a shame. How can we be bring visitors here and have meetings in this condition? We must reconstruct the entire house into a multistory to fit the respect we have in this community. We must do our best and also contact our brothers living overseas to support this renovation'—(Kofi Ashong, 30.11.2015)*

The use of 'we' in this statement reemphasizes collective ownership, social collaboration and responsibility. It occurs in a context where social ties with apparently well-to-do relatives or friends, usually in developed countries, become an opportunity, or even a strategy, for pooling economic resources for housing transformation. This also explains why majority of funds for housing came from shared contributions (Figure 7).

Figure 8: Means of financing housing modifications

Source: Authors' field survey, 2015

Access to services and resident improvisations

Households had access to communal facilities such as hospital, school, market and public toilet. Facilities such as hospital and school were not located inside the settlement, accessible by an average distance of 15 and 20 minutes by foot respectively (Table 3). Notably, 85 percent of houses surveyed had no toilet facility and therefore had to resort to the public toilet within the community. Similarly, none of the households had water supply inside the house. However, resident's improvisation in terms of water supply is noteworthy. For example, some private individuals and groups had established water distribution points[2] (figure 9a), where households could obtain potable water at a cost per bucket. There were several of these distribution points, which simultaneously provided income to the providers and ensured residents access to potable water. Most households, in addition, used rainwater harvesting (Figure 9b) during the rainy season.

The case of informal provision of basic services such as water supply reiterates popular narratives of 'self-help' (Turner, 1972), 'entrepreneurialism' (De Soto, 2000) or even service 'improvisations' (Silver, 2014) to meet the basic local needs. It reveals residents determination, under limited conditions, to ensure access to basic facilities and services necessary for everyday urban life. These service improvisations are not only for survival but to create opportunities for economic improvement for providers. It also underlines the interest in collective welfare—to support the larger community—that is a consequence of the strong social bonds and ties in the community.

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[2] Local water providers purchased water from private water companies, stored them in tanks and sold them to local residents. The tanks were strategically located at different places in the settlement, which enabled easy access.

In another instance, a sewer has been constructed as part of the process of improving sanitation in the settlement. The sewer has been constructed specifically to support the introduction of toilet facilities in some of the houses. One resident, directing to the sewer, stated:

> *'We made this ourselves. All houses here are connected to it. The on-going toilet construction for our house is connected to it. We want proper disposal of waste in our community. We asked our own artisans here to fix it. We want proper sanitation for everyone. In this case, everyone should be OK. We did it'—(Naa Ashorkor, 30.12.2015)*

Table 3: Residents average distance to access basic facilities and services

Facility	Average Distance (in minutes)	Provider
Hospital	15	Government
School	20	Government and Private
Market	10	Government
Public Toilet	13	Government and Private
Water	12	Private (individual/group)
Waste disposal	***	Private (Company)

   ***Waste collection was done on house-to-house basis through a private waste management company.

Source: Authors' field survey, 2015.

It can therefore be deduced that residents efforts and actions towards services such as water, sanitation and housing improvement hint at, though overtly, the sustainability and sustainable development performances in the settlement. Sewers and waste collection practices contribute to the environmental improvement in the settlement, visible in the largely neat surroundings observed during the survey. Again, the transformation of houses also improves physical resilience (including the use of modern materials), in light of heavy rains and storms—a notable progress towards physical durability and building sustainability.

Following the foregoing discussion on resident informal activities, the paper subsequently discusses the influence of these activities (social deliberations and support, space adaptations and service improvisations) on resident's satisfaction and living experiences.

Figure 9: Water supply and distribution in the settlement

a) Tank used for water distribution   b) household rainwater harvesting

Source: Authors' picture, field survey, 2015 (b: aluminum roofing sheets direct flow of rainwater into the barrels to store water for domestic use)

Resident's satisfaction and living experience

Respondents' expression of (dis) satisfaction, based on what they 'liked' or 'disliked' in the settlement, elicited important considerations on how the presence of informal activities influence living experiences. Generally, this was narrated in terms of the house and the settlement as a whole.

In terms of houses in the settlement, satisfaction was based on: in-house bonding or togetherness, and structure of the house and its flexibility to changes (Figure 10a). Dominance of the courtyard-based houses with multiple occupants who had strong bonds and ties; common understanding (in deliberations) and absence of personal conflicts (in the use of shared spaces) gave residents a sense of 'brotherhood' and belonging. On the other hand, physical factors such as the condition of houses (old building materials) and inadequate facilities (e.g. toilet, kitchen, etc.) were the main elements of respondents' dissatisfaction (Figure 10b). The remarks by two respondents, during a group discussion are notable:

> 'I like this house very much. Even though we are about four different households in this house, we behave like brothers and support each other. No one causes trouble or confusion. Oh yes! The courtyard is also good for gathering and connecting with others. We use the courtyard as shared space in a way that benefits everyone. Sometimes, we sit there and talk about football or politics.'—(Yaw Anang—01.12.2015)

> 'But our house is too old. See, the roof is a mixture of old asbestos and zinc. There are so many cracks in the walls. It is just mud, and cracks are appearing everywhere. I like the house but the physical condition is not good. I think you can see it yourself. We don't even have toilet here '—(Acquaye Mark—01.12.2015)

With the respect to the settlement, respondents indicated that relative peace and the freedom to discuss and think collectively, social collaboration and sense of community and rich cultural tradition were the major reasons they liked to live in Abese (Figure 11a). Mr. Nortey, a local elder in the settlement, hinted:
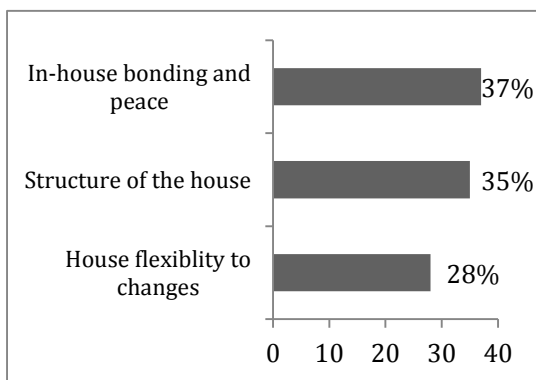
'This is a peaceful settlement with a rich cultural tradition. The Homowo festival provides one of the best moments to bond. Everyone is free to act responsibly here. In difficult times, you can always count on another person for support. We build on our cordial relationships to address our challenges together. By working together, we have constructed a community library and a sewer. We can get water from the tanks. We are still planning many things. Also, the youth occasionally lead out in community labor to improve this area. I have been living here since I was born and I like it very much.'—(Nii Nortey, 01.12.2015)

On the contrary, others suggested inadequate economic opportunities and community facilities as among the reasons they were less satisfied in the settlement (Figure 11b). Naa Adoley, mother and local trader, lamented:

'We all love this place, except for some negative conditions. There are no secured jobs and sometimes you see young people just hanging around. It is quite worrying. We do not get enough from local government and the politicians. We do not have adequate community facilities like public spaces and others'—(01.12.2015)

These resident expressions of their (dis) satisfaction based on likes and dislikes, provides an understanding of the contextual issues that influence living experiences in Abese. These are suggestive of the fact that the high value of their collective character is predicated on a set of rich activities and practices that include social deliberation, support, and space adaptation and service improvisation. Their expression inherently postulates that the improvement of and better living experience in Abese emerge from an interweaving of social, physical, economic and cultural concerns. Based on this understanding of the positive and negative attributes (in terms of likes and dislikes), residents rated their settlement as poor (10 percent), fair (30 percent) or good (60 percent).
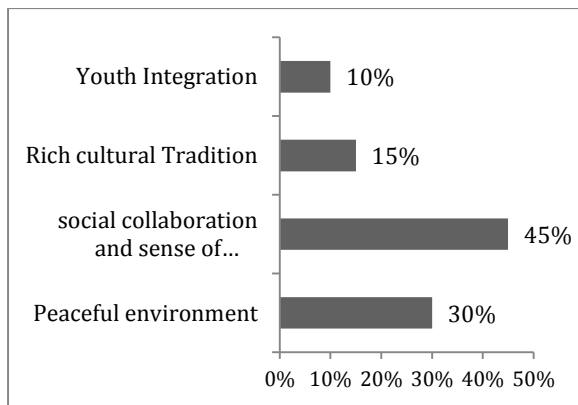
Fig. 10a: Satisfied conditions 10b: Dissatisfied house conditions
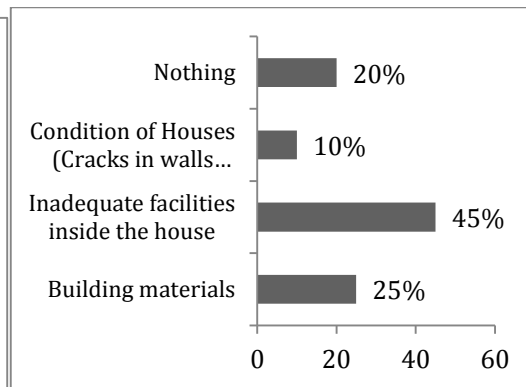
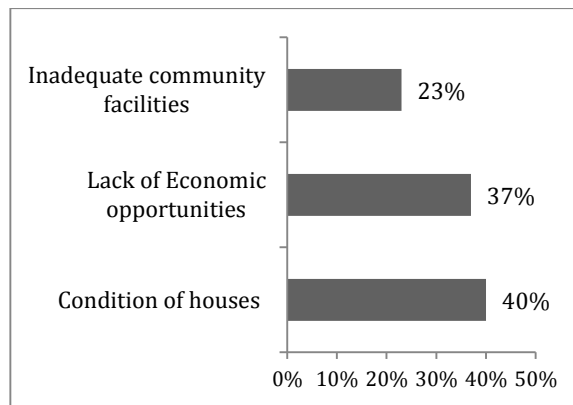Source: Authors' field survey, 2015   Source: Authors' field survey, 2015

Figure 11a: Satisfied conditions in the settlement   Figure 11b: Dissatisfied conditions in the settlement

Source: Authors' field survey, 2015   Source: Authors' field survey, 2015

Generally, residents' rating of their settlement leaned toward a more positive than negative outlook. An opinion leader summarized it this way:

> 'People who do not live here, have very negative views about conditions here. They say so many things. See, this a very good place. We relate to each other, support each other and think together. We are happy. I enjoy good air and I can even sleep outside freely without fear. Every Sunday we all meet in our various family houses to discuss and think about our community. Ah, of course we have many problems. Mud houses, poor house conditions, unemployment...But we are working together. We are doing many things; we are changing things. With little support, things will improve. Why should I go and live in places like Cantonments? They look good but they have tall walls and big gates. They talk to no one. It is like prison.'— (Anyetey, 01.12.2015)

Again, this remark is striking. The respondent affirms an overall positive living experience with a deep awareness of the challenges they face. Social bonding, happiness and collective action are viewed at an appreciable level to cope with obvious physical problems. What is also interesting here is an explicit comparison with Cantonments (a high class residential neighborhood in GAMA) to demonstrate the qualities in the settlement. Collective efforts to improve current conditions, is here cited to indicate a progressive community—one that emphasizes action, change and progress in a positive direction. This supports Obeng-Odoom's (2014) argument that what contributes to happier, positive and better living experience in a place may not always be quantifiable elements such as income. Rather, as Abese reveals, non-income reasons such as social support, solidarity, freedom to act and think collectively, flexibility to adapt and change situations are more important for resident's satisfaction and better living experiences.

CONCLUSION

This paper makes two modest contributions to the emerging discussion on urban informal settlements that focuses on rethinking and understanding of informal settlements to encompass positive experiences. First, it highlights the rich experiences of informal activities and practices in Abese informal settlement that helps consolidate emerging discussions on contextual understanding of urban informal settlements. Second, the study was conducted in a settlement with strong family ties and ancestral lineage. Thus, it's applicability to other informal areas with different characteristics is somewhat

limited, if not narrow. Nonetheless, it at the same time points to the diversity of experiences, practices, and manifestations of urban informal settlements that can include indigene experiences. In this sense, this paper captures the rich experiences of informal settlements made of indigenes.

Furthermore, the paper offers an important perspective on understanding urban informal areas by opening up to resident activities and practices that enrich socio-spatial quality, under challenging conditions. Until recently, dominant narratives have emphasized informal settlements as a problem than places with practices and activities that enrich residents living environments. This narrative has often exposed problematic conditions but hidden resident activities, satisfaction and living experiences. However, this article has revealed enriching practices in Abese, which include social deliberation to discuss and collectively aspire to better living conditions. It has also documented social support even in housing transformation activities. Also, space adaptations and access to water have revealed resident improvisation not only to survive but also to provide services that support collective welfare. In spite of the obvious challenges, it is these enriching activities and practices that have led to satisfaction and better living experiences among residents in Abese. Certainly, these underscore the socio-physical relevance of informal practices, which are receiving rapt attention in the current discussions on localizing the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the community level.

Evidently, these have policy implications. The intention is neither to celebrate residents as heroes of their own destiny nor posit a do-nothing attitude from policy makers. Indeed, the Abese case reveals that there are several resident activities that enrich and reproduce life in the settlement. Most importantly, the findings indicate that it is essential that efforts to improve conditions recognize and embrace peculiar settlement characteristics and (positive) resident informal activities that support their daily urban life. The innovation in terms of policy, therefore, is how these resident activities and practices can become the tools and mechanisms that drive change and progress. How planning and policy efforts can integrate not only resident concerns but also their peculiar activities that better their living experiences. In other words, a policy approach to sustainable urban development that creates a balanced network of resident creativity and technical support. To this end, future research will have to consider how these positive practices and activities can be supported through collaborative planning with communities to bring sustainable improvements in informal settlements.

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