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Photo by Gilson Lázaro

Urban poverty and inequality in Luanda, Angola

This brief shows that the poor in Angola's capital Luanda are effectively trapped in poverty through material deficiencies, limited income opportunities and with crime and prostitution sometimes being the only way out. At the same time, informal social protection mechanisms based on extended family obligations, community solidarity and reciprocity seem to have eroded. As one interlocutor puts it:

"We don't have anything. The rich have everything!"

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This is a brief from the research project “Cooperation on Research and Development in Angola” between UCAN/CEIC and CMI, and its sub-project “Urban and Rural Poverty Dynamics”. It is based on qualitative/participatory fieldwork carried out in two of the city’s *bairros* – with the objective of understanding people’s own perceptions and dynamics of poverty and well-being.

Introduction

Luanda is one of the most dramatic cities in Africa in terms of its history, population density and inequality – and the city is currently going through what the population calls ‘*a crise*’ related to the recent dramatic downfall in oil revenues and poor governance with particular repercussions for the city’s poor. Some of the poor express frustration and anger – but there is mainly a widespread sense of having given up.

What the Figures Say

Statistics on poverty and well-being in Angola and Luanda are generally considered unreliable. The three main public sources are the Household Income and Expenditure Survey conducted in seven provinces including Luanda (INE 2003); the Survey on the Welfare of the Population conducted in all provinces including Luanda but with a limited sample (INE 2010); and the National Population Census covering the whole country but with ‘blank spots’ due to inaccessibility in rural and urban areas – including Luanda (INE 2016).

In general terms, the rural poverty rate (57%) is considerably higher than the urban poverty rate (19%) in Angola. The data were collected prior to Angola’s rapidly deteriorating economy following the oil crisis from 2014. The main reasons for the lower urban poverty incidence emerging from the existing data are higher levels of education, better access to employment, and better access to public services. This is partly supported by data in global publications such as the UNDP’s “Human Development Report” (positioning Angola as number 149 of 188 countries)

and the World Bank’s “World Development Report” (with Angola being 112 out of 181 countries) – albeit with the Angola entries being characterised by lacunas on key poverty markers. Central data on poverty and vulnerability for Luanda, where the poverty rate has been set at 11.5 percent, appear in the table below.

The flip side of data on poverty and well-being as individual entities is inequality. In statistical terms, the Gini-coefficient (a measure to represent the income distribution of a nation’s residents, where zero expresses perfect equality and one maximal inequality) in Angola is 0.532. This makes Angola one of the most unequal societies in the world. In Luanda, where the economic elite resides, this inequality is given spacial expressions in the form of formal and affluent urban spaces (known as ‘the city’ or ‘*cidade*’) and informal and poor spaces (*‘musseques’*) where the large majority of the city’s inhabitants live.

The Communities

For the qualitative study of urban poverty dynamics in Luanda, we have chosen the bairro of Wenji Maka II in the Municipality of Belas and the bairro of Paraíso in the Municipality of Cacucaco for further investigation. As little was known about the *musseques* prior to the study, they were primarily chosen on the bases of accessibility and difference in geographical location (see Map).

Wenji Maka II (meaning ‘problems with trade’) is a former communal agricultural area that was sold by the local community organisation *Associação de Camponêses* to residents and migrants from around 2003/4, and has grown into a bairro of approximately 22.000 inhabitants of mixed socio-linguistic/ethnic background.

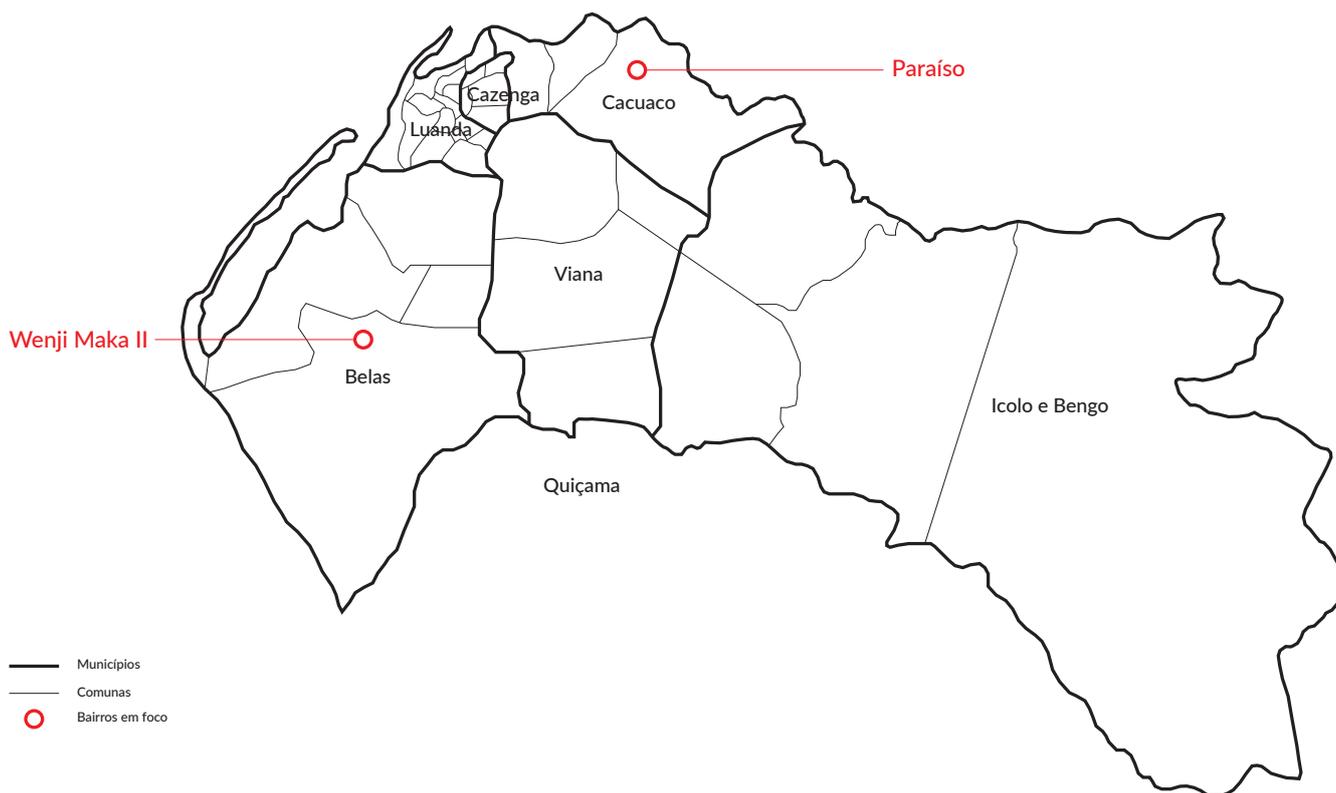
Luanda	2000/2001	2008/2009	2014/2015
Poverty Incidence ¹	-	11,5	-
Poverty Depth ²	-	2,4	-
Poverty Severity ³	-	0,8	-
Household size	6.4	5.4	4.7
Dependency ratio	97/100	87/100	-
Ratio men/women	95/100	92/100	96/100
Labour force participation (%)	64	60	35
Dwellings with inadequate construction material (%)	53	69	71
Access to proper sources of water (%)	38	51	47
Access to mobile phones (%)	3	80	54
School attendance 6–17 yrs (%)	55	71	91
Child Mortality Rate /1000	204	194	-

Table 1:
Key data on Social Welfare
Characteristics in Luanda

Source:
INE (2013 and 2016)

- 1 The Poverty Headcount index gives the share of the poor in the total population, i.e. it measures the percentage of the population whose consumption is below the poverty line. It takes into account neither how close or far the consumption levels of the poor are with respect to the poverty line, nor the distribution of consumption among the poor (INE 2013).
- 2 The Poverty Gap index is the average consumption shortfall of the population relative to the poverty line. Since the greater the shortfall the higher the gap, this measure overcomes the first limitation of the gap (INE 2013).
- 3 The Severity of Poverty index is sensitive to the distribution of consumption among the poor, a transfer from a poor person to somebody with more consumption may leave unaffected the headcount or the poverty gap but will increase this measure. The large the poverty gap is, the higher the weight it carries (INE 2013).

Luanda



Map by: Hanna Tvedten Jorem

Except for the perennial *musseque* problems of poor dirt roads, water overflows and garbage (*lixo*), the immediate impression is one of a relatively well organised community with brick houses and yards (*quintas*); schools and health institutions (most of which are private); a number of small shops or *cantinas*; artisanal workshops of all kinds; and some larger stores particularly along the main roads defining the borders of the bairro. There are also contrasting ‘pockets’ of larger and more luxurious two-three story-dwellings housing the well-off and precarious houses made of cardboards and iron sheets housing the very poorest. The bairro is relatively empty during the day, which is an indication that many people are working or seeking employment in other parts of the city. The *Comissão de Moradores* (a key institution for community development) together with the community-based institution SOS-Habitat work hard to improve conditions and land security.

Paraíso (meaning ‘Paradise’) gives a different first impression. From the late 1990s the bairro was a camp for refugees and demobilised soldiers from the south, and has developed into a community with approximately 120.000 people from various parts of the country. It is situated on a hill surrounded by marshland *cum* garbage dumps, and there is only one entry point for cars that becomes unpassable during periods of heavy rains. There is people and traffic all over, with men and women carrying and selling goods ranging from long iron rods to small fat-cakes. Houses are generally precarious and without *quinta* walls (a sign of poverty in the Luanda context), we detect few public school-and health institutions, and *cantinas* and shops are hardly to be seen – until we learn that they are constructed to be ‘invisible’ in order to reduce the risk of theft and robbery. Perhaps the main characteristic of Paraíso is the near total collapse of state institutions, including schools and clinics (substituted by private alternatives), water supply, electricity and policing – making them fertile ground for excessive prices and corruption. Individual security and unpredictability are main challenges, and people generally seem poorer and more destitute than in Wenji Maka II. In this case, the *Comissão de Moradores* seems more

preoccupied with controlling the bairro population politically than contributing to the development of the community.

Through the focus group exercise ‘Matrix of Community Problems’ – measuring the seriousness of the problems identified as well as the number of people affected in the community – poverty, garbage and health came out on top followed by water, energy and education both in Wenji Maka II and Paraíso.

Perceptions and Dynamics of Poverty

In this project, we have defined poverty as involving i) the lack of employment and income needed to attain basic necessities, ii) a sense of voicelessness and powerlessness in relation to institutions of society and the state, and iii) vulnerability to adverse shocks linked with the ability to cope with them through social relationships and legal institutions. Our own observations and peoples’ own perceptions expose poverty as a multi-dimensional condition. In Luanda’s *musseques*, *everything* has a high price and “there is money in circulation even among the poor” as a local *Padre* put it. Without money people would simply not survive, as everything has to be bought and most social relations are ‘commoditised’ in the sense that services and favours usually have to be paid for.

Asking men and women in Focus Groups to define what ‘poverty’ (*pobreza*) means to them, they list conditions that affect their daily lives and options for leading what they call a ‘dignified life’ (*uma vida digna*) in an urban context. “The poor don’t have an oven and mattresses, and they don’t have a television and a refrigerator – They only eat once a day, and then they eat *coelhos*, *jimboa* and *caboenha* (cheap vegetables) – They don’t manage to pay for their children’s school, and their children play in the rubbish to find something to eat – When they get sick they don’t even have money to buy *paracetamol* – The children have torn clothes – One can see from the way they appear (*a forma de se apresentarem*) that people are poor.”

When asked to list characteristics of being rich (*rico*), the focus group exclaims: “*O rico tem tudo, não falta nada!* (The rich has everything. Nothing is missing!)”. “They eat well, have a nice

house and a car, refrigerator, television, air-condition and tap water, they look well and use make-up – They study at expensive schools, pray, and have access to clinics (which is the private alternative to public hospitals that do not function) – They don't do their shopping in the [open] markets but in supermarkets – And they go to the beach in the weekend and on vacation during days off”.

The Focus groups in Wenji Maca II also distinguished between different levels of poverty (the ‘pobre-pobre’ or *katikiamputu* and the ‘pobre normal’ or *ohukui*) and wealth – separating ‘número um’ who they name as Isabel (the daughter of President dos Santos); the super-rich or *riqaço* and the rich or *bassongas*. In Paraíso, the local vernacular for the extreme poor is *pulungo* (in Kimbundu) or *wahepa* (in Nhaneca Humbi) and for the normal poor *Nga dia ma* and *ochihepi*. Stories told show that it is difficult to move from one category to another – except that people with means may suddenly lose everything as they “spend too much money”, “are robbed” or “bewitched” (*enfeitizados*).

When asked how many people that belonged to the different categories in the immediate community/neighbourhood, there was agreement in Wenji Maka II as well as in Paraíso that out of 10 households nine are poor and one rich – a far cry from the official statistics of 11.5 percent – with Paraíso making a further distinction among the former defining six as destitute and three as poor and Wenji Maca II defining seven as destitute and two as poor. This indicates how perceptions of poverty are relative: While people in Wenji Maka II generally seem better off than in Paraíso, the former are constantly reminded about their condition by living next door to more luxuriant bairros such as Talatona. Concerning the rich, people argued that only people from the ‘normal rich’ category live in in Wenji Maca II and Paraíso – pointing to ‘the city’ (*a cidade*) as the area of the super-rich.

Assessing poverty in the two musseques from the level of specific households and individuals, a group of young boys in Paraíso tells us that money is not the main problem, but the dearth of sensible things to do except working piecemeal (as *biscateiros*) or joining gangs (*os marginais*) for boys and working as small scale traders (*ambulantes/zungeiras*) or ‘play with men’ (a euphemism for prostitution or child marriage) for girls. They see no hope in the bairro, but also do not see a way out.

An older couple in Wenji Maka II with six children had used the household head's pension from the army to invest in a small restaurant for eating and dancing, only to see everything crumble as people can no longer afford to go out – or go to the ‘foreigners’ (usually either from West Africa or central/southern Angola) who according to the old man ‘dominate everything and steal my customers’.

Still in Wenji Maka II, an older man originally from the north was led off from his job in the railways after 35 years, with no compensation or pension and no money to go home to his family in Uíge as he wished he could do. Selling soft-drinks, biscuits and sweets from a small stall outside his house is no work for a

man, he told us, but what could he do? – indicating that no other means were available.

Mr André (49 years) and his wife arrived Luanda from Bié to Paraíso as refugees in 1988, and moved to Paraíso in 2000. André is a mason and has always worked – until ‘a crise’ made work increasingly scarce. He now remains idle most of the time. He and his wife rely on some petty trade and the rent from a second house they own. The worst about living in Paraíso, they say, is the lack of security.

Behind burglar bars in his small shop, a man speaking Portuguese with a French accent is apparently better off. With a TV showing a pastor in DRC in full display, he tells us that he himself is a pastor in a church in Cacucaco (on the other side of the city). He came to Luanda 20 years ago, and has four children who all go to private schools. The shop is really for his wife to have something to do and for the children to live in a safe place, as he is away all the time.

Conclusions

The poor in Paraíso and Wenji Maka II are effectively trapped in poverty through material deficiencies and limited income opportunities; disempowerment in relation to malfunctioning institutions of society and the state; and vulnerability in relation to adverse shocks such as sudden price increases, disease and crime. At the same time, informal social protection mechanisms based on extended family obligations, community solidarity and reciprocity seem to have eroded – partly because poor people simply cannot afford to have outstanding claims.

Many of our interlocutors express frustration and anger at what they considered to be a dramatic deterioration of their living conditions – often directed at ‘the government’ or ‘the party’ but also at people in their community who do ‘not behave’ (*não se comportam bem*). There is also a sense of fatalism (‘only God knows’). At the same time, wealth and upward social mobility is seen to be for people with education, employment and the rights contacts – and who live in other parts of the city than themselves. While Luanda offers opportunities for those in positions to exploit them, the city currently seems to offer only poverty and misery for people in the *musseques*.

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