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Christian M Rogerson [a] & Jayne M Rogerson [b]

[a] School of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Management, University of Johannesburg

[b] Department of Geography, Environmental Management and Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa E-mail:

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Local economic development in Africa: Global context and research directions

Christian M Rogerson & Jayne M Rogerson

This paper locates local economic development research and practice in Africa in a global context. It provides an overview of the international development of local economic development (LED), of its contested definitions and theoretical status, and of existing scholarship on the topic of LED policy and practice specifically across sub-Saharan Africa. Currently there is much more LED research available for South Africa than for the other sub-Saharan African countries. The paper highlights the need for this imbalance to be redressed.

Keywords: local economic development; sub-Saharan Africa; South Africa

1. Introduction

The International Labour Organization (ILO) maintains that globalisation 'has changed the rules that govern the world's economies, connecting national, regional and local economies more than ever before' (ILO, 2008a:2). Further, it asserts that local economies are strongly influenced 'by policies and processes formed at the supranational level, such as market liberalisation, expanding global production systems and the changing terms of trade' (ILO, 2006:2). Globalisation is a vital driver of changes in the way local and regional development is planned (Pike et al., 2006; Ruecker & Trah, 2007; Christensen & Van der Ree, 2008; Rodriguez-Pose, 2008a, 2009a). It is acknowledged that one of the major features of globalisation 'is that markets have become more pervasive and are affecting countries simultaneously across the world' (Christensen & Van der Ree, 2008:2). In addition, globalisation 'implies changes, opportunities and threats and not all territories across the world have the same capacity and tools to make the world an even playing field' (Rodriguez-Pose & Crescenzi, 2008:372).

One outcome of accelerating globalisation that has been observed is the way it exposes 'even the most remote spaces to competition and forc[es] firms, localities and regions to react and adjust to the new economic conditions' (Pike et al., 2006:4). In this reshaped terrain for local and regional development, planning for local economic development (LED) is now a widespread facet of international development planning, particularly in the context of pervasive trends towards decentralisation – the deliberate and planned transfer of resources away from central state institutions – and of shifting structures of government and governance (Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2007; Christensen & Van der Ree, 2008; Rodriguez-Pose & Sandall, 2008; Rodriguez-Pose & Ezcurra, 2009). Localities are increasingly viewed as 'pivotal sites of competitiveness in a new global economy' (Valler & Wood, 2010:140) as globalisation gives LED strategies 'a bigger role to play in international development' (Rodriguez-Pose, 2008a:24). In particular, LED 'offers a means to counteract or take advantages of the forces of globalisation by maximising local potentials' (ILO, 2006:2). Amid current circumstances of global

Respectively, Professor, School of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Management, University of Johannesburg; and PhD student, Department of Geography, Environmental Management and Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Corresponding author: crogerson@uj.ac.za

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economic turmoil, localities are compelled to find new solutions to support local competitiveness and to create inclusive development (Gomez & Helmsing, 2008; ILO, 2008a).

The origins of modern LED practices can be traced back to the 1960s. Rodriguez-Pose (2009b:1) claims that Europe is generally 'regarded as the cradle of LED approaches'. Pressures to stimulate LED have come from at least two main directions: 'on the one hand they are expressions of uneven and inequitable outcomes in the economic landscape and on the other hand they reflect variability in the aspirations and concerns of actors about the pace and extent of local investment' (Le Heron, 2009:93) Although interest in LED approaches to development was first apparent in both Western Europe and North America (Blakely, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Clarke & Gaile, 1998), notions of and approaches to LED subsequently spread to other parts of the world. With the advance of globalisation and growing decentralisation, the 1990s saw a diffusion of LED ideas and practices from the global North to the South (Rogerson, 1997; Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2001; Helmsing, 2002; Nel & Rogerson, 2005a; Chien, 2008; Gomez & Helmsing, 2008). Haughton & Naylor (2008:170) draw our attention to LED as exemplifying international policy transfer, 'one of the emblematic tendencies within the current phase of capitalist development'.

This article situates the record of LED research and experience in Africa in an international context. There are two sections. The first unpacks the meaning and significance of LED in the context of a globalised world. Although in much of sub-Saharan Africa concepts and ideas about LED are relatively recent, a long-established conceptual understanding exists of LED in the global North (Pike et al., 2006) and especially in the USA (Valler & Wood, 2010). The discussion provides an overview of the emergence of LED and of changing LED practice. It looks at the contested definitions of LED and highlights the various theoretical debates. The third, more narrowly focused, section provides an overview of themes in existing scholarship on the topic of LED policy and practice specifically across sub-Saharan Africa. This section flags the emergence and progress of LED research in Africa and highlights the imbalance between the considerable amount of LED research taking place in South Africa and the scarcity of such research in the rest of the continent.

2. Local economic development: Meaning, context and practice

Several observers point out that as the concept of LED is both elusive and contested there are numerous definitions (Trah, 2004; Pike et al., 2007). For one American LED scholar it represents increases in a 'local economy's capacity to create wealth for local residents' (Bartik, 2003:1). Trah (2004:1) paints a wider canvas of LED as 'a territorial concept and part of local development or regional management, specifically aiming to stimulate the local economy to grow, compete and create more jobs, in particular by making better use of locally available resources'. Helmsing & Egziabher (2005:1) consider LED to be 'a process in which partnerships between local governments, NGOs, community based groups and the private sector are established to manage existing resources, to create jobs and stimulate the economy of a well-defined territory'. The World Bank views LED as 'a process by which public, business and non-governmental sector partners work collectively to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation' (World Bank, 2003:1).

Some scholars stress that, in the absence of a clearly defined theoretical model, 'LED strategies tend to resort to the basic features of the approach to specify their content'

(Rodriguez-Pose, 2001:8). The ILO (2006) distinguishes four core features of LED strategies: the need for participation and social dialogue, the territorial focus, mobilisation of local resources and building of competitive advantage, and local ownership and management. These four characteristics are brought together in the ILO's own definition, which states that LED represents a:

> participatory development process that encourages partnership arrangements between the main private and public stakeholders of a defined territory, enabling the joint design and implementation of a common development strategy, by making use of the local resources and competitive advantage in a global context, with the final objective of creating decent jobs and stimulating economic activity. (ILO, 2006:2)

This particular definition of LED is informed substantially by the writings of Rodriguez-Pose (2001, 2009a,b).

Beyond the World Bank and the ILO, another major international development organisation actively engaged in LED is German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). Initial thinking was that 'LED is about local activities to make markets work better' and that it aimed to 'creat[e] places and opportunities to match supply and demand as well as promote new business opportunities' (Trah, 2004:1). The GTZ now maintains that LED is:

> an ongoing process by which key stakeholders and institutions from all spheres of society, the public and private sector as well as civil society, work jointly to create a unique advantage for the locality and its firms, tackle market failures, remove bureaucratic obstacles for local businesses and strengthen the competitiveness of local firms. (Ruecker & Trah, 2007:15)

This particular definition is distinguished both by its focus on LED as an ongoing process and importantly by its recognition that any 'effort to stimulate economic growth of a local economy is bound to involve large scale systemic change' (Meyer-Stamer, 2008:1). The GTZ focus is on a market-driven approach and it considers LED activities as intrinsically opportunistic (Ruecker & Trah, 2007). The notion of the systemic competitiveness of a territory is introduced as a central concept for LED analysis (Meyer-Stamer, 2008:7) and is defined as 'the ability of a locality or region to generate high or rising incomes and improve livelihoods of the people living there' (Meyer-Stamer, 2008:7).

It is generally agreed that the practice of LED started in cities of the global North during the late 1960s and early 1970s in an environment of global economic restructuring and advancing decentralisation (Blakely, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Valler & Wood, 2010). Rodriguez-Pose (2001, 2008b) emphasises that the developmental challenges posed by globalisation precipitated a serious rethinking of the validity of former approaches to development planning and correspondingly spurred the rise and strengthening of LED approaches. An important shift took place from the traditional local government approach of urban managerialism to what was styled as urban entrepreneurialism wherein the local state functions as an entrepreneur (Harvey, 1989; Leitner, 1990). According to the World Bank (2003:2), local governments recognised they had a potential role to play in enhancing the economic viability of their communities. By actively interrogating their economic base, understanding local obstacles to economic growth and investment and by pursuing strategically planned programmes and projects, localities could make a difference in terms of the prospects for local employment and economic growth (Bartik, 2003; World Bank, 2003).

Rodriguez-Pose (2009b) identifies numerous economic and social advantages in a globalised world that are related to the adoption of LED strategies rather than traditional development programmes. One social advantage is that LED strategies empower local societies and generate local dialogue (Rodriguez-Pose, 2001:11). Until recently, people living in many areas of the developing world had little say in or control over economic activity in their territory; now they are beginning to adopt a more proactive stance with respect to their own future (Helmsing, 2002, 2003). Another is that the preparation and implementation of LED strategies helps make local institutions more transparent and accountable, thereby contributing to developing civil society (Rodriguez-Pose, 2009b:10). The economic advantages of LED, however, are its biggest strength (Rodriguez-Pose, 2001). As LED strategies seek to embed economic activity in a territory and make economic activity dependent on the specific economic conditions and comparative advantages of that place, they generate sustainable employment in enterprises more capable of withstanding changes in the global economic environment (Rodriguez-Pose, 2009a,b). In addition, because they involve local stakeholders and root economic activity in a territory, LED strategies can contribute towards attaining goals of decent work (ILO, 2008a).

Initial LED activities from the 1960s through to the early 1980s concentrated largely on place marketing and investment attraction, often linked to incentive systems, such as grants, tax breaks or loans, and the provision of hard infrastructure investments (World Bank, 2003; Pike et al., 2006). In a second phase of LED activities, business retention and the growing of existing local businesses also came into the policy spotlight as 'attention shifted to endogenous economic potentials, striving to support the competitiveness of existing firms, promoting entrepreneurship and business start-up' (Ruecker & Trah, 2007:12). The main tools for LED support from the 1980s to the mid-1990s included provision of business incubators, start-up support, and technical support for small to medium-sized businesses (World Bank, 2003:5).

Since the late 1990s a more holistic approach has characterised LED practices in the global North (Pike et al., 2006, 2007). During this third phase, the individual business support and sectoral development approaches of the second phase are being enhanced through 'making the entire business and community environment more conducive to economic development' (Ruecker & Trah, 2007:13). Developing locally, Beer (2009:63) argues, can involve a mix of strategies, including:

> encouraging inward investment in the region, fostering innovation, nurturing a 'creative city' environment, promoting new business start ups, engaging in regional economic planning, coordinating infrastructure investment, assisting small businesses gain access to capital and acting to facilitate development applications through the approval process.

For some observers, the essential challenge facing contemporary LED practitioners is 'how to make the most of local resources in a way that improves returns from global markets' (Christensen & Van der Ree, 2008:2).

Core aims of the current LED phase are 'providing a competitive local business environment, encouraging and supporting networking and collaboration between businesses and public/private and community partnerships, facilitating workforce development and education, focusing inward investment to support cluster growth and supporting quality of life improvements' (Ruecker & Trah, 2007:13). The concept of systemic competitiveness gained widespread recognition for the way it captured the complexity

of factors that can energise a sustained LED process whereby a 'local economy will change its level of competitiveness, its positioning in regional, national and global markets and ultimately its sectoral structure' (Meyer-Stamer, 2008:1). Esser et al. (2008) contend that the concept of systemic competitiveness offers a frame of reference for LED practice in developing as well as industrialised countries.

Drawing from a wide variety of disciplines, Bingham & Mier (1993: xvi) established the foundations for 'using theory in local economic development'. As a rule, LED theory is viewed as a branch of regional development theory (Pike et al., 2006). With an intra-urban focus, LED theory explores the 'actors, structures, and processes of local regional growth as these exist and take place within a particular defined territory' (Gomez & Helmsing, 2008:2490). Three broad types of LED theory can be distinguished. First are theories located in market-driven development in which firms are the central objects of analysis and the attractiveness of a locality is the object of public policy or local action. Second are theories of local economic (re-)generation which essentially examine 'the other side of the coin of market-driven development' (Gomez & Helmsing, 2008:2490). This second type focuses on how localities can minimise falling behind and 'whether and how the economic regeneration of these localities can be achieved by mobilising local entrepreneurship, raising the capabilities of local people and promoting inclusive economic organisation' (Gomez & Helmsing, 2008:2490). Third is an array of LED theories which centre on alternative local development. At the heart of these is the belief:

> that there is a growing number of people and localities unable (due to severe market failure) or unwilling to participate in (capitalist) market-driven development, either because they lack essential capabilities or assets or because people are motivated by a search for different humane, socially or environmentally responsible lifestyles. (Gomez & Helmsing, 2008:2491)

Many LED programmes are anchored 'on one or more theories of economic development but the multiplicity of theoretical perspectives results in confusion among practitioners' (Beer, 2009:63). Indeed, this array of different theories which inform LED research has prompted Rowe (2009a,b) to assert that no definitive all-encompassing theory of local or regional economic development exists, and to observe that 'there are many theories that relate to and impact on local economic development, but none that explicitly provides a framework for understanding the complex relationships that comprise this interdisciplinary field of endeavour' (Rowe, 2009b: xviii). One consequence of the absence of any comprehensive theory 'for understanding the practice of local economic development' (Rowe, 2009a:5) is that linkages between theory and practice in the emerging discipline of LED are, at best, 'partial' (Beer, 2009:68). Academic efforts at theory building are not focused on disseminating ideas and knowledge to practitioners, while those engaged at the coalface of LED often have a limited interest in matters beyond programme delivery and outcomes (Beer, 2009).

The maturing discipline of LED currently encompasses a complex blend of concepts, practices and rhetoric (Rowe, 2009a:3). Policies and practices targeted to promote or sustain local development processes are a feature of virtually all developed economies and are gaining momentum in the developing world (Rodriguez-Pose et al., 2001; Nel & Rogerson, 2005a; Chien, 2008; Le Heron, 2009). From this brief review of international LED approaches and theories, it is evident that there is a range of different definitions and approaches to LED as well as different entry points for starting an LED

process (Pike et al., 2007). LED processes offer an integrated approach to development rather than a 'one size fits all' solution (Ruecker & Trah, 2007). It is stressed that their core purpose is:

> to mobilise the local economic potential by bringing innovation to all its growth dimensions which range from infrastructure, to local SMEs and their skills, to attracting foreign direct investment, fostering territorial competitiveness, strengthening local institutions, better management of the development process and internalising local resources. (Rodriguez-Pose, 2008a:23)

Weaving together local governments, the private sector and civil society in a search for the right LED formula produces opportunities for localities 'to build from the "inside-out", capitalising on local assets rather than from the "outside-in", relying on external interventions' (ILO, 2008a:2).

Overall, LED approaches are distinguished most radically from traditional development approaches by their focus on a defined territory (Rodriguez-Pose, 2001, 2009a). What binds different LED approaches together is 'the common concern for making local economies robust and creating productive jobs and incomes for local populations and also the recognition that local or regional competitive advantage rests on local interactions, knowledge spillovers and institutional synergies' (Salazar-Xirinachs, 2008: v). Although the activity of LED embodies a clear economic focus, it is increasingly considered to be not simply about economic growth; rather it is geared ultimately towards attaining 'a sustainable development pattern which accommodates and reconciles economic, social and ecological issues and objectives' (Ruecker & Trah, 2007:15). At a time when LED approaches are diffusing from developed to developing countries, it is appreciated that while LED may not be a panacea, 'it seems to be giving new options to parts of the world where traditional policies had become exhausted' (Rodriguez-Pose, 2009a:25).

3. Local economic development in Africa: Progress in research

In common with other parts of the developing world, during the past two decades sub-Saharan Africa has been greatly affected by decentralisation and reduced central state control in an era of accelerating globalisation (Nel, 2007). One significant response has been the spread and growth in the significance of LED as an aspect of development planning (Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2007). This expansion of LED in the region cannot, however, be understood separately from its new-found status as 'a growth sector in the international technical assistance industry' (Cunningham & Meyer-Stamer, 2005:4). As noted by Meyer-Stamer (2004:1), LED 'has become one of the highly fashionable issues of international development cooperation'. It is significant that key research contributions on LED in Africa have been made by leading international development organisations.

The rising importance of LED across sub-Saharan Africa is signalled by the activities of the United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLG-A) (Swinburn & Yatta 2006a,b; Swinburn et al., 2007). The UCLG-A, an association of local governments, individuals and entities, is the united voice and representative of local government. As part of its mission of 'building African unity from within and driving development through the grass roots', it identifies LED as one of six priority areas for action for the period 2006 to 2015 (Swinburn et al., 2007). In isolating LED as a priority for urban Africa, Swinburn and Yatta (2006a) recognise that national level macroeconomic

policies are no longer sufficient for attaining sustainable broad based economic growth. Furthermore, traditional sectoral supply-side development strategies are not achieving the hoped for results as globalisation diminishes the powers of the nation state in Africa and correspondingly underlines both the role of localities and wider city-regions as drivers of national growth (Swinburn & Yatta, 2006a; Rogerson, 2009a).

Before reviewing progress in African LED scholarship, it must be admitted at the outset that it is difficult to demarcate clear boundaries for LED research, not least because of the flexible and holistic approaches to such activity in recent years. The survey presented here is therefore necessarily selective. It seeks to capture major trends and issues in nearly two decades of published African LED research, which originated in South Africa during the early 1990s following the transition to democracy and the country's reintegration into the global economy. The largest volume of African LED research still concentrates on South Africa, since, under the country's constitution, the activity of LED was legislated as a reform mandate for local governments (Rogerson, 1997; Nel, 2001a,b; Nel & Rogerson, 2005a). Over the past 15 years South Africa has become a laboratory for LED practice and research in Africa; many aspects of the South African LED experience have been exported to other African countries (Rogerson, 2006a). Certainly, the evolving policy and practice (good and bad) of LED in this country continues to be closely monitored for lessons that might inform parallel activities in other African countries (Swinburn et al., 2007; Rogerson, 2002a,b, 2008, 2009b). Grant & Dollery (2010) single out lessons even for the developed world from the 'place-shaping' reforms which in 1998 prescribed a developmental role for local government in South African LED.

3.1 South African research

As a general observation, and in common with trends in the global North, it is evident that much South African LED scholarship is 'empirical and pragmatic in nature, focusing on the conduct of economic development policy and the relative efficacy of different policy choices' (Valler & Wood, 2010:140). To a large extent, South African research on LED grew out from pragmatic considerations, seeking responses to new opportunities linked to globalisation or ways of dealing with economic restructuring issues in declining localities. The bulk of writings engage with policy development and critical evaluative research on unfolding LED activities in particular localities, with a view to advancing the practice of LED (e.g. Nel, 1994, 1999, 2001a,b; Rogerson, 2000; Nel & Rogerson, 2005b; Nel et al., 2007; Xuza, 2007). Limited theoretical work has been pursued. The trajectory and progress of LED research across Africa continues to be driven largely by applied policy considerations and its target is mainly enhanced understanding of the practice, opportunities and limits of LED as a development approach.

The applied policy focus of mainstream LED research in Africa was established during the early 1990s. Discerning the most promising directions for LED practice and defining appropriate policy development for LED emerged as hotly debated themes in South African scholarship (Nel, 2001a; Xuza, 2007). At the national level, consideration was given to the policy weight that might be attached to different policy choices for framing overall directions for South African LED planning (Nel, 2001a,b; Binns & Nel, 2002; Nel & Rogerson, 2005a,b; Rogerson, 2006a, 2008). In particular, debates concentrated on the policy balance between addressing poverty alleviation and supporting 'pro-poor' development on the one hand and 'pro-growth' considerations on the

other. For several years, national government gave preference to a 'pro-poor' approach to LED supporting an array of (often unsuccessful) LED projects largely focused on poverty alleviation (Harrison et al., 2008). A 10-year struggle to establish coherent guidelines for LED planning in South Africa culminated in 2006 with the release of a consolidated national framework document which now stressed the imperative to develop locally by constructing robust local economies. The wide range of strategic focus areas for LED includes, inter alia, property development, place marketing for inward investment, small, medium and micro enterprise (SMME) development, investment facilitation, improving the local business investment climate, encouraging local business, institutional development, upgrading skills and training, investment in business sites and premises, and cluster upgrading (Rogerson, 2006a; Harrison et al., 2008). As in the rest of Africa, international donor agencies – in particular GTZ – have been significant actors in strengthening and shaping policy development processes in South Africa.

When it comes to evolving LED practice, the small Eastern Cape town of Stutterheim might claim to be a pioneer in modern LED activities (Nel, 1994). However, it was the burst of urban entrepreneurialism occurring in South Africa's cities that attracted most research attention (Rogerson, 1996, 1999; Maharaj & Ramballi, 1998; Walker, 2000). In many respects LED practice in South Africa's leading cities took its evolutionary cue from North American and Western European experience. Johannesburg, Durban, Pretoria and Cape Town led the way in initiating LED activities to build local competitiveness by encouraging place entrepreneurialism and strengthening city assets and capabilities, as centres of production or consumption or knowledge based information-processing activities, within a changing global economy (Rogerson, 1997, 2000). In recent years, the search for competitiveness has been closely wedded to a drive for world-city status, particularly in Johannesburg and Cape Town (Rogerson, 2005a; Gibb, 2007; OECD, 2008). Inclusive growth was sought through LED initiatives that incorporate pro-poor elements, including support for urban agriculture, public procurement systems and small business development (Rogerson, 2004; Robbins, 2005; Harrison et al., 2008; OECD, 2008). Successful LED programmes, however, have proven elusive in most small towns and rural areas because of the slow processes of land reform, failure to emphasise sustainable local economies, weak local government capacity and limited engagement with local economic potential (Binns & Nel, 1999; Nel & Rogerson, 2007).

As post-apartheid South Africa surfaced as a 'new' destination in the international tourism economy, much research attention was directed at tourism's potential as a new driver for LED and urban economic restructuring (Rogerson & Visser, 2004). Improving the product base for leisure tourism and business tourism were important LED strategies pursued in South Africa's leading cities to maximise the benefits from attracting both domestic and long-haul international tourists (Rogerson, 2002a,b; Lootvoet & Freund, 2006). Bidding for and hosting hallmark events, such as the Rugby World Cup, the Cricket World Cup and the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, have been critical foundations for urban tourism development (Rogerson & Visser, 2007). For regional tourists drawn to South Africa from other African countries, the local developmental potential of expanding shopping tourism and cross-border trading are additional research issues linking LED and urban tourism (Rogerson & Visser, 2007). Outside the cities, tourism was a potential LED focus for regenerating economically depressed localities feeling the impact of defence cuts or mine closures (Binns & Nel, 2001, 2003; Nel & Binns, 2002b; Nel et al., 2003; Abrahams, 2007) and for reviving the fortunes of many declining small

towns, including through pro-poor tourism programmes (Nel & Binns, 2002a; Rogerson, 2006b, 2007, 2009b; Gibb & Nel, 2007; Nel & Rogerson, 2007). In rural areas, maximising the local impacts of tourism projects is a focal point for LED intervention (Rogerson & Visser, 2004; Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007; Spenceley, 2008).

3.2. LED research outside South Africa

Beyond South Africa the research literature on LED is much smaller, but the tempo of work is beginning to accelerate. The significance of localities and city regions as actors in economic development is advancing (Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra 2007:532). In a seminal article, Helmsing (2003) tracks the reasons why LED has emerged as an alternative development approach across Africa since the 1990s, drawing attention to issues of globalisation impacts, structural adjustment and liberalisation policies, decentralisation and ideological disenchantment with central state-led development. Questions of LED governance are central ingredients of LED, which is viewed as a multi-actor, multi-sector and multi-level affair (Helmsing, 2005; Helmsing & Egziabher, 2005). Another significant contribution by Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra (2007) asks whether the 'enabling environment' for the design and implementation of LED strategies exists outside South Africa and identifies the main constraints as lack of government capacity in many countries, poor governance and data shortcomings which often preclude correct identification of a locality's strengths and weaknesses and thus the making of 'well-informed policy choices' (Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2007:528). For sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, outside the more well-resourced and capacitated centres, these authors conclude that 'the generally difficult environment local and regional governments face, combined with the lack of funding and government capacity, both in terms of skills and infrastructure, is likely to limit the ability of subnational institutions to develop and implement successful strategies' (Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2007:532–3).

Despite these caveats, several studies confirm that LED as an alternative development approach is taking root in much of Africa (Aggrey, 2005; United Nations Capital Development Fund [UNCDF], 2002, 2006; Swinburn et al., 2007; Van Empel, 2007a; ILO, 2008b). Accompanying this, research is beginning to appear. In parallel with South Africa, applied research on policy development and understanding and improving LED practice heads the current agenda. One central theme is the imperative need for legislative frameworks, establishing and strengthening partnerships, and public–private dialogue to enable subnational development activities (Beyer et al., 2003; Swinburn & Yatta, 2006a; Van Empel, 2007a; Patterson, 2008; Republic of Namibia, 2009). Donor interventions and support have been crucial for launching an agency approach and broader LED activities in Mozambique (Van Boekel & Van Logestijn, 2002; Rogerson, 2005b; Van Empel et al., 2006; Van Empel, 2007b) and Malawi (Japan Association for International Collaboration of Agriculture and Forestry [JAICAF], 2007, 2008). Malawi's experience is of particular interest as it is the first African country to fully implement Japanese-conceptualised LED in the form of the 'one village one product (OVOP) movement' (Yoshida, 2009). OVOP is a distinctive and alternative LED approach that is not reflected in the South African record. It represents a self-reliant and community-based variation of applied LED which focuses on developing unique products linked to human resource development as well as capacity building (JAICAF, 2007, 2008; Yoshida, 2009). Beyond donors, non-governmental organisations also have been shown to assume a role for promoting alternative rural development in parts of Africa (Hill et al., 2007).

Geographically, the leading edge of LED activity and research is in urban rather than rural areas. The research focus on LED practice is reflected in city studies on the limits and prospects for local government-led LED activity in Swaziland (Sihlongonyane, 2003) and Zambia (Rogerson, 2005c; Hampwaye, 2008a,b; Hampwaye & Rogerson, 2010). Other urban-focused research analyses the upgrading of small enterprise clusters in Kenya (McCormick, 2001; Kinyanjui, 2005) and Ethiopia (Egziabher & Demeke, 2004; Berhanu, 2005; Van der Loop & Abraham, 2005). Strengthening local economies by developing the 'popular' or informal economy and integrating towns and their hinterland represents the axis of the West African ECOLOC programme (Yatta, 2003). Of critical concern for strengthening LED in urban Africa is the question of improving the business environment for private sector development, for both formal and informal sector enterprises. It is observed that 'African countries often lag badly on indicators of the quality of the business environment' (Eifert et al., 2008:1533) and that Africa contains 'most of the world's least business-friendly regulatory environments' (Bannock & Darroll, 2007:3). Importantly, Kessides (2007) shows the limits imposed by disabling business environments on 'productive cities' across much of Africa because of inadequate infrastructure, weak governance, corruption and crime. The result is that:

> some of the basic assumed advantages of urban agglomeration – access to inputs and services affording economies of scale and connectivity to other producers, and low transaction costs – are not being realised to the extent that they should be in Africa, even in the largest or capital cities. (Kessides, 2007:478)

In rural Africa, the imperative for pursuing LED approaches is no less evident. The priority is to address systematic improvements in local economies. As rural towns and markets are vital for LED, interventions must necessarily strengthen small towns as attractive locations for viable rural non-farm sector activities, including craft production (Davis & Rylance, 2004). Once again, creating an enabling local business environment for small enterprise development is essential LED practice (Egziabher & Demeke, 2004; Helmsing & Egziabher, 2005). Considerable attention is paid to the role of tourism as a lead sector for local development in much of east and southern Africa (Rylance, 2008; Spenceley, 2008). Critical questions for LED practitioners in Africa are raised by the scholarship of pro-poor tourism, which asserts the imperative for maximising the local development impact of tourism projects (Rogerson, 2006b; Spenceley, 2008). The challenges for LED are to maximise tourism's local employment impact and engage with local communities and entrepreneurs to ensure local sourcing and supplier linkages for food, beverages, soft furnishings, arts, crafts and entertainment (Ashley, 2006; Meyer, 2007). Finally, the LED impact of community based tourism in rural Africa has come under critical scrutiny (Spenceley, 2008).

4. Conclusion

LED approaches are taking root across much of sub-Saharan Africa (Rodriguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2007). Currently, however, LED practice is uneven, with South Africa exhibiting a broader range and greater maturity of LED activity than other parts of the continent. With the undoubted growth in the policy significance of LED – underscored by UCLG-A – there are major research challenges to further our understanding of both policy development and applied LED practice across sub-Saharan Africa. The above review shows that the volume and range of African LED scholarship has progressed considerably, especially over the past decade.

In broadening the African research agenda there is a clear need to capture and examine data on LED experiences from across the continent and particularly beyond South Africa (Swinburn & Yatta, 2006a,b). Among specific research issues that merit further attention, four may be highlighted. The first is analysis of the special role played in African LED by international development agencies as key actors shaping and reshaping LED practice as well as policy and institutional environments. Secondly, there is the imperative for structured surveys designed to listen to what enterprise managers and entrepreneurs have to say about constraints in local business environments facing all forms of enterprise. Thirdly, as the OVOP movement spreads to other countries, such as Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda, this innovative approach demands further scrutiny, especially for informing alternative LED practice across sub-Saharan Africa, including even for application in rural South Africa (Yoshida, 2009). Finally, given the particular significance of tourism in African economies, additional work is warranted to expand the potential for local linkages concerning employment, sourcing and procurement, SMME development, and outsourcing. Further exploring this nexus of LED and tourism is a vital African challenge for scholars of urban as well as rural tourism.

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