

Rules of engagement for the active pursuit of prosperity

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Introduction

Such a universal term, prosperity, derived from the Latin word '*prosperus*', middle English '*prosperite*', and French '*prosperitas*', meaning favourable or fortunate. Recent and intensive engagement with prosperity has denounced the economic monopoly over it to integrate dimensions that are social, environmental, ecological, and physical. This movement, further catalysed by the UN-Habitat (see UN-Habitat, 2015, 2013), has helped re-focus governments' interests towards maintaining prosperity, and as an avenue for fulfilling the SDGs. Both Developed and Developing Region cities are characterized by their unique geo-political, market and economic, institutional and policy dynamics that sometimes drive societal vulnerabilities. Some of these in the form of physically and environmentally, socially, and economically declining communities that are more prevalent in Developing Regions.

Both regions are, nevertheless, keener to calibrate their approach to inclusivity, as well as prosperity (Cartwright et al., 2018; see also Legatum Institute, 2020). In the governance and pursuit of prosperity, this essentially should happen across the spectrum of politics-polity-policy-practice, involve the range of stakeholders including citizenry/communities etc., and drive positive change at the local level of communities. Differences, however, remain on perceptions and measure of prosperity, which can also be context specific, change with ongoing conditions and needs, and at times is even removed from realities (Abubakar, 2019; Daher and Mintchev, 2021).

With growing focus on conditions or indicators for prosperity for people, research has not paid much attention to prosperity as an operative term. Such a question can be challenging and require a re-examination of *what it means to prosper*. A recent theory and operative

model for prosperity describes it as a process of development and thriving in place for people and environments. Development implies that needs-centres pursuits, which are adequately supported by ideal conditions/spaces, are actualized, causing beneficial advancement, and imbuing value. To thrive, development needs to be adequately sustained through changes in time. For a deeper discussion see Abubakar (2019). Hence, in any system, the procedures taken to attain prosperity are just as important, and should support (psychological) ownership and control, so to intensely facilitate development in place and its resilience. This paper proposes three practical rules to help in this regard, providing guides for stakeholders set on managing and delivering place improvement (in any context) to enhance prosperity.

The three rules include (1) asset-based prospecting, (2) advocative and enabling participation, and (3) small and incremental pursuits in every way. They are conceived through qualitative content analysis and Expert Opinion analysis that form part of broader research to link prosperity and slum improvement conducted from 2014 to 2018. Guided by the requirements in the proposed model for prosperity, the content analysis involved over forty literature sources, spanning subjects that include economics, urban development and practice, ecology, psychology, philosophy, sociology. While the (six) experts in the opinion analysis include professionals and practitioners in urban design, urban management, and development practice in vulnerable communities. Thus, creating a robust proposal. Following on, the three rules are discussed with some examples from case studies.

Rule 1: Asset-based prospecting

Asset-based prospecting means designing engagement(s) in a way that searches for, recognises, and capitalizes on the robust and positive character of a place within all dimensions – human and social-cultural-economic capital, environmental, spatial, and physical – no matter how little or inconspicuous. Building on what already exists whereby they partner, broker, or trigger improvement, and in this way scale up impact. However, without disregarding and, in relation to the challenges within place to avoid risks of decline, while also protecting people's and natural environments' welfare. Asset-based prospecting also means encouraging, strengthening, and supporting people's willingness and capacities for improvement, and for local autonomy towards such. For Hamdi (2004) and Ellin (2013), this approach only serves to further advance an already naturally occurring ability for people (including other organic life) to self-motivate, draw on information, resources, and organize towards benefits. While a well-facilitated autonomy, in any dimension, does not just influence knowledge and expertise exchange, but strengthens inclusivity and protection of rights and (tangible and intangible) property (Azfar and Cadwell, 2003; Glaeser, 2013; Olson, 2000).

Exemplifying this rule is the collaborative Mulini Songline project in Wann, New South Wales, Australia (Foster and Kinniburgh, 2020). Set to revitalize a 100-year-old heritage-listed military site and armoury into a cultural and indigenous education centre, the team sought to emphasize Country (aboriginal concept of site and place) via 6 unique works. One of these builds on the Country-specific *Dahl'wah* (causarina tree) and its role in the ecology and presiding Aboriginal knowledges (ancestry, connections with selves and environment, culture, ecology etc.). The installation comprises low walls with fired clay pieces built from *Mulini* – Country's natural filtrating mud sediment – and is designed to invite and interact with designers and users as they learn the story of place, and in this way also, oneself. The project dignifies the Aboriginal place assets, awarded ownership and control, and has involved them in the dynamic intervention of Country following on.

Rule 2: Advocative and enabling participation

Participation is now a well-established approach in practice. This rule emphasizes how it should be a process that advocates and enables voluntary and robust mental, social, active, and material contribution from beneficiaries/communities, and in the collation of financial capital. They should be able to decisively influence and deliberate about the process of intervention, its outputs and outcomes, and take responsibility for these. Key to participation is the fostering of social interaction and capital to ensure it is effective, while considering the ethical implications involved. For people, natural relations, cultural, and interest-based interaction provides meaning to life and is definitive to social development (Ikerd, 2013; Shah, 2012; Zohar, 1991). It has been shown that when societies face challenges and fruits of endeavours together, it enhances socio-economic structures and cohesion and helps to avoid ills of massive defection (ibid; Dayton-Johnson, 2001; OECD, 2011; Sanoff, 2010).

Exemplifying this approach is a recently initiated *Gengere* slum revitalization project by the author in Lagos, Nigeria. Its aim is to apply a Place Prosperity Framework to define place, identify and implement the most appropriate intervention to enhance community and city prosperity. In preparation for the project, remote consultations (knowledge exchange) were held with the community leadership and government stakeholders. It informed on the conceptual framework, intended outcomes, and benefits, serving to build dignity and respect. With continued advocacy and consultation, a volunteer unit emerged that rallied support, contributed materials, venue, and time to undergo training and simulation exercises to help facilitate the project, and gave feedback and recommendations on the process. Accordingly, it had become *their project*, they relished having the capacity to collaboratively implement and manage its progress. Thus, providing a strong base for the dynamic organization of the

project.

Rule 3: Small and incremental in every way

This is a time-conscious based rule; with time comes continuity, change, mobility, and succession in all dimensions of place (Dainton, 2010; Lefebvre, 1996; Rovelli, 2016). This rule extolls focusing on the most practical, small (few or singular) target(s) of intervention that can be managed and built on incrementally, rather than taking on many or complicated tasks that overlap and become too complex in time. It also suggests strategically selecting target(s) that hold high importance in the problem/challenge definition within the context of place, needs, and improvement objectives. One, which when improved can catalyse positive change along interacting and incremental lines of focus and action. So, essentially starting small and where it matters, and in a manner that objectives, procedures, and requirements for improvement are flexible as stakeholders learn from experience and adapt their responses to the unique evolution of place. With the appropriate stakeholder capacity and level of control, impact can be sustained progressively, which is key to thriving (see Ellin, 2013; Habraken, 1998).

Exemplifying this rule is the community project in Gajabapura community, Srilanka (Hamdi, 2014). With a firm focus on maintaining the continuity of a housing initiative and empowering local community to decide and meet their own needs, a local NGO, Sevenatha, focused on the practical needs for toilets first. They secured a small grant to provide expertise and sanitation training to help people build individual toilets and connect to septic tanks. The outcome helped secure another grant to scale up the first initiative. Thus, another success that helped attract bigger donors like World Bank and UN-Habitat and scale up action to improve adequate living conditions, to which improving sanitation had been key, and furthermore expand initiatives into other communities.

Conclusion

A widely accepted and standardized conceptualization of prosperity is still a work in progress. Still, many national and local governments' foci are firmly set on changing the tide of urban and rural vulnerabilities in all dimensions, a substantial feat in context of urbanization challenges and limited resources. This short paper introduces a theory for what it means to prosper and discusses three rules/ or principles for imbibing prosperity ideals across the political-polity-policy-practice ecosystem in general, and development practice in particular. For prosperity, it is important for initiatives to be positively focused and start at the local level of communities to collaboratively deliver ideal improvement to place and create value that can

be sustained through time. These principles, as shown by the examples are not mutually exclusive. Working with and through place assets will benefit from effective participation and vice versa, while a time-conscious and modest approach can help to organise actions and maintain performance of objectives. While these rules provide broad platforms to adapt unique sub-principles and/or methods of engagement, they are not conclusive. There is potential to advance them through further experiential research and theoretical construction that breaks down these concepts.

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