The African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET) is the local managing partner for the Rockefeller Foundation’s Informal City Dialogues in Accra (ICD Accra). It is our task to conduct these dialogues in the city and to bring together a diverse group of citizens representing public, private, civic, industry, non-profits, local philanthropies, workers, street vendors, urban poor groups, academe, women and youth who will consider scenarios for the future of Accra in 2040. This is a short four month citywide consultation exercise (Jan-April 2013) involving about 300 delegates.

BACKGROUND

Since the “discovery” of the informal city in 1970 by the anthropologist Keith Hart during a research mission to Accra, Ghana, the informal economy has been studied as a seemingly “elusive” socio-economic phenomena, and yet in Ghana we live on streets where the familiar sight of street vendors, street artists and day laborers, contradicts the notion that the informal sector is in any way “hidden”. In Accra today the size of Ghana’s informal sector is placed at 80 per cent of the total labour force. Paraphrasing the late C.K. Prahalad, we can see that “the informal city is the bottom of the pyramid that holds up the formal city”.

What is happening in Accra is part of a global trend, where for the first time in history, more than half the world’s population now lives in towns and cities. Cities and metropolitan regions are clearly the engines of our global economic growth and as a result, cities attract the poor who come for the promise of opportunity. By 2050, an estimated 9 billion people, 75% of the global population, will reside in cities and, without intervention; 2-3 billion will live in slums, creating new vulnerabilities to health, economic well-being, and placing greater stresses on individuals, communities and regions.

Most of the urban poor in Accra live in informal dwellings, where an invisible fault line propels them into large areas of inadequate infrastructure, denied access to water, sanitation and other basic services and investments. The formal city either ignores the poor completely or treats them with benign neglect, open hostility or violence. Despite this the informal sector is flourishing across the schisms that excludes it from the formal city.

As cities become larger, environmental pressures also increase. Therefore natural resource crises and climate change are giving rise to urgent questions about how to build resilience and maximize the opportunities for the poor in cities.

The Rockefeller Foundation, is preparing some responses, in its philanthropic drive to support communities who are rethinking current institutions, and inventing new structures for interaction and bottom-up governance.
They have launched the Informal City Dialogues in six cities, as part of their centennial activities. The cities of Accra (Ghana), Bangkok (Thailand), Chennai (India), Lima (Peru), Metro Manila (Indonesia) and Nairobi (Kenya) - were chosen because they have a history of rich, ongoing discussions about informality and urbanization. The Informal City Dialogues will bring people together to explore the forces driving or resisting change in their city. They will also identify, build or propose an innovation that will help their city achieve a more inclusive and resilient future. The proposed innovations will then compete for the Rockefeller Foundations’ Informal City Urban Innovation Grant Pool of about $1 million. The Dialogues will begin in January 2013 and conclude in September 2013.

The ICD Accra process involves a series of workshops in Accra as shown in Fig. 1. Each gathering will involve between 50-100 participants. A number of communication products will be developed during the process, which we hope will leave a legacy of durable and inspirational narratives about the future of Accra.

We want this project to lead to real change on the ground, as well as advance the understanding of how different organizations can support resilience and equity in cities for a better future. To that end, we are attentive to five critical success factors, described below throughout the project.
To ensure that participants from the informal city are represented in the workshops, we are working with local organizations and community focal persons to host three preliminary workshops, where we engage participants living in slums, informal traders and creative artists. Selected participants from these workshops are then invited to a synthesis workshop to develop a shared vision, before introducing participants from the formal sector, such as the (Accra Metropolitan Authority) AMA and the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC), in the wider futures scenario building process.

In each of these workshops, there will be three “Innovators”, people who are passionate about developing social innovation tools for community development. They are tasked with listening to the conversations in the group and then “thinking out of the box” about solutions that enable people to address those challenges. The innovator with the best idea from each of these workshops will participate in the futures scenario and innovation strategy workshops. A prize will be awarded to the best ICD Accra Innovation Idea at the end of the project.

The project team at ACET are working with locally based non-profit organizations, academic institutions, youth groups and other community based organizations who are important representatives of the informal and formal city of Accra. Experienced futures facilitators were also selected to adapt the core methodology making it locally appropriate, to get the buy-in of participants for the strategies and actions that will be implemented in their city. Hopeline Institute, a micro-finance organization and The National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) in Accra are our two main partners for this project.

This project is designed to build on existing local initiatives and demonstrate obvious value to all the stakeholders involved, including decision makers and opinion makers. A small local steering committee was set up at the start of the project, to help us to identify the invitees to the workshops and interviewees for the stakeholder consultation exercise. They also advised the project team on additional meetings and conversations to help create local ownership of the process.

We have developed a short YouTube video competition called Accra Future-Now Video Competition in order to prepare delegates in advance for the sort of process and outcomes we are looking for, encourage them to commit fully and come with a ready and open mind. About 80 people are being invited to take part in a 3-minute video recording, to answer three short questions on film:

a. What are your hopes and fears for the future of your community?

b. What would you like to change about where you live?

c. How will things improve when that change comes?
Community focal persons have been enrolled to help us reach people from three excluded communities; Ga Mashie and Fadama (also known as Sodom and Gomorrah – the largest slum settlement in Accra), and Nima which is a predominantly muslim community also referred to as “zongos”, whose inhabitants are often migrants from the regions, working in informal sectors and traditionally seen as an excluded minority.

These three community focal persons have therefore been recruited to share information about the project with people in their community, to make sure that they are willing and able to participate in this work, once they understand all the facts.

The project team will select 10 finalists (out of 75) whose videos will be compiled into a short DVD, these recordings will be placed on the ICD ACCRA YouTube website for broadcast during March.

The top three winners will receive high quality smart phones to encourage them in community advocacy. Names will be announced in April and winners invited to a presentation dinner on Wednesday April 24th 2013 in Accra. All entrants will be invited to a project launch event and special film screening on Saturday March 9th.

The film to be premiered is Nairobi Half Life, which tells the story of an aspiring actor who travels from his rural home to Nairobi with the hope of achieving his dreams but instead ends up tangled with a mob of criminals. The gripping narrative of life in the slums of Nairobi and the challenging realities that face young people who become trapped in the under-class of their society is a universal theme, which we hope will generate much conversation amongst the delegates.

It also opens the group to regional perspectives and other narratives on the theme of the informal city. Nairobi Half-life has become the biggest theatrical success for a local film in Kenya and it became the first Kenyan film to be considered for an Oscar, while locally it grabbed four trophies at the Kalasha awards. One of the cast, Joseph Wairimu, also won the Best Actor Award at the Durban International Film Festival last year.

CREATE A LEGACY.

We want this project to have a real impact on the ground, allowing stakeholders to bond over a common purpose and encourage them to continue working together beyond the lifetime of this project. We are therefore creating four communication products for participants to use in Accra.

THE ICD ACCRA PHOTO ESSAY BOOK

A photo essay book with about 50–75 images showing the sharp contrast between the formal and informal sectors in Accra will be produced. The photographs will be interspersed with narratives from three writers based in Accra, offering a local perspective, a foreigners view and an ICD Accra project narrative. We hope to work with local organizations to obtain some archive photographs, as well as current images.

THE ACCRA CREATIVE ARTS DIARY

An online and PDF Accra Creative Arts diary depicting a number of creative artists, living and working in Accra in both the formal and the informal sectors (about 25–50 in total) will be produced. One full colour page will show their artwork and the adjacent page will show their image, with profile and contact details underneath.
Since Nairobi Half-Life is acted in Sheng (a local form of Swahili spoken in Nairobi) and sub-titled in English, we need to provide voice-overs in Twi and English to ensure our guests who are mostly slum dwellers from Accra can understand the story. We have decided to take this challenge as an opportunity to re-imagine and re-interpret the story to a local audience. Therefore a local group of actors from the company known as EHALAKASA, will be tasked with rehearsing the film script in the weeks leading up to the premiere and then providing a real-time voice over for the gathered audience. The event will be filmed and the DVD from the event edited to encourage learning from this approach of sharing local African stories, through film and performance. EHALAKASA are a group of dedicated poets, spoken word artists, inspired musicians, instrument players and lovers of the art, meet at Nubuke Foundation to participate in a biweekly music-poetry-performance show, organised by the Writers Project of Ghana.

THE ICD ACCRA PROJECT DVD.

Our learning, approach, insights, high and low points from the project will be captured in a short 15minute DVD.

ABOUT THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

The Rockefeller Foundation supports work that expands opportunity and strengthens resilience to social, economic, health and environmental challenges—affirming its pioneering philanthropic mission since 1913 to promote the well-being of humanity.

ABOUT THE AFRICAN CENTER FOR ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION (ACET)

ACET is an economic policy institute supporting the long-term growth with transformation of African economies. As a “think-and-do” tank, we apply knowledge by directly engaging citizens and decision makers.