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BUILDING MATERIALS : A Search for Alternatives in Kenya.

PRESENTED AT THE UN TRAINING PROGRAMME

ON HOUSING IN DEVELOPMENT, 1991, NAIROBI MAY 1991

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

Building materials constitute the main input in the construction sector , sometimes accounting for as much as 75 % of the cost of a low cost House (E.C.A.1988:2)

It is however, regrettable that the majority of the third world countries are still importing significant amounts of building materials and components. The level of imports range from a low percentage of 5 to 10% for such countries as Greece and Mexico, through about 60% for Kenya and Ivory Coast, to even beyond 60% for Yemen Arab Republic (MCT, 1982:iv-45).

A survey by Economic Commission for Africa has shown that in some African countries, over 90% of the value of building materials used in the 'modern' construction sector is accounted for by imports (ECA, 1983:2).

It is estimated that building materials alone account for 5 to 8 percent of the total value of imports in Africa which in the last 5 years has represented annual expenditure of about \$ 3 billion (ECA,1988). A scrutiny of building materials used on a modest home ownership housing estate of Umoja II in Nairobi, revealed that at least 37% of the project cost demanded foreign currency for purchase of building materials, equipment and fuel (Agevi,1988:8). The wish of third world countries to significantly reduce the unfavourable dependency on imported building materials, components, technologies and techniques is understandable, real and urgent. One way of achieving this goal would entail sincere promotion of cost effective, foreign exchange saving and labour intensive local building materials production using locally developed technologies which maximise the use of local human capabilities and equipment. Despite this desire, not much practical support has been extended to the sector.

### CONVENTIONAL BUILDING MATERIALS: Nature and Trends

Building materials in Kenya are obtained from many varied sources. These include formal, quasi-formal (intermediate) and traditional/informal. The formal building materials manufacturing sub-sector has evolved since 1928, when only 2 firms were in operation. By 1970, the number of firms in the subsector had increased to 191 and were employing about 18,000 people. The latest information indicates that by 1986, the number of firms had slightly declined to 189. The number of employees had however increased to 43,000 people. The building materials industry thus accounted for about 30% of total employment in manufacturing sector and 5 % of the total national employment (Oduor, 1991).

A review of spatial distribution reveals that 51 % of the formal building materials industries are located in Nairobi, followed by Central Province accounting for about 17%. Coast Province is distant third accounting for 13% of the total number of firms. Some form of specialized materials distribution network has also evolved to respond to special spatial needs of building materials industry. The firms involved in the distribution tend to specialise in dealing in particular range of materials. Apart from keeping stock and providing efficient channel for the distribution of materials, these firms may on preferential basis provide short term credit. In this regard, the Asian dominance, appears to be in the favour of Asian based contractors.

Another interesting trend is to apparent increase in the number of larger firms. Thus whereas in 1970, 30% of the firms were each employing 5-19 people, and 25% were employing between 50-99, in 1986 the Scenario had changed. Majority of the firms, 27% were those employing 50-99 people. This is followed by those employing 200-499, which accounted for 25% of the total while the 20-49 category of firms accounted for 24%