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RURAL HOUSING IN KENYA:  
A Case Study of Traditional Housing and Policies

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## 1.0 AN OVERVIEW OF RURAL HOUSING

### 1.1 Introduction

Kenya has a markedly differentiated geo-ecological and climatological regions. There are noticeable regional diversities and disparities in terms of:

- landscape and natural endowment
- cultural norms and traditions, hence varied social perception with different material products of culture
- levels of development and provision of social and infra-structural amenities and facilities.

As expected therefore, it is difficult in the Kenyan context to talk about a homogenous rural environment with uniform housing conditions. It can however, be argued that despite the sharp and contrasting regional housing differences in terms of the form and socio-spatial organization; the roles assigned to different community based actors, in terms of conceptualization and perception of what the house/'home' is or should do is fairly well defined in different rural communities.

In terms of settlement pattern, most of rural Kenya is littered with scattered homesteads situated on individual or family holdings. The exceptions to this general pattern are to be found in the settlement pattern in:

- large plantations such as Ramisi Sugar Co. in Kwale district in Coast Province, Mumias Sugar Co. in Kakamega, Banita sisal estate in Nakuru, tea estates in Kericho, sugar plantations in Kisumu and South Nyanza district<sup>S</sup>

- rice irrigation schemes in Kimumu and Embu districts
- largely nomadic regions (Rift Valley and North Eastern Provinces)
- in small rural based market centres.

The main organizing framework of rural housing in Kenya is homestead/compound culture rather than 'village' culture. Unlike other African countries (say Tanzania, where one can confidently talk of 'Ujamaa Village') in Kenya, the concept of a village is an elusive one. It is not a clearly defined notion. It may be conceived in socio-cultural terms rather than a physical one. Thus people may talk of a village even where no agglomeration of dwellings is apparent so long as several scattered homesteads within a geographically contiguous area are occupied by people who constitute a lineage clan or other kinship group (USAID, 1979).

## 1.2 Traditional Housing: Trends and Changes

Traditional housing can be construed as a mirror through which the rich and diversified cultural heritage and different life styles of people interact with the physical environment, making maximum use of available local building materials and techniques.

Available information indicated that majority of rural houses have been 'community' built and are socio-culturally appropriate. In the traditional setting, the decision to build and the building process itself was a collective responsibility of the extended family and/or friends. The quotation cited