

Urban Habitat: The Environment of Tomorrow.

URBAN HABITAT: THE ENVIRONMENT OF TOMORROW

THIRD WORLD CITIES IN AFRICA

Paul M. Syagga
University Of Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract:

Urban environmental problems stem from heavy concentration of population and economic activities in relatively confined areas. In the African context, the urban population grows extremely rapidly with the result that the "brown agenda" has become a major concern. There is a crisis in shelter provision and associated infrastructural facilities, as well as a worsening ambient situation. Urban authorities in Africa, despite the worsening economic environment tend to focus on received concepts or conventional methods of supply of water, sewerage, power, housing etc. which majority urban population cannot afford. However, governments need to mobilise the resources of all groups including the informal support structure which characterises the African way of life in urban areas. A really successful environmentally friendly housing solution is where local communities solve their own problems with the Government acting as facilitator in providing information and basic resources. Successful examples exist, however to show how services have been provided through neighbourhood groups NGO's and benevolent private sector. What remains is to emulate and promote the initiatives.

Keywords: Africa, Cities, Environmental problems, Housing, Infrastructure.

Introduction

The state of human settlements and their development in Africa have aroused increasing concerns in the course of the last decade, as has the general deterioration of the African economies. Despite enormous diversity among African countries in such factors as size, population, climate, degree of urbanisation and industrial development, economic growth rates, resource endowments and per capita wealth, there is a large degree of similarity in socio-economic development of African countries which influences and differentiates urbanization. The urban population grows extremely rapidly at rates that are often two or three times the rates experienced by the urbanised economies. Thus from a relatively modest 83 million urban dwellers in 1970, Africa's urban population increased to a substantial 209 million in 1990 (World Bank, 1993). Projections for the year 2005 put the urban population at 400 million and it will double again in the subsequent years to 857 million by 2025. Thus while 27 percent of Africa's population lived in cities in 1980, the proportions will increase to 39 percent in the year 2000 and 52.2 percent in the year 2020, respectively. This rapid urbanisation growth has enormously increased pressure for urban services, particularly in the largest cities across the continent. This "squeeze" between the burgeoning urban population and the services they need

is already one of the dramatic crises of the late twentieth century

Poverty Environmental Degradation Cycle

Population displacements and migration as a result of lack of spatial policies, in times of economic decline, mismanagement of agricultural resources, the frequent droughts, desertification and armed conflicts in a number of African regions, are accelerating the growth of unplanned and precarious settlements, as many more people leave the rural settings for urban accommodation. Thus while city populations are growing at around 6 percent, squatter settlements and slums are growing at about 8 percent annually in many African cities (Syagga, 1994).

Given the poor institutional machinery to deal with this influx these settlements are characterised by poor sanitation, insufficient water supply, poor water quality, overcrowding and inadequate garbage disposal. All these conditions have adverse effects on health, directly contributing to high rates of disease related to poor sanitation, respirations, accidents etc. (Byrne et al. 1986; Lowry, 1991).

In many African cities the rate of unemployment is very high in historical standards. For instance, Economic Commission for Africa (UN, 1992) estimates that in many African countries, the number of urban unemployed is growing at 10 percent or more every year. The trend in many cities is therefore creation of employment in the informal sector which is generally low-income self-employment activities. It is in this regard that Africa finds it difficult to break the poverty environmental degradation cycle which is widening at a frightening pace. Quite often environmental degradation and poverty are locked in a vicious cycle, so that where one is found the other is not far behind (Syagga, 1994).

Another common characteristic of human settlement situation in Africa is the increasing number of refugees as part of a complex stream of migration. (See table 1). The right to seek and attain asylum in shelters (refugee camps) is fundamental, but is also the right to live in peace and safety in one's homeland. An actual or anticipated violation of rights is the direct reason for the departure of countless refugees.

According to Global Refugee Statistics (UNHCR, 1993) there are approximately 19 million refugee population in the world of whom 32 percent are from Africa. Out of the top 50 countries, 20 countries with largest refugee ratios are in Africa, a situation which aggravates human settlement situation in Africa. Women and children make up 80 percent of the refugee populations and are affected in different ways by displacement. The provisions for shelter and related services will therefore require different solutions from other urban migrants. Table 1 shows the ratio for refugee populations to total populations in the 20 African countries with high refugee population, many of whom live in urban areas that are least prepared to receive them. It is observed that whereas urbanization in industrialised countries took many decades, permitting a gradual emergence of economic, social and political institutions to deal with the problems of transformation, the process in African countries is occurring far more rapidly, against a background of energy shortages, lower incomes, ecological problems, and fewer opportunities for international migration. This makes it extremely difficult for the African urban economies to cope with need for housing and other social infrastructure using conventional methods. High standards of service provision based on perceived and received eurocentric concepts will to a large extent not be achievable (Kironde, 1992; Syagga, 1993b). It is advisable to learn from the survival tactics of the urban residents themselves and harness those initiatives and resources in developing and implementing appropriate urban programmes that are affordable and sustainable by the majority of the population.