

THE HOUSING CRUNCH

By DEOGRATIAS BYABAFUMU

A retired industrial worker in his eighties crawls out of a hovel built with polythene, scrap metal, and cardboard to stretch out his weak limbs in the sun. In his lap is his only company—a 4-year-old granddaughter left by his daughter whom he has not seen for a long time. The two survive on meals of black tea and maize flour bread.

The picture is a daily sight in the slums of many African cities which are ringed by the rejected and sickly poor, many of whom left their rural homes when young and have since lost their roots there. The challenge of finding shelter for the urban populations of African and other Third World countries is becoming greater than ever before.

The UN has declared this year, 1987, the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. In March 1986, at a meeting in Nairobi sponsored by the Government of Finland, several East African countries came to grips with the problems of insufficient housing and basic amenities such as water and sanitation. Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, and others disclosed their lack of capital and technical personnel to put up sewers, housing, piped water systems, and roads for most of their people.

While most of the countries at the meeting agreed they have small urban populations compared with other Third World countries such as Mexico and India, they said that overcrowded slums are taking their toll on women and small children since disease is likely to increase in such conditions. What

is more frightening, according to several delegates, is that urban population growth rates are shooting up fast, with most countries' rates now between 4 and 9 percent.

Ethiopia is a rural country, with only 11 percent of its 38 million people living in cities and towns. All the same, says Shitto Mersha, a delegate to the conference, the organizational and technological base of agriculture, the backbone of the country, is weak as it cannot support the food needs of the farming population. Furthermore, most peasants live and work in isolated areas far from services, and access to sanitation and safe water is lacking.

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In a survey carried out in 17 major urban centres in Ethiopia, it was shown that access to water was unsatisfactory although much better than in rural areas. In the 318 urban centres in the country, about 60 percent of the population had no access to such facilities.

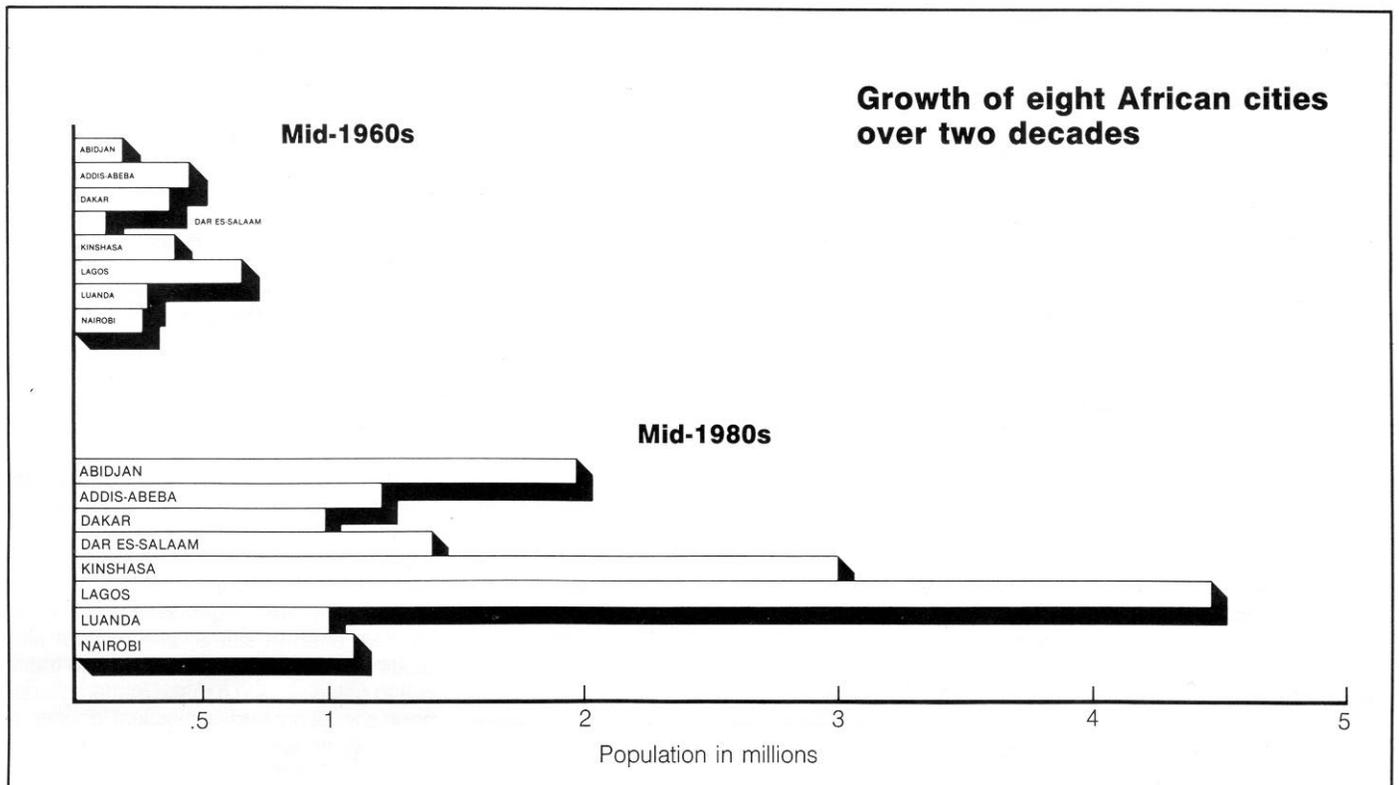
As in several other African countries, the organization and use of urban land in Ethiopia are wanting and urban centres suffer from a weak economic base.

In Tanzania, things are no better. The population is about 21 million people, 15 percent of whom live in urban centres. Mr B.K. Majani, project manager of Tanzania's National Sites and Services Project, told the conference that the high rate of growth in urban centres in the country indicates that cities serve more as centres of refuge than of production. His worry is that cities are becoming more parasitic than productive in overall national development.

Most housing in the country is built by self-help efforts. There is little institutional housing in urban centres in Tanzania and government investment in public housing has been minimal of late. The capital city, Dar es Salaam, which means 'city of peace', has chronic problems with its water system.

In neighboring Uganda, where political instability has undermined economic development, the housing shortage in 1986 was 100 000 units. The country has a major problem with the durability and quality of housing in rural areas because insect pests attack wooden construction materials. Furthermore, staggering inflation has made it impossible for most poor Ugandans to buy building materials.

In 1983, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), only about 57 percent of East Africa's urban and 29 percent of rural areas had access to safe water. In urban



SERVICING

THE CASE OF

centres, water supply has been outpaced by the demands of a growing population, resulting in interruptions of service.

According to WHO, sanitation coverage in urban and rural areas of East Africa average 55 and 18 percent respectively. And while water-based sewage systems serve small areas of large cities and towns, they are poorly operated and often out of order.

VILLAGIZATION PROGRAM

East African countries have taken various measures to provide housing and improve services. When the socialist government of President Mengistu took power in Ethiopia, for example, it used mass mobilization and participation to construct housing.

About half a million peasants in Ethiopia were recently moved from the overworked land in the northeastern areas to the more

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remote, but fertile regions. Another measure has been a mass villagization program. The most populous administrative region in the country, for example, is planning to set up 7735 villages and over two million housing units in the next few years.

In July 1975, shortly after the nationalization of rural land, all urban land and extra houses were also declared public property and compensation was paid to owners. Rent reductions of up to 50 percent were imposed and there have been no rent increases in the last 10 years. Urban dwellers have been encouraged to form cooperatives in order to build homes cheaply. The government is to assist them with technical personnel and loans given at concessionary interest rates.

FINANCING AND SECURITY OF TENURE

Two specialists from the Nairobi-based UN Centre for Human Settlements recommend that local governments supervise land management and infrastructure development programs and that the poor be given security of tenure and access to financing. “If employment is the key goal,” they add, “then small-scale incremental housing holds out the most promise for spurring direct and indirect employment creation in poor countries.” They also encourage the tolerance of revised minimum building codes and standards of housing which the poor can meet.

Kenya has already taken the lead in altering its restrictive building by-laws in

order to adapt and use local materials. In fact, some mud-and-wattle houses—but with iron roofs—are being tolerated in the slums near Nairobi, where raging fires have often ruined the shacks of many poor people.

COSTLY BUILDING MATERIALS

A major constraint still facing developing countries is the rising cost of building materials. It is one of the “chronic problems hindering successful implementation of shelter programs in Tanzania”, according to Mr Majani.

Many Third World countries import about three-fifths of their materials used for official construction, which is between 5 and 8 percent of their national imports. This is a great drain on financial resources. While the average Northern European worker in the late 1970s could, for example, buy 10 bags of cement with a day’s wages, according to the Worldwatch Institute, a rural African worker needed 10 days’ wages to buy the same. Furthermore, the cost of transporting cement over 100 km can exceed the cost of production—as in Botswana and Sudan, for example. Retired Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, a frugal man, once referred to the addiction to the use of cement in construction as a mental paralysis that impeded development and improvement in housing quality by absorbing badly needed capital.

The use of inexpensive local materials is an attractive alternative. In fact, architects now argue that some concrete housing is not suitable for the hot climates of Africa.

‘ASFADOBE’ BRICKS

One inexpensive and durable building material is mother earth. It can be mixed with a little asphalt and pressed with simple technology to make “asfadobe” bricks. In Sudan, these can be produced for a fifth of the price of cement blocks.

In the years to come, housing the poor will continue to be a major challenge for several African countries. There is no indication that the rising tide of migrants to the cities will soon ebb, and theories about urban numbers going down when rural migrants realize there are no jobs in the cities do not seem valid.

There are now over 800 million people in the world living in poorly built dwellings and squatter settlements. In their attempts to cope with this unfortunate predicament, governments must work out sound housing policies that will promote the use of local resources and skills in providing decent shelter for the poor. □

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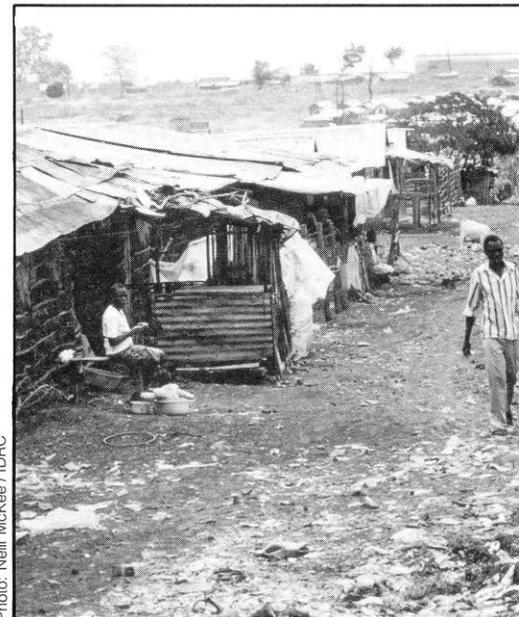


Photo: Neill McKee / IDRC

A Kenyan shantytown. African governments are looking

By LYSE DOUCET

In 1912, Abidjan was a tiny French colonial post with 1400 inhabitants. Its population grew slowly. Eventually the railway line opened, traders set up shop, and the city became the capital of Ivory Coast.

Beginning in the 1950s, Abidjan is said to have undergone a “demographic explosion unprecedented in the short urban history of French-speaking West Africa”. Today the city has a population of almost two million and is still growing. Abidjan is referred to by the French as “little Paris” and Americans say it resembles Manhattan. But it has not been the only African city to grow so fast.

Lagos, Nigeria, for example, is a bustling metropolis of more than four million people. It is a veritable magnet for hundreds of thousands of West Africans who see it as *the* city in which to hustle for money—in trading, services, and the vibrant informal sector. Other burgeoning African cities include Nairobi, Lusaka, Dar es Salaam, Kinshasa, and Douala.

URBAN DECAY

Africa has the highest population growth rate of all the continents and its cities have expanded faster than most governments’ capacity for maintaining a satisfactory level of urban services. Workers in need of affordable housing are obliged to live outside city centres, often in slums, and without adequate urban transportation they find it difficult to get to work. To make matters worse, poor sanitation and insufficient access to clean water lead to sickness and urban decay.