PLANNING SUSTAINABLE CITIES FOR SOCIAL HARMONY IN AFRICA

Geoffrey Nwaka

Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria
geoffreynwaka@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT:
Poverty and rapid urbanization are two of the greatest challenges facing Africa today. UN-Habitat estimates that Sub-Saharan African cities have over 166 million slum dwellers, most of who work in the informal sector where they simply do not earn enough to afford decent shelter and services. What does sustainability mean for such cities and such townspeople? Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit emphasized that sustainable development has to be socially just and ecologically stable, and that the creation of sustainable human settlements is integral to the achievement of sustainable development. In vast areas of Nigerian and other African cities environmental amenities lag behind population growth; inadequate sanitation and waste management, and the poor state of public health infrastructure have led to the spread of a wide variety of water-borne and filth related disease. The main policy challenge for Africa is how to plan and manage rapid urban growth in a way that promotes employment, income and shelter for the poor, and at the same time ensures a safe, healthy and socially acceptable environment; how to forestall the growth and spread of slums, and ensure that the existing ones are upgraded and progressively integrated into the urban mainstream. Current research suggests that the path to urban peace and sustainability in Africa lies in trying to build and manage more inclusive and socially equitable cities. The paper argues that greater priority should be given to the health and development concerns of the poor, and tries to identify the lessons that could help to promote a more positive view and policy regarding the poor and the informal city. It concludes with some general reflections on the future of the African city, what form it will take, and how to bring about the changes needed to make these cities healthier, more productive, inclusive and equitable, and better able to meet people’s needs.

KEY WORDS:
Africa; Poverty and Inequality; Environmental Health; Sustainable and Inclusive Cities
INTRODUCTION

Poverty alleviation dominates the international development agenda of the 21st century, and one of the primary concerns of the Millennium Development Goals is to urgently improve the lives of millions of slum dwellers around the world, and to reduce the number of people without reliable access to good drinking water and sanitation. (UN-Habitat, 2003). More than halfway to the 2015 delivery date for attaining the Millennium Development Goals, it looks more and more unlikely that the development targets in health, education, environmental sustainability, poverty reduction and enhanced international cooperation and assistance will be met, despite noticeable improvements in some areas.

Up to the 1980s poverty was largely associated with the rural areas in developing countries; but the situation has changed with the dramatic increase in the numbers and proportion of the population living in urban areas, and a corresponding increase in the level of urban poverty (Carr, 2004). The assumption that city dwellers are better off than their rural counterparts often obscures the wide and growing gap in health status and amenity levels between the wealthy few and the urban poor majority who are presumed to be illegal squatters in the city, and are therefore excluded from due recognition and access to many urban services. Many now argue that it is best to target poverty where it is growing fastest – in the cities.

Although some of the elite neighbourhoods in African cities enjoy relatively high quality housing and residential environment, the bulk of the urban poor live in squalid and health threatening conditions. The supply of water for personal and domestic hygiene is grossly inadequate, and so is the coverage of sanitation facilities. The state of waste management and drainage is rudimentary, nutritional standards are low, and food contamination occurs frequently, especially in the extensive street food industry. This state of affairs has serious adverse public health implications as seen in the high incidence of water-borne and filth related disease (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1990).

Rapid urbanization also increases the demand for energy – for industrial uses, for transportation and for the domestic consumption of urban households. Electricity supply is usually unreliable in most cities, and petroleum products (especially kerosene), and gas are often unavailable and/or unaffordable for most families. The vast majority of townspeople, especially those in the smaller urban centres, rely almost entirely on traditional fuels (firewood and charcoal) which, unfortunately, have the negative environmental effect of rural deforestation, and the adverse health effect of air pollution. Indoor pollution from open fires and stoves in poorly ventilated homes is known to be responsible for a wide variety of respiratory ailments among women and children who are exposed constantly to toxic fumes in the cooking areas (Hosier, 1992).

How then do we ensure that the struggle against urban poverty and slum dwelling does not result in a campaign against the urban poor and slum dwellers themselves. What are the essential elements of a strategy to address these problems and improve the conditions of the poor.
POLICY DILEMMA

Opinions differ widely on what the appropriate attitude and policies towards the informal sector and the urban poor should be. Some of the more optimistic advocates of the informal sector see it as a vital source of employment and income for the poor, the seedbed of local entrepreneurship, and a potent instrument in the campaign to combat poverty and social exclusion. Others dismiss the sector as an anomaly, a source of disorder, and an obstacle to the development of a modern city and a modern economy. (Abumere 1998; Maegher and Yanusi, 1996). Indeed some governments see slums and informal settlements as evidence of the failure of official policies, and therefore something to be removed. Officials claim that in these slums and informal settlements there is no officially registered owner to whom government can offer services, and that it may be ill-advised to extend services like water and electricity to ‘illegal settlements’ that may soon be pulled down in the course of development.

These conflicting positions pose a difficult dilemma for planners and policy makers, and tend to reinforce the ambivalence and hostility of African governments towards the cities and the urban poor. How do African governments and planners uphold the rule of law and contain the adverse health and environmental effects of slums and irregular settlements without disrupting the livelihood of the poor; how can the vulnerable groups that work in the informal sector, especially women, children and apprentices can be protected from harm and exploitation. This dilemma explains why some African governments have sometimes adopted the misguided policy that blames the victims, and tries to outlaw and repress the informal sector, and to forcibly evict hundreds of thousands of so called squatters. This was the case in the so called "War Against Environmental Indiscipline" and “Operation Clean and Green” in Nigeria, which, like the "Operation Restore Order” in Zimbabwe, destroyed the homes and businesses of millions of poor townspeople, and by so doing worsened the problems of poverty and social exclusion.

The UN-Habitat has rightly observed that “in pursuit of protecting the environment, we must first protect the people” as it is absolutely essential ”to ensure that all people have a sufficient stake in the present to motivate them to take part in the struggle to secure the future for humanity”. While acknowledging the importance of the ‘green agenda’ for protecting natural resources and ecosystems in order to ensure long term global sustainability, the paper maintains that the proper starting point in the quest for urban sustainability in Africa lies in improving the living and working environment of townspeople, especially the urban poor who face a more immediate environmental threat to their health and well-being. This human development approach calls for rethinking the traditional engineering approach, and broadening the narrow technical focus of conventional town planning and urban management in order to incorporate the principles of urban health and sustainability embodied in the Habitat Agenda, ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, WHO’s Healthy Cities Programme, and other recent global initiatives which provide guidance on how to make cities everywhere more inclusive and socially sustainable.

THE URBAN CHALLENGE IN NIGERIA AND AFRICA

Africa is the world’s least urbanized but most rapidly urbanizing continent, with an urban growth rate which is double the rate of overall population growth, and double the urban growth rate in parts of
Asia and Latin America. The total urban population is expected to exceed 200 million in the next few years.

Unlike the historical experience of Europe and North America where the growth of cities and populations occurred slowly over the centuries, allowing sufficient time for the institutions and structures for urban management to develop apace, this extremely rapid rate of urbanization in Africa is occurring in the context of widespread poverty, with little industrialization to provide jobs, and ahead of the development of the requisite institutions for managing and providing adequately for townspeople. Many analysts have observed in Africa the so called process of ‘slumurbanization’:

a new process of urbanization unleashed by the masses of relatively low income migrants who have flocked into the cities since independence, and are seeking to solve their problem of accommodation and employment informally and on their own terms…the urban poor are dominant, and are in most cases are transforming the city to meet their own needs, often in conflict with official laws and plans (Mabogunje, 1992; Cf. COMHABITAT, 2010).

Almost everywhere in Africa, urban conditions have grown from bad to worse. Good quality housing is scare and very expensive. The Nigerian experience represents many aspects of the African urban scene, and can be used as a good example. The urban situation in Nigeria is particularly disturbing. Successive Nigerian governments have at best been ambivalent in their attitude to the cities and to the informal sector. Although Nigeria is one of the largest oil producing countries in the world, and potentially the richest country in Africa, most of Nigeria’s 130 million people, especially those in the rapidly expanding urban informal sector and slums are extremely poor by all accounts.

The rate of urban population growth is about 5.8 per cent, and the country’s urban population is expected to exceed 100 million by 2020. Although most Nigerian towns owe their growth largely to activities generated by European presence in the colonial period, British colonial officials neither anticipated nor approved of the growth of a large African urban population, and therefore tended to see cities as an unfortunate by-product of colonial activities which had to be firmly contained in order to avoid political subversion and social disorganization.

The policies and institutions introduced for urban development were generally very restrictive, myopic and ineffective, especially in the critical areas of land use control, town planning, urban administration, and the provision of urban services. Housing and planning were used as instruments of segregation and social exclusion. Consequently, the rapid urban expansion which occurred in the post-independence period has quickly overtaken and overwhelmed the capacity of local municipal authorities to cope with the crisis of inadequate shelter and services, unemployment, and the worsening deterioration of the urban environment. (Nwaka, 1992; AMCHUD 2005)

Sadly, the colonial laws, codes, regulations and institutions (embodied in the colonial Town and Country Planning Ordinance of 1946), and designed for the small populations envisaged in the cities of the colonial period, have been inherited with little rethinking by post-colonial administrations even as the cities expanded rapidly in response to many aspects of post colonial transformation. (Egunjobi, 2000;). Most of the current legislation and by-laws for environmental health and sanitation appear to most townspeople as reminders of colonial segregation and oppression, and have therefore very little relevance, legitimacy or compliance. Some of the urban related policies and reforms introduced in recent years such as the Nigerian Land Use Decree, the Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law of
1992 (which forms the basis of the National Urban Development Policy of 1997) as well as the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, NEEDS, have proved hopelessly inadequate to deal with the accumulated problems of past neglect.

The urban informal sector expanded rapidly in the 1980 and 90s as a result of the austerity measures introduced as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme. The reduction in public spending, especially for the social sector, the drop in real wages and public sector retrenchment swelled the ranks of the informal sector, and led to the greater informalization of formal sector enterprises.

Unfortunately, government response to the social crisis, and the ‘safety nets’ introduced in the 1990s have not affected the conditions of the poor in any significant way. Government officials have tended to blame the environmental problems of the cities on the informal sector, and have sought to deal with the challenges of informality through increased powers of control and regulation, by insisting on legal titles to land, public housing, mortgage finance, and so on; but these conventional approaches have usually by-passes the poor, still leaving the informal sector as the dominant provider of land and housing in large parts of the urban and peri-urban areas.

A number of more promising policy initiatives have been introduced in recent years. These include the establishment of Peoples Banks and Community Banks (now Micro-Finance Banks), based on the Asian model, and meant to provide small credits and other forms of financial services to the urban poor. As well, the National Directorate for Employment and the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme were set up to promote self-employment through training and financial support for unemployed youth. A recent survey has shown however that only about 10 per cent of the informal sector workers interviewed were aware of how to take advantage of these opportunities.(Dike, 1997; Maeghar and Yanusi, 1996) More recently the Nigerian government has adopted the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) and the state counterparts (“SEEDS) as a social charter and reform agenda meant to strengthen governance, to transform values, combat corruption and alleviate poverty. But the impact of these progressive new initiatives, as they affect the urban poor, remain to be seen.

THE WAY FORWARD

The way forward appears to lie in well-coordinated partnerships among the various stakeholders in the pursuit of urban sustainability. In this regard useful insights can be drawn from a number of UN sponsored conferences and global initiatives which provide guidance on practical approaches to dealing with the urban question. These include Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit which sees the creation of sustainable human settlements as integral to the achievement of sustainable development; the Habitat Agenda which outlines approaches to developing sustainable human settlements; WHO’s Healthy Cities Programme, ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, the World Bank sponsored Cities Alliance for Cities Without Slums, and the UN-Habitat’s twin Campaigns for Good Urban Governance and Secure Tenure. From these, here is growing international consensus that the crisis of governance in developing countries is at the heart of the worsening urban crisis.

The UN Secretary General has identified good governance as “perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development”. This emphasizes the need for a sound
governance structure which provides for greater social inclusion in setting priorities and providing services. State and local authorities need to promote a more decentralized, accountable and effective system of governance that would allow for the broad participation of all interest groups, including the private sector and civil society organizations.

They should also evolve and constantly reviews the general framework of laws and regulations for planning and development so that these are made more realistic and compatible with local conditions. Since resolving the urban crisis is central to Africa’s economic renewal, the international development community needs to genuinely address the global economic context of underdevelopment, and the structural roots of urban poverty in Africa, especially in the critical areas of fair trade, debt relief, development assistance, and so on. The urban poor and informal sector enterprises should also try to better organize and self-regulate themselves in order to engage more constructively with government and other development partners.

Current research suggests that the path to urban sustainability lies in greater realism in building and managing a more inclusive and socially equitable city. This would involve adopting legislative and administrative systems that help to improve the security of land and housing tenure for the poor, to upgrade slums, and to strengthen urban local governance through a broad-based partnership that takes the needs and development concerns of the poor fully into account.

REFERENCES


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