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Housing Policy and Formalization Strategies in Africa's Growing Cities: A Case for the Informal Settlement

Julia Mardeusz

I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Informality is characteristic of the built environment of many African cities. People from rural areas and from other countries stream into Africa's urban areas in search of opportunities and the higher concentration and variety of available jobs. The growth rates of these cities often exceed one percent annually and housing shortages inevitably abound. Many of them lack an adequate amount of formal housing that is both accessible and affordable to newcomers, who are compelled to turn to the informal sector for housing. Organizations with influence over urban planning and policy implementation view informal housing and informality in general as a backward practice and an unsustainable, unsafe urban form vulnerable to even the most minute changes in the world economy and political climate. Informal communities are portrayed as liabilities to the stability of African cities, which are already in constant flux due to their rapid growth rates. Contributors to the United Nations' Habitat report for 2010 on the state of African cities emphasized the perceived negative effects of the high informal settlement occurrence in urban areas: "urban slums are one of the major threats to African urban stability and, by extension, to overall political stability" (Habitat 2). Even so, other urban planners and urban studies scholars see informal housing and slum communities as a vital first step in establishing one's place and sense of belonging in an urban environment. Some go as far as to assert that they are "the way of the future" (Ferguson 2007, 75).

This paper will examine the housing situation and governmental response to the informal urban settlements of Nairobi, Kenya, Cape Town, South Africa, and Lagos, Nigeria, three rapidly growing African cities with relatively high rates of slum occurrence. Governmental response to informal housing has manifested itself in two ways: through encouraging the presence of informal urban settlements and allowing them to flourish, or clearing them away in the hope that residents of informal settlements will be discouraged and driven away by the loss of their homes. Attempts to formalize informal settlements and other strategies used by the government to address them will be discussed. After examining the treatment of informal settlements

in Nairobi, Cape Town, and Lagos, it is clear that informal settlements are fundamental to the growth and vitality of African cities due to their ability to maintain access for all social classes.

II. LAGOS: HOUSING FOR THE POOR IS NOT A PRIORITY

Lagos, Nigeria is Africa's second largest city, with a population that exceeds 10 million (Habitat 2010, 52). With this large population come challenges that result from what the UN terms "over-urbanization," meaning that "the populations are growing much faster than local economies, leading to major social and economic challenges like...slum proliferation" (Habitat 2010, 100). Because of the large population and its many needs, Lagos' government has hesitated to provide informal settlements with even the most basic of services, excluding them from the urban regulations and planning systems (Habitat 2010, 127). Roughly seventy percent of Nigeria's urban population live in slums and have little hope of moving out. Nigeria's minister of Lands, Housing and Urban Developments, Nduese Essien, has found that "currently, over 90 percent of Nigerians in low-income brackets cannot afford decent accommodation, even if they saved 100 percent of their earnings for ten years" (70). Nigeria's government is aware of the housing crisis, yet has chosen to ignore the needs of informal settlements in their largest city, focusing instead on other concerns.

Since Abuja became Nigeria's capital city in 1993, the government has put a lower priority on funding development and infrastructure, including housing, for Lagos (Awofeso 2010, 68). The government, in an effort to promote growth, "has encouraged the private sector to build lavish accommodation for the middle class and the elites, displacing the helpless masses into the suburbs, where there is little to no infrastructure in place" (Awofeso 2010, 71). A higher proportion of public funds was used to build housing allocated for high and middle-income earners than low-income earners (Ibem 2011, 202). Public housing has been underfunded due to the demands of the government's Structural Adjustment Program, an ineffective bureaucracy, and the "politicization of public housing programs" (Ibem 2011, 202), rendering the number of available affordable housing units insufficient and leaving low-income Nigerians underserved.

Nigeria has attempted several different strategies to improve the quality of urban housing in the effort to move people out of informal settlements and increase the amount of existing formal housing. Slum clearance and upgrading occurred frequently in the latter half of the twentieth century, with 36 recorded cases between 1973 and 1995 (Ibem 2011, 203). The government spent 85 million Nigerian naira to build and develop twenty thousand plots throughout six cities, including Lagos. These plots were located on government zoned and surveyed land, with housing and basic services provided, such as roads, electricity, and running water. Due to

government corruption, most of these plots were allocated to government officials and their families instead of the cities' low-income populations, the project's intended beneficiaries. Another initiative targeting the housing needs of informal and slum housing residents involved providing subsidized housing units. Funds for over 200,000 units were authorized, yet less than twenty-five percent of those units were actually built (Ibem 2011, 204). This was found to be ineffective in reducing the number of slums in Nigeria's urban areas, so the government adopted a different method to combat slum housing: public-private partnership. The same strategy has been employed in many other African cities, as housing shortages are often so great that neither the public sector nor the private sector can effectively address the needs of the people by acting alone. Results have been positive in other countries, but public-private partnerships have not been implemented with the same level of success in Nigeria. The volume of housing built by public-private partnerships has been skewed towards middle-income earners and high-income earners, with only 8.93% of units built intended for low-income earners (Ibem 2011, 210). Since these initiatives have failed to create a significant increase in housing available for low-income urban dwellers, they have no other alternative than to remain in informal housing.

Recommendations made by urban planners for improving and structuring Lagos' continued urban growth include reforming Nigeria's Land Use Act. The law's current incarnation gives the government ownership of all the country's land. This encourages people to go through informal channels to purchase land and property or simply disregard government ownership and exercise squatter's rights on unused land, inevitably leading to the destruction of the informal settlement and the displacement of its residents (Sule 1990, 85). Other suggestions include facilitating low interest-rate mortgages and subsidizing housing materials so that people are able to afford better-quality housing. These measures seem to have little bearing on informal settlements, however, as the people who live in them cannot afford property and therefore will not have the ability to make use of a mortgage or a reformed land use policy.

III. CAPE TOWN: THE APPEARANCE OF IMPROVEMENT

South Africa has aggressively combated informal and slum settlements since apartheid's demise in 1994. The country's high slum and informal housing occurrence was a direct result of apartheid, as the South African government restricted the number of blacks who could legally reside in cities (Myers 2011, 88). The construction of new housing for blacks was outlawed in Cape Town in the late 1970s, but people migrated to the city regardless of restrictions and consequently were obligated to live in illegal squatter settlements. Although informal settlements continue to grow in numbers today, several programs have been instituted to formalize informal housing, notably the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and its successor,

Breaking New Ground (BNG). These programs have transformed informal housing into formal housing on zoned and surveyed land. Although the Reconstruction and Development Programme and Breaking New Ground have greatly impacted informal settlements, they have not adequately served Cape Town's rapidly growing population, which places a high demand on housing. Additionally, the new houses are not attractive to their residents, as they are often smaller than the "shack" housing that these programs helped them vacate. The new houses are built in similar areas to the informal settlements where levels of crime, poverty and unemployment are high and services provision is inadequate (Myers 2011, 97). Since the formal housing created by RDP and BNG is virtually indistinguishable from Cape Town's informal housing options, they have not been very popular or successful initiatives. The new housing has also contributed to the disruption and dissolution of community formed in informal settlements.

Despite the South African government's efforts to formalize informal housing in a way that is equitable for the members of the community, the post-apartheid government has also engaged in forced removals and relocations of informal squatter settlements. In 2001, residents of an informal settlement bordering the N2 highway in Khayelitsha, a neighborhood of Cape Town, were forcibly removed. Since forced removals specifically targeted blacks during apartheid, South Africans were outraged about the continued use of similar tactics. The forced removal from Khayelitsha has done nothing to improve the lives of the people who were supposedly suffering from living in informal settlements. The South African Human Rights Commission's investigation of the incident found that the residents of the community had not been consulted before they were moved from their homes. After the residents of Khayelitsha were removed from their homes, which were subsequently demolished, they received neither compensation nor building materials for new homes (Ramutsindela 2002, 53). The area of relocation had no electricity or running water, and no attempts were made to place the children of the community in alternate schooling after their removal. The Khayelitsha case is typical of relocation in Cape Town. The areas in which people are relocated are often farther from the urban core than their old neighborhoods and they do not have the resources to make up for the increased distance and commute to work. South Africa's housing policy, although outwardly an effective and progressive way to deal with informal housing, fails to address the needs of the people.

IV. NAIROBI: POPULATION GROWTH STRAINS CITY LIMITS

The population of Nairobi, Kenya grew at an alarming four percent rate from the years 2000 to 2005 and it continues to grow at a high rate today (Habitat 2010, 8). Nairobi is not one of the cities whose explosive population growth resulted from rural-to-urban migration; instead, it is caused by a high birthrate and

migration into Kenya from East Africa, a region with high levels of displacement and civil conflict. As a result, the city includes over 200 densely populated informal settlements within its limits, in which a third of the city's population reside. According to UN Habitat, these informal settlements have living conditions that are "among the worst in Africa" (Habitat 2010, 140). Services have not been provided to these communities; a BBC special that filmed the living conditions of Kibera, one of Nairobi's largest slums, noted that there were "no title deeds, no sewage pipes, no roads, no services of any kind" (Werlin 2006, 40). Housing is built at an incredibly slow, inadequate rate for such a city that is experiencing such rapid growth. Only 3,000 housing units are built annually, yet the UN estimates that 15,000 additional housing units should be constructed each year in order to keep up with the population increase (Habitat 2010, 153).

The city has engaged in slum clearance and upgrading with the financial assistance of the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF, but these projects do not suffice for the large segment of the population that lives in informal settlements (Werlin 2006, 41). Even when low-income residents of Nairobi are provided with improved housing, they often choose to subdivide the property and rent out either part of the house or its entirety, while the ostensible owners remain in the informal settlement in order to profit from the rent paid by tenants living in the new, upgraded house (Werlin 2006, 42). Historically, the city of Nairobi has engaged in slum clearance without providing its residents other housing alternatives (Macharia 1992, 221). Slums whose residents are allegedly involved in subversive political activity or with large populations of ethnic minority groups are often targeted (Macharia 1992, 230). The UN recommends that future low-income housing be built in Nairobi's satellite areas, 25 kilometers away from the city's urban core, in order to lower the population density of the slums. The UN's defense of its opinion on the matter is "based on the expectation that Nairobi's satellite cities will, over time, provide viable and vibrant urban economies over time, the allocation of low-income residential functions at a distance from the metropolis is preferable in the long term, despite short-term inconveniences" (Habitat 2010, 153). This prerogative seems overly optimistic, considering that relocation to satellite cities 25 kilometers away from Nairobi would compel people who are already living in poverty to assume additional costs of transportation to low-paying jobs. A satellite urban area could take years to develop economically and produce enough jobs to sustain a large population, while Nairobi has readily available jobs, an established economy, and community networks. This housing policy has little to offer people living in informal settlements.

V. INFORMAL HOUSING: PERCEPTIONS VS. REALITY

It is clear that international aid organizations and the governments of African cities themselves view informal settlements as dangerous and disorganized, cancers on the urban environment that need to be removed. The United Nations and other international, multilateral organizations applaud African

cities when they upgrade slums, formalize informal housing, and these organizations themselves pour a significant amount of money and resources into slum upgrading and formalization in the hope that informal settlements will eventually become a thing of the past. However, informal settlements are actually increasing in number, not decreasing; Myers asserts that "...there is a strong trend toward informalization in African cities, meaning an overall growth in and growing breadth to informal activity, notably in the growth of informal settlements and the informalization of formal settlements" (2011, 73).

Some urban planners and scholars recognize that informality is the way to keep African cities accessible to people of all social classes and incomes, independent of the supply and demand of the formal housing market. African cities, including the three examined in this paper, have some of the highest Gini coefficients in the world. Gini coefficients are measures of income distribution among a given area's population and serve as indicators of equality (or lack thereof). A study on South Africa's neoliberal urban governance post-apartheid quotes Rem Koolhaas' opinion on Lagos: "the operation of the Lagos megalopolis illustrates the large-scale efficiency of systems and agents considered marginal, liminal, informal, or illegal according to traditional understandings of the city...Lagos is not catching up to us. Rather, we may be catching up to Lagos" (Ferguson 2007, 75). Meanwhile, the author of the same study characterizes Lagos as "a pathological disaster of urban planning" (Ibid). So which assertion is correct?

It appears that informal settlements will be fixtures of the African urban environment for many years to come, as city governments and international aid organizations alike have been unable to find better alternatives. The cases of Nairobi and Cape Town show that slum upgrading and the relocation of informal settlement communities to other areas are unsatisfactory for the residents. Instead of improving the lives of the people who live in informal urban settlements, relocation and change uproots them from their familiar environments, social networks, jobs and schools. International aid organizations and the governments of African cities must keep in mind that although informal settlements are often plagued with problems and are growing in disorganized, unregulated ways that could be viewed as dangerous, many of the people who live in those communities chose to live there instead of in a rural area or an area on the urban periphery. The people inhabiting informal settlements are in the city, living in the only type of housing available to them, because they want to take advantage of the opportunities available in African cities. If city governments were truly concerned about people living in informal settlements, the best action that they could take would be to incorporate these areas into the city instead of disassociating them from the urban core.

Examination of Lagos, Cape Town and Nairobi also shows that a common issue with housing policy is state ownership of much of the land,

which indirectly encourages the creation of squatter communities and illegal purchase and subdivision of land. A potential solution would be to open up the land for purchase or become more tolerant of squatters and informal settlements on public land, either by creating policy that says as much or by unofficial action. Once evicted, residents of informal housing have nowhere else to go, as housing prices and rents in urban areas are, for the most part, unaffordable. Until a more effective housing strategy is created that actually provides livable housing, reserved for the low-income population of these cities, it seems that the best strategy would be to provide services for the existing informal settlements. With the provision of basic services, many of the problems associated with the existence of urban slums and informal settlements would improve.

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