The Urban Poor, the Informal City and Environmental Health Policy in Nigeria: Strategies Towards Social Harmony

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Poverty and rapid urbanization are two of the greatest challenges facing Africa today. The current Millennium Development Goals underline the need to urgently improve the lives of millions of slum dwellers around the world, and to reduce the number of people without sustainable access to drinking water and sanitation. With the dramatic increase in the numbers and proportion of people living in cities in Africa, urban slums and irregular settlements have become so pervasive that they now outnumber legally planned developments, and their social legitimacy appears to be no longer in question; however, the appalling environmental conditions associated with these settlements constitute a major threat to the health and well-being of the urban community.

The main policy challenge addressed by the paper is how best to support and regulate the urban informal sector and irregular settlement 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 ensure that the legitimate concern to fight urban poverty and slum dwelling does not result in blaming the victims, and in a campaign against the urban poor and slum dwellers themselves. The paper argues that human development ought to be at the centre of the concern for urban sustainability in Africa. While acknowledging the importance of the 'green agenda' for protecting natural resources and ecosystems in order to secure long term global sustainability, the paper maintains that the proper starting point in the quest for urban sustainability in Africa is the 'brown agenda' to improve the living and working environment of people, especially the urban poor who face a more immediate environmental threat to their health and well-being. As the UN-Habitat has rightly observed, 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".

The human development approach calls for rethinking 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 Agenda 21 of the Earth Summit in Rio, the Habitat Agenda of the Istanbul City Summit, and such other global initiatives as the WHO's Healthy Cities Programme, the World Bank's Cities Alliance for Cities Without Slums, the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, the UN-Habitat's Sustainable Cities Programme and its twin Campaigns on Urban Governance and Secure Tenure. All these initiatives provide helpful guidance on how to make cities everywhere more inclusive and sustainable, with adequate shelter for all.

Part of the paper reviews the debates about the role of cities and urbanization in the quest for sustainability. The urban setting has many potential advantages for improved

health care and sustainability because it reduces the unit cost of providing good quality social infrastructure and services. City growth also helps to reduce pressure on fragile agricultural land, and may in addition be an important factor in lowering fertility norms for population control.. As well, the theme of the 2004 World Habitat Day – "Cities: Engines of Rural Development" aptly highlights the positive developmental potential of cities in regional development, and in promoting urban-rural linkages. However, in Africa where the basic infrastructure, services and managerial capacity are inadequate, concentrating people and their wastes in the crowded urban environment would certainly result in increased disorder, and the spread of all sorts of infectious and parasitic water-borne and filth-related disease which adversely affect the quality of life and undermine economic and social sustainability.

The main body of the paper examines how these cities and urban institutions have developed in Nigeria and other African countries over the last 50 years ; the extent to which government policies and programmes have facilitated or constrained urban sustainability, and the main elements of the strategy to achieve better functioning, healthier and more inclusive cities. It considers the misguided policies of many African governments that have tried to outlaw and repress the informal sector, and sometimes to forcibly evict thousands of so called 'squatters'. It discusses how housing and planning codes, standards and regulations inherited from the restrictive, discriminatory and anti-urban policies of the colonial period have continued to inhibit the access of the poor to affordable land and housing security. For many government officials, the real dilemma appears to be how to contain the adverse health and environmental impacts of informal sector activities and settlements without disrupting the livelihood of its operators; how to protect the vulnerable groups in that sector, especially women, children and apprentices, from harm and exploitation;   how to forestall the growth and spread of new slum areas, and ensure that the existing informal enterprises and irregular settlements are upgraded and progressively integrated into the urban mainstream.

The concluding section considers the way forward, stressing the need for well-coordinated partnerships among the various stakeholders in the pursuit of urban sustainability. It discusses the roles which state and local governments should play to promote a more decentralized, participatory, accountable and effective governance; how the general framework of laws and regulations for planning and development should be reviewed to made it more realistic and compatible with local conditions. Since resolving the urban crisis is central to Africa's economic renewal, the paper emphasizes the need for the international development community 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, aid, and so on. It also considers how the urban poor and informal enterprises could better organize and self-regulate themselves in order to constructively engage with government and other development partners. It ends 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 and equitable, and better able to serve people's needs