

Urbanisation and the Urban Poor in Africa

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Key words: urbanisation, rural urban migration, urban poor, anti- eviction, security of tenure.

SUMMARY

Urbanisation and migration are among the greatest global phenomena of our time and will remain so for some time to come. Migration, if properly directed, could enhance economic development. Most African countries are undergoing unprecedented urban growth partly as a result of rural-urban migration. Factors like landlessness, failing agriculture productivity, wars, and natural disasters are pushing the vulnerable rural communities to the urban centres. At the same time attractions of the urban centres such as good schools, hospitals, better employment opportunities, recreational facilities and transportation are pulling rural dwellers to urban centres. Women form a substantial part of these migrants.

On arrival at the urban centre the migrant, with little or no formal education or skills, finds that life is not as anticipated. There are no readily available jobs, majority find themselves in the informal sectors with low incomes. Besides decent accommodation is beyond their reach and most migrants end up in informal settlements with insecure tenure and lacking basic urban services. Occupants consequently cannot improve their dwellings and living standards.

The poor in informal settlement survive through their own initiative and yet most of these initiatives are deemed illegal. The courage, zeal and determination of the urban poor could, however, be enhanced for economic development. Providing the urban poor with secure tenure is one way of ensuring this. Best practice approach of achieving this is partnership between central government, local government, private sector and community based organisations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban population in Africa is growing at an alarming rate. This is attributed to natural increase, conflicts and more so to rural urban migration. Rural urban migration results from landlessness resulting from privatisation of property, commercialisation and Mechanisation of agriculture, failing agricultural productivity and increase rural population. Thus it is the poor and vulnerable from rural areas that form the majority of migrants into urban areas in search of new livelihoods. This creates a conglomeration of urban poverty.

Most African governments are unable to provide basic shelter and employment for the increasing urban poor population. The urban poor are forced to fend for themselves in ways that are against formal laws. They live in deprived conditions:- lack of secure tenure, lack of basic urban services and lack of formal employment.

The urban poor may be semi-educated or unskilled, but they are enterprising, of good health and working age. They have a part to play in the development of their new environment and granting them secure tenure is one step in a long journey towards the elimination urban poverty. This can best be achieved by empowered local government. This paper examines urbanisation trends; rural urban migration; the search for shelter and urban services; and suggests a way forward for tapping the potential of rapidly developing urban areas in Africa as dynamic engines of growth and social modernisation.

2. URBANISATION TRENDS IN AFRICA

Migration and the creation of towns began in Africa before the arrival of the colonial rulers. Prime factors leading to migration were wars, creation of nations, and trade (Toure *et al.*, 1992 and Fadayomi *et al.*, 1992). Economic functions, like trading and handicrafts, necessitated the creation of towns, which also functioned as capitals or important administrative centres for kingdoms and as cultural and religious centres. These centres served as the meeting place of different ethnic and social groups and from here new values and ideas were generated and propagated (Toure *et al.*, 1992).

“During the colonial era, the dominant feature of population dynamics was a series of internal and international migrations all over the continent” (Toure, 1992). Migrations were a response to development policies based mainly on the exploitation of raw materials and on the need of the colonial countries to find outlets for their manufactured goods in the colonies. There was the exploitation of natural resources such as minerals in Zambia (Mijere and Chilivumbo, 1992), Ghana (Bukh, 1979) and South Africa (Tomlinson, 1990). Plantation agriculture, like cocoa, coffee, palm tree, etc., developed in Ivory Coast (Toure *et al.*, 1992), Nigeria (Fadayomi *et al.*, 1992), Congo (Dinga, 1992), and single crop agricultural regimes in

countries like Senegal, which was noted for its groundnuts (Sy *et al.*, 1992), facilitated migration.

Another feature that contributed in no small way to migration in the colonial era was the installation of economic and social infrastructure. Railways and roads were constructed linking urban areas mostly through areas rich in raw material resources (Toure, 1992). These not only made rural-urban migration easier but also acted as catalyst for the development of new towns. For example in Zambia, Mijere and Chilivumbo (1992) argued that the construction of railway line as far as the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire) by the British South African Company, as a result of the minerals discovered in the area, led to the development of urban centres in the area. Other facilities like schools, hospitals and factories also contributed to urban growth.

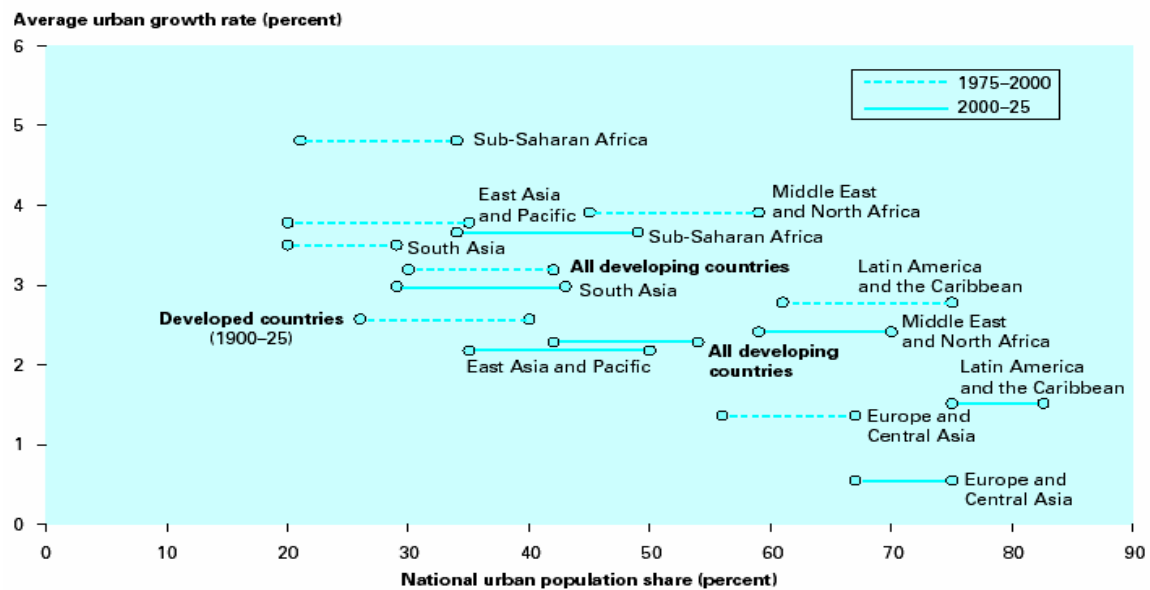
In countries like Lesotho, Senegal, the Central African Republic and Zambia, some regions were drained of their population, while others became migration zones (Toure, 1992). Countries like Lesotho and Burkina Faso became labour pools, supplying South Africa, and Ivory Coast and Ghana respectively (Toure, 1992). There was, however, a ready labour market for these early migrants, who were mainly men.

In the post-colonial period almost all countries maintained the basic direction of colonial development policies. Export crops were developed and diversified in the Ivory Coast, mining was intensified in Zambia and the Central African Republic, and everywhere the practice of concentrating new developments in urban and better developed areas continued (Mijere and Chilivumbo, 1992; Toure, 1992).

Economic and political factors have had great effect on development in the postcolonial era. Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is well known as the least urbanised of the continents but also one in which the rate of urbanisation has been the fastest (see Figure 1 below). Until the ending of the colonial era which extended from 1957 to 1983, the rate of urbanisation was held firmly in check (Mabogunje, 1999). Urbanisation rose rapidly in the 1920s, slowing down in the 1930s and picking up again after the Second World War. The post-independence period saw an unprecedented explosion in the rate and size of urbanisation on the African continent (Mabogunje, 1999). Annual growth rates of 5 to 7 percent were common, leading to the doubling of the populations of some cities between 10 to 15 years. Mabogunje (1999), however, notes that rural-urban migration rather than natural increase account for the growth of the urban population in Africa. This explains why there has been such a rapid growth in the informal population and the consequent pressure on urban land and services. Rural-urban migration is discussed below because of its contribution to informal settlement that houses majority of the urban poor.

Many developing countries are undergoing urban transition with relatively high urban population growth rates.

Figure 1. Urban Population growth rate.



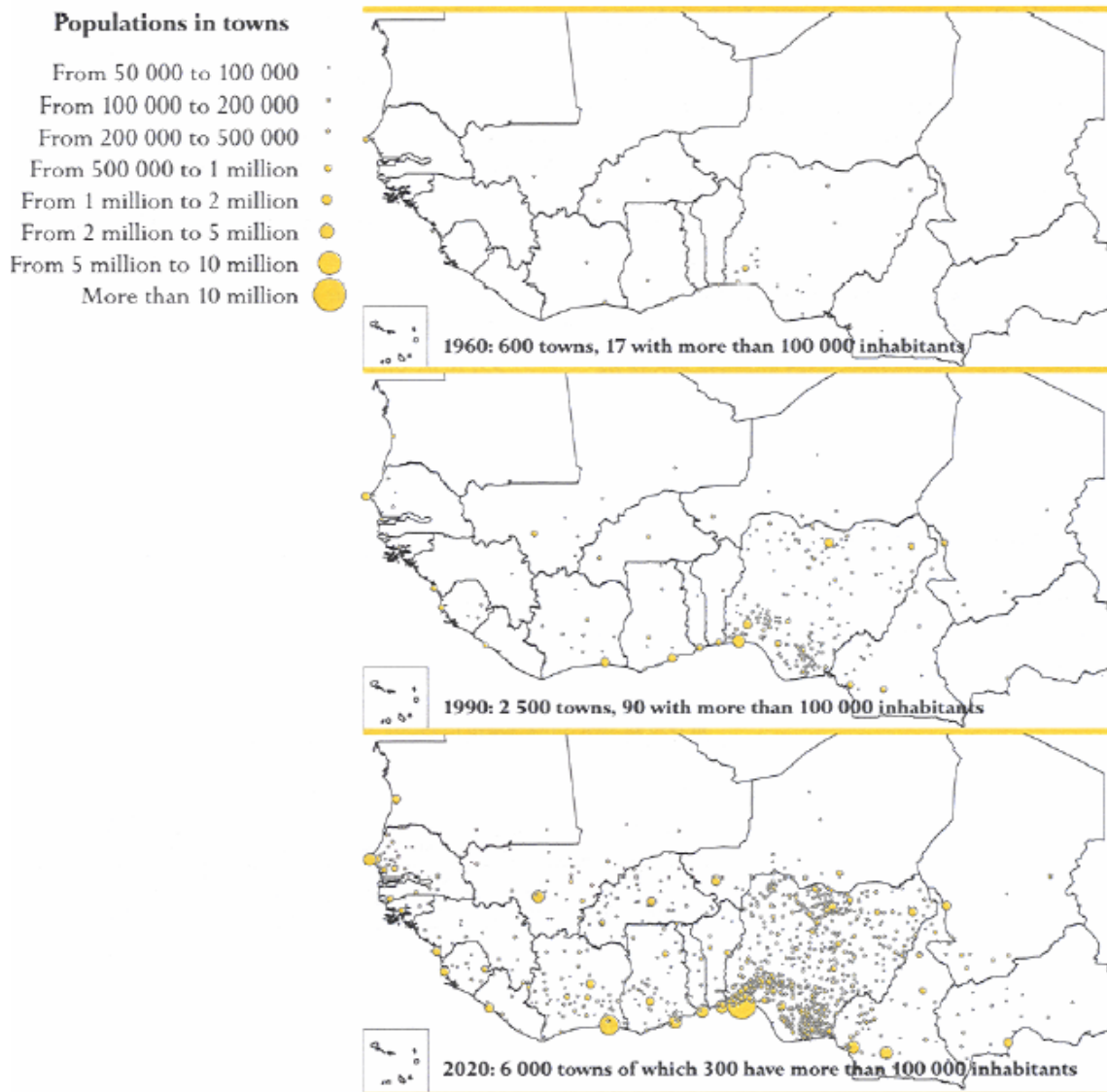
Source: World Bank, 2003 page 113.

Note: All averages weighted by population. Lines indicate increase in share of urban population between end-point years (25-year increments)

From figure 1 above, it is evident that Sub-Saharan Africa had the highest average urban growth rate of close to 5% between 1975 and 2000. The national urban population for the same region for the period ranged between 20% -35%. Although it is anticipated that the growth rate will fall between year 2000 and 2025 to a little below 4%, it will still be the highest in the world and urban population would range between 35% and 50%. Will African governments and urban managers in particular able to tap into the potential of rapid urbanisation or is it going to be a disaster?

Map 1 below, is a striking regional example of how population distribution changes within a lifespan in West Africa: in 60 years (between 1960 and 2020) a predicted tenfold increase in number of towns, and a 18-fold increase in those with more than 100,000 inhabitants. As can be seen, most of them live in smaller towns. In this and other regions, one could speak of the urbanisation of the countryside.

Map 1. Map of cities with more than 50 000 inhabitants in West Africa between 1960 – 1990 and projected for 2020.



Source: Poelhekke, 2000, Page 4.

3. RURAL URBAN MIGRATION

By birth or through rural urban migration, the poor of the world are increasingly concentrating in cities, both large and small. It is expected that very soon the majority of mankind will live in cities. By definition, cities are spatial concentrations of people and their economic and social activities, other than primarily agricultural. They are therefore both a concentration of poverty and wealth, and problems as well as solutions. Urbanisation takes place in the whole world, in poor and affluent regions alike. But in the poorer ones, urban growth is the strongest, nearly half of it caused by migration of poor peasants to the cities.

Studies on rural-urban migration speak of forces that work upon a given population to encourage movement from the rural to the urban area. These factors are termed the push factors. Among the common push factors are lack of sufficient or productive land, lack of alternative employment opportunities, absence of sanitation and medical services, poor educational facilities, and in some cases lack of security and natural disasters (Butterworth and Chance, 1981; Bjerer, 1971; Bergman and Renwich, 1999). On the other hand, factors like employment, educational opportunities, health services, recreational facilities, presence of relatives and the excitement of urban living and others, are urban attractions that pull rural people to urban areas. Although, the decision as to whether a person will migrate or not is personal and conditioned by the attitudes of the individual (Bjerer, 1971; Butterworth and Chance, 1981; Bergman and Renwich, 1999). I am arguing that rural-urban migration in Africa will continue as long as these imbalances exist, and because this will compound the situation in informal settlements, governments should seek to upgrade such settlements.

Rapid growth of population and decreasing fertility of the land (de Wit, 1998), combined with the fragmentation of plots by inheritance practices create an imbalance between the rural population and its economic resource, the land (Bjerer, 1971; Butterworth and Chance, 1981; Bergman and Renwich, 1999). This results in an influx of the rural poor into urban areas in search of new livelihood (Cross *et al.*, 1994; Sy *et al.*, 1992; Fadayomi *et al.*, 1992) and creates pressure on urban land and subsequently, informal settlements (Sida and Swedesurvey, 1998).

In Lesotho, Sembajwe and Makatsjane (1992) report a “massive rural exodus and the shifting of population from the highlands to the lowlands which will ultimately result in serious congestion in the urban centres...” (1992, 239). They attribute this mass movement to population pressure on land, declining agriculture production and increasing poverty of the rural households. Selebalo (1997) cites landlessness as a major reason for the migrating of people from the rural areas of Lesotho into informal settlements in the peri-urban areas. De Wit (1998) reports the fall of the land/man ratio, an indicator of pressure on land, from 0.62 in 1965 to 0.26 in 1995. Thus with decreasing land and increasing population (Sida and Swedesurvey, 1998) the excess population in the rural areas will seek a livelihood in urban areas.

Many people involved in economic development are convinced that “one of the foremost requisites for underdeveloped countries is a reduction of the agriculture sector of population” (Butterworth and Chance, 1981). This, they argue, will reduce the relative role of agriculture in the industrial and occupational structure of the country and raise the productivity of those who remain on the land as well as the community as a whole (*ibid.*). Should this option be adopted through commercialisation (de Wit, 1998) and mechanisation of agriculture, the excess labour, the poor and landless, will find their way into urban areas in search of new livelihoods.

The desire for education for oneself, or for one’s children, health and recreational facilities are all motivation for migration into the urban area as almost all these are lacking in rural areas. Therefore rural-urban migration will continue to grow until such basic amenities have been

provided in the rural communities. Provision of such facilities is beyond the reach of many governments, since most African economies are declining (Mabogunje, 1999). Hence rural-urban migration will continue for some time to come and the best African governments can do in the interim is to remove the bottlenecks in formal land delivery and make room for the poor rural migrant.

Initially migrants were mostly male of working age, but with time, female representation within the migration stream has increased (Bjerer, 1971; Mabogunje, 1999). There are few alternatives open to women in rural areas where agriculture is commercialised and mechanised (Bukh, 1979; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1995). Women cannot find employment as itinerant labourers or plantation workers to the extent that males can, so for women the city is the surest and most available source of employment (Butterworth and Chance, 1981). Young unmarried rural women may be sent by their families to the city temporarily to find domestic employment and send money home, and the desire for independence may prompt some women to migrate to the cities.

Women are largely unskilled and more poorly educated than men in sub-Saharan Africa (Blackden, 1999; Kalabamu, 1998); they therefore do not find secure jobs. Most women migrants end up as domestic servants or with other informal jobs. Moreover, wages for such jobs are generally very low. Most women are denied contracts, and are subject to abrupt firing. Thus the plight of the urban poor is accentuated in the case of women, who form a substantial fraction of informal populations.

In Ghana, as in most African countries, another vulnerable group of migrants have been identified; these are children (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003). This small but growing number of children migrants is clearly evident in the number of street children we find in our urban areas

Rural-urban migration continues and increases even though it is a well-known fact among the rural communities and prospective migrants that a large number of the urban poor are unemployed. The policy in countries like Tanzania, where there was a bias towards rural development which was expected to prevent or minimise rural-urban migration, has failed. Mtatifikolo (1992) reported of increased urbanisation that has put a severe squeeze on urban infrastructure and collective facilities in the capital. The population of Dar es Salaam is reported to have grown from 757,000 in 1978 to around 3 million in 1998 (Kombe, 1998).

Poelhekke (2000), observed that the classical idea, present in many donor-sponsored rural development programmes, that successful rural development can stem rural-urban migration and thus slow down urban growth is being replaced by the conviction that city and countryside need each other in order to create economic growth and social well being. Cities need a lot of food and therefore well-functioning agricultural markets, thus stimulating farmers to change from subsistence to market-oriented production. The vulnerable who loose their land and jobs in the process migrate to urban areas for new livelihood.

In South Africa, urbanisation was influenced to a great extent by apartheid laws and regulations (Hindson and McCarthy, 1994). The primary purpose was “to keep blacks at a ‘safe’ distance from the centres of production and the white residential suburbs, except, of course, for labour purposes” (Tomlinson, 1990, 5). It is debatable how successful these policies were, but Cross *et al.*, (1994) report of migrants developing informal settlements in the Durban Functional Region, as early as 1971, many years before the dismantling of apartheid. All these go to show that rural-urban migration and its concomitant informal settlement will continue despite regulations and policies seeking to control it, even draconian policies like apartheid.

The world Development Report by the World Bank observes that countries that have distributed rural property equitably before urbanizing have developed more democratic societies than those that put assets in the hands of relatively few rural elites (World Bank, 2003, page 84). Thus countries that concentrate land in the hands of a few would urbanize prematurely, educate a few and develop undemocratic societies. Poelhekke (2000) describes such societies as undergoing informal hyper growth, which is characterized by rapid population growth, both through migration and natural increase; an economy heavily dependent on the informal sector; very widespread poverty, with widespread informal housing areas; basic problems of the environment and of public health; and difficult issues of governance.

Durand-Lasserve (1998) noted that the high rate of urbanisation coupled with the general worsening of economic crises that most African states are experiencing lead to dramatic deterioration in living conditions in most urban areas. Governments are seldom able to satisfy the demand for formal land and housing at prices affordable to majority of the urban community.

4. SEARCH FOR SHELTER

African countries and governments are seldom able to satisfy the demand for formal land and housing at prices affordable to majority of the urban community. There are many ways through which poor people find accommodation in urban areas. It may be through building or buying a shack in an illegal settlement (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995). Others may rent a room in an inner city tenement building, a cheap boarding house or in a house in an informal settlement. Whole families or a group of friends may share just one room to keep down cost. Others may live and sleep in public places, parks, graveyards, railway stations or other such places. The poor will always want to find accommodation within easy reach of where income can be earned but when this is not possible they would want to live in places where they can easily travel to their place of work.

The urban poor who cannot afford urban land and housing are forced into informal settlements, thus breaking the urban planning laws (Sida and Swedesurvey, 1998; Payne, 1997; Davies and Fourie, 1999). Informal settlements are overcrowded in most urban areas with appalling consequences as far as housing and sanitation are concerned. The overcrowding is especially critical in the peri-urban areas where the majority of the urban

poor reside. Mitullah and Kibwana (1998) argue that informal settlements are characterised by poor locations, low incomes, high population densities, housing constructed largely of temporary materials, poor sanitation conditions, minimal or non-existent urban services and quasi-legal tenure. Budlender (1992) cautioned that the landless and homeless will never accept their state and that if the law is in conflict with their basic and fundamental needs all they can do is to break the law. Rapid urbanisation has placed the urban poor in situations where their struggle for survival is constantly in conflict with formal laws.

Land for informal settlements may be acquired in several ways. Firstly, land may be acquired through a group of families organising an invasion in which land is occupied without the consent of the legal owner (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995; Wehrmann, 1998; Cross et al., 1994;). Areas chosen for invasion are selected carefully. These are normally areas where squatters are likely to encounter little resistance as the land may belong to the state, abandoned or its owners have died intestate. The choice of the area and the preparation for the invasion are the responsibilities of group leaders with the collaboration of some municipal officials, or some formal leaders of some sort. Secondly, land may be acquired through quiet encroachment where a few households move onto a wasteland, riverbank or some other vacant site (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995). Thirdly, permission to build a house may be received from the landowner or the person or family who traditionally have the right to give such permission (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995). The settler may have to pay some rent, depending on initial arrangements. These arrangements may include defective land tenure from the original landowner to the subdivider, defective tenure conveyed from subdivider to buyer, subdividing in an area where it is not permitted land use or failure of the subdivider to adhere to subdivision regulations concerning minimum plot size. In all the above cases the urban poor have to break one rule or another to meet their basic need for shelter. Consequently, the urban poor live in a constant treat of eviction and has no secure tenure besides their settlements lack basic urban services.

5. SERVICES

Living in informal settlements has serious disadvantages. First there is the problem of lack of tenure security, which leads to lack of public services like water, sanitation, policing, and emergency services to cope with fire or serious health problems. Secondly, inhabitants are not eligible for formal loans to develop their homes or to start or expand a business since their illegal land site is not registered and therefore cannot be accepted as collateral. In some cases inhabitants cannot obtain subsidised goods and services because they do not live in legally authorised addresses (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995).

Informal settlements usually develop in small or large clusters dotted around the city or urban area; consequently it is very expensive to extend water, sewerage, roads and public transport to these areas. The situation becomes worse with informal settlements built on swampy land, hillsides, or other unsuitable environments (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995).

The Global Urban Observatory of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlement (UNCHS, 1997) observed that in sub-Saharan Africa 62.8 per cent of the urban population have no

water connections to their homes. 31.6 per cent do not have safe potable drinking water located within 200m of their dwellings. 57.5 per cent lack electricity, 87.1 per cent lack sewerage and 89.2 per cent lack telephones in their homes. Thus most governments have failed to provide basic services to the urban poor. The poor in informal settlement survive through their own initiative and yet most of these initiatives are deemed illegal.

The poor urban dwellers' life is deemed illegal because in one way or the other, it contravenes official laws of labour, health, safety or environmental legislation. For example, the urban poor get water from unauthorised sources such as rivers and illegally dug wells or water drawn illegally from the main water lines. Electricity is often obtained by illegal connections to nearby pylons. Illegal food supplies are obtained from scavenging the garbage of richer residents or from the city rubbish tip for food deemed spoilt and unhealthy for human consumption by food inspectors. Many of the health services used by the urban poor are not run by licensed or qualified professionals, because official services are either too expensive or too distant and costly to reach. There are no formal jobs for the urban poor yet the informal sector is considered illegal. "The places where many people work do not meet government regulations for working hours or health and safety standards. In addition many rely on selling food or services on the street ... but this too is illegal" (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1995, 29).

Generally there are no services like schools, clinics and recreational facilities, however, where they exist, they are stretched beyond limit and are not efficient. The urban poor therefore find themselves in a vicious cycle (see Figure 2 below), which hinders them from giving of their best for the society.

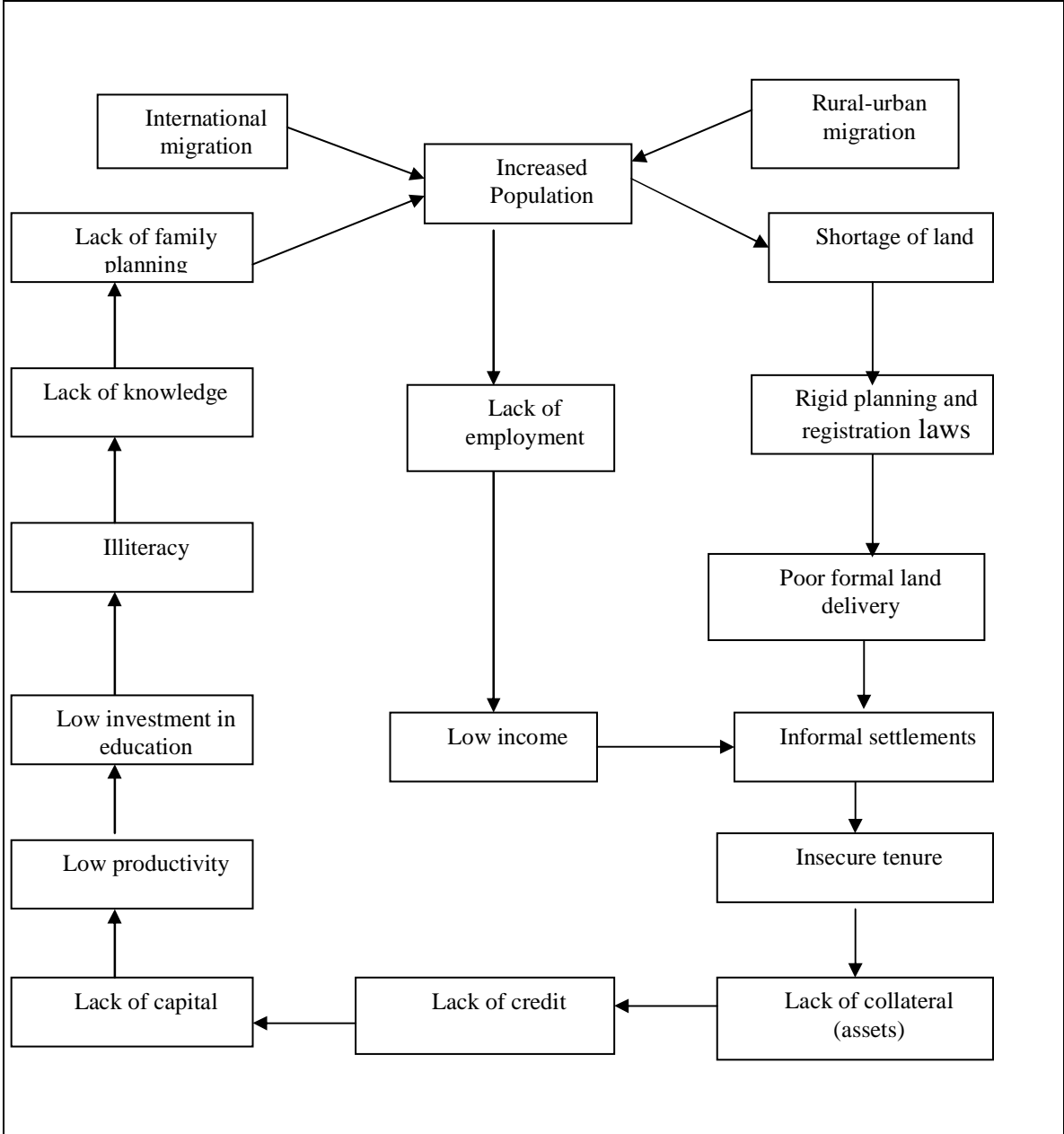
6. VICIOUS CYCLE OF POVERTY

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest proportion of and the fastest growth in, human poverty. Human poverty is defined as the "denial or deprivation of opportunities and choices to live a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-respect and the respect of others" (Mabogunje, 1999, 2). Butterworth and Chance (1981) observed that the urban poor are struggling to meet and maintain the basic biological needs of food, water, shelter, temperature regulation and safety. To them education and ensuring social advancement for their children is secondary. This results in a vicious cycle of poverty for the urban poor.

Figure 2 illustrates a vicious cycle for the urban poor. This is simplified, since a real world situation would be much more complicated. Increased urban population as a result of rural-urban migration, internal high birth rate and, to a lesser extent, international migration, have placed pressure on urban land. There is also the problem of unemployment of the excess population, which results in low income, and creates informal settlements. Planning laws and registration procedures also block formal land delivery and subsequently force the urban poor into informal settlements. Such settlements lack security of tenure, since they are not registered and hence they lack official legal backing. In the absence of security of tenure, informal settlers cannot obtain credit for development and expansion of their businesses, because they lack collateral. This in turn impacts negatively on productivity. With low

productivity and many pressing needs for shelter, food and health, investment in education is given a low priority and subsequently illiteracy and ignorance prevail in the community. Lack of knowledge on issues like family planning result in high birth rates, increasing the poor urban population and the cycle begins.

Figure 2: Vicious Cycle for the Peri-Urban Poor



Adapted from Burkey (1993)

The description of Norway in the 1880s by an English industrialist, cited in Burkey (1993), best describes the urban poor in informal settlements. “There is no use trying to help these

people. This dirty ignorant people are putting too many children into the world. They won't work; they have no discipline. They misuse every opportunity they get. Every time they get some money in their hands it all goes into drinking and senseless waste. All the help we give them is just an incentive to laziness, and another opportunity to produce more children" (Burkey, 1993, 3).

Norway, today has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. History has shown that no condition is permanent and that given the right resources and environment humankind is able to turn situations around.

7. THE WAY FORWARD

Firstly, although urban poverty results from myriad of causes such as institutional failures in land and housing polices, housing finance, urban planning, public utilities, and local governance, one of the most fundamental failures is the absence of tenure security. Security of tenure ensures protection from involuntary removal from land or residence except through due legal process. The United Nations human rights program has devoted increasing attention to the negative practice of forced eviction, and has observed with serious concern the violent removal of people from their homes. Forced eviction is a violation of human rights, (whether of households or entire settlements) particularly the right to adequate housing (UNCHS, 1999).

Although, anti-eviction laws are a form of security of tenure for the urban poor, do not adequately protect the individual occupier against landlords, since legal aid is non-existent or very expensive in most African countries. Thus, anti-eviction laws do not provide sufficient protection for the poor, even though it is a good starting point. Anti-eviction laws could be used to help residents acquire additional rights and increase their tenure security through upgrades (Akrofi, 2000).

By confirming the rights and responsibilities associated with the occupation and use of land, regularizing tenure status removes a major source of economic and political insecurity for urban poor. It reduces some of the risks that discourage poor from investing in their houses and shops and gives them a stronger stake in urban society and an incentive to work with local officials to obtain services (Akrofi, 2000; World Bank, 2003).

Secondly, as alluded to earlier most urban land delivery instruments in Africa cause delay in land delivery because they are based on outdated and/or inappropriate models which make enforcement ineffective and lead to corruption and nepotism. Reforming such instruments is necessary for urban poverty alleviation and the integration of the formal and informal cities. Upgrade of informal settlements needs instruments that will actively involve the community and respect their views. The new instruments should be devoid of bureaucratic delays and lengthy approval processes that lead to excessive cost. National governments should ensure all such instruments are reviewed (Akrofi, 2000).

Thirdly, local governments have a central role to play in urban poverty alleviation through programmes like informal settlement upgrade and management and others. National governments should therefore empower them through legislation and the revision of outdated laws and regulations that impede the smooth operation of local governments, especially in the area of land delivery and upgrading of informal settlements. To be effective, local governments should be empowered by national governments with the required human, financial and material resources. Equipped and empowered local government working in partnership with local community, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the private sector in upgrades would ensure basic infrastructure and services were available to all urban dwellers and would guide urban development. This empowerment would develop and implement new and innovative initiatives by making use of local and scientific knowledge which enable the rapidly developing urban areas in Africa live up to their potential as dynamic engines of growth and social modernisation, rather than get mired in poverty, pollution, congestion and crime.

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TS 18 – Making Land Administration Pro Poor

15/16

Emmanuel Offei Akrofi

TS18.5 Urbanisation and the Urban Poor in Africa

Promoting Land Administration and Good Governance

5th FIG Regional Conference

Accra, Ghana, March 8-11, 2006

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