

Metropolises in Africa

Introduction

What is going on in the urban areas in Africa? What is it that makes millions of people flood to an urban environment and then preferably a metropole? Will this current trend continue in the years to come? How can this urban environment be (re)-designed? Is it possible for families to obtain a place to live in, develop means of subsistence and have access to elementary amenities and offer their children good prospects for the future? Will a stepping stone to Europe offer these families more chances to a better existence?

The writer of this article certainly does not pretend to fathom the causes of the continuing urbanisation process in Africa. Many countries in Africa obtained their political independence around 1960. Since then the migration to urban centres has increased very rapidly. True enough with many new opportunities but also with formidable obstacles for the families involved.

Transition from rural to urban

In 2007 the majority of the world population lives in an urban environment. In Africa this is not yet the case but it will not take long because the urban population increases by more than 4% on average. Despite the consequences of Aids and other diseases the natural growth in these regions is higher than 2%, with the exception of South Africa. The migration of predominantly youngsters from rural to urban centres continues in full force. The departure of youngsters has far-reaching consequences for the families in the villages. The elderly and especially the women have to do more and more agricultural work. If youngsters succeed in acquiring income in an urban setting or elsewhere abroad, they are expected to contribute towards the cost of living of the relatives left behind in the villages. This reciprocity is of great importance to all members of the family. As a member of a family you have numerous rights and obligations. This familial system in Africa, south of the Sahara, still forms the 'basic insurance' for all members who respect the unwritten rules of this pact. Those who are blind to this system are unlikely to understand the background and consequences of the immense transition from the rural to an urban environment in Africa. Every one who was born in a village but lives a life in a city or metropole will do his best to live adequately by the rules of his own family. The network of relations between members of a family is especially important for the food supply.

Effects of the colonial era

Especially in the first half of the last century Europeans claimed parts of the available space in Africa. Suitable farming land for entrepreneurs who started large enterprises. Zones were demarcated for mining and forestry. The colonial administration also claimed large areas for the building of residential neighbourhoods to house the Europeans who settled here for a shorter or longer period. These neighbourhoods were usually built in attractive locations near existing African settlements. In fact a nearly total territorial division between Europeans and Africans was effected based on the legislation for urban planning in the mother country. Before the arrival of the colonial usurpers, collective land-use right was the standard nearly everywhere in Africa. Overall, clear rules were in existence that applied to the acquisition and land-use for housing and to agricultural exploitation for arable farming and stockbreeding. In the colonial period this collective land-use right was partly pushed aside. The land that the colonial intruder wished to use for his own purposes in the rural and urban centres was marked as private property and recorded in a separate cadastral register. What this land should be used for in the urban centres and the sizes of the plots were clearly defined in a zoning plan. This plan also set out which standards the housing had to meet.

In his book "Urban Planning, Housing and Spatial Structures in Sub-Saharan Africa" Ambe J. Njoh sketches an outline of the objectives of the colonial legislation with regards to urban planning in Africa. Modernisation of the urban system was considered of great importance because the traditional use and stewardship of land was seen as backward. One clearly pursued a policy to exclude the indigenous population from the neighbourhoods that were designed and planned for Europeans. Africans needed an admission permit if they wanted to enter these neighbourhoods. Racial and cultural separation of the small, powerful European minority from the indigenous population was the predominant feature of the spatial structures.

Fifty years ago Ghana became independent. This will be joyously celebrated this year. Most African countries were freed from their colonial yoke around 1960. The new African political leaders mostly followed in the previous coloniser's footsteps. Rightly the question may be put what the effects have been of the postcolonial policy on urban planning in Africa. There was hardly staff trained to study the rather complex problems in the urban environment and to work out practical proposals which would take into account the needs of *all* population groups in the towns. In many cases European advisory agencies were called in to work out structural plans for the fast growing urban areas in Africa. Numerous towns saw their population doubled in the first decade after political independence. The existing legislation with regards to the use of land in urban centres and the use of building materials was in most cases copied indiscriminately.

Metropolises on the rise

It is a remarkable phenomenon in Africa that former colonial capital cities such as Dakar, Bamako, Lagos, Nairobi, Kampala and Dar Es Salaam have rapidly grown into immense metropolises after independence. Although it is rather arbitrary to delineate urban territory, the definition used here is that a metropole has at least one million inhabitants who have settled there. The rapid urbanisation contrasts sharply with the policy applied in colonial times when one strived to keep the African families out as much as possible. The new rulers lifted the restrictions with relation to admittance to urban centres. However, because they predominantly kept the existing regulation in the field of urban planning, there soon came a wide rift between the neighbourhoods that were planned and designed and numerous spontaneous settlements around the capital cities.

With Google Earth all metropolises in Africa can be closely observed. A fascinating chance for a town planner to explore the urban territory. In most cases, the spectator will be able to distinguish planned from spontaneous settlements with the help of these pictures. Especially the metropolises of Ouagadougou and Addis Abeba, which I am familiar with, lend themselves very well to this observation method. If previously made aerial photographs are available, they will also enable the observer to determine changes in the land-use with reasonable accuracy.

For other aspects one will still have to make his own observations on the spot or with available research reports. The economy in the urban environment in Africa is mainly based on commerce and the services sector. The building industry also creates many job opportunities because the demand for houses and offices remains considerable. Usually with international aid, dams are built for drinking water supply and power generation. With regards to the spatial layout, however, it has to be concluded that the planning agencies have not been able to keep up with the high rate of urbanisation. This may partly be blamed on the inheritance of the legislation from the colonial past. The zoning plans that are available usually have set unrealistic targets and are not based on the means that are available in these metropolises.

Ethiopia and Burkina Faso have proclaimed all land to be national domain. Acquisition of land in the surrounding areas of their respective capital cities Addis Abeba and Ouagadougou, clashes with the existing rights to land-use of the families that live there. It has turned out to be feasible to compensate these families for their land-use rights.

In Addis Abeba new residential areas are established especially for the more well-to-do in society. Not only is the available space demarcated in keeping with the zoning scheme, also roads, water and power supplies are realized. The building plots are allocated to candidates who can pay the price for these plots. These candidates must also have a bank account in which an amount of money must have been paid which shows that the candidate may be considered capable of realising a building that complies with the building requirements. This means that it is *not* allowed to build walls with wooden poles and mud, although 80% of the existing residential areas in Addis Abeba *have been realised* with these building materials!

Various researchers have exposed this building policy because less than a quarter of the urban population can meet the requirements for admission to a building plot. This can be done differently. In the surrounding areas of Addis Abeba a pilot project was carried out in the period 1997-1999 to offer the lower income families a fair chance of acquiring a living space in a regular way. With an investment of less than fifty Euros per plot all households with an income of less than two Euros a day (this concerns at least 50% of the urban population) could make a bid for such a plot. The available plots were allocated by means of a public lottery. A package to the value of sixty Euros was then made available to the candidates in the form of a reclaimable loan. Every plot owner had to pay one Euro back per month to a revolving fund, which is still in existence. During my last visit in 2006 it turned out that the 450 plot owners had complied with this requirement since the start of the programme, 7 years ago. The zoning plan, drawn up in 1998 for the surrounding area of Addis Abeba matched to a large extent the satellite photograph on Google Earth.

This approach is also recommended in the new master plan of Addis Abeba to enable a much larger part of the urban population to get access to a planned housing plot in a legal way. However, the current political leaders in Addis Abeba apparently wish to maintain their policy of enabling the more well-to-do to satisfy their housing demands. This example of Addis Abeba speaks volumes. If political leaders in Africa do not show any interest in new approaches, the well intending local leaders and civil servants can do little to provide a spatial (re)structuring for all groups in urban society. Although there are certainly differences in approach in other metropolises in Africa, it turns out that planning policies in the postcolonial era are predominantly directed at the wealthier half of urban societies. This creates more and more worrying housing problems for the less well-to-do families who try to survive in these metropolises.

Urban fields for everyone

With relation to the spatial structure it was said before that in most cases the colonial rules have been maintained, although the urban population has changed in composition. The crucial difference, however, is that after political independence former national migration policies have been liberalised or abandoned altogether. Sometimes large squatter or informal settlements were pulled down after which the inhabitants had to find a new place to live elsewhere. The space thus becoming available could be built on the basis of a zoning scheme in which the requirements as to the lay-out, the height of the buildings and the construction materials to be used had to be met. The local elite and the wealthier middle class has in most cases appropriated this living space.

The planning policy of the colonial era, although somewhat adapted, has been maintained. The limited resources available for the construction of infrastructure and public amenities have predominantly been spent in the neighbourhoods that are planned and designed. The local elite and the foreign executives pay considerably *less* for their drinking water in 2007 than the households that live in squatter settlements in the close surroundings of these metropolises. The cost of food, water, energy, housing, schooling and medical care take the lion's share of the poor households' revenue. The migrants in the cities often contribute towards the cost of living of relatives in their home village. However, the children who were born and raised in these cities turn out to have considerably less interest - once they have become somewhat older - in the welfare of their distant relatives in remote villages which they have hardly ever visited. As soon as the social network of the family is undermined, they run high risks in the metropolises. Who will give them assistance in case of a disease, a serious road accident, the loss of a source of income, the demolition of their house by the authorities?

A choice for the allocation of substantial urban fields in the fringe areas of these metropolises gives the best chance of offering the ever-expanding population a decent place to live in. The first few years the level of infrastructure and public amenities in these urban fields will show little difference with the existing settlements in the rural areas. Crucial, however, is that every lot in an urban field will be marked and provided with a recognized cadastral number. In Ouagadougou the local banks give loans to owners for which the value of their building plot is acknowledged as collateral. In this city in Burkina Faso a considerable number of urban fields was laid out in the peri-urban interface in the past twenty years, so that approximately 200,000 new lots have become available for all groups of the urban society of about 1.2 million inhabitants in 2007.

One of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations is to pay attention to the housing conditions of at least 100 million people in the slum areas before 2015. To realise this goal, the Local Government should not only find financial means but also supporters who, whatever their nationality, can try to realize the improvements on the spot on the basis of creative plans. However, if this desirable international effort should clash with local resistance by the political elite, gloomy prospects are looming for at least one third of the urban population in these metropolises. Chaotic situations may arise in the years to come, with consequences that are hard to predict.

The struggle for shelter not only concerns the needed roof for each family but also access to water, food, energy for cooking and a courtyard for living. Long term advocacy is needed to defend these basic rights, specifically for the less income groups of these metropolises in Africa.

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