Building up dwellings and building up societies – Urban housing as social and political challenge

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Abstract

In the first part, the paper will focus on the strong connection and various interactions between states and societies on the one hand and the provision of housing for the immense and still growing number of urban dwellers in sub-Saharan cities on the other hand. Not only can the housing situation in the major cities (similar to the ways how other basic needs are met) have a decisive influence on wealth and economic development as well as social conflicts in the whole country; public authorities and the institutional setting at large rather play a crucial role in the production of housing units and for a multitude of regulations from building codes to social norms.

This leads to the question of housing standards and adequacy, which will be dealt with in the second part of the paper. What and where are dwelling norms derived from? How and to what extent are they enforced? What implications do they have for urban development, spatial planning, and living conditions? Empirical evidence has shown that all too often there is a discrepancy between official building standards and the particular priorities of dwellers. To fill this gap, a comprehensive but flexible and participatory approach to define adequacy has to be applied as even specifications from agencies like UN Habitat do not help to match official standards and dwellers' needs. It is stated that such a bottom-up definition has to include two fundamental dimensions of adequacy, firstly affordability, secondly acceptability. Both factors can be translated into criteria to assess dwelling units or – on a large scale – housing programmes with respect to the specific target group, including both access and preservation.

Urbanisation and urban housing – a short introduction

Urbanisation processes, their pace, and the structures they form are commonly considered a precondition and an important factor for the system of urban housing. Comparing historical and actual phenomena worldwide, urbanisation, besides globalisation, exists as "one of the

most powerful emerging realities of our time" (STREN 2003:1f.), while urbanisation and globalisation have proven to be significantly interconnected in recent decades (cf. HILLIGES & NITSCHKE 2007:18, cf. FEIN 2009:35). Although some authors (e.g. RAKODI 2006:53) point out that the increase of urban population in sub-Saharan Africa has already slowed down, growth rates are still high in the urban centres of the continent (FEIN 2009:38f., MYERS & MURRAY 2007:4f., COY & KRAAS 2003:33). One intervention which represents how governments deal with the still growing number of urban dwellers in Sub-Saharan cities can be observed in the field of urban housing.

Principles of governance in urban housing

Generally, socialist and capitalist regimes differ constitutionally in the role the state plays in economy and therefore also in production and provision of urban housing (cf. FEIN 2009:115). Whereas in ideal typical socialist systems housing is produced and allocated by the public sector, purely capitalist regimes with free market economies feature the principle of the "night watchman state", following the classic model of liberalism, in which the state is reduced to its function of observing the rules, and products, in this case housing units, are provided by private entities, households or private companies (cf. FEIN 2009:115f., 126). Accordant governance mechanisms are institutions of the political systems or market mechanisms respectively. In other words: in capitalist systems, access to urban housing is regulated by the market; in socialist systems, publicly produced housing units are, ideally, distributed centrally and need-oriented, while price mechanisms have no effect (cf. FEIN 2009:126). However, in real existing systems urban housing is rarely left to a totally free market nor subdued by a completely state-directed economy, so that market mechanisms and political institutions coexist in various ways as complementary rather than competing concepts (cf. FEIN 2009:127). An assured housing provision for the urban population requires a stable and functional market system. Yet in most cities of the developing countries, neither the free market nor interventions of public authorities are capable of accommodating the masses of the urban poor (cf. FEIN 2009:128f.). In the following, both elements of governance, market forces and particularly political institutions, shall be analysed and applied to cities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Market forces in the governance of urban housing

The interplay of supply and demand are an important variable for the urban housing market, both for the segment of housing units and the segment of production factors (land, labour, capital). The housing market in turn is "the final outcome of the interaction of all the factors that influence supply and demand" (UN-HABITAT 1996:209, cf. FEIN 2009:128).

There has to be stated a discrepancy between supply and demand for sub-Saharan Africa, meaning the high demand cannot be met by the supply. Hence, reactions of actors in urban housing concentrate on augmenting the housing supply in order to bring back the market to equilibrium. But "housing is [...] the trickiest market in which to interfere, since well-intentioned measures can have the opposite effects from what was intended" (UN-HABITAT

2003b:104, cf. FEIN 2009:132). Moreover, the focus on the supply side and the sole increase of housing production mirrors the mere functionalistic approach that was distinctly criticised by representatives of political economy (FEIN 2009:129, cf. LOHNERT 2002:50). Both demand (for instance through housing subsidies or the allocation of land for habitation) and supply are influenced by housing policies which should be examined in the following.

Political institutions in the governance of urban housing

Distinguishing between political structures, processes and contents, in short polity, politics and policy, is important in analysing the contribution of political institutions to governance mechanisms in the field of urban housing (cf. FEIN 2009:126, 131). As it was seen earlier, the component of polity plays an important role in the basic configuration of state and society by defining the role of the state either as mere enabler or active provider. Yet politics have a bigger and more direct influence on the concrete institutional setting which forms the actual housing policy (FEIN 2009:131f.). Different actors are decisive in decision making in general and in the field of urban housing in particular. Their interests as well as the balance of power and conflicts between them are rarely disclosed: "[...] government policies are never rational responses to carefully researched problems but the result of complex interplays between different groups and interests in each particular society" (HARDOY & SATTERTHWAITE 1989:102, cf. FEIN 2009:132). The municipalities and public authorities are the main actors in housing politics, besides political parties, civil society organisations like non-governmental organisations, donor countries, finance institutions (in the first place the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and the vast international community (amongst others members of the Habitat Agenda, the Agenda 21 or the Cities Alliance) as well as native and foreign consultants (FEIN 2009:132, cf. GAEBE 2004:162, 308, MYERS & MURRAY 2007:17, PAYNE & MAJALE 2004:7). It is inherent to the system why political actors engage in urban housing. Besides humanitarian reasons, which are subject to their own logic of action, sustaining and securing a working population base as well as avoiding social unrest and minimising social tensions are the main reasons for a political system to provide housing for a part of the population as big as possible. Matching these aims guarantee social stability and therefore the stability of the political system (FEIN 2009:133).

The main task of housing policy in general is to decide how many housing units are to be built where, when and in what ways, and how existing housing units are to be distributed (FEIN 2009:133, MARVELL 2007:189). According to HARDOY & SATTERTHWAITE (1997:265), the state has the further obligations (even though seldom met by governments) to accommodate all citizens adequately, to grant legal systems and regulations which protect tenants of exploitation by landlords and landladies, and to provide the resources, especially the financial ones, to implement these tasks. Financial means should be levied from those who benefit from agglomeration advantages, namely the huge supply of urban labour force and the provision of infrastructure, and then distributed according to political requirements (FEIN 2009:133). The instruments that can be used by the political system to govern urban housing are various. Institutionalising and enforcing formal regulatory systems is the monopoly of the political system. Yet, it has to be mentioned that most African countries do

not have a comprehensive legislation for housing. Furthermore, a lot of political instruments for urban planning, like land use planning, have been taken over as colonial heritage from previous governments and administrations (FEIN 2009:133, 143, RAKODI 2006:48, FANTU CHERU 2002:156). Further instruments are building laws, urban development, fiscal and tax policy, investments and subsidies (FEIN 2009:133f., cf. GAEBE 2004:105, 162, SMITH 2006). By applying these instruments, political actors can define the position of new settlements within the urban area, influence quantity and quality of the housing stock by urban renewal and redevelopment or directly by building dwellings, and finally determine the legal status and tenure systems of single housing units and whole settlements. Particularly the latter is relevant in development practice; on the one hand in handling informal settlements, on the other hand in considerations of establishing a functional rental market (FEIN 2009:134).

Similar to the conduct towards other informal segments in cities of developing countries (like urban agriculture or the informal economy sector), three different policies concerning informal settlements can be identified: firstly a prohibitive and restrictive attitude, based on which political actors react by evictions and bulldozing as extreme interventions; secondly an indifferent and neutral attitude, leading to tolerating or ignoring informal settlements in order to avoid political unrest or due to general passivity; and thirdly a cooperative, enabling attitude, based on the realisation that informal settlements at least contribute to the urban housing stock, without costs for the state and even with the prospect of earning taxes and other revenues (FEIN 2009:134f.).

Many political actors, development agents and even scholars equate tenure security with the granting of property rights without considering other options (FEIN 2009:135, cf. LOHNERT 2002:65). One of these alternatives could be rental housing, but not only governmental and municipal actors but also NGOs and international organisations neglect this option by further subsidising ownership concepts (FEIN 2009:135, cf. GAEBE 2004:105, UN-HABITAT 2003a:1). The reasons for the pursuit of ownership for everyone are various and often remain trapped in ideologically rooted denominations: Although there is almost no empirical evidence, it seems to be common knowledge that home owners were somehow the better citizens, contributing more to economy and society, and generally being more conservative (FEIN 2009:135, cf. UN-HABITAT 2003a:3). Hence, neither the suppliers of rental housing nor the tenants themselves are backed by any kind of support in the vast majority of African cities.

New paradigms and the persistence of established structures

MYERS (2005:14) points to "the remarkable confluence in African cities of the grand agendas for development emanating from the West" and substantiates this with decentralisation, sustainable development and good governance (cf. also ABRAHAMSEN 2000:47). These new paradigms are derived from neo-liberalism, and advocate for political decision-making that is oriented towards decentralisation and democratisation, limits public interventions to a minimum, and admits municipalities far-reaching competencies (cf. FEIN 2009: 137f., HILLIGES & NITSCHKE 2007:17). The clear renouncement from public interventionism does not only concern the production (paradigmatically by private actors) and allocation (paradigmatically

by the market, controlled or slightly regulated by municipal authorities) of housing but includes also the privatisation of formerly public services and therefore the provision with basic infrastructure in residential areas (FEIN 2009:138, cf. MYERS & MURRAY 2007:17, GAEBE 2004:308).

However, political and administrative systems by trend remain autocratic, rarely democratic and nearly always inefficient, contrary to the commitment to and the official adoption of these paradigms (GAEBE 2004:307, cf. FEIN 2009:138). Since central governments hesitate to hand competencies and therefore power over to subordinated administrative levels, politics and planning stay, conversely to the postulated decentralisation, caught in over-centralised structures and top-down-oriented processes (FEIN 2009:138, RAKODI 2006:58). Also the "'patchwork approach' - a project here, a project there", mocked by HARDOY & SATTERTHWAITE (1989:307), cannot countervail this tendency. STREN & HALFANI (2001:479) identify a "crisis in government" as part of the general urban crisis and refer to the deficient management and the partly complete loss of control of the political administrative system over urban development (cf. GAEBE 2004:307, GILBERT 2003:75f.). The reasons can be tracked down mainly to chronically insufficient financial and personal resources both on national and municipal level (cf. RAKODI 2006:48, OLIMA & KREIBICH 2002:6).

The divergence between norms and priorities of dwellers

As it was mentioned above, decisive parts of legislations were kept after obtaining independence by the new African governments. This circumstance, additionally to the lack of means, and the sheer number of rules and regulations contribute to the inefficiency of governmental and municipal structures (FEIN 2009:139, cf. GAEBE 2004:308, OLIMA & KREIBICH 2002:5). Moreover, housing policy and urban planning are driven by international discourses that design globalised images of cities. These images are based on the presumed attractiveness and desirability of modern urbanity and are expected to connect international competiveness and high quality of life (FEIN 2009:140, cf. SWILLING & SIMONE & KHAN 2003:228, HALL 2003:55). While the so-called developed countries perceive both concepts as competing normative ideas, many African city governments seem to pursue both objectives using the same instruments, namely urban renewal and the enforcement of building standards (FEIN 2009:140, cf. HALL 2003:55). So after having adopted inadequate colonial urban planning norms, many city governments now copy uncritically standards that are based on European and North American models and mainly favoured by elites and international governmental and non-governmental organisations (FEIN 2009:140, cf. MYERS & MURRAY 2007:17, SCHILDERMANN & LOWE 2002:222). Those internationally created norms do not only apply to housing construction but also to the supply with technical infrastructure. As a result, a broad range of rules and regulations that concern urban housing, especially for the urban poor, are not in accordance with the needs and wants of urban dwellers and therefore with the norms and standards that can be described as "adequate" (FEIN 2009:140, cf. PAYNE & MAJALE 2004:20). This leads to the question of adequacy of housing, alongside the question how the urban housing stock and individual housing units can be assessed.

The adequacy of housing

Adequate shelter is often mentioned as inalienable law and one component in the catalogue of basic needs (cf. UN-Habitat 2003b:114, Fein 2009:23ff.). But which conditions make living space an adequate shelter, and who defines adequacy? This question implicates the setting of a target state, not only theoretically but also in implementing and evaluating different housing strategies. The definition of standards that a dwelling must fulfil to count as adequate does not only concern housing programmes but can also be used, as explained above, to govern and control urban development and housing policy and to legitimate corresponding measures. Corresponding examples are the percentage of homeless people in a city and the calculation of the so-called housing backlog (Fein 2009:142f.). These numbers result, statistically, not necessarily de facto, in higher needs for housing units that are to be built, rebuilt or replaced. Turner (1976:97) and Payne (1977:64) for instance speak consequently of "imaginary demands" and the "deficit myth". Even more serious consequences using high levels of building standards arise when the differentiation between adequate and inadequate is transferred to distinguishing legal from illegal. In this case, legal lodging gets inaccessible for the majority of city dwellers. With regard to these consequences, Yahya et al. (2001:1) state that "the prevailing high level of standards and regulations is morally wrong, in that it stimulates the emergence of dualistic cities which formally recognize a minority of the population as legal residents, while an ever-increasing majority of people live unrecognized in informal and illegal settlements, where they are at considerable risk." Or, as Fantu Cheru (2002:155) phrases specifically for sub-Saharan Africa: "the official approach [...] appears to be out of touch with the realities on the ground" (cf. Fein 2009, Schildermann & Lowe 2002).

The term adequacy is often used yet seldom defined precisely. Chiefly UN-Habitat almost regularly comes up with new operational definitions of "adequate housing" and "adequate shelter". Notably prominent is the quite short listing of space per person, durability of construction and accordance to local standards as indicators for the adequacy of a housing unit (UN-Habitat 2003b:112). Other criteria for adequate shelter, again by UN-Habitat (2006:xf.) arise out of the definition *per negationem* of a "slum" ("lack of durable housing", "lack of sufficient living area", "lack of access to improved water", "lack of access to improved sanitation", "lack of secure tenure"), i.e. in reverse durability, sufficient living space, access to potable water, sanitation, and tenure security (cf. Fein 2009:144). In this context, UN-Habitat (2006:19) characterises adequate shelter more precisely: A durable house "is built on a non-hazardous location and has a structure permanent and adequate enough to protect its inhabitants from the extremes of climatic conditions [...]." A house provides "a sufficient living area [...] if *not more than three people* share the same room." Furthermore a household has "access to improved water supply if it has a *sufficient amount of water* for family use, at an *affordable price*, available to household members without being subject to *extreme effort* [...]" and "adequate access to sanitation if an excreta disposal system, either in the form of a *private toilet* or a *public toilet shared with a reasonable number of people*, is available [...]". Finally, "[...] people have secure tenure when

there is *evidence of documentation* that can be used as proof of secure tenure status or when there is either *de facto* or *perceived protection against forced evictions*." Other approaches to adequacy comprise not only the dwelling itself but also the living environment, like for instance TURNER (1976:97). According to him, living quarters have to provide for their inhabitants not only "*shelter* from climate and neighbours", but also "*tenure* long enough to make the move worthwhile", and, very important, "*access* to the people, institutions, and amenities on which their livelihoods depend".

These terms and definitions are not very practicable in the end, as they dissolve "adequacy" merely in different criteria without further specification and strike with remarkable subjectivity, nearly arbitrariness. It is, for example, incomprehensible what "improved" (UN-HABITAT 2006:19) means, how many persons "a reasonable number" (UN-HABITAT 2006:19) make, or why just a maximum of three persons per room should be declared as criterion for adequacy (FEIN 2009:144f.).

A new approach to housing adequacy

An own approach to housing adequacy (FEIN 2010, FEIN 2009) shall encounter these deficits of nominal definitions and contribute to answering the following questions: How can adequacy be defined? How can the adequacy of shelter be assessed? And finally, who defines adequacy, and for whom? This new approach is derived from the assumption that in the end only the inhabitants (or potential inhabitants) can decide whether the occupied dwelling (or a future housing unit) is adequate for them and will be accepted and handled as a home. Analogue to this idea of a grass root definition, PAYNE & MAJALE (2004:120) claim that housing adequacy "should [...] be determined together with the people concerned". The offered definition of adequacy applies to the dwelling itself and implies tenure security and therefore no threat of eviction. It itemises firstly affordability as criterion sine qua non, and secondly acceptability. The relation between the two dimensions is inverse: The cheaper and therefore more affordable a dwelling is, the lower is the probability of assessing the living conditions as acceptable, and vice versa (FEIN 2009:146).

Affordability as financial adequacy

Even though some authors use adequacy of housing and affordability synonymously (e.g. LOHNERT 2002:50, TYM 1984:209), most definitions of adequacy neglect this important item. Yet it seems to be obvious that a housing unit which fulfils certain standards but cannot be afforded by the target group can hardly be considered as adequate (FEIN 2010:170ff., 2009:147). Particularly in the literature promoting self-help in urban housing, affordability comprises not only the amount of money that households expend for housing but also the amount that households are willing to spend. For a definition of adequacy, however, the willingness is, unlike the ability, not relevant (FEIN 2009:147). UN-HABITAT (1996:200) calculates affordability by the ratio of the price of the dwelling to the average household income per year. This price-income-ratio thus describes how many annual incomes are necessary to purchase a housing unit. In most cases in developing countries this quota

quotient lies at around 5, which indicates that housing is not affordable for the majority of the urban dwellers. Ratios between 3:1 and 2:1 indicate that a significant share of the population can afford a home on their own (UN-Habitat 1996:200). Yet this sole focus on income without considering other expenditures and an eventual seasonality of household incomes misses out important factors (cf. Fein 2006:121). Moreover, these calculations only encompass the purchase of housing units, leaving rental payments unconsidered (Fein 2009:148).

The following more operable and functional definition is therefore suggested: Housing is affordable and financially adequate if the inhabitants can afford both initial and current costs without being forced to use financing strategies which lead to lasting negative sanitary or social effects for the household (Fein 2009:148). If the costs (both initial and current) exceed the resources, households have to rely on alternative finance strategies to compensate the difference. The latter generally comprise either an increase of the discretionary household income (for instance by letting or subletting living space) or a reduction of other household expenditures (Fein 2009:148). An auxiliary strategy is the raising of secondary credits, i.e. loans which are borrowed to repay already existing debts; these double debt retirements put households at risk of debt traps (Fein 2009:148).

Acceptability as natural and socio-cultural adequacy

The acceptance of a housing unit by its inhabitants include the dwelling and its location, the size and, relatively to this the occupancy, the size of the premises as well as building materials, equipment with basic infrastructure, and the tenure status, particularly if it is a rented or an owner-occupied dwelling (Fein 2009:149). Natural, especially climatic, as well as social and cultural factors are the obligatory criteria in the majority of definitions of adequacy, as the definitions by UN-Habitat for instance have revealed. As Lohnert (2002:32) puts it for social justice, also acceptance by the dwellers as natural and socio-cultural adequacy is a normative concept, dependant on the specific social framework and therefore the prevailing values and social norms (cf. Fein 2009:149). These, in turn, are highly subjective and ethnocentric since they are influenced by the specific economic, social, cultural and natural conditions and vary significantly between countries and societies (Fein 2009:149, cf. Drakakis-Smith 2000:154). However, different socio-cultural perceptions exist also within one society and between different social groups and even individual persons: "each individual and each household has its own particular needs" (Hardoy & Satterthwaite 1989:66, cf. Fein 2009:149, Payne & Majale 2004:17). Such preferences and requirements related to housing are hence valid only in the particular natural, social, and cultural context.

For the individual case, particularly for the empirical appraisal of minimal standards and preferences, a housing unit can be considered as naturally and socio-culturally adequate if the inhabitants assess each of the dwelling's components (location, size, occupancy, building materials, equipment with basic infrastructure, tenure status) as at least acceptable (Fein 2010:173ff., 2009:149f.). To facilitate the appraisal of different housing features as acceptable or rather not acceptable, the categorisation of what (potential) inhabitants refuse and do not want, what they explicitly need, what they would like to have, and what

they just do not need is useful (Fein 2010:174, 2009:150). The reasons for different preferences exceed the sole determining individual housing requirements. This implicates that the case specific definition of adequate shelter depends on the characteristics of household members (gender, age, state in lifecycle, occupation, life style) and households (size and composition, income, religion, ethnicity) as well as the kind of the previous dwelling (Fein 2009:150, cf. Fein 2006:122).

Conclusion

A definition of housing adequacy is not only a relative concept in terms of the spatial context; a definition like explained above is also subject to permanent changes in terms of time (Fein 2009:151, 2010:176f.). The factor time affects both dimensions: affordability and acceptability. One reason are changing external parameters like price changes in building materials or other expenses, that make a certain form of housing affordable or prohibitive; but especially changing demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the households make the definition of adequate housing a snap-shot of the their particular situation and the conception of adequacy even more complex (cf. Fein 2009:151). Such a bottom-up definition, which cannot and does not claim universality, requires a flexible approach that investigates preferences and requirements of the very target groups; further it implicates that housing policy must actively incorporate the output into adjusted standards and housing norms (Fein 2009:151).

On the other hand, one has to bear in mind that due to the lack of alternatives the urban poor have no other options than to settle in inappropriate areas and to move into dwellings which are not only in the view of the well-off inacceptable but do not meet their already modest minimal requirements. In many cases, bad housing conditions threaten the health and sometimes even the life of the dwellers. Thus, the de facto occupancy of a dwelling does not necessarily imply its acceptance. If, in a radically relativistic view, accepting becomes sheer tolerating, the ambitious exact appraisal of the dwellers' needs and requirements seems obsolete. Beyond that, it has to be taken into consideration that environmental conservation and safety measures, explicitly fire protection, make the request for imposed regulations at least comprehensible (Fein 2010:177, 2009:151f.). To trace the question of housing standards back to the question of housing policy: it is the responsibility of political actors on different administrative levels to admit a variety of housing solutions without ignoring environment, safety, and human dignity.

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