

Building up Dwellings and Building up Societies – Urban Housing as Social and Political Challenge

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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. The paper will conclude with some significant examples that show how such flexibly applicable norms can be integrated into practice in order to link effective housing production to a sustainable city development.