

MAMBO !

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An Introduction to Kenyan Towns

The Kenyan urban population comprises approximately 40% of the 34 million inhabitants of the country. In Africa, as in other places, social development has led to the urbanisation of man and his environment, although in a much more brutal manner.

Urbanisation of man is firstly because the proportion of the urban population increases at a rate of about 4% annually—the growth rate has decreased slightly from the 1970s but is still remarkable especially as compared to the rural areas where the growth rate is below 0.5%. The comparison between these two rates and the rate of the national demographic growth (2.5%) emphasises the existence of a rural exodus that is still high despite diminishing and being very selective. Today, 13 million Kenyans live in towns, which suggests that in 2020, the urban population will amount to 20 million! This tells us how great the challenge is.

Secondly, urbanisation of land is due to the number of towns (the issue of their definition by the Central Bureau of Statistics, CBS will not be discussed here), which continues to grow. It increased from 139 to 201 between 1989 and 1999 (179 towns of more than 2000 inhabitants). Today, there are 241 communities of more than 1000 inhabitants although the CBS gives a list of 272 urban communities in total. Kapedo is considered the smallest, with a population of 46 inhabitants!

The highest growth rates are found in small towns and not in the larger towns. Several factors explain this fundamental change in distribution of population growth. To begin with, the large agglomerations—especially Nairobi—suffer the effects of criminal activity, insecurity, unemployment, segregation and divisions. These are all

aspects that make life difficult, especially for the many intermediate social classes. As the middle classes are not affected by the trap of poverty, they express their residential choice through their avoidance of the large centres, for several reasons. Secondly, the spatial spread of urbanisation, under the influence of ownership, saturation of the pericentral land market and the dominance of residential bungalows—although Kenyan towns stand out by the existence of a local and collective market—lead to the extension of administrative boundaries and the growth of satellites and medium-size enclaves bordering the big town. The creation of large conurbations as in the case of Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu of metropolitan areas composed of an intermittent urban fabric prevails, thus statistically reducing the burden on the big town but emphasising the functional primacy and attraction of the job market. Thus, Nairobi's suburbs account for more than 4.5 million inhabitants.

Some property developers (small-scale first homeowners, unscrupulous speculators) avoid regulations by locating their projects at the periphery, where the actors are easier to manipulate. These are areas where land is financially more accessible, and regulations and requirements are less rigid, as opposed to central urban communities. On the other hand, in the provinces, the “headquarters effect” combined with the multiplication of districts under the influence of not only political manipulation but also due to the single factor of demographic growth (2.5% annually), implies an increase in the number of administrative centres.

Finally, in the rural areas, there is a regular reclassification of some market towns. Two types of changes can be

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distinguished concerning rural density: in the populated areas of the countryside, the spate of populated strips in small towns propelled by an increase in commercial and artisan activity, which are mainly private enterprises; in the arid zones inhabited by nomadic pastoralists, the gradual concentration of inhabitants. Possible reasons for this are the constraints of drought and insecurity or as a result of the availability of attractive urban facilities, either belonging to associations or religious bodies, such as dispensaries, hospitals, primary and secondary schools, colleges, missions, strategic food stocks, etc.

We therefore witness an urbanisation of land, concentration of inhabitants in semi-urban lands, complex hierarchies and an emerging metropolis around the largest towns, without questioning the peak of the pyramid. The major problem slightly diminishes, authority is maintained, sometimes even being reinforced. Kenya is therefore certainly a country in complete urban transition, but whose spatial organisation remains largely unchanged since the colonial era.

Nevertheless, the era of urban bias is over. Towns doubtlessly contribute to the national wealth as it is estimated that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the country's GNP is from urban areas. This contribution to the country's wealth makes towns, particularly the first among them—Nairobi—attractive areas to Kenya's landless rural folk. The economic growth, 5% annually since 2002, is another pull-factor. Thus, during the 1990s which were a truly wasted decade for Kenyan development, urban poverty (the proportion of the poor in urban areas) grew from 30% to 50%. At the same time, the proportion of the poor across the

country “only” grew from 45% to 52%. Urbanisation and the relative pauperization of the urban population thus go in tandem. Kenya's peculiarity lies in Nairobi's association with two historical driving forces of urban growth: economic investment and demographic agglomerations. The economies of survival and investment come together resulting in a town of contrasts. This is quite unique from



Kibera: a slum area in Nairobi

Africa's point of view. However, the social and economic costs of the growing urban poverty are a result of gross inequalities, injustices and external factors that contribute to the economic downward trend. For instance, access to drinking water in Kenyan towns is unequally distributed. More than half of the population living in slums (71% of the urban population) have no access to clean drinking water. In a typical scenario, the poor obtain more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of their water from mobile vendors and they pay higher prices for their water than the rich do. The supply system at urban level is segregated. The tribulations of such a system demand an adjustment and a re-centralization of governance in water management services. Poverty does not shelter one from insecurity. In the slums, the current insecurity is less a result of ethnic or political

dissent than due to gangs that steal, pillage, rape and kill. Poverty and deep divisions are the basis of the *Tragedy of the Commons*—in the countryside as in the towns, toxic waste, encroachment on public land and the destructive use of public property are so widespread as to be ignored.

Despite these changes and the economic burden on towns which are signs of a pre-emerging economy, the country has no tangible urban policy.

First, at municipal level, the land authorities have very little means of real action. For medium-size and large towns, the municipal authority is vested in a dual system defined by the *Local Government Act Cap 265*, that opposes a political side (municipal councils of whom 25% membership is not elected but nominated by the Ministry of Local Government - MOLG) and a technical side filled with the executive, divided into several departments which correspond to municipal council committees. The majority of municipalities are poorly equipped with qualified personnel thus reducing their capacity for action and increasing possibilities for bribegiving and unscrupulous speculators. Apparently, beyond the initiatives of donors, the novel urban policy as carried out by the Nairobi City Council—the *Beautification and Lighting Programme*—is responsible for a 40% increase in municipal spending (to the tune of Ksh 5.3 billion from 4.8 billion). The outdated, dismal and evidently purely ostentatious nature of the programme is a throwback to the urban embellishment programmes that existed at the end of the 14th century. When one compares this to the needs of urban development, the urgent necessity of providing urban actors with the facilities to face the real challenges of a durable development cannot be

gainsaid. Note, however that the mere terms of this stroke of conscience risks colliding with economic interests, the most influential clients among the actors.

Local authorities depend on a grant from the central government; Local Authorities Transfer Fund (LATF), introduced in 1999 and the Road Maintenance Levy Fund (RMLF). This represents about 5% of the annual national resources. The amount allocated to the LATF is based on a decennial evaluation of needs based on a prior Local Authorities Service Delivery Action Plan (LASDAP). For medium-size towns, the proportion of the central grant in the municipal budget greatly varies from 15% in Karatina to 50% in Bondo. Nairobi stands out because it has for a long time represented a strong opposition to the Moi regime. Thus, the town has suffered as a result of investment decisions. Between 2002 and 2004, despite the urban population being on the same wavelength with the NARC regime, Nairobi remained the same. Note that it contributed 60% of the GNP and housed more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the urban population but only got 18% from the central funds (LATF). The remainder of the budgetary resources of the urban territories mostly came from land taxes, trade licences, market rights etc. Nevertheless, in a majority of the CTU, the recovery rate for local taxes was less than 50%.

Local spending must be approved by the Minister for Local Government. This not only limits the autonomy of local authorities but also ascertains the unity of the whole body. The MOLG requires that at least half of the grant be used for basic

services. As a group, the municipal councils spend about 10 billion KShs as follows:

- 20% for roads and sanitation
- 20% for social services (schools and hospitals)
- 15% for municipal water provision
- 5% for municipal housing (local authorities traditionally house their employees).

About 30% of the spending is allocated to “administrative expenses”, a rather vague definition whose details can be easily manipulated. 80% of these expenses are standard, of which more than half goes to salaries, and only 20% to investment. Under these conditions, therefore, municipal spending on investments depends on the priorities of donors (multinational, bilateral, NGOs etc). Such priorities are often heterogeneous, deficient, incoherent and often repetitive. However, this interference from outside actors also contributes to an emerging shared management of urban services. This is certainly a potentially favourable factor to the progressive adoption by local stakeholders representing different aspects of the town.

At a strategic level, it is natural that the urban question—such as it is—does not come up, contrary to issues

of devolution and regionalism which are hot topics in the current electoral debate. For Kenyans, Nairobi is not a challenge as such; it is not a project area but often merely a place of plunder. To explain this shallow representation, we must look at major anthropological factors (the derogatory view of the town as being like Sodom and Gomorrah) and political factors. However, the durability of national development—its profitability, equitability and ecological sustainability—as well as the expectation of inescapable demands from international donors requires Kenyan decision-makers to understand and to restrict prevailing urban dynamics, forcing them to break away from a sectarian approach and towards a more integrated one.

At government level, one of the major gaps in urban development is the lack of coordination between the different technical ministries responsible for amenities (water, transport, etc.), the strategically important Ministry of Land and Housing (which is responsible for land allocation, survey mapping and urban planning decisions) and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development. The sectarian and technocratic nature of accounting for urban development is obvious.

Doubtlessly, one of the challenges is a reevaluation of the whole urban issue along with a de-politicisation of the land question. Power and planning should be returned to the centre, without restraining private initiative which is an essential vehicle for urban development. The regulatory and stipulated role of the State would thus be

Water supply point in Kibera



improved. Another problem lies in the disconnection between central decisions and local realities. This is worsened by corruption; hence the incapability of councils to implement decisions from the top due to a lack of qualified personnel.

These issues are not new and in 2005, Habitat, the UN agency based in Nairobi, identified certain priority programmes for the urban sector in Kenya. Among these are the following:

- The creation of a national coordination agency for the urban sector
- The decentralization of the jurisdiction of urban planning to the local urban authorities
- The launching of a revenue-sharing strategy between the government and local bodies
- The creation of an observatory for urban development
- The establishment of a viable economic development plan for Nairobi



The classical difficulty of harmonizing decentralization of management skills and re-centralization of strategic skills returns as a priority. What has become of these proposals today? Principal questions for planner to consider: “How can these interventions be clarified in terms of sustainable development?” “When almost everything is a priority, how does one choose the first priority?” “What external factor contributes most to the economic downturn?”

The dominant model of Kenyan urbanization is the model of extensive urbanization in spite of the uniqueness of the town’s landscape being composed of collective areas of both public and private land. The driving force of this spatial extension is basically the private sector guided by unregulated market rules. In the same vein, privatization of public services leads to an adoption of improved service norms that are graded—maximized for the rich and maladjusted for the poor. In Kenya, this adoption lies on

the stated and claimed national desire to produce a ‘European’ or a ‘real’ town. This indicates an acceptance of the colonial heritage by the populace. We know that the adoption of maximalist norms leads to a cumulative deceleration in equipping the town. It increases technical divisions, added to social tensions and the loss of self-esteem among the poor. This is why the search for a compromise between the market logic and public service must be the general context of interventions in matters concerning urban planning and development.

In Nairobi, the establishing of an energy-efficient programme could appear to be an integrated response to the current challenges of a land area faced with traffic jams and over-production of greenhouse gases, to a form of extensive urbanization. Increasing the intensity of energy production in Nairobi could be an

interesting possibility. Further reflection is required on an urban transport plan whose aim is to reduce the greenhouse effect. It is imperative to adopt international norms concerning the quality of petroleum products, and in motor-vehicle consumption. Secondly, the diversification of modes of transport, particularly public, is another means to be considered. The third possibility is a way in which to promote an urbanization model that is less extensive, more compact and less fragmented.

The automobile lobby, the high valorization of the automobile—a true symbol of social success in Kenya like in other emerging economies—the power of land speculators, institutional explosion and the absence of a real inter-community culture are obstacles that should be taken into account.

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Editor's note

Mambo is a Kiswahili word, which strictly speaking, means “news” or “information”. However, current usage, and specifically colloquial speakers will recognise the word as a form of greeting, loosely translated as “what’s up?”

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