Social housing in Africa: a model to be (re)invented?

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

While the question of housing for working-class populations remains a recurrent issue in sub-Saharan African cities, the "social-housing" policies implemented by states following independence, and under the influence of lenders, have almost always benefited the most well-off. Are the "participatory" alternatives now promoted by some NGOs enough to create a new model for social housing in Africa?

Strong demographic growth and urban sprawl, planning "failures", areas of illegal occupation and informal housing, and reforms concerning "good governance" are all recurring themes in institutional reports and scientific analyses on the subject of African cities. The initial hopes brought by independence gave way to the crisis of the 1980s and a succession of structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s, resulting in a reduction of state involvement across the board, followed by injunctions to turn to public–private partnerships. Operations in urban areas thus became much more scarce; however, since the 2000s, there has been "urban comeback", relatively speaking. In the name of economic growth and the fight against poverty, the issue of urban development is back the agendas of both policymakers (ministries and local authorities) and lenders. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and UN-Habitat are once again advocating technical interventions in urban areas, albeit not without links to the credos of decentralization and participation. This has led to a range of stakeholders reactivating or launching development projects, first and foremost state authorities themselves. It is within this framework that new, supposedly "social" property-development and housebuilding programmes have been initiated.

This article proposes a discussion of the concept of social housing in sub-Saharan Africa based on the study of three cities: Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, Yaoundé in Cameroon, and Nouakchott in Mauritania, three state capitals marked by a French presence (former colonization and current cooperation) and the majority of whose residents are poor. By looking back over the history of housing policies since independence, we shall analyse discourses and measures claiming to promote "social housing", as well as their implementation. By mobilizing the "social" category, these public intervention policies are supposed to provide affordable housing for modest categories of the population (for rental or ownership). However, our analysis shows that the "social" dimension of the housing produced is not always obvious. It also reveals a recurring pattern in these three cities, characterized by similar timetables: a first phase of state intervention, leading to the construction of housing complexes, followed by the withdrawal of public players in the name of "structural adjustments", and finally a recent return to urban operations, with significant involvement on the part of private investors, in which the rise of social housing now seems to be based on participatory experiments on a small scale.

From the "modern" city to the "adjusted" city

In colonial times, housing policies were often limited to the construction of a few housing estates (Fourchard 2002) together with a handful of apartment complexes for civil-service workers. For the new states that came into being following independence in 1960, social housing embodied the attainment of a certain "modernity". At this time, apartment blocks inspired by the *Athens Charter* were built by domestic construction companies, sometimes at the instigation of the former French authorities. This type of accommodation was designed as a tool to facilitate the birth of a "modern" city-dweller, breaking with the "traditional" ways of life, often perceived to be the preserve of "villagers". In each of the countries concerned, these projects were primarily intended to house civil servants. The cost of the dwellings (whether for rental or rent-to-own) was such that only the middle and upper classes could afford to live in them. Even though these programmes clearly marked the development of public intervention in the housing sector, they did not benefit the poorest households. In the face of these heavily subsidized operations, driven by indebted states and often benefiting local clients, lenders eventually reacted with force.

Figure 1. A collective housing complex built following independence by the Société Immobilière du Cameroun: the "Cité Verte" in Yaoundé

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The structural adjustment plans of the 1980s[1] tolled the death knell for a form of urban interventionism. In Cameroon and Mauritania, the public housing stock was privatized, transferred or sold to sitting tenants. Alternatively, the management of public housing would be the subject of legally dubious arrangements, or settlements between administrators and tenants, who would in practice take ownership of their dwelling and pass it on to their heirs or to family members, without always paying certain taxes. At the same time, the management of communal areas (public squares, communal courtyards, stairwells) was largely left to the initiative of residents alone. Only Burkina Faso initiated a large social-housing programme in the 1980s, during the revolutionary period (1983–1987) that ended with the assassination of Thomas Sankara, at which point the country then joined the cohort of states "under structural adjustment".

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[1] In the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund conditioned its aid to poor countries on the implementation of measures to reduce debt. These reforms primarily took the form of austerity policies (lay-offs, reduced wages, reduced public spending) and the desire to privatize urban services, open up the market, and combat corruption.

Figure 2. Grey detached houses in a residential complex in Ziniaire, Burkina Faso

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The years that followed were marked by a *de facto* tolerance on the part of the public authorities for the illegal occupation of private and public land and the subsequent speculation, in the name of social pacification. In a context of inequality and a concentration of government annuities in the hands of an elite, laissez-faire attitudes calmed popular discontent while reflecting the impotence of the public authorities. At the same time, the World Bank decided to intervene in urban areas (Osmont 1995). It advocated the recognition and ex-post regularization of illegal neighbourhoods, which seemed the most cost-effective solution, yet without eliminating the problems of urban sprawl, the lack of neighbourhood amenities and poor urban planning in general. The World Bank also encouraged what were known as "serviced-plot" operations, which incited residents to self-build *in situ* at lower cost, on serviced land made available by the state, at the expense of a real public policy housing construction (Deboulet 2007). While these policies targeted the poorest in society, these inhabitants were nevertheless asked to actively participate, financially and physically, by building their own homes on plots of land.

With the crisis of the 1980s, the indebted states abandoned their goal of making their capitals the "modern cities" of the continent. In a context of strong urban growth, speculative and clientelist practices – associated with the rise in illegal occupation – had largely made the initially declared ambitions obsolete. Social housing was targeted above all, and at best, at categories such as civil servants, excluding the poorest. From the late 1980s, and the structural adjustment regime imposed upon these states, the urban dynamics and housing-policy models fell increasingly into line with transnational political and economic approaches, driven by neoliberal ideologies that limited the production of social housing for modest social categories.

Aspiring to the "global" city

During the 1990s, the World Bank therefore continued to support self-building for those inhabitants perceived as among the poorest. In parallel, it encouraged efforts to increase competitiveness and attract foreign direct investment, with a view to developing major projects

(construction of offices, mid-range and high-end residential buildings, etc.), frequently resulting in the eviction of the poorest city-dwellers.

This was the case in Ouagadougou, with, for example, the appearance of the "Ouaga 2000" residential neighbourhood, built with money from the diaspora and Libyan investments, or with the restructuring of the city centre, where the ZACA (Zone d'Aménagement Commerciale et Administrative – Commercial and Administrative Development Area) project led to the expulsion of 12,500 inhabitants (Biehler 2010). Similarly, since 2000, Yaoundé has repeatedly been the scene of "resettlement" operations (Blot and Spire 2014) – in reality, evictions that have not led to a single resident being rehoused. Meanwhile, old neighbourhoods adjacent to the city centre are threatened with restructuring,[2] of which the exact terms and the cost to the population are still unknown. The same applies to Mauritania, which is actively seeking funding from the Gulf states. In 2009, the "old town" of Nouakchott (built in 1960), deemed to be obsolete, was destroyed with a view to building towers in its place.

Figure 3. The "Cité des 1 200 Logements" ("1,200 Dwellings Estate"), a subdivision for civil servants built under the Sankarist regime in the 1980s – a housing estate of the revolution – in a pericentral area of Ouagadougou

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In the jargon of expert studies, the "prosperous" city (UN-Habitat 2012) should not, however, forget to be an "inclusive" city. Accordingly, alongside these major projects, programmes described as "social housing" are initiated, through funding arrangements resulting from sometimes less-than-transparent public–private partnerships. These are considered necessary, owing to the low investment capacity of the states, and are made possible by the growing number of investors, in particular from emerging countries. In this case, despite the initial intentions, very few housing units have been produced for poor residents (Bertrand 2003): rather, these dwellings are intended for access to home-ownership, requiring salaried employment and a bank loan, thereby excluding

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[2] Yaoundé 2020 urban master plan.

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the majority of urban residents, who live on often irregular income resulting from informal activities with no access to banking services. This is the case for the housing estates planned by the CGE (Compagnie Générale des Entreprises, literally "General Company of Businesses") group, a partner of the Burkinabè government in Ouagadougou, even though their construction forms part of the "10,000 social housing units" programme launched in 2007 by the government. Likewise, in Cameroon, a programme including the building of 10,000 housing units and the development of 50,000 building lots was due to be delivered in 2013, primarily in Yaoundé and Douala. To date, it has above all resulted in the construction of luxury apartment buildings for access to home-ownership. Although partnerships with Chinese companies are theoretically in progress, with a view to reducing the cost of future construction projects and making them more accessible, access to home-ownership for the middle and upper classes remains the watchword for these public–private partnerships, ousting less solvent populations. Similarly, in Nouakchott, Socogim (Société de Construction et de Gestion Immobilière de la Mauritanie, literally "Property Construction and Management Company of Mauritania") has clearly left behind its original social vocation by building 1,200 villas to creditworthy customers, chosen by three banks with which it has concluded agreements. Although conducted in the name of "social housing", these recent initiatives continue to address the wealthier categories of the population. Faced with this failure, other measures for housing for the poorest, based on participation, seek to offer an alternative.

Figure 4. "Socogim Plage": a neighbourhood of Nouakchott built in the 2000s by the Société de Construction et de Gestion Immobilière de la Mauritanie, a company initially responsible for social housing

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Can "citizen participation" help reinvent social housing?

The renewal of "citizen participation" covers very different situations since it can be both promoted by the highest international authorities or initiated more or less spontaneously by populations at local level. Take, for example, the experiences of self-building supervised by NGOs,

such as the "Twize" programme in Mauritania[3] between 2002 and 2008, which was supposed to enable people to access housing by obtaining a microloan via solidarity lending. The aim of this initial "bricks and mortar" measure was to encourage people to go on to self-build projects, thus ensuring better urban integration (Allou *et al.* 2012).

Alongside these programmes inspired by lenders' guidance, we have also observed a reinvention of housing cooperatives. These initiatives do not just promote housebuilding; they also bring together city-dwellers in legalized structures that enable access to housing at a lower cost. This is reminiscent of the transfer of experience that took place from the Castors movement in France[4] (Légé 1987) to Dakar in Senegal in the 1950s and 1960s (Osmont 1978). In Yaoundé, a cooperative project sought to demonstrate that it was possible to build low-cost single-family housing, as long as the public authorities showed themselves inclined to provide plots of serviced land and the Crédit Foncier de Cameroun was willing to offer low interest rate. The cooperative[5] wants to be an "exemplary" project, and an initiator of public policy with regard to social housing. With a dozen or so housing units completed, its aim is not so much to advocate an alternative form of housing but above all to give new impetus to public action in search of solutions.

Are these experiences condemned to remain ultra-localized and sporadic? Or will they, conversely, lead to lasting and structured movements, supported by NGOs and municipalities, in a context of international experience-sharing networks? To what extent can these projects be channels through which the voices of the poorest populations can be heard? Do not they form part of a system of government where NGOs are above all intermediaries between populations and the existing public authorities (Roy 2009), serving forms of social pacification while failing to challenge inequalities in terms of access to housing and land, and, further upstream, economic and social inequalities?

A field of research to be developed

This comparative history of social housing in three African capitals has helped highlight several types of actions when it comes to housing, marked by three successive stages: a first phase of public intervention, followed by the withdrawal of the state and the enactment of a policy governing self-building, and finally a policy based on public–private partnerships coupled with more local initiatives funded by NGOs. It would no doubt be useful to examine the genealogy of these housing policies in greater detail in order to understand the connections between them and common influences, past and present: who is responsible for inspiring and disseminating these policies, and on the basis of what kinds of localized experiences (Verdeil 2005)? Moreover, leaving aside the unique circumstances and experiences of the Sankara years, we might wonder what differences exist between sub-Saharan African cities. This calls more than ever for new empirical studies, from both a historical and a geographical perspective.

Lastly, this comparative reading underlines the extent to which successive measures supposedly aimed at building social-housing have, decade after decade, essentially addressed a relatively affluent population, remaining inaccessible to less well-off households. These findings are not unique to Africa, as the debate on whether housing provision should focus on the poorest in society or on the widest possible range of population groups is recurrent in Europe, where states are also still searching for the ideal model (Lévy-Vroelant and Tutin 2010). However, our analysis shows that the influences on the development of African cities are diversifying and include international institutions, cooperation services (from France in particular, but also from China, Brazil, etc.) and

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[3]   The "Twize" programme was set up by the GRET (Groupe de Recherches et d'Échanges Technologiques – Group For Research and Technology Exchanges), a French NGO, between 2002 and 2008. It is

[4]   "Les Castors" was a French cooperative movement created in response to the housing crisis in the aftermath of World War II.

[5]   Set up as part of the "Assoal" programme, on the basis of European Union funding, French cooperation (via the Service de Coopération et d'Action Culturelle) and a Dutch NGO (Cordaid).

certain foreign NGOs, in conjunction with elected officials and local associations, as well as developers and private investors. These multiple and complex influences lead to a redeployment of state action within "composite systems" (Jaglin 2004) where major public and private players intersect, along with small local developers and small and medium-sized land-owners speculating on parcels of land, regardless of whether they own them legally. In this context, we need to continue to reflect upon the way in which increasing the range of initiatives can facilitate the invention of an alternative "model" that benefits Africa's poorest city-dwellers.

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