

## Housing Dynamics and Informal Businesses in Built-Up Areas of Major Cities in Cameroon

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**ABSTRACT** Housing transformations in most Third World towns have been unsuccessful and misdirected, resulting in poor control on building and construction by local authorities. The urban poor have modified their homes to accommodate business as a survival strategy. Such modifications are unregulated and affect urban development. Forceful evictions from unregulated business sites have hardly been the panacea, especially where adequate provisions have not been made to accommodate the displaced population. This has been the approach pursued by the local administration in the large cities of Cameroon like Douala, Yaounde and Bamenda. This paper investigates the recurrence of illegal housing structures along most commercial streets. Data were obtained through interviews with planning officials, house owners and tenants. Urban refurbishment and regeneration can pay off through a progressive reconstruction rather than the spontaneous demolition of outmoded and dilapidating structures which is often pursued. Housing modifications need to be integrated into the development plan of local planning authorities and should be concomitant with regeneration so as to avoid social stress and non-conformity of residents to housing standards.

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary urban growth in Asia and in Africa in particular is taking place in a context of far higher absolute population growth, lower income levels, and much less institutional capacity than was the case earlier in the North (Majale 2003). Rapid urbanization and inadequate capability to cope with the housing needs of people in urban areas have contributed to the development of informal settlements ([www.who.int/ceh/indicators/informalsettlements.pdf](http://www.who.int/ceh/indicators/informalsettlements.pdf)). In most urban areas in Third World countries, housing modifications has been very unsuccessful and misdirected, resulting in the poor control of building and construction by the local council authority. In Cameroon, regeneration methods emerged out of the poverty crises that besieged most of the towns in the late 1980s. In most of these towns and cities, more than 50% of the population lived in substandard housing conditions (INS 2003) that needed demolition. In line with the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) initiated by the Britton Woods institution, the housing sector falls within the social welfare domain eligible for funding and thus constitutes an important area for assessment.

Low industrial output, fall in incomes and increasing levels of unemployment in the late

1980s accompanied by salary cuts in the early 1990s as well as massive retrenchments from the public service and para-state institutions caused a lot of social disruptions in Cameroon. People had to find a niche for survival and part of the reaction was the creation of informal businesses and the subsequent development in unregulated housing. The situation became chaotic by the year 2000 leading to a series of regeneration drives undertaken by government. The HIPC initiative was expected to assist the government through her debt relief to re-orientate its focus on social and other developments rather than repaying off its huge external debt (Friedrich 2001). Unfortunately, since April 2006 when Cameroon attained the HIPC objectives, social problems like housing scarcity in urban areas continue to be endemic. Poverty increase since 1987 has made it difficult for individuals to build homes and above all, the tremendous initiative of the government through its housing schemes in the 1980s to assist the population to have access to decent houses at low cost petered out. This constitutes a big challenge for the nation as more and more people keep on migrating into towns due to widespread rural poverty (Fombe and Ajuh 2008).

In urban areas in Cameroon, displaced populations are forced to find alternative locations

with reasons being that they illegally occupied the land or built unwanted structures. The alternative locations are places within the same urban area or other towns where redevelopment or rehabilitation is less stringent (Knowles and Wareing 1994). This action gives room to the dynamics and cycle of continuous growth in makeshift structures. In some urban areas, resettlement is not undertaken because it is too costly (from the social and financial perspective), or there is the difficulty in finding new places to relocate residents and businessmen (Hellman 1973).

Most local governments under the supervision of the Ministry of Towns undertook a concerted action to stamp out the anarchy in the growth of these unwanted structures. The destruction was very massive and entailed the demolition of all structures that were either within 5 metres from the edge of any street in the more densely built-up areas or without a building permit (Law No. 77/2, 1972 and Law No. 2004/003, 2004). In Akwa (Douala) and Briqueterie (Yaounde) massive destruction was undertaken by the municipal council authorities with over 2,000 victims involved in the October 2007 clean up, indicating a massive resurgence in wooden structures in Douala and Yaounde after the exercise in 2000.

How to solve these problems constitutes a major challenge for developing countries. This paper thus seeks to explain the sustained growth of informal settlements and to suggest the approach that the public sector may undertake to stem the housing problem in Cameroon's Regional capitals and major towns.

### Research Problem

The proximity of Cameroon to politically unstable countries like Chad and Central African Republic has some effects on the social structure and growth of its major towns. Most of the towns considered in this study are regional capitals which have administrative, socio-cultural and political influences in their respective regions (Fombe and Balgah 2010). The 51% rate of urbanisation in the country (NIS 2000) has been the result of the growth and development of these towns.

The impetus for inner city renewal in 1999 emerged out of avowed necessity and was undertaken under the slogan *hygiene et Sanita-*

*tion* or clean-up campaign. The materials used to construct substandard/unregulated structures are very rudimentary and environmentally unfriendly. They include such material as old corrugated iron sheets, wooden boards and discarded metals. However, other durable materials like metal sheets (containers) and cement blocks were solicited for structures that served the dual purpose of business and lodging.

The anarchical growth in structures and population is principally the result of non usage of urban land for the purpose for which it was intended (Fombe and Forgwe 2000) and so are exploited by the desperate who hope to improve on their living conditions. Most of the materials used in these structures were made up of metal sheets and some cement blocks. Such structures were erected on side-walks within 2 to 5 metres from the street. Findings of the 2007 destructions in Douala and Yaounde reveal that the same streets were littered with fewer numbers of durable structures than was the case in 2000 because the owners had actually anticipated that these structures could be destroyed at short notice. Major structures affected by the demolition in 2000 were restaurants as in Bamenda, Bafoussam and Yaounde; the selling of clothes as in Kumba and Yaounde. Structures handling electronics were highly affected in most towns. Field studies indicate that these three items have created a large informal market along the major streets of Cameroon towns as a consequence of high consumer demand.

Urban rehabilitation in most large cities of Cameroon has often been done in a sporadic manner. Forceful displacements have hardly worked especially where adequate provisions have not been made to accommodate the displaced population. The most frequent reaction by those displaced has been to gradually move back to areas similar to those from which they were evicted (Fombe 2005).

The problems that arise from regenerating urban infrastructures in these towns are the result of their poor and unplanned nature over the years, created by a nonchalant administration within the background of rapid urban population increase of over 5%/year (Fombe and Balgah 2010) and the absence of jobs. The underprivileged population has thus exploited a legal vacuum to erect temporary and makeshift structures along the major streets thereby violating zoning laws as a means of survival. Anarchy in

space results from the non-respect of building and construction norms and the high and increasing cost of building materials. This has led to spatial disorder. In this background is the incessant influx of population into the growth poles resulting in rapid and sustained population increase. The greatest blame can be placed on the local and central administration for an unguided urban growth strategy and corruption. A series of unsuccessful regeneration drives are pursued as these towns keep on expanding.

An examination of the theory of urban involution by McGee (1971) based on the reasons for the rapid growth of the population of third world cities and the rapid increase of informal unregulated activity in the inner city is sufficient evidence for the sustained growth in temporary and makeshift structures. This theory illustrates that entry into the informal sector that involves mainly small-scale businesses is easy especially for the unskilled and newly arrived rural in-migrants seeking survival in the city. The urban underprivileged who make up more than 60% of the urban population of most towns (INS 2006) hastily erect temporary (movable) structures on major streets and public open spaces close to business institutions. Planning regulations are poorly pursued and corrupt public officials sometimes fraternise with defaulters making such activities to flourish. They block pedestrian walks, impede circulation and enhance criminal activities.

There has been neglect in zoning and control over the acquisition of land and occupation of public space by most business actors. Various urban functions like markets and motor parks operate in open spaces and along streets not developed for them. Public space constitutes attractive zones for unregulated businesses. A cycle of temporary and makeshift structures begins as noticed along the main streets of Yaounde, Bamenda, Bafoussam and Douala. Administrative premises, commercial establishments like banks and large shops equally attract informal activities. These activities expand in number and magnitude attracting a large crowd, causing congestion and generating enormous sewage whose disposal is not envisaged in the Urban Town Planning Regulation.

The post-demolition period has hardly been immediately followed by a meaningful redevelopment exercise. Demolitions have also not been matched by a relocation plan for the victims and

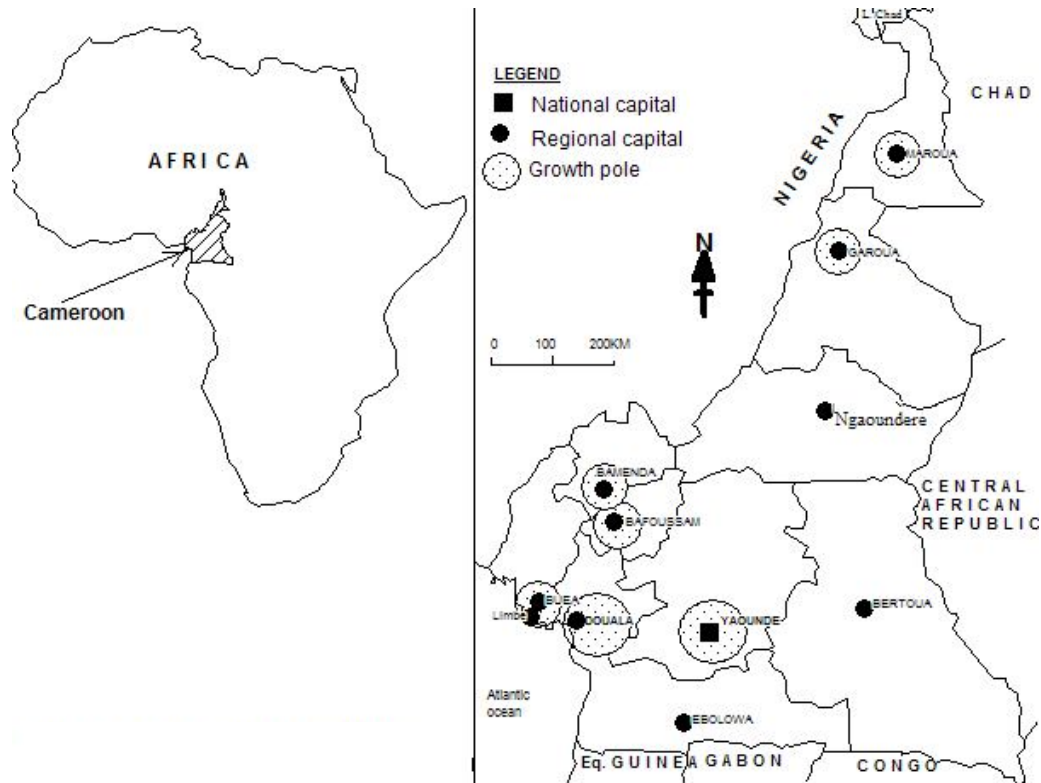
the deserted areas not appropriately developed for alternative uses. This explains the resurgence and re-invasion of such zones by other waves of informal business actors. Nonetheless, some limited works along the Bamenda Commercial Avenue, Rond point Deido Douala and Yaounde city centre have been noticed within the past five years. Based on these vacuums, the increasing number of urban underprivileged, eager to survive at all cost and unable to return to the village have relocated or adopted other survival strategies in the city. This leads to the characteristically dynamic housing transformations in the urban space in the neglected urban sectors.

This study illustrates the failure of the administration in a wide scale action undertaken in the early 2000s to restructure and renew the housing stock. Since the exercise was once more unsuccessful in Douala and Yaounde in October 2007, there is enough reason to discern the causes of these failures and the housing dynamics on space. The study highlights the difficulties faced in sustainable urban planning, investigates the recurrence of housing problems thought to have been previously addressed in the urban areas and proposes an urban housing development strategy for the rapidly expanding towns.

## METHODS

Cameroon is a country in West-Central Africa, bounded by Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria. It is a vast country with ten administrative regions each of which boasts of an urban growth pole around which the urbanisation process of the country revolves. This study is centred on six major Cameroon urban centres (Fig. 1).

Data collection involved a sampled population of 100 informal actors operating along each of the main commercial streets of Yaounde (1.8 million); Douala (1.9 million); Bamenda (300,000); Bafoussam (250,000) and Kumba (144,000) (BU-CREP, 2005). These regional growth poles including Limbe, a petroleum refining town, were used as examples for most of the data and discussions on the dynamics of poor housing structures. The respondents were principally males of between 15 to 35 years who were highly involved in street vending. 18% of the sampled population comprised females, most of who operate within the market vicinity. Along the selected streets, the housing structures were iden-



**Fig. 1. Selected study sites (major growth poles) and regional capitals of Cameroon**

*Source:* Data obtained from NIS, 2005 Census results, 2010, Yaounde.

tified and business actors involved in activities like restaurants, electronic equipments and used clothes topped the list of interrogators based on their business outlays, number employed and customers received daily. The population size was obtained through a pre-sampling exercise. A systematic sampling was then undertaken geared at appreciating the nature of replication based on questions like duration of business in the present location, previous location and reasons for change of location.

In data analysis, methods used to reveal housing problems were through observations and identification of structures of temporary and durable building materials. Information from local councils in charge in the activity and building permits was used to compare with field evidence (actual number of approved structures) to draw conclusions on the role played by the above authority on housing regulation. Data on selected study sites (Fig. 1) was obtained from

the 2005 census results. From this data, a ranking of the settlements indicated those considered as regional growth poles which are principally the regional capitals. The design of Figure 2 is based on observed facts using current planning approaches pursued by each town to decipher the weaknesses and make recommendations on a better approach. Based on data related to activity and housing structures, a classification of housing materials into four groups was undertaken for Yaounde and Douala in percentages and used to compare their importance along the main avenue (Ahmadou Ahidjo) of both towns.

Data on the importance of informal activity made use of the total number of employees for selected structures in the sampled towns. The values for each type of activity were classified according to streets. These values were then compared to ascertain the significance of these activities in terms of attraction exerted on job

seekers/unemployed. In analysing data on employment potential, reference was made to data on employment rate in 2005 which was linked to the number of workers retrenched from the public service in 1995 and the nation's annual population growth rate of 2.8% to explain the sustained increase in the growth of unregulated structures as well as small businesses.

## RESULTS

Along the Avenue Ahmado Ahidjo in Douala for example, in 2007, the high number of unregulated structures containing electronics (113) and foodstuff (108) illustrates the high turnover realized by those involved. Their high density does not however, imply that the profit realised is substantial to ensure an improvement in the activity. An amount of money, usually between US\$20 and US\$30 is raised for the day to ensure survival of the individual or family members as well as continuity in the business. Electronic equipment dominantly from South East Asia has become widespread. The sellers confirm this by linking such products to their lower prices compared to those sold in the formal shops. Due to their fast sales through the informal outlets, most youths have taken up the activity to make fast profits.

Presently, business actors prefer structures in wood to cement blocks for their activity unlike in 2000. In Table 1, containers/metal structures (50%) were greatly solicited in 2000 and wood (57%) in 2007 in Douala for example. In Douala and Yaounde, wooden structures dominated the streets with a percentage growth of 187 and 346 respectively. The same table reveal

a negative drop in the use of zinc and zero percent in the use of cement blocks. The traders explain that wooden or metal stands are portable and so can be easily transported if they are compelled to relocate or suffer minimal financial losses when the structures are destroyed by urban developers.

The high rate of unemployment (60-70 % in 2005) and rising influx of rural youths into the urban areas is significant. The size of the civil service for instance has been reducing since 1995. It moved from 135,903 to 119,975 in 2000 (NIS 2000), representing a 13.2% drop. The trend continues, representing a negative growth in employment by the public sector for a country whose annual population increase is 2.87%. Most of the operators start-off by spreading their products on the ground in small quantities and as their incomes increase, they erect small temporary structures (mostly stalls) and later move to durable ones composed of metal or cement blocks. This process can take between 1 to 3 years for an individual operating electronics for example to be fully stabilized.

Municipal authorities of these towns collect daily fees from the business actors or a building fee for those with housing structures. Findings reveal that income from these unregulated activities is hardly deployed to develop the infrastructures of the areas they occupy.

Table 2 indicates the number of workers accommodated in selected unregulated business structures. Data was collected from businesses astride the main commercial axes covering a distance of 100m. For each of the major streets of the five towns indicated, mobile restaurants employ or make use of 2 or 3 labourers as in

**Table 1: Makeshift materials and activities along Avenue Ahmadou Ahidjo in Douala and Yaounde prior to the 2000 and 2007 demolitions**

<i>Town</i>	<i>Materials used</i>	<i>% of total 2000</i>	<i>% of total 2007</i>	<i>% change (2000-2007)</i>
<i>Douala</i>	Zinc	15	05	-66
	Cardboard (plywood)	02	25	1150
	Wood	20	57	187
	Container/metal	50	12	-76
	Cement block	23	00	00
<i>Yaounde</i>	Zinc	19	01	-94
	Cardboard (Plywood)	25	12	-52
	Wood	112	500	346
	Container/metal	05	06	-89
	Cement block	00	00	00

*Source:* Field survey, 2000 and 2007

**Table 2: Number of workers for selected structures/type of activity along major streets of sampled towns**

Town	Main avenue	Number of workers (100m distance)			
		Mobile restaurant	Electronics	Clothing	Household utensils
Bamenda	Commercial	2	1	1	1
Bafoussam	Tamdja	2	1	1	1
Douala	Amadou Ahidjo	3	1	1	1
Yaounde	Kennedy	3	1	1	1
Kumba	Fiango street	2	1	1	1
Total		12	5	5	5

Source: Field survey, 2007

Bafoussam and Douala respectively. Other activities like electronics, clothing and household utensils are managed by one person as seen along the five major streets of the selected towns shown in Table 2. This leaves thousands of unemployed youths eager to take up such businesses. Since there is limited space for each operator, any vacant premises and areas of high population density is attractive to the activity.

From the forgone, the following findings are outstanding; firstly, the urban housing dynamics is partly responsible for the sustained influx of rural poor and youths into the city. The scarcity in housing in most towns (a high person/room density of over 3 (INS 2000) has caused landlords to modify their houses with extensions into pathways in contravention of the housing regulations. Secondly, low monthly incomes (generally below US\$ 100) generated by informal activity cannot make a substantial contribution to urban development. In addition, not all of such businesses can be targeted to honour the tax obligations of the city. Thirdly, functional zoning is poor and the absence of control by planning and public authorities has partly been responsible for the housing chaos. The authorities also enhance the anarchy through the granting of building permits and the collection of business fees from unregulated actors. The absence of qualified officials on the ground has permitted a lot of illegal arrangements between the traders and officials, a phenomenon which is not healthy for the economy and city.

## DISCUSSION

In the light of rapid growth of unwanted housing structures in the city and given the slow pace of administrative regulations and actions

involved, the Commercial Business District (CBD) is experiencing increasing problems at a macro perspective. Though each individual participating in informal business raises some income to ensure survival in the city, the crucial problem is that income generated cannot substantially contribute to the overall development of the city in which they operate. In the open markets, most local councils collect a daily token fee per trader of less than 50US cents for development purposes. This exercise is feasible because the traders have fixed selling points within the defined market. It is difficult to levy and collect such tolls from those who have possibilities to sell in mobile structures. The dynamics and cycle of sustainability of unregulated structures becomes evident, thereby rendering the urban areas more difficult for regeneration to achieve a macro solution for urban dwellers as observed by Knowles and Wareing (1994) in Britain. The reaction by the planning authority has been forceful evictions. But some proponents like Durand-Lasserve (2006), Mueller and Dooling (2011) argue against it and advocate a policy which protects the poor as a prerequisite for their integration into urban life. The anarchy can however, deteriorate if increasing numbers of immigrants or those in search for housing space along the attractive commercial streets discover that such arrangements are favourable to them but without a sustainable future.

Reacting to the destructions and erection of wooden structures, the traders adopt their own coping strategies to ensure the sustainability of their operations and this constitutes a highly visible element of the housing and infrastructural dynamics. This means that mobile structures can easily be displaced without much financial expenditures whenever they are under



businessmen who have realised the weakness in public control over such street activity. The main problem here is the chaos and health risk created by such businesses. Nwaka (2005), writing on the situation in Nigeria feels that the main policy challenge is how to support and regulate the urban informal sector in order to promote employment, productivity, and income for the poor, and at the same time ensure a safe, healthy and socially acceptable environment. In the same vein, Melik and Lawton (2011) show how inappropriate management of such public space neglected by planning proponents render the cities less sustainable and less competitive compared to other cities as safe and beautiful places to live in.

Field evidence reveals that each year in the major cities, more substandard or unregulated structures are constructed than standard ones. Given that there are no ongoing renewals or rehabilitations, at the end of a period of say 10 to 20 years, the blighted situation will increase at a rate that the town planning authorities cannot handle. If in each year about 150 new sound structures are constructed within the town, accompanied by substantial demolition of dilapidated structures, then in the same period, one should expect a simple decelerating rate of deterioration. The dynamics would then be one of a cycle of standard rather than substandard structures sprouting. An idealised cycle to fight the replication of unregulated structures is presented in Figure 2. According to the figure, greater upsurge of unregulated structures is the result of the slow rate in building and the availability of acceptable structures. When the population can find easy accommodation either for business, living homes or both, then the proliferation of unregulated structures should become irrelevant as illustrated in scenario 2 of the same diagram. This process should be achieved not only through an ongoing demolition process pursued by the government and local planning authority, but address from a holistic perspective, the problem of rents, taxes, inflation and unemployment.

### CONCLUSION

There is much ineffective and inappropriate urban development drive in Cameroon. The role of local planning authorities is not very visible in as much as housing development, provision

and business regulatory mechanisms is concerned. Their actions have been embroiled in unregulated actions such as issuing building permits where such is not required or collecting business taxes from unregulated activity, thereby enhancing the urban chaos.

Housing refurbishments need to be a well-focused and thoughtful process integrated in the development strategy of local authorities and planners of Third World cities. It should be concomitant with regeneration so as to avoid social stress in urban areas with limited financial capabilities to handle the problems associated with resettlement and development. Urban authorities should have the responsibility in directing public services and capital improvements towards upgrading the quality of life in those areas that have unique attractions for this new population. It is the task of town planning to minimize the impact that changing cycles have on urban housing, residents and businesses through a purposeful urban development plan. Having attained the completion point of the HIPC initiative since 2006, the Cameroon government should be able to direct more resources towards solving the endemic housing problem in urban areas. The Council support Fund is a good initiative if well managed. The role of the civil society is equally imperative. Through the creation of community associations and Common Initiative Groups (CIG), urban communities can as well manage their housing problems in a sustainable manner.

Planning policy in unregulated activity and housing structures should lay emphasis on how to contain the adverse environmental impacts of many of the activities of the urban informal sector without disrupting livelihoods, and causing social distress. It should be able to promote environmental awareness and guarantee the right to the city, while at the same time protecting the vulnerable groups in the informal sector, especially women, children, and apprentices, from harm and exploitation. The city is a citadel and dreamland for many especially from the rural milieu. Their contribution to socio-economic development should not be misconstrued.

### PERSPECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For those who have made a permanent living in Cameroon cities, the landscape is one preg-



nant with a struggle between street vendors/owners of temporary structures and the local administrative authorities. Whenever efforts are made by the latter to transform the streets and protect them from these unattractive structures, they soon reappear in a more durable form. It would appear the cycle of building and destruction is bound to continue. There is a lot of mutation in unregulated structures in urban areas for the reasons already evoked. What then is the sustainable approach to this housing dynamics of unregulated structures and informal activity which do not promote sustainable urban growth in Cameroon in particular and Third World cities in general? The battle is not lost because the changing phase of the city of Yaounde in the past five years is a good example to emulate by the other towns. Here, the local planning authority has made frantic efforts to compromise informal street vending with space for parking, recreation and organised business structures, while at the same time integrating small-scale but regulated activity within the centralised zones through low-cost business structures and other amenities like electricity, water and sanitation.

There is need for the central government to intervene through laws that encourage rather than discourage private owner-occupied homes. Long-term planning strategies should be formulated and sensitization campaigns undertaken to keep the population abreast with the development objectives and perspective of growth of the city. City planning should be a collective effort between the private and public sectors if sustainable growth has to be achieved.

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