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HOUSING FOR THE LOWER INCOME GROUPS - CHALLENGE FOR THE CITY

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect Council's opinions in any way.

Over the past decade the City Council of Nairobi has wrestled with the problem of housing the ever increasing population of the city. The city however, has not achieved her goal of adequately housing all the families resident within her boundaries. The failure is not so much attributable to lack of concern and attention on the part of the Council but to the combination of rapid growth and a relatively meagre resource base including varying standards and philosophies.

This paper will outline Council's experience and achievement in the housing of the lower income groups. It will further highlight the contradictions in policy and the factors that inevitably influence Council's policy in the field of housing.

During the colonial period, the African population of the city was mainly made up of male migratory workers who left their wives and familes in the rural areas. Their movement to the city was tightly controlled and only those who were gainfully employed were permitted to reside in the city. Besides, the level of wages was such that few could support a family in an urban area. These factors accounted for the lower rate of population growth within this period as well as the skewed sex ratio and the relatively small household sizes characteristic of the time. Unemployment was non-existent and there was a balance population and jobs.

The population structure pertaining at the time had a great impact on housing provision in the city for the African workers. The Europeans and Asians do not fit this model as they were of higher income brackets and low cost housing was irrelevant in their case. The main thrust for low income municipal hosuing was to accommodate Africans. However, there were a few schemes for European and Asian Low Income population such as Woodley and Pangani.

The system of administration largely ignored the African population and had accorded it little say in the conduct of urban affairs. At best, Africans were regarded as "wards of urban authorities rather than as citizens." This explains the relative disparity in the provision of services between various racial groups that resided in the city.

The African estates were to house single males who were later to return to their respective places of origin in the rural areas. The units constructed then were simple rooms shared facilities in which individuals were allocated bed spaces. The rents therefore were very low and could be easily be afforded by the low income population of the time. But even in those early days a need existed to house family units in the city, albeit at a very low level. This led the Council to develop family units in Kaloleni; but the experiment was not repeated elsewhere.

In addition to municipal housing, other institutions such as Government, the Railways and major employers constructed low cost housing for their employees. The type of housing provided was similar to Councils provision: single-roomed units with allocated bed spaces. The provision of housing by employers was understandable and rational as the employees had to be accommodated by their new employer when they changed jobs or had to return to rural areas on retirement. Thus the provision of low cost housing was geared to employment opportunities and the burden was shared between all major institutions both private and public. The demand and the number of completions was essentially low and was not a strain on available resources.

However, while the policy suited the prevailing circumstances, it did not take into account any likely long term changes which could upset the balance as it existed. This was the case at independence when artificial controls, out of necessity, had to be removed, setting a period of rapid population growth.

In the late fifties there was a change in population policy. This change was occasioned by the findings of a Royal Commission which published its report in 1955. The commission was critical of the policy of encouraging African migratory labour in towns and strongly advocated creation of a stable African urban population. The implementation of this recommendation was more evident, not in the numbers that were allowed into the city, but in the type of housing units constructed. The emphasis in the new housing estates was in the provision of modest self-contained family units. The estates of Ofafa, Jericho and Jerusalem are examples of this change in policy.

In d948, when the first national census was taken, the city's population was barely 120,000 of which 57% was of African origin. This population had increased to approximately 350,000 by 1962 and to 510,000 by 1969. The 1948 figures relate to the Old City area while the rest includes population in the new areas added to the city in 1963. The African population during this period grew at the rate of approximately 9% p.a.

The Urban Study estimated that on average there will be approximately 14,700 additional households in Nairobi every year. This was based on the assumption that no change in average household size will occur. Thus year by year estimate of households is as shown below:-