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# Rural Housing Conditions in Meru District, Kenya

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## INTRODUCTION

Housing conditions in rural areas of the Third World countries receive very little attention, particularly if compared with the proportional share in the total populations of these countries. In both studies and policy measures, the emphasis is put on the urban environment, with priority for the bigger cities. This situation is also found in Sub-Saharan Africa. The increased attention for housing in general which can be observed during the last decade did not change this urban bias. Various factors contribute to this urban bias, such as the assumed better housing conditions in the rural areas if compared to the urban slums and squatter settlements; development policies which in spite of all verbal commitments to basic needs, still concentrate heavily on economic growth only with dominant attention for so-called modern production activities and consequent priority for urban areas, and probably as most important factor - the disproportionate political influence of the urban-based segments of the population.

In Kenya, which gave quite some attention to housing research the emphasis is also on studies of urban housing conditions. Gradually, some more information comes available about the rural housing situation: so far surveys have been undertaken for Kiambu, Kisii, Kisumu, Kakamega, Nakuru and Kwale districts.

The objective of the Meru research can be formulated as follows: to provide insight into the spatial differentiation of the present state of housing conditions in Meru District, to identify the factors influencing the housing conditions and to make suggestions for improvement in accordance with the preferences of the local population.

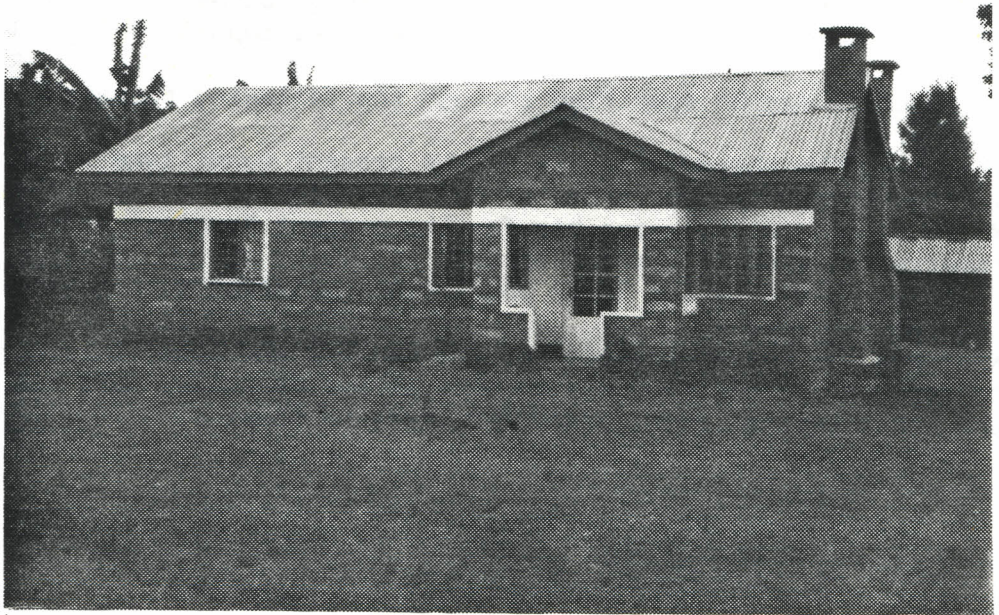
This objective may be specified through the following research questions:

1. Which are the characteristics of the present conditions in the various homogenous sub-areas of the Meru District?
2. Which factors are responsible for the present housing conditions observed in each of the sub-areas?
3. To which extent is the local population satisfied with the present housing conditions?
4. What are the characteristics of the central and local government policy for the district and to what extent do policy measures meet the local population's demand for improved housing?





1. and 2. The sharp differences in housing conditions between the various parts of Meru District are illustrated clearly by these examples of houses in the dry zone (above) in the western part of the district and the Mount Kenya coffee zone (below).





Housing conditions comprise the following aspects:

- type of house in terms of shape and nature of building materials;
- size of the house and the homestead in terms of in- and outdoor living space per person;
- available amenities such as kitchen, toilet, water and electricity;
- availability of and access to infrastructural and community services such as health and education facilities and public transport.

The housing situation in Meru District is assumed to be influenced by a number of specific conditions: a high degree of agro-ecological variation with related cropping patterns and income opportunities; government policy with regard to agricultural growth, and re-settlement of the population in sparsely populated parts of the district; government policy in the field of community services and more especially the activities of non-governmental organizations in this field; and, finally, the self-help activities of the rural population to improve their living environment. The degree to which these supposed forces influence housing conditions will differ for the various parts of the district. Therefore, a substantial spatial variation in the quality of housing is expected in Meru District.

The data on which this report is based, has been collected by three broad methods, viz. the study of literature and government reports, interviews with key informants such as e.g. government officers, and a sample survey among households in the various sub-areas of the district.

The report consists of five sections. After a general background of the district and the main features of its economy, a picture is sketched of the settlement pattern and the housing situation in general and the pattern of relevant services at the district level. Subsequently, detailed information is provided about the employment and income situation of the households in the various sub-areas. A fourth chapter deals with the actual housing conditions and the factors responsible for these conditions. A fifth chapter is devoted to the preferences of the local population and the specific characteristics of government policy at the district level. Finally, a brief summary of the results and some conclusions are given.