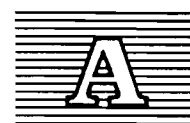




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ABSORPTION OF NEWCOMERS INTO AFRICAN CITIES^{*}

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* The views expressed in this report are those of the expert and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

ABSORPTION OF NEWCOMERS INTO AFRICAN CITIES

Although the least urbanized of the continents, Africa is today undergoing what is perhaps the fastest rate of urbanization in the world. From a small beginning in 1920 of having 3.1 million people in centres of 100,000 and above, Africa by 1970 had come to have over 35 million people in centres of this size. This rate of 8.4 per cent growth per annum is no doubt impressive because of the small base from which it has sprung.^{1/} But the smallness of the base itself attests to the novelty of the urban phenomenon in large areas of Africa. Indeed, until the colonial period, there were hardly any urban centres of note in Africa outside of northern and western Africa and the coastal areas of eastern Africa.

The current level of urbanization in Africa does derive largely from forces of socio-economic change set in motion during the colonial period. In particular, it owes much to the transportation development, agricultural and mineral exploitation and the establishment of a nation-wide system of administration undertaken by colonial powers in territories under their control. Throughout the colonial period, however, many of these centres were relatively small and their problems were on the whole of manageable proportions. Indeed, as of 1950 there were only two cities, Cairo and Alexandria, with a population of over a million. Most of the remaining 70 large cities had population of less than a quarter of a million.

The major change came with the 1960s, the decade of African independence. The number of large cities jumped from 72 to 114 with more than five of them having population of over a million.^{2/} Indeed, a high proportion of the rapid

^{1/} Growth of the World's Urban and Rural Population, 1920-2000 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.69.XIII.3), p. 32.

^{2/} William A. Hance, Population, Migration and Urbanization in Africa (New York, 1970), p. 230.

swell in the volume of migration from the rural to urban areas in African countries were directed to these few large urban centres. In no time, various socio-economic pathologies became evident. Unemployment and underemployment became rife; housing accommodation was scarce and what with the pressure of population on the available residences many people had to reconcile themselves to living in overcrowded dwellings when they are not condemned to sticking it out in shanty-towns and bidonvilles. The pressure on urban infrastructural equipment was also great resulting in general environmental deterioration in most of these cities. Many roads fell into disrepair just at the time traffic on them started to get very dense; refuse disposal system virtually broke down and both the drainage and sewerage network within cities were tasked beyond their capacity. In short, it was clear that many African cities had become overloaded and for the first time attention began to be focussed on how effective they are in absorbing the large number of migrants leaving the rural areas for the city.

The concept of absorption

Absorption in this context must be seen as the process whereby new migrants come to break the essential ties with their rural areas of origin and become wholly engrossed or engaged in the exploitation of urban resources for their daily existence. In order to fully appreciate the varied dimensions of the concept, it is necessary to position it within a systems approach to rural-urban migration. This approach suggests that rural-urban migration should be seen as a basic change in the nodal structure of a society involving a permanent transformation in individual skills, attitudes, motivations and behaviour patterns. The rural-urban migration system, thus embraces not only the individual migrating but also all "the various institutions (sub-systems) and the social, economic and other relationship (adjustment mechanisms) which

are an integral part of the process of the migrant's transformation"^{3/} The system also relates to an environment which is defined in terms of the economic conditions (the wages, prices, consumer preferences, degrees of commercialization and industrial development) within a country in a given period; the level of technological development as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of the transportation and communication network, the public sector social welfare activities especially in education and health and general governmental policies in such areas as agricultural land development, mechanisation, rural marketing and population control.

Within such a system approach, the absorption of newcomers into cities can be said to begin with their reception, that is, the initial provision for them of board and lodging. For fresh arrivals from the rural areas, reception represents the beginning of socialization into the different life style of the city. The different rhythm of daily life, the overwhelming concern with time, the regulated nature of feeding, the overcrowding in rooms, all these and the psychological adjustment needed to bear with them constitute the first phase of the process of socialization.

The socialization of the newcomers involves their learning about where to find jobs, what types of jobs are available for persons of particular skills and who to see or speak to concerning being employed. Learning also extends to finding out about self-employment, what services or goods can be sold, where the goods can be purchased, which location in the city offers the best chance of a profitable turnover and which areas or social class offers opportunity for rendering specific service. Once a newcomer has been rehabilitated into the economy of the city and can thus earn a living, his next major concern is housing. Here again some learning process is involved. There is the search

^{3/} See A.L. Mabogunje, "Systems approach to a theory of rural-urban migration", Geographical Analysis, vol.2, 1970, pp.1-8.

for areas where rents are at a level that the newcomer can afford and where there are likely to be vacant accommodation. A large part of this search is often undertaken for newcomers by friends or acquaintances in work places. Where conditions are such that the newcomer has to provide his own temporary shelter, he still has to learn about where to find the materials, how to muster the labour and, most important, how to dodge any measures that are calculated to frustrate his moves.

With some form of employment and housing, it may be assumed that the newcomer is now absorbed into the city. Such an assumption, however, would be naive since it misses the whole point as to why individuals choose to leave the certainties of their rural home for the uncertainties of a new existence in urban surrounding. These uncertainties are related to both the latent opportunities available in urban centres and the high though vague expectations of the individual. It is these expectations that propel him once established to seek to acquire new skills or improve on old ones or to find ways of manipulating initial opportunities for greater financial benefits.

Either way, what is sought for is the capacity to progress in one's work, to move forward both in terms of financial rewards and social recognition. Since increase in earning capacity and in social status is often marked by a tendency to seek out better residences in the more highly regarded districts of the city, socio-economic mobility often goes hand in hand with geographic or residential mobility. Upward social mobility is thus a most critical phase in the absorption of newcomers into cities. Indeed, it can be argued that it is only when this stage has been reached, when the city is now seen and appreciated as a place offering rich returns for skill and ability that the process of absorption can be said to be complete. Thus, in circumstances where there is limited employment opportunities, the volume of rural-urban migration might

be considerable but actual absorption will be small. What may result, in fact, is the type of "constant circulatory movements" between rural and urban areas which Mitchell so clearly identified in Central Africa in the 1950s.^{4/}

An important factor which may affect the rate of absorption in countries where economic growth cannot be said to be sluggish is therefore the operation of various discriminatory employment policies especially those that have the effect of limiting the skills and opportunities for advancement for migrants of specific ethnic or racial groups. This was a factor of greater or less importance in most of Africa during the colonial regime and continues to be critical for the absorption of newcomers to cities in much of Southern Africa under white minority rule. It is in fact in such situations that circulatory movements of migrants are most pronounced.

Reception and socialization of newcomers

The influx of migrants into African cities represents a response to information flow between city residents and their relations and friends in the rural areas. This fact means that the vital initial task of receiving and caring for newcomers into cities is carried out by households. Only in countries such as the Republic of South Africa where contract labour is still important is the reception of newcomers organised by companies and semi-public agencies. Elsewhere, the household in carrying out the socialization of the newcomers operates partly on its own and partly as a unit within a larger organisation. Especially in West African cities, this organisation is the ethnic association (associations d'origine) formed by individuals from the same hometown, district or ethnic group. Its functions include housing newcomers who have no specific households to go to and helping them

^{4/} J.C. Mitchell, "Wage labour and African population movements in Central Africa", in K.M. Barbour and R.M. Prothero (eds), Essays on African Population (New York, 1962), p. 232.

to find employment or jobs. Ethnic associations perform other functions such as fostering loyalty to and keeping newcomers in touch with events in their home area, serving as mutual aid agency to meet the burdensome expense of members when they get married, or fall ill or have to take responsibility for the burial of a near relative, sponsoring the establishment of mosques, churches and schools to cater to the needs of their members and generally regulating interpersonal relations among their members and those of the host community.

Although perhaps the most important, the ethnic associations are only one of the many voluntary organisations which help in the process of socializing new migrants into urban life. There are religious organisations, mutual aid clubs, recreation clubs and other cultural organisations which ease their process of absorption. So vital is the role of these various organisations that Kenneth Little virtually correlates their emergence and growth with the colonial urbanization of most of West Africa.^{5/}

The importance of voluntary organizations as agencies of socialization was perhaps greatest in the immediate post-war period just when political agitation for independence began to gather momentum. But the involvement of these organisations, especially the ethnic associations with partisan politics was a kiss of death since such political activities came to divide rather sharply people from the same home area. What further weakened these organisations was their inability to cope with the large volume of newcomers into cities in the period just after the political independence of their countries. Much of this new wave of migrants comprised young people in a hurry. They had been sent to school in the rural areas and believe that with their education, limited though it is, they had a direct passport to urban employment. This means that their plan to migrate was not contemplated as carefully as in the past and depended

^{5/} Kenneth Little, West African Urbanization: A Study of Voluntary Associations in Social Change (Cambridge, 1965), 179 pp.

on all types of casual contacts with old school mates and friends. In many cases, however, it had the support of their parents who also believed that migration to the city and away from agriculture is the natural sequence to their children's self-improvement after primary education.

The greater literacy of the majority of these newcomers to the city also meant that they did not need the type of guidance usually provided by these associations. In the East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, for instance, the magnitude of this new stream of migrants can be gleaned from the fact that enrolment of children into primary schools rose from 0.7 million in 1950, to 1.6 million in 1960 and to 3.1m. in 1970, representing a doubling of numbers every ten years.^{6/} Clearly, most of the products of these schools cannot be absorbed into rural employment and must be expected to join in the massive migration into the cities. More specifically, Sabot noted for Tanzania that before independence 33 per cent of migrants were without any education whilst after independence this had dropped to only 14 per cent.^{7/} The weakening of the role of voluntary associations means in effect a fall back on the household and a higher disposition to depend on formal governmental machinery to cope with the problem of newcomers both in terms of housing and employment.

The housing of newcomers

The fact that voluntary associations were ever important in the search for and the provision of initial housing for newcomers was an indication of an inadequate concern in these matters by public authorities. Such a situation was understandable during the colonial period when the rate of urbanization was so low that the problem of housing was hardly visible and could therefore

6/ UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1970, pp. 178-182 and ibid., 1973, pp. 145-147.

7/ R.H. Sabot, Education, Income Distribution and Rates of Urban Migration in Tanzania (University of Dar-es-Salaam, Economic Research Bureau, Paper 72.6, September, 1972), p. 10.

be managed in the informal way operated by voluntary associations. The same cannot however be said for the situation in African cities since the 1960s. Indeed, the rate of urbanization between 1965 and 1970 was such that the annual urban housing needs allowing for a 50-year replacement were estimated at some 0.7 million dwelling units or a programme of providing between 9.5 to 15.0 dwellings per 1000 inhabitants, a rate not attained today in many of the richer industrial countries of the world.^{8/}

Faced with such gargantuan need for housing, voluntary associations find themselves completely helpless whilst the administration of most cities have no financial resources to enable them to cope. The result is that newcomers are forced to make do as best they can in the shanty towns and bidonvilles which are now a common feature of the urban landscape in most developing countries. There are, of course, shanty towns dating back to the colonial period. One good example is the Rebeuss quarter in Dakar which dates from about 1925 when numerous construction work especially the extension of the port attracted large number of migrants into the city. But most shanty towns in Africa have developed since the late 1950s.

A typical shanty-town is a collection of insubstantial housing constructed usually of "recuperated" waste material of wood or corrugated iron-sheets and in some cases of mud-wall and thatch-roof or iron roof. There is, in many cases, little in the way of a road system, and most internal communication takes place through alley ways which twist and turns among the houses. In cases where a planning authority insists on a lay-out or where this is vital to facilitate sale of building plots some outline of a road system is discernible. This is usually unpaved and gutted by erosion. There are hardly any infrastructural equipment or social facilities. Many houses have no electricity

^{8/} See World Housing Conditions and Estimated Housing Requirements, (United Nations publication, Sales No. 65.IV.8).

or piped water and are generally reduced to using pit latrines. There is no sewerage or drainage system and used domestic water find outlet along the roads, alleys and footpaths. There are also few schools if any in the area and no hospital or health facilities. Yet, this is often a most active area of the city with its petty traders, barbers, tailors carpenters, mechanics and photographers and innumerable beer parlours or "shambas".

Even with the poor quality of accommodation offered in these places there is often a problem of availability. Land close to the city is at a speculative premium and the relatively high cost limits the number of people who can afford to purchase them. This problem of land ownership is thus a factor in the resulting congestion and overcrowding that is associated with shanty towns.

It is tempting to wonder what the city authorities are doing about these matters, especially as the existence of such shanty-towns with their appallingly low level of sanitary facilities constitutes grave health hazards to the main urban population. The bitter truth in the present African situation is that they are doing so little. In the first place, their financial resources are so small relative to what is needed that in many cases it is not even worth starting. In many African cities, especially those in West Africa, the financial resources available to local urban administration is limited to personal income taxes, various fees and fines and statutory grants from the central government. Usually, the personal income taxes are limited to those of persons in the lower income brackets whilst the statutory allocations tend to be subject to frequent arbitrary revisions. The use of property tax as a source of urban revenue was well-developed in the colonial period only in a few cities in West Africa but had wider coverage in East and Central Africa. Even in these later countries, it is faced with increasing difficulties of collection and coverage

with the rapid, post-independence growth of their cities.^{9/} Thus, with such limitation in financial resources, most local authorities cannot engage in developing new lay-outs, constructing new roads or maintaining old ones that even a site-and-service programme to rationalise the provision of housing for low-income people is generally above their capability.

Outside of the capital city, the central government in most African countries has shown less interest in coming directly to the financial assistance of local authorities in coping with their housing problem. Instead, they have tended to set up housing agencies of various types on a national basis. There are, for instance, the various sociétés immobilières and the sociétés d'équipement in French-speaking African countries, the housing corporations and building societies in English-speaking African countries, as well as the banks. These various agencies, whilst providing a growing stock of new houses, hardly ever address themselves to the needs of new migrants and the poorer elements of the urban population. The Société Immobilière (SICAP) in Senegal, for instance, had by December 1963, built over 3000 of what were called "super-economical" dwellings of one, two or three rooms.^{10/} However, the rentals for these varied from \$8 to \$20 per month and applicants who want any of these houses on a tenant-purchase basis must make a down-payment equal to 10 to 12 months rent. Clearly such buildings were not meant to re-house residents of shanty-towns.

One other factor inhibiting more purposeful action on the part of local authorities is the existence of standards and norms laid down for housing development and deriving largely from the colonial era. Most of these standards relate to the type of building materials appropriate for urban dwelling, density of housing per acre, design of and space use within houses and sanitation

9/ John F. Due, Taxation and Development in Tropical Africa (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963), pp. 102-118.

10/ Housing in Africa, United Nations publication, Sales No. 66.II.K.4, p. 83.

requirements. For example, the Building Regulation for Western Nigeria requires first:

"that all domestic buildings must have a toilet and a bathroom or combination of a toilet and bath at the rate of one unit for every flat or one unit for every three bedrooms, whichever is greater". ^{11/}

It then proceeded to further specify that:

"every bathroom or toilet or water closet shall have the floor, platform or seat either plastered with cement or be made of some water-tight non-absorbent material and be enclosed by walls or partitions of bricks. Surface of every such wall or partition shall be finished with a smooth impervious surface such as cement plaster $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick or glazed tiles, polished marble or any suitable material to a height of not less than 3 feet above the floor of such room".

It is clear that standards such as these are meant for housing persons of a much higher income groups than the new migrants with limited earning capacity to pay the rent that such houses must command. Indeed, in Kenya, it was suggested that the monthly economic rent for the minimum standard modern dwelling in urban areas would absorb up to 75 per cent of the income of the regularly employed unskilled worker - an obviously unrealistic proposition.^{12/} Moreover, such standards limit the effectiveness of housing programmes even where there is the will and the resources. Again in Kenya, it was suggested that the £7 million actually spent in 1970 on providing housing in the modern sector could finance the construction of 1,000 units worth £7000 each, 7000 units worth £100 each, 20,000 units worth £350 each.^{13/} The first is the selling price of houses under the mortgage schemes sponsored by the National Housing Corporation, the second the average cost of medium-cost housing

^{11/} Western State of Nigeria, Adoptive Building and Sub-division Regulations Order (Ibadan, July 1973), pp. 52-53.

^{12/} International Labour Office, Employment, Incomes and Equity: A Strategy for Increasing Productive Employment in Kenya (Geneva, 1972), p. 197.

^{13/} Ibid., p. 199.

sponsored by the public sector, and the third the estimated cost of site-and-service schemes.

An aspect of standards which also has adverse effect on the ability of public authorities to cope with housing problems is the current social preference for certain types of building materials involving the use of foreign building technology. High social value is set on cement products and on iron and steel products. Very few African countries are, however, self sufficient in the production of these materials. Indeed, in many of them, these products have largely to be imported. Faced with the current difficulties in their external balance of payments, many countries thus have to accept a very low rate of addition to their housing stock. This obsession with largely imported building materials also leads to complete discounting of the value of locally available materials involving the use of traditional technology of construction. Confronted with unrealistic standards and value preferences, local authorities are thus constrained to turn a blind eye to open contraventions of bye-laws and building regulations, contraventions which represent at least some positive contributions to the provisions of vitally needed housing accommodation in the city.

Apart from standards, there are the problems posed by the supply of land for systematic urban development in many African countries. In these countries, traditional land tenure system vests rights in land in lineages or extended family groups. During the colonial period, attempts were made to apply foreign legal processes to transactions in land although in many countries especially in West Africa these did not get as far as the establishment and legal registration of rights in land. The effect today is that the provision of land for urban housing involves intricate and risky negotiations with an indeterminate number of family members. Many private individuals who take on these risks

in a speculative sense thus expect to be adequately compensated whenever public authorities choose to acquire the land for urban development. It is true that in many African countries such authorities have powers of compulsory acquisition but these are meant to be exercised in the framework of fair compensation. The determination of what is fair is clearly debatable and is further confused where such land speculation is undertaken by members of the same elite class as those in the government. The result is that cost of land come to bulge so large in plans for housing development and seriously to limit the scope of effort of public authorities. By contrast, such prohibitiveness encourages squatting or temporary and illegal occupation and thus contributes to the prevalence and expansion of shanty-towns in the periphery of African cities.

In short, with respect to housing, a programme for the rational absorption of newcomers into African cities still has very far to go. The recent nature of the problem, its concentration largely on the capital city, the relative unpreparedness or incapacity of the public authorities to cope with it, all these are contributory to the present state of affairs. Yet, it would be doing less than justice to the migrants themselves to assume that, outside of what they might expect from voluntary associations whose members they know or to whom they are linked by some social ties, they expect their housing problems to be resolved by public authorities. What they desire more than anything else from a public authority is that it helps them to get employment. It is thus necessary to examine how well African cities have managed to absorb its newcomers in terms of offering them adequate job placements.

Employment opportunities for the newcomers

The period of rapid urbanization in African countries coincided not only with the expansion of social facilities in education and health on a national scale but also with growing industrial development in the cities. For

most African countries, this period of industrialization dates only from the mid-1950s, at a time when a new strategy for rapidly industrialising formerly backward colonial territories was being vigorously canvassed at the international level.^{14/} This strategy was that of import substitution whereby such territories begin their process of industrialization by producing first those consumer goods for which they already have developed markets and eventually working backwards to produce the machinery and equipment needed to manufacture the consumer goods. It was indeed a strategy based on the principle of "last things first". It was nonetheless very persuasive in its formulation and most governments in developing countries were attracted to it. In no time, many countries had factories producing wheat flour, soft drinks, beer, shoes, textile plastic materials, bicycles, domestic utensils and so on. Most of these factories, however, had to import not only their machines and equipments but also much of their semi-processed raw material, their working capital and their technical expertise. In short, what was done locally was no more than last stage assembling.

In terms of employment, it was soon clear that this type of industrial development whilst being capital intensive, created relatively few new jobs openings. But its factories became the highlights of the new urban economy and, along with government offices, employment in them became the ambition of the rapidly growing number of educated youths in most African countries. Those who were fortunate to be employed on a permanent basis found themselves with relatively high and regular monthly income. Yet, even for them, particularly those in the low-income group, most of the goods and services available in the large, modern commercial stores were too expensive for their purse. The result is the need for cheaper substitutes of somewhat indifferent quality. Such substitutes

^{14/} See, for example, A.O. Hirschman, The Strategy of Economic Development (New Haven, 1965).

were made available by other groups of Africans who had found in the city market opportunities to cater for the needs of the urban low income groups.

The result is the phenomenon in most African cities of an urban economy that can, for purposes of analysis, be dichotomised into two sectors - formal and informal. This terminology was first applied to urban economy in developing countries in the study of employment and incomes in the cities and towns of Kenya.^{15/} According to this definition, the formal sector of the urban economy comprises economic activities carried out within the scope of laws and official regulations governing such matters as the creation of shops or workshops, relations between employers and employees, taxation, and control of technical skills and of product quality. It is characterised by difficulty of entry, frequent reliance on overseas resources, corporate ownership, large scale of operation, capital-intensive and often imported technology, formally acquired skills, often expatriate, and protected markets through tariffs, quotas and trade licences.^{16/} The informal sector is the very obverse of this. It is notable by its ease of entry, its reliance on indigenous resources, family or one-man ownership, small scale of operation, labour intensive and adapted technology, skills acquired outside the formal school system, and unregulated and competitive markets.

Whatever its inadequacy, this distinction provides a basis for appreciating problems connected with the absorption of newcomers into African cities. After years of assuming that the failure of the formal sector to absorb most of these newcomers resulted in their being unemployed, we now know that for most of them the informal sector provided some form of employment which serves as a veritable buffer in their search for well-paid and regular employment.

^{15/} International Labour Organisation, op. cit.

^{16/} Ibid., p. 6.

Following on such pioneer studies as those of Callaway in Ibadan in 1960, the World Employment Programme of the International Labour Organisation has now mounted a number of studies into the employment opportunities available to migrants in the informal sector of the economy of cities in the developing countries of the world.^{17/} For Africa, apart from the already published study on Kenyan cities, there are others on Dakar in Senegal and Abidjan in the Ivory Coast.^{18/}

From these various studies three points stand out in connection with the absorption of newcomers into urban employment. First, the percentage of them that are unemployed, in the sense of having no gainful employment is smaller than used to be imagined. The Labour Force Sample Survey of 1966/67 for Nigeria showed that urban employment rate was only 8.9 per cent, of whom only about 30 per cent had been in search of employment for over two years.^{19/} Similarly, in Kenya, it was found that in Nairobi the unemployment rates for household heads both **male** and female was only 4.2 per cent.^{20/}

Secondly, the formal sector accounts for between 60 to 80 per cent of total employment in the capital city but its contribution drops significantly in other cities. Part of the reason for this is that a high proportion of all wage employment in African countries is concentrated in this single centre. Thus, in Kenya in 1969, Nairobi alone accounted for over 50 per cent of all wage-earning Africans in Kenya, 70 per cent of all Asians and over 85 per cent of all Europeans. It also accounted for over 66 per cent of the total wage bills for formal employment in Kenyan cities.^{21/} Similarly, in the Ivory Coast

^{17/} See Archie Callaway, "Nigeria's indigenous education: the apprentice system", ODU, Journal of the University of Ife Institute of African Studies, vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 62-79.

^{18/} See Chris Gerry, Petty Producers and the Urban Economy: A Case Study of Dakar (International Labour Organisation, WEP 2-19-101-1, Geneva, September 1974), 139 pp.; and H. Joshi, H. Lubell and J. Mouly, Urban Development and Employment in Abidjan (ILO, WEP 2-19, Geneva, October 1974).

^{19/} Federal Republic of Nigeria, Labour Force Sample Survey 1966/67 (National Manpower Board, Manpower Studies No. 11, Lagos, December 1972), p. 12.

^{20/} ILO, op. cit., p. 56.

in 1971, Abidjan Department alone accounted for over 70 per cent of the 132,000 wage and salary earners in the country.^{22/}

Thirdly, and most important, a sizeable proportion of those who used to be regarded as unemployed are now known to be engaged in the informal sectors of the economy. This sector covers such employment as traditional and modern artisan manufacturing and repairs like blacksmithery, furniture-making, shoe making and leather-goods, motor repair, bicycle repair, tailoring, trading and personal services. Most of these workers tend more often than not to be under-employed but not to be unemployed. Moreover, their enterprises are able to engage a large number of new immigrants usually as apprentices and in this way to facilitate the absorption of new comers into the city. In Kenya, it is estimated that this sector accounted in 1969 for some 20 per cent of income-earning opportunities in Nairobi and 35 per cent in Mombasa.^{23/} The percentage for Abidjan was shown as growing from 28 to 31 per cent between 1965 and 1970.^{24/} Mazumdar suggests that both these figures might be underestimations and that, from the experience of developing countries in Asia and Latin America, the proportion may be closer to 50 per cent even in the capital city.^{25/}

The informal sector of the urban economy thus performs a number of very vital functions in the absorption of newcomers into African cities. In the first place, through its apprenticeship system, it serves as a means not only of disseminating new skills but of improving the chances of later absorption into the formal sector of the economy. In the second place, the informal sector provides very special opportunity for absorbing young female migrants who, for

^{22/} H. Joshi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-33-2-35.

^{23/} ILO, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

^{24/} H. Joshi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 2-19.

^{25/} Dipak Mazumdar, "The urban informal sector" (unpublished paper, October 1974).

various reasons often have great difficulty in getting employed in the formal sector. Personal and domestic services provide ample employment for most of these. In the third place, this sector provides various goods and services for the immediate satisfaction of the consumption requirements of newcomers and the mass of low-income earners in the city.

The various significance of the informal sector is today forcing closer attention on it not only as a means of coping with the employment problems of newcomers but also as a potential leverage for dealing with issues of environmental improvement in African cities. Yet, if the truth be told we do not know enough about this sector and its operation to be sanguine of its ability to help solve these various problems. Informal sector producers and craftsmen in Dakar argue that their fate is considerably worse now than it was before. They argue that the unregulated nature of entry into the market generates such intense competition in which many lose out. What happens to those who lose out in this competition? Do they stay on in the city, move out to other cities or return home? Whatever the answer, it is clear that the process of absorption will be complete only when the opportunity for upward mobility come to be something that the newcomer can take for granted in his day-to-day existence in the city.

Socio-economic mobility for newcomers

Upward social mobility of newcomers can be said to be a function of two variables: an improvement in their skill and competence such that they can be absorbed into the formal sector, and an expansion in the demand for the products of their activities such that their earnings can become more regular and grow steadily. The first variable of absorption into the formal sector is usually the most desired and once it has happened the chances that the newcomer is permanently absorbed becomes very great. Nonetheless, this movement is not

always one-way or final. Periods of economic recession have always been marked by retrenchment in the formal sector and a re-involvement of former wage-earners in the informal sector.

It is, however, the expansion in the demand for their products which ensures a certain degree of regularity to the income and chances of upward social mobility for the majority of those engaged in the informal sector. This expansion is partly the result of growth in the city population and the linkage relation between activities in the informal and formal sector. The growth of population assures that there is a continuously growing market but it is the linkage relation that often determines that the informal sector can supply the needs of this market. In his study of the informal sector in Dakar, for instance, Gerry found that 80 per cent of furniture makers, 43 per cent of tailors and a sizeable proportion of metal workers, shoe makers, leather-workers and mechanics depend on the large foreign-owned firm for most of the raw material and equipment for their business.^{26/} Some of these raw materials include materials "recycled" from what are in effect wastes or discarded by-products of activities in the formal sector. There is thus an intimate dependent relation between the informal and the formal sectors such that changes in the latter could have serious consequences for the former.

Under conditions of continued economic growth, the personal income level available to the self-employed is thus often no worse off than that of formal sector employee earning the official minimum wage rate. Indeed, in his survey of labour markets in seven urban areas in Tanzania in 1971, Sabot found, for instance, that the income of the self-employed was unambiguously less equally distributed than that of the wage earners.^{27/} Accepting a minimum monthly wage

^{26/} Chris Gerry, op. cit., p. 131.

^{27/} R. H. Sabot, op. cit.

level in Tanzania at that date of Sh.180, he found that 23 per cent of those depending on house rentals, 32 per cent of those running Shamba, 33 per cent of street hawkers, 43 per cent of transporters, 51 per cent of those in crafts and artisanal manufacturing, 55 per cent of small contractors and hotel and bar proprietors and 64 per cent of shopkeepers earned well above this level. Indeed, in the case of shopkeeper more than 34 per cent earned over 1000s a month.

In terms of socio-economic mobility, however, it is not so much such monthly income as the life time performance of the self employed that is crucial. Intuitively, it is often assumed that the life-time performance of those in the informal sector will, whatever their earnings at the point of entry, typically produce a flat age earning profile, or at any rate, one significantly flatter than that for workers in the formal sector. The reasoning behind this is the belief that opportunities for stable capital accumulation and growth are very limited for activities in the informal sector. This proposition is, however, not borne out in practice. Although data is as yet unavailable for any African city, experience from cities in other developing countries, notably Malaysia, shows that there is little difference in the shape of the profile for male employees in the formal sector and male self-employed in the informal. The profile showed a growth of mean earnings from age 15 to about age 35, a slight decline to about age 55 and a sharper one after that date. For female employees and female self employed, however, the profiles were flatter for both categories but more so for the self-employed.^{28/}

This prospect of self-improvement for the self-employed in the informal sector ensures not only their upward mobility but also their total commitment to urban life. Their progress in the economic field comes to be matched by their residential mobility. The move from the shanty town to better neighbourhood in the city thus marks the final step in the absorption of migrants into the city.

^{28/} See Dipak Mazumdar, "The urban informal sector" (unpublished paper, October 1974).

It presumes the development of a viable network of contacts and relationships which can now enable the newcomer to withstand the stresses and vicissitudes of urban existence without any longer seeing a return to the rural area as an attractive alternative. Given these circumstances which have developed spontaneously, it is tempting to deliberate on what strategies governments can employ not only to ease the process of absorption for newcomers but more important to provide some institutional scaffolding for it.

Strategies for improving the absorptive capacity of African cities

Any strategy to improve the absorptive capacity of African cities must be squarely predicated on a new and decisive orientation by African governments to the rural-urban migration process, an orientation that does not see rural migrants solely as a problem but more as people whose high achievement motivation and determination constitute important resource that could be tapped to alleviate or even cure much of the present urban ailments. The immediate implication of such a new orientation would be to force a review of the present strategies being pursued by various governments to deal with this problem. At present, most governmental programmes for improving urban conditions are based on the use of capital and capital intensive technology. Whether it is the provision of housing, the construction of roads, the installing of public utilities and social facilities, the practice is to contract this out to various large-scale, often foreign enterprises at enormous costs. The result is that when the main problem is touched at all, the effect is often no more than a scratch on the surface. More often than not what is achieved is the opposite of the stated objective.

The new orientation thus places more emphasis on social mobilization of people than on huge capital investment. Social mobilization enables the exploitation of novel ways of coping with the problem of employment, housing and

environmental improvement for low-income people. Such ways involve numerous variants of self-help schemes by which newcomers provide the unskilled labour for constructing their own accommodation whilst the authorities offer various expertise and materials needed to complete the house. In this regard, it is important to stress that whilst there are a few examples of successful self-help housing schemes, these have been the exception rather than the rule. Part of the reasons for failure include the token nature of the effort, the lack of official commitment and long range policy support by government and the failure to treat these schemes as an integral part of regionally and nationally planned development effort.

An equally important reason for failure is the inability of public authorities to acquire land to a sufficient extent for such socially mobilized effort. There is already a growing feeling that many African countries are reaching the point where they cannot afford to dodge taking the critical step to create urban land banks or similar schemes designed to facilitate the cheap acquisition by city authorities of land in the periphery of cities. When such decisions have been taken, they would ensure that site-and-service schemes so essential for providing cheap housing for the low-income group can be more expeditiously tackled.

Social mobilization is also critical for improving the employment opportunities for newcomers. It must be agreed that for a long time to come, the formal sector of the economy is unlikely to absorb a sizeable proportion of newcomers into African cities. Whilst government must, therefore, continue to do everything necessary to ensure the steady expansion of employment opportunities in this sector, it must now make determined effort to mobilize activities in the informal sector to perform more effectively their function of training ground and buffer. A major necessity in such a programme of mobilization is an

improvement in the statistical information available about them. For many countries, this would involve the introduction of licensing for most of these activities. Licensing, however, must not be used as a means of restricting entry into this sector but should serve to guide governmental programme of assistance so that they can reach out to many informal sector activities and enhance their capacity to absorb more newcomers.

One area of assistance is to ensure the continuous expansion of the market for the products of this sector. It has been mentioned that such expansion is a function both of increased demand by the growing mass of low wage earners and steady supply of material (or bye-products) and equipment by enterprises in the formal sector. Government can assist on both fronts. In terms of demand, government can encourage a process of purchasing direct from the informal sector. This would be particularly advantageous for the craft and artisanal manufacturing enterprises but to succeed would involve some effort at organising them in an appropriate manner.

On the supply side, government assistance could take the form of extending credit facilities to these small entrepreneurs. In many African countries, government often have a variety of credit schemes to aid small-scale enterprises. But these hardly ever gets down to the majority of those concerned. Part of the reason for failure is not only inadequate publicity but lack of awareness of the special circumstances of most of these enterprises. This requires that some imagination be exercised in designing credit schemes in such a way that they can apply directly to those they are meant to serve. Such imaginative programmes will depend on the interests shown in mobilising the various categories of activities within the informal sector.

Finally, government can assist these enterprises by establishing extension service units to help upgrade the level of their skills and managerial competence and encourage greater product sophistication. Again, such a programme can

succeed only where the emphasis is first on social mobilization. The impact of such extension services will be not only to improve the type of training enterprises in the informal sector continue to provide to the masses of newcomers to the city but also to increase the chances of some of these enterprises to cross the threshold into the formal sector of the economy. Either way such a programme would be instrumental in improving the absorptive capacity of cities especially in terms of those who can be made to become finally committed to urban existence.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that none of these strategies of absorption has much chance of success without basic structural transformation in the socio-economic organisation of societies in developing countries. To put it in the words of Gerry:

"If promotional strategies for small industry and petty production are formulated with disregard for the socio-economic reality which obtains in a contemporary underdeveloped country where the interests of self-centred and self-sustained economic growth are subordinated to the interests of a small but prosperous domestic élite who are themselves in turn subordinated to the interests of the foreign capital invested in, and profiting from, production in those underdeveloped countries, no evolution of petty production will be possible. 29/

Yet, if petty production or the informal sector fails to evolve, then the chances of most of the cities in African countries to absorb the mass of newcomers streaming in to them becomes very low.

The problem is not made any easier by the prevailing attitude among leaders in most of these countries, an attitude which sees planned development as a technical exercise of capital allocation among economic sectors which is best left to civil servants to cope with. Such an attitude places very little premium on social mobilization and thus already compromises the chances of

success of strategies such as those outlined above. The danger that such strategies when implemented in a social context could have the opposite effect of further concentrating national resources in the hands of a small elite is already being perceived in many African countries where government has attempted the indigenisation of the economy.

What all this boils down to is that the capacity of African cities to absorb newcomers and ensure for them a tolerably decent standard of living cannot be divorced from the overall strategy and ideology of development in a country. It emphasizes the fact that the element system in a country must not be seen as a passive variable in the development process but as a dynamic agglomeration of people whose fortunes are inextricably interwoven with that of the economy as a whole. Thus, over and above the macro-economic and sectoral policies of development, governments must pay great attention to policies at the level of specific sectors of the population. Within cities such policies must be concerned not simply with beautification and the provision of capital intensive infrastructure but with how to fully utilize the potential human resources represented by the many newly arrived migrants anxious to become functionally and meaningfully integrated into urban society.

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