Transforming African Cities: United Nations Technical Assistance, Urban Development, and Modernization in a Decade of Decolonization, c. 1955–1965

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ABSTRACTS

Experten der Vereinten Nationen spielten in den späten 1950er und frühen 1960er Jahren eine bedeutende Rolle bei der Formulierung urbaner Entwicklungspolitiken für das subsaharische Afrika. Obwohl der Prozess der rasanten Urbanisierung hier bereits in den 1920er Jahren begonnen hatte, waren die damit verbundenen Probleme von den kolonialen Regimes lange Zeit vernachlässigt worden, so dass die Regierungen der neuen unabhängigen Nationen mit einer Reihe von strukturellen Problemen konfrontiert waren, zu denen beispielsweise das Fehlen einer effizienten Bauindustrie, Mangel an ausgebildetem Fachpersonal oder die weitgehende Nichtexistenz von Daten und Statistiken zählte. Vor diesem Hintergrund entspann sich ein Diskurs über Strategien zur Lösung der Herausforderungen, die weit über pragmatische Ansätze hinaus auch grundsätzlichere Fragen über die Zusammenhänge zwischen Urbanisierung, Modernisierung und Entwicklung im subsaharischen Afrika beinhaltete.

United Nations experts played an important role in formulating policies of urban development in Sub-Saharan Africa during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Even though the process of rapid urbanization in the region had begun in the 1920s, colonial regimes had been slow to react to this challenge. Thus, governments of the newly independent countries were confronted with a number of structural problems, among them the lack of an efficient building materials industry and qualified personnel or the virtual non-existence of data and statistics. In this context, a discourse on strategies to cope with the challenge developed that went far beyond pragmatic approaches and involved more general questions about the interrelationship of urbanization, modernization and development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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The two decades after the end of the Second World War saw the emergence of a newly globalized "Urban International".[1] Undoubtedly, questions of housing and urban planning had been discussed in a transnational setting for much of the twentieth century, and architects and urbanists exchanged expertise both through private networks and the structures provided by influential organizations such as the International Federation for Town and Country Planning.[2] But, despite some interest in the colonies and apart from a few exceptional conferences where colonial urban problems were discussed,[3] the interwar Urban International had been mainly transatlantic in scope, focusing on urban policies in Europe and America.[4] It was only in the post-war decades, when the dimension of rapid urbanization in the Global South became visible and the processes of decolonization led to new challenges, that its perspectives became truly global.

As I have argued elsewhere,[5] the United Nations played a leading role in this process. Given the new organizations' commitment to international social and economic cooperation in its charter,[6] it became involved in questions of housing and planning in the immediate post-war years when reconstruction in Europe and Asia seemed one of the most pressing problems. From the early 1950s however, under the influence of new members from the rapidly decolonizing Global South and the emerging discourse of "development", the focus changed to the specific problems posed by rapid urbanization in what were regarded the "less developed" parts of the world. Debates on these problems in the United Nations Economic and Social Council made them highly visible for an international audience, and it was indeed under the aegis of UN and UNESCO that the first international conferences on social and economic questions connected to urbanization in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were held during the late 1950s and early 1960s.[7]

1 I borrow this term from P.-Y. Saunier, Sketches from the Urban Internationale, 1910–50: Voluntary Associations, International Institutions and US Philanthropic Foundations, in: International Journal of Urban & Regional Research 25 (2001) 2, pp. 380–403. This article builds on sources from the following archives: Architectural Association, London/Otto Koenigsberger Papers (AA/OK); Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY/Charles Abrams Papers (CUL/CA); United Nations Archives, New York City (UNA).

2 For discussions see e.g. ibid.; P. Hall, Cities of Tomorrow. An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century, Oxford 2014; A. Sutcliffe, Towards the Planned City. Germany, Britain, the United States, and France, 1780–1914 (Comparative Studies in Social and Economic History 3), Oxford 1981; D. T. Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age, Cambridge, MA 1998; P. Wagner, Stadtplanung für die Welt? Internationales Expertenwissen 1900–1960 (Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft 220), Göttingen 2016; S. V. Ward, A Pioneer 'Global Intelligence Corps'? The Internationalisation of Planning Practice, 1890–1939, in: Town Planning Review 76 (2005) 2, pp. 119–141.

3 See e.g. P. Schäfer (ed.), Wohnungswesen in Tropischen und Subtropischen Ländern. XIV. Internationaler Wohnungs- und Städtebau-Kongress, Brussels 1938; J. Royer (ed.), L'urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux. Communications & rapports du congrès international d l'urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays de latitude intertropicale. 2 vols, La Charité-sur-Loire and Paris 1932–1935.

4 Wagner, Stadtplanung für die Welt, pp. 140–142.

5 T. Wolffhardt, Vom Wiederaufbau zur urbanen Entwicklungspolitik. Die Vereinten Nationen, transnationale Netzwerke und das Problem der Urbanisierung, ca. 1945–1966, in: Historische Zeitschrift 309 (2019) 2, pp. 337–376.

6 UN Charta, Chapter IX, esp. articles 55 and 56. B Simma (ed.), The Charter of the United Nations. A Commentary (Oxford Commentaries on International Law). 2 vols, 3rd edn, Oxford 2012, vol. 2, pp. 1535–1610; for a programmatic assessment of the global role of the United Nations in the social field see S. Amrith and G. Sluga New Histories of the United Nations, in: Journal of World History 19 (2008) 3, pp. 251–274.

7 See P. M. Hauser (ed.), Urbanization in Asia and the Far East. Proceedings of the Joint UN/UNESCO Seminar

At the heart of UN activities stood the small Department of Housing, Building and Planning within the Secretariat in New York. From 1951 to 1966 it was headed by Ernest Weissmann, a Yugoslav former CIAM architect with a broad network of connections in architectural and urbanist circles.[8] Under his leadership, the department developed into what I want to call one of the "nodding points" of the globalizing Urban International. Its influence was not only guaranteed by working for UN bodies and publishing an international magazine on housing and planning, but above all through its activities within the United Nations' Program of Technical Assistance.[9] Through the 1950s and early 1960s, the department not only organized a series of transnational conferences, many of them on specific urban problems of the Global South, but also engaged in about 130 expert missions to the Global South, involving more than 280 experts from at least 43 countries.[10]

In this article, I will focus on the department's activities in Sub-Saharan Africa during the decade from around 1955 to 1965, the period in which most Sub-Saharan countries gained their independence. In doing so, I want firstly to provide insight into the role of the United Nations Technical Assistance Programme during the crucial years of constitutional decolonization. International Organizations tried to fill spaces left void by departing colonial administrations through international expertise. Secondly, I want to show that in the specific circumstances of decolonization the formulation of policies of urban development presented itself as a choice between different alternatives that were as much dependent on actual conditions as on general questions about the meaning of the urbanization process in Sub-Saharan Africa. I begin this paper with a short overview of the urban situation at the time of decolonization. The second section is devoted to the emergence of the UN Programme of Technical Assistance in the years of independences, while the third discusses alternative approaches to the housing problem proposed in the early 1960s. The final part of the article will be concerned with the question of how policies of urban development were tied to larger ideas about Sub-Saharan societies and the relationship between urbanization and modernization.

(in Co-operation with the International Labour Office) on Urbanization in the ECAFE Region, Bangkok, 8.–18. August, 1956, Calcutta 1957; id. (ed.), Urbanization in Latin America. Proceedings of a Seminar jointly sponsored by the Bureau of Social Affairs of the United Nations, the Economic Commission for Latin America and UNESCO (in Co-operation with the International Labour Organization and the Organization of American States) on Urbanization Problems in Latin America. Santiago (Chile), 6 to 18 July 1959, New York 1961; UNESCO (ed.), Social Implications of Industrialization and Urbanization in Africa South of the Sahara, Paris 1956; Report on the Workshop on Urbanization in Africa, 26.4.–11.5.1962, UN/ST/TAO/Ser.C/57.

8 For Weissmann's pre-war activities see T. Bjazic Klarin / Ernest Weissmann. Socially Engaged Architecture, 1926–1939, Zagreb 2015; for more detail on the war and immediate after war years my "Vom Wiederaufbau zur urbanen Entwicklungspolitik", pp. 346–348.

9 For recent accounts see C. N. Murphy, The United Nations Development Programme, Cambridge 2006, pp. 51–81; O. Stokke, The UN and Development. From Aid to Cooperation (United Nations Intellectual History Project), Bloomington 2009, pp. 43–82.

10 For an overview for the years 1950–1967 see: The United Nations Development Programme in Housing, Building and Planning. Cumulative List of United Nations Development Programme Projects, 18.7.1966, UN/E/C.6/54/Add. 1.

1. The Colonial Heritage

The period of Sub-Saharan independences was in many ways a period of optimism. Independent governments aspired to overcome the humiliating colonial experience and to define a new role for Africa in the world. Central to this vision was, as Frederick Cooper has argued, the idea of "development", understood as a general rise of living standards, access to social services, healthcare and education, water and food security or even the increase of agricultural productivity and the introduction of modern farming methods.[11] For the more radical African leaders it also encompassed the vision of an industrialized and urbanized future.[12] Iconic figures such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana or Sékou Touré in Guinea envisioned a future for their capitals as modern cities comparable to the metropolises of Europe and North America, symbolizing at the same time the will of overcoming colonial restraints and the claim of African countries for participation in international modernity.[13]

However, these aspirations met with a difficult colonial heritage. Since the 1920s, Sub-Saharan urban agglomerations had entered a phase of intensive growth. Many Africans migrated to administrative and economic centres in the hope of higher standards of living, better job opportunities, and more generally, of escaping rural poverty. Urban populations doubled between 1920 and 1940, and again during the two following decades.[14] The inhabitants of colonial capitals such as Dakar and Léopoldville (Kinshasa) multiplied up to more than tenfold during these forty years, meaning that towns with a population from about 25,000 to 30,000 inhabitants grew to cities of 300,000 and 400,000 inhabitants.[15] Urban growth was maybe not as spectacular in the lesser colonial towns, but clearly it pointed in the same direction: Conakry in Guinea, for example, still a comparatively small town in the late 1950s, grew from 15,000 in 1939 to 70,000 inhabitants at the time of independence.[16]

11 F. Cooper, Africa since 1940. The Past of the Present (New Approaches to African History), Cambridge 2002, p. 91.

12 However, there were also dissenting voices among Sub-Saharan Intellectuals. For differing views in French West Africa cf. J. E. Genova, Africanité and Urbanité: The Place of the Urban in Imaginings of African Identity during the Late Colonial Period in French West Africa, in: S. J. Salm / T. Falola (eds.), African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective, Rochester 2005, pp. 266–286.

13 See N. Plageman, 'Accra Is Changing, Isn't It?'. Urban Infrastructure, Independence, and Nation in the Gold Coast's Daily Graphic, 1954–57, in: International Journal of African Historical Studies 43 (2010) 1, pp. 137–159; M. Smokvina / M. Smode Cvitanovic / B. Kincl, Influence of Croatian Urban Planners. Urban Development Plan of Conakry, Guinea, 1963, in: C. Nunes Silva (ed.), Urban Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa: Colonial and Post-Colonial Planning Cultures, New York 2015, pp. 225–244; Ł. Stanek, Architects of Socialist Countries in Ghana (1957–67). Modern Architecture and Mondialisation, in: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 74 (2015) 4, pp. 416–442, at 426–428.

14 United Nations, Growth of the World's Urban and Rural Population, 1920–2000 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Studies 44), New York 1969, UN/ST/SOA/Ser. A/44, p. 27.

15 L. Beeckmans, Making the African City: Dakar, Dar es Salaam, Kinshasa, 1920–1980, PhD thesis Rijksuniversiteit Groningen 2013, p. 22.

16 J. Suret-Canale, Conakry, Capitale de la Guinée, in: C. Coquéry-Vidrovitch (ed.), Processus d'urbanisation en Afrique, 2 vols, Paris 1988, vol. 2, pp. 93–103, at 93.

Colonial urban policies never proved to be adequate to that challenge. For much of the twentieth century colonial urbanism had been based on the principle of segregation which found its expression in the duality of colonial cities:[17] Investment and building concentrated on city centres with their administrative and public buildings and European residential areas, where services such as water-pipes and sewerage, electricity and paved roads were generally available. The needs of growing African populations, however, were largely neglected: "Traditional" quarters that often predated colonial power became increasingly overcrowded and insanitary, while the large number of newcomers had to be content to live in self-built shacks and huts in the peripheries, regularly without any services or even paved roads available.[18]

Only in the years of development colonialism after the Second World War, colonial urban policies gradually began to change. Colonial administrations, be they French, Belgian or British, developed a greater interest in Sub-Saharan cities. Master plans for many of them were drawn during that period, while investment in housing for Africans was made for the first time on a large scale. In the French colonies semi-public Sociétés Immobilières began to play a major role,[19] while in the Congo the Office des Cités Africaines began huge construction activities.[20] British approaches were hardly centralized, but also in the Colonial Office structures for urban policies were created and building programmes set up in many colonies.[21]

17 See e.g. C. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, From Residential Segregation to African Urban Centres. City Planning and the Modalities of Change in Africa South of the Sahara, in: Journal of Contemporary African Studies 32 (2014) 1, pp. 1–12; id., Racial and Social Zoning in African Cities from Colonization to Postindependence, in: E. Bogaerts/R. Raben (eds.), Beyond Empire and Nation. Decolonizing Societies in Africa and Asia, 1930s–1970s, Leiden 2012, pp. 267–286; R.K. Home, Of Planting and Planning. The Making of British Colonial Cities (Planning, History and Environment Series). 2nd edn, London 2013, pp. 135–147.

18 See e.g. L. Bigon, A History of Urban Planning in two West African Colonial Capitals. Residential Segregation in British Lagos and French Dakar (1850–1930), Lewiston 2009, p. 209; p. 294f.

19 S. Dulucq, La France et les villes d'Afrique noire francophone. Quarante ans d'intervention (1945–1985). Approche générale et études de cas: Niamey, Ouagadougou et Bamako (Collection villes et entreprises), Paris 1997, pp. 144–146; J. Poinsot/A. Sinou/J. Sternadel, Les villes d'Afrique noire. Politiques et opérations d'urbanisme et d'habitat entre 1650 et 1960, Paris 1989, pp. 173–176; J.-L. Vénard, 25 ans de Intervention française dans le secteur urbain en Afrique noire francophone, Paris 1986, pp. 26–27.

20 B. de Meulder, OCA (Office des cités africaines) and the Urban Question in Central Africa, in: Conference Proceedings: Modern Architecture in East Africa around Independence (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, July 27–29, 2005), Utrecht 2005, pp. 141–148; id., Het Office des Cités Africaines. Wonen als instrument van instant welvaartskolonialisme in Belgisch Congo (1952–1960), in: K. van Herck/T. Avermaete (eds.), Wonen in welvaart. Woningbouw en wooncultur en Vlaanderen, 1948–1973, Rotterdam 2006, pp. 94–109.

21 R. Harris, The Turning Point in Urban Policy for British Colonial Africa, 1939–1945, in F. Demissie (ed.), Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa Intertwined and Contested Histories, Farnham 2012, pp. 127–152; A. D. King, Exporting Planning: The Colonial and Neo-colonial Experience, in: G. E. Cherry (ed.), Shaping an Urban World. Planning in the Twentieth Century (Studies in History, Planning and the Environment), New York 1980, pp. 203–226, at 215–216.

Figure 1: "Guinea-Conakry: A Study in Contrast" (Background Photography), 1962.
Source: UN Photo Library, New York.

However, the results of these efforts may be summed up as "too little too late". A number of modern housing developments resulted (fig. 1), which on the supply side of the housing problem may indeed have made a difference. But this was certainly not enough to balance decades of neglect. And while colonial low cost housing programmes were designed for African wage earners, this group presented only a small fraction of African urban populations. Even given the lack of data characteristic of colonial Africa, it seems certain to assume that the rent for low standard modern housing was out of reach for the majority of African urbanites.[22] At the same time, ongoing rapid urbanization aggravated the urban problems still further, and peripheral settlements that came to be known as shanty towns and bidonvilles grew ever larger.[23]

Tackling these problems was even made harder for independent governments by a number of structural problems. The first of these lay in the fact that the African building materials industry could safely be described as "underdeveloped". Colonial administra-

22 Coquéry-Vidrovitch, Racial and Social Zoning, p. 277.

23 C. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, Villes coloniales et histoire des Africains, in: Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire 20 (1988), pp. 49–73, at 67–69.

tions had been happy to import building materials and had never made much effort in developing a domestic industry. In the early 1960s for example, in the whole of West Africa no factories producing necessary building materials such as iron or steel parts for construction, electrical or sanitary equipment, window glass and paint could be found. In addition, the three cement plants which existed produced only a third of the amount consumed in the region.[24] The fact that all these materials had to be imported increased building cost enormously.

At the same time, the departure of colonial administrations and their subsequent Africanization often meant a profound loss of expertise. Colonial education systems did not provide for a large number of qualified Africans to fill these gaps – while there was a small number of persons that could study abroad, in general the secondary education provided for in the colonies was far from sufficient to satisfy postcolonial needs. This was particularly true for the fields of housing, building and planning. Not everywhere was the situation as dramatic as in Malawi, where the only town planning expert left the country with independence.[25] But the fact that apart from South Africa no Sub-Saharan territory possessed an architectural faculty or a town planning school before independence, guaranteed that, apart from a few privileged graduates from North American or European universities, almost no qualified personnel was available.[26] And even if the colonial powers had hesitantly begun to build administrative structures to cope with the problems of housing and urban development in most of their territories after the Second World War, the upper echelons of institutions such as Public Work Departments in the British and Directions de l'urbanisme in the French colonies were almost exclusively staffed with Europeans. Where, as in Ghana, the transfer of power was taking on the form of a more or less organized process spanning a period of years the worst consequences could be avoided through targeted qualification and gradual replacement.[27] However, where political decolonization came as a rupture, independent governments would be confronted with an untenable situation. In what might be the most extreme case, Guinea, left by the French colonial administration in a rush after its negative vote on de Gaulle's "Communauté Française" in September 1958, found itself not only de-

24 United Nations/Economic Commission for Africa, Housing in Africa [Addis Ababa?] 1965, UN/E/CN.14/HOU/Rev, p. 4f.

25 The United Nations Development Programme in Housing, Building and Planning. Cumulative List of United Nations Development Programme Projects, 18.6.1966, UN/E/C.6/54/Add.1, p. 40.

26 N. Odentaal / J. Duminy / D. K.B. Inkoom, The Developmentalist Origins and Evolution of Planning Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, c. 1940 to 2010, in: C. Nunes Silva (ed.), Urban Planning in Lusophone African Countries, Farnham 2015, pp. 285–299, at 289 and 291; African Modernism. The Architecture of Independence: Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia eds. M. Herz, I. Schröder, H. Focketyn, J. Jamrozik, I. Baan, A. Webster, Zurich 2015, p. 11.

27 However, even in Ghana the change-over from Colonial Office to Gold Coast Civil Service and the departure of colonial administrators caused a huge lack of qualified staff, even if, in retrospective, the loss of expertise seems less dramatic than in many other African countries. Otto Koenigsberger, United Nations Technical Assistance Administration Second Housing Mission to the Gold Coast 1955/56. Progress Report No. 1, 16.1.1956, UNA/S-0441/1084, p. 2.

prived of all expert staff in questions of urbanism but also without documentation of previous and ongoing projects.[28]

2. United Nations Technical Assistance (UNTA) and Decolonization in Africa

In this situation, international expertise was much sought for by the newly independent Sub-Saharan states, and the UN Programme of Technical Assistance proved particularly attractive. Compared to other parts of the world, UN Technical Assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa was slow to develop. In 1952, of the 1,767 experts engaged in the programme, only 55 or little more than three per cent were assigned to Sub-Saharan territories.[29] Four years later, on the eve of Ghanaian independence, total numbers had risen to 220 experts, but that still represented only about seven per cent of the total of 3,122.[30] The reason for this was, of course, not a willful neglect of the region by the United Nations, but an obvious aversion of the colonial powers to international interference of what they regarded as their respective empires' internal affairs. Indeed, the mistrust against International Organization in the early 1950s went so far that they founded their own organization for technical assistance – the Commission for Technical Cooperation in Africa South of the Sahara (CCTA) – that was supposed to channel and control international activity in the field.[31] Given these constraints during the colonial period, it is hardly surprising that UN Technical Assistance activity almost exploded during the years of constitutional decolonization: In 1964 expert assignments to Sub-Saharan Africa reached a number of 1,700, meaning more than 30 per cent of the total programme (fig. 2).[32]

Many of the UNTA projects during the decade of independences mirrored the "classical" fields of UN Specialized Agencies such as the FAO, the WHO or UNESCO in that they focused on issues such as the improvement of agricultural production, health services and education. However, already in 1954 a first mission was also organized by the UN Department of Housing, Building and Planning.

28 F. Pfister, M comme métis. Des idéalistes en Guinée-Conakry, Paris 1995, p. 37; p. 135.

29 Fifth Report of the Technical Assistance Board to the Technical Assistance Committee, UN/E/2433, p. 151f.

30 Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1956, UN/E/TAC/REP/97, p. 112.

31 V. Bonnecase, La pauvreté au Sahel. Du savoir colonial à la mesure international, Paris 2011, pp. 114–118; J. Kent, The Internationalization of Colonialism. Britain, France, and Black Africa, 1939–1956, Oxford 1992, pp. 263–267.

32 Fifth Report of the Technical Assistance Board to the Technical Assistance Committee, UN/E/2433, 151f; Sixth Report of the Technical Assistance Board, UN/E/TAC/REP/3, p. 257; Seventh Report of the Technical Assistance Board, UN/E/TAC/REP/25, p. 260; Eighth Report of the Technical Assistance Board, UN/E/TAC/REP/66, p. 97; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1956, UN/E/TAC/REP/97, p. 112; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1957, UN/E/TAC/REP/120, p. 107; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1958, UN/E/TAC/REP/143, p. 120; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1959, UN/E/TAC/REP/166, p. 108; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1960, UN/E/TAC/REP/189, p. 124; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1961, UN/E/TAC/REP/213/Rev.1, p. 29f; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1962, UN/E/TAC/REP/235/Rev.1, p. 134f; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1963, UN/E/TAC/REP/265, p. 106f; Annual Report of the Technical Assistance Board for 1964, UN/E/TAC/REP/276, pp. 120–122.

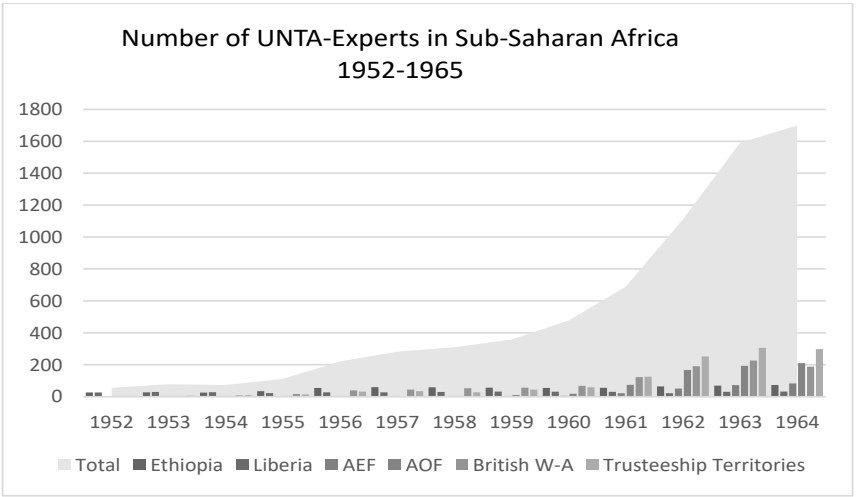


Figure 2: Number of UNTA-Experts in Sub-Saharan Africa 1952-65 (exclusive of regional experts). Regional numbers including former colonies. Sources: Annual Reports of the Technical Assistance Board, 1953–1965. Details given in note 32.

In what must be seen as a unique case that predated political independence, a team of three high-level experts – Otto Koenigsberger, Charles Abrams and Wladimir Bodiansky – visited Ghana, then still the Gold Coast.[33] Most missions, however, took place immediately after independences. In the late 1950s and early 1960s experts were sent to fourteen newly independent countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in addition, a team of three regional advisers was formed in 1963, who travelled the continent on short-term missions.[34]

3. Approaching the Housing Problem

UN experts became involved in tackling the problems of urbanization on many different levels. They advised governments on the establishment of new administrative structures such as Housing and Planning Boards, on the reform of building and planning regulations, legislation concerning land titles, and also on savings and loans institutions. They organized courses for engineers and foremen, and, in some cases, they were instrumental in the founding of institutions of higher education and building research.[35] Sometimes,

33 See Report on Housing in the Gold Coast. Prepared for the Government of the Gold Coast by Charles Abrams, Vladimir Bodiansky and Otto H. G. Koenigsberger. Appointed by the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration, 26.4.1956, UN/TAA/GOC/1.

34 The United Nations Development Programme in Housing, Building and Planning. Cumulative List of United Nations Development Programme Projects, 18.7.1966, UN/E/C.6/54/Add.1, pp. 21–56.

35 A good example for this is the establishment of an architectural and planning school at the Kumasi College of

as in Lagos, they even became involved in metropolitan planning.[36] Suggestions and results necessarily differed, depending on local conditions and government priorities, but in sum these advisory missions must be seen as part of a medium-term strategy which aimed at providing independent Sub-Saharan countries with the necessary instruments to cope with the challenges posed by ongoing rapid urbanization.

All experts agreed, however, that the deteriorating situation in African cities also urgently needed immediate action, particularly with regard to the ever worsening housing situation. UN experts spent much of their energies in conceptualizing national housing programmes that could replace colonial projects which had only improved supply for selected groups. Among housing experts from both the Western and Eastern hemispheres it was a long-held belief that the mechanisms of the free market could not, in the foreseeable future, offer a solution to the problem of adequate housing for the urban poor. This was the more so in Sub-Saharan countries, where even in a country with an above average medium income such as Ghana only four per cent of the urban population were expected to dispose of the necessary financial means to provide for adequate housing without any form of external support.[37] In other words, the housing problem was not seen as a question of supply and demand but as a question of needs and economic capacities to meet these needs.[38]

Such a perspective caused a full set of consecutive problems because it required a knowledge of both needs and capacities that was virtually non-existent in Sub-Saharan Africa. A lack of data on actual urban populations and housing conditions was virtually ubiquitous, which made the exact analysis of present inadequacies and the projection of future needs almost impossible. The same was true for reliable statistics on household incomes, essential for the definition of target groups in any comprehensive housing programme.[39] However, even without exact data, any possible solution to housing problems could be defined as depending on three variables: income and saving levels (extremely low), housing costs (extremely high) and governments' financial possibilities to bridge the gap between the two (severely limited). As any of these variables could determine the success or failure of a housing programme, much thought was spent on how slender government

Technology in Ghana. First suggested by Abrams and Koenigsberger, a school for 'community planning' was established in 1958, which formed a basis for the faculty of architecture that in the late 1960s cooperated with the Architectural Association in London. See Report to the Council of Kumasi College of Technology, Gold Coast, on Professional Education in Subjects Allied to Building. By Prof. R. Gardner-Medwin and Prof. J. A. L. Matheson, 5.11.1956, UN/TAA/GOC/1Add.1 App; H. P. Oberlander, Planning Education for Newly Independent Countries, in: Journal of the American Institute of Planners 28 (1962) 2, pp. 116–123, at 121–122; Arena: The Architectural Association Journal 82 (1966) 904: Kumasi Special Issue.

36 See Charles Abrams, Susumu Kobe, Otto Koenigsberger, Maurice Shapiro and Michael Wheeler, Metropolitan Lagos. Report Prepared for the Ministry of Lagos Affairs of the Federal Government of Nigeria, April 1963, UNA/S-0175/1554/0003.

37 Report on Housing in the Gold Coast, UN/TAA/GOC/1, pp. 10–12 and App. A: Housing Needs and Targets, pp. 44–61.

38 United Nations/ECA, Housing in Africa, pp. 107–122.

39 United Nations/Bureau of Social Affairs, Report on the World Social Situation including Studies of Urbanization in Under-developed Areas. Prepared in Cooperation with the International Labour Office, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the World Health Organization, New York 1957, UN/ST/SOA/33, p. 148.

means could be put to most effect and of how savings for housing could be encouraged. The approach that seemed to promise the most immediate success, however, was the lowering of building costs which formed the most substantial part of housing cost. When the United Nations initiated a series of pilot and demonstrations projects in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1960s,[40] emphasis was thus laid on testing different methods of construction that were deemed to allow substantial reductions of expense. The ultimate aim was not only giving examples of how a reduction in building cost could be realized but also comparing the value of differing approaches.[41]

Basically, this meant a choice between three different ways of building, even if approaches could be combined, and choosing one never meant completely excluding the others. The first of these was what could be called a "high modernist" approach to building as it tended to replace traditional building methods by decidedly modern technologies based on the industrialization of building. In its centre stood the method of heavy prefabrication, meaning that standardized building elements such as walls or ceilings were produced in factories and transported to building sites where they would be compounded. This technology was not only deemed to be the basis of the success of housing programmes in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, but also proved to be increasingly attractive to the Western hemisphere.[42] While UN experts on the spot generally took a critical stance on such programmes,[43] they proved to be popular with West African governments, probably because they promised modern accommodation for modern African urbanites as well as industrialization at the same time. Even if this would initially cause huge investments, it was thought that these could be amortized by high output over a number of years.

A second, much less radical, approach built on the improvement of conventional construction methods. Experts believed that much cost could be saved through more efficient planning and improved housing design, reorganization and rationalization of building processes, standardizing building elements such as doors and windows and, wherever possible, the replacement of imported materials with domestic production. This approach was, for example, tested in Guinea, where the United Nations in cooperation with the government of Israel initiated a pilot project consisting of the building of 47 housing units in Conakry.[44]

Finally, building in the form of aided self-help projects was a question much discussed

40 These were based on a resolution of the UN General Assembly in 1960. UN/A/RES/1508(XV) 12.12.1960. For the general scope of these projects see e.g. Planning and Implementation of Pilot Projects in Housing, Building and Planning. Report by the Secretary-General, 30.12.1963, UN/E/C.6/15.

41 See Ernest Weissmann, Guinea – Pilot Project, 7.7.1962, UNA/S-0175/0535/0001. The project was only realized in part.

42 See e.g. United Nations/Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Report of the Ad hoc Group of Experts on Housing and Urban Development, New York 1962, UN/ST/SOA/50, pp. 32–34.

43 See Report on Housing in the Gold Coast, UN/TAA/GOC/1, App. M: The Schokbeton Building Method, pp. 134–142.; Branko Tuckoric to Ernest Weissmann, 1.4.1965, UNA/S-0175/0534/0008.

44 Accord tripartite Guinée-ONU-Israel pour la construction d'un habitat expérimental a rez-de-chaussée à Conakry, 9.4.1963, UNA/S-0175/0535/0001. For a short overview see Henrik Ramic, Report of Mission to Republic of Guinea (21 September–17 November 1966), UNA/S-0137/0002/0012.

in the early 1960s. Basic to this approach was the idea that cost could be considerably reduced by future house owners' contribution in form of their own labour. Such projects could take on different forms, but in general they consisted of the provision of serviced lots, the purchase of materials in bulk, the selection of appropriate participants, their training and organization in working groups and finally the supervision of works and technical support.[45] Savings were thought to be considerable: When the UN expert Donald Hanson prepared a UN pilot project in Mogadishu in the early 1960s, for example, he expected a reduction of costs of 20 to 50 per cent.[46]

Each of these approaches had its flaws. Despite early warnings from UN experts against such an approach, prefabrication plants were set up by governments in both Ghana and Guinea during the 1960s. Both never reached the stage of mass production as given transport problems and the dependence on imported materials their produce was too expensive. Thus, the plant in Guinea simply found no market for its produce,[47] while the plant in Ghana, erected with Soviet financial support, was found uneconomic shortly after completion as well.[48] Improvement of conventional technologies was in many experts' eyes the right way to move forward – but it was clear that the reduction of costs that could be reached would never be high enough to make these houses affordable for the largest parts of urbanites in the medium-term. And governments were financially simply not in a position to bear a large part of the expense.[49]

Aided self-help projects seemed to be more promising for reaching low income groups – however, experience soon showed that in a low-wage country such as Somalia where imported building materials made up for the greatest part of building cost, expectations of high savings through self-building were misleading. Only one year after the initiation of the Mogadishu project, the responsible UN-expert came to the conclusion that self-help could reduce costs at best by five per cent.[50] More generally, urban self-help projects

45 For details see United Nations/Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Manual on Self-Help Housing, New York 1964, UN/ST/SOA/53.

46 Donald R. Hanson, Preliminary Survey of Housing, Building and Planning Needs and Resources in Somalia, 21.9.1960, UNA/S-0175/1814/0003, chap. 4.

47 Branko Tuckoric to Ernest Weissmann, 1.4.1965, UNA/S-0175/0534/0008; International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/International Development Association, Economic Trends and Prospects in the Republic of Guinea Volume II: Sectoral and Statistical Appendix (Africa series no. AF 63), Washington, DC 1967, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/974291468037150131/Sectoral-and-statistical-appendix [accessed 26 March 2020]), Tab 33.

48 C. Stevens, In Search of the Economic Kingdom. The Development of Economic Relations between Ghana and the U.S.S.R, in: Journal of Developing Areas 9 (1974) 1, pp. 3–26, at 22.

49 In his proposition for a housing programme for Guinea, for example, UN-expert Branko Tuckoric suggested that only minimum standard accommodation should be built for 90 per cent of the population. But nevertheless, even if half of the cost would be borne by private investment, the programme would still engulf 75 per cent of the country's budget. Further reduction seemed possible but a comprehensive programme would always cost a multiple of the percentage of government spending on housing thought to be reasonable. See Branko Tuckoric, Rapport final de mission, 10.9.1965, UNA/S-0175/0535/0001, esp. p. 30; p. 56; pp. 59–62. See also François Pfister, Rapport de Fin du Mission, 18.1.1966, UNA/S-0175/0534/0008.

50 Axel V. Axelsson to Y. J. Joury, 20.4.1964; id., Memo: Aided Self-help Housing within the Low Cost Housing Project in Mogadiscio, November 1963, both UNA/S-0175/1832/0003. See also Noel McGovern to Ernest Weissmann, 28.6.1963, ibid.

could only be conceived as temporary solutions by many experts, as in their eyes they were necessarily based on low-tech and threatened to ossify traditional ways of building and living.[51]

4. Modernization, Housing, and African Urban Futures

The final argument leads to a number of questions surrounding the formulation of national housing policies that pointed far beyond questions of pure practicability. These were questions concerning what role housing could play in the process of development and modernization, and ultimately, what urbanism could mean in Sub-Saharan Africa. The formulation of national housing programmes was not only complicated by a lack of quantitative data but maybe even more so by a more general lack of understanding of the sociological processes tied to urbanization. As the social and cultural changes tied to urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa were – despite some pioneering work by both UNESCO and United Nations[52] – hardly understood, it was by no means clear what sort of housing would be needed for the future. Did governments have to build for "traditional" African extended families, or was it to be expected that supposedly more modern structures based on the nuclear family would emerge? How would housing have to be designed to meet particular cultural needs? In what ways could and should housing contribute to modernization, not only from a technological perspective, but also in changing cultural and social patterns?

To understand the urgency that was attributed to such questions it is well worth to consider the changes in perception of African urbanism in the period of decolonization. The long neglect of African urban populations by colonial regimes can be seen partly as a result of colonial sociologies. For the best part of colonial rule, African societies had been seen as tribal, integrated rural communities with little potential for change or development. Apart from a small "detribalized" and Europeanized elite, there was little space for permanently urbanized Africans in this traditionalizing perspective. It was only the emergence of urban unrest and strikes in all parts of Sub-Saharan Africa through the 1930s and 1940s that made seem a rethinking necessary. But even if this led to the new policies described above, the colonial developmentalism of the 1950s never fully replaced older skepticism. From the perspective of many colonial administrators, urbanization was, in Richard Harris' words, "a necessity that had to be accepted", but never "a strategy to be embraced."[53]

51 Pierre-André Emery, Observation sur le rapport de la mission chargée d'examiner et d'évaluer le „self-help housing" en Afrique, 11.5.1963, UNA/S-0445/0038/0006.

52 UNESCO, Social Implications; Report on the Workshop on Urbanization in Africa, 26.4.–11.5.1962, UN/ST/TAO/Ser.C/57.

53 Harris, Turning Point, p. 150. See also: F. Cooper, Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: The Examples of British and French Africa, in: M. Bandeira Jerónimo and A. Costa Pinto (eds.), The Ends of European Colonial Empires. Cases and Comparisons (Cambridge Imperial and Post-colonial Studies Series), New York 2015, pp. 15–50, at 17–30.

However, during the 1950s, with modernization theory a more optimistic vision of urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa emerged in which it was seen as central element within the larger process of social and economic transformation. From this perspective, the city was seen as the place where humans could liberate themselves from traditional ties, get to know new modes of production and consumption and build new social institutions. Some theorists went even so far that they tried to index degrees of development according to a country's degree of urbanization.[54] Modernization theory, of course, largely equated modernization with Westernization. As Frederick Cooper has argued, it can be seen an "arrogant, teleological and ethnocentric" approach as it replaced "dynamic analyses of actually on-going societies" with a "stereotype of the West". However, as he points out, instead of building on racist colonial sociologies it propagated the idea that development was open for all and welcomed formerly colonial people to the modern world.[55] More than that, it could give support to the vision of an urbanized African future put forward by nationalist leaders such as Sékou Touré or Kwame Nkrumah.

During the 1950s and 1960s, such a perspective was also very common among UN housing advisors. The first UN mission to the Gold Coast in 1954 that set in many ways the tone for later missions, described a period of transition, not only politically, but also in regard to cultural and socioeconomic development. While signs of a new modernity could be seen everywhere, tradition still had a great role to play, as could be seen in the "extreme contrast" between "[…] tribal and […] urban ways of life, between social customs of the West and of the Old World, […], between the old ethic and the new […]."[56] While this situation implied a number of choices for the moment, its ultimate outcome was beyond doubt, as Charles Abrams, head of the mission, pointed out in a private letter to Kwame Nkrumah:

> […] *it is incontrovertible that the influences and impacts of the West are already here and can no longer be held down. The city is emerging from the plains, the markets are bulging with the goods from the West, the house builder has begun to emulate Western styles, the environment is changing and bringing with it the inevitable duality of city and country, the migrations to seek better opportunity, and with it the first symptoms of overcrowding, squatting, absentee landlordism, slums, the break-up of simple land tenures. No nation has been able to resist the relentless advance of these forces and every country has had to evolve a program to cope with them.*[57]

How deep convictions of the equivalence of urbanization and modernization ran, is shown by a graph included in the Report on Housing in the Gold Coast. While rural populations are represented here by human figures dressed in what seems to be some

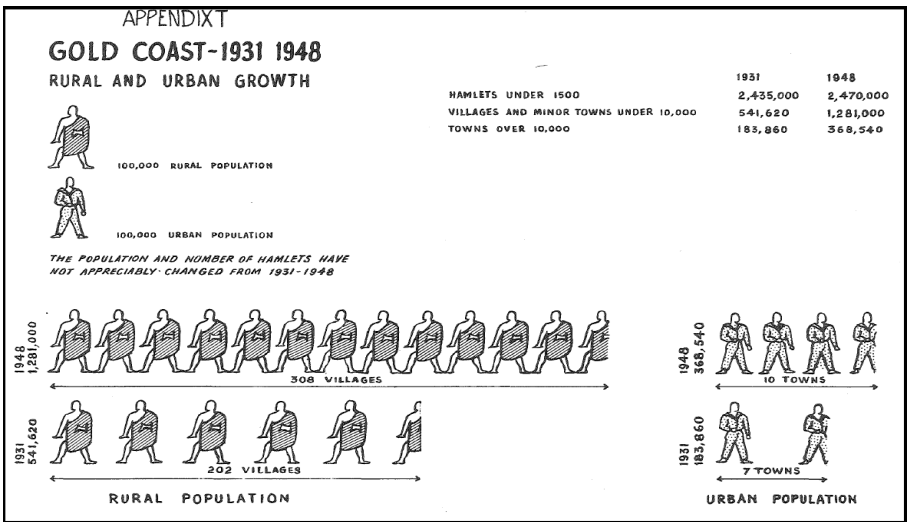
54 See Wolffhardt, Vom Wiederaufbau zur urbanen Entwicklungspolitik, pp. 364–365.

55 Cooper, Development, Modernization and Social Sciences, pp. 34–35. For a valuable critique of modernization theory see N. Gilman, Mandarins of the Future. Modernization Theory in Cold War America (New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History), Baltimore 2007.

56 Report on Housing in the Gold Coast, UN/TAA/GOC/1, p. 5; p. 3; p. 12.

57 Charles Abrams to Kwame Nkrumah (personal and confidential), 16.12.1954, CUL/CA/Reel 21.

form of traditional clothing, urban populations are symbolized by figures that remind of modern workers wearing overalls (fig. 3).



But while in general supporting the optimistic visions of Sub-Saharan political leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Africa's urban future, UN experts from early on also played a role in lowering the expectations of a rapid solution of urban problems. They regularly warned against too much trust in supposedly modern solutions caused by the euphoria surrounding independences, and they emphasized the need to adapt urban policies to existent practices and financial possibilities.[58] The high costs of prestigious building projects were sometimes criticized as standing in the way of broader building programmes that could help solving the housing crisis.[59] Even if sometimes differing positions between the experts could be found, they generally agreed on the principle that building and especially housing policies depended "both on the prevailing situation and on the level of development of the national economy."[60]

Nevertheless, during the early 1960s a school of thought emerged among UN advisors that emphasized the necessity of seeing any approach to the housing problem in light of its potential to contribute to modernization and development. It was centred around the group of regional housing advisors working for the UN Economic Commission for Africa, where persons such as the eminent architects Alfredo "Duccio" Turin, Pierre-André Emery or Marc Nerfin played a leading role. For them, any investment in housing would, given the slender means available, always have to be measured against its

58 See e.g. Report on Housing in the Gold Coast, UN/TAA/GOC/1, p. 7.

59 Otto Koenigsberger, Building Cost in Nigeria. Prepared for the Ministry of Economic Development of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 15.6.1962, AA/OK/Box 38, p. 4; p. 6.

60 United Nations/ECA, Housing in Africa, p. 174.

contribution to modernization, not only in technological terms but also in terms of how much specific housing designs could contribute to accustom the inhabitants to living in modern economies and societies: "It would be a matter of granting priority according to the accelerating effect of housing on modernization […]."[61] And while these experts were prepared to accept self-help housing as a temporary answer to the pressing needs, they would always insist that modern housing, including multi-story buildings and high densities, could be seen as essential for creating African urban futures.[62]

Such views certainly did not remain uncontested. In particular, housing experts involved in "community development" could offer an alternative vision. The concept of "community development" had a long history, the roots of the idea reaching back at least to the United States of the interwar years. In the 1950s it had become an important concept in international development policies,[63] being adopted not only by a number of Asian countries but also by colonial administrations in Sub-Saharan territories[64] and the United Nations.[65] The concept involved a number of differing strategies, dependent on who embraced it, but in its most general sense it was based on the idea that development was not only a question of top-down initiatives but also of group agency in a defined community:

> *Community development can be tentatively defined as a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and the fullest possible reliance upon the community's initiative.*[66]

Of course, this was not necessarily a strategy of empowerment, as it implied "objective needs" defined by experts, as opposed to the needs felt by the community in question. Wherever the two were not identical, the communities' wishes were to be manipulated: "Either the people feel no need, because they are too backward. In this case the need must be inculcated in them. Or else the needs felt by the people do not coincide with objective real needs in which case the people must be induced to modify their ideas."[67]

In what regards the housing questions, programmes of community development were initially seen as a promising approach to the problems of rural settlements. However, in

61 United Nations/ECA, Housing in Africa, 126. See also M. Nerfin, Pour une politique de l'habitat en Afrique, in: Revue Tiers-Monde 6 (1965) 24, pp. 959–988.

62 Notes for a Proposed Study on the Changing Nature of the African Household in the Process of Rapid Urbanization (Note by the Secretariat), 27.6.1963, UNA/S-0445/0016/0001.

63 See D. Immerwahr, Thinking Small. The United States and the Lure of Community Development, Cambridge 2015.

64 Probably in reaction to US development policies, the Colonial Office in London in 1949 had decided to rename its programme of "mass education" to "community development". See R. Hyam (ed.), The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945–1951 (British Documents on the End of Empire Series A 2), London 1992, part 1, p. lxi, and part 4, p. 60, doc. 365: [Mass Education]: Circular Despatch from Mr Creech Jones to African Governors and Others, 10.11.1948.

65 See United Nations/Bureau of Social Affairs, Social Progress through Community Development, New York 1955, UN/ST/SOA/26.

66 Ibid., p. 10.

67 Draft Final Report of the Workshop on Urbanization in Africa D: Community Development and Organization, 4.5.1962, UN/Sem/Urb/Af/30/Rev.1(d), 67a.

the late 1950s and early 1960s, much thought was spent on the question if such an approach could be transferred to urban groups.[68] This, of course, meant that communities had to be identified in urban conditions, where, given the expectations of urban sociology, traditional group identities based on kin and local solidarities would lose much of their meaning. In particular, in Sub-Saharan Africa urbanization was often equated with "detribalization". Communitarians, however, advanced a contrary view. In their eyes, African urban agglomerations were marked by compartmentalization based on ethnic and tribal solidarities.[69]

Thus, communitarian approaches to urban housing problems implied a very different vision of African urbanism. For them, aided-self-help was not only a question of necessity but could, in building on "traditional" forms of African solidarity, help preclude the worst consequences of social disorientation caused by rural-urban migration. Consequently, urban housing would not need to have a modernizing effect – quite the contrary, it should be designed similar to rural housing, as most urbanites had only recently arrived in the cities and thus brought rural ways of living with them. One-story-single-family houses were preferable to multi-story, multi-family houses as there was "[…] a preference for being close to the ground and for being able to grow food crops."[70] Urbanization, from this perspective, was less a radical step towards modernization than a process of spatial concentration of rural populations.

5. Resumé

In 1964, on the occasion of the first session of the UN Economic Commissions for Africa's new Committee on Housing, Building and Planning, a high official put the challenges posed to governments by the fully inadequate housing situation as follows:

> […] *the housing situation in our continent* […] *is characterized, quantitatively and qualitatively, by absolute inadequacy.* […] *this situation gives us at least one reason for optimism. It is true that our responsibilities are immense, but since the entire task lies before us, we are freer.* […] *we have to build the new Africa, we have to design the new city and it is the sign of our liberty that this new Africa, this new city will be what we can make it. We have all the task before us and that is what gives us this rare opportunity, this historic opportunity of being able to decide on almost everything, if not everything.*[71]

68 See United Nations, Approaches to Community Development in Urban Areas. Notes on Recent Experience in Twenty-Four Countries and Territories (United Nations Series on Community Development), New York 1959, ST/SOA/Ser.D/3; The Applicability of Community Development to Urban Areas. Report by the Secretary General, 27.3.1961, UN/E/CN.5/356.

69 Community Development and Urbanization. Prepared by the Secretariat of the Economic Commission for Africa (Workshop on Urbanization in Africa), 9.4.1962, UN/E/CN.14/Sem/Urb/Af/11.

70 Donald R. Hanson, Report of the Mission to Survey and Evaluate Self-Help Housing in Africa, 18.3.1963, UNA/S-0175/0079/0003, i-iii, quote iii.

71 Text of the Opening Address by Mr F.A. U'Liba N'Guimbous, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, 23.11.1964, UN/E/CN.14/329/Ann. 1, S. 1f.

This must be seen as a programmatic statement, of course, as already by the mid-1960s the high hopes tied to independence had begun to fade, and it had become ever clearer how limited Sub-Saharan governments' capabilities were. If Africans had found their political kingdoms, everything else was not added automatically. Urbanization went on with annual rates probably even higher than before independences, the housing situation kept on deteriorating while scarce public means meant that investment could only be made very selectively. This situation was aggravated by the structural constraints left by colonialism, the most serious among them being the virtual non-existence of an effective building industry. Nevertheless, as I have argued, the need to formulate policies of urban development allowed for a number of choices to be made, choices not only regarding technicalities of building, but also of what the very meaning of Sub-Saharan urbanism should be.

In the years surrounding independences, UN experts had an important role to play in the formulation of national policies of urban development. Given the lack of expertise in postcolonial administrations their advice was much sought for in many fields, from administrative issues to questions of building technology. Given the nature of advisory missions, visible results of UN activities are hard to be found, but it seems clear that while governments followed their suggestions in many instances, in others different agendas than those proposed by the experts were followed. The least successful part of UN activities in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1960s is almost certainly represented by their programme of pilot- and demonstration projects. While the testing of different approaches to a solution of the housing crisis may have been an important experience with the challenges posed by the specific African conditions, many of these projects never reached the self-set targets.[72]

More importantly, however, the experiences gained by UN experts in Sub-Saharan Africa can be seen as valuable contributions to the formulation of different approaches to the challenges posed by rapid urbanization. The alternative visions of policies of urban development they discussed were in many ways focused on the specific conditions of Sub-Saharan Africa. But they also touched on a fundamental question of urban development: Should policies of urban development in the Global South focus mainly on easing the worst problems of ever growing populations and concentrate on the urban poor? Or should they be seen themselves as a contribution to development and modernization, not only in technological terms, but also by promoting change of social and cultural patterns? This, however, was a question that was to engage the Globalized Urban International for a long time to come.

72 A pilot project in Guinea had to be discontinued after many years of work and the spending of considerable financial means, another in Somalia brought, even though around 60 houses were finished, rather disappointing results. See Yuri Sokolov to A Sager, Inter-Office Memorandum: Pilot Housing Project – Conakry, Guinea, 11.1.1968, UNA/S-0535/0001; Report on Pilot Project of Low-cost Housing, Appendix to C.A. Qawi to N. Gleboff, 24.4.1967, UNA/S-0175/1832/0003.