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THE PROLIFERATION OF INFORMAL HOUSING

IN MAJOR CITIES IN CAMEROON:
evidence, drivers and the way forward



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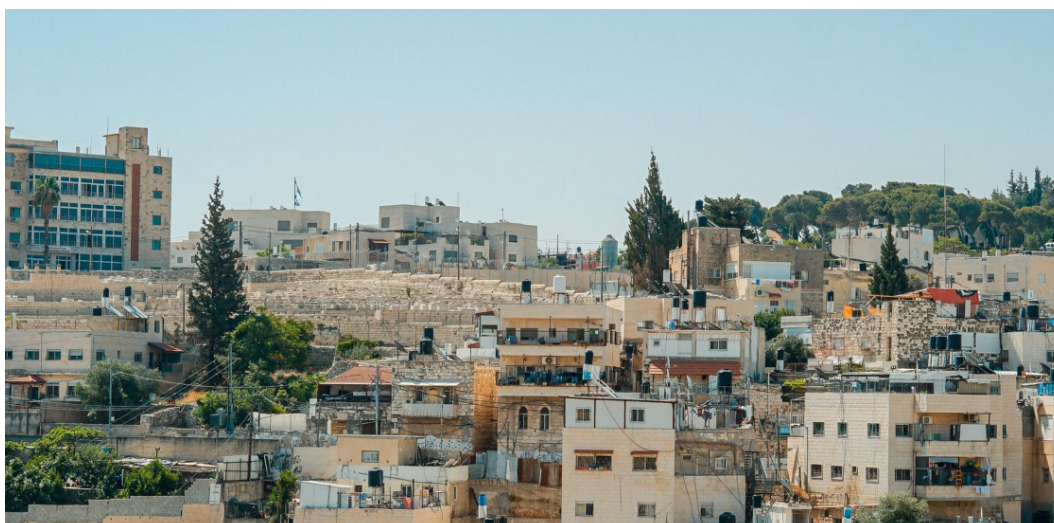
INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of informal settlements in Cameroon is problematic. A range of factors explain why this is becoming recurrent. Some of these factors include a deficit of housing supply, unaffordability issues, critical market factors, weak legal and institutional systems, and the socio-economic conditions of the country. This article focuses on the roots of Cameroon's informal housing crisis. Reviewing the literature on the topic, we provide the context of the problem in Cameroon by pointing out some evidence and magnitude of the issue and probe into some historical facts on housing. We then explore some of the negative conduits to the housing problem and propose key recommendations to the government that can help improve the situation. We used the content analysis method in collecting data.

Background to informal housing in Cameroon: evidence and magnitude of the problem.

According to (UN-Habitat, 2015b; Brown, 2015) [\[1\]](#), informal housing can be defined as residential areas where occupants often have no guarantee for the land or houses they live in; for example, they may squat or rent informally. Such areas frequently lack basic services and city infrastructure. Settlement in such areas may not abide by planning and building procedures and is regularly located in geographically and environmentally hazardous areas.





Douala and Yaoundé are the two largest cities in Cameroon where informal housing is pervasive. According to the National Institute for Statistics (NIS, 2015), between the period 1976 and 2013, the population of Yaoundé increased from 1, 176 743 to 3, 919,827. That of Douala also experienced an increase from 935,166 to 3,174,437 during the same period. These figures indicate that there has been an increase in population growth rate in Douala (233%) and Yaoundé (239%) respectively for the past 40 years. This remarkable increase is due to the rapid urbanization of the two cities, which is impelled by the convergence of people from all other parts of the country in search of better living conditions. To solve the problem of informal housing caused by rapid population growth, 15000 units and 12000 units of houses need to be built annually in Yaoundé and Douala (Tuekam, 2015). Yet, only 2400 units are erected on average in these cities. Consequently, there is a shortage of almost 525% ($15000 - 2400/2400$) and 400% ($12000 - 2400/2400$) of housing supply in Douala and Yaoundé respectively (The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2012). From a historical standpoint, there has always been a big gap between the supply and demand for housing. The housing policy of Cameroon has not been able to address this vacuum despite all efforts by the state to resolve the problem. Against this backdrop, the issue of informal housing in Yaoundé and Douala gained ground.

The proliferation of informal housing in Cameroon is not a new problem. It started as far back as 1952, before the country's independence in 1960, where the housing equation has always been a priority of the government's real estate corporation (Société Immobilière du Cameroun) [2]. Since then, efforts have been made to address the urgent need for housing by the population, especially in Yaoundé and Douala. However, in the last decades, the country is still facing the challenge of high population growth, rapid urbanization, low incomes of the majority of households, and quasi-inexistent access to a mortgage market among others. According to the National Institute of Statistics, 47% of the population of Douala and Yaoundé live in informal settlements (NIS, 2012). Given the phenomenal increase in the populations of the cities of Douala and Yaoundé, the proliferation of informal housing in these cities to house these numbers remains the order of the day.

Conduits to the proliferation of informal housing .

The growth of informal housing and disadvantaged populated neighbourhoods is a global problem caused by the increase in urban populations. According to Avis (2016), *“an estimated 25% of the world’s urban population lives in informal settlements, with 213 million informal housing occupants added to the global population since 1990.”* Smith, Korydon, and Berlanda (2018) states that 1/6 of the world’s population (1 billion people) live in informal settlements.

A range of interconnected elements has led to the rise of informal housing in Yaoundé and Douala. The UN-Habitat recounts that rural exodus, population upsurge, unaffordable housing, weak housing governance (particularly in policy, planning, and urban management), economic susceptibility and low paid jobs, deprivation and displacement triggered by conflict, natural disasters, and climate change are some of the negative conduits to the proliferation of informal housing (UN-Habitat, 2015b).

According to the World Population Prospect, Cameroon’s population growth rate is at an alarming 2.6%. Its 2020 projections from the same source stood at 26.55 million, up from its 2002 survey which was 17.4 million [3]. How can population growth, for example, lead to the rise of informal housing? Statistics have shown that as the population of a country increases, its urban population also experiences an upsurge due to rural-urban migration. Cameroon is not an exception to this global phenomenon. There seem to be some ambiguities regarding statistics of the exact rate of urbanization in Cameroon. The CIA World Fact Book records that the urbanization rate in Cameroon currently stands at 3.63% with 52.6% having been urbanized to date [4]. Meanwhile, a World Bank study on Cameroon city competitiveness diagnostic carried out in 2018, recounted that Cameroon has experienced a rapid rate of urbanization increasing from 13% in 1960 to 54% today, making the country to have one of the highest rates of urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa with 56% of the population now living in urban areas (World Bank, 2018) [5]. In terms of forecast, the UN states that by 2050, 70% of Cameroon’s population will live in urban areas (Ibid). These are pieces of strong evidence to show that the rapid urbanization growth rate contributes negatively to the proliferation of informal housing in Cameroon. What can be done to take Cameroon out of this conundrum? Next, we propose two key recommendations that can help improve the situation of informal settlement.



Recommendations

We formulate two main recommendations based on two main researches:

1. Smith et al (2018), endorse a range of directives for improving informal housing from previous research, which we also found useful for the cases of Cameroon. Globally, the government of Cameroon should double its efforts to implement localised planning and promote enhanced information management system. This can be realized by identifying suitable housing forms for the city's future.
2. In addition, Favela (2010) found eight recommendations for the improvement of informal housing in Rio de Janeiro. One of them could be useful for the case of Cameroon, namely:

With the takeoff of the decentralization process, the local governments should provide a range of housing alternatives in regards to tenancy and payment, such as short-term rental, long-term lease, cohousing, and financed purchase. This will help solve the problem of availability and affordability thus reducing the increase of informal housing.

CONCLUSION

This article was all about the roots of Cameroon's informal housing crisis. After analysis, we came to the conclusion that there has always been a big gap between the supply and demand for housing in Cameroon, and that the efforts made by the government are insufficient. Also, we noted that the increase in urban populations causes the growth of informal housing and disadvantaged populated neighbourhoods. To solve this situation, we recommend the proactivity of the government in promoting localised planning and decentralization of public actions.

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