

URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS: IMPLICATIONS OF RAPID URBANIZATION WITHOUT ADEQUATE URBAN GOVERNANCE IN LESOTHO

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Background
3. Urban Development and Services
4. Environmental and Social Problems and their Implications
 - 4.1. Social Problems
 - 4.1.1. Urban Poverty
 - 4.1.2. Housing
 - 4.1.3. Access to Public Amenities
 - 4.1.4. Crime and Vice
 - 4.2. Environmental Problems
 - 4.2.1. Pollution
 - 4.2.2. Waste Management
 - 4.2.3. Water Supply and Sanitation
 - 4.2.4. Health
5. Urban Environmental Challenge
6. Conclusion and Recommendations
- Glossary
- Bibliography
- Biographical Sketch

Summary

The massive influx of migration towards urban areas, in developing countries has resulted in the over-population of these areas. Population is increasing at higher rates than the national government's ability to provide services for sustainable, healthy living environments. Hence the vast majority of Third World cities are increasingly faced with the problems of deprived neighborhoods. Like most developing countries, Lesotho's urban population has been growing at a higher rate than was anticipated and has resulted in uncontrolled, overcrowded, and unplanned urban settlements extending into physical settlements ill-suited for human habitation; especially within the capital Maseru. As is well known, rapid urbanization has various implications for the infrastructure and service needs of cities, since in most cases urban populations are increasing at rates that are outstripping any reasonable expectations in improvements on housing, health care, employment opportunities, and infrastructure required for healthy living environments.

The failure of government to expand water supply, sanitation, energy resources, security, social amenities, aesthetics, and transportation to the unplanned settlements in the urban periphery where most of the urban poor live has resulted in misery and urban decay. The ongoing rapid urbanization without adequate urban governance and service provision means that a substantial proportion of Lesotho's urban population is at risk of environmental hazards such as increasing urban poverty, homelessness, ill-health, pollution, crime and vice among others. This may also be a result of increasing urban population with little or no consideration for the institutional framework to ensure that these implications are addressed. Thus increasing the number and seriousness of urban environmental problems seems to have taken a severe toll on towns, and threaten all societies, poor and affluent alike. The purpose of this article is to discuss the implications of rapid urbanization without adequate urban governance and service provision on the urban environment in Lesotho, with a particular focus on low-income settlements within Maseru.

1. Introduction

Many Third World countries, including Lesotho, are presented with the problems of deteriorating infrastructure, environmental degradation, inner city decay, and neighborhood collapse. The present scale of cities' development, and its corresponding impacts, is seen to be of a different magnitude to the extent that one cannot expect cities to be sustainable for much longer. These cities, like our local communities, can grow in a sustainable manner if they provide high social cohesion for all those who live in them. This therefore implies that developing countries should increase their capacities to produce and manage their urban environments if only to maintain today's often extremely inadequate conditions. This increase in capacity is fundamental for developing countries to strive for healthy living environments as we move further into the twenty-first century.

Because the unprecedented expansion of urban agglomerations leaves economic growth far behind, there is widespread concern over what is happening in Third World cities. The central question is how will Third World countries cope economically, environmentally, socially and politically with such acute concentrations of population in their cities? Hence the critical issue that needs to be addressed is the extent to which national governments can formulate and implement development policies that have a definite positive impact on trends in urban growth and its management.

2. Background

Lesotho is a mountainous enclave surrounded by the Republic of South Africa (RSA). It has an approximate land area of 30 555 square kilometers. Lesotho's resource base is very limited, with only 9% of the total land area being arable, and is gradually declining due to severe soil erosion and squatter settlements. Agricultural productivity, since the 1980s, has declined drastically as a result of high population pressures on the already scarce arable land, poor soils, erratic rainfall, and increasing land degradation. The acute shortage of land has meant that for many years Lesotho has not been able to feed its people as land has become denuded.

The economic prospects of the country are very bleak. Lesotho's average Gross National Product (GNP) per capita estimates are US\$350, of which 40% is from remittances of migrant workers, thus indicating the economy's dependence on RSA. In fact 70% of average household income comes from labor migrant remittances and these migrant remittances accrued nationally surpass the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in any given year. Given the rate of retrenchment since the 1980s, however, the GNP is expected to decline in the future. Most of the GDP generated comes from the agricultural sector, which is also deteriorating. Lesotho has a negligible industrial sector comprising construction industries and light consumer goods industries. As a result, Lesotho's economy has a very limited capacity to produce adequate employment opportunities. The economic repercussions of the declining agricultural base and retrenchment of mine workers are very clear. The remittances have terminated to families dependent on them for a livelihood, and these families have to find viable alternative sources of income within the country. Unless employment opportunities are created soon to accommodate retrenched workers, the unemployed will flock in greater numbers into urban areas and thus increase the problems of the urban informal sector resulting in poverty, crime, homelessness, poor health, prostitution, and pollution which are already happening at present, especially in Maseru.

In view of such urbanization dynamics, urban planning and management are of crucial importance. Even though urban planning in Lesotho dates back to the early 1960s, it is one of the sectors that have been neglected by the central government. This neglect results in serious consequences for the urban inhabitants and deterioration in the urban quality of life. Much research has been done on urban development and planning but to date little has been achieved in terms of physical planning, service delivery, and the aesthetics of healthy urban planning. Studies carried out from the time of Monroe in the late 1960s (Monroe was one of the first development planners who worked as a consultant for the government of Lesotho and assisted in drafting the first development plan for Maseru), emphasized the need for a national approach to planning and regional development. These studies also emphasized the theory of the "*space economy structure*". They argued that while there was a need to concentrate development in Maseru, regional development planning should still aim at promoting growth in the periphery, thus concluding there was a need for expansion in coordinated national development.

The roles of urban planners in most countries have in recent times diversified and extended to areas such as strategic planning, environmental planning, and facilitation of the planning process. In general their roles have become socially and economically sensitive rather than physical as it had been in the past. In Lesotho, however, the little exercised urban planning is still to a large extent physical. Attempts to widen the scope of planning so that it becomes forward-looking have as yet not been successful as land reform has met stiff socio-economic political resistance and, without it, planning stands little chance of success. Despite all other efforts by local planners, consultants and the formulation of planning acts, the result of inefficient and ineffective planning in Lesotho has resulted in uncontrolled urban sprawl encroaching on agricultural land in the urban fringes.

3. Urban Development and Services

With growing populations expanding into unplanned urban residential areas, the demand for additional and improved services from the increasing population is emphasized in terms of infrastructure and service provision to these settlements. The peri-urban areas of Maseru, where well over 60% of the city's population reside, are estimated to be growing at a rate of 10 to 12% per annum. There are a few basic services provided, such as piped water, adequate sanitation, tarred roads, waste disposal services, decent housing, and many others, and the population is increasing at a much faster pace than the government's ability to provide with adequate services and facilities. Thus, as population densities increase, the lack of such services becomes increasingly crucial for the maintenance of a healthy city.

It is the experience of most developing countries that, once city plans and development programs have been finalized and approved by higher authorities, the management and control of the implementation process is often neglected. Lesotho is no exception in this regard. Plans are made and finalized but implemented a couple of years later irrespective of the socio-economic, political, environmental and demographic dynamics that occur between the time of planning and implementation. As a result, most often what is entailed in National Development Plans and many other policy documents is never really implemented. Hence urban planning in Lesotho has become a wasted effort as urban problems continue to increase on a daily basis, affecting the lives of the poor in the urban periphery the most.

The Urban Development Services (UDS) department of the Ministry of Local Government is fully charged with the responsibilities of urban development and service provision. The main objectives of the UDS include:

- To enhance the general quality of the housing environment through standardizing and fostering efficiency in the design of infrastructure networks;
- To foster accelerated household access to water, sewage networks, and electricity with view to promoting improved living standards;
- To foster improved resource management and economies of scale in the provision and maintenance of services, and
- To promote public participation and self-reliance through assisted self-help programs with a view towards ensuring equity and the elimination of hitherto skewed subsidies in the provision of infrastructure.

The principal goal of this agency is to enhance the quality of life of the urban people through facilitating greater household access to basic services such as piped water, water-borne sanitation and energy for domestic uses. In theory the activities of the UDS are meant to complement those of the Land Survey and Physical Planning (LSPP), Maseru City Council (MCC), and other agencies concerned with the delivery of infrastructure, and to facilitate the provision of utility services in a planned manner in urban communities, which mostly lack such services. Due to the overlapping of responsibilities between bodies responsible for urban development, it becomes very difficult to delineate the actual responsibilities of this department and to say whether it is doing its job to maintain healthy living environments. Whether it is the UDS, LSPP, or the MCC's responsibility to ensure the proper planning and implementation of urban

development activities, there remain a substantial number of urban settlements that are neither budgeted for nor planned. Thus many mishaps are experienced as government does not feel the need to provide these places with the required services and most of them are not easily accessible, thus increasing the cost of transferring services to these areas. Urbanization is not a very complicated matter if plans and budgets go hand in hand. This is unfortunately not always the case in the developing countries. The sheer magnitude of some urban problems leaves city planners in utter despair and somewhat hesitant to embark on efficient urban planning and development.

After years of delay and neglect there are still no signs that the substantial re-development of Lesotho's peri-urban settlements will be underway in the near future. The failure of the central government to recognize the situation's nature, their failure to give a housing policy some priority in development planning, and the subsequent delay in the implementation of readily available legislation have created a backlog in urban development. Thus urban environmental problems experienced in the low-income settlements situated in the urban-periphery can only be expected to deteriorate further for some time to come. Urban problems caused mainly by rapid urbanization, however, can be reduced if plans are implemented in time, reflecting more on priorities of the most necessary services and land use planning (in terms of zoning) to avoid negative neighborhood externalities. Much can also be accomplished if city planning policies are lawfully approved and implemented by the responsible institutions, and if migrants are allowed only into planned areas, which are subsidized and made affordable to residents.

4. Environmental and Social Problems and their Implications

In many developing countries, such as Lesotho, one obvious result associated with economic development is rapid urbanization. This is coupled with an urban unemployment rate of 23% of the economically active population, and with its rural-urban migration increasing at a rate of 5.5% per annum. Even though Maseru is a relatively low-density settlement with an average of 41 households per hectare and should in theory facilitate a healthy environment, this is not the case because the sprawl of settlements is uncontrolled and, as a result, socio-economic environmental problems are experienced especially within the low-income settlements. These include:

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Biographical Sketch

Tsepiso Mohapi holds an Urban and Regional Planning degree from the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and is currently completing an MBA in Strategic Management Practice with the University of Natal. She has been working as a Documentalist with the Institute of Southern African Studies (ISAS) at NUL. Her research interests include gender studies, urban studies, environmental management and population studies, with research focus on Southern African issues.