

Full Length Research Paper

Urban housing improvement and conflict prevention framework for Cameroonian cities: Lessons from Kumba

Jude Ndzifon KIMENGI^{1*}, NDI Humphrey Ngala² and Solange G. Akhere³

¹Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Catholic University of Cameroon Bamenda (CATUC), P.O. Box 782, Bamenda, Cameroon.

²Department of Geography, University of Yaounde I, Cameroon.

³Department of Sociology and Human Geography University of Oslo, Norway.

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The rapidly growing population of Kumba, like other Cameroonian cities, suffers from the problem of poor and inadequate housing conditions which manifest through anarchical construction – a potential source of future conflicts. This study employs the interviews of 60 directly affected inhabitants and three focus group discussion which was complemented by secondary sources. The information obtained was subjected to content analysis in order to guide the development of the urban housing framework. The results indicate that driving forces of housing conflicts in Kumba include population increase, inadequate shelter, difficulty in obtaining building permits, poor urban planning, non respect of building codes, poverty and high rents. These factors manifest through self-generative conflicts which emanate from frustration, anarchical sprawling of settlements, demolition and confrontations, selective demolition and the absence of relocation facilities. Synergy among urban development stakeholders (local population, council authorities, delegation of Urban Development and Housing, landlords and FEICOM) represents a logical way forward in the institution of suggested interventions for housing improvement and conflict prevention.

Key words: Housing conditions, conflict prevention, urban governance.

INTRODUCTION

The right to adequate housing is a universal right which is recognized at the international level and in more than one hundred national constitutions throughout the world. It is a right recognized as valid for every individual person. It

is shocking to note that in spite of this right, the number of homeless, inadequately housed, and evicted persons are increasing in the world, especially in urban centres (Golay and Özden, 2007).

*Corresponding author. E-mail: ukjbypro2@yahoo.com, jude.kimengsi@catuc.org.

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According to the NGO Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), more than 4 million persons were victims of evictions between 2003 and 2006 - 2 million in Africa. An estimated, 100 million persons are homeless and more than a billion are inadequately housed. By 2050, the United Nations estimates that 3 billion persons will be living in slums with most of these persons found in the developing nations albeit no continent is, nor will be, spared.

For the U. N. Commission on Human Settlements (UN-Habitat) and the Global Strategy for Shelter, “shelter for all” means affordable shelter for all groups in all types of settlements, meeting the basic requirements of affordability, tenurial security, structural stability and infrastructural support, with convenient access to employment and community services and facilities”. Demanding the right to adequate housing implies fighting for the inclusion of the most vulnerable people in society and forcing governments to respect their legal obligation to guarantee a life of dignity. This implies also fighting forced evictions, illegal in international law but of which hundreds of thousands of persons are victims every year (Golay and Özden, 2007).

The actions of city government can make matters worse for the poor, through inappropriate and repressive policies and interventions, or they can be supportive, for example, by ensuring access to essential infrastructure and services (Devas, 2004). The denial, *de jure* or *de facto*, of the right to adequate housing brings in its wake dramatic consequences and causes numerous violations of human rights in such areas as employment, education, health, social ties, participation in decision-making (denial of civil rights, among others). This, in turn could generate conflicts in urban centres where the need for shelter space remains daunting (Golay and Özden, 2007).

The problems of haphazard urban construction and the question of squatter settlements presents a major challenge in most Cameroonian cities (Fombe and Balgah, 2010; Amawa and Kimengsi, 2012; Achankeng, 2003; Ndenecho and Lambi, 2002). This represents a series urban governance challenge since it can impair the attainment of Vision 2035 which aims at transforming Cameroon into “An Emerging Economy by 2035”. As a follow up on the need to ensure *Urban and Regional Development and Environmental Protection* as noted in Challenge Number four of “Cameroon Vision 2035” this study falls within the current urban development pre-occupation of Cameroon (Cameroon Vision, 2015). It is within this context that there is a need to suggest a framework for urban housing improvement and conflict prevention in the face of expected population increase.

As a response to the pressing needs to ensure orderliness in urban centres, city authorities in Cameroon embarked on the notion of demolition of sub-standard structures and the consequent rendering of the poor urbanites homeless. This then magnifies the conflicts and

assumes a more perceptible phase. The later case arises due to the open confrontations between recalcitrant city dwellers who resist the demolition exercise on the one hand, and on the other hand, it ensues when some structures which ought to have been demolished are spared either due to complicity or because the owner is influential and/or has a political leaning. This unfair situation where justice seems to target the poor generally generates feelings of resentment and nurtures a “violent volcano” which when finally allowed to “erupt”, might be the root cause of a modern day civil unrest in Cameroonian cities.

The problem and objectives

It is truism that the anarchical sprawling of settlements is the reason behind the massive urban disarray observed in Cameroonian cities today. This is due to the fact that most of these structures were constructed without the respect of the laid down construction norms (Fombe and Balgah, 2010). This situation is applicable to Kumba which is the largest town in the South West Region of Cameroon. The centrality and nodal attribute of the Kumba has made it a point of reception for migrants from other parts of the South West Region. As the town receives migrants continually, conflicts have emerged as people are either unable to secure adequate and affordable housing leading to poor urban construction, or they are forced to contend with an ‘unacceptable situation’ of demolition of structures by the government.

The problems of haphazard urban construction (Tchawa, 2009; Ndenecho and Lambi, 2002), and the question of squatter settlements present a major challenge in most Cameroonian cities such as Kribi (Tchawa, 2009), Buea (Amawa and Kimengsi, 2012), Bamenda (Achankeng, 2003), Douala and Yaounde (Ndenecho and Lambi, 2002; Fogwe and Lambi, 2001). Sustainable urban development remains complex in part by the nature of human occupancy of the urban space (Tchawa, 2009). This represents a series urban governance challenge since it can impair the attainment of Vision 2035 which aims at transforming Cameroon into “An Emerging Economy by 2035” (Cameroon Vision, 2015). Although many scholars have researched on housing problems in Cameroonian cities (Fombe and Balgah, 2010; Amawa and Kimengsi, 2012), very little attention has been paid to the development of a housing improvement and conflict prevention framework. This paper seeks to address the current research gap by using the case study of a classical Cameroonian town – Kumba. The proposed framework could create an enabling environment for the improvement of the housing conditions of urban dwellers so as to prevent a more degenerative option of demolition which could be avoided from the inception. The lessons and experiences could also be adapted to solve housing-driven conflicts within

other cities in Cameroon, and may serve as a guide to the designation of policies for adequate housing and conflict prevention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A structured interview was conducted in which 60 persons were interviewed (20 each) from the three subdivisions that make up Kumba. The interviews were directed to those who were affected by the problem of poor housing and demolition, municipal authorities and the Delegation of Urban Development and Housing. In this study, particular focus was given to the Fiango and Mbonge Road neighbourhoods which were greatly affected by the demolition exercise. This was done to assess the root causes of the development of poorly constructed houses and their connection with potential conflict development. Three focus group discussions were done – two involving tenants and one involving landlords. Each focus group discussion consisted of 8 participants each who were mainly household heads of ages between 30 to 55. Each focus group had at least 3 female participants. The key issues raised as far as urban problems are concern include the scarcity of good quality housing which translates to high rents and the rapid development of slums, among others. The participants comprised principally of operators of the informal sector, tenants and landlords. The interactive sessions among these diverse groups presented a platform for the current urban housing governance practices to be examined and how they can be improved upon.

Given the sensitive nature of the housing demolition exercise, the study had to obtain data from these sources in a bid to triangulate information. In addition, this study employed the use of a survey research method in which the three council areas of Kumba were targeted to elicit some of the peculiar problems of urban housing and their potentials for conflict generation. Field visits were made during periods of demolition such as in January 2012. This was a very important period where the realities of confrontations arising from the resistance to demolition were observed.

Based on the interactions through interviews and focus group discussions, complemented by secondary sources, the researcher heavily employed the content analysis approach. This was characterised by the transcription and examination of participant's diverse opinions. One of the key challenges in this method employed is the fact that it does not show in quantitative terms the situation. The study preferred the use of content analysis in order to clearly analyse without eliminating or suppressing the views expressed through interviews and focus groups discussions. Caution was employed in order to avoid a situation of over or under representation of the actual situation on the ground. Hence, it was preferable to interact and deduce from the series of discussions their views of the current situation.

From the triangulated information, the researchers developed a housing improvement and conflict prevention framework which gives directives for synergy among the diverse urban development stakeholders in Kumba.

Population data was obtained from the Kumba City Council Records, BUCREP and from population projections. Five year population projections were done for the 2010 to 2030 period using the formula: $P_3 = P_1 + N/n (P_2 - P_1)$

Where; P_3 = Population of the year to be projected.

P_1 = Population of the previous year.

P_2 = Population of the current year.

N = Period P_1 and P_3 (years).

n = Period P_1 and P_2 (years).

The rationale for such projection is that it gives us an insight into

what could be expected as far as the demand for adequate housing is concerned in this town and what should be done in order to prevent rising housing-driven conflicts. Kumba which is the headquarters and the economic capital of Meme Division of Cameroon is located between latitude $3^{\circ}, 4''N$ of the equator and longitude $9^{\circ}, 10''$ east of the Greenwich Meridian with a total surface area of about 800km^2 (Kumba Urban Council, 1995). It is bounded to the north by Barombi Kotto, to the south by Mukonje and Matumba II, to the east by Mabanda and to the west by Kake II (Figure 1). Kumba is a town in Cameroon with a colonial history; it has gone through pre-colonial through colonial and post-colonial developments and can therefore be used to picture the Cameroonian situation. In addition, it acts as a redistribution centre for all divisions of the Southwest Region and it is a transit zone to Nigeria through Mundemba and other creek zones of the Region. It is the most populated town in the region (Kumba Urban Council, 2003), suggesting that its housing challenges are, indeed, pressing (Figure 1).

RESULTS

A major contributing factor to the upsurge of the problem of inadequate housing and the generation of conflicts (both perceptible and imperceptible) is the increase in population arising principally from rural exodus. The population of Kumba moved from 42000 in 1976 to 68000 in 1990 and the official census of 2005 showed that Kumba's population is 144268 (*Bureau Centrale De Recensement et D'etudes de la Population BUCREP, 2010*). The increase in population for this junction town has been dramatic (Figure 2) and such an increase inevitably translates to an increase in the demand for adequate housing with the result being the haphazard construction of buildings which are of poor quality and are poorly planned.

With such an astronomical population growth, both observed and expected, coupled with the phenomenon of urban poverty, the problem of securing adequate housing has been daunting to urban dwellers in Kumba. The respondents recounted their experiences during their early years of arrival or stay in the Kumba. It is difficult to find a structure that respects all the laid down laws of construction and where houses are available, they are very expensive. This gave rise to the haphazard construction of poor quality housing which has continued unabated despite the clarion call by the city authorities for the inhabitants to respect the laid down building codes. A major problem raised by the urban population is that the process of acquiring building permits remains very costly in terms of time and money. In addition, some council officials collect tips and allow the building of such makeshift structures which are today facing demolition (Figure 3). Conflicts also assume the form of the consistent and unjustified increase in house rents by landlords in the Kumba, thus forcing some dwellers who are unable to afford for such housing to evacuate the areas. Between 1960 and 2014, a more than 50% increase in house rents has been recorded for the different categories of housing

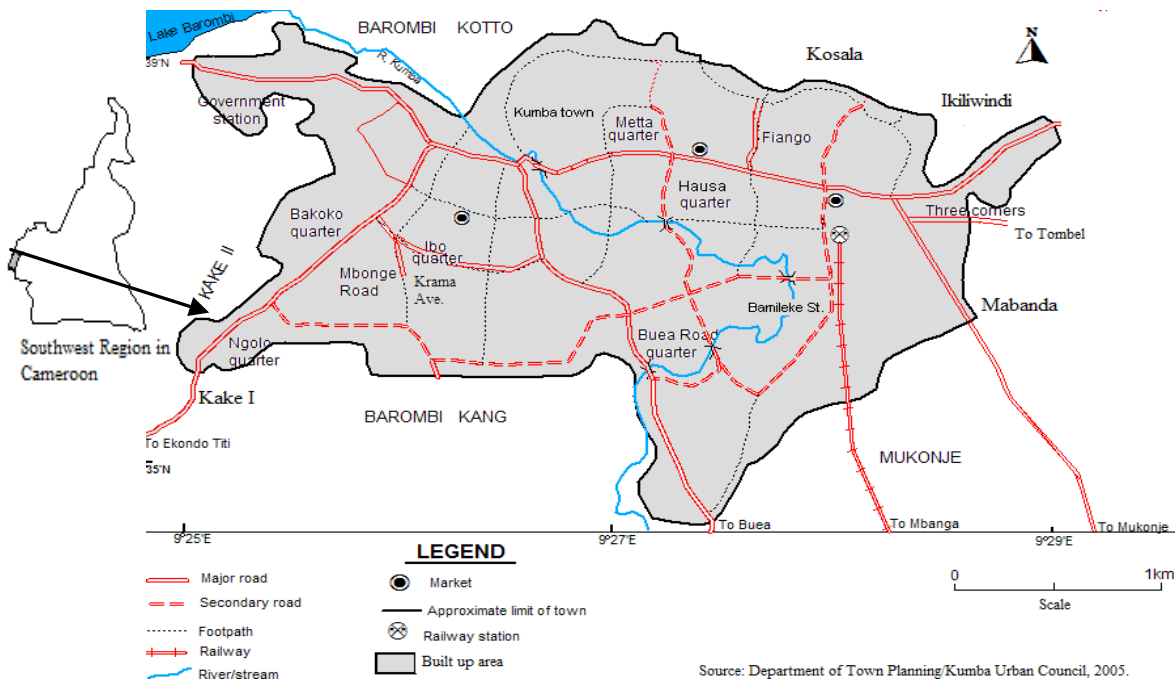


Figure 1. The map of Kumba (Department of Town Planning/KUC, 2005).

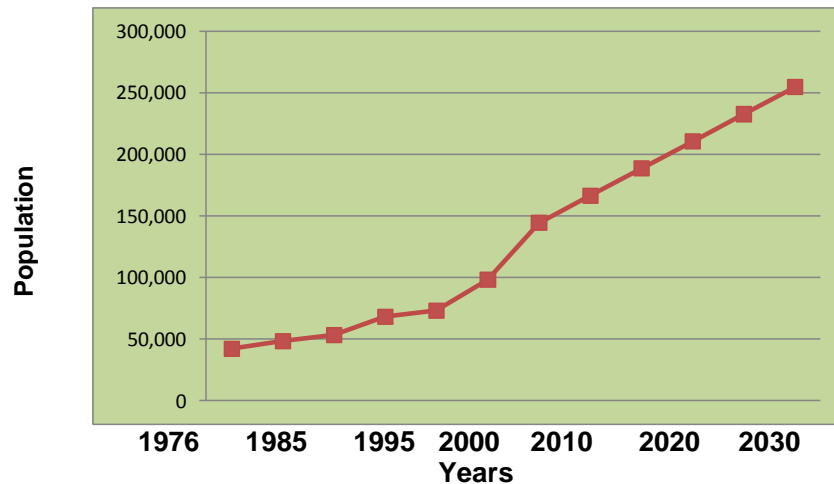


Figure 2. Population Evolution in Kumba (1976-2030).

(Table 1) in Kumba which, ironically have witnessed much degradation. This depreciation also accounts for the consistent moves by the city government of the Kumba to demolish structures as a way of beautifying the town. The recent demolition of houses in Kumba (Figure 4) in January 2012 was another period for lamentations and confrontation between the city authorities and the local population who complain that the city authorities have not made provision for their relocation and so “they should not take the second step before the first”, the population

claimed. As the demolition process goes on, an angry mob could be seen observing the situation with so much discontent while the victims are not only devastated but some develop critical health conditions. This move to demolish structures which seems very traditional, does not provide a solution to the problem in Kumba, instead, it creates fertile grounds for the local population to resent their authorities especially in cases where some houses are spared. The move was described as “...wanton destruction of houses and displacement of entire families

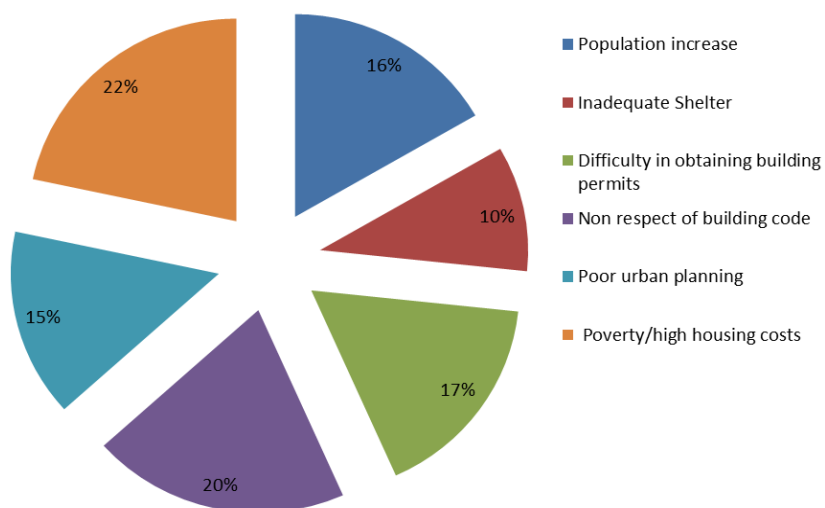


Figure 3. Driving forces of housing conflicts in Kumba. Field Survey, 2012.

Table 1. Evolution of house rents in Kumba (1960 – 2014).

Category of housing	Years					% increase (1960-2014)
	1960	1980	2008	2014		
Caraboat	3000	4000	6000	8000		63%
Block (1 empty room)	5000	7000	8000	10000		50%
Block (1 self-contained room)	10000	12000	20000	22000		55%
Apartment (2 rooms)	14000	16000	35000	45000		69%
Apartment (3 rooms)	20000	25000	40000	50000		60%



Figure 4. The demolition exercise in Fiango-Kumba (notice a caterpillar on duty as the population watch in anguish).

within the Kumba Municipality...an eloquent proof of a system that has lost touch with the reality of people” (The Star, Monday January 30, 2012. pg 3). The driving forces of urban housing conflicts manifest through self-

generative conflicts which emanate from frustration, anarchical sprawling of settlements, demolition and confrontations, selective demolition and the absence of relocation facilities. Based on these interacting forces, a

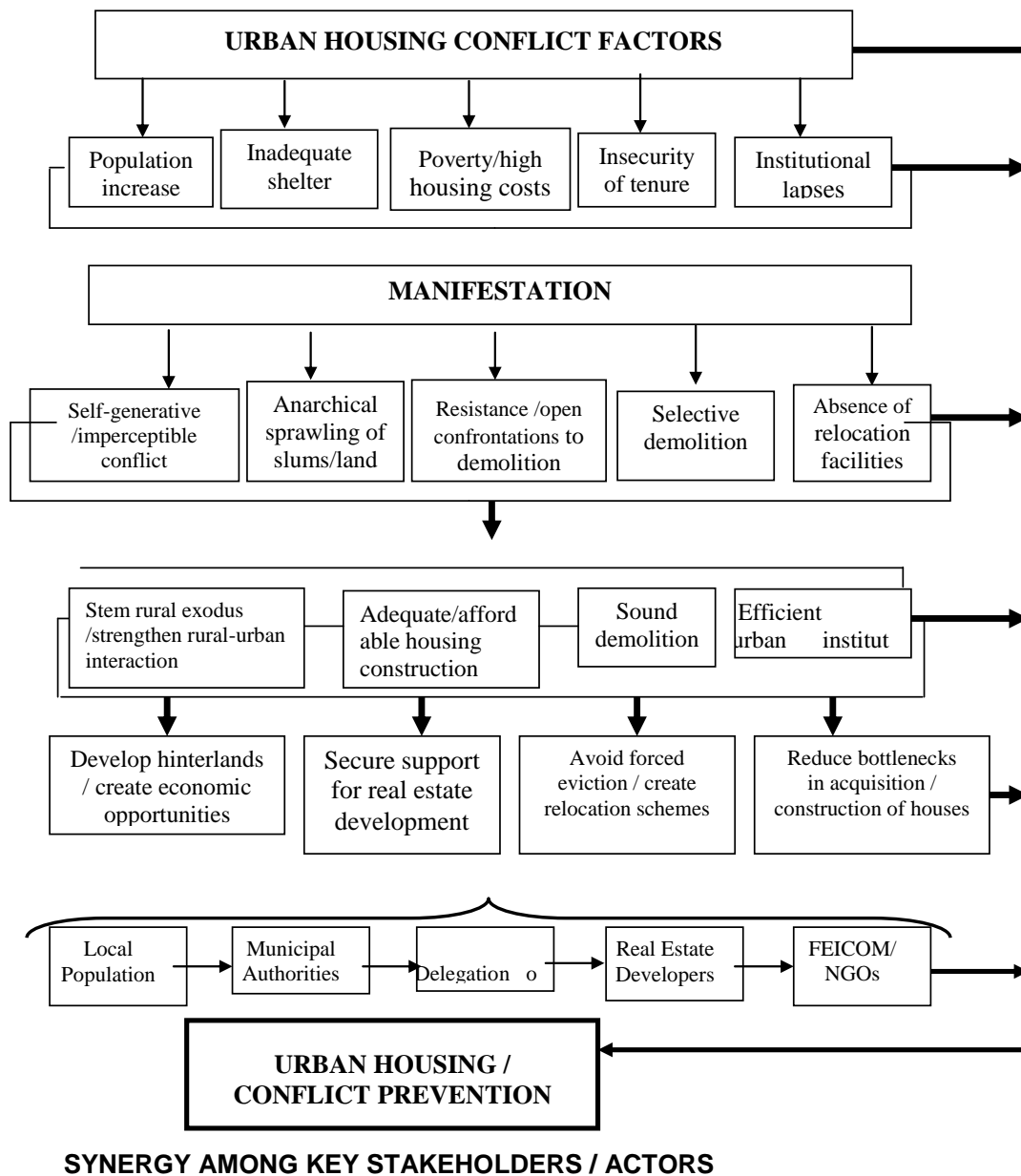


Figure 5. An urban housing improvement and conflict prevention framework.

Housing improvement and conflict prevention framework (Figure 5) which calls for the need for the synergistic interactions among the diverse stakeholders of urban development in Kumba is necessary. The framework which was developed based on focus group discussions and information from other sources involves strengthening interactions between Kumba and its environs through the enhancement of development initiatives in the surrounding areas to stem the displacement of the rural poor into urban centres. Non-farm income generating activities in these hinterlands are needed to reduce the

concentration of activities in the Kumba which has essentially assumed the status of a primate city. Urban development plans of Kumba have to be properly laid down and adhered to, in order to avoid being victims of forced eviction during future demolition processes. In order to attain their vision of an orderly housing development of the Kumba, the municipal authorities should source for housing development funds through FEICOM and also sign a partnership agreement with real estate cooperation to construct adequate and affordable housing to the city dwellers to occupy the houses and

repay the cost after a number of years. This is a long-term housing development strategy which can assist in reducing the incessant confrontations arising from the demolition process. Evidence has shown that for housing construction and the relocation of urban residents to be successful and conflict-free, the development of an educative and persuasive approach is necessary since the option of using force to evict these poor urban dwellers is not a sustainable solution because it may simply mean the relocation of the same problem in another part of the town.

A regulatory body should be constituted by the urban stakeholders of the Kumba. This body should comprise of the municipal authorities from the three councils, those from the Kumba City Council, authorities of urban development and housing, landlords and tenants and other housing estate developers. The body should prepare a framework to ease the acquisition of land for building and also to check the incessant increase in house rents which forces the urban poor to opt for poor and conflict-laden housing. This situation will reduce the exploitation of the majority of the poor urbanites who either earn very meager salaries or struggle to eke out a living. The framework should also elicit possible ways of securing funding and building affordable houses for urban dwellers and at the same time, adopting measures aimed at stemming the massive influx of people into the urban centers.

It is necessary to create new layouts and relocate these people. Also, the provision of secure tenure in existing informal settlements with the participation and contribution of all existing residents is necessary. In addition, those constructing should respect the tenets of Law No 2004/003 of 31st April 2004 governing urbanization in Cameroon by following an orderly pattern. The Services of Urban Development should ensure the effective implementation of the law.

An educative and persuasive approach should be used by the authorities of these urban areas to redress the haphazard growth of spontaneous settlements. The option of using force to evict these poor urban dwellers is not a sustainable solution because it may simply mean the relocation of the same problem in another part of the town. The local population should be sensitized against their illegal negotiations with some unscrupulous municipal authorities who receive bribes and allowed their construction to continue even when the plan is not respected. This eventually ends up to their disfavour as the houses are demolished some years down the line.

Conclusion

The driving forces of housing conflicts in Kumba include among others population increase, inadequate shelter, institutional challenges (involving difficulty in obtaining

building permits, poor urban planning and non respect of building codes), poverty and high rents. Between 1960 and 2014, more than 50% increase in rents was registered for all categories of houses in Kumba. These factors manifest through self-generative conflicts which emanates from frustration, anarchical sprawling of settlements, demolition and confrontations, selective demolition and the absence of relocation facilities. Synergy among urban development stakeholders (local population, council authorities, delegation of Urban Development and Housing, landlords and FEICOM) represents a logical way forward in the institutions of suggested interventions in the domain of creating economic opportunities at the periphery to stem rural exodus, securing support for real estate development, avoiding forced eviction / creating relocation schemes, and reducing bottlenecks in the acquisition / construction of houses.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests

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