

# The challenge for Africa's cities

Along with all the development problems confronting African cities, they are under-resourced and ill prepared to cope with the hazards of Global Environment Change (GEC). Here leading experts\*, **David Simon** and **Cheikh Guèye**, explain some of the challenges.



Low-income housing in Africa is threatened by climate change

PHOTO © DAVID SIMON



Homes in the low-lying area of Bariga are under threat from rising sea levels

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In poorer countries, Global Environment Change represents a fundamental development and an environment and governance challenge that threatens to undermine all recent development gains and to increase human poverty and vulnerability.

Addressing the skills, knowledge and resource gaps is therefore an urgent priority. Cities represent key concentrations of wealth, power, infrastructure and economic dynamism which can be harnessed in the search for solutions. Conversely, they also have concentrations of poverty, and the problems that go with it.

Effective urban action to mitigate the impacts of and to adapt behaviour to their changing realities requires a good understanding of the complex interactions

of causes and effects in order to identify the groups and areas most at risk, and to formulate appropriate strategies.

The key priorities should be the most vulnerable (usually poor) people living in the most vulnerable localities such as low-lying or steeply-sloping land. There is still time to plan for Global Environment Change by integrating appropriate changes into relevant plans and actions. Simply adding these to shopping lists for donor funding will not be adequate.

Coastal and inland cities face different combinations of risks. Inundation from sea level rise and overwash of low-lying areas during storm surges, along with salinization of the water table, are particular coastal problems. Heat islands and intensified local winds may be more severe for inland urban areas. Security of fresh water and adequate

food supplies are likely to be problematic everywhere affected by increasing temperatures and falling rainfall.

In Senegal, for example, agricultural failure is already contributing to increased rural-urban migration. These challenges also underline the importance of understanding city functioning as part of broader systems rather than as self-sufficient entities.

To most people in Senegalese capital, Dakar, home to some 2.5 million people, Global Environment Change represents something that is both distant, due to the number of immediate priorities related to widespread poverty, and at the same time very close when we see the powerful impact of GEC in some areas.

The government's political will to address any given issue is commonly measured by the presence of that issue in the

discourse of President Abdoulaye Wade on emerging themes. Faced with the worst floods that Dakar has ever known, he has recently announced an ambitious and unprecedented initiative: the Plan Jaxaay. This plan allows for the relocation of entire suburban neighbourhoods into thousands of homes built largely with state subsidies.

Rufisque East in metropolitan Dakar is symbolic of the type of disaster that could in future affect the inhabitants of African cities. This city's centenary cemetery (in the Lébougui neighbourhood of Thiawlène) has been partly destroyed by the fury of waves and the encroachment of the sea that has already engulfed the neighbourhood mosque and entire houses.

Bargny Guedj, another area near Rufisque, has experienced the same problems. Farther south, the town of San-

gomar, has become an island through erosion of its land bridge to the mainland. Inappropriate low-income housing in the sprawling peri-urban fringe beyond the airport is also threatened (See photo on page 17).

These cases exemplify what will happen increasingly in years to come both in Senegal and some of its West African neighbours like Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Nigeria. Real strategies to anticipate and manage risks do not yet exist. A sea wall is the only measure that has been implemented in Rufisque.

For example, the newly constructed Bar Beach promenade on Victoria Island at the mouth of Lagos Lagoon in Nigeria was not designed to cope with likely sea level rises of 30-50 cm during this century. It also does not protect the numerous densely populated, low-lying areas of the city around the lagoon

like Bariga, where poor residents are very vulnerable. Similar examples exist across Africa. It is inevitable that, in addition to all their existing development challenges, African cities will face the effects of climate change, for which they remain under-resourced and ill prepared. ♦

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## Putting urban vulnerability on the international agenda

**Michail Fragkias**, Executive Officer, International Human Dimensions Programme, Urbanization and Global Environmental Change project, reports back on two recent international workshops organized by the IHDP and its partners – UN-HABITAT, ENDA-Tiers Monde, the CUNY Institute for Sustainable Cities, and the Global Institute of Sustainability at Arizona State University.

The joint conclusions of scholars and mayors and their advisors suggested strong interest in collaboration with local and international initiatives to combat the adverse effects of climate change and increase the resilience of cities to climate change.

Concerns over drought, sea level rise, coastal erosion and land use change were raised frequently. But agreeing on the necessity to incorporate environmental concerns is not enough because the main challenge is convincing leaders and politicians.

There exists a need for a good balance between responsibilities at local, regional, national and international level – a shared responsibility.

They found a striking imbalance in the governance decentralization process: while more responsibility is being devolved to the local authorities, this is not being matched by adequate resources.

Mayors identified specifically the difficulty of utilizing human resources: some key skills did not exist or were inadequate but others (such as the basic one of environmental management) do

exist but deployment is hampered by the funding problems.

Finally, there is a mandate to move ahead: mayors agreed that even small steps can help create momentum for change. The truly responsive actors and agents of change exist at the local level. Mayors are prepared to move forward once they get funding associated with policy changes that could build improved resilience in their cities.

Both workshops identified a pressing need for additional emphasis on adaptation to climate change in cities. A collaboration of local and international institutions is critical for strengthening local responses to climate change.

Practitioners also suggested the need for a better coordination and organization of capacity building initiatives. Local development plans are a good entry point for integrating climate change aspects into local planning.

There was consensus that we now face a pressing need for the development of new initiatives and programmes for climate change and cities in the global south.