

# The importance of sustainable building and settlement development to combat rural poverty

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Building and settlement development in rural areas is an often neglected issue. How come? When we think of buildings and settlements, a spontaneous reaction of ours is that these concern only cities or urban agglomerations. But buildings and settlements, which form our built environment, are present in our every-day-life, whether we live in a city or in a rural area. We live in houses, our children spend significant time in school facilities, and we spend almost our whole working life within buildings.



*Provision of housing as an adequate shelter.*

From experience we know that the built environment, in form of buildings, roads, green and outside spaces, has a great impact on the quality of the environment in which we spend our life time. In other words, buildings and settlements as such and the manner how they are built can influence our living conditions, whether this is in a city or in a rural setting. That implies that adequate and sustainable buildings and settlements can substantially improve the living conditions in particular that of rural communities and specifically in developing countries. Sustainable buildings and settlements are seen as one of the most important key bases

for sustainable livelihoods of millions of rural people in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

What are the reasons why **sustainable building** can decrease **rural poverty** in developing countries?

- Provision of housing as an adequate shelter is first of all a human right: an adequate home that protects from weather (intense sun, rains) and natural hazards (e.g. flooding, earthquakes, cyclones). Safe housing includes adequate water supply, sanitation and waste handling concepts.
- Housing is important for home-based jobs. In order to generate income and thus to alleviate poverty, rural houses should provide a safe and user-friendly space for example a production unit, workshop, office, etc.
- Provision of education facilities through adequate school buildings: boys and girls (also adults) can

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*Housing is important for home-based jobs and should provide the necessary room.*

be better educated as an important pre-condition to alleviate poverty and to enhance stable and democratic countries.

- Provision of suitable rural health facilities which take into account specific conditions of a rural setting, contribute improving significantly (primary) health care. Sustainable building methods provide safe, durable, and hygienic facilities which fit to the needs of patients and caring staff.



*Adequate rural school buildings are a pre-condition for education.*

- The construction sector provides labour and opportunities for income generation for rural people, including for women. Construction sites offer labour opportunities and skills improvement through learning on the job. For example, the production of construction materials (bricks, prefabricated concrete elements, etc.) is an opportunity to create skilled and unskilled jobs. Best practices as the production of Compressed Earth Blocks (CEB), and of Micro Concrete Roofing (MCR) Tiles are interesting examples of how to decrease rural poverty.

Furthermore, a sustainable built environment in rural areas through adequate facilities (schools, job opportunities, infrastructure, etc.) can decrease rural-urban migration. How come? Many rural people leave their homes in hope of finding jobs, better infrastructure and safe housing in cities. How can we influence this? Attractive villages with adequate quality of housing with a good infrastructure (sufficient and clean water supply, sanitation, and waste treatment) and facilities for jobs are one of the pre-conditions to lower migration and thus also to prevent 'brain-drain' and loss of work forces to the urban agglomerations. It is not sufficient to improve only buildings as such but also to enhance villages as a whole.

What does it require to make rural areas more attractive? First of all, planners should ask directly the rural people of how they imagine an attractive rural living setting. Based on those findings, planners together with the residents should consider the whole 'fitting together' of neighbourhoods, streets, recreational areas, agricultural and production spaces, etc. And moreover, planners should not only think of the physical-technical aspects but



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also to look at the social, cultural (ethnic), economic, political, and environmental conditions. For example, in order to protect natural resources and thus to sustain rural life, sustainable settlement development is crucial apart from adequate housing and infrastructure. A controlled planning of settlements is needed in form of sound settlement plans whereby spaces for growth are indicated. Why is this important? It is important in order to avoid uncontrolled developments and sprawls to protect agricultural land. Moreover, protection zones close to water sources and rivers have to be indicated and also enforced. Settlement plans should cover minimum distances of houses to dumping sites, industry, steep slopes, cliffs, etc. Settlement plans should also indicate clear land ownerships which is one of the most crucial bases for stable and sustainable rural living conditions, and therefore to decrease rural poverty.

Do **public hearings** have an impact?

- A well built up and regular communication contact between the rural local authority officials and the rural people (residents, nomads, private business people etc.) is fundamental. Through that contact, rural people get to know what their local authority undertakes. And moreover, officials demonstrate their commitment to listen to the needs of their people. Personal positive experiences in Kenya (Kisii area) were that the Ministry of Local Gov-

ernment, local authorities and the villagers have demonstrated great willingness to exchange views. There, public hearings created a change in the perceptions onto the other party as well as the problems. An interesting challenge hereby was the relationship between the elected councillors (legislative side) and the local authorities' officials (executive side).

Does **decentralisation** help to improve rural living conditions?

- A careful decentralisation process must have integrated a devolution of adequate financial means and power over decisions from higher political-administrative to the municipal and village level. This is to enable and strengthen the rural areas' room for action to improve rural living conditions in a direct and self-sufficient manner. Yet, the district levels or 'middle ground' levels of political and administrative hierarchies should maintain important responsibilities with respect to larger measurements as regional development plans, district roads, etc.

What is the missing link to a good rural policy?

Considering the issues mentioned above, there is an urgent need for a **rural policy** that **includes sustainable building** and **settlement development** strategies in order to improve the living conditions of rural people in a sustainable and humane manner. In other words, a new rural policy should include a strategic approach through sustainable building and settlement development interventions which promote the self-sufficiency of rural areas in order to decrease rural poverty and thus to improve living conditions of rural communities.

This requires not only **awareness** but also a **preparedness** of us and our partners being active in rural development to acknowledge that **rural building and settlement strategies** offer opportunities to improve significantly the living conditions of rural people.