

The vanishing villages of Kiambu

As rural areas sequester more people into urban centers, towns and cities expand outwards, encroaching on the surrounding rural areas for space to accommodate the increasing populations.

Among other places in Kenya, the pressure of urban expansion is increasingly felt along the boundary between Nairobi and Kiambu, Kajiando and Machakos counties. Along the borderline between Kiambu and Nairobi counties, this trend has rapidly accelerated in temporal and spatial scale. The urban expansion has also spilled beyond the borderline into the heartland of Kiambu.

In Kabete, Kikuyu, Kiambaa, Githunguri, Juja, Thika and Kiambu urban sub counties in Kiambu County, urban growth and sprawl is transforming and annexing the rural villages into the urban continuum of the advancing megalopolis. The urban encroachment has occasioned a chaotic rural-urban morphology and impacts on the social systems, agricultural production and ecological vitality of the rural villages.

This phenomena is not new and has been occurring at different rates in some parts of the county such as Thika, Juja, Ruiru, and Kabete. However, its pace has accelerated over the last ten years and has been extending to other areas of the county.

In addition to population growth, sprawled urban development is caused by various other interrelated factors including economic growth, industrialization, land speculation, lack of affordable housing, transportation and lack of proper land use and planning policies or failure to enforce these plan and policies.

In these borderline villages, residential and commercial housing have proliferated across the landscape especially next to or a few meters from the main roads. The structures are built on land that has been historically under productive agricultural use as compared the urban sprawl in other city outskirts where encroachment occurs on land that was initially idle or underutilized.

Modern housing have been developed by individual home owners or by small to medium scale investors in the growing real estate market in Kenya. However, encroachment in much of interior areas of Kiambu is driven by subdivisions of land into small parcels earmarked for projected urban growth.

The free for all plots business has attracted a constellation of speculators including real estate developers, churches/evangelists, and all manner of other unscrupulous operatives including brokers and conmen prowling on gullible buyers. The plots fad is hyped in pervasive adverts in the media, flyers, magnificent banners along major roads and land merchants offices opened in all key towns in the county.

The land subdivision is rapidly transforming the landscape of Kiambu from a dominant agricultural land into disorganized and undefined land use patterns. As a result of this subdivision of scarce and productive farmland, crop farming and dairy production have been pushed to the edge. Coffee farms have been rapidly cleared to make way for residential and commercial developments.

The urban growth and rural fragmentation evolves without full understanding of consequences. The urban onslaught which is largely viewed as *maendeleo* (development), spreads across the landscape as an uncontrollable or an inevitable phenomena. It also increasingly expand in patchworks of dispersed settlements lacking relationship with each other and with the metropolitan nucleus.

The sporadic and uncontrolled rural fragmentation also brings with it pressures on prevailing social and ecological systems. It is devoid of social impact assessments to determine the challenges and opportunities that the urban growth presents on the affected rural communities. Environmental impact assessment to determine the consequences of the rural fragmentation on natural resources and ecosystems is also circumvented.

Among the envisaged socio-economic consequences include the bombardment of rural people into an urban lifestyle which will result to disintegration and loss of rural character and identity of once coherent communities. It also exerts pressure on local infrastructure and other utilities. While the intensive combination of small scale agriculture, residential and commercial land uses has diversified the local economic base, it also comes with a higher cost of living for a low quality life.

Ecological impacts on the other hand include alteration of the visual landscape and environmental degradation in terms of declining quality of water, soil and air. Interlinked ecological systems are also being isolated and ecological functions disrupted.

The haste to capitalize on the urban boom has not afforded planning for critical infrastructure and many other important urban utilities. Therefore, right from onset, elements of unsustainable urban development have begun to show in aspects such as waste disposal and drainage systems.

In a country contending with gross unsustainable urbanization, the miss-planning nightmares in most of our major cities and towns are being replicated in the urban expansion fringes. Unexpectedly, this urban incursion has not yet attracted public concern. Politicians, planners, agriculturists, academia, the media and other potential voices have remained mute at the height of this tension, hence has not been subjected to the necessary interrogation.

There is an urgent need for a debate on the disproportionate urban encroachment in Kiambu, as elsewhere, which should especially center on its drivers, patterns and impacts, issues of food security, urban sustainability and ecological integrity as well as policy responses. Further

urban expansion require to be properly planned in order strike a balance between the dynamic interplay in urban growth and preservation of agricultural land and ecosystems.

Urban growth should not necessarily be spatially expansive. Concentrated residential settlements and other urban development makes it easy to provide infrastructure and services to urban populations.

The answer to this urban sprawl and encroachment thus lies in developing limits through prescriptive policy and planning on how urban growth ought to be managed. This can be partly achieved by establishing a buffer zone at the interface between urban and farming land as well as other non-agricultural uses.

Such designated zones for urban expansion should accommodate medium to high density residential areas and bands where agriculture and urban culture can co-exist. Well planned and organized urban developments will flourish socially, economically and ecologically.

George Njoroge,

njorogegeorge12@gmail.com

Researcher and writer on environment and development issues