

# H-Net Reviews

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**Ann Schlyter.** *Multi-Habitation: Urban Housing and Everyday Life in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe.* Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2003. 77 pp. SEK 100 (paper), ISBN 978-91-7106-511-7.

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## Surviving Urban Poverty

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This is the twelfth monograph on Zimbabwe issued as a series of Research Reports since the 1960s by the Nordic Africa Institute. Two other recent publications on Zimbabwe (2001 and 2002) also deal with poverty and the struggle for survival in an urban environment; similarly, Ann Schlyter's other contribution to the series is a study of housing in an urban community, but in this case at a compound in Lusaka, Zambia, which she had revisited at intervals over the past four decades.

The present study concerns Chitungwiza, an area some thirty kilometers to the south of the Zimbabwean capital city Harare, of which it is really an extension. The population of Chitungwiza, more than half a million and possibly as much as one million, is mostly poor. Some of its inhabitants are people who work in Harare and its outer industrial areas. Others are not employed in the formal sector of the economy (an estimated 70-80 percent nationwide), although many engage in small-scale trading, farming, and other "informal" activities. Chitungwiza has a legacy of poverty, much of it derived from the wartime squatter camps such as Chirambahuyo which were demolished after independence to make way for new urban communities based upon home ownership.

As the title of this study indicates, "multi-habitation" is the main strategy of a poor community aspiring to home ownership. In defining her area of study, the author raises the following questions: What are the various forms of multi-habitation? How do tenure, income, gender, or age affect spatial arrangements and the experience

of quality of living in multi-habitation? What policies, regulations, and norms have led to the present situation of multi-habitation? What significance has housing for residents coping with poverty and how does it influence their agency as urban citizens?

These questions were applied specifically to "Unit N" in Seke North, one of the poorest areas in Chitungwiza, which was chosen with the aim of relating multi-habitation and housing to coping with poverty. Among the previously researched houses in Unit N (first visited in 1982), ten were selected to sample both female and male owners, houses that were rebuilt, and houses that were still "ultra-low-cost units," houses with outbuildings added and those without.

Following an introductory chapter that deals with housing and urban living in colonial Zimbabwe and the reforms introduced by the ZANU-PF government after independence—including the extension of home ownership through "rent-to-buy" contracts with urban councils—the book includes a series of case studies of the "tenant/purchasers" and their respective lodgers. In the area under study, the inhabitants were offered ultra-low-cost units, consisting of two small rooms with limited electricity, and plumbing and walls of mesh chicken wire and concrete, with an obligation to build a proper four-room house within a limited period of time. But this goal was not achieved by 95 percent of the inhabitants because they were too poor to afford even the plot rent.

Consequently, their way of coping for survival was to extend the house space by constructing "illegal" out-

buildings which could be let to lodgers, both single individuals and entire families. As a result of this multi-habitation, the lodgers frequently outnumbered the original family dwellers (up to fifteen persons could be living on one plot) and their rental payments were often the only source of income for the would-be purchasers, especially for single women with young children.

Although the author claims that multi-habitation has its advantages—providing some security against crime and marauders and a sense of community among the inhabitants—and that it is commonly practiced throughout Africa, she also concedes that it can adversely affect the quality of living conditions by depriving the inhabitants of adequate space and privacy for family life. Nevertheless, in southern Africa it has become the dominant form of housing in a period when “the objectives of urban and housing policies have been formulated as decentralisation, home ownership, enablement and empowerment” (p. 72). The rent-to-buy model in Chitungwiza has not been sustainable because it was premised upon a strong state taking responsibility for the huge investments required and an active partnership with the private sector.

Instead, the author concludes, “with a weak state, impoverished local governments and a policy hostile to urban dwellers, this model cannot be replicated” (p. 73).

Much remains to be said about Chitungwiza that obviously lies outside the defined framework of this study. But it would be interesting to know how and why the government’s housing policies failed to deliver, turning erstwhile urban supporters into urban opponents. Was it one of the many cases of government corruption, such as the diversion of public funds for low-cost housing to a VIP luxury housing project? However, other than an aside that in 2001 many of the residents “expressed their contempt for the ruling party” (p. 72), politics is entirely ignored, even though Chitungwiza, with the advent of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, became a hotbed of opposition activism. So much so, in fact, that following the MDC victories in national and local elections (including those in Chitungwiza) the army was sent into the town to beat up, torture, and even kill MDC supporters, including those seeking refuge inside their “multi-habitation” dwellings. But that is indeed another side of the Chitungwiza story.

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