

AFFORDABLE HOUSING: A KEY CHALLENGE FOR MALAWIAN CITIES, AN ALARMING CALL FOR JOINT EFFORT, SAYS CFSC

The Centre For Social Concern (CFSC) has expressed concern over prevailing poor household and housing conditions in the cities, especially Lilongwe and Blantyre. The National Statistics Office 2008 Population and Housing Census has shown that 36 dwelling units out of 100 dwelling units you can see in Lilongwe are permanent (built using modern and durable materials) while almost more than half of the dwelling units are semi permanent (built with modern and partial lasting materials). The trend is similar in the other cities for instance, in Blantyre (35.9% permanent and 59.7 semi-permanent). Zomba city with 59.7% permanent dwelling units and 29% semi-permanent dwelling units seems to have the most improved dwelling unit structures followed by Mzuzu city (48.7% permanent and 31.1% semi-permanent).

According to the *CFSC*, this situation is making decent housing unaffordable to the majority of Malawians, forcing the low and medium Income earners to reside in poorly constructed houses with inadequate space to decently accommodate all family members. "While it is irrefutable that housing is a basic need" says CFSC, "there is need for a joint effort from indigenous business community to take lead to complement the Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) efforts in providing affordable housing." The Malawi government housing policy has been implemented within the context of Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) and the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy I (2006-2011) where Land and Housing is embodied under the theme of sustainable development specifically at sub-theme six, Land and Housing. The *CFSC* through its Satellite Homes Research, a qualitative survey of living conditions in high and medium density areas of Blantyre, Zomba, Lilongwe, and Mzuzu has over time revealed that this right is ignored. Currently, private housing rental rates in the high and medium density locations in all the cities ranges from K8, 750 to K25, 000 for a two bed roomed house on average. On the other hand, the Malawi Housing Corporation (MHC) has fair housing rental rates. For instance, in Blantyre a MHC two bed-roomed house is pegged at K8, 800 and K6, 600 in Lilongwe. The situation is different in Mzuzu where MHC housing rental rates vary depending also on the time when the house was built. Thus, an MHC two bed roomed house rental rate goes up to K18, 150 if it was built in 2009, K10, 780 if built in 1990s and can go lower up to K6, 600 if built in the 1960s.

As such CFSC welcomes the low cost housing project plans for middle class as announced recently by the Lilongwe city council. However, there is need to put in place a deliberate Housing and Transit Policy updated in line with the 21st century to avoid time lags as it has happened over the past years. Affordable housing if well designed creates jobs and also supports economic recovery in the following ways: **Maintains and retains skill workforce**. The growing concern on shortage of affordable housing makes it difficult for large investors to retain blue-collar job workers. Secondly, it **creates an entrepreneurial opportunity for job creation and support for local investment**. Finally, it **generates local government revenue and increases its property values**. Housing generates revenue for local government through rentals and taxes. Thus, building new houses creates jobs in construction thereby boosting and attracting other business such as retail and healthcare industries. Renters spend money on goods and services. The CFSC through its *Urban Basic Needs Basket (BNB)* advocates for a three bed room house in high and medium density areas to promote a decent standard of living and also adequate for an average household size of six. The urban poor are increasingly pushed to the periphery looking at the current demand for affordable housing. As a consequence, the cost of decent affordable housing exacerbates inequalities among the rich and the poor. Certainly, there is an urgent need to improve poor urban resident's housing needs. It is the *CFSC's* hope that the indigenous business community will accelerate their efforts in addressing decent housing concerns.

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