

RISE AFRICA

Inspiring Action for Sustainable Cities

Discussion Series

The Cities of #TheAfricaWeWant

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*Why cities should transform informalities
into assets to achieve sustainable urban
development in sub-Saharan Africa*



THEME:

Africa is the 21st Century
Global Gamechanger and
the role of our cities



In October 2019, two days of torrential rain led to a landslide that swept away many houses of a shanty town built on a hillside on the outskirts of the city of Bafoussam, Cameroon, and killed several people. Was this predictable and avoidable? Yes! The authorities considered the causalities and ordered the demolition of the surviving houses. No further action was taken to mitigate the root causes of vulnerability to climatic shocks in this part of the city.

This is a common story for the 189 million slum dwellers in sub-Saharan African (SSA) where 60% of the urban population lives in slums (United Nations, 2018b)¹. In the region, the lack of housing and the eruption of slums and informal settlements on the outskirts of cities are the result of a larger issue: unbridled urbanisation. The encroachment of urban sprawl on natural ecosystems, compounded by the lack of or poorly maintained urban infrastructure, has resulted in the increased vulnerability of cities to the impact of climate shocks, particularly floods and droughts.

The high socio-economic and environmental costs of “laissez-faire” policy

Urbanisation in SSA is like a high-speed train going faster than anything else, faster than economic growth, faster than urban planning and management, faster than investment in infrastructure, housing and urban public services. The average urban population growth rate in the region was above 4% during the period 2015-2020, with Uganda at 5.70%; Burundi, 5.68%;

Tanzania, 5.22%; and Burkina Faso at 4.99%, among the front runners (UN-Habitat, 2020). In the Republic of Benin, from 1960 (the year of independence) to 2020 (the year in which urban population overtook rural population), the proportion of the urban population increased five-fold. Africa has 86 of the 100 fastest-growing cities in the world and 17 among the top 20; first and second on the list being Gwagwalada in Nigeria with a 6.46% annual growth rate, and Kabinda in the DRC with a 6.37% annual growth rate (World Urbanization Prospect, 2018). Africa's urban population is projected to triple between 2010 and 2050. Much of this growth is taking place in small and medium-sized towns (OECD/SWAC, 2020).

Urbanisation as reflected in national statistics lags far behind the reality in SSA, and the mapping of urban growth patterns is fragmentary. Policies to guide urban development, where they exist, are often based on projections derived from outdated demographic data or the opinions of experts who may perpetuate outdated stereotypes about urbanisation in Africa. Myths that need to be dispelled include: (a) the belief that urbanisation in Africa is due to rural-to-urban migration, when in fact it is largely the outcome of natural urban population growth, rural-to-urban migration having peaked in the 1960s and declining since then; (b) the assumption that African cities are cheap, when in fact they are more expensive (by an average of 31%) than cities in countries with similar income levels in other regions² ; (c) and the assumption that urban issues are not economic but social.

Furthermore, due to the speed of urban growth,

entire sections of urban development plans, when they exist, are often obsolete before they are adopted and come into force. This situation is detrimental to the effective planning and management of cities. It has led to a “laissez-faire” policy that has generated very negative, though typically overlooked socio-economic and environmental consequences.

Unplanned and unmanaged urbanisation in SSA has eroded the three pillars (social, environmental and economic) of sustainable development. It has generated poverty traps in burgeoning slums, spatial fragmentation that reduces economic mobility, urban sprawl that encroaches on natural resources, and environmental degradation through urban waste and pollution (UNECA, 2017).

Urban sprawl has also led to the privatisation of existing urban public green spaces. For example, the city of Dakar lost 34% of its green spaces between 1998 and 2008. In Lagos, they now cover barely 3% of urban space.

Urban sprawl and spatial fragmentation of cities have also increased the per capita cost of infrastructure and hindered its cost-effectiveness. Urban services in African cities are more expensive in purchasing power terms than those in other developing regions, making African cities less competitive. As a result, they are mainly centres of administration and of consumption, not centres of transformation or value creation for the economy of their respective territories.

Common features of sub-Saharan African cities

Sub-Saharan African cities are very diverse, but share the following five features:

- A very young population. On average, more than 50% of the urban population in SSA cities is below 18, posing the challenge of how to capitalise on the demographic dividend through education for youth employment. Africa's rapidly growing youth population is often referred to as the continent's greatest asset if properly harnessed. But in the meantime, African urban youth are crippled by unemployment. According to the AfDB, "Of Africa's nearly 420 million youth aged 15-35, one-third are unemployed and discouraged, another third are vulnerably employed, and only one in six is in wage employment. Youth face roughly double the unemployment rate of adults, with significant variation by country." (AfDB, 2016). A time bomb!
- Urban "informalities" outweigh the formal sector. In SSA cities, the informal sector is larger, more dynamic and more adaptive than the formal sector. Cities with largely informal housing, economies, and institutions are in practice informal cities, regardless of what policymakers say. In 2018, slums and other informal settlements were home to 238 million people in SSA, equivalent to 44% of the urban population, the highest rate in the world. In some countries, that percentage is above 60%. Those who live in the slums often lack connections to the city's water and electricity networks and pay through intermediaries several times

more for access to these services than the price charged to residents of the formal city who do have connections. Their lack of creditworthiness is often cited as a reason for the low investment into the networks in urban informal settlements. Slum dwellers often live for decades as illegal urban residents, only to be evicted with brutal destruction of the investments they have made with their meagre resources. However, evictions are the worst solution for getting rid of slums.

- Climate change shocks represent systemic risks. In the Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI) SSA cities are ranked among the world's cities at "extreme risk" due to their high rate of population growth compounded by poor urban infrastructure and services and lack of disaster prevention and mitigation systems (Verisk Maplecroft, 2021). That vulnerability is mainly social and infrastructural and often concentrated in informal and poor settlements.
- Institutional weakness is a crippling structural handicap. The persistent dysfunctional state of African cities can be explained in part by their institutional fragmentation and their weak technical and managerial capacities in urban planning and management. The dynamics of rapid urbanisation, high population growth and lack of employment generate large areas where government rule, administration and services are not effective, and give way to unlawfulness. That is one of the unintended consequences of the macrocephaly of capital cities. They often represent on average 20% to 40% of the countries' urban population. However, they capture a much higher proportion of the urban investments made by

governments through the national budget. For instance, in 2018 in Mali, 75% of civil servants were in the capital city which received 80% of government spending, despite being home to only 13% of the population (The Economist, 2021). But the main challenge is the absence of relevant leadership. These challenges are compounded by the lack of effective political, administrative, technical and fiscal decentralisation. Sectoral policies and projects affecting urban development are designed and imposed by central governments, often by-passing local government authorities, and disregarding local needs and contexts. In that regard, the COVID19 top-down response has been a reality check for the effectiveness of decentralisation in Africa.

- Insecurity of tenure is a major roadblock for urban development. One of the most pervasive insecurities in African cities is land insecurity; it impedes public and private investments and disproportionately affects the poor. The administration of land tenure is often made up of dual and parallel systems: the customary system (often undocumented) and the formal system. The former prevails in informal settlements and is a major source of insecurity for settlers because their ownership is not acknowledged when they are confronted with public administration townsites or urban upgrading programmes.

Youth unemployment and insecurity figure prominently among the threats that rapid urbanisation poses to the sustainable development of sub-Saharan African countries. Rapid and unmanaged urbanisation

might well be part of the cause as well as the consequences of Africa being the most conflict-prone region of the world, with two-thirds of conflict-related deaths worldwide since 1990 (Williams, 2016). Unemployment and social and spatial fragmentation fuel insecurity, and insecurity hinders the benefits of urbanisation. According to a 2011 World Bank survey, “40% of those who join rebel movements say they were driven by a lack of jobs.” (Ighobor, 2017). In addition, international migration in SSA mostly involves young people moving from one country to another within the same subregion in search of better opportunities, 4 out of 5 in 2017 with an average age of 31 (IOM, 2020). They often end up unemployed, or involved in (or scapegoated for) violence or crime.

But fortunately, the prospects and promises of urbanisation for #TheAfricaWeWant outweigh the challenges, and this is not a matter of blissful Afro-optimism. Properly managed, these obstacles can prove to be steppingstones to sustainable success in urban and territorial development.

Turning informalities into assets for sustainable urban development

Indeed, while these challenges are interrelated, they seem intractable; but there are smart solutions to some of them that could serve as a starting point for public action that will catalyse change and transformation. SSA cities are built around “informalities” - informal settlements, informal economies,

informal institutions – which are often disregarded by public policies, planning and investments. Integrating some of these informalities into public policies and institutions could be a smart entry point for amending the overall urban governance framework.

Figure 1: The challenges that SSA cities will have to overcome to turn their informalities into assets and become engines of a sustainable transformation of their respective territories and countries, and ultimately of the continent. To develop dynamic and effective land tenure systems and to upgrade slums are two closely related and interconnected challenges that could serve as strategic entry points for achieving inclusive and sustainable transformations.



Develop dynamic and effective land tenure systems: You can't plan and manage effectively what you don't apprehend and value

A city's most important asset is its territory, its land. Securing this asset is a smart starting point for a strategy of change and transformation, especially when it involves the valuation and integration of the land assets of slums dwellers and other urban informal settlers. It is more about inserting efficiency into informal sectors and building on their embedded resources and ingenuity than traditional urban planning and management, which often lead to a tabula rasa approach that ends up being too costly in socio-economic terms.

Assessing the state of urban land holdings and land rights through land audits is a necessary first step for SSA cities. This will provide an inventory of available land, its current nature and uses, and the de facto or de jure ownership or use rights attached to it. This inventory must be carried out in a dynamic, participatory, and inclusive manner in order to prevent it from being an opportunity for the elite to grab urban land. Cost-effective digital solutions for land audits pave the way for building fully digitised, reliable and secure urban cadasters, available online for all urban actors. This is already underway in countries like Rwanda and Benin. Digital planning and urban management tools allow for the development of dynamic and participatory urban planning and management, the optimisation of infrastructure and services, the building of efficient land tenure systems and tax administration, and service provision capable of keeping up with the unprecedented

pace of urbanisation in SSA while limiting urban sprawl through sustainable densification of city centres. Taking this step facilitates the planning and implementation of critical urban infrastructure and services including the creation of green and public areas which are essential for urbanity.

Such a dynamic and digitalised land administration framework could contribute to overcoming the loss of urban public and green spaces in SSA cities, by making the case for preserving and investing in urban public space as urban commons that enhance safety, public health, and environmental sustainability, ensure efficient urban mobility, promote equity and social inclusion, and provide opportunities for enhancing citizen involvement. (UN-Habitat, 2019)

Such a framework also allows for achieving tenure security for all by consolidating the existing dual land administration systems into one. Initiatives for innovative land tenure and management systems in African cities using digital technologies including field surveys completed by drones (such as in Kasangulu, a small town 35 km southeast of the fast-growing megalopolis of Kinshasa which has nearly 15 million people) (AIN, 2021) and social dialogue and stakeholder engagement could catalyse change and transformation for inclusivity given that insecurity of tenure disproportionately affects the poor.

Upgrade slums

Upgrading slums aims at improving and connecting them to services through holistic and innovative approaches to urban

infrastructure networks and services (water, energy, internet connectivity, education, health, transportation, financial inclusion, etc.). In most cities, this is about bringing the majority of the urban population to urbanity, a great boon for urban inclusion, and for national wealth generation. Eradicating slums through evictions is generally counterproductive unless the slum dwellers are properly relocated. Evictions further trap populations into poverty and create new slums, often not too far from the eviction sites. A more viable alternative would be to recognise and formalise the property rights of the residents, to build on their potential for innovation and investment, and to co-design and co-produce with them the improvement of their built environment through access to urban services. Otherwise, doing without them is going against them.

Define and structure smart and sustainable cities through urban infrastructure and services

The raison d'être of cities is not only to be centres of mutualised access to public functions and services, but also to connect their citizens, territories, economies, and ecosystems to each other at subnational, national, regional and global levels. Cities must therefore offer value to their residents commensurate with their capacities and potentials, implemented through effective governance systems. In that regard, expanding urban infrastructure and services is a challenge common to SSA cities to become effective centres of value creation, innovation and transformation for the competitiveness and the resilience of their citizens, and for the economies and ecosystems of their

respective territories to thrive.

Bridge the urban infrastructure and services gap

Africa's urban population will nearly triple in the next 30 years. The level of urban infrastructure in 2015 has been assessed to be only one-third of what will be needed in 2030 for African cities to move towards sustainable development paths. Most cities in the global North are trapped in outdated infrastructure paradigms and models that are difficult to conform to the requirements of low-carbon development. Africa has to build its infrastructure almost from scratch, and therein lies the opportunity. Decisionmakers must avoid simply replicating existing models of urban infrastructure development and management. They must take advantage of the infrastructural gap to rethink and invent models adapted to the socioeconomic emergence of the continent using appropriate and contextualized design, technologies and management models. Energy access is a good example of a sector in which African cities could leapfrog sustainably by embracing the opportunities offered by decentralised energy production and distribution schemes in designing their energy mix. Another example is the opportunity to dramatically improve cities' connectedness through a combination of well-contextualised urban mobility options that reduce spatial fragmentation and achieve integration through effective and affordable urban mobility.

Adapt and build resilience to climatic shocks

This calls for a paradigm shift in urban planning and management because successful

adaptation and resilience are not built for people and communities but with them. Climate risks are now a systemic threat, and the response of cities must also become systemic. The City of Cape Town, for example, faced with the imminent risk of running out of water due to the increased frequency and intensity of drought, had no choice but to adopt exemplary systems for planning and management, anticipation and early warning, adaptation and resilience to drought.

Smartly bridge the infrastructure gap via digital transformation

The disruptions the COVID-19 pandemic has caused and the impacts of the response on the urban economy have highlighted the serious consequences of the digital divide, particularly in informal settlements at cities' peripheries, because of the very high cost of mobile internet. However, they also revealed the capacity for innovation and resilience of urban communities through social innovations and the use of the internet. These positive and adaptive disruptions stressed the role of digital transformation as a critical tool for SSA cities to smartly bridge the urban infrastructure and service gap and accelerate socioeconomic inclusion and resilience. Thus, ensuring affordable access to energy and internet infrastructure and services, especially for the urban poor, could unleash their abilities to connect and access urban services available online and bring a great boon for urban inclusion.

Urban digital transformation can impact rural development and advance territorial integration by supporting the building

of positive urban-rural links mutually beneficial for cities and their territories, e.g., connectedness, financial inclusion, access to education and health services, etc. It can also support farmers' adaptation and resilience to climate change, providing digital access to agricultural extension services, market information, weather forecasts and climate early warning systems.

Solutions based on digital infrastructure and services are emerging in some SSA countries (i.e., Kenya, Rwanda, Benin), such as the community digital centres (CDC) currently being deployed in 44 local governments in Benin (out of 77 in the country) with the ambition to soon cover all urban centres. The standard CDC looks like a cyber-café with free public wireless internet access points set up in collaboration with the town halls, often in community youth centres and equipped with several computers and applications designed to meet the needs of communities. The objective of the CDC is to provide access for non-urban populations to public services available online.

Consider cross-border agglomerations' potential contribution to security and integration

Security wise, cross-border agglomerations in SSA (defined as being within 40 km of another urban agglomeration in a neighbouring country) are currently prone to insecurity, because they are centres where governments' rules are not enforced, and services are lacking. Concerted investments by neighbouring countries in cross-border agglomerations could help improve the delivery of public services to populations,

enhance security, mitigate crime and violence associated with cross-border illicit trafficking, and accelerate regional integration through market access. This will give substance to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement and could be driven by the regional economic communities (RECs).

According to Africapolis, Africa has some 635 cross-border cities that are home to nearly 8% of the continent's total urban population, including ten national capitals and six cities with more than one million inhabitants. In Benin, Gambia, Lesotho, Swaziland and Togo more than half of cities are cross-border agglomerations. Efficient and competitive cities connected to each other are essential for the implementation of the AfCFTA single market and for a better integration of the continent in the changing post-COVID-19 architecture of globalisation that calls for subregional and regional value chains necessary for a low-carbon transformation of the world economy.

What needs to change in the leadership and management of SSA cities

Sub-Saharan African cities hold great potential for the structural and sustainable transformation of their territories, countries and the continent. But the challenges they face are seemingly intractable, and decision makers often blame the lack of financial resources. In reality, what SSA cities lack is skilful and dedicated service-oriented leadership.

SSA cities need effective decentralisation, improved territorial governance and rule of law

The positioning of urban planning and management as well as territorial governance at the heart of development issues also requires effective and active decentralisation (political, administrative, technical, fiscal) articulated around efficient local institutions. Progress towards urban transformation requires some level of consensus building. But as Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, noted “democracy is not consensus but conflict wisely managed” (Mills et al., 2017).

Urban management and territorial governance offer excellent opportunities for participatory democracy to work because they deal with local issues that attract the participation and engagement of citizens, especially youth and women. Democracy for development is essential for effective decentralisation and the empowerment of cities and local governments. Unfortunately, it has been observed since 2015 that democracy and decentralisation are declining on the continent (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2020).

Urban transformation needs a new kind of African leader in public governance

Sustained growth and effective resilience rely on human capital. We need to strengthen the mobilisation of African talent and consolidate public sector expertise, resources and knowledge at the local level for effective, collaborative and inclusive public governance.

The development vision of a city must embody

the potential and comparative advantages of its territory in order to build the infrastructure and promote innovation and services that will make it a more attractive city for its residents, business community, and foreign investors. This requires effective public governance. African cities need leaders and managers who understand this. The transformation and competitiveness of the African private sector will go hand in hand with the transformation and competitiveness of African cities.

The type of leadership needed is one that comprehends the potentials of people and nature that is able to understand how communities and their institutions function in their relationships with the built environment and at what scale, in order to better integrate them into the urban fabric. Such leadership can guide people's ambition for their cities, while wisely managing contradictions, trade-offs and conflicts and facilitating convergences in order to enable collaboration and participatory approaches to co-design and co-implement with stakeholders the desired changes and transformations.

Africa needs to groom such leaders for all levels of urban planning, management and territorial governance in order to transform SSA cities into centres of value creation, innovation, inclusion and resilience derived from the potentials of their citizens and territories, while enhancing their environment. Here again, education is key. Some of the architecture, urban planning, and urban sociology curricula taught in African schools and universities are outdated or do not reflect the realities and challenges of sub-Saharan African cities. We can

only develop the leaders and managers that African cities need if these curricula are inspired by the local context. It is not a matter of imitating the latest modern urban paradigm and design, but of adapting and creating cities that also reflect the African sociology and psyche.

The informalities of African cities are largely disregarded not only in public policy but also in urban and architectural design curricula. This must change if we are to sustainably transform African cities, for we cannot transform what we marginalise or fail to understand.

SSA cities will become drivers of sustainable development as they capitalise on the demographic dividend and become increasingly integrated into global value chains. The main driver needed for positive changes is sound leadership that adapts and deploys the required innovative urban policy tools and approaches to transform the informalities that govern SSA cities into assets for making African cities the engines of a sustainable transformation of their respective territories and countries, and ultimately of the continent.

Endnotes:

¹ Cf. Figure 1.1 in “Africa’s Cities: Opening Doors to the World” WB, 2017.

² “The cost of living in New York city is the highest in the United States due to the city’s productive advantages—but Luanda, Angola; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo; and N’Djamena, Chad all have higher costs of living than New York City.” (UNECA, 2017: pp 86)

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About RISE Africa:

RISE Africa is ICLEI Africa's platform for inspiring and fostering new connections that lead to swift and impactful actions for enhanced sustainability and resilience in Africa's urban areas. Exposure to forward-thinking ideas from different disciplines through a range of curated interactions will provide an antidote to outdated "silo" thinking that is well recognised to inhibit innovation. Instead of being another 'talk shop' amongst like-minded individuals, RISE Africa will bring a diversity of city role players together in innovative sessions to identify new opportunities for collaborative action.