

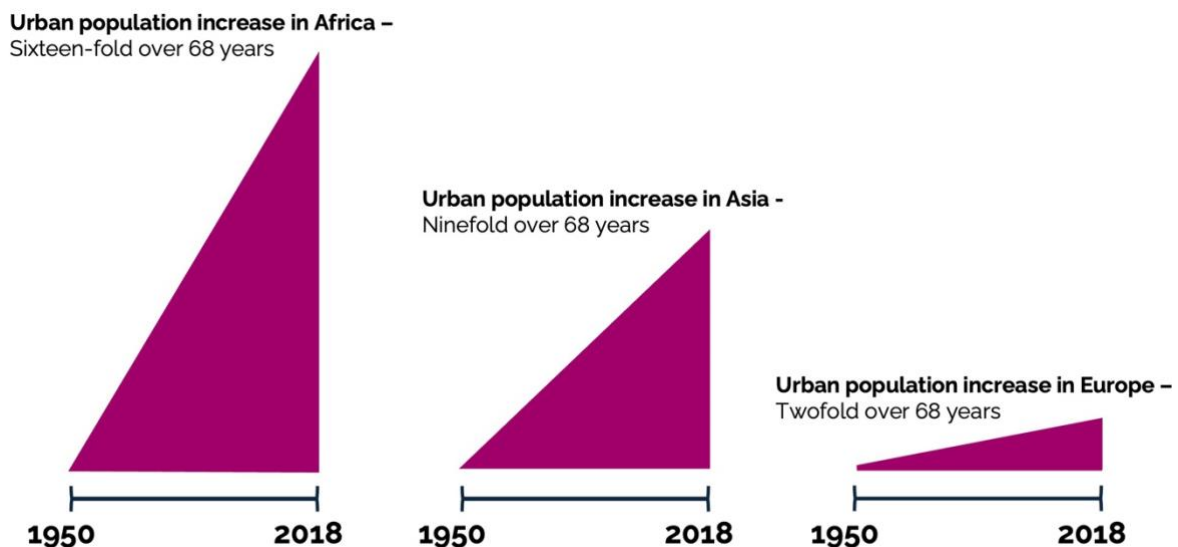
The Latest Trends: The Urban Governance Implications of African Urbanisation

Amy Weimann, Warren Smit, Martin Magidi & Babette Safougne | May 2024

Understanding the African urban context has never been as important as it is right now.

Between 1950 and 2018, Africa's urban population experienced a staggering growth of 515 million people, marking a sixteen-fold increase over 68 years from 33 million to 548 million people (UN-DESA, 2018). This growth far outpaced the ninefold increase in Asia's urban population from 246 million to 2.3 billion, and the twofold increase in Europe's urban population from 284 million to 553 million during the same period (Figure 1). Africa's urban population is projected to grow by another 900 million people over the next 30 years (OECD/UN ECA/AfDB, 2022). By 2050, two thirds of the entire African population will be concentrated within urban areas.

Figure 1. Illustrating the rate of urban population increases for selected regions from 1950 to 2018.



Note: Sixteen-fold increase means that Africa's 2018 urban population was 16 times greater than its 1950 urban population. Asia's 2018 urban population was only nine times greater than its 1950 urban population, and Europe's 2018 urban population was double its 1950 urban population. The diagrams illustrate the rate of increase in urban populations, not the absolute increase.

Source: UN-DESA (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision. Online Edition. Table 1.8 Evolution of the urban, rural and total populations of the world, by geographic region, selected years, 1950-2050. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

Did you know?

Since available data from 1950, Africa has had and will continue to have the world's highest urban population growth rates (UN-DESA, 2018).

Despite the expected increase in urban population numbers over the next 30 years, this does not mean the rate of urban growth in Africa will increase overtime. From 1950 to 1990, urban population growth rates for the continent were over 4% annually. Currently estimated at 3.44%, projections suggest a slow decline in the annual growth rate to approximately 3% by 2045, followed by a further decline to 2.7% between 2045 and 2050 (UN-DESA, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

Differences in urbanisation across Africa

Within these regional figures on urban population growth are substantial differences between cities, countries and subregions. For example, in 2020, the population of Southern Africa was estimated to be 64.6% urban, while East Africa was only 29% urban. Similarly, the rates of urban population growth vary considerably. East Africa is experiencing an average annual urban population growth rate of 4.32% between 2020 and 2025, whereas Southern Africa's urban population growth rate during the same period is a more modest 1.84% per year (UN-Habitat, 2022).

While the majority of Africa's urban population resides in smaller urban settlements of less than 500,000 inhabitants, recent data indicates that cities with populations ranging from 500,000 to 1 million are experiencing the most rapid growth (UN-DESA, 2018). Of the ten fastest urbanising countries globally, seven will be located in Africa for the period of 2018 to 2050 (Burundi, Malawi, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Sudan, Niger, and Rwanda) (UN-DESA, 2018). However, some countries such as Liberia, Mauritius, and Egypt all experienced declines in urbanisation between 1990 and 2018 (UN-DESA, 2018).

The challenge in defining "urban"

- UN-Habitat offers the following definition of cities, based on the Degree of Urbanisation approach, specifically "settlements of at least 50,000 inhabitants in a high-density cluster of grid cells (greater than 1,500 inhabitants per sq. km)" (UN-Habitat, 2022, p. 35). Meanwhile, the World Urbanization Prospects (UN-DESA, 2018) lists cities with populations exceeding 300,000 inhabitants.
- There are varying ways to define "urban". For example, national governments around the world utilise varying definitions for "city" and "urban" based on their own administrative, numerical, and functional criteria.
 - According to [Africapolis](#), 25 African countries use administrative criteria to define urban areas. These definitions utilise precise and fixed administrative unit boundaries. These may exclude surrounding suburban areas which are home to many people who work or study in the city. In other instances, and especially in the context of certain African cities, these boundaries may include what would be considered as "rural" areas by international standards.

- About 13 African countries use numerical criteria such as population size (minimum number of inhabitants ranges from 1,500 to 30,000) to define urban. For example, Benin defines urban settlements as geographical areas with a population of 10,000 or more.
- Functional characteristics can also be used, such as the existence of electric lighting, paved streets, and water supply and sanitation systems. For example, Angola includes infrastructure in its national [definition](#) for urban areas alongside considerations of high population density.
- The urban-rural continuum: African cities are constantly growing and developing, often beyond administrative boundaries. Due to rural transformations and urban sprawl, urban-rural is rather a continuum than a dichotomy as rural and urban boundaries are indeed blurry (OECD/UN ECA/AfDB, 2020).
- Many areas in Africa are identified as urban by national statistical agencies, yet are not officially acknowledged as urban in international global databases (OECD/UN ECA/AfDB, 2020).

What is urbanisation?

- Urbanisation, in its narrow sense, relates to the process involving cities' emergence, growth and expansion (or contraction). Specifically, it is concerned with "the change in size, density, and heterogeneity of cities" (Vlahov & Galea, 2002, p. S4).

IMMEDIATE (PROXIMAL) DRIVERS OF URBANISATION IN AFRICA	
Natural population increases	Natural population increases usually account for the bulk of urban population growth in African cities. In 2021, sub-Saharan Africa had the world's highest fertility levels with 29% of global births at an average of 4.6 live births per woman. This is expected to decline to 3.0 live births per woman by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022).
Migration	Rapid urbanisation can be driven by net-in migration where the number of people migrating into cities is greater than the number migrating out. However, in some African contexts, circular migration (whereby migrants into cities then move out of cities) and net-out migration (the number of people migrating out is greater than the number migrating in) are also observed and can slow urbanisation. Examples have been seen in Zambia (net out-migration) and Harare, Zimbabwe (circular migration).
Reclassification of rural areas as urban	As cities expand their boundaries, they absorb neighbouring settlements and their populations, previously categorised as rural. Moreover, population growth in rural areas may lead to the reclassification of settlements from rural to urban. In Uganda , urban expansion and the associated reclassification of rural land use to urban is a major driver of urbanisation (Ministry of Lands Housing & Urban Development, 2022)

Source: *World Urban Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (UN-DESA, 2018)

Some implications for African urban governance

- Many African cities do not receive sufficient capital investment to support urban development in the face of rapid urbanisation, resulting in fragmented urban development, insufficient housing, and inadequate basic services, amongst other challenges (OECD/UN ECA/AfDB, 2022). In 2020, [51% of the urban populations](#) of sub-Saharan Africa were living in slums, which are characterised by inadequate living conditions and inadequate access to basic services.
- For many African cities, the creation of formal employment opportunities has not been in proportion to the expansion of the labour market in urban areas. As a result, there has been a growth in informal employment, under-employment, unemployment, and poverty (Smit, 2018).
- Urban growth in many cities has also resulted in increased urban sprawl, and as a result some urban formal and informal infrastructure encroach into natural terrain. Urban governance policies must find a way to carefully balance urban growth, the efficient use of land, and natural resources (OECD/UN ECA/AfDB, 2020).
- In sub-Saharan Africa, the working-age population group will continue growing until 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). If cities are to harness the economic benefits of this demographic trend (youth bulge), cities must focus on creating opportunities for education, training, and employment (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). This can be a major challenges if urban governments do not have the legal competence, financial resources and personnel to attend to these imperatives.
- As urban populations are expected to continue to rapidly increase over the next 30 years, policies geared towards poverty and addressing inequalities will be important (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022).

Conclusion

Urbanisation in Africa is a multifaceted phenomenon with profound implications for society, economy, and governance. By understanding the definitions, rates, regional disparities, city-level variations, and challenges associated with urbanisation, stakeholders can better navigate the complexities of African cities and work towards sustainable and inclusive urban development. Addressing these challenges requires innovative policy solutions, effective governance structures, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Whether you're an academic, policymaker, student, or government official, engaging with the dynamics of urbanisation in Africa is essential for shaping the future of the continent's developmental landscape.

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