

Sustainable urbanisation – challenges in the 21st century

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The proportion of the world's urban population is expected to increase from 47% in 2000, to about 57% by 2050. Furthermore, more than 90% of future population growth will be accounted for by large cities in developing countries.⁽²⁾ Demographic growth is slowing down in the whole world, signaling a major shift in both the pace and scale of global demographics. According to the United Nations (UN) Habitat, an important facet of this shift is the historic milestone achieved in 2007, when more than half of the global population was living in cities and towns, thus making urban centres the dominant habitat for humankind.⁽³⁾ This seemingly geographical shift has tremendous implications for the current and future dynamics of human development.⁽⁴⁾

In the developing world, Africa has experienced the highest urban growth during the last two decades, at 3.5% per year; and this rate of growth is expected to hold into 2050. Over a third of Africa's one billion inhabitants currently live in urban areas, but by 2030, that proportion will have risen to a half.⁽⁵⁾ The major challenge facing the developing world in the 21st century is that of sustainable urbanisation. The challenge is most applicable to Africa, where the current rate of urbanisation is fastest, and cities are least prepared to offer poor migrants decent living conditions through innovative solutions in housing, education and infrastructure.

This CAI paper looks into the sustainable urbanisation challenges that Africa faces, and how Africa can work around these challenges in order to provide sustainable growth. The paper highlights the underlying issues associated with the practice of sustainable urbanisation, particularly the promotion of growth management and urbanisation within Africa's fast growing regions.

Urbanisation: Looking through an African lens

Over the last two decades, demographic and economic changes have propelled cities and urban centres to become the principal habitat of humankind. Cities represent the greatest achievements of human civilisation. Cities are not only where rapid improvements in socio-economic and environmental conditions are possible, but they are, indeed, where such change is most needed. For example, cities offer a largely untapped opportunity to develop cohesive mitigation and adaptation strategies to deal with the risks associated with climate change and lessen their impact on the environment. Urbanisation can pose major threats to the achievement of sustainable development, due to detrimental environmental impacts and other adverse effects associated with intensive resource consumption and poor management.

Urbanisation's informal economy

As most of the urban migrants from rural areas are uneducated/unskilled, they end up working in the informal sector, which accounts for 93% of all new jobs and 61% of urban employment in Africa.⁽⁹⁾ Since income from the informal sector is, by its very nature, low and intermittent, most migrants naturally

seek for shelter from, or become tenants of slum landlords. As a consequence, many African cities have to deal not only with slum proliferation, but also with increasing insecurity and crime. Weak institutions across Africa have contributed to poor urban enforcement, resulting in dysfunctional land and housing markets, which in turn have caused the mushrooming of informal settlements. Furthermore, African governments have neglected the key drivers of productivity, which include small and medium-size enterprises, human resource and skills development, and technological innovation.⁽¹⁰⁾ These factors are essential in advancing predominantly informal, survivalist and basic trading activities to higher value-added work.

Pressure on the environment

Another challenge resulting from Africa's rapid urbanisation is the increasing pressure of urban populations on natural resources and the environment. The expansion of cities is generally at the expense of forests and other ecosystems, increasing pollution (especially air pollution) and the proliferation of related diseases. In the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities and strategic management of the environment, this rapid population growth and urbanisation has resulted in environmental degradation and resource depletion. Between 1990 and 2000, Africa lost 52-million hectares of forests: this amounts to a decrease of 0.8% per year and 56% of the global total.⁽¹¹⁾

Urbanisation in most of Africa, particularly south of the Sahara, is moving forward rapidly. This has resulted in a pressing need to provide facilities and amenities for creating an environment for sustainable urbanisation. In much of what has been said, and similar to what can be seen across the rest of the world, the African urbanisation process has mainly been influenced by the economy. With migrants moving from so many rural locations into one city, the unemployment problems of people from rural areas is simply being shifted into urban centres, worsening the urban housing dilemma. The most important paradox of this situation is that the more jobs that cities manage to create, the greater the influx of newcomers. Besides increased problems relating to unemployment, rural to urban migration also puts stress on the already dire service provision situation in these urban settlements. The challenge is not to arrest development but to use the available resources in a more productive and efficient manner, ensuring better and more equitable returns to people while at the same time lessening pressure on the environment.

Urbanisation: Climate and environmental changes

A UN Habitat Report⁽¹²⁾ identifies certain major challenges brought about by urbanisation in the 21st century. These include:

- environmental challenges caused by people residing in hazardous areas in environmentally sensitive areas, and the increased use of cars as people rely on transportation to get to their respective localities in sprawling urban areas;

- institutional changes - a change has been visible in urban political systems from what is termed 'government' to 'governance'. There are generally less participatory processes in developing countries.⁽¹³⁾

The effects of urbanisation and climate change are converging in dangerous ways. The world's population is already more than 50% urban and this is expected to rise to two-thirds in little over a generation. Cities and towns already bear the brunt of natural disasters such as flooding and tropical storms. Many of the world's largest cities and towns are located along coastlines, rivers and floodplains, which are most vulnerable when natural disasters strike.

Forecasts based on the best available scientific evidence indicate that in the coming decades, climate change may render hundreds of millions of urban residents increasingly vulnerable to floods, landslides, extreme weather and other natural disasters.⁽¹⁴⁾ Increasingly, the poorest and most marginalised are disproportionately affected by climate change, and yet they have the least capacity to mitigate these factors and protect themselves.⁽¹⁵⁾ Research findings in the UN Habitat's 2010 State of African Cities Report⁽¹⁶⁾ suggests that as many as 200 million Africans could be displaced by the effects of climate change by the year 2050, putting a huge strain on the capacity and resources of cities. While all coastal cities face such threats, the impact on those with populations of over 10 million inhabitants will be substantial. Without appropriate planning, design and investment in the development of sustainable cities, a growing number of people will continue to face unprecedented negative impacts, not only of climate change but also of reduced economic growth, quality of life and increased social instability.

The case of Dakar, Senegal: Urban and environmental problems

Metropolitan Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, hosts approximately 2.5 million people. The greater area covered by the city constitutes only 0.3% of the surface of Senegal, while 25% of the country's population is based here.⁽¹⁷⁾ Half of Senegal's urban population lives in Dakar. The city is the site for 80% of the national economic activities and is administered through 53 local communities. As a result of mass migration, the urban environment is in a continuous phase of degradation. Despite problems and limitations, Dakar attracts more and more residents. The general tendencies are ones of an increase in the level of urban primacy and socio-economic bipolarisation.⁽¹⁸⁾

Greater Dakar faces a deficit in the urban planning sector, faced with extreme institutional and sectoral fragmentation under an ever-growing administrative area unable to deal with crises such as floods and coastal erosion. A new strategy of urban development for greater Dakar is needed in response to the current planning deficit.⁽¹⁹⁾ A new integrative approach to city planning could connect all sectors and types of actors in the search for solutions to the problems in the greater area of Dakar, broad enough to take into account environmental concerns. This will allow for the smoother facilitation of the required dialogue among stakeholders and will define the vision regarding the future urban development of the agglomeration.⁽²⁰⁾

Conclusion

The urbanisation rate in Africa is slowing, but so is the population growth rate, due in part to epidemics such as life-threatening diseases (e.g. HIV/AIDS). Africa's big cities will probably continue to grow, but the future is, as always, uncertain. This simply means that some official attention needs to be deflected to rural communities, if not to provide more rural jobs, then to improve the income of those involved in agricultural production, the predominant means of rural livelihoods, to reduce the pressure to migrate.

Part of the solution to the challenges posed by urbanisation lies in how cities are planned, governed and how they provide services to their citizens. When poorly managed, urbanisation can be detrimental to sustainable development. However, with vision and commitment, sustainable urbanisation is one of the solutions to our ever growing global population. Efforts to create jobs, reduce our ecological footprint, and improve quality of life are most effective when pursued holistically. By prioritising sustainable urbanisation within a broader development framework, many critical development challenges can be addressed in tandem; such as energy, water consumption in production, biodiversity, disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation.

To sum up, some key recommendations are:

- Upgrading informal settlements through the provision of integrated infrastructures and services that target the marginalised groups, including the poor, youth, women and elderly people. In addition, governments should act proactively to ensure orderly urban development by defining and implementing clear urban development strategies;
- Mobilising urban financing from local and foreign investors. These resources should be efficiently and adequately allocated between central and local governments' urban projects and should encourage strengthening the role of municipalities;
- Improving human capital through equal access to education and healthcare services and facilities for all categories of citizens in order to meet labour market needs;
- Diversification of economic activities through the creation of new economic hubs oriented towards high sustainable and value-added production and exportation. These reforms should be more inclusive to ensure that all categories of citizens, regardless of their age, race, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic conditions, have equal access to adequate housing, basic infrastructure and services and equal job opportunities.

Ecologically friendly sustainable development in Africa is about decision making, trade-offs and the delicate balance of priorities. Like any change process, it requires participation and commitment from top to bottom – from government policies to individual behaviours. In addition, new technological and social innovations will be required to provide alternatives to help all Africans maintain their livelihoods without depleting the scarce natural resources available to the African continent.⁽²¹⁾ Hence we can conclude by saying that judging from past experiences in the developed world, where urbanisation caused a lot of problems in the short term it has turned out to be a natural and positive development in the long run.⁽²²⁾

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