



Rapid urbanisation in sub-Saharan Africa a fallacy

It is frequently asserted that urbanisation levels are rising faster in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world. In the latest *Counterpoint* from Africa Research Institute, “Whatever happened to Africa’s rapid urbanisation?”, Dr. Deborah Potts presents evidence to show that the rate of urbanisation since the 1980s has stagnated – or even regressed – in many countries.

The populations of numerous urban areas are growing rapidly, but so are rural populations. The process of urbanisation – whereby an increasing proportion of a population lives in urban settlements – is occurring far more slowly in Africa than is suggested by UN-Habitat and World Bank datasets, and “common knowledge”. In many countries, the evidence indicates an increase in the urbanisation level of only about 1% per decade. Some countries counter-urbanised during the 1990s.

Most of the growth in urban populations is attributable to natural increase, rather than net in-migration. Limited economic opportunities have severely reduced the attraction of many towns and cities to migrants. “Hardships being experienced in Europe and America since 2008 pale by comparison with the consequences of structural adjustment in urban Africa”, states Dr. Potts, Reader in Human Geography at King’s College, London.

The urban scenario can change rapidly. GDP growth rates have improved in many African countries since 2002. Better economic performance which is accompanied by the creation of very large numbers of reasonably paid urban jobs and substantial investment in infrastructure could stimulate in-migration, reduce the speed and frequency of circular migration, and boost urbanisation levels. Conversely, if urban economies weaken further, net in-migration may continue to decline and countries will experience even slower urbanisation – or counter-urbanisation.

Misleading projections based on inaccurate datasets obscure important policy messages about urban economies, urban poverty and migration trends in sub-Saharan Africa. For much of the region, the foreseeable future will remain predominantly rural. Predictions of a majority of Africans living in towns by 2020 or 2030 are not supported by evidence. The demands placed on policymakers by rapid population growth driven by natural increase are quite different from those created by net in-migration – but they are no less complex, or substantial.

To download a copy of “Whatever happened to Africa’s rapid urbanisation?” [click here](#)
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