

THE STATE OF AFRICAN CITIES 2014

Re-imagining Sustainable Urban Transitions

PRESS RELEASE 1

Extremely rapid growth of cities, towns and villages in Africa is continuing unabated, further adding to the continent's already significant urban challenges, a new report published by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) says.

The report titled *The State of African Cities 2014: Re-imagining sustainable urban transitions* succeeds similar publications in 2008 and 2010. ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability was commissioned by UN-Habitat to coordinate and oversee the editing and writing of the report, in close co-operation with United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA) and support from the British High Commission in South Africa.

Due to its still limited incorporation in the global economy, Africa has escaped many of the impacts of the global recession following the 2008/9 financial crisis, albeit that it has been affected by such indirect consequences as lower demand for raw materials and shifts in tourism. Nevertheless, economic performance has been robust in Angola, Ethiopia and Nigeria; while Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda are all experiencing sustained economic growth. Consequently, it is now projected that due to their growing middle classes, by 2030, Africa's highest-performing 18 urban economies may have a combined purchasing power of USD 1.3 trillion. However, this prediction may be somewhat premature because, despite ten years of comparatively high Africa-wide economic growth, poverty remains a deeply pervasive phenomenon with about half of all Africans living on less than USD 1.25 per day and only four per cent receiving more than USD 10 per day.

Sustained African economic progress, given continuing global uncertainties, will depend on more self-driven African development. To this end, African nations require large investments in road, rail and energy networks to boost their urban economies and unlock sparsely-populated areas. Further nation- and institution-building is needed to overcome weak urban governance and still high corruption incidence.

The report states that the total African population is set to nearly double to almost two billion over the next 25 years and, if current demographic trends persist, by 2030, its population could exceed that of Europe, South America and North America combined. This vast demographic expansion will add many more people to cities that are already deeply troubled by pervasive unemployment and poverty, deficient services provision, and dire lack of affordable housing. Lagos (Nigeria) has recently joined the list of the world's mega cities (10+ million people) - Africa's second after Cairo (Egypt) - while Kinshasa (DRC) is also projected to become a megacity in a few years' time. In the not too distant future, other African capitals will follow suit.

But, according to the UN, it is not in its largest cities where the African urban transition mostly unfolds. Rather, an estimated three quarters of the anticipated urban population growth will have to be absorbed by intermediate size and small cities. These towns generally have even fewer urban management capacities than their larger counterparts. Therefore, the report warns, the urban slums already so emblematic for many large African cities may soon also become a prominent feature of the smaller cities.

Moreover, the report states, Africa's already formidable urban challenges will become further aggravated by the predicted or already felt negative impacts of climate and environmental change. African cities large and small will increasingly become more exposed to additional vulnerabilities and risks, ranging from temperature increases, changing rainfall patterns, as well as predicted more frequent and severe droughts, floods and storms. Given the high concentration of African urban populations in coastal areas, there is also threat of inundation through sea level rise and storm surges that may affect millions. Climate and environmental change are likely to also cause more vulnerability to urban food, water and energy insecurity.

It is now clear; the report states that Africa's development aspirations are unlikely to be achieved by the urban development approaches it has applied over the past decades. African urbanism is mostly based on theories and visions developed for the cities in the advanced economies of the global North. But the urban models from the 1950s to 1980s have shown to have less relevance for Africa today, since they were conceived under entirely different circumstances, including low oil prices, much slower population and urban growth, as well as without today's vulnerabilities resulting from climate and environmental change.

Africa should consider moving away from promoting low urban densities and private car-dependent cities. It should attempt to decouple urban developments from wasteful natural resource demands that can simply not be sustained. Since Africa is in still comparatively early phases of its urban transition, the continent is in a privileged position to re-conceptualize what constitute its best options in the light of the inevitable and rapidly-unfolding urban growth.

For more information and to access the report please visit the UN-Habitat website at: <http://unhabitat.org/the-state-of-african-cities-2014/>

