

# Growing Cities: Urbanization in Africa

**Felix Meier zu Selhausen**

Wageningen University

## 1. Introduction

Urbanization, greater economic growth and rising living standards historically have gone hand in hand and are central facts of our modern world because urban areas account for a large percentage of GDP in most countries. No country in the world has ever reached middle income status without a considerable population shifting into cities. Over the past 200 years while the world population expanded considerably people everywhere in the world have shifted from almost exclusively living in rural areas to living in cities. At the same time there has been a transformation in the structure of the global economy from the majority of people working in the agricultural sector to mainly working in urban manufacturing and service based sectors. In most countries urbanization is a natural consequence and stimulus of economic development based on industrialization.

Although African societies have been predominantly rural for most of their history, urban settlements have existed for centuries and have been an important feature of Africa's history. The earliest known cities of Africa emerged around the Nile Valley - the most famous being Alexandria in Egypt. Also the kingdoms of highland Ethiopia organised themselves around towns two thousand years ago. Later, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the kingdom of Great Zimbabwe in southern Africa constructed a complex stone-walled city. In West Africa, the trans-Saharan trading town of Timbuktu (Mali) emerged as an intellectual and spiritual capital and as centre for the spread of Islam throughout Africa in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, on the East African coast the Arab trading hubs of Mombasa and Zanzibar grew in size. Towns and cities functioned as centres around which societies were organized – as focal points of trade, political authority, military garrison, religious and cultural ceremonies, or served as refuge and collective shelter in troubled times.

However, it was not until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that rural-to-urban migration and population growth accelerated urbanization to unprecedented levels in Africa. Whereas, until 1960 there were two cities with more than one million inhabitants in Africa, by 2010 there were 56 cities on the continent with more than one million inhabitants. Today, Africa has the fastest growing urban population in the world and both urbanization and urban growth is taking place

in every African society. The growth of African cities is one of the most significant transformations taking place in contemporary Africa revealing the changing modern face of Africa starkly (see photo below). This phenomenon has resulted in a profound reorientation of peoples social and economic lives, bearing both major challenges and opportunities for actors engaged in all aspects of urban life.



*The urban face of Africa – Lagos (Nigeria) is Africa’s largest city*

The main purpose of this chapter is to present the urban dynamic for Africa in a global perspective and to explain the causes and consequences of urbanization and urban growth for African countries. The following section sets-off by introducing some of the key-concepts and explaining the processes behind urbanization. Section 3 reviews the historical origins of urban settlements in Africa and compares Africa’s urban development in a long-term perspective with other regions in the world. This is followed by a discussion of the economic aspects associated with urbanization. Section 5 explores what drives urbanization in Africa, while Section 6 examines some of the opportunities and consequences of growing cities in Africa. Finally, we conclude by summarizing the lessons from this chapter.

## **2. Key concepts of urbanization**

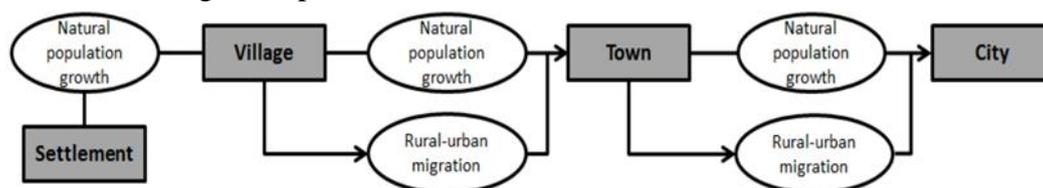
We know what we mean when we say “I live in a city” or “I am moving to a city” because we have certain images of cities in our mind: its bright lights at night, the busy shopping centres, the tall buildings or even the traffic jams. But how do we define places as urban and how do we distinguish a city from a “town” or a “village”? To begin with, the definition for what constitutes

an "urban area" varies considerably in different parts of the world. The major institution that documents both population and urban growth is the United Nations. In preparing estimates of the urban population, the United Nations relies on data produced by national statistical offices in all countries in the world. However, each country uses different criteria in order to distinguish urban from rural areas, and thus a standardized definition does not exist despite international efforts. The majority of countries define urban areas applying certain requirements regarding the density of settlement, population size or the share of a population employed in agriculture. Also, for African countries the definition of urban areas varies. For example statistical offices in Botswana and Zambia define an urban area as settlements of 5,000 or more inhabitants of which the majority is not employed in the agricultural sector, while in Ethiopia and Liberia urban areas are classified as places of more than 2,000 inhabitants. However, there is agreement that urban areas are characterized by higher population densities than rural areas, which means that many people are concentrated in a small space rather than being spread out over a large territory.

Let us continue by clarifying and distinguishing the concepts of urbanization and urban growth as both terms will be used repeatedly henceforth. The term urbanization refers to the process whereby an increasing percentage of a country's population comes to live in urban areas (i.e. towns or cities). Urbanization occurs when the urban population grows at a faster rate than the rural population. In other words, if the rural population and the urban population grow at the same pace, the rate of urbanization will not change. The principal source of this process of urbanization is people migrating out of rural areas to come to live and work in urban areas.

The term urban growth is used to refer to the percentage change in the total number of people living in urban areas from year to year. In Africa urban growth is caused by three factors: natural population increase among city residents; migration to cities from rural areas; and statistical reclassification of previously rural areas as urban, as they became built up. In theory it is possible for a country to experience urban growth without urbanization. This is the case, if the number of people living in urban areas is increasing, but at either the same or slower rate than the rural population. However, this is rare and over the past decades the majority of world regions have seen urban growth and urbanization simultaneously.

**Figure 1:** The urban growth process



*Source:* Derived from United Nations (2012)

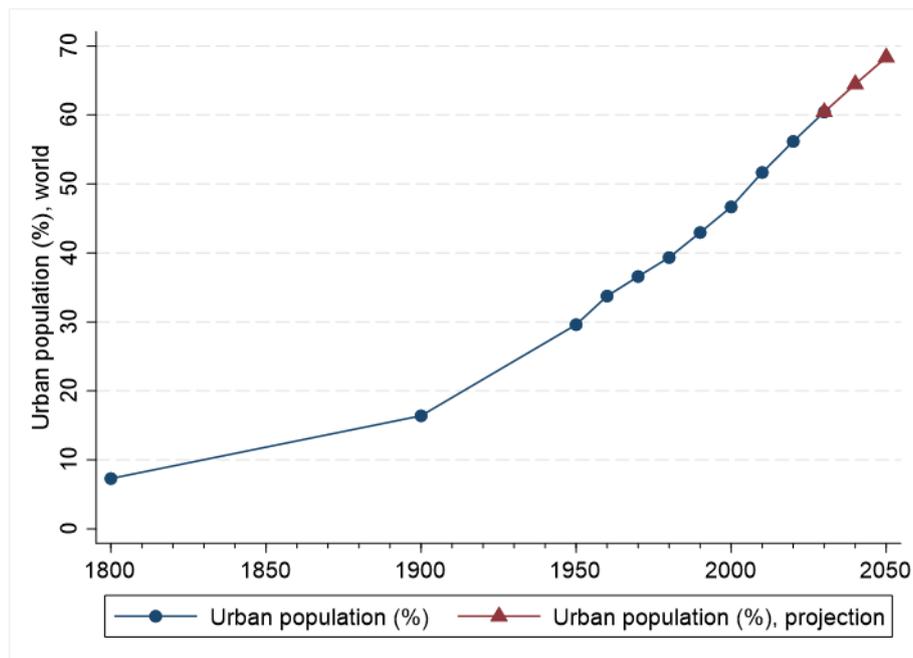
The urban growth process (from human settlement to cities) is simplified and summarized in Figure 1. The urban growth process entails the process from human settlements becoming villages, villages growing into towns, and towns being transformed into cities. First, when the urban population is relatively small (e.g. village) – rural-to-urban migration is the principal contributor to urban growth. However, as the urban population becomes larger, urban natural population increase tends to play the greater role for urban growth (unlike urbanization). An increase of the natural urban population occurs when the number of births exceeds the number of deaths within an urban population. In the past, urban areas often tended to have higher death rates than rural areas. About 400 years ago, in Europe it was not uncommon that the death rate was even higher than the birth rate, causing the urban natural population to decrease. The reason was that infectious diseases were the main causes of death and that these diseases tended to spread more rapidly in towns where people lived in close proximity and social interaction. Until today rudimentary water and sanitation infrastructure can turn urban areas into breeding grounds for bacteria. For example, the outbreak of cholera (caused by water contamination) has been most common in slum areas of cities. In addition, the standing water of open sewage systems offers a breeding ground for anopheles mosquitoes, the carriers of malaria. Moreover, many people living close together may result into urban congestion, referring to the many cars and motorbikes on the roads that cause considerable air-pollution and bring cities to a standstill in particular during morning and evening rush hours. Moreover, industries' and cars' high concentration of suspended smoke and dust from fuel combustion adversely affects the quality of air that people breathe and therefore can affect human health.

On the other extreme, living close together bears important advantages for industries. When factories and people are located near each other in cities, they can benefit in various ways. Factories tend to locate in urban areas in order to benefit from *economies of scale* and the existence of a sizable and growing market to sell their produce and take advantage of the transport infrastructure for distributing their produce nationally and exporting it to other countries. The term *economies of scale*, describes the benefits that factories obtain when locating their economic activities close to each other. As a result of related factories grouping in urban areas, their production costs may decline significantly, because if there is a network of many factories in the same area, this attracts other businesses to establish and supply the latter with production materials and customers than a single firm could alone. As a result of more factories in related industries locating close to each other (or 'agglomerating'), makes production cheaper for factories which can be a major contributing factor for the growth of cities and wage employment.

### 3. African urbanization in a global and historical perspective

Historically, widespread urbanization is a recent phenomenon of economic development in our world. Today, different countries stand at different stages of urbanization and economic development. However, the world's urban population remained small and unchanged for thousands of years, before experiencing a rapid and sustained expansion beginning in the late 19th century. Figure 2 portrays that in 1800 about 8 percent of humanity in the world lived in urban areas. Back then London was the only city in the world with a population exceeding one million. Only from 1800 onwards people moved from rural areas into cities in much greater numbers than before. The fundamental event was the Industrial Revolution taking place in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe. The rapid expansion of industries required more and more people to work in urban factories, which attracted people looking for employment and a better life. At the same time major changes in agricultural technologies increased agricultural productivity which allowed feeding an ever growing urban population, outside the agricultural sector.

**Figure 2:** Global urban population estimates, 1800-2050



*Source:* United Nations (2018). Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser (2018) - "Urbanization", Our World in Data.

Figure 2 shows that the pace of urban population growth accelerated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1900, 16 percent of the global population lived in cities. By 1950, these urban population rates doubled. However, the largest and fastest growth in the world's populations has taken place after 1950. From both Table 1 and Figure 2 we can see that between 1950 and 2020 the level of urbanization in the world rose from 30 to 56 percent – meaning that for the first time in

history more people live in urban than in rural areas. The speed of contemporary urban growth rates experienced by developing countries over the last 70 years is exceptional by historical standards. Table 1 (left columns) shows that the three regions with the highest percentage of people living in cities in 2020 could be found in North and Latin America, followed by Europe. Table 1 (right columns) also presents the average urban growth rates for the last 70 years. We can clearly see that all regions in the world experienced its greatest urban population growth between 1950 and 1980 and slowed down notably thereafter. Looking ahead, Figure 2 also presents future projections by the United Nations which tells us that the global urban trend will continue so that by 2050 two-thirds of humanity will live in urban areas.

**Table 1:** Urban population share and urban growth by world region, 1950-2010

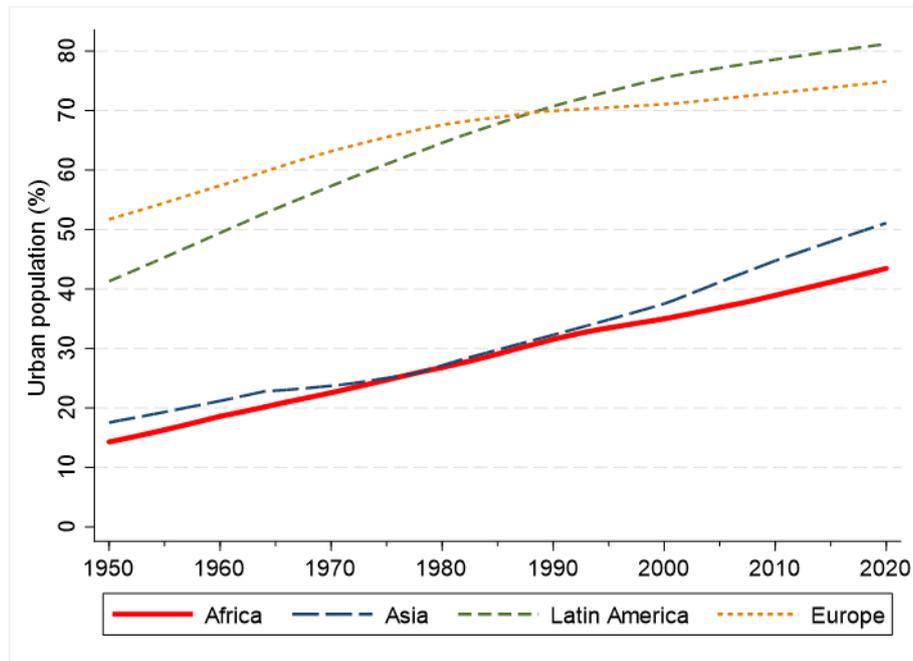
	Share urban (%)			Urban growth rate (%)		
	1950	1980	2020	1950-80	1980-2000	2000-20
Africa	14.3	26.8	43.5	4.6	4.0	3.6
Latin America	41.3	64.6	81.2	4.1	2.6	1.5
Asia	17.5	27.1	51.1	3.6	3.3	2.6
Europe	51.7	67.6	74.9	1.7	0.5	0.4
North America	63.9	73.9	82.6	1.8	1.4	1.0
<b>World</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>39.3</b>	<b>56.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.1</b>

*Source:* United Nations (2018).

Both Table 1 and Figure 3, put Africa's urbanization experience into a long-term comparative perspective. We can see that Africa over the past 70 years has been the least urbanized region in the world, but at the same time it had the highest urban growth rates, ranging between 3.6 and 4.6 percent (Table 1). In 1950, only 14 percent of Africans were living in cities while 41 percent of the people in Latin America and 52 percent of Europeans lived in urban centres. By 2020, 43 percent of Africans lived in urban areas, whereas in North and Latin America as well as in Europe this proportion was almost twice as high.

In 2020, Africa's total population exceeded 1.3 billion of which approximately 588 million lived in urban settlements. According to future projections this urban population number will triple in the next three decades reaching 1.5 billion in 2050 by which time almost 60 percent of Africans will be living in urban centres. Meanwhile, already densely urbanized regions, such as Latin America, North America and Europe will grow much slower and therefore their urbanization trends become flatter over time (Figure 3). Also, from Table 1 we can observe that the growth rates of urbanization tend to decline as the overall urbanization in each region rises, as there is an upper limit to how urban any population can become. Considering that Africa and Asia show the highest urban growth rates in the world since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Table 1), mirrored by dynamic urbanization trends shown in Figure 3, it strongly suggests that urbanization for Africa and Asia will continue vigorously in the next decades – catching up considerably with Europe and the Americas.

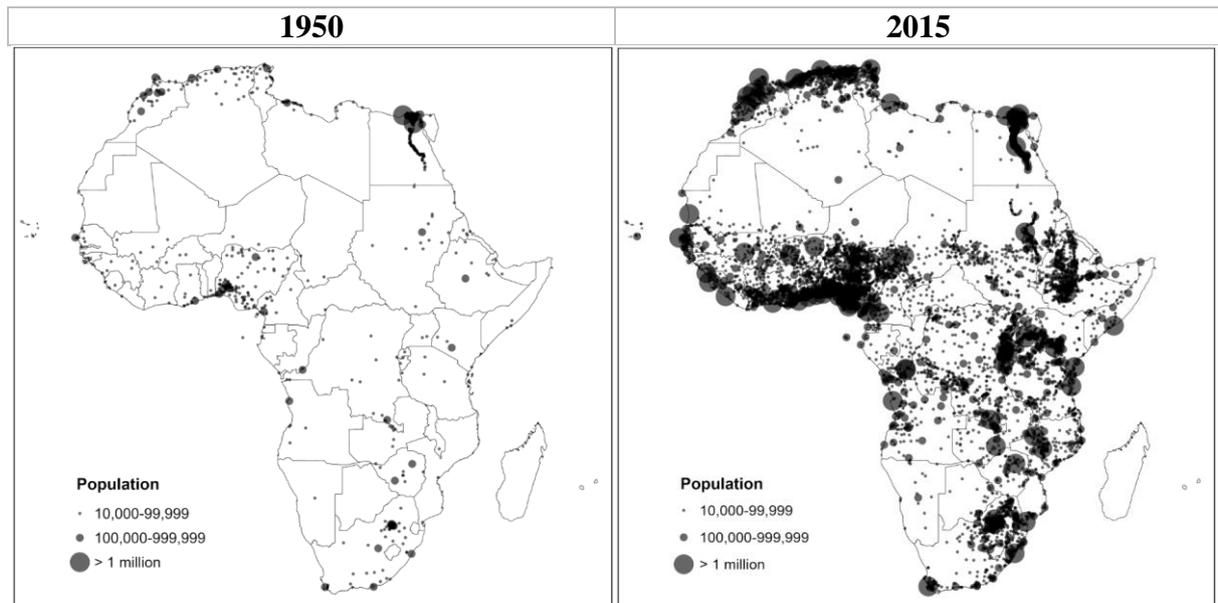
**Figure 3:** Share of urban population in world regions, 1950-2020



*Source:* United Nations (2018).

Map 1 plots African cities by size in 1950 (right) and 2015 (left) respectively. Comparing the two maps visualizes Africa's rapid pace of urbanization even better. As you can tell from the two maps, both the number of towns larger than 10,000 and cities larger than 100,000 (small and medium grey circles) and the number of cities with more than one million inhabitants (large grey circles) have increased significantly over the last 65 years. Until 1950 there were no cities with more than one million inhabitants in Africa except Alexandria and Cairo in Egypt, as well as Johannesburg in South Africa. By 2015, there were 57 cities on the continent with more than one million inhabitants. The top 5 African 'mega-cities' in terms of population (per area of agglomeration) in 2015 were: Cairo (Egypt, 16.2 million), Lagos (Nigeria, 10.8 million), Johannesburg (South Africa, 7.2 million), Kinshasa (Democratic Rep. Congo, 5.8 million), and Luanda (Angola, 5.1 million). Figure 3 and Map 1 taught us that rapid urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon for Africa. Next we seek to explain why and how urban areas have developed in Africa over the last century.

**Map 1:** African cities by size, 1950 and 2015

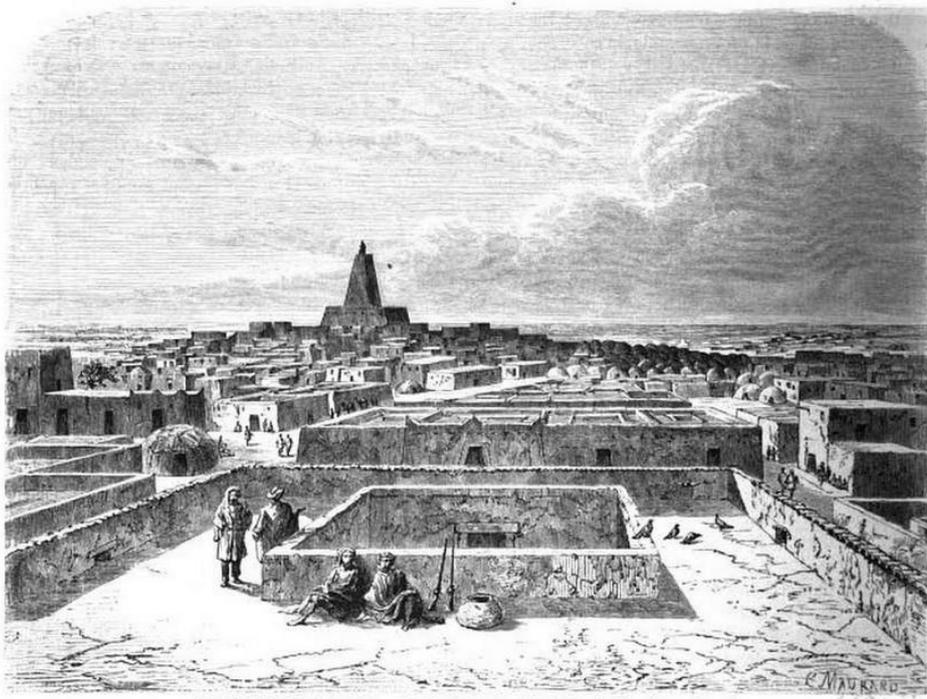


*Source:* Meier zu Selhausen (2022).

First, geographical location matters for human settlement. Usually in the past as in the present, there have been good reasons why towns developed where they currently are. For some of the larger areas of settlement in Africa the location of natural resources (e.g. water, energy sources, copper, gold and diamonds) was important in determining where people settled and migrated to in the first place at the beginning of the colonial era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, completely new industrial-urban economies emerged as a direct consequence of the discovery of minerals in Southern and Central Africa. Rapidly urban areas started to grow around industrial plants and housed the mining companies' administration and workers. The first mineral discoveries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century regions that attracted migrant labourers were for example Johannesburg, Witwatersrand (gold) and Kimberly (diamonds) in South Africa, Kitwe and Ndola in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and Lubumbashi (copper and cobalt) in the southern Congo (now DRC). Those areas grew rapidly into industrial mining, smelting and refining towns creating vast employment opportunities in the factories as well as offering a market for agricultural produce for surrounding farmers. South Africa became the largest producer of gold in the world and the majority came from the mining town of Johannesburg which already by then had a population of 250,000, making it the largest urban centre south of the Sahara. Mining created an urban-industrial civilization with high speed contrary to the more gradual development of towns in non-mining areas. The construction of the railway by colonial administrations for the extraction of natural resources and cash crops (e.g. cocoa, cotton, coffee, tobacco, sugar, and palm oil) to the coast also played an important role in determining the location of harbour towns for exports. For example, Nairobi was an uninhabited swamp and only started to attract settlement in 1899 when it became the colonial railway depot and headquarters during the British construction of the railway line that connected Mombasa on the

Indian Ocean coast with Uganda. Another driver behind initial urbanization in white settler colonies, such as Kenya, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and South Africa concerned the expropriation of fertile land from Africans which was parcelled out to white settlers. The clearance of African inhabitants from their land by the colonial government marginalized Africans economically. They were forced into reserves or drifted into cities in search of work contributing to the rapid growth of Nairobi in Kenya and Salisbury (now Harare) in Southern Rhodesia for example.

Contrary to those recently built towns stand ancient towns in Africa. Location mattered for their existence as much as for natural resources described above. However, those towns originated mainly because of their geo-political location to control and manage ocean, river and land trade rather than the mining of minerals. In East Africa, the trading centres of Mombasa and Malindi on Kenya's coast exported spices, gold and ivory to Arabia and Asia whereas Zanzibar (now Tanzania) became the largest slave market in East Africa. Even older are the towns of Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt along the river Nile and its fertile plains. Moreover, cities in the West African Niger Valley, such as Timbuktu and Djenné (Mali) emerged as thriving centres of the trans-Saharan trade and Islamic scholarship many centuries ago. For this reason, Timbuktu is recognized by the United Nations as world heritage site. The drawing below displays an old view of Timbuktu around 1500.

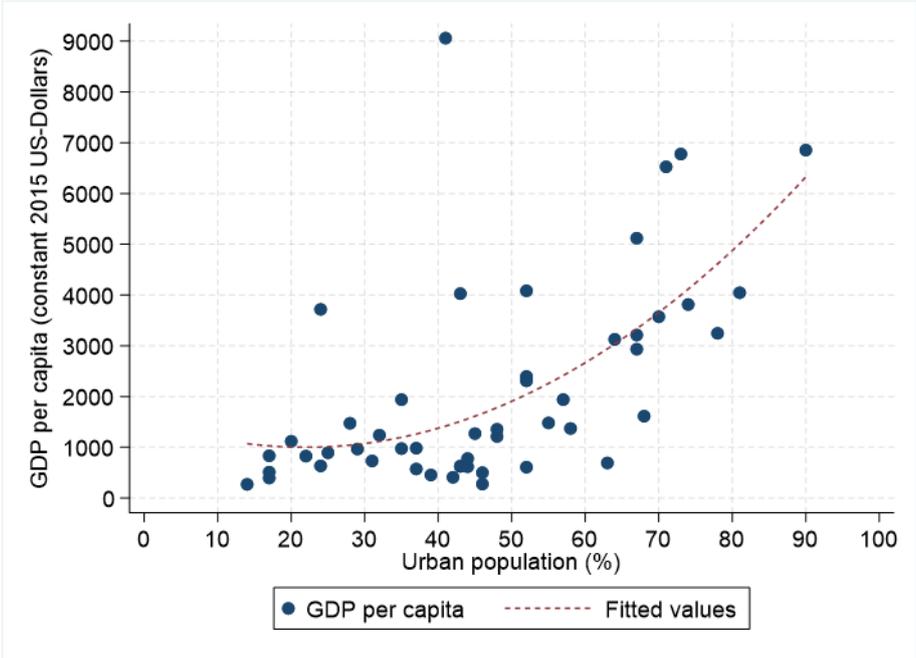


*Ancient trading town - Timbuktu (Mali), UNESCO-World Heritage site since 1988*

#### 4. The economic perspective of urbanization

Historically, there has been a close relationship between urbanization and economic development. However, this account is mainly drawn from the experience of Europe and North America during the 19th and 20th century that experienced economic growth, development and urbanization at about the same time. In recent decades, similar processes of economic development and urbanization can be observed in many Latin American and Asian countries. One of the underlying reasons for this relationship is that when the economy of a 10 country grows, usually more jobs are created which are concentrated in urban areas. When cities can offer better employment opportunities in combination with higher wages than found in rural areas, people tend to move out of the rural based agricultural sector to try their “luck” in the urban-based industry and service sectors. In an economy, the long-term shift of people working in the rural agricultural sector to working in urban manufacturing and service based sectors is referred to as *structural change*.

**Figure 4:** GDP per capita and urbanization rates in 46 African countries, 2020



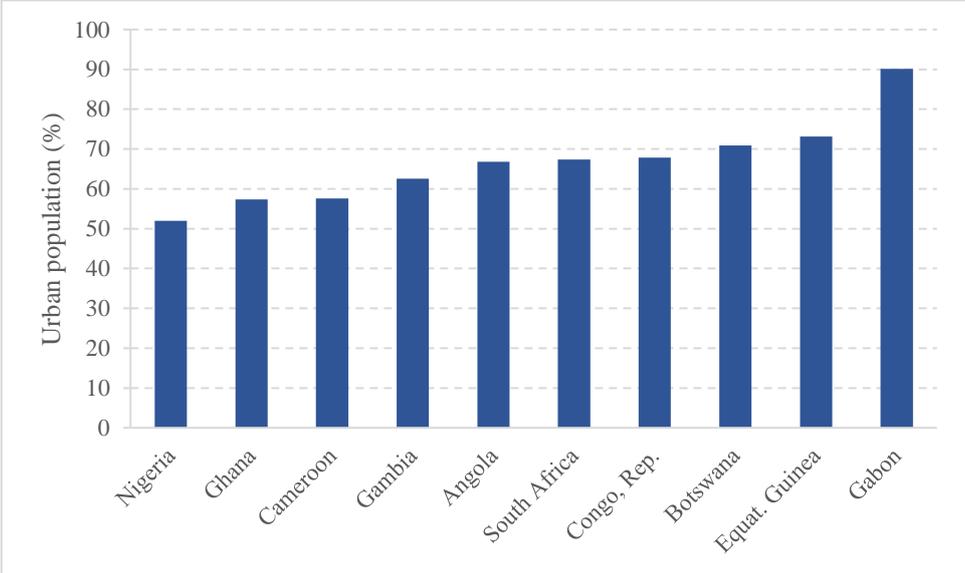
Source: World Bank (2021), World Development Indicators (WDI).

Next, we want to compare in how far this historical and global relationship can also be applied to African countries. Our departure point is Figure 4, which indicates on its y-axis GDP per capita, expressed in US dollars of the year 2015 and on the x-axis the urban urbanization rate. Each dot represents one African country in the year 2020. Three things stand out. First, the trend line through the dots gives the impression that African countries with higher levels of economic development (measured as GDP per capita), are also more urbanized and vice versa. Second, the positive relationship between urbanization and GDP per capita however only seems

to materialize once countries have reached the 50 percent urbanization rate. Before that there is no relationship whatsoever. In other words, urbanization has not been accelerated by economic development and vice versa in those African countries where less than 50 percent of the population lives in urban centres. Third, almost all African economies before the 50 percent urban threshold are relatively poor, have GDP per capita levels below \$1,500 (with the exceptions of four countries), but many have at the same time comparatively high urbanization rates between 30 and 50 percent. This gives the impression that urbanization in many African countries preceded greater economic development and rising living standards.

Figure 4 illustrated the positive relationship between African economic development and urbanization and vice versa *after* an urbanization rate of 50 percent. Next, we want to find out whether this link also remains true on a country level.

**Figure 5:** Urbanization rates in a selection of highly urbanized African countries, 2020

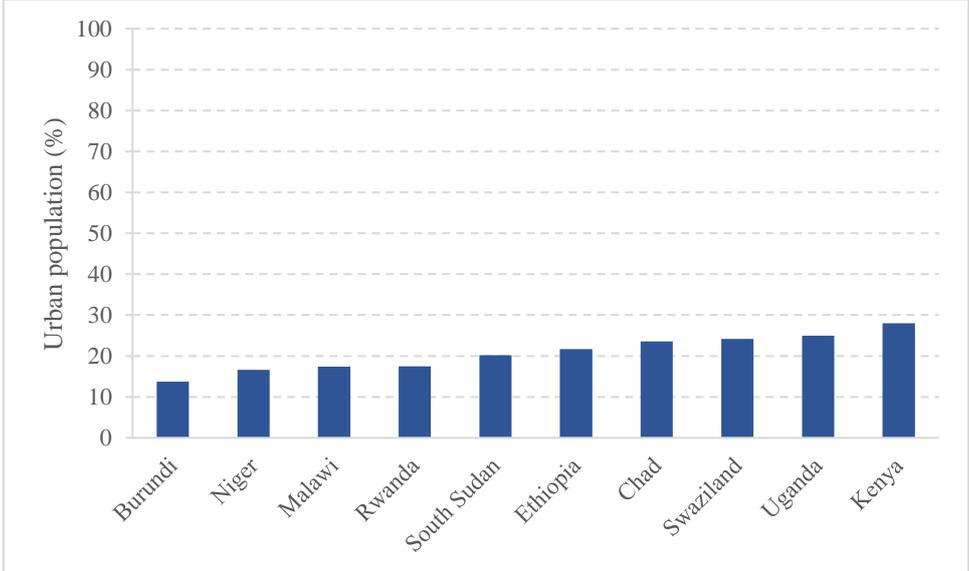


Source: World Bank (2021).

To do this we compare the ten most urbanized and least urbanized countries in sub-Saharan Africa shown in Figures 5 and 6. Differently put, we compare those countries before and after the 50 percent urbanization threshold from Figure 4. The average GDP per capita in 2020 for the ten most urbanized sub-Saharan African countries is \$4,500 whereas for the ten least urbanized countries it comes to \$1,100. In other words, the most urbanized African countries have GDP per capita levels four times the least urbanized nations in Africa – supporting the overall trend we observed in Figure 4. One of the explanations is that six of the top-ten urbanized countries have vast oil reserves (Angola, Cameroon, Congo Rep., Gabon, Ghana, and Nigeria) which contribute to higher GDP levels and resources to invest into the development of cities and associated industries. Moreover, all countries (with the exception of Botswana) have access to the sea and therefore direct access to world markets via ocean trade (export and

import) which generally favours economic development through cheaper transport costs. At the same, time all top-10 countries (except Botswana) are located in western Africa, which has historically been more densely populated and commercialized. All of the least urbanized African countries (with the exception of Eritrea) are landlocked. Access to the sea is very important to foreign companies when determining whether to open a factory (typically in urban areas) in Africa because it reduces transport costs for export significantly. As factories typically locate close to each other to benefit from economies of scale the geographical advantage seems to have added to economic development and urbanization. In sum, we can find a positive relationship between the level of urbanization and the level of economic development and vice versa for African countries if we compare the least and most urbanized African countries. However, an overall statistical relationship between urbanization and economic development seems to be restricted to African countries that have reached the 50 percent threshold of urbanization.

**Figure 6:** Urbanization rates in a selection of less urbanized countries in Africa, 2020



Source: World Bank (2021).

**5. What makes African cities grow?**

Urbanization (unlike urban growth) is the result of rural Africans coming to live in urban areas in search of employment and a different lifestyle than known from the countryside. However, the rapid pace of urban growth in Africa is caused primarily by the natural increase of the urban population and secondary by rural-to-urban migration. Africa’s urban population started to grow rapidly since World War II when European colonial governments, especially Britain and France, started to prepare colonies for independence which brought about an expansion of the general public health and sanitation, especially in urban settings, built clinics and hospitals and made basic medicines widely available.

Over the last decades improved health care services, mass-immunization programs, access to cheap medicines, and diffusion of basic knowledge about personal hygiene and sexually transmitted diseases led to sharp reduction in mortality. In particular child mortality began to fall due to better treatments for polio, measles, diarrhoea and malnutrition. Those interventions reduced infectious and parasitic diseases that used to thrive in densely populated urban settlements in the past and determined to a large amount urban population growth. A reduced disease burden in towns then resulted into lower urban (infant) mortality rates, allowing for an increase in the natural urban population. In addition, improved access to surplus food and energy supplies, partly through productivity and infrastructure improvements as well as imports and international aid over the last 60 years led to significant improvements in life expectancy in urban and rural areas across Africa. In combination with persistently high fertility rates of 5 children born on average per woman, this led to a population boom of 13 historically unprecedented size which also drives rapid population growth in urban areas which is independent of rural-urban migration. In other words, the rapid growth of Africa's urban population (unlike urbanization) is driven primarily by rapid population growth in urban areas, while rural-to-urban migration is the prime driver of urbanization.

Subsequently, we want to understand why people from the rural countryside decide to move to urban areas? People choose to move to the city for various individual reasons. Those motives can be summarized as so-called push and pull factors. A push factor is something that can force or encourage people to move away from rural areas to urban sectors. Such a decision can be influenced by environmental factors such as land scarcity, famine, drought, and flooding in rural areas. Other push factors may include war and conflict, lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, poor education and medical services, extreme rural poverty, or the desire to escape from unhappy family circumstances and gender discrimination (e.g. early marriage).

On the other hand, pull factors encourage people to move to urban areas. Those include the chance to get employed in the urban industrial and service sectors that provide higher urban wages while urban centres provide better access to medical and education services. Certainly, one important incentive that "pulls" people into cities is the prospect of finding a job. In most regions in Africa we can observe a strong link between urbanization and the settling of industries and service providers. The industrial and service sectors of the economy are usually located in urban areas. As economic growth sets off in the urban sector, factories tend to be located in urban areas in order to reap the benefits of economies of scale explained in Section 2 and the existence of a sizable and growing market for manufactured goods. It is important to note that these increasing returns to scale for firms are a major contributing factor to the growth of cities, as they contribute significantly to employment opportunities (or probabilities). When a city's economy is prospering it attracts people, not only because cities offer better employment opportunities but also higher wages than rural agriculture. In addition, industries

that provide services to consumers, such as for example lodging, catering, and, printing also tend to be attracted to urban areas by the growing numbers of people to reside. Moreover, firms also value the proximity to administrative institutions which regulate commercial activities and a larger concentration of consumers - “the market”.

However, although the economic attraction of cities for rural people are certainly important for rural-to-urban migration, it is worth noting that social and cultural attractions also play an important role for why people migrate, as city residents have access to a completely different lifestyle almost unknown in rural settings. In particular for young adults cities are the more dynamic and interesting places as it gives access to exciting social and cultural events. The much higher density of people living together also provides increased social interaction and a larger marriage market for men and women. Furthermore, many rural-to-urban migrants are only temporary urban citizens in order to spread risk in household income earning strategies, where some family members remain at the farm and others try their ‘luck’ in the cities. Villagers who migrate from towns moreover hope to obtain better income, to save money to pay a bride price upon return to the village, to find jobs which they consider more suitable for 14 literate persons than farming or to escape tribal discipline. Also the costs of migration play an important factor when people take the decision to move from rural areas into urban areas. Those include for example: transport costs, higher living costs than in rural areas, and psychological or social adjustment to a new environment.

## **6. Challenges of urbanization in Africa**

Cities’ promises however are not always fulfilled. Cities may be known for greater employment opportunities, higher wages and higher living standards on average, but not everyone who migrates to an urban centre, or is born there, benefits from it. Intense demographic pressure in urban areas has been a source of reasonable concern for African governments and the international aid community. Urbanization and urban growth without accompanying economic growth and structural change in many African countries has resulted in a situation whereby cities grew in tandem with slums and informal economic activity. Slums (also referred to as townships or squatter settlements) are perhaps the best indicator that urban growth with limited economic growth has not improved the living standards of all city inhabitants. The United Nations have introduced a definition of slums:

“A slum household is defined as a group of individuals living under the same roof lacking one or more of the following conditions: access to improved water; access to improved sanitation facilities; sufficient living area (not more than three people sharing one room); structural quality and durability of dwellings; and security of tenure.” (UN-HABITAT, 2008).



*The shady side of urbanization – Freetown's Kroo Bay slum (Sierra Leone)*

The two largest slums in Africa, Kibera in Nairobi (Kenya) and Khayelitsha in Cape Town (South Africa) symbolically stand for the discussed unequal economic and urban growth where its residents live in shacks built from discarded wood, cardboard or iron sheets without running water and electricity. Often they appear to be heavily polluted by human waste, garbage, and dust. The open sewage systems exacerbate the threat of illnesses and diseases for residents of slums, and are particularly harmful to children and pregnant women. Also, unplanned and rapid urban expansion threatens ecologically sensitive areas, such as ocean coasts, rivers and wetlands. The photo above portrays the living conditions in Freetown's Kroo Bay slum (Sierra Leone). Regular flooding threatens both health and housing of its residents.

Table 2 shows that about six in ten African urban residents are slum dwellers, which is significantly higher compared to the urban situation in other developing regions such as Latin America and Southern Asia. It also presents the ten African countries with the highest percentage of urban population living in slums where at least seven of every ten urban residents are slum dwellers. This strongly suggests that urbanization has taken place in the absence of improved economic opportunities for many urban residents but is taking place because people are physically moving out of the countryside. However, instead of finding employment in the industrial sector it has taken them into employment in the urban informal sector or conditions of unemployment. The parallel increase of slum residents has some serious repercussions for the security of those areas, as criminal rates, drug abuse, prostitution and HIV infection rates appear to be more prevalent in urban areas, and are particularly high in slums, where people live even closer to each other. For example, HIV/AIDS has slowed the pace of urbanization in the countries of eastern and southern Africa, as more people died in urban areas due to AIDS relative to rural areas.

**Table 2:** Share of slum dwellers among urban population (%) in Africa and developing regions, 2014

	% slum
South Sudan	95.6
Sudan	91.6
Chad	88.2
Guinea-Bissau	82.3
Mauritania	79.9
Madagascar	77.2
Congo, D.R.	74.8
Ethiopia	73.9
Somalia	73.6
Niger	70.1
Malawi	66.7
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	<b>55.3</b>
<b>South Asia</b>	<b>30.5</b>
<b>Latin America</b>	<b>20.4</b>

Source: UN-Habitat (2016).

## 7. Conclusion

There is a worldwide trend towards urbanization. For the first time, in 2010, Africa's total population exceeded one billion, of which a population of 395 million Africans lives in urban areas. This urban population is projected to grow to one billion in 2040, and to 1.23 billion in 2050, by which time more than half of all Africans will be living in cities, and consequently cease being predominantly rural. In other words, the ongoing rapid urban transition across Africa is one of the most significant and dynamic transformations taking place in contemporary Africa. Despite the fact that Africa currently has the lowest urbanization rate in the world it has the fastest rate of urban growth of all continents in the world.

Rural-to-urban migration has been the prime driver of urbanization across Africa for which Africans from rural areas respond to individual pull and push factors. Natural urban population increase is the main contributor to urban growth, caused by gains in life expectancy (or urban mortality decline) due to improved disease control and increased access to surplus food supplies which combined with a minimal fertility decline provided the necessary conditions for an unprecedented urban growth to occur in African countries.

Those welfare achievements occurred more rapidly than economic growth and development in many African countries. As a result, many countries in the region experienced urbanization without equal economic development. Moreover, an overall relationship between urbanization and economic development is restricted to African countries where the majority of the population already resides in cities. The unequal combination of rapid urbanization without sufficient economic growth also resulted into low living standards in African cities with the

majority of urban residents living in slums. If African cities want to be able to improve the livelihoods and well-being of millions of future Africans coming to live and being born in cities they need to plan for investing into urban infrastructure and housing facilities, since the future of African societies and culture will be played out mostly in cities – not in the countryside anymore.

### **Study questions**

1. Make a list of five things you associate with a city - things that cannot be found in rural areas. Then, explain why you want to remain to live in your city. Or, alternately, describe why you would want to leave your city.
2. Explain the difference between the concepts of urbanization and urban growth? What are the two prime drivers of those processes?
3. In urban areas people live closer together than in rural areas. Name some advantages and disadvantages of living close together in urban areas.
4. What are the challenges caused by urbanization without sufficient economic growth in Africa?
5. Explain the difference between pull and push factors responsible for rural-to-urban migration. Give some examples why people are either ‘pulled’ into cities or ‘pushed’ out of rural areas.

### **Suggested readings**

Anderson, David and Richard Rathbone (2000). *Africa's Urban Past*, Oxford: James Curry.  
Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine (2005). *The History of African Cities South of the Sahara*, Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers.

Douglas Gollin, Remi Jedwab, and Dietrich Vollrath (2016). Urbanization with and without Industrialization, *Journal of Economic Growth* 21(1): 35-70. Obtainable from: [https://www.remijedwab.com/files/ugd/ea9b22\\_f2b02bbaf515458693f76d364bb890a0.pdf](https://www.remijedwab.com/files/ugd/ea9b22_f2b02bbaf515458693f76d364bb890a0.pdf)

Fox, Sean (2012). “Urbanization as a Global Historical Process: Theory and Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Population and Development Review* 38(2): 285-310.

Human Settlements Programme, Quick Guide 1: Urban Africa: Building with untapped potential. UN-HABITAT (New York, 2011).

Meier zu Selhausen, Felix (2022). “Urban Migration in East and West Africa: Contrasts and Transformations,” In Michiel de Haas and Ewout Frankema, *Migration in Africa: Shifting Patterns of Mobility from the 19th to the 21st Century*, London: Routledge.

Todaro, Michael and Stephen Smith, *Economic Development* (London: Pearson, 2011), 311-358.

UN-Habitat (2016). *World Cities Report 2016, Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures*. New York: United Nations.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division: World Urbanization Prospects, the 2018 Revision (New York, 2018), obtainable from: <https://population.un.org/wup/>

World Bank, World Development Indicators (WDI), Washington D.C.: The World Bank. obtainable from: [World Development Indicators | DataBank \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/)

### About the author



**Felix Meier zu Selhausen** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Economic and Environmental History Group at Wageningen University. My research lies at the intersection of economic history, development economics and demography. In particular, my research focuses on the relationship between religion and socioeconomic development in Africa and gender relations in urban and rural contexts. Previously, I was awarded a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Economics Department, University of Sussex. I graduated from Utrecht University in 2015 with a Ph.D. in Social and Economic History.