

Executive summary

The pace of urbanisation in Africa over the last 60 years is without precedent. In 2015, Kenya had more urban dwellers than the entire continent combined in 1950. Africa's urban population in 2015 was 567 million people, compared to 27 million in 1950. Africa will continue to have the fastest urban growth in the world. The continent's population is projected to double between now and 2050 and two-thirds of this growth will be absorbed by urban areas. This means that in the next 30 years Africa's cities will be home to an additional 950 million people. This urban transition is profoundly transforming the social, economic and political geography of the continent. Urban management is a key development challenge and policy agendas need to refocus on the opportunities and challenges that cities and urbanisation present. A key element of this agenda is the need to better understand the reality and diversity of ongoing transformations. *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2020* highlights the diversity of contexts and sources of urban growth and their impact on current urbanisation patterns and forms.

Africa's urban diversity is rarely captured in existing analyses and narratives. This is explained in part because urbanisation is developing beyond the capacity of statistical measurements that are based upon administrative divisions and therefore only reflect a partial understanding of urban phenomena. The term "city" is globally understood to refer to a politico-administrative unit whose boundaries and legal status are defined by national governments according to varying administrative, political and

functional criteria, contexts and objectives. The boundaries of administrative units are precise and fixed. Cities, however, are alive; they evolve, develop and grow, often beyond their administrative boundaries. Africapolis data which is standardised, systematic and comparative, sheds new light on the singular reality of African urbanisation and urban growth. Africapolis is based on a spatial approach and applies a physical criteria (a continuously built-up area) and a demographic criteria (more than 10 000 inhabitants) to define an urban agglomeration. Unlike cities whose boundaries are fixed, the urban agglomerations defined by Africapolis are units whose exact shape, contents and limits vary over time and are functions of their built environments. ([Chapter 1](#))

Although the majority of the 7 617 urban agglomerations identified by Africapolis overlap with a city, as defined by national authorities, the spatial approach applied integrates the many 'spontaneous' extensions and neighbourhoods that are emerging beyond administrative boundaries; areas that are not officially recognised as wholly or partially "urban".

Africapolis also reveals the existence of hundreds of urban agglomerations that are not recorded in official statistics, in areas generally considered to be rural. The extent of this phenomenon is striking, and does not only concern small towns, or the suburbs of big cities, but agglomerations of all sizes. Some have more than one million inhabitants: Onitsha (Nigeria); Sodo, Hawassa (Ethiopia); Kisii, Kisumu (Kenya); Bafoussam (Cameroon)

and Mbale (Uganda). Their emergence is driven by rural demographic transformations which lead to widespread *in situ* urbanisation. The extent of in-situ urbanisation across Africa also challenges the influence still attributed to rural exodus and residential migration in driving urban growth. In fact, in many current urbanisation hotspots, it is the absence (or weakness) of rural migration that drives urbanisation.

In 2015, more than 50% of Africans lived in urban agglomerations. Africa had 74 urban agglomerations with more than 1 million inhabitants, similar to the European Union and the United States combined. In almost half of the 50 countries covered by Africapolis, the level of urbanisation exceeds 50%, while only Niger has a level of urbanisation below 20%. But beyond this snapshot, what makes Africa's urban transition truly unique is the pace and scale of the ongoing urbanisation processes. The urban population increased by 2 000% since 1950, and the number of urban agglomerations grew from 624 to reach 7 617 in 2015, massively transforming Africa's urban geography. In the space of decades, new capitals emerged and a few other urban centres have grown far beyond their initial sizes, dominating national urban systems. They are also quickly moving up in the global urban hierarchy. Today, Kinshasa, Abidjan and Dakar are the largest francophone agglomerations in the World after Paris; Cairo the largest agglomeration in the Arab World; and Lagos and Johannesburg are among the ten largest English-speaking agglomerations.

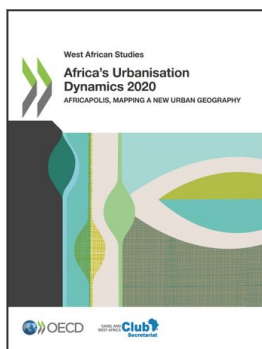
However, it is the continued emergence of thousands of small towns and intermediary cities that is profoundly transforming African societies. These new urban agglomerations, many rooted in rural transformations, play a vital part in reducing distances between urban and rural populations, in structuring urban networks, and in connecting the local and regional to the continental and global. This heightened proximity between rural and urban environments, gives rise to new and unique urban forms increasingly blurring the lines between rural and urban. Anticipating the future of Africa's urban evolution cannot be built solely upon observations of its current urban landscape but will also need to take into consideration the dynamics that drive rural transformations. (Chapter 2)

Africa's rapid urban growth can only be understood by framing it as a multidimensional process comprising historical, environmental and political factors, each of which dynamically interacts at different stages of the urban transition. The spread and density of the urban network has its origins in Africa's ancient settlements and agricultural expansion. The location and growth of many modern metropolises can be linked to the colonial and post-independence periods. Environmental constraints, like the availability of water or land, have major influences on urban growth and urban forms as seen, for example, by the agglomerations of the Nile River valley or in Rwanda. However, the greatest influence on shaping urban phenomena has been political. The impact of urban planning and policies, or the lack thereof, is visible in most of Africa's

urban agglomerations. Integrating these contextual circumstances is essential to better understand the sources and intensity of current urban growth, but also to model future urban dynamics. ([Chapter 3](#))

The diverse and multifaceted nature of Africa's contemporary urban transition gives rise to new dynamics, new urban forms and new scales of urban development. In several countries, new settlement and mobility patterns lead to the emergence of large metropolitan regions around metropolises in areas of high urban concentration. This regionalisation of urban dynamics, in some cases across borders (e.g. the Greater Ibadan Lagos Accra corridor), displays strong functional integration at scales beyond the agglomeration, while at the same time reinforcing a spatial decoupling from the rest of the territory and increasing discontinuities within national urban systems. A new urban form specific to Africa is emerging in densely populated, traditionally rural areas. Increasing densities and the merging of small and intermediary agglomerations drive widespread agglomeration processes that are giving rise to a new type of mega-agglomeration. Their spontaneous nature combined with the fact that many are emerging in the interior of the continent often results in a lack of up-to-date statistical information and political recognition. More broadly, the ongoing redistribution of population densities and the emergence of new urban centres in the interior of Africa are shifting the urban balance from coastal to inland Africa. ([Chapter 4](#))

Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2020 describes the profound urban transformations occurring in Africa. They raise larger questions on urbanisation and its relation to the environment. Expanding spontaneous urbanisation, densification of territories and strong demographic growth mount pressure on existing policies protecting the environment and require the development of new ones, reconciling urban and sustainability concerns by building on existing adaptation strategies. This is becoming a major challenge for development policies in Africa. The design of appropriate and efficient policy interventions depends on recognising and better understanding these realities.



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