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THE PRESSURES OF GROWTH: RAPID URBANIZATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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THE PRESSURES OF GROWTH: RAPID URBANIZATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Africa, urbanization is projected to continue to increase at an unprecedented pace. In 2015, Africa's urban population was close to 40 percent. By 2050, more than 60 percent of the continent will live in urban areas. In the Middle East, the rate of urbanization also increased dramatically from the 1960s to 2000s, but has recently slowed down. Urbanization has nonetheless transformed the Middle East and promises to have a significant impact on Africa as well. Both the rapidity of urbanization and the reason for its occurrence—due primarily to demographic upward trends (i.e., decreases in infant and maternal mortality etc.) as opposed to rural-urban migration—differentiate this period of change from other periods of rural-urban migration.

Africa currently has three megacities with populations over 10 million: Lagos, Cairo, and Kinshasa. Estimates suggest that Khartoum, Dar-es-Salaam, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Abidjan and Kano could expand into megacities by 2050. Population pressures are accompanying urbanization in Africa as governments struggle to accommodate the growth of their cities. Infrastructure and service provision are particularly lacking in many African cities. Rapid urbanization has been associated specifically with housing shortages, a lack of clean water and sanitation services, and increased crime. In the Middle East, housing shortages, youth unemployment, and large displaced and refugee populations—although less acute than in Africa—also pose a problem for the region's cities.

To effectively address these issues, governments could benefit from external assistance from international partners in the following areas: infrastructure development, urban planning and reform of the law enforcement sector.

BACKGROUND

Urbanization has generally been positively correlated with economic and social development trends for a number of reasons. It is easier and less expensive to provide basic services such as education, sanitation, and health care to more densely populated and geographically compact areas. Larger cities also provide economies of scale that allow for the "sharing, matching, and learning" of common infrastructure, industrial risk, employee pools, and the like, all of which facilitate economic productivity.

In Africa, however, the correlation between urbanization and development is found to be weaker than in other regions. Urbanization in Africa has been associated with modest economic growth but also with extreme poverty and an increase in large informal economies. Part of the explanation for the insufficient economic growth accompanying African urbanization can be found in its rapid rate of change. African urbanization is taking place at a record pace. Although currently about 60 percent of Africans live in rural areas, by 2050 it is expected that close to 60 percent of the continent's residents will live in urban areas. This rate of urbanization surpasses much of the historical record in Europe, Latin America, and North America (See Figure 1). East Asia experienced a more rapid population transfer from the 1980s to the 2010s, but urbanization there has slowed dramatically since. A similar trend occurred in the Middle East and North Africa, but again, the growth trajectory has stabilized. In Africa and South Asia, however, urbanization is predicted to continue to strongly increase for the next several decades.

Furthermore, the nature of the population increase in Africa and other developing regions over the past few decades is markedly different from previous growth spurts. Initially, Africa's rapid urbanization was due primarily to pull factors that drew residents from rural to urban areas (i.e., better employment opportunities and service provision), but more recent research has found that current population growth in African cities is now due to natural demographic increases—decreases in infant and maternal mortality coupled with higher birth rates are expected to continue to increase the continent's population. The population growth combined with the inability of public institutions to adapt to the new demographic conditions has resulted in a number of colossal and very poor cities in Africa.

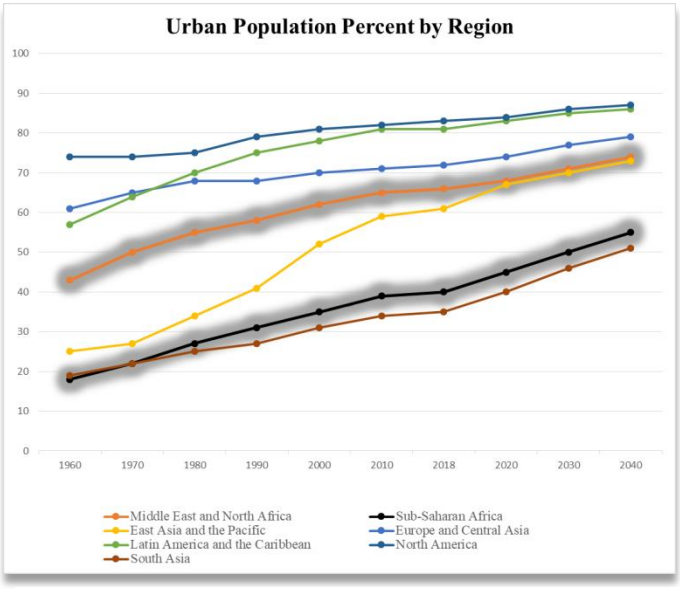

***Figure 1**. Urban Population by Region. (Source: Population Estimates and Projections, World Bank Group, 2018.)*

In the Middle East, problems associated with rapid urbanization are less acute because much of the urbanization process has already taken place. From the 1960s to the 2000s, according to the World Bank, the urban population almost doubled from about 35 percent to about 60 percent. The pace has since slowed, but the region still faces similar challenges in its cities due to burgeoning youth populations, limited job prospects, overstressed infrastructure, and scarcity of resources, especially water. In addition, wars in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria have resulted in mass displacements; those fleeing conflict have recently found refuge in major urban areas in the Middle East.

MEGACITIES

The rapid urbanization of Africa and the Middle East has resulted in a proliferation of "megacities." Megacities are typically considered to be metropolitan areas with populations of more than 10 million residents. Current examples of megacities in Africa include Lagos (20 million), Cairo (12 million, 20 million metro area), and Kinshasa (10–11 million). Khartoum, Dar-es-Salaam, Luanda, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Abijan, and Kano are all projected to become megacities by 2050. Although there are currently no megacities in the Middle East, given growth projections, cities such as Riyadh (7 million), Baghdad (8.8 million), and Tehran (8.8 million/15 million metro area) have the potential to become megacities in the near future (see Figure 2).

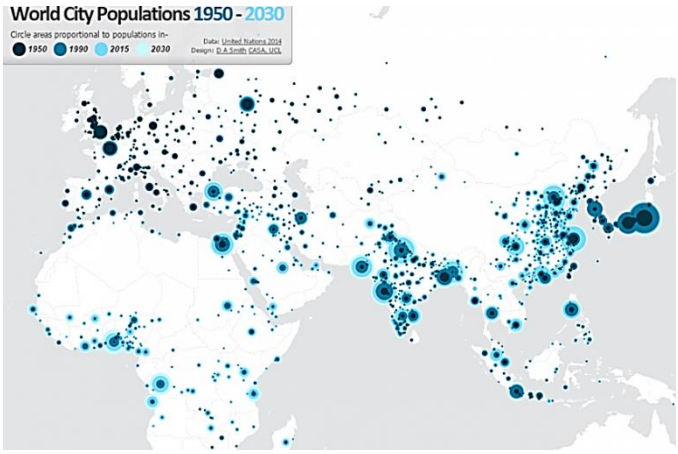

***Figure 2.** World City Populations, Africa and the Middle East, 1950–2030. (Source: Duncan Smith/UCL/CASA, http://luminocity3d.org/WorldCity/#3/11.95/10.02.)*

Rapid urbanization is fueling the growth of megacities in Africa at an alarming rate when compared with historic data. The population of Lagos alone grew from 300,000 to 15 million in about 50 years. In contrast, it took nearly 150 years for the population of London to expand from 1 million to 8 million residents.

Africa has fewer megacities relative to other regions such as Latin America and Asia. Some researchers have argued that a lack of megacities in Africa is actually hindering its growth potential because megacities have served as engines of growth for other regions. Megacities are not inherently problematic. Instead, issues arise when the pace of growth outstrips (1) the government's ability to provide infrastructure and other basic services and (2) the economy's ability to supply adequate housing and create sufficient formal employment. Many new and emerging megacities currently suffer from acute housing shortages, increased crime, lower life expectancy, and higher economic inequality. Some have cautioned about the "rise of poor megacities" and warned that it will become a major problem in the near–to mid-term. In the Middle East, urbanization is slowing, but a growing youth population and scarcity of resources, especially water, in major cities could put intense pressure on governments and help fuel instability.

CHALLENGES: INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICE PROVISION

Concern over the pace of urbanization led several African governments to attempt to place restrictions on rural-urban migration in the 1980s and 1990s. By 2013, 45 countries in Africa had implemented some sort of policy to limit rural-urban migration, to little effect. From a government perspective, because large populations could lead to civil unrest and mass protest, managing the urbanization process was a priority concern. It is true that protests are more common in Africa now than ever before. Rapid urbanization can also place a significant strain on existing infrastructure, in particular roads and housing, which are in short supply. Congestion due to inadequate public transportation and poor road conditions is adding significant time (several hours in some cases) to workers' commutes and negatively affects economic productivity. From an economic perspective, however, urbanization is a natural process that can redirect people from less productive economic activities to more productive ones. Urbanization can also result in the clustering of businesses and knowledge, reducing the costs of production and increasing specialization. The key is how governments manage the urbanization process without discouraging it.

HOUSING

An estimated 60 percent of urban residents across Africa live in informal settlements, also referred to as slums that lack access to sanitation and potable water. In Lagos, the most populous city in Africa and projected to be the third most populous in the world by 2050, more than 60 percent of the population lives in slums. Many of the slums, like Otodo Gbame (population 30,000 to 40,000) and Makoko (population estimates range from 40,000 to 300,000; see Figure 3) are located near or on the waterfront, with residents living in makeshift wooden shacks on stilts or, in some extreme cases, canoes. Clean water, sanitation facilities, and reliable power are almost impossible to access. The state government of Lagos has been attempting to evict residents and raze such developments to make way for luxury housing.

Figure 3. *Makoko settlement, Lagos, Nigeria. (Source: Page Tsewinor, own work, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ wiki/ File: Makoko.jpg.)*

Formal housing remains unaffordable in Africa due in large part to the unavailability of land in urban areas, which has often been previously appropriated by the political class. In many African countries, the most valuable farmlands and urban lots are concentrated in the hands of a small number of elites with ties to the government.

"SMART" CITIES

Several countries have recently undertaken ambitious and expensive plans for urban housing that have yet to yield much. In Ghana, Hope City was touted as a revolutionary $10 billion planned information and communication technology hub to be located outside Accra that could accommodate 50,000 employees and 25,000 residents. Announced with much fanfare in 2013 by former President John Mahama, construction on the project stalled in 2016, and by 2018, little progress had been made. A similar story is unfolding in Kenya's Konza City, projected to house 30,000 and employ 200,000 upon completion, which has also made little progress since it was announced in 2013. On a slightly more modest scale, Vision City in Kigali, Rwanda, is a "smart neighborhood" project that aims to house 22,000 people in a tech-enabled environment. Critics of the project argue that the housing planned for Vision City is unaffordable for the average Rwandan (the average home costs $160,000) and will do little to address Kigali's actual housing problem.

UNEMPLOYMENT

The structural transformation of the economy that usually accompanies urbanization oftentimes has not occurred in Africa. Usually, urbanization as a result of push-pull factors (the draw of rural populations to cities) is accompanied by a shift from agricultural-based economic activities to industry-based activities. This is not happening in most parts of Africa. As a consequence, unemployment is a huge problem, especially among the youth. According to statistics compiled by the African Development Bank, only about 33 percent of people under the age of 35 are formally employed; one-third are unemployed; and another one-third are underemployed or "vulnerably" employed. In slums, unemployment rates are even higher. A recent study funded by the European Union estimated that only 12 percent of residents in the slums of Uganda were formally employed. About 32 percent were self-employed. The most popular jobs were in food vending and transportation. The study also linked poverty to high rates of crime and potential radicalization.

Figure 4. *Kibera Slum in Nairobi, Kenya.*
(Source: By Schreibkraft, Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8837530)

POLICING AND CRIME

Slums are often plagued by crime and a lack of trust in security forces, which can lead to the use of vigilante groups to fill the policing void. Vigilante groups have cropped up in major cities in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, where trust in the police is low and crime is high. They frequently enjoy more local support than state security forces. In Nigeria, the government has begun to partner with vigilante groups in an effort to better regulate their activities.

WATER AND SANITATION

Public service provision, while theoretically easier in cities than in rural areas, where residents are more geographically disparate, is also a challenge for most megacities. It is time consuming and expensive to pipe water into already established settlements. In Lagos, only about 10 percent of the population has regular access to clean water furnished by the local government. In Kiberia, Nairobi, only 20 percent of residents have electricity, and there

are almost no toilet facilities. Lack of service provision has promoted many mass protests in Tunisia, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. Sanitation and potable water, if not adequately provided for, can result in health crises and, in a worst case scenario, pandemics. Poor sanitation is associated with diseases such as cholera, dysentery, typhoid, and polio. Highly dense cities can also facilitate the quick spread of infectious diseases such as occurred with the Ebola virus in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in 2015 and 2016.

MEGAREGIONS

In the future, areas of rapid expansion could face jurisdictional and governance issues related to "megaregions" that traverse multiple countries. Urbanization in West Africa has spread along about 600 kilometers from Ghana to Nigeria and stretches across Benin and Togo. Lagos is the largest city along this expanding corridor. Planners and government will have to grapple with how to harmonize and deconflict regulations regarding interstate travel, trade, residency, and taxation across these countries. This massive undertaking will require assistance from a variety of sources.

TRENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Similar to trends in Africa, several Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, are increasingly finding themselves unable to adequately accommodate mass influxes of people. Housing shortages are common. In Iran, a lack of affordable housing has led many Iranians to move into shipping containers on the outskirts of Tehran. Saudi Arabia is planning on building 1 million new homes over the next five years to address its needs. In Jordan, 85 percent of its estimated 630,000 Syrian refugee population are living in informal settlements and camps outside the capital of Amman.

Attributed to a "baby boom" in the 1980s and 1990s, the size of the youth population in many Middle Eastern countries has exploded in recent years. Youth unemployment in the Middle East, although generally lower than in most African countries, hovers around 30 percent. Conflict in some countries and an overreliance on public sector employment in others have contributed to high rates of youth unemployment. When prolonged this has the potential to upend the Middle East if large numbers of the unemployed and underemployed turn to protests to express their frustrations.

A POSSIBLE WAY AHEAD

Many governments have found themselves unable to provide adequate infrastructure, such as roads and housing, to accommodate the massive population growth. Service provision is also lagging. In Africa's urban areas, education, health care, sanitation, access to clean water, and reliable energy sources are all well below the global average. Finally, unemployment, especially among the youth population, is a major cause for concern. From the government's perspective, youth frustrated by their grim employment options are prone to protest and vulnerable to radicalization. From the perspective of international community, young people from Africa and the Middle East with few prospects for employment could attempt to migrate to other regions, compounding the current migration problem in Europe.

Secondary cities, or smaller, less populous cities to which population transfers can be diverted, have been suggested as a way to alleviate some of these pressures. However, secondary cities are not a panacea. In South Africa, for example, infrastructure and service provision, while better in secondary cities than in rural areas, still lags behind the major metropolitan areas. World Bank economists caution against massive deregulation to address this crisis, instead encouraging African governments to engage in a coordinated policymaking effort.

To effectively address these issues, African governments could design policies and use external assistance in the following areas: infrastructure development, urban planning and reform of the law enforcement sector.

- Infrastructure development—Investments in roads, hospitals, electricity grids, schools, and sewage systems would all pay dividends by enabling countries to accommodate population booms. These investments could be undertaken bilaterally, multilaterally, or through public-private partnerships with industry from partner states.
- Urban planning—Realistic and detailed urban planning that addresses traffic, housing, and business needs is also sorely needed. International community could offer its expertise in this area to any governments in Africa and the Middle East that are receptive.
- Reform of the law enforcement sector – better trained and equipped police organizations are critical for controlling the criminality in the urban agglomerations. Eradication of corruption within the police ranks is also needed in order for the citizens to regain thrust in the law enforcement institutions, thus limiting the use of vigilantes for pursuing justice.

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