



## Africa's urbanisation: Implications for sustainable development



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### ABSTRACT

Sustainable development remains one of the most advocated development concepts worldwide, yet, there continues to be limited signs of progress towards its achievement in Africa. Recent studies identify rapid and unplanned urbanisation as a major threat. With Africa expected to become a home to nearly quarter (1.3 billion) of the world's urban population in 2050, research into the ramifications of urbanisation on the functionality of the region's urban environment is urgent and tenable. This paper fleshes out and teases apart the implications of rapid urbanisation on sustainable development of Africa.

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### Introduction

The concept of sustainable development emerged in the 1980s as a result of the world's recognition of the need for environmental protection in development planning practices (Cobbinah, Black, & Thwaites, 2011; Cobbinah, Erdiaw-Kwasie, & Amoateng, 2015; World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). The meaning of sustainable development has increasingly focused on fostering adaptive capabilities and creating opportunities to maintain or achieve desirable social, economic and ecological systems for both the present and future generations (Cobbinah et al., 2011; Folke et al., 2002; Holling, 2001; WCED, 1987). It is therefore recognised globally as a complex phenomenon that embraces and integrates three main principles – environment, society, and economy – with the objective of achieving a self-sustaining progress. For this reason, sustainable development is often described as a potential pathway for achieving environmental conservation and stimulating socio-economic development at country, regional and local levels, and is increasingly being embedded into national and international development policies (Cobbinah et al., 2015).

Although many benefits have been claimed for sustainable development, such as it being a framework for achieving a balance between socio-economic development and environmental conservation, disillusionment has grown amongst practitioners and stakeholders especially in Africa where these claims have not been

realised (Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005; Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005). In pursuit of human advancement in Africa, Boadi, Kuitunen, Raheem, and Hanninen (2005) argue that sustainable development should not focus only on safeguarding the environment or alleviating poverty, rather it should ensure that human development is consistent with sustainable use of the natural and environmental resources. Such an understanding can help improve people's welfare, ensure effective urban management (Boadi et al., 2005) and protect Africa's natural environment which serves as home for some of the world's threatened ecological species (Coria & Calfucura, 2012).

Recent studies have identified urbanisation as one of the key factors influencing Africa's urban development (e.g., Bao & Fang, 2012; Darkwah & Cobbinah, 2014; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division [UNDESA/PD], 2012). Urbanisation is described as a demographic (UNDESA/PD, 2012), ecological (Tavernia & Reed, 2009), sociological (Pivo, 1996) and economic (Bao & Fang, 2012) phenomenon that concentrates population in urban areas and has the potential to either stimulate or retard growth and development of these areas – towns, cities, metropolis, mega cities, megalopolis – in both developed and developing countries.

Several arguments suggest that sustainable development may be achieved amidst rapid urbanisation, indicating that the two are compatible. There is a significant overlap between sustainable development and urbanisation in the sense that economic development remains central to both sustainable development and urbanisation (Cohen, 2006; UNDESA/PD, 2012; WCED, 1987). First, the process of urbanisation often leads to creation of cities that serve as engines of economic growth, and centres for integration of

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human and entrepreneurial resources that generate new ideas, innovations and technologies necessary for promoting sustainable and productive use of resources (Songsore, 1977; United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UNHABITAT], 2012). For example, some developing countries (e.g., China) have demonstrated a much better ability towards achieving sustainable development through improved economic development (Cohen, 2006). Second, urbanisation creates a platform for clustering of productive activities in industry and services which often result in low production costs and generates more benefits that translate into improved standards of living of urban residents (UNHABITAT, 2012).

However, with recent global urbanisation labelled as a socio-economic threat in developing countries (UNDESA/PD, 2012), there are increasing arguments that the idea of sustainable development does not always coincide with the notions of urbanisation (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Misilu, Shouyu, & Li Qian, 2010; UNDESA/PD, 2012). Recent studies indicate that many urban areas in Africa have found it increasingly difficult to deal with intensive, unplanned and unsustainable urbanisation which is believed to have eroded the socio-economic and environmental benefits associated with urbanisation and sustainable development (Darkwah & Cobbinah, 2014; Misilu et al., 2010; UNDESA/PD, 2012). For instance, the level of urbanisation in Africa is alarmingly high: official statistics estimate it to reach about 58% in 2050, with the continent hosting nearly quarter (1.3 billion) of the world's urban population (Cobbinah et al., 2015; UNDESA/PD, 2012). Evidence suggests that the current and estimated rate of urbanisation is already having a toll on Africa in terms of urban poverty, and unsustainable exploitation of resources including land and energy (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment [MEA], 2005; UNDESA/PD, 2012; UNHABITAT, 2001). More commonly, Africa's urbanisation is demographically driven and occurs in the absence of socio-economic and environmental benefits (Cohen, 2006; Songsore, 2009).

In spite of this somewhat discouraging argument and reality, the international community has been motivated over the years to use sustainable development initiatives to improve the economic and social welfare of people and facilitate environmental conservation in Africa and other developing countries (United Nations [UN], 2000; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2011). The international community, since the 1980s, has established a number of sustainable development-based organisations with a focus on developing countries, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UNHABITAT), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Despite the activities of these organisations towards improving the functionality and liveability of the urban environment, Boadi et al. (2005) observe that over the past two decades urban Africa has not witnessed any meaningful improvements in the environment and the living conditions of its residents, and that African cities continue to be plagued with urbanisation threats including unemployment, poverty, insecurity and water and sanitation challenges.

Regardless of the limited claims of sustainable development benefits being realised in developing countries particularly Africa, few studies (e.g., Boadi et al., 2005; Cohen, 2006) have focused on evaluating the influence of rapid urbanisation on the development of Africa. For example, Cohen (2006) examined urbanisation in developing countries with a special focus on the processes and patterns of Africa's urban growth, while Boadi et al. (2005) explored urbanisation and development in Africa focusing on environmental and health implications. In this paper, an analysis of the ramifications of urbanisation on Africa's urban environment is presented.

The paper is organised as follows: A discussion on urbanisation dynamics in developing countries focusing on Africa is presented. This is followed by an analysis of the potential benefits of

urbanisation to sustainable development in Africa. The negative implications of urbanisation on sustainable development of Africa is further discussed. Finally, the conclusion and some recommendations on urbanisation and sustainable development on Africa's urban future is presented.

### Urbanisation dynamics in developing countries: an African perspective

In recent years, rapid urbanisation has become synonymous with developing countries (Brockhoff, 2000; Fox, 2012). Between 1950 and 2000, urbanisation level in developing countries more than doubled from 18% to 40%, with the level expected to exceed 50% by 2020 and 64% in 2050 (UNDESA/PD, 2012). It is true that, in a variety of contexts, developed countries have experienced higher levels of urbanisation compared to developing countries. However, recent studies indicate that rapid urbanisation in terms of absolute population in developing countries has become a threat to sustainable development (Brockhoff, 2000; UNDESA/PD, 2012). For example in 2010, although the developing and developed countries had urbanisation levels of about 46% and 78% respectively, their corresponding urban population was 2.6 billion and 96 million (UNDESA/PD, 2012), highlighting the rapid growth of urban population in developing countries. This growth will continue, with over 90% of global population growth projected to occur in urban areas of developing countries over the next four decades (Table 1).

Unfortunately, the threat of rapid urbanisation to sustainable development of urban areas is increasingly becoming certain and palpable in Africa, where urban growth is pervasive (Brockhoff, 2000; Fox, 2012; UNEP, 2007). Until recently Africa's population was largely rural, however, with an average annual urbanisation rate of 3.3%, Africa is now the world's fastest urbanising region (UNDESA/PD, 2012). Official UN statistics show that Africa's urban population increased from 33 million to 288 million between the period of 1950 and 2000, and currently exceeds that of developed regions like North America (UNDESA/PD, 2012). As presented in Table 1, future projections are even more alarming as about 1.3 billion people are expected in urban Africa by 2050 (UNDESA/PD, 2012).

Nevertheless, Africa's urbanisation has been uneven across the various sub-regions and countries. For example, in 2010, Eastern Africa recorded an urbanisation level of 23% compared to 41%, 51%, 59% and 44% for Middle Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa and Western Africa respectively. These variations further reflected at the country-level, where countries such as Ghana, South Africa, Libya and Gabon had urban population of 51%, 62%, 78% and 86% respectively in 2010 compared to 11%, 17%, 18% and 23% in Burundi, Ethiopia, Niger and Kenya respectively (UNDESA/PD, 2012). With rapid urbanisation in Africa expected to persist until the mid of the 21st century (Hope & Lekorwe, 1999; UNDESA/PD, 2012), the continent is now at the crossroad of urban transition, and how this transition is managed has implications for sustainable urban development (McGranahan, Mitlin, Satterthwaite, Tacoli, & Turok, 2009).

Africa's urban population is progressively concentrating in cities often with a million-plus population (see Table 2). As at 2010, there were 50 of such cities across the continent with Lagos (Nigeria) and Cairo (Egypt) having over 10 million people (UNDESA/PD, 2012; UNHABITAT, 2010). According to the UNDESA/PD (2012), cities in Africa are likely to experience unprecedented growth at average annual rates of between 1.93% and 6.13% by 2025. Rather than viewing such growth as an opportunity for the pursuit of economic, social and environmental advancement, its unguided nature poses range of development threats including unsustainable exploitation of resources such as land (MEA, 2005), and increased urban poverty (Boadi et al., 2005).

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