



Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Africa's diplomatic capital



Mulatu Wubneh*

Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 January 2013

Received in revised form 24 May 2013

Accepted 9 August 2013

Available online 9 September 2013

Keywords:

Urban development

Primacy

Housing

Infrastructure services

Sustainability

Urbanization in Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

As the national capital, Addis Ababa remains the economic, political and administrative hub of Ethiopia. In the last 50 years, the city has gained international significance as the headquarter of the African Union (AU), UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA) and a regional office for a number of international organizations including UNDP, UNESCO and the European Economic Commission (EEC). However, like many cities in the developing world, Addis Ababa is facing a number of problems related to population growth, lack of economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of housing, and large areas of informal development with major environmental problems. This profile identifies some of the strategic planning elements that the city could adopt as Addis Ababa strives to develop into a premier metropolitan area for a sustainable community and a diplomatic capital.

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Introduction

As the head quarter of the African Union (AU) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA), Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is emerging as an international center with diverse economic and cultural characteristics. The city has evolved from a relatively modest size where pack animals and pedestrians shared main highways with modern automobiles to a cosmopolitan center where freeways; high rise buildings for office, shopping, hotel and restaurants; condominiums and exclusive neighborhoods with gated communities have become a common scene.

Located in the central part of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa is about 5 h flight from Europe and about 3–4 h flight from many African cities as well as the Middle East. This central location together with being the headquarter of AU and UN-ECA has given Addis Ababa a significant advantage in serving as Africa's diplomatic capital and in attracting millions of visitors that come for conferences and other site visits. Thanks to the Ethiopian Airlines, one of the most successful airlines in Africa, many of the visitors can get direct connection to Addis Ababa (Fig. 1).

In terms of geography, Addis Ababa lies on the western edge of the Rift Valley escarpment at Latitude 9°2'N and 36°45'E. The city is at the foot of the Entoto range (altitude 2,900 meters) dropping down to 2300 m in the southern periphery toward the Akaki Plains. The general climate is of sub-tropical with an average temperature range of 10 °C. Beginning in mid-November temperatures are cooler (10–15 °C) particularly at night and in the early morning, rising

to 20–23 °C in the day time. February to May is the warm season with temperatures climbing to over 23 °C in the afternoon. June to mid-September is the long wet season when temperatures are often mild.

Addis Ababa, whose name means 'New Flower', is indeed blooming by the day, and is undergoing rapid changes in physical structure of buildings as well as layout of streets and neighborhoods. This transformation, however, is not without challenges. Despite the dynamic growth in population and the tremendous change in physical structure of the city, there are a number of issues related to the spike in population and the capacity of the municipality to provide services such as housing, transportation, water and sanitation; land and housing; economic development; governance; environment and quality of life; and overall sustainability of the community. Many of these problems are challenging the capacity of the local government to manage growth and to provide services for a sustainable community.

The objective of this paper is to analyze how these challenges are impacting the development of Addis Ababa, specifically the growth of the city as an international center. Addis Ababa is quickly becoming a focal point of international organizations. In the last ten years, several international organizations have located in the city. The municipal government has made a major stride to change the characteristics of the city through massive infrastructure investment and engaging in major revitalization programs. However, despite the effort, Addis Ababa is one of the poorest cities in Africa and the government is facing the daunting task of trying to meet the needs of the rising population. Thousands and perhaps millions of its residents are without jobs, housing or better quality services. This study will identify some of the major options that the

* Tel.: +1 (252) 328 1272; fax: +1 (252) 737 1527.

E-mail address: wubnehm@ecu.edu



Fig. 1. Addis Ababa, international connections. Source: Ethiopian Airlines.

municipal government must consider if Addis Ababa is to manage its growth and develop as a sustainable international city.

This paper is organized as follows. After briefly reviewing the foundation and early development of Addis Ababa, the analysis presents an overview of the economic, social and physical characteristics of the city. It also identifies the major challenges the city faces by focusing on the demographic, housing, infrastructure and quality of life of the modern city. The conclusion outlines some of the major strategic planning objectives that the city must adopt in future directions of its development.

Foundation and development in an historical context

Established only about 125 years ago, Addis Ababa is a relatively young city compared to some of the major historic towns of Ethiopia such as Axum, Lalibela and Gondar. Addis Ababa is the last of the roaming capitals of Ethiopia's emperors going back to the Axumite period in the 7th Century A.D. In 1886, Menelik II established Addis Ababa as his permanent capital. Soon the city that was initially selected for its warm climate, rich forest reserves



Fig. 2. The first municipal building of Addis Ababa.

for wood, and hot springs, became a thriving community. The establishment of permanent structures including the palace

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