



Demographics

Urbanisation in Africa

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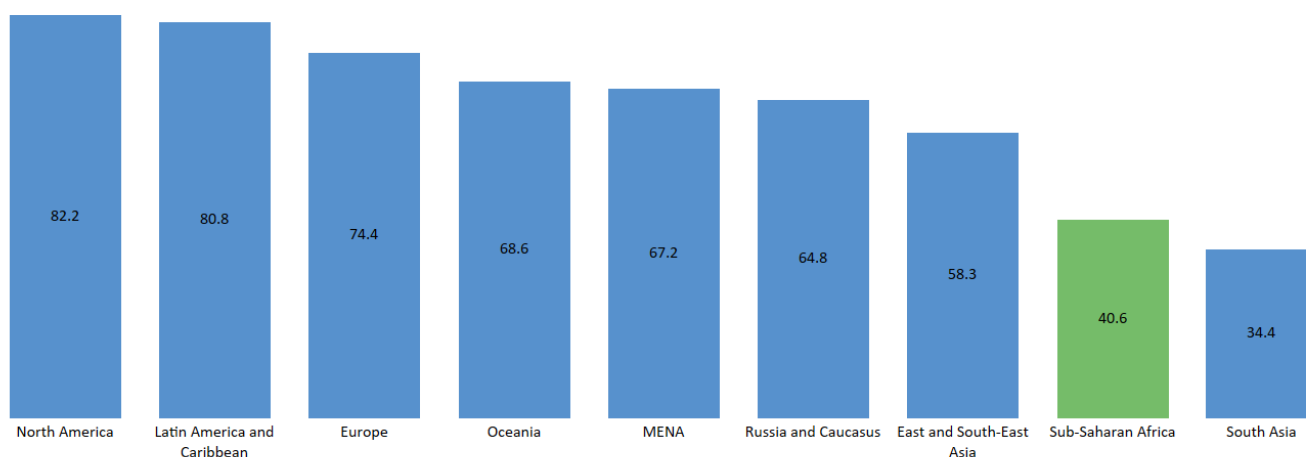
Historically, urbanisation has been a catalyst for growth and development, closely linked to the demographic dividend. In 2019, Africa's average urbanisation rate stood at 43%, with Gabon at 90% and Burundi at 19%. While this is lower than the global average of 58%, it signifies the potential for significant growth. It's a sign of hope, a promise of a brighter future.

It is essential to consider the level and the rate of urbanisation, both of which present Africa with future challenges.

A 2010 analysis by the McKinsey Global Institute found that the shift from rural to urban employment could account for 20% to 50% of **productivity growth** in Africa. The relationship is complex and non-linear, however. Very high levels of urbanisation may serve as a **drag** on economic growth beyond rates of around 70%, which may explain why Latin America and the Caribbean, which now have the highest percentage of their population, staying in urban areas (81%) comparable to countries in the Global North. It is likely that the infrastructure and institutional setting typically associated with higher levels of urbanisation make all the difference in the contribution that urbanisation makes to development.

However we look at it, urbanisation is lagging in Africa. Instead, most Africans lived in small village communities at the time of independence, and fewer than one-fifth of them could likely be classified as urban. That number had increased to around 27% by 1980, to 35% by 2000, and should reach 50% by around 2041, with sub-Saharan Africa numbers much lower than rates in North Africa. In contrast, the rest of the world crossed the halfway mark shortly after the turn of the century. Africa is likely to reach the two-thirds mark only by around 2070, compared to 2042 for the rest of the world. The impact of climate change may, of course, accelerate this process. Only South Asia, which includes rural countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Afghanistan, had lower levels of urbanisation in 2019 than sub-Saharan Africa, as shown in Chart 7.

Chart 7: Rates of urbanisation, 2019



Source: IFS 7.84 initialising from UNPD WPP data

East Africa is the most rural part of the continent and will likely remain so, with levels of urbanisation currently almost 30% lower than in North Africa, the most urban region. West Africa is experiencing the most rapid rates of urbanisation (average rates are currently roughly on par with Central Africa) and will, after the middle of this century, likely approach rates of urbanisation seen in North or Southern Africa. Rapid urbanisation rates will present these governments with significant challenges in coping with the influx in the provision of services, congestion and basic infrastructure. Currently, Gabon, Libya, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Algeria and São Tomé and Príncipe are the most urbanised countries with urbanisation rates of over 70%. South Sudan, Rwanda, Malawi, Niger and Burundi are the least urbanised, with less than 20% of their populations considered urban. Without the productivity benefits of the more significant portion of its population eventually concentrated in urban areas and the associated drag of very high fertility rates, these countries will struggle to grow incomes even as the urban growth rate is likely to outpace the ability of authorities to manage the same.

The theme on [health](#) explains that it is easier to provide safe water, improved sanitation and basic infrastructure within an urban setting, where bulk services such as clean water, improved sanitation and household electricity can be provided to people in denser settlements than to a population spread out across large rural areas - but that is only possible if urbanisation proceeds at a pace that allows authorities to preposition the associated infrastructure.

Contrary to the historical experience in much of the world, Africans currently do not move to urban areas in response to existing job opportunities in the manufacturing sector (which would increase productivity) but rather to escape the deprivation and poverty of rural existence. Consequently, poverty is urbanising, and urban slums and informal settlements are expanding, given the limited capacity of authorities in these urbanising areas to respond.^[1] Sharp income inequalities in many African cities also mean that economic growth only reduces poverty to a limited extent. As a result, Africa has more urban poor than any other region.

From a low base, Africa's urban population growth is the fastest globally, however. Each year, urban Africa grows by an estimated 20 million people. By 2030, that number will be close to 25 million; by then, Africa will host six of the world's 41 megacities. Cairo, Lagos, Kinshasa, Johannesburg, Luanda and Dar es Salaam will have more than 10 million inhabitants each, and 17 African cities will have a population of more than [five million](#) each. The African Economic Outlook 2016 estimates Africa could see its slum population triple by [2050](#). On the current urbanisation trajectory, the nature of these congested and somewhat chaotic African cities is unlikely to benefit from the benefits of urbanisation without sufficient preparatory investment and planning.

The move from rural subsistence farming to urban informal employment in low-end services is positive because it is moderately growth-enhancing. Still, it would be much higher if jobs in the manufacturing sector were attracting urbanisation. However, the nature of Africa's slow urbanisation is a significant drag on economic transformation. Paul Collier^[2] succinctly summarised the challenge and opportunity:

Urbanisation can be the essential motor of economic development at its best, rapidly lifting societies out of mass poverty. At its worst, it results in concentrations of squalor and disaffection, which ferments political fragility. African urbanisation has been dysfunctional, the critical indication being that cities have not generated enough productive jobs.

The management of its urban areas will present African leadership with many challenges. Urbanisation has powerful socio-political implications, and it has become an essential consideration in explaining the rise of populism in the West and in Africa, where urban areas are first to turn away from supporting the governing party, evident in cities as diverse as Algiers, Addis Ababa, Harare and Cape Town. Like elsewhere, African urbanites tend to be more politically engaged than people in rural areas, reflecting higher levels of education and access to media and information. Inevitably, it is in the larger cities that support first goes to opposition parties.

Urban populations are more cosmopolitan and often younger, while rural populations are generally older and politically more [conservative](#). Consequently, there is usually a marked difference in attitude between rural and urban people. 'The young, regardless of where they live, tend to associate more with urban outlooks,' write [Auerswald and Yun](#).

Endnotes

1. M Ravallion, S Chen and P Sangraula, New evidence on the urbanization of global poverty, *World Bank Research Digest*, 1:4, 2007, 26–28.
2. P Collier, *African urbanisation: An analytic policy guide*, London: International Growth Centre, 2016.

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute, and is an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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