



Demographics

Urbanisation in Africa

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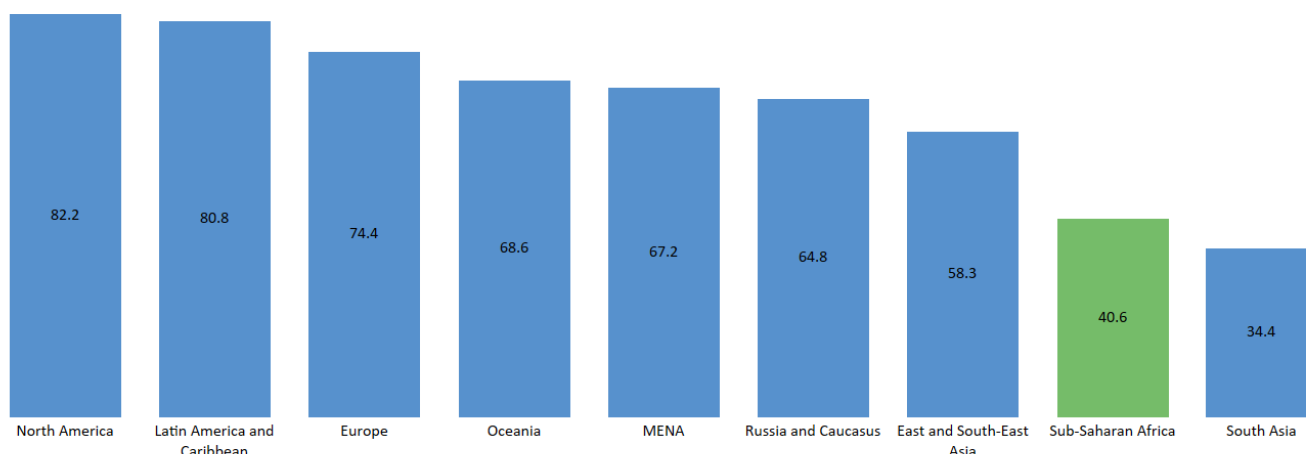
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Urbanisation in Africa

Historically, urbanisation is associated with growth and development and closely associated with the demographic dividend. The average urbanisation rate for Africa was 43% in 2019, ranging from 90% in Gabon to 19% in Burundi. The rate in the rest of the world in 2019 was more than 15 percentage points higher, at 58%.

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 has the highest per cent of its population staying in urban areas (81%) comparable to countries in the Global North. It is eventually likely that it is the infrastructure and institutional setting that is typically associated with higher levels of urbanisation that makes all the difference to the contribution that urbanisation makes to development. However we look at it, urbanisation is lagging in Africa. Instead, the vast majority of Africans lived in small village communities at the time of independence and fewer than one-fifth of Africans 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. 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 larger portion of its population concentrated in urban areas and the associated drag of very high fertility rates, these countries will struggle to grow incomes.

The theme on health also explains that the provision of safe water, improved sanitation and associated basic infrastructure to a larger portion of a country's population is typically facilitated by higher rates of urbanisation. It is easier and less expensive to provide bulk services such as clean water, improved sanitation and household electricity to people in

denser settlements than to a population spread out across large rural areas.

Contrary to the historical experience in much of the rest 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 destitution and poverty of rural existence. Consequently, poverty is urbanising, and urban slums and informal settlements are expanding.^[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, and 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 that Africa could see its slum population triple by 2050.

The move from rural subsistence farming to urban informal employment in low-end services is positive in that it is moderately growth enhancing, but it would be much higher if it were jobs in the manufacturing sector that 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:

At its best, urbanisation can be the essential motor of economic development, rapidly lifting societies out of mass poverty. At its worst, it results in concentrations of squalor and disaffection which ferments political fragility. To date, African urbanisation has been dysfunctional, the key 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 important 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, generally, higher levels of education and access to media and information. Inevitably, it is in the larger cities that support first goes to opposition parties.

Whereas urban populations are more cosmopolitan and often younger, 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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About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. 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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