Health and WaSH
Urbanisation and disease

Jakkie Cilliers
Urbanisation and disease

In densely populated parts of the world, such as Western Europe and later North America, the pull of industrialisation and the subsequent rise of large cities required authorities to implement closed sewage systems and other measures to combat infectious diseases. But by the time Africa started to urbanise (towards the end of the 19th century), imported modern medicine (vaccines and later antibiotics) allowed for higher population densities without the need, by colonial authorities, to invest in health infrastructure. Larger communities of people were able to live in denser settlements — not because of city planning or appropriate housing laws and adequate municipal water and sewerage infrastructure, as was required elsewhere to contain disease and plague, but because modern medicines served as an effective alternative to keep infectious diseases under control.[1]

Even today, many African countries have poor sanitation, making people more susceptible to the impact of infectious diseases, although access to safe water is steadily improving. The simple but essential act of washing one's hands is difficult without consistent and reliable access to clean water. The situation is particularly bad in rural areas, where more than half of Africa's population live. In 2019, only 79% of Africans had access to improved water supply compared to 96% of the people in the rest of the world. Even the term 'improved' in this context is a low bar as it simply means that, by nature or construction, water is protected from outside contamination, particularly faecal matter. Cholera, an acute diarrhoeal infection primarily caused by contaminated water, has, for example, become endemic in Africa. Over the past four decades, Africa has recorded 79% of global outbreaks, which place significant strain on the healthcare facilities across the continent. This situation will, however, slowly improve. By 2030, access to improved water in Africa will increase to approximately 82%, and to 87% by 2043. Piped water access in Africa, which can guarantee water free from contamination, was much lower in 2019 at 43% of the continent's total population compared to the average for the rest of the world at 70%.

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) target is for 98% of the population in all countries to have access to improved sanitation services by 2030, but is it likely that this will only be possible for less than 63% of Africa's population (up from 57% in 2019). Only about 19% of Africa’s population is expected to have access to wastewater collection and treatment systems in 2030 compared to the average in the rest of the world then, of 47%. Eight African countries (Libya, Morocco, Seychelles, Algeria, South Africa, Botswana, Tunisia and Cape Verde) will be above the average for wastewater connections in the rest of the world (i.e. the world without Africa) in 2030.

Low levels of urbanisation are a drag on the provision of bulk infrastructure and limit the potential for rapid improvement. On the other hand, it likely constrains the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and COVID-19.
Endnotes


Donors and sponsors

Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the Creative Commons BY license. You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.

- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.

- All of our charts can be embedded in any site.

Cite this research

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.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.