

H I G H L I G H T S

PLANNING FOR URBAN EXPANSION

Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2024





Planning for Urban Expansion

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Joint report by the AfDB, Cities Alliance, OECD/SWAC and UCLG Africa



Executive summary

Planning for Africa's urban expansion



Over the next three decades, Africa will experience an unprecedented increase in its urban population, doubling the number of people living in cities from 704 million to 1.4 billion by 2050. Africa will also be the continent with the second largest urban population after Asia (3.5 billion). Nigeria, with a projected urban population of 250 million people, will have the fourth largest urban population in the world while Egypt (147 million) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (111 million). Nigeria and Egypt will also be among the top ten globally. Together, these three countries will account for more than one-third of the total urban population in Africa.

Africa's urban transition presents an urgent challenge, but also an unparalleled opportunity. Proactive planning, effective governance and innovative financing strategies are essential to ensure that cities can thrive and deliver on their potential to drive inclusive economic development. By acting now, Africa can manage its urban growth in ways that promote sustainability, inclusiveness and resilience, setting the stage for a prosperous urban future.

Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2024: Planning for Africa's Urban Expansion, provides the most comprehensive view to date of Africa's future urbanisation dynamics and explores the implications for urban planning, governance and financing. Aimed at policy makers, development partners and experts, it provides projections, insights and actionable recommendations for managing the continent's urban transition in a sustainable way.



Urban projections are a requirement for planning and public policies

The projections of urban expansion to 2050 prepared for this report come from the Africapolis urbanisation database. The report provides policy makers with the most comprehensive view to date of projected urbanisation dynamics, with detailed insights into the urban population growth and spatial expansion of over 11 000 urban agglomerations in the 54 countries of Africa. These projections reveal important regional trends and spatial features that can inform urban planning at the national, metropolitan and agglomeration levels and help shape cities that are more sustainable and liveable.

More and larger cities

Eighty percent of Africa's projected demographic growth for the period 2020-50 will be absorbed by urban areas. By 2050, two out of three will live in an urban agglomeration. Between 2020 and 2050, Africa's level of urbanisation is projected to increase from 54% to 64%. This strong dynamic will continue to shape urban networks. Africa will have more cities and more large cities. The number of urban agglomerations with more than 10 000 inhabitants is projected to increase by more than 2 000, from 9 000 in 2020 to more than 11 100 in 2050. In addition, by 2050, Africa will have 159 urban agglomerations with more than 1 million inhabitants and 17 megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants, the second most of any continent. More than the purely aggregate numbers, these changes highlight the massive urban transformations projected over the next 30 years.



Two-thirds of Africa's urban growth will be in large cities

More than two-thirds of Africa's projected urban growth will take place in large cities. The number of people living in large urban agglomerations of more than 1 million inhabitants will grow from 325 million in 2020 to 836 million in 2050, and their share of the total urban population will increase from 46% to 59%. At the other end of the distribution, the share of people living in small urban agglomerations (10 000 to 100 000 inhabitants), although increasing in absolute terms from 209 million to 275 million, will decrease from 29% to 19% between 2020 and 2050. Similarly, the populations living in intermediary urban agglomerations (100 000 to 1 million inhabitants) will increase from 183 million in 2020 to 310 million people by 2050, but their relative share of the continent's total population will decrease from 26% in 2020 to 22% in 2050.

Africa's urban areas will more than double

Driven by population growth, African urban agglomerations will see strong expansion of their built-up areas. New urban dwellers and growing cities will require land for all kinds of uses, from housing, commercial building for retail, businesses and industry, public building (schools, hospitals, administrative buildings), to transport infrastructure and facilities (airports, logistics depots). The growth in urban area expansion is projected to exceed the growth in urban population, 3.2% compared to 2.3% per year. The total urban footprint is projected to increase from 175 000 square kilometres to 450 000 square kilometres between 2020 and 2050. The expansion of urban built-up areas will have significant implications for the broader dynamics of urbanisation, as it serves as a crucial metric for understanding growth patterns, infrastructure needs and environmental pressures.

Making room for Africa's expanding cities



The key challenge facing Africa's urban agglomerations is how to make room for their growing populations. Projected urban growth will pose major challenges for urban planning as it is outpacing the capacity of many central and local governments to provide housing, basic services and infrastructure. At the same time, the need to build large parts of Africa's future cities also presents an opportunity to plan cities that are better designed for the 21st century and better equipped to deal with major challenges such as climate change, housing and transport. Past failures and current thinking in other regions of the world offer lessons that urban planners and governments can learn from. However, there is also a need for African urban planners to develop and experiment with new ideas, and to integrate local realities and contexts into the design of the continent's urban future.

The need to plan now

As most of Africa's urban areas will be built in the next few decades, policy makers must strengthen the relevance, capacity and speed of urban planning. The way cities are built has an impact on every aspect of urban life, from residents' access to jobs and services; to their health, social life and safety; to the cost of living. Urban planning can limit or reinforce existing inequalities and exclusion, such as women's participation in the labour market, and it can be a force for change, shaping the interactions of urban areas with their surrounding ecosystems and hinterlands.

The opportunities of planning for urban expansion

African cities are in a unique position to innovate and test processes and urban planning solutions. New technologies and data can be leveraged to inform and implement urban planning. The systematic integration of climate, environmental and energy considerations into the planning of urban growth could lay the foundations for lasting reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, reduce exposure to extreme weather events, and make cities more sustainable and resilient. New African approaches to urban planning should also be built around better stakeholder participation, local capacity and informality to ensure that growth is managed in an efficient and inclusive way. All this points to the urgent need to reinforce planning capacities at local and regional levels.



Effective urban governance is key to managing urban expansion




Governance is key to managing the urban transition. Many African countries need a renewal of urban governance frameworks, including stronger local governance structures, improved multi-level co-ordination, and more inclusive policies. Recognising the urgency of accompanying urbanisation, national urban policies (NUP) and national development policies (NDP) will be instrumental.

To be effective, urban governance action needs to be at the right scale and reach all inhabitants and economic activities. In addition, centralised, siloed policy making must give way to an integrated, inclusive approach to managing cities and towns.

This requires active co-operation and co-ordination between different levels of government and the devolution of appropriate responsibilities and resources. New urban governance must be responsive to local conditions and deliver the necessary infrastructure and services. Stakeholder engagement creates the basis for representation and local government accountability and is a prerequisite for effective urban governance.

Leveraging decentralisation for better urban management



Effective management of projected urban expansion requires the establishment of robust local government institutions within a strong, supportive national enabling framework. Local governments, with their understanding of local dynamics, are well-positioned to influence urban policies and manage key services like planning and service delivery. To ensure their effectiveness, national constitutions must recognise subnational governments as autonomous, granting them legal and financial authority, and clearly defining their roles within the broader governance system.

The role of land governance systems

A key element of urban governance is the land management system. In many African countries, the formal land governance system is unable to identify, consolidate, plan, service and deliver land for public, residential and commercial use at the scale required to manage urban growth effectively.

This has profound implications for the ability of local governments to meet their land-use planning objectives.

Addressing jurisdictional fragmentation in growing cities

Jurisdictional fragmentation within the same urban or metropolitan continuum increases the obstacles to setting policy objectives, complicates urban governance and blurs the distribution of powers between governance bodies. The problem of jurisdictional fragmentation is increasing due to the expansion of urban agglomerations, particularly large metropolises. Governments need to adapt existing scales of governance and establish institutions at the appropriate geographical scale.

Financing Africa's urban growth



Rapid urban growth creates high demand for investment in infrastructure and public services. However, current levels of spending in African cities are very low and fail to meet the needs of rapidly growing populations. Existing systems for financing urban development face both quantitative and qualitative problems. Structural barriers, such as regulatory constraints and limited fiscal capacity, prevent more money from reaching cities. However, closing the financing gap also requires making more effective use of available investment funds.

Government strategy, planning and regulation is needed to increase investment

Financing urban expansion requires a long-term strategic approach to urban development that sets objectives and priorities. Governments play a central role in steering spending priorities through policies and direct investment. A unified government approach that includes strategic vision, governance reform and regulation is essential to boost investment in Africa's urbanisation. The benefits of urban investment will yield results in the long term. However, inaction risks locking in long-term expenses. In particular, climate-resilient solutions should be built into the design of infrastructure and service delivery from the outset. The benefits of such investments can far outweigh the additional costs and should be seen as an investment in the future, rather than a burden.

The need to spend more



To meet the challenges and seize the opportunities brought by urban growth, governments must significantly increase urban investments. Central governments need to create the conditions to scale up available funding to cities. This requires measures to increase the fiscal space of public institutions, improve access to credit mechanisms and deliver regulatory frameworks that work for African cities. Countries also need consistent spatial planning approaches based on real financing conditions, prioritising spending that supports urban growth and promotes sustainable and inclusive development. Strategies are also needed to leverage alternative sources of finance and attract additional private investment.

The need to spend better


A key priority for African cities is to align investment spending with the needs and realities of residents and businesses, while increasing the involvement of the private sector and civil society.

To achieve this, it is imperative to refocus urban investment on real and agreed objectives, rooted in each country's contexts, economic growth aspirations, and social and environmental goals. Currently, there is a clear misalignment between the projects that are financed and the projects that are needed, and between the cost of projects and the financing available. Smaller, cheaper and therefore more rapidly realised projects can deliver infrastructure and services at the pace and scale required by rapidly growing cities. Smaller local projects also have the advantage of involving more local economic actors, whether formal or informal.

In addition, investment spending should be better balanced across urban agglomerations, including intermediary and small ones. Finally, the consideration of urban clusters, corridors and connectivity in investment planning will allow for the benefits of the agglomeration economy to be more widely spread across national territories.

Key findings

The need for planning Africa's urban expansion, now



Africa's urban population is projected to double between 2020 and 2050, adding 700 million new urban residents to reach 1.4 billion people. This unprecedented urban expansion presents urgent challenges, but also unparalleled opportunities. Proactive planning, effective governance and innovative financing strategies are essential to ensure that cities can thrive and deliver on their potential to drive inclusive economic development. By acting now, Africa can manage its urban growth in ways that promote sustainability, inclusiveness and resilience.

The most comprehensive view of future urbanisation dynamics in Africa to date



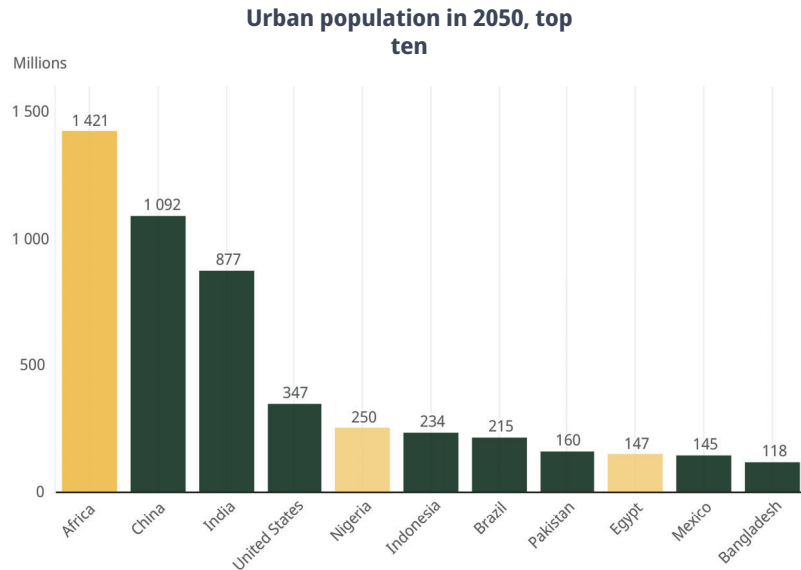
This report provides projections of future urbanisation dynamics in Africa and explores the implications for urban planning, governance, and financing based on:

- Demographic and spatial projections for over 11 000 urban agglomerations in the 54 countries in Africa
- Africapolis – visualise urbanisation in Africa database – providing historical demographic and spatial growth data
- The inclusion of key features of urban expansion, such as rural transformations, in-situ urbanisation, merging and absorption

Projecting and mapping urban expansions are essential metrics for understanding patterns of urban growth, infrastructure needs, and environmental pressures.

Cities will absorb 80% of the total population growth

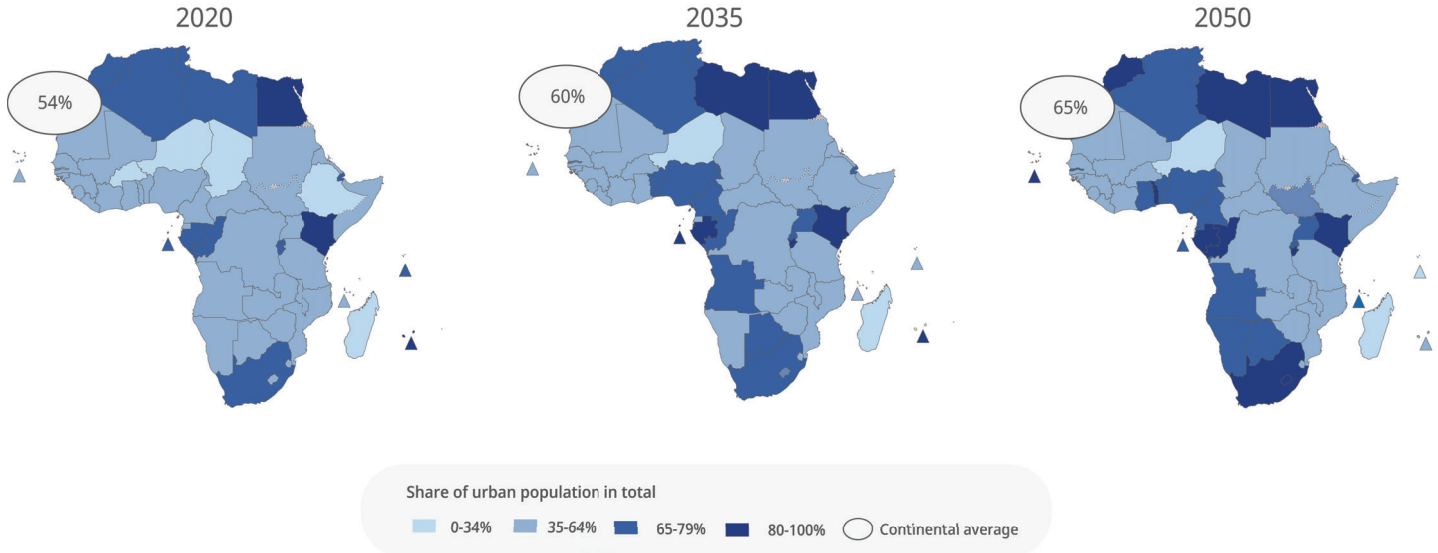
- Africa's population is projected to reach 2.2 billion by 2050, 80% of this growth will be urban.
- By 2050, the continent's urban population will have grown by 704 million to reach 1.4 billion million.
- Africa will be the continent with the second-largest urban population behind Asia.
- Nigeria and Egypt will have the largest urban population by 2050 in the continent and will be in the top ten largest urban populations in the world.



2 out of 3 Africans will live in cities

The share of people living in cities will increase from 54% in 2020 to 65% in 2050. Only 12 countries, the majority in West Africa, will have a level of urbanisation below 50% in 2050.

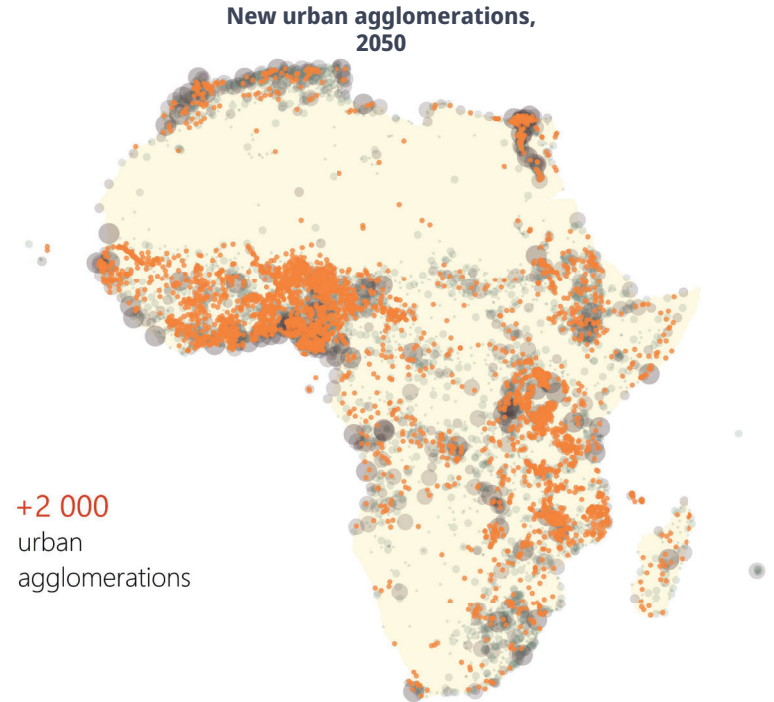
Level of urbanisation in Africa, 2020-50



More cities

The number of urban agglomerations in Africa will increase from 9 000 in 2020 to over 11 000 in 2050.

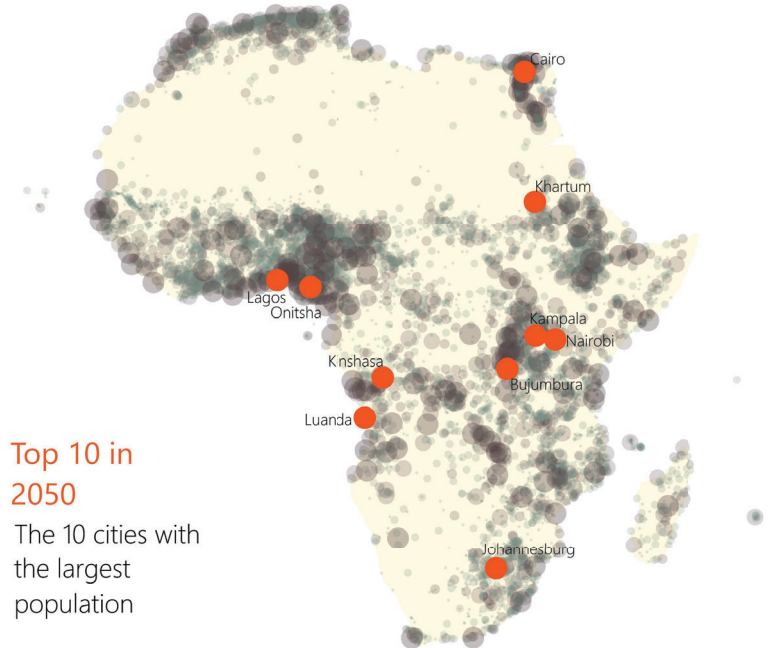
Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia and DRC will account for 36% of all 11 139 cities on the continent.



More large cities

In 2050, Africa will have 159 urban agglomerations with more than 1 million inhabitants and 17 megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants, the second most of any continent.

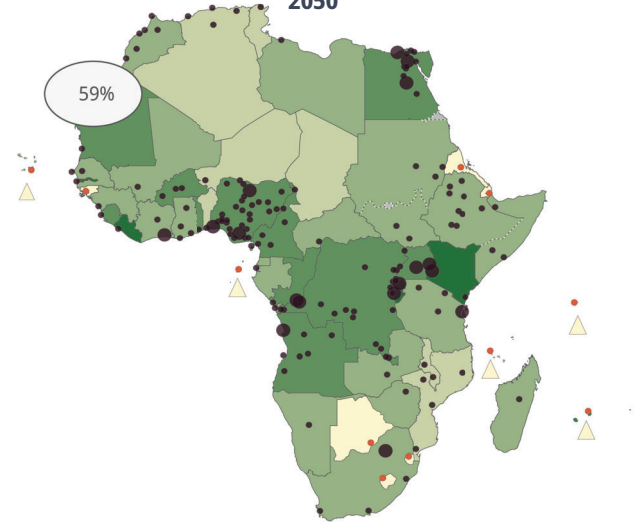
The 10 largest agglomerations in 2050



2/3 of Africa's urban growth will be in large cities

The number of people living in urban agglomerations with more than 1 million inhabitants will grow from 325 million in 2020 to 836 million in 2050 and their share in the total urban population increase from 46% to 59%.

Urban agglomerations with more than 1 million inhabitants, 2050



Largest urban agglomeration by country and urban agglomerations with more than 1 million inhabitants in 2050

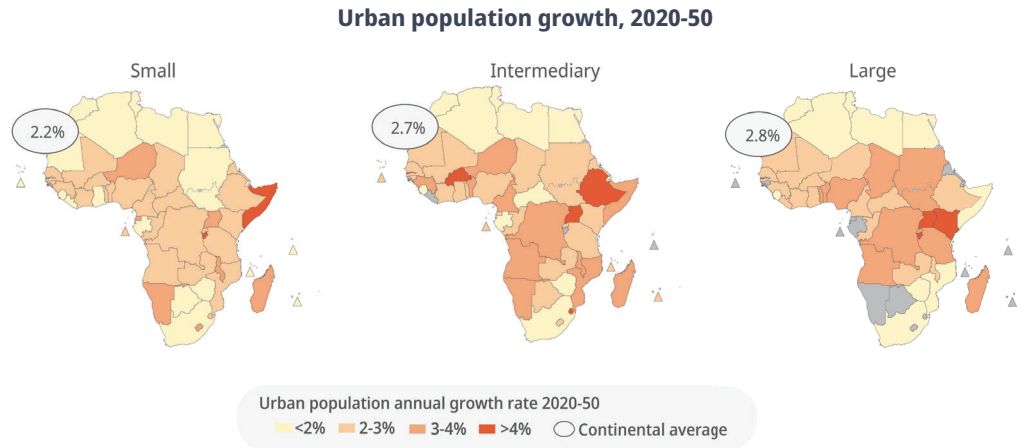
● <1 million inhabitants ● 1 - 10 million inhabitants ● >10 million inhabitants

Share of urban population living in an urban agglomeration with more than 1 million inhabitants in total urban population in 2050

□ <20% □ 20% - 39% □ 40% - 59% □ 60% - 79% □ >80% ○ Continental average

Large and intermediary cities growing faster

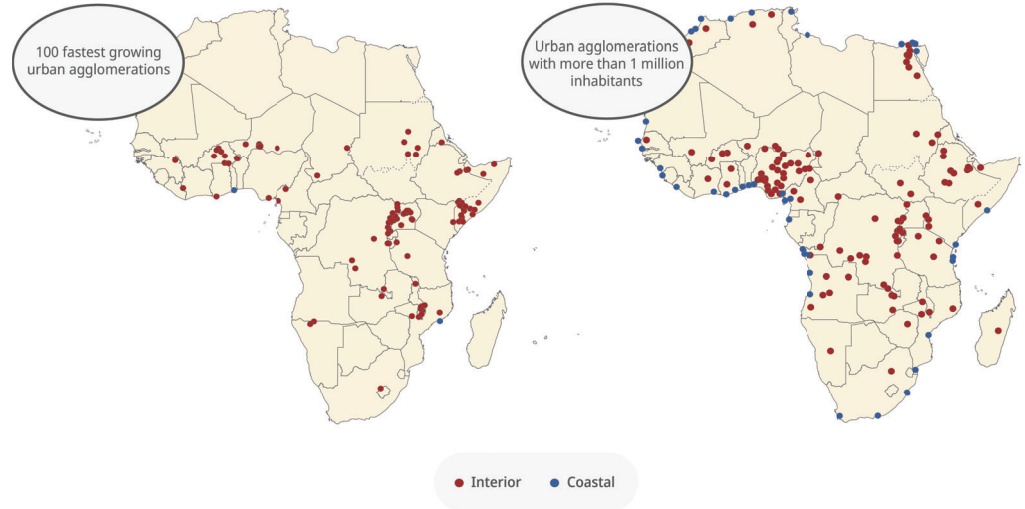
The population growth of large and intermediary urban agglomerations between 2020 and 2050 is projected at 2.8% and 2.7% respectively (average annual compound rate). Small urban agglomerations are projected to grow at an average annual rate of 2.2% over the same period.



81% of Africa's urban expansion will be in the interior

By 2050, 69 out of the 100 most populous urban agglomerations will be in the interior, and 6 out of 8 the continent's projected mega-cities with more than 20 million inhabitants. This often overlooked dynamic requires a new understanding at the role of cities in the continent's integration.

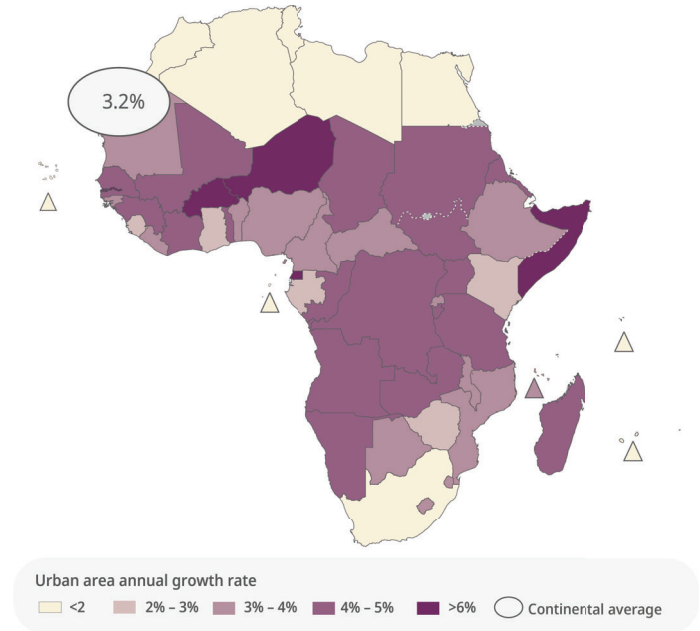
African coastal and interior urban agglomerations, 2050



Cities' built-up areas will more than double

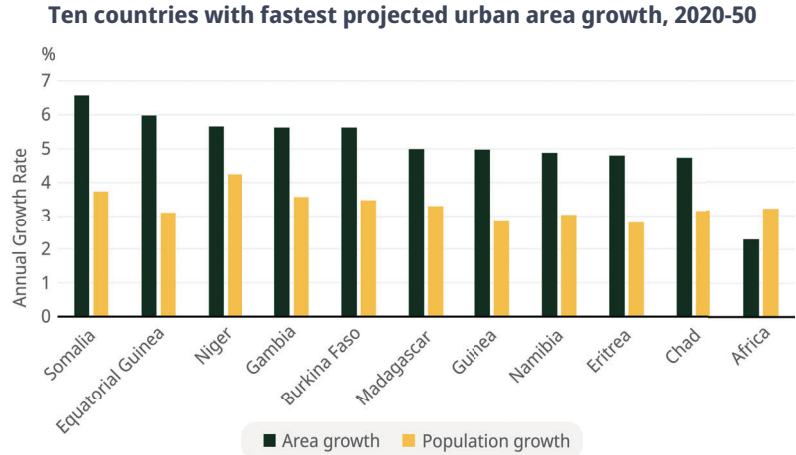
- New urban dwellers and growing cities will require land for all sorts of uses, from housing, commercial constructions for retail, businesses and industry; public building (schools, hospitals, administrative buildings, etc.); to transport infrastructure and facilities (airports, logistics depots, etc.).
- The total urban footprint is projected to increase from approximately 175 000 km² to 450 000 km² between 2020 and 2050. Despite this expansion, cities will account for less than 2% of the total continental land area in 2050.

Annual growth of urban built-up areas in Africa, 2020-50



Built-up areas are growing faster than populations

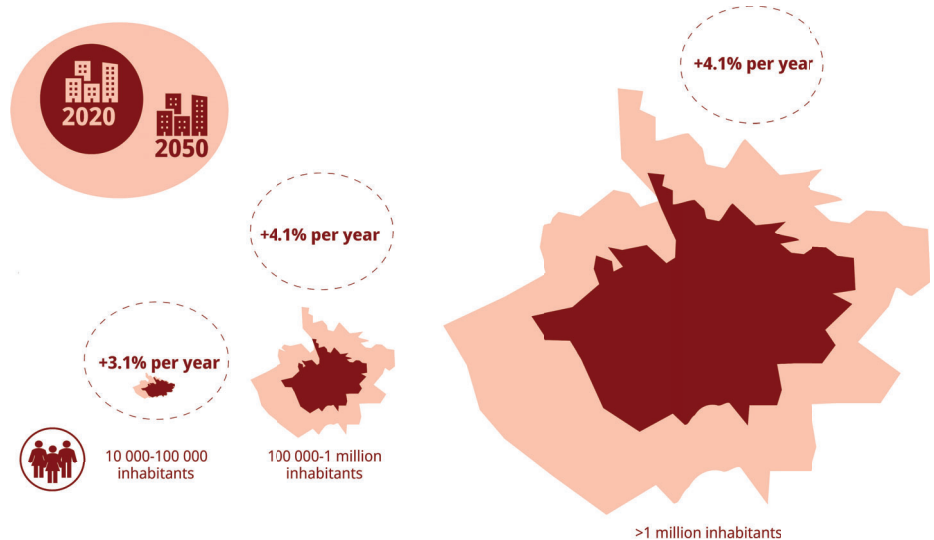
The growth in urban area expansion is projected to exceed the growth in urban population, 3.2% compared to 2.3% per year. Urban population growth does not translate directly into urban area growth due to a variety of political, environmental, and historical factors. Politically, zoning laws and urban planning policies can restrict the physical expansion of cities. Environmental constraints, such as the availability of water, arable land, and the presence of natural barriers like mountains or bodies of water, can limit the sprawl of urban areas. These intertwined factors create a complex dynamic and highlight the diversity of national contexts in Africa.



Large cities will add the most urban land

The built-up areas of the average large and intermediary urban agglomeration are projected to grow at an annual average of 4.1% compared to 3.1% for small urban agglomerations between 2020 and 2050. Agglomerations with 1 to 2 million inhabitants are projected to have the fastest area growth at 5.2% annually.

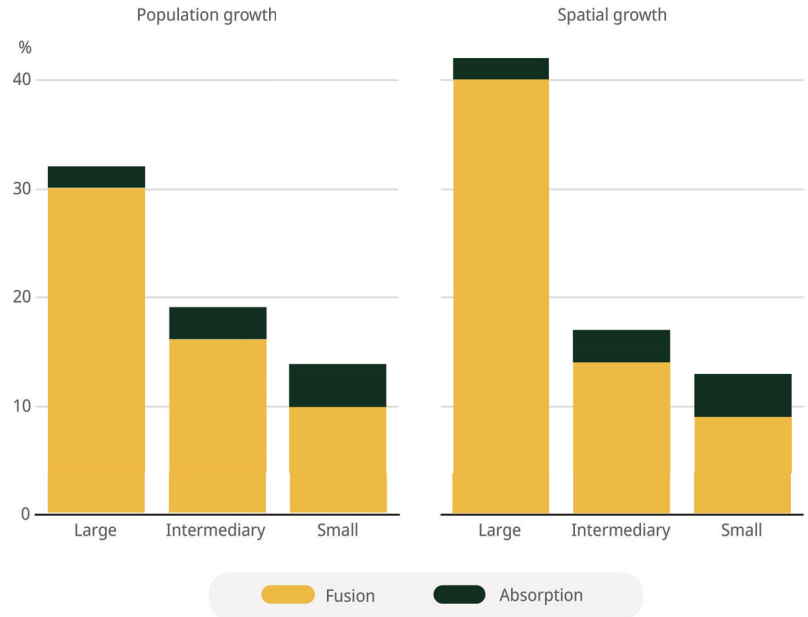
Average urban area growth by agglomeration size, 2020-50



Fusion, a major driver of urban growth

Driven by urban expansion, many cities will absorb existing urban and rural agglomerations along its expansion trajectory, leading to the creation of larger agglomerations. At agglomeration level, the contribution of fusion and absorption to population and area growth can vary greatly. Despite being observed across all city size, it contributes particular to the growth of large cities.

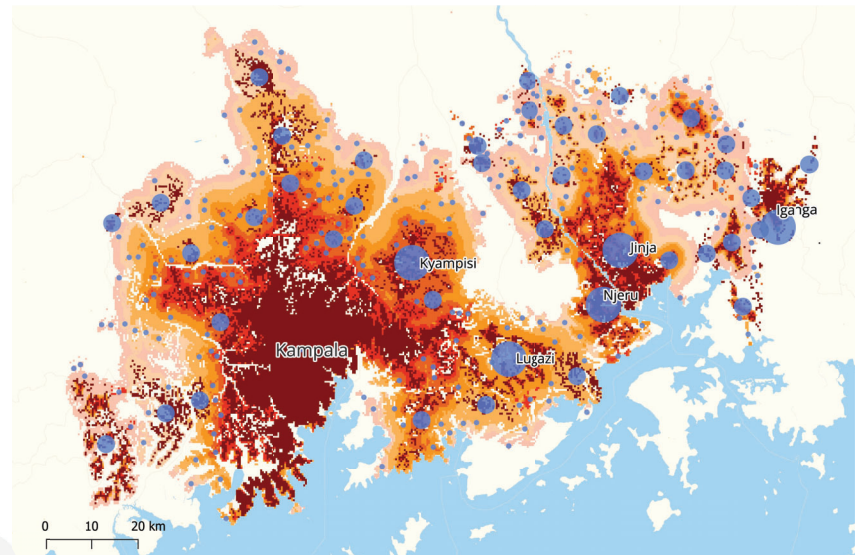
Contribution of fusion and absorption to population and spatial growth of urban agglomerations



Large scale fusion

By 2050, the 10 largest urban agglomerations in Africa will on average have fused with 56 urban agglomerations. For these agglomerations, fusion explains 41% of the total population growth and 40% of their spatial growth. In Kampala, Uganda, 36% of the projected population growth is explained merging and absorption of nearby urban agglomerations and rural settlements. Kampala is projected to merge with five urban agglomerations with over 100 000 inhabitants by 2050, with 40 urban agglomerations with populations between 10 000 and 100 000 inhabitants and absorb 235 rural settlements.

Fusion and absorption in Kampala, Uganda



Kampala's large-scale fusion (2020-50)
Urban agglomeration (built-up area)

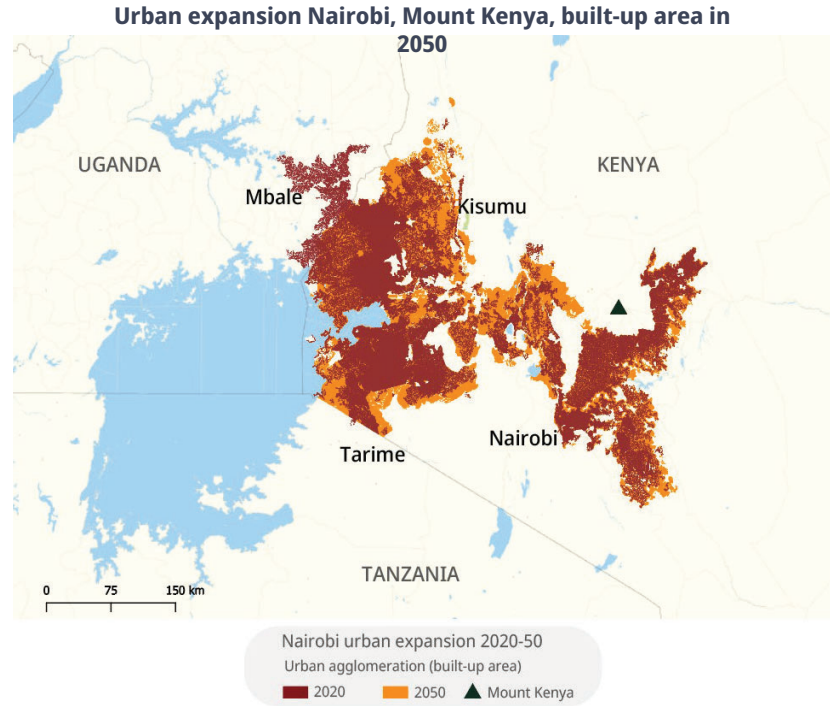
■ 2020 observed area
■ 2025 ■ 2030 ■ 2035 ■ 2040 ■ 2045 ■ 2050

Fusion and absorption
(urban agglomerations)

● Agglomerations > 100 000
● Agglomerations < 100 000
• Rural agglomerations

The formation of mega-agglomerations

The development of mega-agglomerations is driven by the expansion of large urban agglomerations and the strong population growth in the surrounding areas leading to large scale fusion and absorption. Mega-agglomerations form complex socio-economically connected urban landscapes, although featuring lower population densities and leaving many unbuilt gaps. The formation of these large urban units is generally not captured by official statistics and definitions.



Policy recommendations



Make Room for Africa's Growing Cities



- The key challenge facing Africa's urban agglomerations is how to make room for their growing populations. As in other regions of the world, urban population growth will inevitably lead to expansion—as the amount of land needed to accommodate growing populations increases.
- The way in which city expansion is planned and built impacts every aspect of urban life: on residents' access to jobs and services, on their health, social life and safety. It can limit or reinforce inequalities and exclusion, such as women's participation in the labour market. The way cities are built will also impact transformations in their hinterlands and its interactions with ecosystems.

The need to strengthen relevance, capacity and speed of urban planning



- The capacity of urban planning to design Africa's urban future needs to be strengthened. African urban planning needs to develop and experiment with new ideas and to integrate local realities and contexts into the design of new plans.
- Most of Africa's urban areas will be built in the next few decades. Because of the rapid pace of urban expansion and the slowness of the urban planning process, it is crucial to begin planning for growth today.

Plan for reality



- For urban planning to be effective, plans must be correctly dimensioned. Plans need to reflect actual needs based on realistic projections of urban growth. They need to consider the full functional extent of the agglomeration, beyond administrative boundaries. Importantly, plans also need to correspond to actual financial and economic capacities to ensure implementation.
- Urban planning needs to systematically integrating climate, environmental and energy considerations into the planning of urban growth to reduce exposure to extreme weather events and make cities more sustainable and resilient.

The need for multi-level governance and clear objectives



- Centralised, siloed policy making must give way to an integrated, inclusive approach to managing cities. Enabling effective multi-level governance needs to empower local governments and other urban stakeholders. This requires active collaboration and co-ordination between different levels of government and assignment of appropriate responsibilities and resources.
- Good governance systems set clear objectives, policies and procedures to ensure that public and private action results in concrete improvements on the ground. To be effective they need to be designed at the appropriate scale and reach all inhabitants and economic activities.

Addressing land governance is priority



- A pivotal element of urban governance is the management of land. Rapid urban expansion will amplify pressures on land governance systems. Land governance systems need to identify, consolidate, plan, service and make land available for all uses at the scale required to manage urban growth effectively.
- Effective land governance systems are crucial for growing cities, as they enable urban planning, provide essential resources for local governments, and attract increased investments by ensuring secure land tenure and transparent regulatory frameworks.

The need to recognise informality



- Most urban residents in Africa reside in informal areas, and much of the economic activity that takes place in the urban environment is informal. The ongoing failure to recognise these populations and activities drastically reduces local governments' range of action.
- To respond to conditions on the ground and to deliver the needed services and infrastructure for all, urban governance needs to consider and involve all urban residents.

The need for a long-term strategic approach to urban investments

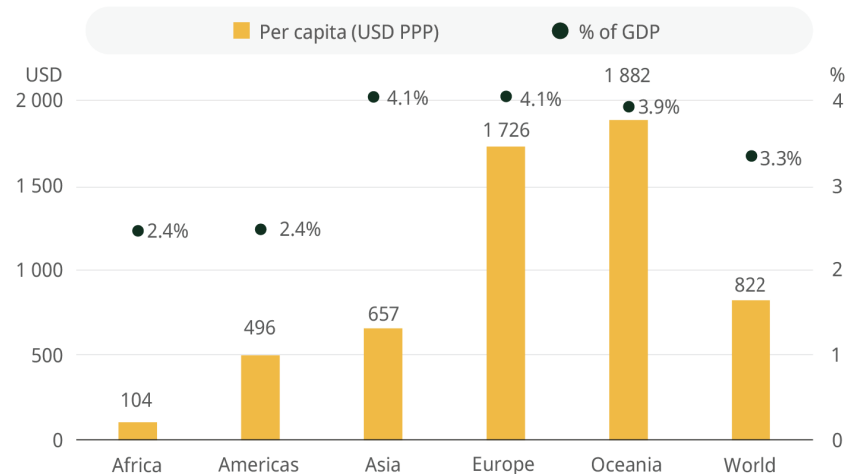


- Financing urban expansion requires a long-term strategic approach to urban development that determines objectives and priorities. Governments play a central role in steering spending priorities through policies and direct investments. A unified government approach incorporating strategic vision, governance reform and regulation is essential to boost investment.
- More effective regulatory frameworks are needed to increase the availability of funds for urban development, from both private investors and public actors.

Spend more

- Current levels of spending in African cities are very low and fail to meet the needs of rapidly growing urban populations. National and local governments must increase investments.
- Increasing climate change adaptation and resilience investments are crucial for sustainable and livable cities.
- Beyond government spending, it is essential to leverage alternative financing sources and attract additional private investment.

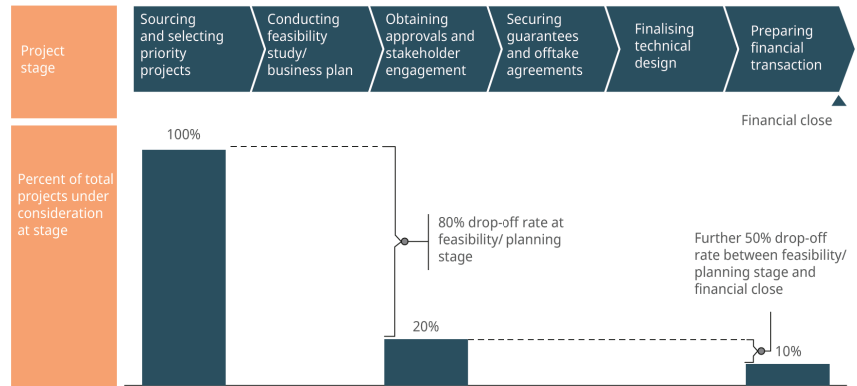
General Government Direct Investment



Spend better

- A priority is aligning investment spending with the needs and realities of residents and businesses, while increasing the involvement of the private sector and civil society. To achieve this, it is imperative to refocus urban investments on real and agreed objectives.
- Smaller, cheaper and therefore more rapidly realised projects rooted in the local context can provide infrastructure and services at the pace and scale required by rapidly growing cities.

Africa's infrastructure paradox: few projects reach financial close



- Low technical capabilities, as well as limited financial resources being dedicated to developing feasibility studies and business plans, result in many being rejected.
- In many African countries, weak country balance sheets and limited banking access for offtakers/commodity buyers impede projects, especially mega-projects, from obtaining required guarantees.

Lakmeeharan, K. et al. (2020), [Solving Africa's infrastructure paradox](#) (accessed on 3 July 2023).



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