

# AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

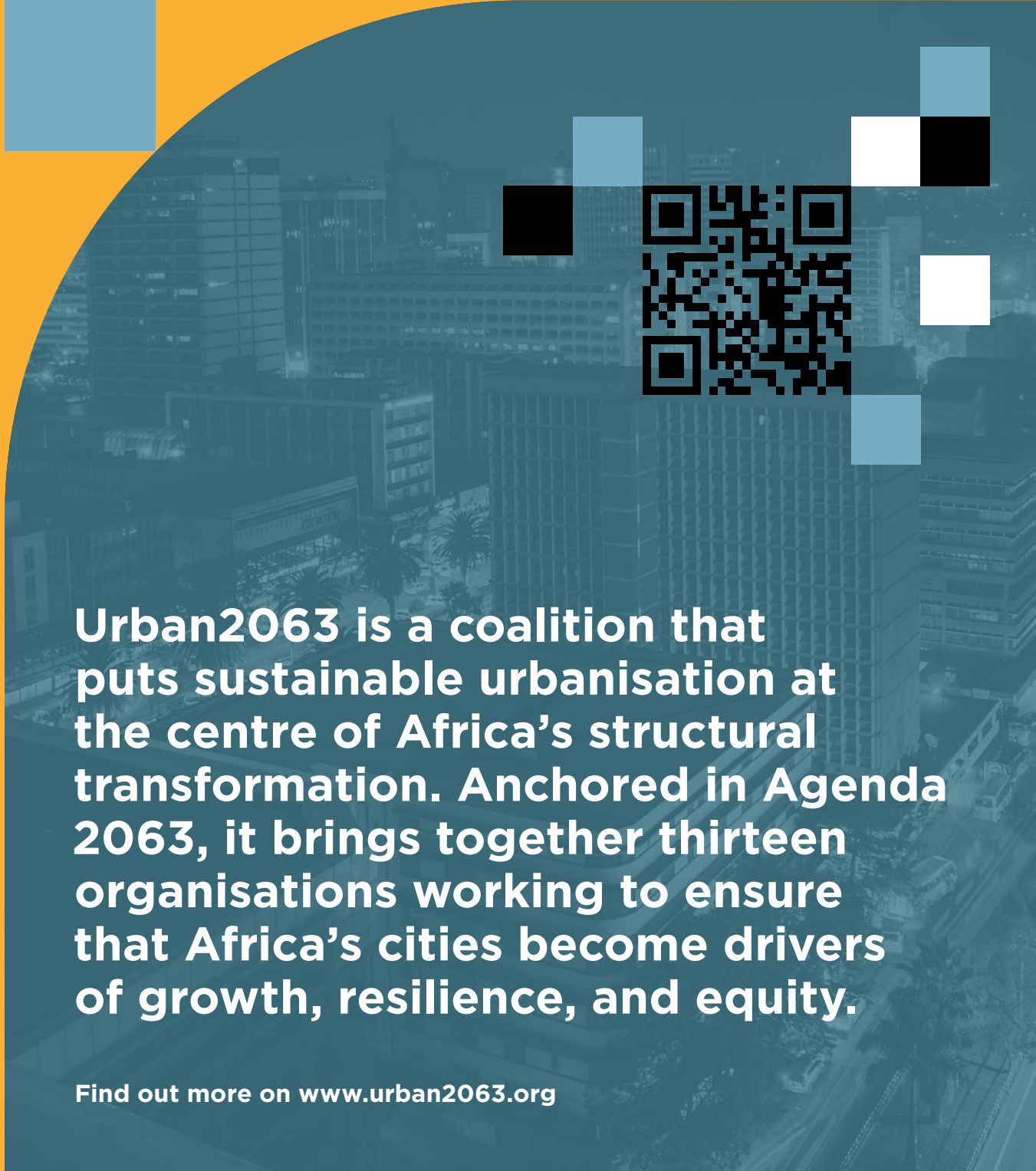
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**Urban2063 is a coalition that puts sustainable urbanisation at the centre of Africa's structural transformation. Anchored in Agenda 2063, it brings together thirteen organisations working to ensure that Africa's cities become drivers of growth, resilience, and equity.**

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African Centre for Cities, African Climate and Development Institute, Association of African Planning Schools, ARUP (Africa Region), Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, Centre for Sustainability Transitions (Stellenbosch University), Climate KIC, Club of Rome, Urban Futures Studio (Utrecht University), Women in Employment Globalizing and Organizing, World Resource Institute, Overseas Development Institute & GSM Association.

**URBAN2063**  
*an UNSTOPPABLE FORCE*

# AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

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# HARNESSING AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

by **Edgar Pieterse** and **Tau Tavengwa**



Aerial view of inequality. Wealthy housing alongside the Makause informal settlement in Primrose, South Africa. 20 000 people live in very poor conditions with no access to proper running water or ablution facilities. Photo by Martin Harvey





Here's the reality we're facing.

By 2063, a billion more Africans will be living in cities than today. Right now, 23 of Africa's 52 countries are classified as low-income, and more than 80% of urban jobs are informal—a figure that's barely better in middle-income countries.

If you are in that 80%, chances are you're stuck in a lifetime of piecemeal work that makes it almost impossible to secure decent housing, or access to basic services like water, sanitation, and electricity. That's before you've thought about paying the rent on time, or covering your bills. Getting a mortgage on your own place some day? A pipedream.

Makeshift work inevitably leads to a kind of makeshift life, or "slum living" as the UN calls it.

Young people in most African cities are growing up in these conditions, which makes the idea of finishing school, or going on to vocational or tertiary training, and ultimately finding a stable job, seem impossible. And that's if there are any stable jobs.

But here's the more insidious part: living in slums doesn't just limit opportunities—it crushes hope. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai puts it, slums make it nearly impossible to develop "the capacity to aspire". When your daily reality is survival, dreaming about a brighter future feels pointless. The here and now is the only thing.

There's been a lot of talk about the "resilience" and "inventiveness" of African youth—their tech fluency, their willingness to take on corrupt political elites, as seen in recent protests in Nairobi, Maputo, and Dakar. But what good are those qualities when you're dealing with unreliable electricity, limited access to decent schools and healthcare, and virtually no platforms for political expression? Throw climate change into the mix, and we're looking at a future that's unpredictable at best, catastrophic at worst.

Scientists estimate that 70% of African cities are extremely vulnerable to climate change, and it's always the poorest who get hit hardest. People in slums often lose everything to floods because they have no choice but to build with cheap materials in flood-prone areas and on unstable slopes. Without insurance—because who would insure them?—they live under the constant threat of losing everything and starting over. For city governments, it's easier and cheaper—in the short term—to react to disasters than to invest in prevention. But this reactive approach traps them in an endless cycle of emergency response, exacerbated by the increasing severity of climate events. Rinse and repeat, with no way out.

Most African city governments understand these dynamics perfectly well, but lack the legal authority and funding to build the capabilities they need for effective urban planning. Many national governments talk a good game about devolving power to cities, but few actually do it. The African Union adopted a charter on decentralisation in 2014, but only eight member states have ratified it so far. South Africa was the last to sign on in 2022, and we still

need 15 countries for it to take effect. Where's the urgency? Where's the leadership pushing this forward?

The slow progress toward democratic devolution has many causes, but the biggest one is political fear. Since multiparty democracy emerged in the early 1990s, opposition parties have consistently found their strongest support in slum populations. This terrifies the aging political class—many of whom trace their legitimacy back to liberation movements—and has seriously damaged the development of the continent's cities.

To understand how we got here, we need to look back over the past half a century.

When African states gained independence in the 1960s and 70s, most cities shared a common structure: a modern core that mimicked European cities, serving as the political and commercial hub for colonists, physically separated from areas designated for indigenous populations.

Even within the colonial areas, there was clear class stratification. The least educated workers, holding the most menial jobs, lived farthest from the white colonial core. Those in clerical and service jobs—clerks, teachers, bus drivers, police officers—lived in townships closer to the center, but still with far less access to services and amenities.

After independence, new urban investments didn't just maintain this colonial spatial arrangement—they made it worse.

The newly liberated native middle class didn't just take over running the state from departing colonists. Many used their political power to carve out commercial interests for their parties, themselves, and their families in



***Following colonial logic, it was considered politically essential to prioritise agriculture. After all, the thinking went, Africans were naturally connected to the land”***



the neocolonial economy. This recreated the same skewed investment patterns, creating comfortable middle-class enclaves surrounded by expanding makeshift neighborhoods as more people moved to cities seeking opportunities. Chronic underinvestment in these growing areas created the conditions for systemic poverty and exclusion—the slums that define African cities today.

Investment in these new slums was seen as unnecessary. Following colonial logic, it was considered politically essential to prioritise agriculture. After all, the thinking went, Africans were naturally connected to the land. In the 1960s, making Africa the world's breadbasket seemed revolutionary. By definition, Africans weren't urban subjects—urbanisation was somehow unnatural and contrary to indigenous culture.

The anti-colonial movements that gained independence by the 1960s were deeply rooted in agrarian ideas about freedom. Colonial violence meant land dispossession, so freedom meant returning land to its rightful indigenous owners—working it through agriculture and collective ownership. Traditional African values were tied to pre-colonial cosmologies that emphasised the connection between human and natural systems, expressed through rituals and celebrations centred on the soil.

This worldview shaped the first generation of post-colonial administrators, who focused on two priorities: making agriculture and mining the backbone of the economy, and installing the new political class in the urban areas formerly occupied by colonial administrators as a symbol of political autonomy.

The economic focus on primary sectors perpetuated neocolonial dependence on Northern investors and markets. The indigenous elite became brokers who could accumulate modest capital but never gained equity or autonomy to develop indigenous businesses that could control raw materials and their processing. This is why African economies remain asymmetrically positioned in global value chains and why structural transformation has been so elusive. It's also why Agenda 2063 promotes economic transformation within a single African market as the continent's most important reform.

Since traditional leaders continued to play important roles in stabilising post-colonial politics, land-use regulations remained under traditional authorities. The complexity of these land tenure agreements made urban investment extremely difficult. Things got worse in the late 1970s and 80s when many African governments faced economic crises and increasingly relied on authoritarian rule.

The 1970s was a boom time for Africa. Cheap loans were readily available, and many states enjoyed a resource boom, with the rise of fossil fuel revenue for many states.

This petrodollar growth was short-lived and soon became a nightmare. Between 1979–80, interest rates skyrocketed due to oil price hikes after the Iranian revolution and Middle Eastern instability. The 1980s and much of the 1990s became a period of profound economic stagnation and impoverishment, coinciding with rapid population growth driven by higher fertility rates and successful vaccination programs that reduced infant mortality.

The Bretton Woods institutions stepped in with a single cure-all. Their medicine of choice was what came to be known as “structural adjustment”, a series of belt-tightening measures imposed on African countries if they wanted to receive loans from the IMF and the World Bank. Promoted as a remedy, it instead worsened the continent's developmental crisis.

Africa lost two decades to structural adjustment, a period that coincided with accelerating urbanisation. Most states weren't ready for this reality, and their lack of foresight continues to haunt the continent's cities. Meaningful institutional reforms like those outlined in the African Charter on Decentralisation will remain stalled until political leaders see them as urgent—which means loosening their grip on power and becoming accountable to the slums and the growing population of frustrated young people.

“Resilience” can only take young people so far. They're now directly challenging the rigid, unrepresentative political cultures that have become barriers to change rather than enablers of their “capacity to aspire”.

But all is not lost.

The future is still ahead of us. Rather than continuing to relitigate past failures, we need to prioritise spatially aware public policy and integrated infrastructure investment.

This isn't just urgent. It's essential.

The anti-urban policies that most post-independence governments adopted resulted in a lack of proactive city planning and serious spatial economic policies across the continent. Every African—not just young people!—needs to push back against the stubborn refusal to allow strong, empowered local governments that can work with citizens and businesses to create environments for dynamic cities. Cities that can generate not just traditional infrastructure, but new forms that enable residents to benefit from economic agglomeration, sustainable productivity, education, and innovation.



***To be blunt, few of the nearly 700 million Africans now living in the continent's cities trust the institutions tasked with delivering the basics they need for a fair shot at economic and social mobility. Transforming these institutions and their cultures won't happen organically"***

A fit-for-purpose regulatory environment is fundamental. The AU's ambitious Agenda 2063 aims to "reposition Africa in the world to effect equitable and people-centered social, economic and technological transformation and eradicate poverty", fulfilling "our obligation to our children as an intergenerational compact". It provides, if not a roadmap, at least a North Star for the continent and its cities.

The intergenerational compact that Agenda 2063 proclaims can only be fulfilled if it deliberately pursues sustainable urbanism as the cornerstone of pan-Africanism.

Looking ahead, four things become clear about how we can move forward.

As Africans, we need to develop a deep alternative imagination for overcoming the dysfunctional urbanisation that threatens our future.

This means reframing our affordable housing and infrastructure challenges and fostering innovation across policy, finance, design, and citizen participation—right down to how we build.

Given that two-thirds of Africa's built environment has yet to be constructed, we must commit to local innovation that can seed ecosystems creating sustainable technologies and construction value chains around alternative building materials, integrating and updating promising indigenous knowledge.

We need to balance learning from what works elsewhere with developing alternatives suited to our contexts. The glitz and glass of high-tech modernism in Dubai, Shanghai, and Singapore isn't the model we should be striving for.

Elsewhere in this Special Report, you'll find arguments that our current governance, policy, planning, fiscal, and coordination mechanisms need a complete reboot. A more

coordinated approach to these dimensions is crucial for creating the cities Africa needs to deliver on Agenda 2063's intergenerational promise.

A commitment to radical transparency by African governments at all levels is non-negotiable. This means putting accountability at the heart of the institutional recalibration that contributors across these pages advocate for. As citizens, we need to demand an end to top-down decision-making, procurement manipulation, and bureaucratic inertia embedded in public administration cultures across most African governments.

To be blunt, few of the nearly 700 million Africans now living in the continent's cities trust the institutions tasked with delivering the basics they need for a fair shot at economic and social mobility. Transforming these institutions and their cultures won't happen organically. We need distributed leadership that demands investment in and cultivates purpose-driven innovation ecosystems where all key players—local universities, thinktanks, social movements, business interests, philanthropic actors, and every citizen—play a role and feel equally represented.

There are important green shoots of innovation emerging in cities across the continent. Rather than seeing them as outliers, we need systems that embrace and build upon them, creating learning networks that can weave them together into a coordinated whole with the momentum to accelerate effectiveness and impact.

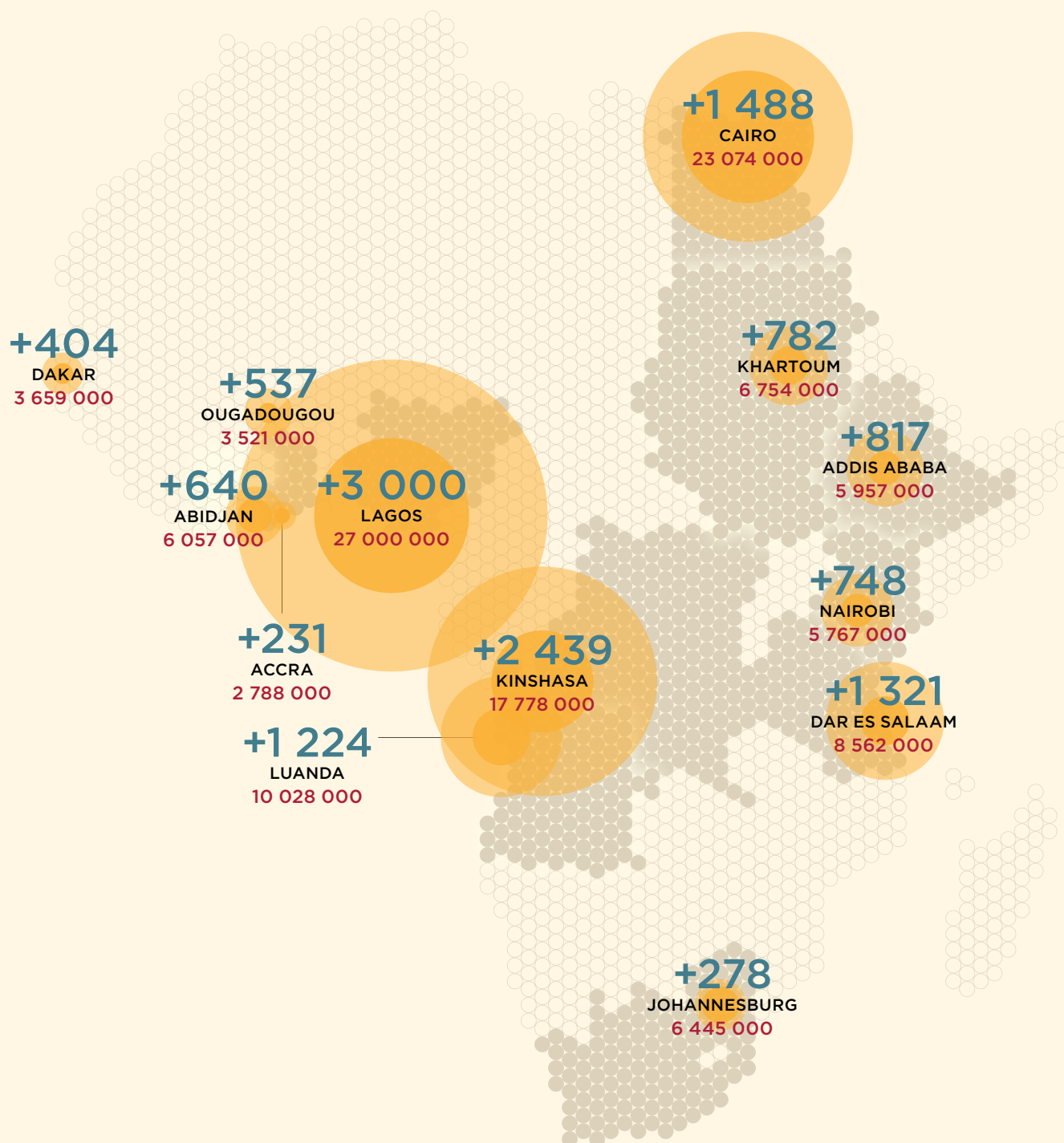
This is a call to actively follow the North Star that can translate Agenda 2063's vision of an intergenerational pact into an operating model for the African cities yet to come.

The people who will make up that extra billion are moving to Africa's cities now. It's unstoppable. The clock is ticking. ♦



## AFRICA'S CITIES ARE GROWING DAILY, AND WILL CONTINUE TO AT THE SAME PACE FOR THE NEXT FEW DECADES

About 700 million Africans now live in cities across the continent. This number is set to grow to 1.3 billion by 2050, according to UN Habitat, and The African Union





# A REALITY CHECK, FOR THE WORLD

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*Africa's demographic transformation will reshape the world—and how we prepare now will have real consequences, argues former Mozambican Prime Minister, **Luísa Dias Diogo**, who also previously served as Minister of Finance, and is now a member of the Absa group Board of Directors.*



# Africa is heading toward a demographic explosion that will reshape the world. What should global leaders understand?

**LUÍSA DIAS DIOGO:** By 2050, we will have 2.5 billion people in Africa, with 150 million young people under 25. Half of this population will be in cities that simply haven't been prepared for such an influx. This isn't just an African problem—it's a global challenge that will determine how the world evolves.

These young people will be seeking jobs, seeking survival. When you have young people looking for jobs and not finding them, they will be ready to do anything. They have nothing to lose. Without employment, they won't just stay put—they will create different kinds of pressures at home, in European countries, and across the developing world.

The finance architecture is broken for this reality. I used to negotiate bilateral, concessional debt as Finance Minister. Now African leaders face commercial debt that can't be rescheduled easily. The international architecture must change because when countries declare they cannot pay, everyone loses—the country loses credibility, lenders lose money with no prospect of recovery.

## Why are African cities failing their growing populations, and what must change?

**LDD:** Look at the stark reality: in Mozambique, urban poverty has exploded to more than 70%—we used to have less than 50%. This is happening because cities get less attention than rural areas, despite housing half our population.

We must stop having city leaders act as firefighters. Right now, they're constantly responding to crises instead of planning transformative futures. In my experience with Mozambique's industrial areas, I've seen how unprepared cities become sources of instability rather than prosperity.

Cities need real power—revenue collection, investment authorisation, the ability to move fast on green industrialisation and circular economy initiatives. We're not talking about sovereignty issues, but practical decision-making authority. Otherwise, instead of cities organising the demographic dividend, we will have cities organising demographic failure.

## Can the private sector step up to meet this urban challenge?

**LDD:** Absolutely, but governments must take the first step. I've learned that when you approach the private sector with agendas where they see sustainable returns and regional stability, they engage. The key is awareness and dialogue.

Municipal leaders need to sit with investors and say: "This is our city. We're working here together. How do we solve these challenges?" Look at banking—we're already selecting investments based on future sustainability, rejecting materials that harm our continent's development.

The companies moving fastest on green industrialisation started with government-led conversations about shared challenges and opportunities. We need much more of this partnership thinking.

## What should South Africa champion during its G20 Presidency?

**LDD:** President Ramaphosa is Africa's ambassador in these rooms, and he needs to challenge the G20 whilst showing we're ready to lead. Three priorities stand out:

First, regional integration—we need connected markets, not fragmented pieces with different rules. Second, innovation and digitalisation—both sides must abandon old dogmas for new solutions to unprecedented challenges. And third and most importantly, capacity building for transformative leadership at every level. What Africa needs is the "how", and that must be developed together. We're mobilising our own revenues, but we need initial partnership to reach the next stage.

The demographic transformation is coming whether we're prepared or not. The question is whether we'll shape it into opportunity or watch it become a crisis. ♦



# WHAT AFRICAN CITIES OFFER TO THE WORLD

*Anton Cartwright is an economist and Director  
at Econologic and Credible Carbon.*

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Here is a direct provocation. Too many cities on the African continent continue to be organised around the interests of commodity-extracting multinationals and a small economic elite. This is partly why we continue to see a disproportionate focus on port and airport development, Special Economic Zones, new towns, and mega-infrastructure projects often designed to generate resource taxes. This brand of urban development comes at the expense of economic diversification, mobilisation of domestic resources, and sustained investment in socio-economic development. It ignores the innovation, resourcefulness, and resilience of the African urban majority, and under-values their livelihoods, carved out against the odds, as “informal”. This is holding the continent back.

Contrary to urbanisation periods elsewhere in the world, it is becoming clear that a growing urban population in Africa will not, on its own, guarantee significant socio-economic progress. Sure, the 25–35 million new arrivals into towns and cities across the continent each year are contributing towards a measure of progress: pockets of economic growth, declining infant mortality and malnutrition, and climbing adult literacy. But this progress has been unevenly distributed and can best be described as “marginal” rather than “systemic” or “transformational”. A combination of centralised planning and budgeting, coupled with the inability to attract foreign direct investment for basic infrastructure, and the rising toll of climate change has undermined the “urbanisation dividend” that lifted other parts of the world.

And yet a nagging sense—supported by a growing set of datapoints—suggests the development of African cities could shape the development of African countries and the global economy. Recognising this potential it’s important to ask: what is the objective case for African cities? More practically, in the context of increasingly transactional international trade and development, what do rapidly evolving and growing African cities actually have to offer the rest of the world as it faces a myriad of uncharted challenges? There is no easy answer to this question, but there are four specific features of Africa’s urbanisation that provide cause for pragmatic optimism.

Let’s start with Africa’s population. With a median age of 19, the continent will be home to the only working-age population that will be growing ahead of 2050. Ironically, the macro-economic and financial stability of high-income countries where populations are ageing rapidly (the median age in Europe is 45 and in Japan it is 50!) will depend on the old-fashioned factory and farm work, the carers and nurses, and the consumption habits of Africa’s growing economically active cohort. A global economy that is rapidly automating will still require energetic, economically ambitious people to “pitch up” and “show up” as workers and consumers. A growing proportion of these actors will be found in African cities.

The continent is destined to become the last major frontier of working-age population growth, and failing to invest and harness this potential would be to forego an immense economic opportunity for both Africa and the world. Next, there is the chance to reimagine the role of Africa’s urban infrastructure. Enough has been written about Africa’s desperate lack of key infrastructure; the construction



***Enough has been written about Africa's desperate lack of key infrastructure; the construction of the energy, transport, and urban infrastructure the continent needs is estimated to require \$157 billion per annum. This should be seen as the source of investment growth for the global economy that it is"***

of the energy, transport, and urban infrastructure the continent needs is estimated to require \$157 billion per annum. This should be seen as the source of investment growth for the global economy that it is. Unlike in other regions where cities are already built, African cities are in a position to be constructed in full anticipation that climate change events will become more intense and frequent for at least the next three decades. In the process, African cities can reset the relationship between urban expansion and nature in ways that protect the continent's globally significant natural carbon sinks.

Where infrastructure is complemented with energy, African cities hold the key to low-carbon manufacturing. Africa's urban energy systems will be created in the wake of the global energy revolution that has seen the price of renewable electricity fall below that of hydrocarbon and hydro-powered electricity. In addition to this, a number of African countries hold the strategic minerals on which the roll-out of renewable energy and electric vehicles will depend. The combination of strategic minerals, renewable energy, and growing urban markets for manufactured goods and services provides a fertile context in which to expand low-carbon manufacturing sectors within the continent. It is these sectors that will allow African countries with hydrocarbon resources to process and benefit those resources on the continent, rather than continuing their export as raw commodities while importing refined petrochemicals. Finally, Africa's cities hold the key to financing Africa's

debt. Many African countries face persistent trade deficits and carry high debt-to-GDP ratios. This undermines the case for investing on the continent, sustaining and amplifying the global imbalance between the countries of the global North and South. The transition of African cities from dependents on commodities to engines of diverse and inclusive economic growth represents a key to reducing the continent's dismal debt-to-GDP ratios, while also offering a huge contribution towards the desperately needed global rebalance. However, this transition is only possible if domestic resources (including remittances) are mobilised for infrastructure investments that boost productivity quickly while generating further economic activity. International financiers need to understand the African urban opportunity and provide more affordable international investment for basic urban infrastructure and services.

Of course, the path forward isn't simple. But if the future of Africa is young and urban, then African cities are the future. As such, Africa's cities will exert a definitive influence on the global economy's stability. This influence could be massively positive for the world, or exacerbate existing problems. While African leaders have yet to grasp this opportunity—let alone table it to the world as a bargaining chip—Africa's urbanisation is integrally linked to the future of the entire world, and the inherent opportunities are clear. The question is, why isn't the continent's leadership making a stronger argument on this, both to their own people, and to the world? ♦



## OVER TWO-THIRDS OF THE BUILDINGS THAT WILL MAKE UP AFRICA'S CITIES IN 2050 DO NOT YET EXIST

With cities set to absorb 700 million more people than today by 2050, Africa urgently needs answers about who will finance its urban transformation, and how



# THE AI HYPE TRAIN IS COMING FOR AFRICA.



**WE MUST NOT BLINDLY GET ONBOARD**



*I know tech lies when I see them, having come of age during the “Africa Rising” era. We need to focus on what will really help our young people. We need new stories, argues co-founder and CEO at Impact Hub Accra, Will Senyo.*

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I wake up most days with one question on my mind: How might Africa’s young people avoid a future shaped by Silicon Valley billionaires, and instead focus on building an alternate vision of urban life free from exploitation and extreme income inequality?

I’m the last person you might expect to ask that question. For 15 years, I have worshipped at the altar of tech. I have operated at the intersection of technology and capital, investing in and supporting technology founders, social entrepreneurs, and creatives. I now consider myself a “recovering cult member”.

I came of age in the early 2000s, when the “Africa Rising” narrative had built momentum, driven by a shift in the global perception of the continent’s economic potential. Investment in telecom infrastructure helped increase access to the internet, new Africa-focused venture capital funds were forming, startups were launching to global fanfare, and it looked like technology would replace religion in Africa.

Tech founders were the new rock stars.

Global capital had found its new frontier. The money-men had discovered a market of a billion people and they couldn’t wait for investors to mine this new gold. But that period promised a future that largely hasn’t materialised.

Nearly two decades on, a new hype cycle is emerging and we are about to rinse and repeat. But the past should have taught us a lesson: we are playing a game we cannot win. Focused on all the wrong things, the current tech explosion will put young Africans in greater precarity, relying on hollow dreams built by forces that only seek to exploit their attention, data, and skills. Because this is a war for mindshare, and we are losing. The next 20 years cannot be a repeat of the past.

As I write this, young people across the continent are living in a truly unique moment. Geopolitical shifts are shaping a new global economy with all indications pointing to the worst possible outcomes for—ironically enough—the most educated cohort of young people in Africa’s history. If you’re a tech-savvy young African living the urban experience in cities like Accra or Cairo, you have little escape from the hum of technology hype as you consume copious amounts of “content” across multiple tech platforms. You live with a constant reminder of what you’re told is the inevitable AI avalanche.

Your daily media diet is likely filled with AI doomers screaming about how GPT is coming for your non-existent job. The AI boomers, on the other hand, swear on all that is holy that the most transformational technology ever

designed by our Silicon Valley overlords will deliver the much-awaited universal income utopia. It's a new techno-feudal era, and they have piles of cash to power their large language models and buy Nvidia-powered GPUs packed in data centres guzzling unthinkable amounts of energy. It's the 2010s all over again, and I have lived through one too many hype cycles that promise massive growth and transformation, powered by access to the internet, social media, and financial technology, to believe it this time.

This is why I can understand if all that talk about golden futures sounds implausible to the hordes of struggling young Africans. I empathise with their confusion. To be young in Africa means a high likelihood of living in a city with access to some of the poorest infrastructure imaginable, earning little to no income, and entertaining few prospects of that ever changing. This is the urban experience of most young Africans.

And yet our leaders now stand ready to blindly follow another hype cycle.

Questionable regional initiatives will begin forming with names like the AU Artificial Intelligence Task Force or Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy. They will make a big show of Africa's future shaped by technology, knowing full well they lack the power, capital, or strategic leverage to make any of these technologies work for us. You will hear things like "AI for sustainable development in Africa", which will make bold claims of how AI can help smallholder farmers with yield, along with a whole host of technobabble that will dominate the news cycle. We will lose critical years if we fail to focus on building the things that will actually deliver the most value to the next generation of Africans.

While I see all the flaws in the techno-utopia story, I also see its genius appeal. It thrives on narrative! Beautifully woven stories of a future free from the growing pains and friction of life. The rags-to-riches stories of tech start-up founders splashed across Forbes; investor return the size of a small nation's GDP. But we cannot be distracted by the jazz hands. Instead, for the pragmatic optimists among

us, there's something to learn about the power of narrative. The next 20 years must instead be about shaping authentic, clear-eyed narratives about what should be important to young people on the continent.

I don't have any answers, just a conviction that business as usual won't cut it. There's one central shift I believe needs to happen. We cannot continue to build futuristic technology on non-existent or weak infrastructure. Take urban housing. If you're a low-income, 27-year-old college graduate living in Accra, no amount of AI can save you from living in substandard housing. Here are the numbers, for what they are worth. The current housing shortage is estimated at 2 million units in Kenya, 17 million in Nigeria, and a conservative 3.5 million units in Egypt—and this is if you're being generous and counting questionable existing urban housing as 'decent'. In my native Ghana, we need to deliver between 85,000 and 100,000 new housing units annually to even have a shot at putting a dent in the 1.8 million housing deficit over the next decade. Fifty per cent of all Ghanaians still live in sub-standard housing with limited access to water, energy, and sanitation.

These are the defining stories of this generation. A continent that cannot offer its people that most basic of human needs—a decent home—has no business marching its best and brightest into a fantasyland of AI. I am hopeful that we can galvanise this generation around one theme: make African cities equitable, liveable, affordable, and soulful. More than anything, I believe shaping bold narratives around this, driving top talent towards the problem, and centring capital on it, could shape the next 20 years of African conversations.

The same narrative style that brought us hopeful stories of the mobile phone as a transformative device for Africans can tell a new story: if you really want to be a rock star and change the world, start with the basics: give young Africans solid ground on which they can realise their own futures. We cannot afford to be forever chasing after every shiny object, distracting ourselves from the job of addressing the hard realities of life on our continent. ♦





***We cannot be distracted by the jazz hands. Instead, for the pragmatic optimists among us, there's something to learn about the power of narrative. The next 20 years must instead be about shaping authentic, clear-eyed narratives"***

*Lawyer, youth leader, and human rights activist **Namatai Kwekweza** believes that the future isn't fixed, and can still be written. Young people need to fight for it, she argues. Whatever it takes.*

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**T** AU TAVENGWA: I've been reading about the work you are doing in Zimbabwe, specifically dealing with human rights. I thought we could chat about what that means in a context with a massive youth demographic, and experiencing quite significant migration of these young people into the country's cities. Tell me about your organisation, WELEAD.

**NAMATAI KWEKWEZA:** WELEAD Trust is a youth leadership development and advocacy organisation based in Harare, Zimbabwe. It's been in existence since November 2017. We focus on increasing the participation space for young people. We use the Zimbabwean constitutional definition of "young", which is 15 to 35. That definition is also affirmed in the African Youth Charter. We train leaders using what we call the iServe leadership model: Innovation, Servant leadership, Empathy, Responsibility, Volunteerism, and Expression.

As an institution, we have this radical belief that every human being deserves to live a life filled with opportunity, a life lived of unlimited possibility. We want everyone to have access to infrastructure and systems that affirm and support all their capabilities and aspirations with the condition that they are willing to pursue it and work for it. This is not possible if you are in an environment where your rights are consistently violated.

If your right to a good education is denied, if you cannot access clean drinking water, you have limited freedom of expression, [freedom] from torture, or the right to legal





**THE FUTURE  
IS WORTH  
FIGHTING FOR!**



*So, my generation has never seen or lived with function and normalcy. There are young people growing up in Harare who have never seen water coming out of a tap in their house. In the country's largest urban area, they have grown up fetching water at a community well. It's unbelievable. And then you see the president proudly going about commissioning wells in urban areas. It's embarrassing"*

representation of choice when you need it, that limits your potential.

This is what we focus on as an organisation, and is why we fight for human rights. That's why we do what we do.

**TT: How do you define opportunity?**

**NK:** How we define opportunity is always relative and subjective, and depends on context. We are not prescriptive, and do not seek to define for others what an opportunity looks like for them. We focus on the fundamentals.

If you work on education [but] not on having a good economy that supports the socio-economic rights of people—where they don't have jobs, cannot access credit, or build businesses that can create even more opportunities for others—that's not enough.

That's the situation in Zimbabwe right now. We keep educating people knowing full well that they wouldn't have an opportunity for employment or to make a good livelihood. The environment is not permissive.

We target the government, those in power, and we work through various channels to apply pressure to decision-makers to ensure that whatever decisions they're making are designed to fulfil the fundamental rights of every citizen for a start, and to create an environment that allows individuals to take whatever opportunities emanate from that. We leave it to the individual to take and decide whatever looks and feels like an opportunity for them.

**TT: An interesting statistic I came across recently is that across the African continent there are about 11 million people annually coming out of educational institutions with some kind of higher education certificate, diploma, or degree.**

**However, all the economies across the continent only manage to create about 3.9 million formal jobs**

**annually. They just get absorbed into the huge number of people whose only chance of earning a penny lies in the informal economy. I thought I would mention that, because it contextualises what you're saying about how you define what an opportunity is. We have this big challenge across the continent.**

**Let's go back to something you also mentioned. That applying pressure to the authorities, to the government, is an important component of what you do. What form does that pressure take? How are you doing that?**

**NK:** It's a spectrum. In certain cases, we engage with parliament's Portfolio Committee on Youth, others with the Ministry of Youth, for example, or whatever the relevant ministry is on the issue we might be working on. Other times, that's neither possible nor enough, so we use other tactics that can range from petitions, protests and marches, or digital/social media. The ability to tell our stories with our own voices is a powerful thing, and all our campaigns are premised on that.

I'll give you one example of this. For a very long time, the Zimbabwean government was refusing to publicly acknowledge the horrible conditions in our public hospitals. We spent about three months earlier this year running a campaign as citizens to highlight what we were observing. Initially, there was a lot of backlash against people speaking out, but after the deluge of stories and experiences that were shared, the authorities could no longer ignore the situation. Time will tell how it goes, but now there are some attempts to fix the issues in our hospitals and public health facilities. The ability to shape the public discourse, to shape a narrative, is something that we prize, and take very seriously.

Sometimes our work requires that we do straight-up community mobilisation and engagement which involves boots on the ground—going to local constituencies,



speaking with young people, initiating conversations in the streets, and pamphlet distribution. We work with young artists and musicians to create visuals or catchy jingles that carry critical information, for example. We do the best we can to create stuff that easily connects to, and is palatable to, the young citizens we need to reach. Since we started in 2017, we have learnt to adapt as the situation demands, and use whatever tactics we have in our toolbox.

It's critical to be cognisant of the context we operate in. There has been a sustained erosion of civic space in Zimbabwe. A lot of governments across the African continent are dealing with their people heavy-handedly.

We have to factor this into how we strategise because sometimes participation comes with great risk. We have had many moments where people do not show up because they feel that the cost of just showing could be much higher than what they are willing to pay. So that's also something we think about a lot, and we employ whatever tactics work best under each circumstance.

**TT: What in that toolbox of tactics have you found most effective? Where have you gotten the best results?**

**NK:** I feel we've had the most wins with our leadership development programmes. We have done a lot of training, and some of the young people we've trained have gone on to do their own thing, and it's actually really dynamic. We believe in the ability to replicate good leadership and one's capacity to show up for your community as a full citizen. So, leadership training is one of the most powerful things we've done. Some of the young people that have participated in our training programmes have gone on to become members of the Model Youth Parliament, for example. A few are now parliamentarians, and even more have gone into local politics and become city councillors.

There are constituencies of people that have not gotten any piped water for the past 20 years in Harare. At the same time, there is an influx into the city. Looking at what all this means, you very quickly see how city planning and stuff like that affects and shows up in a human rights sense. So, the discourse around the city and space is a discourse of human rights: how you're designing your city affects where and how people get services.

Some of the biggest issues we are faced with are infrastructure-based, where you've got roads that are so dilapidated, no access to electricity, and water [shortages], as I mentioned.

This is not just the result of more people in the city, but largely the result of a lot of corruption, a huge problem we are dealing with across the country. It's very easy to see how an instance of corruption results in a terrible road regardless of the fact that money is being spent on it every year to fix the same problem, for example. Some of these big companies win tenders to build roads, and then they will build something so substandard that in three to five years, it's already pothole-infested.

We are seeing this play out in Harare, and our work and advocacy is intrinsically connected to how we get better outcomes.

I was born in 1998. By that time, the Zimbabwean economy was in shambles, and many systems that I am told were previously highly functional were starting to collapse.

This was accelerated by the volatility and repression that came with, and followed, the land invasions that were orchestrated by Mugabe as he clung to power.

So, my generation has never seen or lived with function and normalcy. There are young people growing up in Harare who have never seen water coming out of a tap in their house. In the country's largest urban area, they have grown up fetching water at a community well. It's unbelievable. And then you see the president proudly going about commissioning wells in urban areas. It's embarrassing.

I can't remember the last time I drank water from our tap. We always buy mineral water, because tap water is filthy. If you leave it in a bottle, it turns green after a few days.

When I went to Germany, it was a culture shock. I kept requesting bottles of mineral water. And the Germans would gossip that, "Oh, she's such a diva. Look at her. She only drinks bottled water."

And finally I told them, "I don't drink tap water, because where I come from, it's dirty." And they said, "here in Germany, it's safer to drink tap water than bottled water." And it was a culture shock for me. I was like, "so I can actually drink this?"

I'm saying all this to illustrate one point. Because we've been so traumatised and used to the trauma of things that don't work, when we find ourselves in environments where things do work, our instinct is to resist how they work. It creates a whole other psychology that is difficult to shake off, and that trauma will impact the future.

Something has to give.

We need leadership or a movement that can capture the collective imagination of a young mind in Zimbabwe. We need a movement able to spark an imagination of the future in ways that animate the youth of Zimbabwe, and the continent, into being hopeful, and [driven towards] clear planning and thinking about how to get there. We need a vision of the future that's greater than the fear of what will happen to us if we challenge and disrupt, or try to dismantle, the status quo.

We have no nostalgia or reminiscence of what used to be. We want a future, and that comes with a plan about what we want to happen in the next 20, 30, 50 years. As young people, it is worth going out of our way to fight for this future. It is worth struggling, challenging, and being threatened with death and imprisonment for. ♦

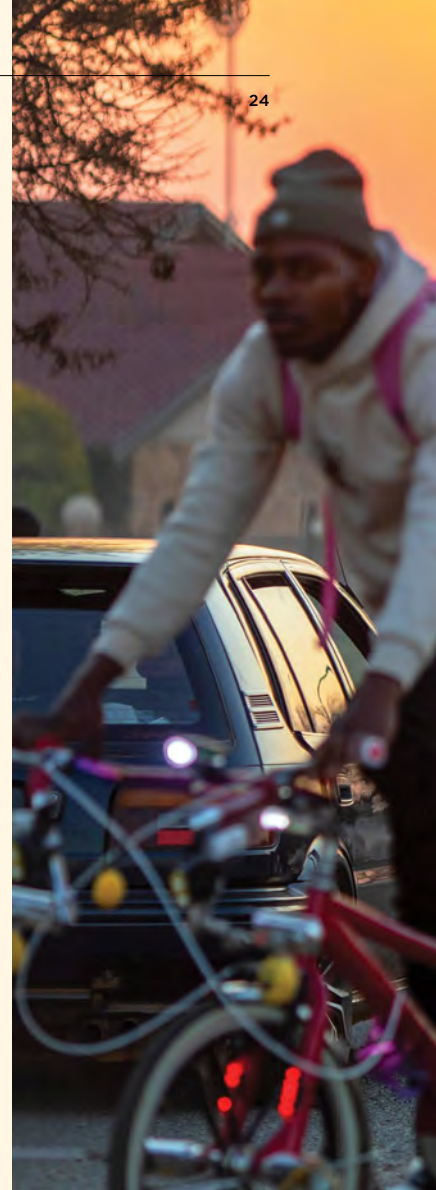
# YOUNG, GIFTED, AND STUCK

*Young people across Africa are struggling to get a start in life because our cities are failing them, says **Nolita Mvunelo**, Club of Rome Programme Manager on African Youth and Urban Futures. Nonetheless, they can achieve great things when given the chance.*

Creating meaningful work for Africa's expanding youth population is becoming even more challenging now that AI is eliminating the limited white-collar jobs that affluent young Africans used to aspire to, says Nolita Mvunelo. A co-director of The 50%, a global network advocating for greater youth-led participation in policymaking, business, environmental, and climate leadership, the 26-year-old South African-born engineer is also the Club of Rome's Principal for Cultural Transformation. Both roles demand that she pays close attention to the impact of emerging technologies and systems stubbornly resisting critical transformation for young people across the world.

"You don't really need lawyers or accountants in the same way you would have before this moment, and entry-level jobs are being eviscerated because everything a young person entering the job market could do can now can potentially be automated," she says.

In the past, countries looking to create opportunities for their citizens had an obvious answer: by creating an environment that investors deemed stable and profitable enough to drive industrialisation quickly, opportunities for young people entering the job market would open up. "But we can't do that anymore," says Mvunelo, citing the challenges of climate change resilience and adaptation when it comes to stability in developing countries. "No one has the answers, and this is frustrating young Africans," she adds.





KLERKSDORP, SOUTH AFRICA: In the township of Alabama, boys get together to compete for prizes for the most creatively modified bikes. The subculture is a spinoff of “stance culture”, where car owners personalise their vehicles with ostentatious paint jobs and souped-up sound systems. The cycling subculture provides teens a vital way to express themselves. Photo by Per-Anders Pettersson

As she sees it, investing in education systems that enable young people to be entrepreneurial and create sustainable development opportunities themselves is key. But, she argues, education alone is not enough. After all, “what use is a degree, or being entrepreneurial without the ability to raise the capital necessary to start a business? There needs to be investment in young people,” she notes.

We need to mobilise investment around the big-picture ideas young people across the continent have, continues Mvunelo, citing the Green Africa Youth Organization (GAYO). Founded in Accra in 2014, GAYO was the 2025 Winner of The Earthshot Prize. An example of the type of opportunity industrious young Africans are creating for themselves from the ground up, GAYO is a blueprint for a problem-solving ethos that tackles systemic challenges affecting the entire world. Based in Ghana, GAYO now operates in five countries across Africa, engaging young people on environmental and climate issues while encouraging entrepreneurial approaches.

Mvunelo also points to the Green Generation Initiative, led by 30-year-old climate activist Elizabeth Wathut. Promoting environmental education across Kenya, this exciting organisation is focused on environmental restoration, among other activities. Meanwhile, in Tunisia, Aya Chebbi, a 37-year-old former African Union youth envoy, has founded the Nala Feminist Collective (NALAFEM), an organisation preparing young women to enter public office.

“She’s putting her social capital behind young women and encouraging them to get in and help fix the system. One of Nalafem’s fellows recently got appointed to a National Youth position for a major party in their home country, Kenya. They’re making real strides,” says Mvunelo.

The reason initiatives like these are succeeding is because they understand that you just can’t follow the traditional path of waiting your turn in a system that promises long-term rewards while stifling creativity. “We need big bets upfront,” Mvunelo says.

One of Mvunelo’s biggest concerns is how our cities are failing to support young people. “Take Cape Town, for example,” she says. “It’s not a city with any planning geared to young people, most of whom cannot afford to rent a small apartment. Entry-level jobs pay between R10,000 (US\$570) to R20,000 (just over US\$1,000) while a studio apartment within 20-minutes of the city centre costs R8,000 (US\$450) to R10,000.”

Young people across the continent are struggling. “Our cities are a direct hindrance to their success,” concludes Mvunelo. ♦

Edited for clarity and length





Africa's youth face a crushing squeeze of unemployment and narrowing prospects, as city leaders fail to match the scale of the challenge with concrete action

# WHY AFRICAN CITIES ARE FAILING THEIR YOUTH

*South Africa's Human Settlements Minister, Thembisile Simelane, believes African countries are chronically unprepared for rapid urbanisation—and it's costing millions of young people their futures.*

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**EDGAR PIETERSE: African countries seem consistently unprepared to manage rapid urbanisation, despite seeing millions of young people move to cities every year. Why do you think this is happening?**

**THEMBISILE SIMELANE:** We need to look at our role in the AU-STC 8—the African Union's Specialised Technical Committee on Urban Development and Human Settlements. Established in 2014, it's supposed to be our consultative body for sustainable development across Africa. But it's severely understaffed with no bold initiatives to properly resource it.

The focus remains mostly inward-looking on member states. We fail to exchange lessons because we're not utilising the platform. We don't leverage what it could offer us.

But the bigger problem is chronic underinvestment. Cities struggle to generate revenue—whether from the government, consumers, businesses, or households. With such limited revenue, they cannot plan effectively for current needs, let alone future growth.

Consider municipal priorities like poverty eradication and job creation. What economic activities do municipalities actually initiate to stimulate industries? I recently met with Ekurhuleni's mayor and said: "You are an industrial city. You can't simply complain about revenue collection. What are you doing to propel industries forward?" Cities could offer tax rebates, municipal incentives, timed benefits to attract investment. But they don't.

**EP: What are the deeper systemic challenges you're seeing?**

**TS:** There's a fundamental lack of coordination. Our housing plans don't align with Transport Ministry plans, yet we're building houses while they build roads. The same people use both for business and residence. Without this connection, people spend excessively on transport because travel routes don't align with where they live.

When President Thabo Mbeki initiated regional economic development, the concept was to master it domestically, then regionalise it. Asking: if you're strong in mining, who's using your coal? How do you maximise gold, diamonds, platinum, agricultural output?

This thinking informed how we structured metro districts, whose purpose was creating regional economies beyond municipal boundaries—but they're not operational. District-level planning should integrate these areas, but it doesn't happen. And without regional economic planning, we get endless duplication (technical colleges offering identical programmes, etc.).

Today, we have 44 essentially empty district shells with severely limited functions. Look at Gauteng's Vaal Triangle—you cannot plan as separate municipalities because it's one integrated economic belt, but municipalities don't learn from each other, so they plan identically. Review our municipal development plans—they're virtually interchangeable.

**EP: What kind of skills and capacity building do you think is needed?**

**TS:** We must intentionally participate in a skills revolution for urban planning. We need qualified people who understand urban planning fundamentals and regional economic mobilisation. How do we engage NGOs, change-makers, academia, research institutions?

Planning cannot happen by accident—where people settle randomly and we reactively create human settlements. It requires deliberate design.

But we have a fundamental weakness in implementation. We excel at initiating discussions, signing agreements. We take trips to China or elsewhere, but two years later, we're doing exactly the same things. We're found wanting when it comes to actually opening up and letting others influence our policies.

The training of planners is particularly problematic—they don't engage with economic fundamentals. The plans they produce aren't sufficiently focused on job creation as the foundation for integrated human settlement planning.

**EP: How do you see disaster risk and climate change fitting into the G20 agenda this year?**

**TS:** While we're not a priority sector in G20, I see enormous potential through the Disaster Risk and Mitigation Working Group. Recent experience in Mthatha demonstrates how disasters reverse progress in addressing inequalities.

We still have people in temporary shelters—women with children, some nursing babies, whose homes were destroyed. The state cannot respond promptly due to poor planning. We lack municipal plans for formalised settlements across all areas.

We shouldn't have lost 10 children who drowned when their transport was swept away after heavy rains. Those roads should have been closed. Municipalities know their vulnerable areas. When warnings are issued, they must monitor overnight.

We haven't achieved resilient infrastructure standards. Our disaster financing focuses on recovery rather than mitigation. People still live inappropriately close to Mthatha Dam. We should relocate them during calm periods, but we don't have the foresight.

Disasters cross boundaries. El Niño effects in Mozambique impact us; likewise with Lesotho. We need enhanced global cooperation, technology sharing, and capacity building from developed countries. This could be our entry point into the G20 discussions, even if we're not directly prioritised.

**EP: What gives you hope that this can change?**

**TS:** We need to be intentional about systems thinking and long-term planning. Look at cities like Dubai—they're planning decades ahead. New York's basic infrastructure from the 1800s still serves the city because those planners had 100 to 200-year forecasts.

But fundamentally, we need a strong core ideology focused on building dignity for people. That's a human rights conversation. Until we centre human dignity in our planning, we'll keep building these empty shells instead of functional, thriving cities that serve their people.

The potential is there. We just need the political will to make it happen. ♦





NAIROBI, KENYA: Young people protest against the government's finance bill on June 25, 2024. Outcry over the bill, which proposed to raise taxes on a number of goods, spurred the government to withdraw several contentious provisions, including taxes on bread and vehicles, but the bill passed a second-round vote. Photo by Donwilson Odhiambo



# BEYOND “PARTICIPATION”

*Activist and planner Regina Opondo has spent years agitating and organising against gender discrimination in Kenya. It's gruelling work, but she is inspired by how young Kenyans are rewriting the script on what engagement looks like. She spoke to Julia Hope.*

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**JULIA HOPE:** You are an activist, and organiser, whose work spans planning, urban policy, and gender rights. Let's start there.

**REGINA OPONDO:** I don't think it is possible to separate these things because at the heart of everything, even when the context or challenge at any given point might be different, you're talking about people, and often, it's the same people. I have always been interested in joining the dots across all the things I do. Coming into the urban space and specifically joining Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI), I was very clear I wanted to be able to continue some of my activism in other spaces, while bringing it into the organisation's work. I'm lucky that I'm still able to engage in work around election integrity, anti-torture, and addressing current and historical injustices.

**JH:** You do a lot of work on gender issues. What are the specific challenges that women face in Nairobi—where you are, and more broadly, in all the various spaces and places you work in. How does this intersect with your urban activism and organising?

**RO:** The challenges women face are everywhere. We live in a patriarchal system. Women face challenges around free movement and having a voice, which affects our ability to lead in most spaces that are male-dominated.

As KDI, we're challenging gender roles by creating spaces for women to work in construction, which has always been a male-dominated industry. We are working to assist women to confidently play a role as decision-makers in matters concerning their neighbourhoods, creating and promoting nature-based solutions, and planning. It has been the tradition that a lot of planning decisions are made without their full participation, and we are working with many women to address these sorts of challenges. Similar challenges are experienced across the board in our society, but more and more opportunities are opening up for women.

[And that] space is opening up because of the work that has been done by women and other feminists before us—and I say “feminists” deliberately, because they are not always women. So, we are working and growing out of the spaces created by others in the past. I see our responsibility as one to keep pushing and widening those

spaces, and making sure they are available for future generations of women, girls, and other marginalised groups.

Dismantling the patriarchy is a lifelong mission. It's ever-present. It's in our homes, thrives across our communities, and is embedded in a lot of the systems we operate in.

I can give you examples of KDI's policies to address these issues. It starts at the Kenyan Constitution, which clearly specifies that in anything, it's not legal to have one gender take up more than two-thirds of jobs, positions, whatever. So, that gives us solid ground to anchor ourselves on. As an organisation, we aim for a 50/50 split. So, in all our work—from convenings, how our office and our staffing is structured, the teams that we have in the office, and communities we engage, in our co-design workshops, co-construction, in research—the target is that split.

Another thing worth mentioning here is that over the years, we have been very deliberate about applying a human rights-based approach in all our projects, programmes, and work. We do not think about women as a homogenous block, and carefully consider their diversity—young girls, youth, women of all ages, disabilities, etc. Unfortunately, we often find that the majority of the women are in the unskilled labour category in industries like construction, for example, so we try to ensure that the women we work with can advance to becoming part of the skilled labour force. Sometimes that means starting from scratch, so in the past, we invested in a Carpentry Academy, again working on the 50/50 principle, and that contributed towards having a pool of skilled female carpenters.

We also run a Sustainable Design Academy, which is growing a cohort of women working with their male peers in sustainable design at community level with the competencies to understand things like nature-based solutions, implementing them, and maintenance of public spaces.

These are very male-dominated spaces, and women in these roles are unusual. So, while attitudes are starting to change, there are moments when we have experienced intense pushback. KDI's construction manager is female, and there are always women working alongside men on our sites. This might not shock people in the same way it would have in the past, but where pushback happens, we have a zero-tolerance policy on discrimination. So, pushback is there, but we're also pushing back against the pushback.

We are not alone in this. Other organisations are working along similar principles in multiple sectors. Naomi Mwaura founded an organisation called Flone

Initiative, specifically to facilitate having more women working in the transport sector—in the matatu industry, public transport, driving trailers, that sort of thing. Flone is one of many.

In many communities, citizens are organising themselves on these issues, and professionals like me have to take note and think about how we can expand this conversation, which is core to how we rethink our city.

#### **JH: How has the government responded to these initiatives?**

**RO:** There are multiple, different levels to that. On one level, we have tokenistic, kneejerk responses on certain issues, and a failure to really grasp what is required of them. A good example of this: we have had a massive wave of gender-based violence in Kenya in the last few years, and the President established a 34-member taskforce to “look into the matter”. In the public interview process, it became very clear that one of the women shortlisted was just the wrong person to even consider. She made some quite shocking comments in parliament about femicide. Just because someone is female does not mean they make a good advocate for women. That's one layer. On the other level, the 2010 Constitution has created an infrastructure that enables the government to respond a lot better on these issues. We have oversight offices, the two-thirds gender principle I mentioned earlier, and these are good starting points that give us something to work from.

We have independent offices like the National Gender and Equality Commission, established by an act of parliament in 2011. If it broadens its thinking, it could be an important instrument in ensuring that some of what I'm talking about is embedded in the system. To be fair, we are seeing many government development programmes seriously making attempts to fulfil the two-thirds gender requirement in ways that are not just tokenistic. So it's not all doom and gloom, but we have to continue drumming, insisting, and pushing, to change and influence the system. Sometimes we have to force it to change.

Another aspect I need to mention is the importance of hope. It's essential, and is a strong part of what has brought us where we are today. In a lot of my work, hope is what created room for the women who came into the Assembly as nominated members before, and eventually became the elected officials who fought for the legislation I've



*Young people...care enough to be out on the streets protesting against national budget measures, and they are well informed. They have taken the time to learn, some are developing apps, bringing their skills to the organising table, and bringing their energy to contest how Nairobi is run, how the city works, and to push for it being more responsive to everyone's needs—and especially for young people”*

been talking about against Sex and Gender Based Violence, against sexual offences, human trafficking, and so on. Hope is what enabled all these things which, honestly, do not only benefit women but everybody. Gender equality benefits everybody. Young men have also been very good allies in some of those battles. The Human Rights Caucus in parliament consists mostly of younger people—male and female—and the male members have been very strong allies.

**JH: Let's end with hope. How do we rethink and ensure that we are building up cities that work for everyone?**

**RO:** There seems to be this assumption that citizens are generally not engaged, that young people are not engaged. In 2023, I got to a point where I almost threw my hands up in despair that we had been doing all these things for years and years, but still, nothing was as good as we thought it would be by now. I was doing a little bit of work around that year's elections, in which the largest number of people who did not vote or participate were young people. But, those same young people are out on the streets as we speak. So, something has shifted. They care enough to be out on the streets protesting against national budget measures, and they are well informed. They have taken the time to learn, some are developing apps, bringing their skills to the organising table, and bringing their energy to contest how Nairobi is run, how the city works, and to push for it being more responsive to everyone's needs—and especially for young people.

That's why I feel a lot of hope that to truly, truly engage people, we need to go beyond consultation. We need more and better participatory planning, civic education, all those things, and young people are the ones who will

and are taking this forward. They are the majority. They are the ones who are going to give us a liveable city, and they will define what “a liveable” city is for themselves and fight for it. For a very long time, we've been talking about “liveable” in terms of basics: access to water, shelter, public space, mobility, safety from violence and flooding. But, for these young people, a liveable city is all that and more. It's one in which you can fully express yourself.

Young people made Nairobi's city government change its mind about the fees it was levying on anybody who wanted to film in the city centre, because they are on social media—on TikTok—and are making videos all the time. The simple act of making a video was too expensive and they pushed back and forced the county government to remove those fees because they were making it even more difficult for young people to make money. Nowadays, traditional jobs are not the only way to make money. People are making a living on social media.

What I'm saying is, they're redefining what “liveable” means, what a “just city” means, beyond the basic, outdated, traditional definitions of the terms. It's an exciting thing to watch and to be part of. And for me, those are the hopeful signs of change.

Beyond gender, political affiliation, or other factors that separate us, young people are defining new ways to be involved in the governance of the city. We are beyond the type of traditional public participation that takes place in community halls. The new participation is informed, it is digital, it is hybrid, it is in our language.

For me, this is an exciting thing. ♦

Edited for clarity and length





Waziri Mainasiri, run leader and hub coordinator for UrbanBetter's Cityzens, leads a walk-run campaign in a Lagos neighbourhood to spotlight pollution and other environmental challenges. Photo: UrbanBetter

# BREATHE EASY

*Collecting evidence, building connections, and collaborating: these are the three main ingredients of a movement of young fitness-enthusiasts-cum-citizen-scientists whose campaign for cleaner air is spreading across Africa—and beyond. Waziri Mainasara spoke to us, and told us how they are doing it.*

“People need to have the feeling that they are not alone. They need to feel connected to something, and to know that when they find themselves in need, there are others to speak for them, to back them up,” said Waziri Mainasara Abubakar, the 35-year-old coordinator of Lagos Cityzens Hub, a clean air and healthy places initiative.

Mainasara, an economics graduate of the University of Lagos, has been a fitness enthusiast for as long as he can remember. This led to his founding “Fit Trackers”, a group promoting healthy living and physical activity in Lagos, where he has lived since arriving from Abuja as a university student.

For the last two years, he has worked at Cityzens as a mix of organiser, cheerleader, and diplomat—an all-round advocate for clean air in Lagos.

One of the key strategies of the hubs—which were initiated by UrbanBetter (the health advocacy organisation behind the Cityzens campaign)—is “using what they already enjoy” to get people thinking about the environment and other social issues. In this case, that means exercise. People might not have considered themselves active participants before, but the hubs give them a voice and the power to make a difference. This approach is seemingly bearing fruit in Accra, Lagos, Nairobi, and Bogota, where UrbanBetter has opened Cityzen hubs in collaboration with local city partners. And they are expanding their reach—a Joburg hub will soon follow.

“The first people we were able to mobilise were part of the running community. Our first major event in May 2024, launched during Air Quality Awareness Week, was attended by 300 people. We had a 5 km relay, and afterwards did a mass walk through some neighbourhoods with placards that highlighted key messages about air pollution. Everyone had a great time,” said Mainasara.

In 2024, the Lagos Hub organised Urban October Fest. The day-long festival used the arts to spread the clean-air message, staging plays on a number of issues, including the effects and consequences of air pollution, and how to counter its spread.

Given Lagos’s limited data on air pollution (until 2023, the entire city had only one active air-pollution censor), activities like these are crucial. Enabling people to voice important issues that affect their daily lives in a way that authorities cannot brush aside, they also critically show people that they are not alone in the fight for change.

In Lagos, as in the other cities, Cityzens mostly consist of young students and professionals. When exercising outside, they carry air-quality sensors—borrowed from hub-managed libraries—that allow them to collect

data on carefully planned running routes. They also map hazards ranging from uncollected garbage and potholes to water and sewage spills along the way, using a specially designed app.

Adopting a tactic they call “Data Driven Precision Advocacy”, participants use that data as the basis of the campaigns across the city. Post-run analysis arms the citizen scientist-cum-activists with irrefutable data that informs the messaging and campaigns that follow. They then organise raucous marches aimed at raising awareness and getting the public on board, while simultaneously applying pressure in boardrooms and seminar rooms with government department heads and policymakers, as well as universities and other institutions.

Armed with what Mainasara calls “Activation Insights Briefs”, they approach decision-makers using official and other channels, including social media. “We have successfully engaged Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency, the Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority, the Lagos Waste Management Authority, and the Lagos State Sports Commission,” he says of the group’s written campaign, and how it “demonstrates... what we’ve done and what we have found.”

“I call it ‘making the noise’, not just for advocacy’s sake. The people in these organisations are also our stakeholders. They come to our events, and we go to them and share with them the gaps we are identifying, and also the recommendations we have come up with.”

So far, so good. But the Cityzens’ ambitions are not limited to air pollution. “We are not just focused on air pollution but on urban health and urban transformation and the built environment more broadly,” said Mainasara. ♦



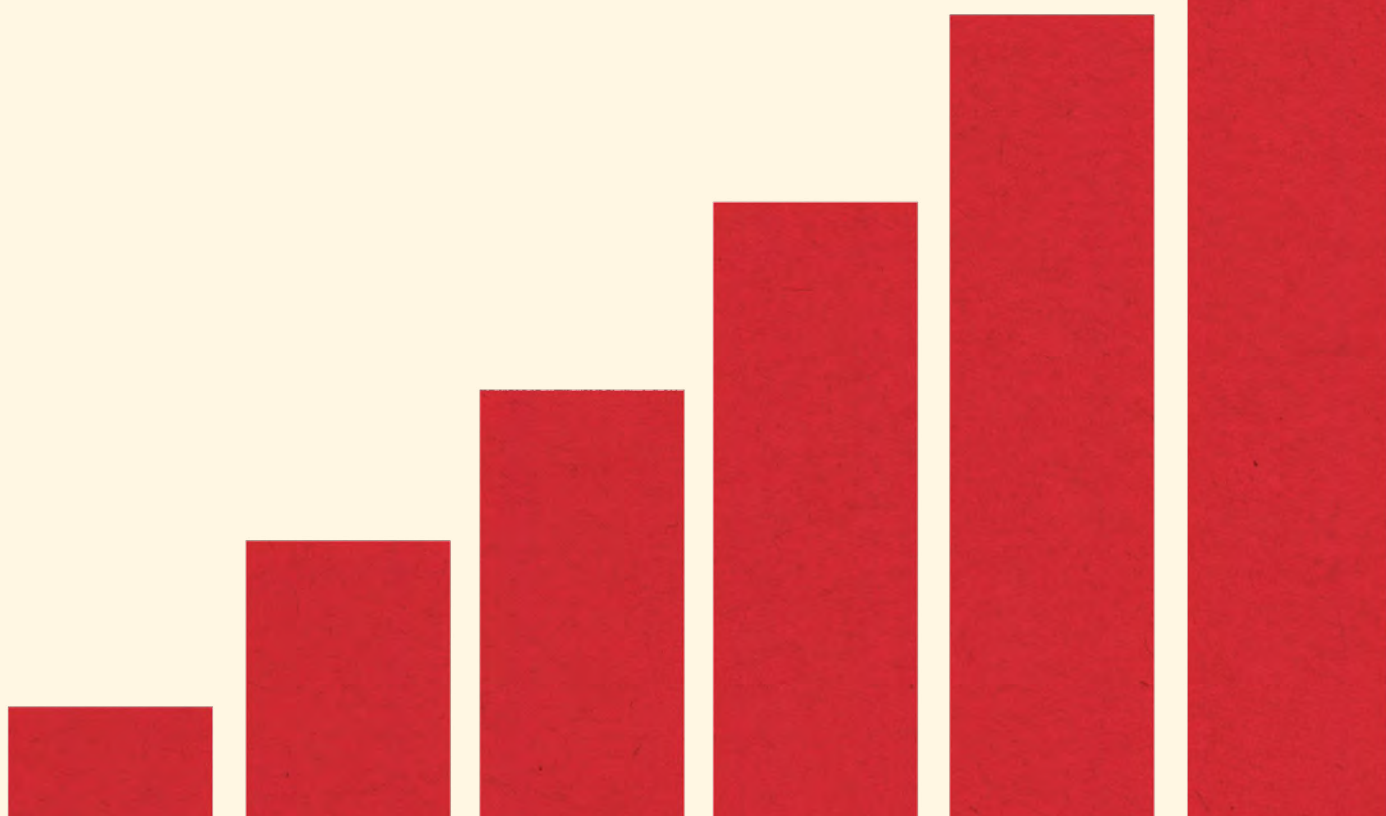
# Africa is the only region in the world where extreme poverty has risen since 1990

*The number of people facing extreme poverty (\$2.15 per person per day) in Africa increased from 450 million to 500 million over the past 34 years. By 2024, while 16% of the world's population lived in Sub-Saharan Africa, the region accounted for a staggering 67% of people living in extreme poverty. Looking ahead, the projections offer little hope, with one in three Africans expected to live below the \$2.15 poverty line by 2030—that's just five years away.*

*While extreme poverty is most concentrated in Africa's rural areas, affecting nearly 50% of the population compared to 20% in cities, urban poverty remains widespread. Over 70% of Africa's urbanites live below the \$6.85 daily poverty line. These bleak figures demand urgent, people-centred, and inclusive economic growth.*



**Sources:** Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024, World Bank  
Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa, **International Monetary Fund**











# LAGOS: RESTLESS CITY



*Lagos is an ever-changing mix of ambition, chaos, and grit, building towards a future it can barely contain. In the city's shiny high rises and sprawling informal settlements are stories of survival, transformation, and joyous uncertainty. Lagosians, it seems, do not know how to quit its allure.*

By **Jesusegun Alagbe**

27 million. Let's think about that number for a minute.


That's the number of people who, according to the city's leaders, call Lagos home. A number that will have grown significantly by the time you read this.

It's about 18 million more than the population of New York City, 20 million more than the number of people living in Johannesburg, an extra six million on top of those who call Mumbai home.

And the numbers keep piling up: Lagos absorbs at least 3,000 more people every single day. Across the country, hundreds of people, especially the young, are currently en route to the capital, dreaming of better lives, seeking new opportunities. What meets them on arrival is a restless city, bursting at the seams, in a daily battle not to be overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of residents, and the multiple crises it faces. Spiralling inequality, an affordable housing shortage, crippling infrastructure deficits, a looming climate and environmental emergency; you name it, Lagos is facing it.

So, the question is: in its jam-packed markets, on its congested roads, and across its glittering towers and sprawling slums, how can Lagos possibly hope to house and sustain the thousands—the millions—of people yet to come?

Depending on who you ask, it is either going to somehow keep on muddling through, to fulfill its destiny as the continent's premier financial and cultural hub, or it's on the verge of imploding, weighed down by the impossible challenge of meeting its inhabitants' basic needs. Remember, this is a city where only a tiny percentage of that 27 million population can—or, in some cases, will—pay the taxes essential for its development. Lagos is already home



Lagos' landscape is always changing. The new commuter rail cutting across the city and the surge of skyscrapers—especially on the island—gives a sense of the scale of that change. Photo by Oluka Levi



to more than 10% of Nigeria's population of 240 million, and operates on an annual budget of approximately \$2.2 billion, and a gross domestic product of \$259 billion. Compare that to New York, with a population of just over 8 million, which runs on a budget of about \$116 billion, and a \$1.2 trillion income.

Despite these challenges, which would feel existential to some, Lagos has a momentum, a pulse you can feel. This is just as true on the island, with its ever-expanding financial district and upscale residential homes, as it is the mainland, characterised by energetic streets, cultural diversity, and an astonishing mix of residential, commercial, and industrial areas. To see Lagos grow—new infrastructure, construction, demolitions, and business

Atlantic isn't meant for everyone—its promised upmarket shops and glitzy apartments are aimed at a very particular kind of Lagosian.

Beyond the glossy towers of Eko Atlantic and Ikoyi, Lagos is barely chipping away at a housing deficit estimated at over 3.4 million units. 87% of this deficit is in low-income housing, according to the World Bank. Moruf Akinderu-Fatai, Lagos State's Commissioner for Housing, announced in May 2025 that the state government needs to build 187,000 low-income houses. The improbability of that task becomes clear when you learn that only 10,000 such units have been built since the current Lagos administration assumed office in 2019. The housing commissioner recently claimed they intended to up that number to 14,000

by early 2026, but that sounds more like an official concession of defeat than a plan to deal with a housing crisis endured by millions of the city's poorest residents. The city's leaders seem overwhelmed by the scale of the problem. At the current rate of delivery, and not accounting for that daily 3,000 growth, it will take the city (which, at current levels, is projected to be the world's largest, with a population of around 80-million by 2100) about 250-300 years to clear the current shortage.

If this is the reality of life in Lagos for most people, what should we make of the stated ambition to become a "full-fledged smart city" by 2030, in the words of state governor, Babajide Sanwo-Olu? It creates a dissonance that is one of the defining stories of Lagos's transformation.

Yet even the small number of desperately needed housing units being built present their own challenges. First, many are located on the city's expanding fringes, where transport infrastructure and public services lag behind, trapping residents in long, unpredictable commutes. "The government keeps believing they're building houses for the people, but what they don't realise is that some of the projects are very far from the city centre. With no good inner roads and infrastructure, I don't think such houses serve people like me," said Ibrahim Owoade, a civil servant. "Many of the new estates are very far from the city centre, such that you will spend half of your day in traffic just to get to work. When you spend almost half of your salary on transport each day, how much is left to survive on, with two kids? Such a development should come with good road networks and transport infrastructure."

Another resident said they didn't feel like they were living in a real home because of the poor drainage system in their area, which leads to regular flooding. "Earlier this August, it rained for about three consecutive days. You needed to see how human beings were swimming in floods.



***Depending on who you ask, it is either going to somehow keep on muddling through, to fulfill its destiny as the continent's premier financial and cultural hub, or it's on the verge of imploding, weighed down by the impossible challenge of meeting its inhabitants' basic needs"***

developments are seemingly announced every week—is to know, in your heart, that this city isn't going to slow down anytime soon.

Which means a population of 30 million looms on the horizon.

And then what?

How can Lagos possibly keep on growing while caring for the people who already live here, whether their families have been here for generations, or they recently arrived? You can imagine the shock of the new Lagosians, who, getting off the bus, look upwards to see cranes looming large overhead as developers compete to change its skyline, and across to a sea of self-built structures in which 50-75% of the population live in the city's 140 informal settlements. Developers big and small are investing fortunes to cater for demand by the city's well heeled in a kind of "Dubaiification" that has long been evident in projects like Eko Atlantic, a planned city within the city built on land reclaimed from the ocean, and so obviously modelled on Palm Jumeirah that they could be siblings. But Eko

Cars stuck. It was difficult to go out or come in. While I laud the government for providing the house, I think they can do more in terms of providing better infrastructure. After all, a home is not just about having four walls and a roof.”

And, these houses aren’t even really affordable to your average Lagosian.

A “low-cost” one-bedroom apartment is still far beyond the reach of many families living on the city’s minimum wage, earning between \$470 and \$625 a year. Under the existing rent-to-own and mortgage programmes, housing unit prices vary between \$2,600 and \$13,000. Even at these “affordable” prices, the numbers are daunting. A Lagosian on the standard minimum wage would need to save their entire salary for four to seven years—without eating, paying rent, or spending a dime—to be able to afford the cheapest unit. “The houses are not truly affordable for ordinary people,” said Comfort Buchi, a junior lawyer living in the city. “Even though required to make a 30% down payment and spread the balance over 10 to 20 years, you can’t do that earning \$55 a month,” he said.

These are concerns shared across the city. But others refuse to accept this grim view, preferring instead to see Lagos’ humming construction sites as a sign that their city possesses an unstoppable vitality far greater than its seemingly insurmountable problems. But for people like Buchi, without careful planning, the city will plunge itself into deeper inequality, a place where the haves keep on buying the plush high-rises with amenities and services, of which the have-nots can only dream. As the city pushes toward 30 million residents, the question remains: can it build fast, smart and practically enough to house the 70% of its population stuck in its slums?

Meanwhile, a rather different question is being addressed on Lagos’ eastern borders, in the shape of the Lekki-Epe International Airport. The existing Murtala Muhammed International Airport has served the city since 1979, when the population was around 4 million. While the general population, and therefore passenger traffic, has skyrocketed, the city has lived with the limitations of a

single major airport. The Lekki-Epe International Airport, a \$450 million project spanning 3,500 hectares, is being developed in cooperation with Turkey’s Summa Group and seems tailored for the idealised Lagos of the future—bigger, faster, more connected. The proposed airport is strategically positioned near the Lekki Free Trade Zone, and is expected to handle millions of passengers annually, serving not just Lagos but nearby industrial and tourist zones.

The new airport’s location is no accident. The Lekki corridor is fast becoming Lagos’s new economic hub. It is home to a \$20 billion refinery owned by billionaire Aliko Dangote, a deep seaport, industrial estates, and multiple upscale residential neighbourhoods. The Lagos government believes a major airport in this location will shorten supply chains, ease travel for business and leisure, and give foreign investors a faster route into Nigeria’s commercial capital. The city’s officials envision a sleek, modern terminal with runways that are capable of handling even the largest aircraft, the Airbus A380. What’s more, the facility will be integrated with the planned Green Line rail and expressways to move passengers quickly into the city. But not everyone is convinced. The government is so well known for overpromising and underdelivering that it could practically be a campaign slogan. For most Lagosians, a little skepticism is inevitable.

“Lagos always has big ambitions, which isn’t bad, but most times, it doesn’t work things out properly. There are plenty of examples around us, which is why the new airport, though a fine dream, can become one of those megaprojects with poor implementation,” said Kolade Johnson, a 38-year-old entrepreneur who runs a small café in Lekki. “Unless transport links, power supply, and urban planning around the airport are properly coordinated, the Lekki international airport could in the future become the cause of the very congestion and infrastructure strain it is meant to relieve. The project sounds exciting, because it will bring many opportunities. But I also worry. Will ordinary people like me be able to afford to benefit from what’s coming? Or will it just be for the big men?”





Vibrant markets like Idumota remain the backbone of Lagos' largely informal economy. Photo by Oluka Levi



In Ojuelegba, street checkers draws both players and curious onlookers. Photo by Oluka Levi





Beneath Lagos' bridges and overpasses, small markets spring up with vegetable sellers and more. Photo by Oluka Levi





Flooded streets force residents to wade through rising waters after the rains. Photo by Oluca Levi



Corporate, residential, and hospitality towers now define Victoria Island' lagoonfront—and the emerging skyline of Eko Atlantic. Photo: Shutterstock





Lagos traffic often pushes patience to its limit, as seen in this roadside clash. Photo by Oluca Levi



Commuters push into a yellow danfo, a reminder of how difficult mobility remains for Lagosians. Photo by Oluca Levi





Day or night, Lagos' streets teem with life and commerce. Photo by Oluka Levi

But for Abdullahi Usman, who runs a travel agency based in Lekki, “this is exactly what Lagos needs. Every time, I lose hours moving goods and people across the city to the Murtala Muhammed International Airport at Ikeja. With the Lekki-Epe International Airport, we’re talking faster turnaround, lower costs, and the ability to connect directly to global markets from Lagos Island. This is a promising economic catalyst.”

Talk to Lagosians about their city, and it’s clear that life is a daily dance of love and hate. It sweeps you off your feet with its energy and chaos, the intensity of the day-to-day lifestyle. I have lived here for over a decade, and I wake up each day, ready to confront the madness. Who knows how the day will go? What begins as a bright, sun-filled morning might devolve into bone-deep frustration. In daily traffic, Danfo drivers, impatient in their yellow metallic buses packed with equally frustrated commuters are regular culprits, weaving between lanes and always ready with an insult. “Bro, if you’re still a learner, park that car at home or get a driver,” one yelled at a middle-aged man driving a Mercedes Sedan recently as I drove through Ikeja. The Mercedes driver blocked the danfo bus, jumped out of his car, removed his jacket and tie, before proceeding to give

the bus driver a slap across the face. Scenes like this are a daily occurrence. Chaos is everywhere.

You can’t be in Lagos and be dull, it’s often said. But you can be unhappy. Endless noise from the streets, unfathomable smells wafting from the open drains that are the city’s sewer system, the impatient blare of horns mixing with the street vendors calling out their wares, into a pure cacophony. And let’s not forget the prophecies of doom from the megaphone of the street preacher telling you that if you are not born again, you are sure to spend your life in hell. Yet, somehow Lagosians love their city. To be a Lagosian is to love its people, its vibrant streets, artistic culture, the dreams and opportunities it fuels that you can’t find anywhere else, and the smell of peppery suya as you walk the streets at night. Friends of mine, who have travelled out of the city for just a week, often complain about how other cities are too quiet and slow for their liking. They tell you there’s no place like Lagos. Ain’t that the truth.

But what does “Lagosian” even mean in a city that has added more than 20 million people in the past four decades? Is it the fisherman whose family has lived along the waters for centuries, the young graduate who arrived from Ekiti five years ago, the herdsman from Kano selling

his cattle at one of the city's abattoirs, or the spare parts vendor from Enugu making a new life here?

With its explosive migration, the city's identity is now as much about shared urban life as it is about ancestral ties. If you asked a millennial or Gen Z, they would tell you that being a Lagosian means having an instinct for the city's hustle—knowing how to navigate its traffic, to bargain in the markets and never, ever letting the scammers outwit you. An ability to adapt quickly to the city's ebbs and flows, and to thrive amid its chaos, it seems, is what makes a Lagosian.

Historically, a Lagosian was someone whose roots traced back to the indigenous peoples of Lagos, notably the Awori, a sub-group of the Yoruba, and other early settlers like the Egun, returnee Afro-Brazilians in the 19th century, and Saros (freed slaves from Sierra Leone). These groups were known to have lived along the lagoon and on Lagos Island long before the arrival of colonial settlers. Back then Eko (later renamed Lagos by the Portuguese) was a quiet cluster of fishing villages, not the behemoth it is today. The Awori people, said to be among the earliest settlers, staked their lives on the tides, their wooden canoes slicing through the calm waters where skyscrapers now cast their shadows.

But today, the original Lagosians are a minority, their numbers dwarfed by the sustained population explosion the city is experiencing. Lateef Okunnu, a prominent 92-year-old advocate with Lagos ancestry, was quoted in *Punch*, a local newspaper in 2017 expressing his concern. "I don't think we are up to five per cent of the population of Lagos now. That is the disadvantage we have, non-indigenes virtually taking over the governance of Lagos," he said.

And he is not alone.

The rapid expansion of the city has left many older residents bewildered, unable to recognise it. They yearn for a lost Lagos, once a tight-knit web of extended families, a place where everybody knew everyone else, elders had the final say in all disputes, and community festivals drew entire neighbourhoods into shared celebration. That Lagos is long gone. They worry that religion and politics have divided the people and money talks louder than lineage. Yes, the sway of the old families like the Olowos and the Dosunmus still exists, but in a city of more than 27 million, their voices are getting drowned out by the roar of com-

merce, migration, and relentless expansion. If the truth of cities is that they are forever changing, Lagos's transformation is total.

Migration has rewritten the DNA of Lagos. It has changed its identity and diversity. Nigerians—young and old—looking to trade or seek jobs, bright-eyed entrepreneurs, artists, musicians, and designers, continue to come to Lagos. They are joined by others coming to the city as a place of last resort, fleeing the conflict-ridden villages of Borno, and rain-drenched forests of Cross River. For each one, this city promises opportunity. Lagos is where they hope to make their fortune, find fame, or peace. The Igbo traders set up electronics and car spare shops, Hausa herders find work in abattoirs, migrants from Togo work as artisans, and those from the Benin Republic hawk fruit on the highways. While Yoruba remains the dominant language, this cosmopolitan city has an ever-growing tapestry of dialects that include Igbo, Hausa, Pidgin, French, Urhobo, and Ibibio.

Each wave of migration and economic change has remade the city, sometimes painfully, sometimes gloriously. The journey from a fishing settlement to colonial port, imperial capital, and now to the beating commercial heart of post-independence Nigeria and West Africa, has been a long, unpredictable one.

The question isn't whether Lagos will change. It always has, always will. But, at 27 million, Lagos is a rarity in the history of urbanisation. Forget about calling it a megacity, those which are home to a mere 10 million people. It is one of just 15 metacities—places with more than double that population, and it has smashed its way to number four on the global list. Its sheer size throws up so many questions. Who and what forces will shape its future? Can its inexhaustible list of deficits in infrastructure ever be overcome in an era where cities no longer have a clear path for how they grow their economies? How can it create enough jobs, and taxpayers to fund the infrastructure and services it desperately needs? As I walk its streets, I can't help but feel that the answer lies somewhere in the spaces between the old and the new, between the memories of the elders and the dreams of the newcomers.

Coming to Lagos is one thing; finding a decent place to live, another. An estimated 70% of the population lives far from the glass towers of Victoria Island and Ikoyi on the island, or the exclusive neighbourhoods of Magodo and

Ikeja GRA on the mainland. Many are pressed into sprawling informal settlements like Makoko, Ajegunle, and the mushrooming edges of Alimosho. Here, homes—little more than shelters, if we're being honest—are stitched together from corrugated iron sheets, plywood, and whatever can be scavenged from construction sites or the roadside.

In these communities, a family's living room may double as a shop, and the streets are not streets at all. They are winding dirt paths, often flooded and impassable after rain. Millions of people living in these places earn their living however they can—driving motorcycles (known as *okadas*), selling vegetables at dawn markets, or hawking sachet water to motorists in traffic. You want to build a home here? It is often less about blueprints and mortgages but more about relationships—negotiating with a local landlord who likes you, pooling resources with friends, paying masons in daily installments until the walls are high enough to protect you from the elements. At least for now.

Yet, whenever the city wants to build or expand another of its ambitious projects, it's the people in the slums who find themselves in the crosshairs. They already have little, their houses ramshackle, and they have no power. To top it off, they now stand in the way of progress, and need to be cleared out, to be replaced by bulldozers and cranes. And who is fighting the corner of these people as they get rolled over? Certainly very few people in government. Mostly it's a combination of grassroots organisers, slum dwellers' associations, social media influencers, and non-profits like Justice & Empowerment Initiatives trying to stand up for the little guy against forced evictions.

While they keep fighting on, officials are busy painting a glossy picture of Lagos as “a centre of excellence”, as the city's literature unironically calls it, or a “smart city.” There is much talk of fibre-optic cables, digital hubs, automated traffic systems, resilient infrastructure, renewable energy, and a digitally connected populace. But the gap between this ambition, allegedly to be achieved by 2030, and reality of 2025 is wide: can a city leap into a high-tech tomorrow when large swathes of its people still rely on open wells for water?

As if to illustrate the point, a government official Mahmood Adegbite recently said on TV that residents of the upscale Lekki neighbourhood who were digging boreholes to get drinking water for their homes might instead have found sewage water, raising serious concerns about their safety. He said there are plans to treat the wastewater in the area. And that's it—plans! Lagos has many.

Like so many cities around the world, the city's problems are compounded by the climate crisis. Rising seas continue to eat away at the coastline, sending saltwater into drinking supplies and flooding low-lying

neighbourhoods. Drainage channels clogged with refuse turn a sudden downpour into chest-high floods within minutes. Yes, the dream of a smart city remains, but for many Lagosians, the smarter question is: can it first become a safe one?

There is one area where Lagos seems to be on the right track. Step onto the new Blue Line at Marina and you can feel Lagos trying to rewrite its commuting story. The train glides past the island's waterfront, through Mile 2 to the growing communities of Okokomaiko, slashing a journey that once took two hours in traffic down to less than 30 minutes. Inside, air-conditioned carriages hum quietly, a far cry from the chaos of *danfo* buses outside.

Then there is the Red Line, designed to run from Agbado in neighbouring Ogun State straight through to Marina, slicing journey times that once took hours to mere minutes. Stations are planted in critical population centres like Ikeja, Agege, and Yaba, tapping the Red Line directly into the heart of where the vast majority of the city's working population lives. For the first time in years, a commuter living on the mainland could reach the island for work without spending half the day in transit. The Green Line, still under construction, promises to link the north of the city to its commercial core, threading together suburbs that have long been isolated by gridlock. The vision is bold: three rail corridors weaving together the sprawling edges of Lagos into a more connected whole. Together, these rail projects are meant to form the backbone of a network that could carry over half a million passengers daily.

But the real heart of Lagos's mobility remains its messy mix of BRT buses, yellow *danfos*, *okadas*, and ride-hailing services. Each morning, BRT stations buzz with crowds, queues spilling into the street as ticket officers guide people on board. In the city's grand vision of a “smart” transport network, the trains and buses are supposed to work seamlessly together. But for now, they're still an uneven duet—one part future, the other distinctly, stubbornly Lagos as it's always been.

“I have been taking the Blue Line for over a year now, and it's been fantastic. I seldom drive my car anymore. It saves me money on fuel and time. I think Lagos is getting it right on its rail networks,” said 35-year-old Bukola Adesami, a bank worker who lives in Mile 2 but works on Victoria Island. “But I'm also worried: will the trains still be this clean and reliable in, let's say, five years, or maybe when another administration comes in? In Lagos, we've seen too many big promises fade.”

Yes, the city is chaotic, but for many of us, it's home. After the day's drama is over, come nighttime, it slows down, and Lagos exudes a more alluring charm. After the endless cacophony of traffic has quietened down, after





***In all likelihood Lagos' future will continue to be built less on rigid blueprints but on relentless adaptation. Its growth is, and will continue to be, messy. It will be mostly informal, often improvised, but also deeply human. Streets, markets, neighbourhoods, and communities are evolving in ways that no blueprint could have foreseen. If the planners' maps can't quite keep pace, people's lived realities fill in the gaps, creating a city that resists the predictable lines of textbook urbanism"***

that random downpour has abated, the sound of Burna Boy's baritone coming through the speakers at an open-air bar is a welcome release. Then, Davido carries your mood away with his raspy voice. Add to that, some tunes from other Afrobeats artists, a little South African Amapiano, and a bowl of hot pepper soup—you're good to go. In those moments, the city feels like it's trying to embrace, rather than consume, you.

It's enough to make you feel ready to do it all over again the next day, back into the mix, into a Lagos where every other person you meet might just have the answer to your problems. If the floods take over the streets, a strong man is often to be found ready to lift you across the road for a token amount. Just the other day, when flash floods covered the roads of Ikeja, a central business district on the mainland, a man approached me to offer his service at \$0.65, to carry me across the road. Thankfully, I was wearing shorts, so I offered a polite "no", removed my sneakers, rolled up my shirt, and waded in. This is the other side of Lagos's dynamism. It's not all breakneck speed of development and changing skylines. It's a city filled with people who are able to bend, stretch, and improvise through every obstacle. In Lagos, the need for survival and moments of desperation can turn into something vibrant, even beautiful, at once hard, and tender. Here, life is not just lived; it is performed, and everyone plays their part.

Having started out with the number 27 million, we must admit, no one really knows the true size of Lagos'

population. Without reliable, up-to-date data, it remains as much a figment of our collective imaginations as it is a fact. The last official census was in 2006, and the planned 2023 headcount never materialised, leaving population figures to float in the realm of projections and guesswork. Officials have recently begun to quote 27 million more confidently, and the World Bank, in an internal document outlining the need for the development of a "multi-sector diagnostic and transformation strategy" for Lagos put the population down as "between 13-27 million" in a cautious nod to the unverified figures touted by state and other government officials. But look at that gap in numbers! The difference

between 13 and 27 million is quite a few people, with all that implies for the city's needs. Whatever the figure, Lagos feels like it's taken crowded to a new level. The looming concern is therefore: how do you plan housing, transport, energy, or climate resilience for a population whose size is inflating day by day, when you are missing essential data?

In all likelihood Lagos' future will continue to be built less on rigid blueprints but on relentless adaptation. Its growth is, and will continue to be, messy. It will be mostly informal, often improvised, but also deeply human. Streets, markets, neighbourhoods, and communities are evolving in ways that no blueprint could have foreseen. If the planners' maps can't quite keep pace, people's lived realities fill in the gaps, creating a city that resists the predictable lines of textbook urbanism. In this way, Lagos mirrors the trajectory of many cities across the Global South, places where rapid expansion outstrips formal systems, forcing residents to invent their own ways to live, connect, and survive. Some might argue, making their own, more soulful kind of smart city.

"For me, Lagos should not be forced to adopt a data-driven order it cannot yet sustain, but to learn from what it already is. It's an organic, ever-changing metropolis with lessons in resilience, creativity, and endurance. Both its chaos and its potential must be embraced. Lagos will keep moving and reshaping itself in ways that defy easy measurement—and perhaps that is exactly why it matters," said Adetunji Ojo, an urban expert and real estate developer. ♦



**George Kibala Bauer, Senior Director at GSMA—a global organisation for mobile operators and the broader mobile ecosystem—sheds light on the existential stakes of Africa’s data deficit.**

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# Data: The Infrastructure Africa Cannot Afford To Ignore

On November 5, 2010, Ghanaians woke up to discover they were now the proud citizens of a middle-income country.

Overnight, they, and their country, had transformed from being poor to this new status. So, what changed to bring about this good news? The answer is that the government's Statistical Service had revised the country's GDP estimates. That revision, known as rebasing, showed that Ghana's GDP had been underestimated by up to 60%, amounting to around US\$13 billion in previously unreported economic activity. Plenty of Ghanaians surely found themselves wondering how that could even be possible?

Shortly afterwards, Nigeria's Bureau of National Statistics updated its own base year figures, releasing new data which accurately allowed it to show that the country's

estimate was now 89% higher than previously known. This moved Nigeria's economy from being Africa's second largest after South Africa to number one at the time.

These two extraordinary examples highlight how important accurate data and statistics are to our understanding of key trends and challenges facing African economies. Prior to its rebasing, data on Nigeria's GDP had understated the true value of the country's ICT, telecommunications and services sectors as engines of national development. This seems to have led to decisionmakers to prioritise policies that disproportionately favoured more historical growth drivers such as the oil industry.

Africa's national governments have long struggled with dealing with the challenge of collecting accurate data to use for informed policymaking. But that is far from the only challenge they face where numerical accounting



## *The stakes of Africa's urban future are too high to plan in the dark*

of what is going on in their countries is needed. In most instances, data scarcity is the most common issue. While many governments manage to generate a certain amount of consistent data through household surveys, most cannot afford to conduct them regularly. Whatever data they collect is further complicated by its being quickly rendered obsolete or outdated by swiftly changing on-the-ground realities. Collecting population data at scale is a complicated, high cost, and time-consuming logistical feat that many countries across the continent simply cannot afford. As cities across the continent become the key sites in which most of its pressing challenges will need to be dealt with, it's increasingly clear that the data deficits it faces is existential. It is crucial that it be confronted head-on as the type of essential evidence-based policymaking the continent's cities need is premised on having a full accounting of not just the scale and size of economic activity, but as granular as possible an understanding of how people in the continent's cities live.

According to UN Habitat, just under two-thirds of Africa's urban population lives in informal settlements or slums. Add onto that the fact that data on life in and on these ubiquitous informal settlements is limited, and you start getting the picture of the challenge facing policymakers and communities. How can you adequately design policies and long-term plans for what you do not truly understand?

To unlock Africa's urban potential, cities must begin by making sufficient investment in one critical robust data system. Not just its collection, but also in the tools and expertise necessary for analysis, deployment into the areas where it's needed and sharing. Additionally, the data needs to be accurate, inclusive, and actionable. Data for its own sake serves no purpose.

Specifically, the data systems need to enable policymakers and all the relevant actors across our urban systems to do four key things. They should:

1. Respond to the realities of low-income populations that are often overlooked in traditional data sets.
2. Break down data silos between sectors and departments.
3. Build partnerships with private sector data holders.
4. Anticipate future urban population, economic, housing and other trends.

Across Africa, lawmakers have a unique opportunity to establish policies, regulations, and interventions that an-

ticipate rapid urban growth and avoid the high costs of retrofitting infrastructure in informal settlements—which can cost up to three times as much as new infrastructure development, and comes with significant financial, political, and social impacts. Geo-spatial data can be used to anticipate growth and pre-emptively respond. The Ethiopian Urban Expansion Initiative, a partnership between New York University and Ethiopia's Ministry of Urban Development and Construction is a good example of this. Focussed on four cities—Adama, Bahir Dar, Hawassa, and Mekele—the project used geo-spatial and population data to forecast and plan for the growth of these cities up to 2040.

Beyond merely supporting more evidence-based policymaking, innovative uses of new technologies can also help cities use their data systems for improved resource mobilisation. This is essential.

African cities collect far less property taxes than their counterparts in other regions. Property tax revenue in sub-Saharan Africa averages less than 0.5% of GDP, compared to over 2% in high-income countries.

When integrated into a coherent policy and reform process with political backing, digital innovation could be a game-changer for African cities that want to increase revenue. For instance, the availability of satellite images and aerial orthophotographs taken by drones has transformed how land and property records are tracked and compiled.

Digital data management systems can link geospatial data such as GPS coordinates to ownership information, particularly useful in places without a functioning address system. These technological advances allowed the city of Freetown, Sierra Leone to double the number of registered properties in its jurisdiction in just one year. This has quintupled the city's property tax revenue prospects, further bolstered by the introduction of a more progressive tax structure that has seen the top 20% of properties triple their contribution while the bottom 20% has more than halved. The city of Kampala, Uganda has had similar success, geo-tagging at least 300,000 properties and adding them to the tax register since 2014.

But, before getting seduced by the potential of effective data systems, let's go back to basics. What are the key building blocks of an effective and inclusive citywide data ecosystem?

For a start, there must be clear data standards—common formats and definitions that enable sharing across departments, which can be easily integrated with other data



sources. Data scientists are said to spend a quarter of their time “cleaning data” due to a lack of clear standards.

There must also be clear protocols that govern the types of data collected, how it is stored, and used. And where data is concerned, it goes without saying that trust is vital. This has to be earned, and cities aiming to win over a broad range of stakeholders and citizens need to actively invest in building this trust. Clearly articulated policies around the collection, use, sharing, retention, and disposal of any data collected are a good starting point towards building trust.

Lastly, cities need to put in place strategies to attract, train and retain cohorts of data science and systems engineering experts. With these in place, cities can develop products and services that lead to tangible impact and develop policy that is rooted in reliable evidence.

How do cities get there?

COVID-19 served as a catalyst for public-private data-sharing partnerships across Africa. To deal with the pandemic, many governments leveraged private sector data such as call detail records (CDR) held by mobile operators to monitor movement patterns and track the spread of the disease. This is an encouraging development.

It’s well known that most cities across the continent lack data on mobility and usage patterns of the informal transportation networks that are the bedrock of life. Call detail records are increasingly being used by urban transport authorities to understand these dynamic systems. In Senegal, Orange’s big data team Flux Vision partnered with the transport authority Conseil Exécutif des Transports Urbains de Dakar (CETUD) and other local businesses to use CDR data to understand movement patterns in peri-urban areas, track changes to mobility during sudden crisis events such as floods, or during holiday periods, in order to plan and implement new bus routes.

Cities across Asia have shown how data from ride-hailing companies can also be leveraged to support long-term planning. In the Philippines and Malaysia, the ride-hailing company Grab has partnered with municipal and national

governments and the World Bank Open Transport Partnership to make use of OpenTraffic, the company’s open data visualisation tool, which uses anonymised driver GPS data, to understand traffic congestion and make data-driven decisions on transport planning and infrastructure investment.

However, the business and funding models to support such partnerships in a manner that ensures both financial sustainability and accountability aren’t as clear cut. Governments need to put in place the legal, data, and policy frameworks to enable these collaborations that also clearly address any concerns over privacy and potential misuse. Another pressing question is regarding the wisdom of handing over vast troves of personal data to corporations, who have proven to be unreliable custodians of sensitive information in the past.

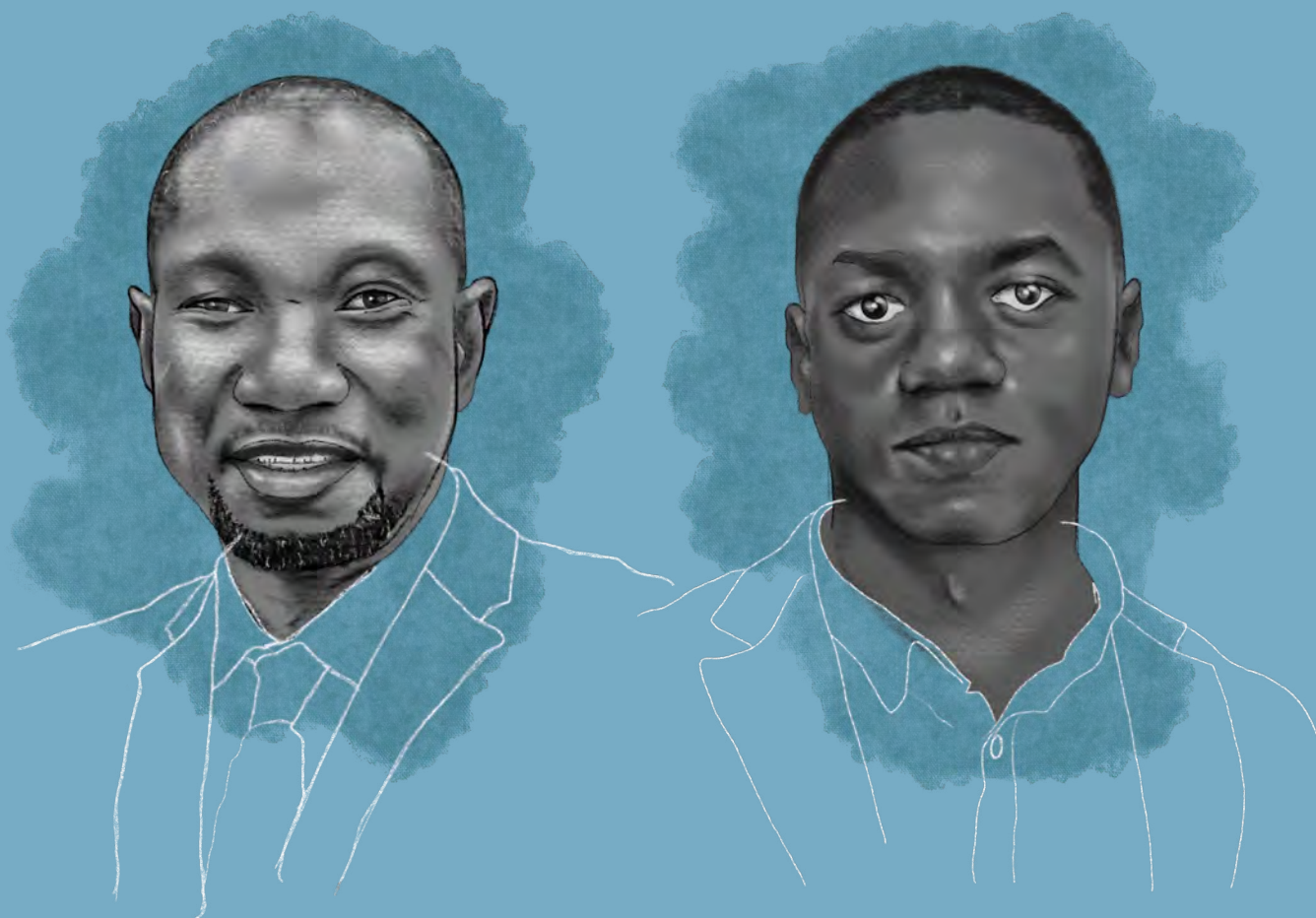
Initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, the Digital Impact Alliance, the International Growth Centre’s Cities that Work Initiative, the International Centre for Tax & Development, and the GSMA’s AI for Impact’s programme aim to support policymaking in overcoming these barriers and provide platforms to share learnings across contexts.

The stakes of Africa’s urban future are too high to plan in the dark. Cities are under pressure to become engines of economic productivity and social mobility, deliver housing, jobs, and access to essential services, while also building climate resilience.

Planning with inadequate or outdated data means that decisions may not align with the current and future needs of cities and their residents. Investing in inclusive data systems is not a technocratic luxury—it is a moral and practical imperative. It determines who is seen, who is served, and whose future is planned for.

With AI emerging as the next great transformative technology, now is the time to set strong, contextual and inclusive data foundations for Africa. These efforts need to be continent-wide.

Jumping onto the AI bandwagon without establishing first principles on data for the continent will only reinforce existing blind spots and inequalities rather than adequately addressing them. ♦



# SET THE CITIES FREE

*United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN Habitat) colleagues **Oumar Sylla (Director for the Regional Office for Africa) and Emmanuel Makaka (Resource Mobilisation and Programme Management)** explain why building autonomous local governments is essential to unleashing the possibility and power of a sustainable and equitable African urban future.*

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The future of Sub-Saharan Africa is urban. The numbers don't lie. By 2050—just 25 years from now—at least 60% of the population will be living in cities. We need to be planning for that reality. Actually, scratch that. We need to be acting on it now.

This surge in urban density is putting enormous pressure on local governments. They're not just expected to provide infrastructure, basic amenities, and social services anymore—they also need to create environments that actually enable economic development, all while tackling rising poverty and inequality. Business-as-usual simply won't cut it. National governments can no longer be the sole providers of the leadership that this growing urban constituency demands. Some real transfer of powers and funding from national to local government is essential if we want genuine progress.

While a notion of devolution has floated around Sub-Saharan Africa since precolonial times, it only gained real momentum post-independence when the structural adjustment reforms of the late 1980s made decentralisation a buzzword. Bringing decision-making and services closer to citizens, the idea was to foster a stronger social contract between local governments and their communities. But entrenched interests largely hijacked the process, and what we got was not true devolution of powers, but mostly deconcentration of administrative functions. Institutional weakness, financing constraints, and a ruling elite motivated by the desire to protect its interests all conspired to prevent real devolution across most African countries.

Building autonomous local governments free from the interference of entrenched interests won't be easy, but it's essential if cities across Sub-Saharan Africa are going to achieve a sustainable and equitable future. It's going to be a long road. First, cities need to develop their own stable and reliable revenue sources—augmented by, rather than completely dependent on, central governments.

For this to work, national governments need to actually commit to transferring national resources to appropriate, devolved, and robust city or state-level entities. At the same time, local governments should build up or strengthen their local revenue collection capacity, and embed strong cultures of consistency and accountability in the institutions tasked with collecting revenue and delivering services. Citizens need to see their tax money at work if they're going to have faith in the system. Collection efforts need to be digitalised—both to ensure efficiency and to foster accountability. With these foundations in place, diversifying revenue bases to include property taxes, municipal bonds, and private sector partnerships actually has a chance of succeeding.

It's easy enough to find initiatives aimed at improving local government capacity across the African continent. The problem is they're barely suited to the task at hand—mostly reduced to piecemeal “workshops and training activities” rather than actions that truly build sustainable institutional capacity at the local level.

Transferring functions from central to local governments requires careful coordination, ensuring the right



***Building autonomous local governments free from the interference of entrenched interests won't be easy, but it's essential if cities across Sub-Saharan Africa are going to achieve a sustainable and equitable future. It's going to be a long road"***

mix of competencies is in place along with the necessary resources. Where resources are lacking, local governments have options: they can combine resources to establish pooled service provision for critical functions like data collection, shared monitoring and analytics capacity, financial services, knowledge-sharing platforms, and innovation hubs.

In 2000, Rwanda embarked on a phased reorganisation and decentralisation of its entire governance structure. Beyond all the mechanics of redrawing administrative maps, consolidation, and creating decentralised administration units, some critical constitutional imperatives had to be put in place. In Rwanda's case, a constitutional provision mandates that the central government transfer 30%

of the country's national revenue to its 30 districts, which have both legal and financial autonomy.

Rwanda has a unique, tragic recent history that accelerated many of these reforms, but it's not alone in this effort. Senegal has also made strides in transferring national revenue through the Fonds de Dotation de la Décentralisation (FDD), which automatically transfers national resources to the country's communes and départements. It's a step in the right direction, but in contrast to Rwanda, only a measly 3.5% of national VAT revenue is set aside for this purpose—to fund everything from education and housing to health, urban planning, and youth development. Kenya, South Africa, the DRC, and Nigeria are among other African states that have made similar commitments in an effort to fast-track development.

The achievements so far are modest but promising. Kenya's localised climate fund, the County Climate Change Funds (CCCCF), has enabled climate action at the local level by providing financial resources to local governments. The fund has enabled Kitui County government to establish an early warning system and train communities on climate resilience. Wajir County's government has implemented water harvesting and storage projects with some success. Niger and Mozambique have both used performance-based grants, empowering districts to design flood mitigation projects in Niamey and mangrove restoration in Quelimane, respectively.

Johannesburg, expanding at a rate of 3.2% annually since 1998, is South Africa's largest metropolitan municipality and a continental economic hub. The City has leveraged its limited autonomy to accelerate access to basic services through various initiatives. It digitalised its building approval processes, leading to a remarkable reduction in approval times for building projects. This has contributed favourably to the delivery of housing units and approvals of land claims that will benefit more than 100,000 residents, among many other initiatives that promote access to basic services.

In June 2025, the African Development Bank granted a US\$139 million corporate loan to the City of Johannesburg aimed at enhancing the City's capacity to provide energy, improve water and sanitation, and upgrade waste collection services. What was remarkable about this announcement was that it marked the first time since its founding in 1964 that Africa's biggest lender had extended financing to any subnational government on the continent without requiring a national government guarantee. It remains to be seen what will come of this loan, but it's an important signal that empowered cities can do more to improve their residents' lives when they're freed from the constraints of a centralised system.

Only by giving more power to mayors and city leaders can the potential of cities across the continent truly be unleashed. ♦





***National governments need to actually commit to transferring national resources to appropriate, devolved, and robust city or state-level entities. At the same time, local governments should build up or strengthen their local revenue collection capacity, and embed strong cultures of consistency and accountability in the institutions tasked with collecting revenue and delivering services”***



# Gender Bias Is Stifling Progress



***As the first female mayor of Lusaka, Chilando Chitangala, has found entrenched gender biases are a constant barrier to fulfilling her mandate. Being a member of the opposition party has only added to the challenges she faces. Despite the hurdles, she persists.***

**M**y experience of becoming a female mayor—and just getting into politics, I must say—has made me very aware of how support for women is not very good. It's forced me to conclude that my country is still not women-friendly when it comes to being actively involved in politics and taking on decision-making positions.

Deep issues in our culture still make the experience quite difficult. People think that women shouldn't be in positions of responsibility. I've interacted with too many women—for example, councillors in our rural authorities—who share the common experience of being in meetings where some men refuse to be addressed by a woman. It's the reality of being a female leader in my country. During elections, female candidates struggle to secure funding for their campaigns, while their male colleagues have disproportionate access to financial support.

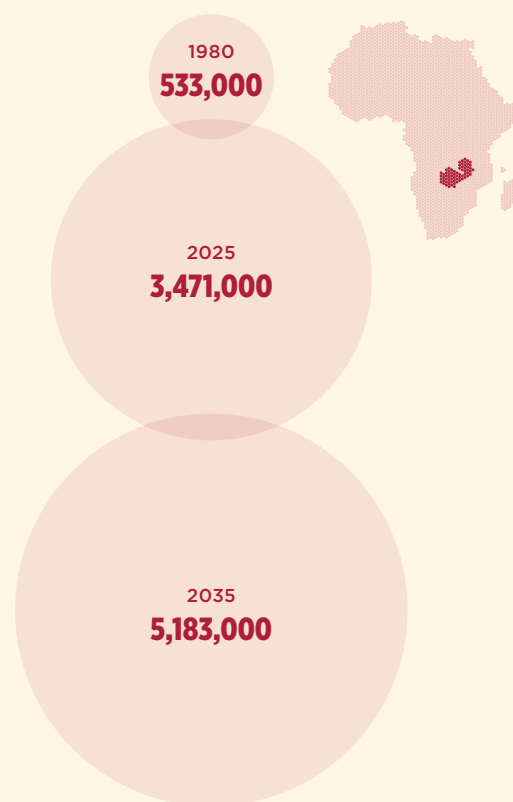
I think we need laws and policies that compel the election commission to mandate that every party contesting an election has 30% female candidates, and if they cannot meet that quota, they cannot take part in any election. Only then will we be given the space we need as women. It's difficult to work in an environment in which there are no laws to back us up. We need action, not just talk in boardrooms about this. We need to promote gender equality. It's good for society. I can confidently say from experience that female politicians and technocrats have more commitment to what they are entrusted to do. We respect our mandate more than the men. That's what I think. We deliver. But it takes more than just women to change this. We need men who are gender champions to advance the cause of having more women taking part in advancing the political reforms we desperately need.

We also need a mechanism to make sure that central governments are more responsive to the needs

and difficulties experienced by many local governments across the continent. I am an opposition mayor in the country's capital city and I'm having difficulties working with the central government: this affects our being able to deliver on our promises to the people. So, we need to have mechanisms to address these sorts of issues. This could be a Congress formed by existing local government associations across the continent such as South Africa's Local Government Authority (SALGA), our own Association of Local Government Authorities of Zambia (ALGAZ), and the National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana (NALAG). This can be a mechanism to make sure that central governments are more responsive to the needs and difficulties experienced by many local governments across the continent. The Congress should interface directly with the African Union which needs to establish a full department focused on local government rather than just a Steering Committee as is the case right now.

The African Union is uniquely positioned and possesses enormous potential to shape the future of African cities, but its impact on local governance depends on the extent to which it engages local authorities directly. That's where we should start. Currently the AU primarily engages with national governments and, unfortunately, the priorities and policy directives at the national level in many cases do not trickle down to the local level, largely due to ineffective coordination. ♦

Edited for clarity and length



Lusaka population growth

# STARTING ANEW, (Almost)

*The mayor of Shaggar City, Teshome Adugna, on what it takes to build a new city on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, virtually from scratch. He spoke to Edgar Pieterse.*

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**T**he major objective of establishing Shaggar is to create a strong and dynamic city. In my region, both population and urban space are rapidly growing, but we have not had good urban thinking to accompany this growth.

We have more than 725 towns in Oromia. In 2022, the Oromia regional government merged six of those that surround Addis Ababa. So where there once were these small, highly fragmented towns which were not capable of managing their resources properly—they were not working on making themselves more liveable or resource-efficient—Shaggar was created as a knowledge-based city.

Our major objective is to create an economically and culturally vibrant city, and to transform the lives of our people. We are making progress.

From the beginning, we determined that our first priority had to be ensuring the rule of law. The small towns that have been absorbed to constitute Shaggar were never able to build the capacity to enforce the rule of law. This was essential to establish an environment attractive for the level of investment we intend to marshal.

Previously, the local government would allocate land for development to an investor, for example. The investors, in many cases, would arbitrarily incorporate adjoining land







***Amalgamating six fragmented towns with a total population of just over three million, spread over 1,160 km<sup>2</sup> (by comparison, New York City is 1,200 km<sup>2</sup>) is pretty complicated”***

parcels beyond that allocated to them, clearly breaking the law. There were no consequences for this. We found more than 1,000 instances of this in 2022 when the amalgamation was officially instituted. So, we were relentless, and enforced the law. We made sure that fines were paid, and reviewed the operationality of all those investments, and realised that many of these so-called investors had gotten into deals in which they took ownership of sizeable land portions purely for speculative purposes, without ever intending to develop it, but simply to sell it on at a profit.

We took action, and as a result, most of the investors are now working on developing the pockets they own for the purposes they originally committed to. This is good for the city. New jobs and other economic opportunities for our citizens are being created as a result.

There was also plenty of illegal construction all over the city. In some cases, you would not be able to know who was in charge of, or responsible for, quite substantial structures, and there was no adherence to any building standard. Previously, everybody was trying to grab land for themselves without following the law. Local leaders, religious leaders, private citizens—they were all doing it. Some would invoke religion to justify their actions. We had to make it very clear that all land across Shaggar should be used for development that collectively benefitted the entire population: that it had to be used efficiently and optimally.

A second priority has been around how we use the resources available to us, and also to mobilise new ones.

Land, of which there is plenty, is proving to be an important source of revenue and economic development.

At the beginning, there was no easily available information on what resources were available. The records just hadn't existed in proper form. So we had to figure this out almost from scratch. Starting with an audit of the illegal seizures of land, and holding any form of illegality to account, gave us a chance to create a system that has properly allowed us to know what assets and resources we have as a city. We have had to build a whole new system of land and resource management that is more efficient. Almost all land across the territory is now accounted for, properly registered; we have been carefully planning and designating appropriate land use, and have specified

a development corridor that will be of great importance to the city's development.

Before Shaggar was established, the revenue mobilised by the six towns was not more than 6 billion Ethiopian Birr (about US\$44 million). Within one year, this improved to 16.5 billion Birr (about US\$115 million). We expect this to hit 23 billion Birr (US \$165 billion) by the end of the current financial year. So that has been a great success that we will continue to build on.

Collecting more revenue has to go with improving the quality of service delivery for residents across the city. We have been working hard at this. Burayu, one of the old towns, had uncontrolled expansion, a lot of it driven by illegal construction. Even as it expanded, the services offered by the administration never expanded to keep up with the demand. Suddenly, we had to figure out how to address this. We have split Shaggar into 12 sub-cities, with three of those making up what was formerly Burayu. While I am the mayor of Shaggar, each sub-city has its own mayor who, while enjoying a lot of autonomy, is accountable to the larger, metropolitan body of which I am the head.

This setup has made me more accessible to the people of Shaggar. Decentralisation has made it possible for us to respond to what each of the 12 sub-cities (and 36 wards) need to strategically focus on.

Amalgamating six fragmented towns with a total population of just over three million, spread over 1,160 km<sup>2</sup> (by comparison, New York City is 1,200 km<sup>2</sup>) is pretty



complicated. We have had to think about how technology can be best utilised to help us deal with some of the challenges created by the state of fragmentation. So, we have worked with one of the big telecoms companies in Ethiopia to create a virtual private network that keeps us seamlessly connected to the sub-city administrations, for example. This initial investment opened up the possibility of us implementing a city-wide digital parking system that is in use now. This has created job opportunities for the youth and brought in more revenue that we can invest to improve the city.

In 2022, the city didn't have a single hospital. This was a shock to me. I was suddenly mayor of a city of three million people without a hospital. We had to find a way to address this from the outset.

I heard there was a four-storey building built as a health centre. I used the power of the mayor's office to mobilise a range of people to make sure the building could become a primary health centre. The following year, we allocated more budget to establish a wider network of health centres across the city. It hasn't been smooth sailing, but we have two general hospitals completed now, and are working towards having a total of four within the next two years. This year alone we are building 33 health centres to enable easier access to healthcare for people in their own communities. We are looking at developing a further 29 "health posts" as we call them to have a more comprehensive system in place.

We are working hard to improve not just infrastructure, but quality of life for people across the city.

Shaggar is the only city that enjoys the level of autonomy we have. The national government gave us the dispensation to operate with a status equivalent to that enjoyed by regions, even though we are a city. It's part of a series of reforms the national government is beginning to implement, which is all about giving more attention to urban areas. In the past, rural areas were the key priority. This has changed.

The Shaggar structure is also unique. I have three deputies, each with a clear focus area. The first focuses on the economy—job creation, investment, and trade. My second deputy focuses on agricultural development. We confidently talk about and want to make sure the city has a strong agricultural production base. It's essential for our food security. The third deputy's key focus is on the planning system, things like land use, infrastructure, etc. This has enabled us to work with the 12 sub-mayors and our constituents very effectively, and to make a lot of progress very quickly.

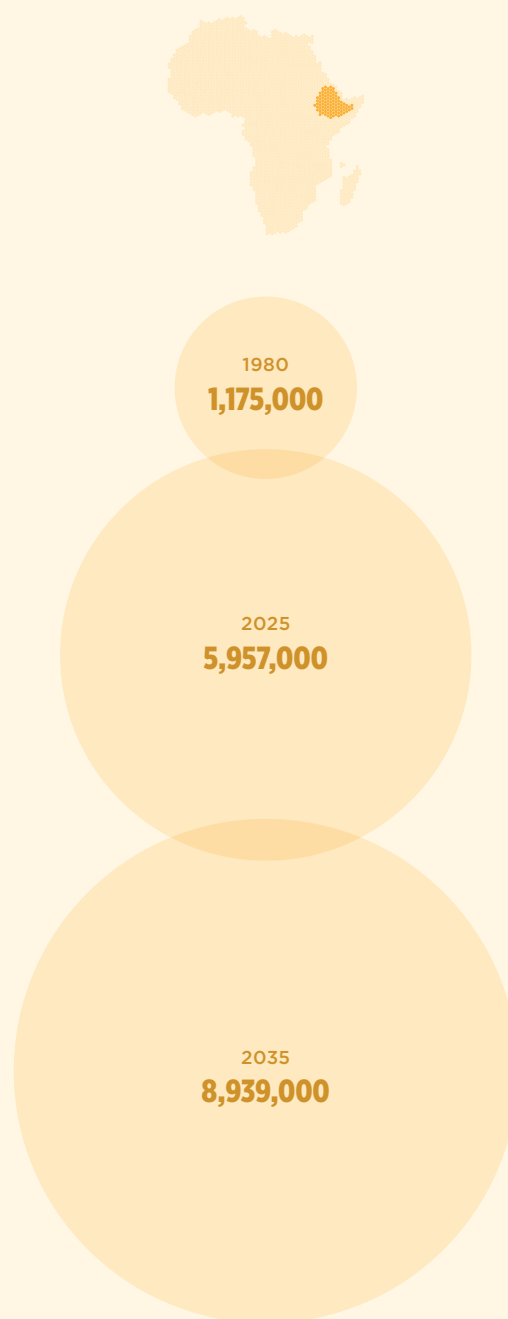
I think Africa has to make cities a priority and pay attention to the urban development that's going on. In my view, there is no way other than urban development.

Urban leadership is not an easy job. I have so much I would like to achieve in my term as mayor, and am in constant need of all types of support—professional, policy,

strategic. I need support even in prioritising, alongside financial, technical support, and in awareness creation. All these things are vitally important.

With the depth of the problems we have, we need to work and think together. ♦

Edited for clarity and length



Shaggar City population growth





# REBOOTING THE GLOBAL FINANCE SYSTEM WILL PAY DIVIDENDS

*The continent's Public Development Banks must play a key role in changing how African cities are financed, says **Zeph Nhleko**, Chief Economist of the Development Bank of Southern Africa.*

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Here's a little-known fact worth considering: the just over 530 Public Development Banks (PDBs) operating globally make up only about 5% of the financial sector, yet between them, they manage around US\$23 trillion in assets. To put that in perspective, Africa's largest multilateral bank—the African Development Bank—holds assets worth US\$50 billion, while the largest national bank, South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation, controls US\$9 billion. State-owned financial institutions like Nigeria's Bank of Industry, Côte d'Ivoire's Banque Nationale d'Investissement, and South Africa's Development Bank of Southern Africa all carry public mandates to facilitate long-term economic development goals within their borders or across regions.

Their work is fundamental, and they're major players in a global financial system desperately in need of reform. As calls grow louder for improving the structure, regulation, and operation of the international financial system to support all countries equally, it's becoming clear that

Public Development Banks will be crucial stakeholders. Their success will play an outsized role in determining the future of infrastructure and key social investments in cities across the continent.

Over the last decade, calls for global financial reform have grown impossible to ignore. The demands are clear enough. Reformers want significant changes in how international institutions like the IMF and World Bank operate, giving developing nations—which make up a large part of these banks' client base—a greater voice in decision-making and governance. They're also pushing to improve global financial stability by strengthening regulations for banks and non-bank financial institutions worldwide, enhance debt sustainability by addressing the debt burden of developing nations, increase climate finance flows to developing countries, boost infrastructure investment and connectivity to facilitate trade and economic growth, and tackle growing global inequality.

Progress has been sluggish, hindered by multiple issues. There's little consensus on implementation, largely due to differing national priorities. Geopolitical fragmentation and political or economic barriers further contribute to the slow pace of these critical changes.

Make no mistake: African countries, like many across the global South, desperately need these reforms. Handled well, they could support key continental economic drivers—increased domestic investment, youthful and growing urban populations, and the expansion of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA), founded in 2018 with the aim of building a single market for goods and services, free from tariffs, to boost intra-African trade.

The continent's cities stand to be key beneficiaries, and here's why.

African cities are growing faster than anywhere else in the world. This trend will continue for the foreseeable future, with the continent expected to be 60% urbanised by 2050. This is happening while access to long-term, concessional development financing to complement often limited domestic resources remains difficult. Reform would level the playing field, addressing the financing constraints that hinder African cities' ability to provide basic services, build infrastructure, and respond to climate and economic shocks.

But better access to finance under current conditions won't be enough.

African cities need genuinely affordable financing. Reducing borrowing costs by ensuring more accurate risk assessment matrices are used for Africa's cities seeking resources for infrastructure and other essential investments would be game-changing. This could take many forms: debt-relief initiatives, fairer lending terms, increased access to concessional financing, and breaking unsustainable debt cycles by improving how debt is assessed and managed. Transparent and predictable mechanisms for debt restructuring would also help tackle a global financial system premised on the views of risk-averse credit rating agencies, lending practices that mirror often volatile economic cycles, and capital markets skewed against African borrowers. This situation has adversely affected the development of many cities across the continent. Developing a more inclusive financial system with wider access to affordable public and private funding will be critical for their uninhibited success.

A reformed system would make climate finance and investments in renewable energy projects available to cities across the continent, boosting sustainable growth by enabling African cities to adapt to climate change impacts and transition to low-carbon economies. Here, development banks can play the important role of ensuring seamless processes that enable funds to flow between international and national spaces. Well-run and fully functional country platforms led by public development banks at both multi-lateral and country levels will be fundamental.

African countries aren't monoliths—they're connected not only geographically, but through history, culture, movement, and trade. Facilitating intra-African trade and investment by supporting the development of an integrated financial system within the continent could be another important outcome of global finance reform. Improved access to affordable, long-term financing for infrastructure that connects countries and cities—roads, railways, ports, and





***African cities need genuinely affordable financing. Reducing borrowing costs by ensuring more accurate risk assessment matrices are used for Africa's cities seeking resources for infrastructure and other essential investments would be game-changing”***

digital networks—is critical for implementing the AfCTA, a programme at the centrepiece of Africa's future. Aligning global finance with Africa's integration goals can help unlock the continent's vast internal market potential and drive shared growth.

In cities, PDBs have a direct role to play as financiers, implementers, facilitators, and integrators of investments in infrastructure-based services, business-led urban development, social inclusion, and learning and development projects. In 2020, the Development Bank of Southern Africa launched Development Laboratories (DLabs), a programme of spaces created in collaboration with local government, private sector, and community partners to provide social, economic, health, and sports facilities in low-income areas across South Africa. Currently operational in nine locations, the model provides technology that helps communities

access services and other opportunities. This collaborative model could serve as a blueprint for how cities across the continent can use technology to improve not only their effectiveness, but also the lives of their residents. The DLabs programme also illustrates how PDBs are more than just conduits for finance—they're catalysts for reform at both global and hyperlocal scales. They can partner with stakeholders at the city level to seed new innovation that directly improves the quality of everyday people's lives in cities built on access to basic services, technology, social engagement, and business development.

The continent's PDBs are an important piece of the puzzle in the development of Africa's cities. The global financial reforms being called for can only make them an even more effective player in determining how the continent's urbanisation unfolds, and increase their prospects for success. ♦



# FIGHTING FIRES, AND (constantly) BAILING WATER

**Manuel De Araujo, mayor of Quelimane, is no shrinking violet. As an opposition leader of a prominent Mozambican coastal city under siege from extreme climate events, De Araujo has been vocal about the failings of his national government and the African Union. He spoke to Cityscapes Magazine.**

I want to make something very clear: there are very few networks, projects, or collaborative agendas I know of as a city leader coming from the African Union. It's extremely rare that the African Union takes the lead in bringing together the urban agenda.

Africa is the fastest urbanising continent, yet apart from one initiative—the first African Urban Forum in 2024—I haven't seen any meaningful action from the AU. There's a leadership vacuum that should be filled by the AU and regional organisations. I expected there to be a small secretariat or unit at the SADC level spearheading urbanisation initiatives, but I've not heard of one.

At the regional level, there's a lack of boldness and initiatives that would really lead the work for African urbanisation.

My city, Quelimane, is easily one of the most climate-vulnerable cities, not only in Mozambique, but in the world. It's a coastal city built on a swamp on the banks of a river. We face two kinds of flooding—coastal saltwater intrusion, and flooding from sea level rise and abnormal rain. Most of the time these happen simultaneously, making the situation very dire.

We experience flooding every single year. So, my first priority is to make sure we have infrastructure to manage flooding. When it rains too much, we flood. When it doesn't rain during the dry season, we have food supply problems due to water scarcity.

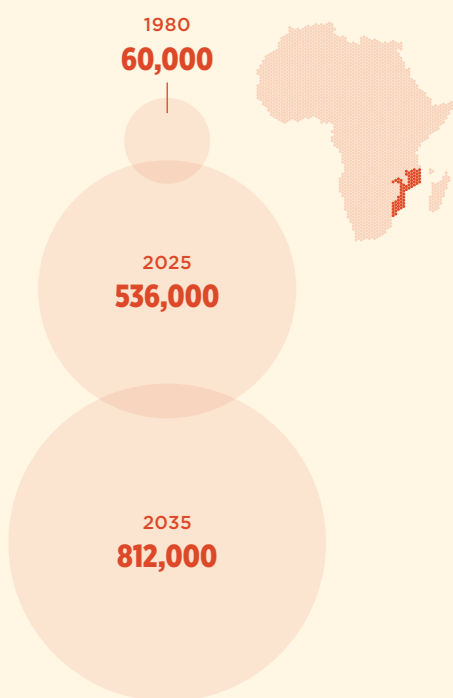


The second is building up human capacity. You need people who understand the causes of these extreme weather events and consequences, but also an international community of institutions to help navigate this complexity. For a country like mine, where most people only speak Portuguese, language can be a barrier to accessing funding and information. Even with a well-qualified team, you still face the challenge of accessing financial resources. Those are my three main priorities: infrastructure, equal access to information, and financial resources.

We're not the same political party as the national government, which creates problems sometimes. We need the national government to provide access to information and to the many funding opportunities, like the Green Fund, which could only be accessed through the relevant national government agency or ministry.

The general expectation is that mayors should play their role to achieve the SDGs, but the central government doesn't seem to share that view. The government has embassies abroad, ministries that get information from the international system. They know what the priorities are, but there's no clear communication line with local governments. It's like we're fighting in different fields with different purposes. How do they expect us to contribute?

In local governments, we work like firefighters. You wake up with an agenda, and by day's end, out of 10 planned things, you may only fulfil one, because other issues are always coming up. If I'd known, I would have done firefighting training rather than studying economics—it would fit better for a mayor's job. ♦



Quelimane population growth

# 83.6%

of Africa's employed population is in the informal economy



*This figure points to the precarious nature of work for the overwhelming majority of the workforce. Informal employment is associated with irregular income, unsafe labour practices, and a lack of social and legal protections. In 2023, fewer than one in five Africans had access to at least one social protection benefit. Nevertheless, it is the informal economy that absorbs the majority of otherwise unemployed youth and women. Harnessing the creativity and resourcefulness that characterise self-made work in Africa's cities is key for social and economic resilience.*



Construction boom in Addis Ababa. Photo by Neal Wilson

# ETHIOPIA UNLEASHES ITS CITIES

*Ethiopia's Minister of Urban and Infrastructure Development, **Chaltu Sani** believes Ethiopia's radical urban policy reforms—granting cities autonomy over revenue and planning—offer a blueprint for the continent's urban future. She spoke to Cityscapes Magazine.*

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## Why do African cities matter?

**W** **CHALTU SANI:** Successful cities will be the engines that power Africa's future. They will drive economic growth and social progress. They're critical for addressing poverty, inequality, and climate change, while also serving as centres of innovation and prosperity—fostering job creation, tackling inequality, improving access to education and healthcare, and attracting investment.

To realise successful African cities, we need three things.

- i. We must manage the urbanisation of the continent more proactively.
- ii. Africa's leadership needs to understand the complex nature of urban systems and plan accordingly and appropriately to local contexts.
- iii. Building strong, innovative cities that drive the prosperity of our nations must be the guiding principle for all our actions as leaders.

Unlike the gradual evolution and growth of Western cities or the oil-driven boom of Middle Eastern ones, Africa's cities are being shaped by unique demographic, economic, and technological forces.

This is why cities must be at the heart of Agenda 2063. They are key to realising the prosperous Africa we want.

## What has Ethiopia's federal government done to enable cities to lead national development?

**CS:** Ethiopia's urban development represents a complete philosophical transformation through four basic reforms.

We're giving cities a lead role in our country's economic transformation. Previous policies positioned cities as being there to support rural transformation. The new urban policy shifts that have happened in recent years firmly define cities as playing a central rather than support role to how we develop as a nation.

We have also changed our leadership philosophy from rigid and dogmatic to one that's far more pragmatic, transformational, and legacy-based. We are focusing on indigenous knowledge-based adaptive leadership to address decades-old urban challenges.

In our new policies, we've granted cities autonomy in terms of revenue collection and budgeting, priority-setting, and planning. Ethiopia has 2,543 cities, towns, and urban centres generating 55.1% of GDP. We have implemented urban structural reform that's resulted in the merger of some of these regional strategic towns to form stronger, larger cities. Shaggar City is one of them. [see the interview with the mayor of Shaggar City, page 58]

We are prioritising urban planning, investing in critical infrastructure, and devolving power to local authorities to make decisions reflecting the needs of each unique city.

## Ethiopia hosted the first African Urban Forum in 2024. What's the future of this platform?

**CS:** I'm so happy when I reflect on that first African Urban Forum we hosted. We had an amazing time with Africa's leaders—more than 2,500 participants from

47 African countries, including 55 ministers, ambassadors, and mayors.

The forum has immense potential to become a transformative platform for collaboration and action. It will continue as a political, academic, and expertise platform for Africans to discuss the urban agenda.

I hope the STC-8 (the African Union Specialised Technical Committee on Sustainable Urban Development) will again host the second African Urban Forum, hopefully in 2026. I envision it as a dynamic space where city leaders, policymakers, civil society, and private sectors co-create solutions to urbanisation challenges.

It can drive advocacy for urban priorities, share best practices, and shape policies supporting sustainable, inclusive cities. By aligning with global agendas like the G20 and UN Sustainable Development Goals, the forum can amplify Africa's urban voices, ensuring our cities are central to the continent's development narrative for decades to come.

The message is clear: African cities have their own identity and major potential. But, in order for them to lead the continent's transformation toward prosperity, they must be fully empowered. ♦

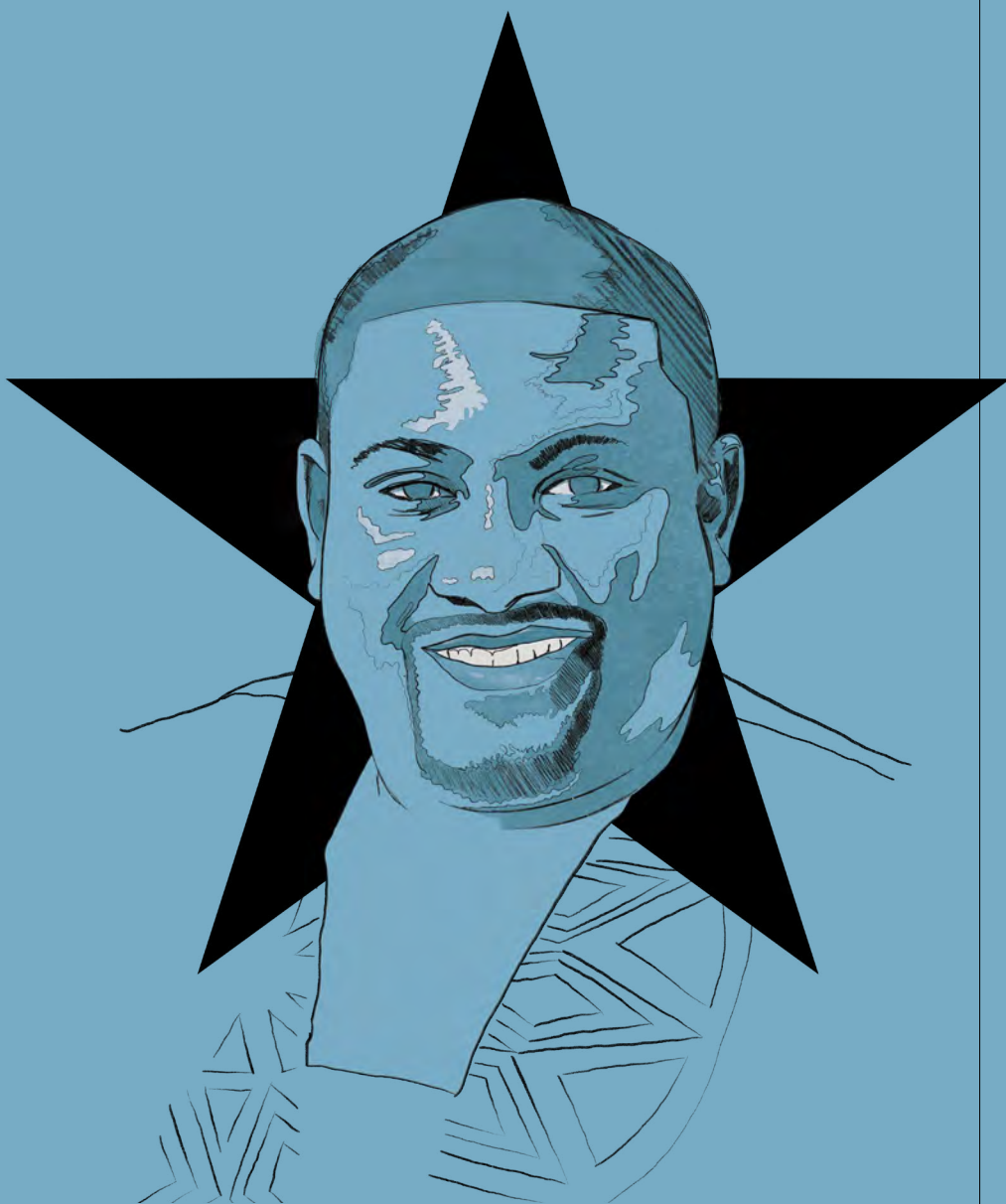
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# **Sub-Saharan Africa has the world's youngest and fastest- growing population. The number of people aged 15–24 is projected to rise from 263 million in 2023 to 446 million by 2050**

*By 2035, more young Africans will enter the labour market than the rest of the world combined. This demographic shift holds great promise for development. However, without job creation, investment in education, and digital transformation, youth unemployment will continue to rise.*





**Talib Ahmed Bensouda** became mayor of Kanifing, Gambia, at 29, so he knows a little about what the city's youth want. Listening to their demands is vital to guiding it through the infrastructure, revenue and employment challenges it faces, he says.

# A NEW GENERATION, FOR THE NEXT

**K**anifing is the biggest and most densely populated municipality in the smallest country in Africa. Even though we feel like we are the capital, we are not recognised as that [Banjul, to the west, holds that title]. Our biggest challenge is a lack of infrastructure, and huge pressure on the infrastructure that we have in place. We are struggling with housing, waste management, roads—you name it. We are struggling to give our residents a good quality of life.

But, despite the pressure we are under, we have a clear agenda to transform the city.

Our number one priority is developing the resources needed to do anything! We are modernising our revenue systems through digitisation and licensing reforms to build a sustainable financial base to fund our programmes. You cannot optimise council services without developing a good revenue base that you can sustain.

We are experimenting with technology. For example, with partners, we are exploring how we can use technologies like Google Plus Codes to make sure every built structure and piece of land is allocated an address that we can connect to our systems, including what we want to be a dynamic, up-to-date rates database. We are also conducting studies to connect waste collection and tax payments.

As mayor, I am trying to make sure that there's a strong social contract between the city and all its residents. I think that's very important.

Seventy per cent of our population is below 40. Of course, I am part of that demographic. So, youth employment is always on my mind and is top of our agenda as city leadership. One of my goals during my term as mayor is to maximise economic opportunities for youth. We are in the process of developing a programme aimed at funding the creation of at least 2,000 youth businesses. It's something we are trying to fund now.

As mayor, I'm also very concerned about building resilience through infrastructure. So we are trying to develop our public markets, which are an essential part of life here, and invest in community centres for our communities and youth.

Like many other African cities, we are very vulnerable to climate events that can be associated with climate change, even though we haven't contributed much to emissions and other factors. I feel like we are taking the brunt of the effects of climate change.

I believe it's inevitable that we have more and more people like me occupying positions of leadership, given that the population across the continent is skewed towards the young. We are just an obvious majority now, and there's no way to stop that from happening. Technology and social

media are enabling the youth in my country and across the continent to be connected to the rest of the world, making them aware of what's happening. In some way, it's helping build up their confidence. So, we have a youth on the rise, and their increased confidence is resulting in some wanting to be in leadership.

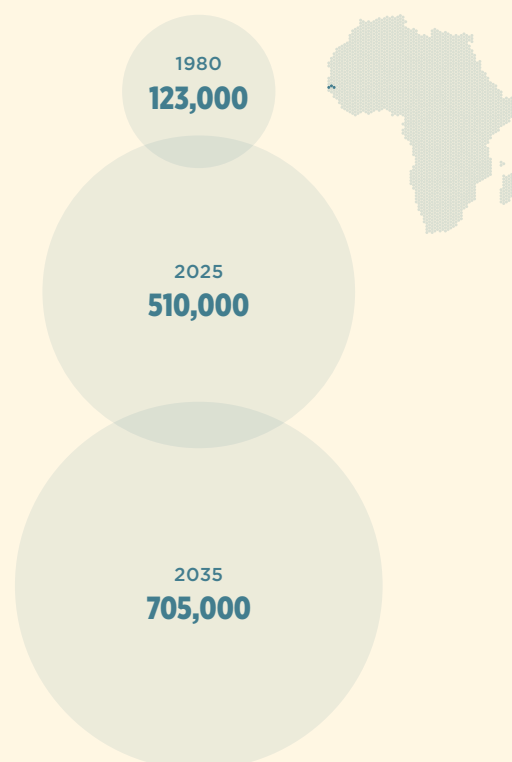
I became mayor at the age of 29. I'm 38 now, so I'm still young. I am seeing the rise of a new generation of mayors who are bringing a bold, reform-driven mindset grounded in action and technology, and who share the aspirations of the youth.

It seems to me that across the continent the countries that are currently facing youth-led protests are mostly being led by older people. The youth have been frozen out of government for a very long time—being told that they have to “wait their turn”, or are too young. So my generation and the one coming up behind me are losing patience. They want to be involved in deciding their own futures. The youths are feeling like they have not been getting their fair share of the national pie.

I think African youths have always been irritated throughout the generations by being told to wait. But, what's different now is the advent of the internet. Its given is an ability to communicate and to organise. Say what you will about social media, but it has given the youth an ability to draw lessons from elsewhere and sometimes to organise quickly.

The youth are converting that long irritation into action. That's something I have to understand and respond to as mayor. ♦

Edited for clarity and length



Kanifing population growth

# TURNING CARBON INTO CURRENCY

*World Resources Institute colleagues Obadiah Mungai, Fikresilassie Aklilu, Emmerentian Mbabazi, and Charity Mwangi argue that Africa's urban transformation doesn't have to pit equitable development against sustainability; in fact, they need one another.*

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Without intervention, African cities—like so many of their counterparts around the world—are headed towards becoming major carbon emission hotspots. But this outcome isn't inevitable. With thoughtful strategies and proper planning, the continent's cities could instead prioritise infrastructure that serves a dual purpose: improving residents' lives whilst acting as dynamic tools to capture carbon from the atmosphere. Africa's cities have boundless opportunities to become major carbon sinks. It is not wishful thinking to imagine this transformation.

Here's how it could happen.

Turning cities into equitable carbon sinks requires data-driven planning that breaks down administrative barriers and professional silos. Hyperlocal data ecosystems—encompassing satellite mapping, community-led vulnerability assessments, and urban metabolism analyses—are essential for identifying where nature-based interventions like urban forests and wetlands can maximise carbon sequestration whilst simultaneously addressing systemic inequities in service access. Yet geospatial tools alone won't suffice. They must be woven together with participatory approaches that put citizen engagement at the centre.

Cities can craft integrated spatial plans that protect cross-boundary carbon-rich ecosystems and prioritise green infrastructure in underserved neighbourhoods. We already know this works. Take the collaboration between the World Resources Institute (WRI) and Kampala to map informal settlements and wetlands. This partnership has enabled evidence-based policies that protect vulnerable communities from flooding while preserving critical carbon sinks.

Beyond their visual appeal, urban forests, tree canopies, and green corridors represent vital infrastructure. They absorb carbon dioxide, reduce heat islands, control water run-off, and enhance biodiversity. Addis Ababa's "Green Legacy" campaign targets planting 20 million trees annually, blending afforestation with community engagement. Such efforts need strategic scaling. In South Africa, Durban's resilience strategy mandates green space ratios—a promising start towards policy that both promotes urban forest preservation and improves underserved areas. Tools like the Tree Equity Score help cities identify and address disparities in green space access, ensuring benefits reach every neighbourhood.

Water systems that include healthy wetlands, mangroves, and river banks form the lifeblood of carbon sequestration. Well-managed water resources are crucial for sustaining green urban infrastructure. African cities can develop more robust water management by adopting integrated frameworks that align stormwater systems with urban forestry goals. Nature-based solutions—restoring watersheds, constructing permeable surfaces to combat flooding and recharge groundwater—offer another strategy. Equally important is addressing water equity to ensure that informal settlements, which often lack drainage infrastructure, receive priority in climate adaptation plans.

While mitigating emissions, cities must take additional steps to reduce their carbon footprints. The transport sector, which contributes nearly a quarter of global carbon dioxide emissions, presents a key target. The potential

of electric public transit and non-motorised transport networks, combined with effective speed management and transit-oriented development, cannot be overstated. Lagos's recently launched Blue and Red Line rail systems integrate with non-motorised mobility options. Pedestrian walkways and overhead bridges for safe passenger access to rail and bus stations have been carefully considered—representing a significant shift for Lagos. The use of wind power in Cape Town exemplifies strategies available to cities seeking to decarbonise urban energy systems. Pair these efforts with rooftop solar installations and green building standards, and the beginnings of a robust carbon mitigation agenda emerge.

Achieving resource efficiency represents the holy grail of any successful mitigation and sequestration strategy. Among WRI's initiatives is a programme called Accelerating the Circular Economy for Food (ACE4Food), which focuses on the food-energy nexus. It supports efforts to decrease food loss and waste, effectively utilise unavoidable food waste, and encourages regenerative agricultural practices. In Accra, community-led composting initiatives have diverted landfill waste whilst creating jobs. Rwanda has enhanced food security by reducing post-harvest losses and converting organic waste into compost, improving soil fertility and crop yields for over 5,000 smallholder farmers. Similarly, using rice husks for biochar production exemplifies sensible repurposing of industrial byproducts that can lock carbon into soil, as does Dar es Salaam's circular water system, which reuses treated wastewater for urban farming.

Our experiences have shown beyond doubt that top-down interventions, however well-intentioned, will fail. Local buy-in and citizen participation remain essential



***Cities can craft integrated spatial plans that protect cross-boundary carbon-rich ecosystems and prioritise green infrastructure in underserved neighbourhoods. We already know this works”***

ingredients for success. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, the “Freetown the Tree Town” campaign engaged citizens to plant one million trees to replace the countless numbers sacrificed to the city’s massive expansion—a loss that was devastating indeed. In 2017, floods and landslides tore through Freetown, claiming lives amongst residents of informal settlements. As usual, the city’s poorest residents proved most vulnerable, bearing the brunt of environmental emergencies. It’s crucial that people in these communities participate in every aspect of intervention—from setting goals to co-designing solutions. Lusaka has initiated programmes to train women and youths in rainwater harvesting and urban forestry, proving that grassroots capacity-building can simultaneously advance social equity.

Two unavoidable truths emerge: none of this can happen without both political will and sustainable financing. Without political leadership that grasps the urgency and necessity of interventions with clear potential, any possible success remains compromised from the start. Simultaneously, exploring innovative funding for carbon sequestration initiatives is essential. Public-private partnerships can unlock funding, while blended finance mechanisms like Cape Town’s green bonds must be used to channel capital towards green infrastructure.

African cities don’t need to choose between development and sustainability—both must be addressed simultaneously. The catastrophic 2017 landslides in Freetown and the devastating destruction of property and loss of life in Durban in 2022 are among many reminders of this reality.

The imperative to act remains clear, and evidence shows that cities can forge a carbon-neutral future rooted in equity. The path forward is evident. We must take it. ♦



# **CITIES MUST LEAD AFRICA'S ENERGY TRANSITION**



*How African cities address their energy needs as they grow will determine their future, and that of the continent, say **Jakkie Cilliers** and **Alize le Roux** of the Institute for Security Studies.*

Here are two facts that, together, make no sense.

1. More than 630 million Africans have no access to electricity.
2. The continent exports about half of its oil and gas production.

African countries are in effect supplying the rest of the world with energy, while their own citizens cannot heat their homes, light their streets, or power their schools. The situation will only worsen, given rapid population growth, rising incomes, and increasing urbanisation.

Modelling by the Institute for Security Studies African Futures (AFI-ISS) team shows that, as domestic energy use surges, the continent will likely become a net energy importer before 2040, reversing its long-standing role as a net exporter. This shift comes against a backdrop of underdeveloped supply systems, heavy dependence on fossil fuels, and weak national and regional grids.

Africa's cities lie at the heart of this unfolding story. Rapid urbanisation means more Africans than ever now live in cities. A billion of us will do so by 2038. The engines of development, cities also face unique energy pressures: from powering transportation and industry to providing basic services. The continent's development trajectory will depend in large part on how well its cities meet these pressures.

With our African Futures programme work, we have been exploring multiple scenarios for the continent's energy future. In doing so, we looked at three scenarios.

We looked at what 2063 might look like if we stayed on the **Current Path**, in terms of energy demand and production on the continent. Simple answer ... nothing good comes of that scenario. Reform across the board is urgent. This led us to the **Africa Energy Policy** scenario. Using available data, we envision an alternate path in which many countries put policies in place that enable a rapid deployment of renewable energy technologies, achieve greater levels of efficiencies, and a managed transition away from fossil fuels. It would not be easily done, but it would set the continent on a different trajectory. In an ideal world, Africa could go even further: via the **Sustainable Africa** scenario. In this scenario, renewables generation (encompassing solar, wind, hydro, geothermal, and biomass) expands rapidly. Again, efficiency improves, and carbon intensity falls, even as per-capita consumption rises in line with development goals. It is the holy grail of Africa and the world's energy future. This is what cities across the continent should ultimately be striving for.

Recent studies have highlighted the profound energy implications related to the shape and structure of African cities. Detailed analysis of building footprints and urban form reveals that, as cities double in population, energy demand for commuting triples in Africa. The reasons are obvious: greater sprawl and lower density increase travel distances, plus transport in any city consumes a disproportionate share of energy. For example, transport accounts for 27% of South Africa's and 37% of Brazil's total energy

use, according to the 2024 IEA World Energy Balances and Renewables report. A sizable chunk of this consumption is in urban areas. Clearly, urban planning is a key part of the energy puzzle. Compact, connected, higher-density cities can reduce the energy demand of urban mobility systems. Policymakers must take note of this.

For Africa's burgeoning urban population, energy access is not a luxury. It is essential for everyday life. A stable

Africa's energy transition will be meaningless unless it includes and serves the continent's poor. Cities are a fertile frontier for fighting poverty and inequality. Access to electricity and affordable, sustainable energy in general has to be part of any plan to alleviate poverty and build better futures. This can take many forms, ranging from subsidised solar installations, "pay-as-you-go" systems, or "cash-for-power" programmes. Cape Town has introduced a

promising model that allows rooftop solar producers to sell excess energy back to the municipal grid. More experiments like this are needed.

However, policies alone are not enough. We need better energy governance. Greater effort and investment are needed to build local research hubs with the capacity to collect and analyse data, and then deploy insights in a timely fashion. These hubs could be the backbone of cities and give metro governments the capacity to develop the tools necessary to model demand, plan investments, monitor equity of access, and integrate energy with climate and spatial planning.

Lastly, it is essential that cities integrate climate resilience into their energy planning. Urban areas are particularly vulnerable to climate impacts such as heatwaves, flooding, water stress, and related health risks. Energy systems must therefore not only be low-carbon, but also resilient to extreme weather. Strategies such as urban greening, efficient cooling, and decentralised service clusters can help build resilience.

Africa's cities should not merely see themselves as potential beneficiaries of a coming energy transition. Instead, they should position themselves as the critical actors they are, and seize a key part in shaping it.

How cities structure their development, generate and distribute energy, plan and design their transport corridors and built environments, and prioritise inclusive access, will determine whether urbanisation becomes a developmental asset or a source of greater inequality and insecurity across the continent.

The path ahead demands foresight, political leadership, and urban vision. African cities can lead the transition, paving the way toward a sustainable, equitable future for the continent. ♦



*African countries are in effect supplying the rest of the world with energy, while their own citizens cannot heat their homes, light their streets, or power their schools”*

energy supply powers hospitals, schools, businesses, and the digital infrastructure that drives modern economies. Conversely, energy poverty deepens inequality. It disrupts education, harms public health, and disproportionately affects women and children, who bear the burdens of traditional fuel use. The prevalence of informal settlements across the continent (often outside formal grid coverage) amplifies this divide, limiting access to modern cooking, lighting, and cooling, and ultimately leading to negative health outcomes for entire populations.

So, what to make of all of this?

First, we need policies that enable **investment in renewable urban generation and micro-grids**. A rapid scaling of renewables, accompanied by a boost in storage capacity and mini-grids to serve dense urban and peri-urban communities is needed. Localised systems can be more robust and offer greater resilience.

Policies that support transit-oriented development, densification, and walkable neighbourhoods should be non-negotiable. Good urban planning can reduce energy use. Africa's cities need to actively tackle and rein in urban sprawl as they grow.





***Africa's cities should not merely see themselves as potential beneficiaries of a coming energy transition. Instead, they should position themselves as the critical actors they are, and seize a key part in shaping it"***



# The Housing Crisis Is Everywhere

*Executive Director of UN-Habitat Anacláudia Rossbach says the housing crisis has gone global—and her organisation's new strategy is designed to meet the moment with unprecedented urgency.*







**Y**ou've just launched UN-Habitat's new Refresh strategy. What's the essence of it and why is this the right focus now?

**ANACLAUDIA ROSSBACH:** UN-Habitat was created 50 years ago to deal with the shelter crisis. Today, we're living in a housing crisis. Either we never solved the original crisis, or—and I believe this—it's different this time because the structural problems we used to see only in the Global South are now reaching the global North as well.

The affordability gaps, homelessness—it's gone global. Now many countries are putting housing back on the agenda because they're realising the dimensions of what we're facing.

We still have one billion people living in slums and informal settlements in the Global South. About 300 million people are in homelessness situations globally. The IMF even recognises there's a historic affordability gap. You have young people who simply cannot buy or rent houses anymore.

Add demographic changes, migration flows, ageing populations. We're losing houses to climate events—the fires in LA, Valparaíso constantly burning, flooding everywhere. Humanitarian crises from conflicts requiring constant rebuilding.

The idea agreed with member states was to focus UN-Habitat's work for 2026-29 on access to housing, land, basic services, including transformation of informal settlements. We need extra attention and urgency because while we speak, people aren't accessing water. We cannot afford another pandemic.

**But this isn't just about building more houses, is it?**

**AR:** Exactly. We're not in the same situation as 50 years ago. We have to pay attention to where we build and how we build. We need to maximise the existing built environment and recognise the social and ecological function of land.

Housing has been a key driver of urban sprawl—often unnecessary sprawl—affecting food security and natural environments. Look at Cape Town's droughts, São Paulo, Bogotá. So many cities are suffering from unplanned—or sometimes even planned but unnecessary—urban sprawl that's affecting nature.

If we plan better, we'll attract finance and resources—public, private, domestic, international. Investors will put their money in cities that are better-planned, efficient,

competitive. The same with international donors. If there's a long-term vision where a project makes sense and will have higher impact, there's a higher likelihood of investment.

**How does this multilevel approach actually work in practice?**

**AR:** Housing policies designed and implemented at only one level don't work. We need multilevel collaboration and community perspectives. We need real engagement of local and regional governments to identify land, integrate housing into cities, connect to services and economic opportunities, and liaise with stakeholders.

The national level is the enabler, but we need a large infrastructure of data, knowledge, and practices to mobilise resources so the whole ecosystem can work.

Most importantly, we have to be an enabler of a broader ecosystem. Make sure policies are in place, urban policies connect with financial frameworks, subsidies, investments, incentives—all aligned with urban plans attuned to the New Urban Agenda. A city that works for all: people, nature, and the economy.

Cities are critical for everything we need to achieve. By 2050, 70% of the population will live in cities. Cities produce 70% of emissions, consume most energy. There's no industrialisation or economic growth without clusters of economic activities and educated labour forces in urban settings. Cities are gateways to global economies.

**Africa faces perhaps the most extreme version of these challenges—massive slum populations plus urban sprawl. Which African governments are really stepping up to work with you?**

**AR:** At the first Africa Urban Forum in September 2024, I got real traction. There was genuine realisation of how critical housing is, how important it is to address informal settlements. This was later recognised in the African Union declaration.

Our strategic plan got 105 countries voting in support—with consensus on every single word. At our UN-Habitat Assembly, we had 50 ministers attending, 30 from Africa. Not just making political statements—they came with concrete actions and policies they're implementing.

Housing is coming to the centre of countries' political agendas. Kenya, our host country, put housing as a central priority and designed schemes to leverage domestic



*We still have one billion people living in slums and informal settlements in the Global South. About 300 million people are in homelessness situations globally. The IMF even recognises there's a historic affordability gap. You have young people who simply cannot buy or rent houses anymore"*

resources. At the Financing for Development Conference, I heard from local governments about efforts to get higher autonomy to leverage and manage resources.

What I saw were governments coming with concrete ideas, strong will to build capacities, review policies, and work collectively. Not asking "where is my five trillion dollars?"—which is what the World Bank says we need for urban infrastructure—but practical approaches.

**What realistic progress do you hope to see by 2029?**

**AR:** We're not going to solve the housing crisis by 2029, but I hope we'll have a significant set of African countries that design national policies and programmes, leverage resources

domestically and internationally, and have cities with improved urban plans. Cities with instruments to review how they use territory, maximising land potential to leverage resources while overcoming segregation and including informal settlements.

We're working on regional strategies for different contexts and developing KPIs. But honestly, we don't have much data from the urban sector—it's pretty under-researched. We'll need to collectively get this information because it's simply not there.

The challenge is that while we speak, people aren't accessing basic services. The urgency is real. We cannot afford to wait for another crisis to force our hand. ♦



# FINANCING THE FUTURE:

How African Cities Can  
Earn Investor Trust



***African cities will struggle to attract long-term investment unless they can demonstrate consistent financial capacity, says Trevor Manuel, South Africa's Minister of Finance from 1996-2009, Chairperson of the Board of South African banking group Old Mutual, and now Chairperson of the South Africa G20 Presidency Africa Expert Panel initiated by President Ramaphosa as part of the G20 work in 2025.***

**F**rom a business perspective, what role should cities play in Africa's economic future?

**TREVOR MANUEL:** I don't presume to speak for "the private sector". There's no such thing. These are individual initiatives that sometimes work together, sometimes don't. But the central question is whether private finance should be used more extensively in local government financing, especially for patient capital needs like infrastructure.

The fundamental issue is whether municipalities have the capacity to plan in detail and demonstrate they can raise revenues consistently. Some have taken interesting approaches—Lagos is very future oriented—but that's the exception. The big challenge on the African continent is to think more seriously about the use of space and its context.

Most African city elites have simply occupied colonial spaces with existing infrastructure and added to it haphazardly, without detailed structural plans. If you need to source capital, municipalities must make rational presentations that can be financed long-term and prove they can recover finances through taxes and other measures on a continuing basis.

The reality is stark. Think of all those municipalities that can't even get a financial statement together for auditing. Think of municipalities that employ people to do

ongoing work in finance, but still require outside input to prepare financial statements. South Africa is supposedly at the zenith of African capabilities, but very few of its local governments live up to what that means.

**How do we balance systematic planning with the reality of where investment wants to go?**

**TM:** Take Johannesburg—a prime example of local government dysfunction. There's sufficient capital there to construct blended programmes, but the Joburg metropolitan area lacks ability or interest. The class represented in municipal leadership speaks to the same elite needs everywhere—gated communities, malls, airport access.

The challenge is constructing a transformative medium-term budget combining various capital sources. On the one hand, it's inescapable that the municipality must be able to levy charges on a range of services, and collect. In addition, it could borrow long-term from multilateral institutions and access patient capital through bonds.

By way of example, 25 years ago, Johannesburg had strong municipal bond market scoring. But if you can't retain that trust, you will never be able to attract that long patient capital that does find itself in bonds. I was surprised the Development Bank of Southern Africa

recently gave [the City of] Joburg a massive loan. I hope it's a fulcrum point for change. Yet, it seems that the trust levels have arguably not improved in light of recent concerns expressed by the Minister of Finance and the appointment of the Presidential Johannesburg Working Group—a collaboration to address challenges and accelerate service delivery in the City of Johannesburg.

### **What has your G20 Africa Expert Panel discovered about global finance and African cities?**

**TM:** We started unbelievably late—got our remit in February with hundreds of G20 meetings already happening. There's no clarity whether the US will take up the presidency next year or participate meaningfully in working groups. Without that, they might just rule a line through everything they don't like.

But we've uncovered crucial issues for the G20 to address. Peter Blair Henry from Stanford's Hoover Institution is one of our panellists, and demonstrates clearly that return on capital for infrastructure lending on the African continent by the IFC are six times the returns achieved by the S&P 500. This highlights the potential for greater infrastructure investment, but African governments must improve the credibility of local institutions.

The position of ratings agencies is fundamentally important. The Vatican's commissioned *Jubilee Report* shows that countries exporting unprocessed commodities are always deemed higher risk than those exporting finished

goods. Because they are deemed to be higher risk, ratings are always unfavourable. The cost of borrowing increases concomitantly, and that is an obvious problem for every African country.

There's also the growing chasm between countries' ability to tax and establish/deepen capital markets. We're seeing increasingly that corporations are structuring themselves in a manner that makes it difficult for developing countries to go after them for revenue they would otherwise be entitled to.

### **What about generating stable revenue for African cities?**

**TM:** Generating your own revenue starts with tax systems, but even wealthy African countries have hitched their tax systems to commodity prices. At \$90 a barrel, Nigerian revenues look good. At \$45 a barrel they really battle to cover the most elementary costs. You need stable revenue sources delinked from commodity price fluctuations.

Take Naspers, for example, one of South Africa's most successful companies. It's listed on our stock exchange, but has an international portfolio that stretches from Amsterdam, Beijing, to Shanghai and elsewhere. So, the question of how much of their revenue should be taxed in South Africa becomes crucial. My hope is we can look beyond the Continental Free Trade Agreement slogans to examine what actually flows, what generates resources, and what enables genuinely integrated production different from the past.

These issues require significant modernisation. How we tackle and build successful circular economies, and address infrastructure deficits—stuff like water and solid waste treatment—all require extensive investment in a whole range of modern capabilities. I'm not sure that we are doing enough to address that on the African continent. The people with expertise are not being properly listened to, and that's a challenge. ♦



***We're seeing increasingly that corporations are structuring themselves in a manner that makes it difficult for developing countries to go after them for revenue they would otherwise be entitled to"***





# WHERE DO WE GO **FROM HERE?**

**Edgar Pieterse** of the African Centre for  
*Cities on what needs to happen next.*

***“One of the most widely held criticisms of urban policies in Africa is that they are inconsistent, haphazard, and not coherently articulated... Physical planners rarely work with economists, there are no ministries of urban affairs, and even well-defined problems such as housing and urban transportation run the gamut of intra-governmental negotiations before anything serious can be attempted.”***

This quote doesn’t come from 2025. Or 2015. Or even 1995. It’s from an article by Richard Stren in *African Studies Review* in 1972.

It’s a reminder why African urban policy debates can sometimes feel like Groundhog Day. Every few years, we rediscover that the urban population is projected to double within a generation; the large-scale nature of informal urbanisation; the inadequacy of infrastructure investments; the dramatic under-supply of affordable housing or public transport, and so on, and so on, and so on.

The response mostly seems to boil down to the following recipe: generate a national urban policy, devolve more power to city governments, improve the capacity of city governments to raise their own revenue, and then deploy that to ramp up infrastructure investment, and sometimes, rebuild trust between citizens and local government. Yet, over the last 15 years in which pan-African bodies such as the African Union and the African Development Bank have been promoting urban policy reform, we’ve seen little practical implementation even of these standard remedies, apart from a proliferation of National Urban Policies that also have little impact on the routine operations of governments. Having them on paper seems to be enough.

You will find the full range of urbanisation pressures discussed in this Special Report—and some of the recipes

proffered are familiar, and necessary: devolution, infrastructure investment, more trust. But, what is clear is that something has shifted. The voices of Africa’s youth—who now represent the overwhelming majority of the continent—are unignorable. And they have something to say. They are restless, tired of the old formulas, and no longer content to let the rigid, tone-deaf, and elderly politicians who continue to speak in platitudes while delivering little determine their futures. The youth are redefining what being part of the city means, and remaking the terms of how they engage systems with the view of changing them. Whether they are mayors, activists, or ordinary citizens, they are organising themselves in ways great and small, and are prepared to fight for their future. The age of deference is over!

Another thing that’s shifted is that there is an unapologetic belief in African agency and accountability. Western paternalism is openly called out as the neocolonial control it has always been, while investments from the East, and increasingly the Gulf region, are regarded with equal scepticism. This generation insists that African societies have enough knowledge, resources, people, and talent to craft solutions in their own image for the challenges they face. The question is, can this force a change in the listless, uninspiring political leaders we have been stuck with for so long?

The young and irreverent crop of military and political leaders who have emerged in various parts of West Africa in the last few years have captured the imagination of many young Africans. They preach African autonomy and self-determination, and represent this sense of urgency. What they symbolise should not be underestimated even if their endgame remains unclear.

Youth movements across the continent have shifted in tenor. Many of their activists were born and raised in a digital era unlike any before it, and have a fluency in technology that previous generations do not fully grasp. They express and organise differently. They are equally as worldly and communitarian as they are passionate about preserving and amplifying their Africanness, ready to deploy it as a fuel for global exchange and aspiration. In doing so, they are projecting and building a very different image of Africa, its diverse cultures, and unapologetically projecting it across the continent and onto the rest of the world



*The voices of Africa's youth—who now represent the overwhelming majority of the continent—are unignorable. And they have something to say. They are restless, tired of the old formulas, and no longer content to let the rigid, tone-deaf, and elderly politicians who continue to speak in platitudes while delivering little determine their futures. The youth are redefining what being part of the city means, and remaking the terms of how they engage systems with the view of changing them”*

with a new confidence. The profound impact of Afrobeat, Amapiano, and rise of a new wave of African fashion design, architects, and chefs focused on elevating African cuisine as never before are testament to this new spirit. It is seeping into many other areas of life on the continent.

Across cities dominated by makeshift, unsafe, precarious, and unhealthy settlements, a broad-based, pan-African urban movement is slowly taking shape.

But, the youth alone cannot change what ails us.

Urban economies might demonstrate healthy GDP growth rates, but the fundamental drivers of productivity and resilience are stagnant. Given this reality, citizens are no longer waiting for political space to be opened up for them to voice the harshness of their lives. They are taking up space in whatever form it comes—en masse online, but also in small street-level social media groups; and on the streets, as we have seen in Maputo, Nairobi, Lagos, and many other parts of the continent in the last few years. That this is concentrated in cities is telling, and heralds the future. But, it's an opportunity too.

If we turn this problem on its head, several opportunities reveal themselves, and the contributors to this *Special Report* show the way. They demonstrate that good ideas of how to respond to the call to save Africa's future are plentiful. What's in short supply is a commitment to the base reform necessary to give them the chance to follow through.

They affirm the following moves that should inform the way forward:

1. Listen to the youth. They have ideas about the future and how to build it that could bring about a necessary shift. Alongside this, address once and for all, the problems being wreaked by the dominant patriarchy across the continent. It's an impediment to progress for everyone.
2. There is design, engineering, and ecological expertise (both traditional and contemporary) across Africa that can be harnessed to develop alternative housing typologies that also would enable communities to largely construct and maintain structures themselves. Africans know how to do beautiful, low-carbon building, and have done so for centuries. We need to embrace that.
3. Prioritise the alignment of the continent's economic growth with the need to address critical housing infrastructure shortages. The construction boom that will come with this alignment has the potential to lift the fortunes of the continent in general, and its cities in particular. It's a prerequisite for their success.
4. Fast track investments in digital public infrastructure, and invest in data systems. These are both essential for the intelligent management of the investments that need to be made across all sectors.





From Lagos' EndSARS to movements across the continent, youth-led protests underscore a growing fracture with institutions and leaders. Without action, more upheaval lies ahead, argues the author. Photo: Photostock

5. Invest in youth-led social enterprises, and make them the backbone of strong local economic development. Build robust digital tools and other mechanisms to connect those enterprises, both to each other and into larger regional systems of regulation and governance. Through this, we can determine over-hyped smart city and AI debates.

None of this will be easy. It will require constant tinkering, finessing, and embracing a spirit of experimentation like never before. It will demand that we test the efficacy of each of these moves and tailor them to the context in which they are implemented. There are no one-size-fits all ideas here. After all, one thing hasn't changed: Africa is still not a country.

But we cannot escape two realities. The first is: where will the money to do this come from? The other—and we must be brutally honest with ourselves as Africans—is that most governments across the continent are as dysfunctional as the systems they manage. In their current form, real experimentation is near-impossible. We need to ask ourselves what to do about this fundamental truth.

International aid is not how we pay for our own development. It's encouraging to see many African governments prioritising the unlocking of domestic resources. An intentional focus on mobilising the substantial dormant capital in Africa to fund proud, local, and sustainable forms of

African urbanism is needed. Whether we grab this opportunity is up to us all.

Everyone of and in the continent—the activists, policymakers, active citizens, national banks, the private sector—must insist on, and work towards, the changes we so desperately need. We must also change our attitudes towards youth, towards women, the environment, each other, and towards what or where we look as examples of how we want the future of our cities—the future in general—to be.

If we focus on indigenous resources and priorities, we can develop our own purpose-built infrastructure investment and maintenance models on the continent. We can build African cities, not the failed imitations of the European cities we keep lacking the imagination to sufficiently think our way past.

Let's start telling that story now, loudly, and fully commit to not just dreaming, but doing. ♦





A busy market in Lagos Nigeria. Photo by Ariyo Olasunkanmi









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The logo for DBSA, featuring the letters 'D', 'B', and 'S' in a dark grey font, with the letter 'A' in a bright yellow color. The 'B' and 'A' are stylized with a small yellow leaf-like shape above them.