



The slowing of sub-Saharan Africa's urbanization: evidence and implications for urban livelihoods

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1. See, for instance, Satterthwaite, D (2002), *Coping with Rapid Urban Growth*, RICS, Leading Edge Series, London; also Brockerhoff, M (1999), "Urban growth in developing countries: a review of projections and predictions", *Population and Development Review* Vol 25, No 4, pages 57–778; Bocquier, P (2004), "Analyzing urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa", in A Champion and G Hugo (editors), *New Forms of Urbanization: Beyond the Urban–Rural Dichotomy*, Ashgate, Aldershot, pages 133–150; and Bocquier, P (2005), "World urbanization prospects: an alternative to the UN model of projection compatible with urban transition theory", *Demographic Research* Vol 12, No 9, pages 197–236.

ABSTRACT According to data from the most recent inter-census period, some sub-Saharan African countries are now urbanizing very slowly. Actual decreases in the level of urbanization are rare, but have been recorded for Zambia (where counter-urbanization began in the 1980s) and Côte d'Ivoire and Mali (where there is evidence of counter-urbanization during the 1990s). Countries where urbanization levels are stagnating or increasing very slowly, especially when considering large and medium-sized towns, include Benin, Mozambique, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Niger. The East African situation is more mixed, but growth rates in many large centres are around or below the national rate. For many urban centres there is evidence of increased circular migration, which has reduced the contribution of in-migration to urban growth. These trends are largely the result of declining economic opportunities in many urban areas, reflecting crises in urban poverty and livelihood insecurity.

KEYWORDS insecurity / migration / sub-Saharan Africa / urban livelihood / urbanization

I. INTRODUCTION

This short paper reviews a range of evidence on downward shifts in the growth of African urban settlements in different countries. While these have occurred within a broader international context of downward revisions in the growth rates and size of many large cities in low- and middle-income countries,⁽¹⁾ these trends in some countries of sub-Saharan Africa need particular attention. This is because they are more marked, and imply economic problems and urban livelihood issues that are still too rarely fully recognized in policy circles, even if there is now more awareness of the seriousness of urban poverty. Above all, this note seeks to address the assumption that flows in migration to many African urban areas have not changed.

II. URBANIZATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The 2009 World Development Report, *Reshaping Economic Geography*,⁽²⁾ emphasizes the positive contribution that cities and migration can make to development in poor countries and how there is evidence of this across the world. While I would fully support this position, it is necessary to

disaggregate the experiences of different regions. The significant surges in urban-based employment that have accompanied the various experiences and experiments with economic liberalization in some Asian countries have generally not occurred in Africa. Rather, structural adjustment from the 1980s has brought formal employment stagnation or decline, and a massive increase in the scale of dependence on informal work, generally in very low-income jobs.⁽³⁾ Basically, the structural conditions affecting urbanization in much of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa are significantly different from those in many other regions of the developing world, and thus its economic geography is being reshaped in different ways.

The following analysis focuses mainly on population growth in towns in the upper and middle levels of the urban hierarchies; there is marked variation in small and very small centres, which is beyond the scope of this short paper, although these trends are also very significant.⁽⁴⁾ Where there is recent census evidence, it is becoming increasingly apparent that for very many urban areas, particularly in West Africa, recent growth has been only a little above, no different from, or even sometimes below, the national population growth rate. Therefore, such towns are not growing much faster, and occasionally more slowly, than rural populations: in other words, urbanization, as a **demographic** process whereby the urban share of a country's population is increasing over time, is slow or stagnating. Thus, the majority of growth in most towns is attributable to natural increase, which, for sub-Saharan African towns, is often very similar to, or occasionally higher than, rural rates. This can be shown individually for many countries, including Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya,⁽⁵⁾ Zimbabwe,⁽⁶⁾ Côte d'Ivoire, Central African Republic and the DR Congo.⁽⁷⁾ Although urban fertility is lower, this is countered by lower death rates and youthful and fertile urban age profiles compared to rural areas, which boosts **birth** rates. Recent demographic health surveys in the 2000s (e.g. for Zimbabwe and Kenya, where there have been marked fertility falls) still indicate remarkably little difference between rural and urban crude birth rates in most (but not all) countries, but significant differences in infant and child mortality rates, which remain the chief factor in determining overall death rates in most African countries, which suggests urban natural increase is often still as high or higher.

These demographic parameters mean that, as a general guide, the contribution of net in-migration to the growth of one town, or group of towns, can be assessed by comparing its growth to the national rate. This is the basis of the evaluations of urban growth shown in the last column of Table 1, which collates a range of data on recent urban growth trends from 14 African countries. The rates are mainly calculated from censuses (see table notes). These are supplemented for Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Senegal by survey data from a large-scale migration project across the region covering 1988–1992 (NESMUWA – Network of Surveys on Migration and Urbanization in West Africa), which have been analyzed and reported by a group of French scholars.⁽⁸⁾ These studies have shown that net in-migration rates to many towns have slowed, and sometimes reversed, and they have also highlighted a downturn in Côte d'Ivoire's level of urbanization during the 1990s, from 46 per cent to 43 per cent.

Essentially these data speak for themselves. Across Africa there is accumulating evidence, beyond the case of Zambia where counter-urbanization was established in the 1980s,⁽⁹⁾ that net in-migration to towns has slowed very significantly. Actual counter-urbanization now also appears to have

2. World Bank (2009), *Reshaping Economic Geography; World Development Report 2009*, The World Bank, Washington DC, 383 pages.

3. Bryceson, D and D Potts (editors) (2006), *African Urban Economies: Viability, Vitality or Vitiating?*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 353 pages.

4. Potts, D (2008), "Recent trends in rural–urban and urban–rural migration in sub-Saharan Africa: the empirical evidence and implications for understanding urban livelihood insecurity", Environment, Politics and Development Working Paper Series, Paper 6, Department of Geography, King's College London, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c6/03/95/42/PottsWP6.pdf>.

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6. Potts, D (forthcoming), *Re-inventing the Wheel? Circular Migration in Contemporary sub-Saharan Africa: A Case Study of Zimbabwe*, James Currey, Oxford.

7. Potts, D (1997), "Urban lives: adopting new strategies and adapting rural links", in C Rakodi (editor), *The Urban Challenge in Africa: Growth and Management of its Large Cities*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, pages 447–494.

8. See Beauchemin, C and P Bocquier (2004), "Migration and urbanization in francophone West Africa: a review of the recent empirical evidence", *Urban Studies* Vol 41, No 11, pages 2245–2272; also Beauchemin, C (2002a), "Des villes aux villages: l'essor de l'émigration urbaine en Côte d'Ivoire", *Annales de géographie* Vol 624, pages 157–178; Beauchemin, C (2002b), "Surmonter le doute statistique: le cas de l'émigration

TABLE 1
Recent net migration evidence and urbanization in selected sub-Saharan African countries

(cell annotation: dark grey = strong net out-migration; light grey italics = weakly negative or no net in-migration)

Country	Time period	National AAGR* %	Category of urban settlement(s)	AAGR* %	Notes
Benin	1992-2002	3.3	Cotonou (capital city)	2.2	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
			Porto Novo (2nd largest town)	2.2	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
			All towns > 10,000	3.4	Negligible net in-migration
Burkina Faso	1990s ^(a)	2.9	All towns		Net in-migration negligible
	1996-2006		All towns > 10K excl. capital city	3.1	Ouagadougou 4.7% per year: net in-migration, otherwise negligible
Côte d'Ivoire	1988-92 ^(a)	3.3	Abidjan (largest city)		Net out-migration of national citizens
	1988-98 ^(a)		All towns > 5,000	< 3.3	Counter-urbanization: 46% to 43%
	1988-98		Abidjan	3.8	See text
	1997-98 ^(a)		Abidjan		Net out-migration of national citizens
Ghana	1988-98	2.6	3 of 4 next largest towns	< 3.3	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
	1970-1984		Accra (capital city)	3.2	Greater Accra and 2 other regions de-urbanize
	1984-2000		Kumasi (2nd largest town) > 100,000 (excl. Kumasi)	2.6	Net in-migration negligible
Kenya	1989-1999	3.0	5 of 10 largest towns	3.3	Net in-migration less than 1/5 urban growth
			Nairobi (capital city)	2.1	Growth less than national rate
			Mombasa (2nd largest town)	4.9	Strong net in-migration. Approx. 40% growth
			Nakuru (4th largest town)	3.7	Net in-migration. Approx. 1/5 urban growth
			Eldoret and Kisumu (3rd, 5th)	2.9	Net in-migration negligible
Mali	1987-1998	2.6	Next three largest towns	4.9	Strong net in-migration. Approx. 40% growth
			All towns	2.0	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
			Bamako plus 2nd largest town	4.0	Counter-urbanization: 22% to 19% ^(b)
Mauritania	1988-2000	2.4	3rd, 4th and 6th largest towns	0-0.6	Strong net out-migration
			Nouakchott (capital city)	2.6	Net in-migration very small
			Nouadhibou (2nd largest town)	1.5	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
			3 of 6 next largest towns	≤ 2.0	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration

TABLE 1 CONTINUED
Recent net migration evidence and urbanization in selected sub-Saharan African countries

Country	Time period	National AAGR* %	Category of urban settlement(s)	AAGR* %	Notes
Mozambique	1997–2007	2.5	Maputo (capital city) Maputo plus Matola Beira (4th largest town) 16 largest towns	1.1 2.2 0.5 2.5	Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration Net out-migration from capital conglomeration Strong net out-migration Negligible net in-migration
Niger	1988–2001	3.3	Niamey (capital city) 3 of 4 next largest towns 38 main towns excl. Niamey Lagos (largest city)	4.7 <3.0 3.5 2.9	Net in-migration positive. Approx. 30% growth Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration Very weak net in-migration Net out-migration? See text
Nigeria	1991–2006	3.2	All towns except Dakar	2.6	Net foreign emigration
Senegal	1988–92 ^(a) 1988–2002	2.6	Dakar (capital city) 10 largest towns (incl. Dakar)	2.3	Net migration negligible Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
Tanzania	1988–2002	2.9	Dar es Salaam (largest city) Arusha (2nd largest town) Next 10 largest towns	4.8 7.1 3.0	Strong net in-migration. Approx. 40% growth Very strong net in-migration > half growth Net in-migration negligible
Uganda	1991–2002	3.4	Kampala (capital city) Gulu and Lira (2nd, 3rd) Next five largest towns	3.7 ca. 10.0 2.4	Net in-migration small War-induced urban growth from refugees Counter-urbanizing/net out-migration
Zambia	1980–1990 1990–2000	2.7 2.4	All urban areas All urban areas Copperbelt towns	2.5 1.4 –0.09	Counter-urbanization: 40% to 38% Counter-urbanization: 38% to 36% Very strong counter-urbanization

* AAGR = Annual average growth rate

SOURCES: Compiled and calculated from raw data in national censuses either from published census material or, for the recent West African censuses, from Brinkhoff, M (2008), <http://www.citypopulation.de/>, except for:

(a) Data for 1988–1992: from the NESMUWA project, see Beauchemin, C, H Sabine and B Schoumaker (2004), "Rural–urban migration in West Africa: toward a reversal? Migration trends, economic conjuncture and rural development in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire", Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Boston, 1–3 April 2004, accessed 8 December 2007 at <http://paaa2004.princeton.edu/abstractViewer.asp?submissionid=40503>; also Bocquier, P and S Traore (1998), "Migration and urbanization in West Africa: methodological issues in data collection and inference", in M Bilborrow (editor), Migration, Urbanization, and Development: New Directions and Issues, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Kluwer Academic Publishers, pages 249–293.

(b) Counter-urbanization of all towns in Mali, reported in Tacoli, C (2001), "Urbanization and migration in sub-Saharan Africa: changing patterns and trends", in M de Bruijn, R van Dijk and D Foeken (editors), *Mobile Africa: Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, pages 141–152.

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9. Potts, D (1995), "'Shall we go home?' Increasing urban poverty in African cities and migration processes", *Geographical Journal* Vol 161, No 3, pages 245-264; also see reference 5, Potts (2005).

10. Counter-urbanization in Mali is reported in Tacoli, C (2001), "Urbanization and migration in sub-Saharan Africa: changing patterns and trends", in M de Bruijn, R van Dijk and D Foeken (editors), *Mobile Africa: Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, pages 141-152.

11. See reference 9; also Potts, D (2004), "Regional urbanization and urban livelihoods in the context of globalization", in D Potts and T Bowyer-Bower (editors), *Eastern and Southern Africa: Development Challenges in a Volatile Region*,

taken place in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali.⁽¹⁰⁾ Net in-migration has become weak or negligible in most or all of the main urban centres in Benin, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger and Senegal. The share of Niger's population in its 36 main towns with more than 8,000 residents in 2001 increased by only 1 per cent from 1988 to 2001, to 16 per cent. In Benin, the population share in towns with more than 10,000 residents in 2002 had increased by less than 1 per cent from 1992, from 38.2 per cent to 38.8 per cent. In Niger, Kenya and Tanzania, the capital cities are still experiencing strong net in-migration but the situation in other main towns is very mixed; Arusha however is clearly highly attractive to migrants. It is also worth noting that in Kenya and Tanzania, unusual definitions and re-definitions of "urban settlements" at the lower end of their urban hierarchies have rendered the overall urban growth rates and levels reported in their censuses extremely misleading (and exaggerated) in recent decades, so it helps to base assessments of growth trends on individual settlements.⁽¹¹⁾ In Uganda, the significance of violent conflict in driving in-migration to towns is evident for Gulu and Lira, but otherwise in-migration has been only a small, or negative, component of growth in the main towns. In Ghana, net urban in-migration was very moderate in the 1970s and early 1980s, and has become stronger since; yet it remains a minor component, except for Kumasi where growth has more than doubled to 5.5 per cent per year, compared to 3.4 per cent for Accra Metropolis. Such broad-brush analysis could obviously be refined for each country, with reference to local factors. For example, international migration from and to West African towns adds another layer of complexity that is not covered here but that is detailed in the studies based on the NEMSUWA project.⁽¹²⁾

What are the implications of these trends? First, a city growing annually at 3 per cent or more is a major planning challenge, whether its growth is derived from migration or natural increase. Yet sometimes, it appears that such continued growth, mainly from internal demographic factors, misleads, for it is assumed that the appearance of new residential areas (often unplanned) must mean that the city is attracting (and keeping) large flows of in-migrants. However, there is no necessary connection with migration. Second, available evidence suggests that reductions in net in-migration as a component of growth in many towns are not primarily due to less mobility but, rather, to significantly higher rates of **circular** migration, which has always been of great importance in sub-Saharan Africa, which have adapted and been reinforced by structural change. Such adaptations are mainly the result of very negative livelihood changes for most of the urban population for whom there is no economic safety net, if all else fails, except within the nexus of rural-urban linkages. This has been clear in Zambia and Zimbabwe and is suggested by survey data from a range of other countries.⁽¹³⁾ Evidence from Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso also shows very significantly that urban-rural migration streams there have become less, not more, age-specific, so many young people are among those leaving the cities.⁽¹⁴⁾ Debates about such circulation are considered in Potts,⁽¹⁵⁾ alongside a detailed examination of longitudinal evidence from the 1980s to the 2000s from Harare, Zimbabwe, about migration trends, which provide, in microcosm, an extreme example of how these shift in response to major changes in urban economies.

In crude terms, the message is that some African countries are now not necessarily becoming more urban, or only very slowly so, in the sense of a higher proportion of their total population living in large towns.

The implications, in terms of understanding the nature of contemporary urban and rural livelihoods and economies, are very different from those where it is clear that urban economies are so attractive that their population growth is significantly derived from in-migration from rural areas. It is crucial that policy makers and donors recognize the evidence from sub-Saharan Africa about current rural-urban and urban-rural migration trends, which are such important indicators of the crisis in urban poverty and livelihood insecurity in so many of its major urban settlements, and recognize the urgency of addressing these issues.

Pearsons, Harlow, pages 328–368.

12. Further details can be found in Potts (2008), see reference 4.

13. See reference 9, Potts (1995); also see reference 5, Potts (2005); and see reference 6.

14. See reference 8, Beauchemin, Sabine and Schoumaker (2004).

15. See reference 6.

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