

PRESS RELEASE

Urban centres boom as rapid urbanisation redefines the urban geography of Africa

Paris, 26 June 2023—Africa is experiencing enormous urban growth and is now 50% urban, according to new findings from the 2023 Africapolis data revision and update. Africapolis, the most comprehensive information source on cities and urbanisation in Africa, is developed by the Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (SWAC/OECD).

The new data release shows major growth in existing urban agglomerations and documents the emergence of hundreds of new urban centres since 2015 in areas generally considered rural, helping to paint the most complete picture of the urban geography of Africa to date.

Preliminary results from the 2023 update show that from 2015 to 2020, the 54 countries of Africa added more than 1 100 new urban agglomerations and 110 million new urban residents, an increase equal to more than 150% of the population of France. Africa now has at least 8 500 urban agglomerations with 10 000 or more residents. Furthermore, existing agglomerations—including towns, cities, and metropolitan areas—expanded in area by 16% over the five-year period.

At the 21 June launch of the revised and updated dataset, keynote speaker Luc Gnacadja, Founder & President of the Think-and-do-tank GPS-Dev (Governance & Policies for Sustainable Development), former UNCCD Executive Secretary, and former Minister of the Environment, Housing and Urban Planning (Benin), emphasised the importance of getting urbanisation in Africa right:

If urbanisation is to succeed in Africa, urban informalities must be transformed into assets (...) Informality has been a means to adapt, a bottom-up response to fragmented situations. It generates incredible agility, a great capacity for innovation and, potentially, for urban revitalisation.

Luc Gnacadja, GPS-Dev

As Africa becomes increasingly urban over the next several decades, government leaders, international organisations, NGOs and development banks will require a much more accurate picture of how urban areas are changing. Without urban planning, growth can lead to extensive informal development, poor integration of new residents and high costs in extending services such as water and electricity.

There is a need to ruralise urban projects and urbanise rural projects.

François Yatta, UCLG Africa

Yet, urbanisation is already improving the lives of millions of people on the continent. On average, residents of urban areas enjoy better access to basic services, nearly 50% more paid working hours per week, and almost twice as many years of education. Even small urban areas outperform national averages in almost all areas of development, according to the 2022 SWAC/OECD Secretariat report, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics: The Economic Power of Africa's Cities*.

Hadizatou Rosine Sori-Coulibaly, SWAC Honorary President, underlined the importance of the cross-cutting role of urban development issues:

Where initiatives exist, particularly in relation to local funding issues, it would be beneficial to engage in dialogue not only with sectoral ministries but also with ministries that play a cross-cutting role. Investing in this area could add value across the board at the country level.

Hadizatou Rosine Sori-Coulibaly, Honorary President, SWAC

According to Iris Wilhelm, GIZ Advisor for Cities, leaders can respond to Africapolis data by providing sustained investments to small and medium-sized cities, often overlooked in official statistics but accounting for more than half of total population growth.

GIZ uses Africapolis data through infographics to show trends and patterns of urbanisation to raise awareness on the rapid urbanisation happening on the continent and advise the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to advocate for context-specific policy approaches.

Iris Wilhelm, GIZ

Similarly, Lukas Lüscher, Swiss Development and Cooperation (SDC) representative, recognised the importance of supporting data collection efforts:

Africapolis is an essential tool for supporting urbanisation dynamics in Africa. One of its major assets is that it focuses not only on medium-sized and large cities, but also on secondary towns, enabling us to better anticipate urbanisation dynamics.

Lukas Lüscher, SDC

UEMOA and ECOWAS member countries have seen enormous urban growth. They are in the midst of a major transition, and it indicates a profound need for investment in the urban sector as well as continued monitoring of the trends.

Patrick Lamson-Hall, SWAC/OECD Secretariat

Africapolis data also plays a critical role in bringing attention to secondary cities (50 000 to 1 million people) which act as ports of arrival for rural to urban migrants and play a vital role in establishing rural-urban linkages and improving conditions in rural areas by providing access to the economic opportunities, services and infrastructure of urban areas. More and more rural households rely on cities as markets for goods and sources of wage labour to support rural livelihoods.

We need to encourage effective decentralisation—because cities are a collective project—by developing and promoting participative and responsible governance in order to anticipate these rapid urban transformations.

Mame Marie-Bernard Camara Monteiro, UEMOA

Finally, urban centres are defined by governments using legal and administrative criteria that sometimes do not reflect the actual extent of an urban agglomeration and make comparing cities a challenge. These criteria are difficult to change, but with Africapolis, policymakers benefit from an objective and trustworthy data source that provides a snapshot of the urban geography in their country and permits the detection and analysis of changes over time. The urban area definition pioneered by Africapolis has led to the detection of major cross-border agglomerations and the mapping and measurement of previously unknown metropolitan areas.

Consideration of space goes hand in hand with consideration of scale. On the scale of an agglomeration, we are seeing a demographic decline in the city centres of large agglomerations. On a national scale, however, [we observe] a regional concentration of populations.

François Moriconi-Ebrard, CNRS

The findings from this data launch will inform the upcoming report *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics: Plan for Urban Expansion* set for release in 2024.

The 2023 revised and updated Africapolis dataset can be found at: www.africapolis.org

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The urban expansion of Ibadan (Nigeria) from 2015 to 2020

