



Africa's Future

Africa's cities must be transformed if the continent is to keep pace with the rest of the developing world.

BY A.C. MOSHA

The world's urban population is growing at a phenomenal rate, posing a huge challenge to those responsible for the management of urban development and provision of services. The African continent is no exception. Its urban population is growing faster than that of any other continent. It is predicted that by 2030, nearly 800 million people—approximately the population size of the entire continent today—will be living in urban areas.¹

Nothing, it seems, can stop the breakneck expansion of the cities. Judging from current actions by physical planners and municipal governments, such phenomenal growth spells disaster: the number of poor people will soar, more and more people will live in squatter areas, infrastructure will almost disintegrate, and the environment will deteriorate further unless drastic actions are taken soon.

Population Explosion

The factors behind the relentless growth of cities in Africa have been extensively studied. In general, the reasons have to do with overall population growth, underdevelopment in rural areas, and the search for paid employment by rural dwellers.

Africa has the world's highest urbanization rate but the fewest resources to deal with it. Africa's level of urbanization grew from 19 percent (53 million) in 1960 to 27 percent (129 million) in 1980. By 2000, it had reached 38 percent (297 million) and is still growing—not so much from migration as natural growth. The average rate of urbanization is expected to reach 55 percent by 2030—the South American figure in 1965.²

Africa's urban population growth rate hit 4.4 percent per annum between 1990 and 1996. The figure surpasses Africa's annual population growth rate of 2.8 percent. The annual average rate of urbanization is

not expected to decrease to 3 percent until after 2025. The urbanization growth rate, combined with a high population growth rate, will ensure a dramatic increase in the region's urban population.

In 2000, Cairo and Lagos were the only African cities whose populations surpassed 10 million inhabitants. By 2020, the urban areas of Nairobi, Johannesburg, and Abidjan will also have reached or surpassed the 10 million mark, while 77 cities—or six times more than today—will have more than 1 million people. There will be nearly 650 towns—close to four times the current figure—with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

The built-up areas will be 12 times as dense and the average distance between towns four times shorter.³ All in all, many more people are going to live in larger cities. Population growth rates will also ensure that the population of African cities remains overwhelmingly young. About 40 percent of the population is under 15 years old, and another 20 percent is in the 15 to 20-year age group.

Most governments have taken the view that they need to control the process of urban growth. Many governments have adopted specific policies to this end, but few it seems have achieved any success. No major ideas on future policies seem to be on the agenda. And yet there are huge economic needs—for housing, schools, and public health—precipitated by such rapid urbanization.

Urban Crisis

The 1980s and 1990s were a period of urban crisis across the continent. The ever-expanding African cities currently face severe problems:

■ a decline of the economy and in levels of employment with a corresponding rapid increase in “informal sector,” or “underground econ-

omy,” activities in many key areas;

- a deterioration in both the quality and distribution of basic services;
- a scarcity of shelter;
- a decline in the quality of the urban environment.

While all four are interrelated, the economic factors seem to be the most basic. All these changes adversely affect the quality of urban life for everyone—particularly low income groups.

These conditions resulted because national and urban economies stagnated in absolute terms while urban populations across the continent continued to grow, and the resources necessary for roads, sewers, water supplies, schools, and hospitals simply could not keep pace with the needs of the population.

The continent’s cities must become sustainable, productive, safe, healthy, humane, and affordable. Such a daunting challenge demands answers to hard questions: Where will the people live, what will they eat, and where will they get good, clean water to drink?⁴

Economic Stagnation

The World Bank, the Shelter for Sustainable Development, and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) all agree that African cities are victims of their poor economic status.⁵ According to the UNCHS, for example, the annual average growth in per capita income between 1980 and 1991 was negative for sub-Saharan Africa, although a few countries had dramatic increases. Individual income in Botswana increased 10-fold between 1960 and 1991, while in Egypt it increased 6.5-fold, and Kenya experienced a 3.1-fold increase.⁶

Most countries suffered from economic stagnation, high inflation, poor terms of trade, severe

debt problems, civil strife, drought, rising unemployment, unstable currencies, or falling incomes for a large portion of the population.

Every cloud has a silver lining, however. Cities are important sources of development, and large cities are the dominant players in terms of investment and formal employment in many countries. Many people are employed in both the public and private sectors of the economy. Hand in hand with this has been the growth of the informal sector of the economy in most African cities. The informal sector now is claiming an increasing number of urban laborers. Some people have gone into urban agriculture as a supplementary source of livelihood for food and fuel. In Dar es Salaam, Kampala, Lusaka, and Harare, for example, urban agriculture is widespread.

While many national governments see the informal urban economy as a problem that must at least be regulated more effectively, there is evidence that large-scale, capital-intensive enterprises and small, informal enterprises can work together within a larger, mutually beneficial system.

Although African urban economies may be engines of growth and the increasingly complex interface between formal and informal sectors contributes much, the general fiscal performance of urban areas in terms of support for public administration and infrastructure has been dismal. Spending has been very low. During the mid-1980s, for instance, Nairobi spent approximately US\$68 per capita on services and infrastructure, while Dar es Salaam spent US\$5.80.⁷

While the overall level of funding for local provision of services and infrastructure is generally very limited in African cities, the avail-

able resources come predominantly from national rather than local sources. Just as local governments depend on higher levels of government, their limited and unreliable resource base weakens their ability to attract and keep competent personnel. Unless this is sorted out in the future, municipal governments will remain helpless to handle the expected problems.

Deteriorating Services

As African cities continued to increase in size during the 1980s and 1990s, their declining economic situation led to a precipitous decline in the supply of basic infrastructure and urban services. Bottlenecks in transportation, water supply, health, and education have become intolerable; these services are totally inadequate to meet growing demands.

A visit to any African city reveals that most refuse is uncollected as piles of decaying waste rot in streets, open spaces, and parks. The poorest areas of any city are generally the worst-served by garbage-collection service—with heavy consequences for residents. It is estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of garbage in urban areas of African cities remains uncollected. In Dar es Salaam, only 22 percent of the rubbish is collected.⁸ In Kinshasa, the collection of household waste is undertaken in only a few residential areas. In the rest of the city, household waste is left on the road, tossed in illegal dumps and storm water drains, or buried in open land.

Sanitation is one of the worst problems facing African cities. According to the UNCHS report of 1996, more than half of the population had no provision for sanitation in 1991. About 20 percent of Africa’s urban population used simple pit latrines, about 20 percent had homes connected to public sew-

ers, and about 20 percent were connected to septic tank systems. Many cities in Africa—Accra and Lagos, for example—lack drainage systems. Most sewage, human excreta, and wastewater, as well as run-off, end up untreated in rivers, canals, gullies, and ditches. As for the cities with sewers, rarely do they serve more than a small portion of the population—typically, the richer residential, government, and commercial areas.

Provision of water for rapidly growing populations in towns is very expensive. The majority of urban households do not have water in their compounds. Industrial development and even housing projects are sometimes hampered by inadequate water supplies. Large numbers of people die every year from drinking contaminated water. The incidence of cholera, dysentery, and other water-borne diseases corresponds inversely to the distribution of safe water.⁹

African cities also lack tarred roads and functional public transport systems. Inadequate road networks result in severe congestion as the volume of traffic increases, and many roads turn into quagmires during the rainy season because of poor drainage.

In all cities in Africa, the number of people affected by inadequate pedestrian facilities and inadequate public transport greatly exceeds the number affected by traffic congestion and parking problems. In several sub-Saharan African cities, public transport systems have disintegrated through overcrowding and lack of investment, and there has been a major decline in the supply of public transport despite growing populations. In many cities, a high proportion of all trips on public transport are provided by the informal sector. By the end of the 1980s,

the informal sector had between 40 and 80 percent of the share of public transport in most capital cities of sub-Saharan Africa.

Inadequate Shelter

The fast urbanization rate has also caused problems with shelter. A high number of people live in accommodations that are both insecure and substandard despite government struggles to provide decent housing. Most people live in “informal” housing, where clean drinking water must be directly purchased from water sellers at a prohibitive cost and telephones and electrical connections are scarcely available.

About half of the urban population lives in very poor housing. In Lusaka, as many as 55 percent of the population lived in squatter settlements in the 1970s; in Dar es Salaam, the figure was 70 percent. The number of people living in poor-quality housing has probably doubled by now, with attendant unhealthy social consequences.

More-effective municipal management—reinforced by more-democratic structures at the local level and more devolution of powers from the national government—is generally seen to be key to the liberation and coordination of all the private activities that can contribute to a substantial solution of the housing problem.

Environmental Stress

The deterioration in the built environment is evident throughout most of urban Africa. As more of the urban population is forced into unplanned settlements, levels of water pollution increase. Several factors contribute to water pollution: lack of water, health services, and sewer systems; improper solid waste disposal and inadequate systems to dis-

pose of wastewater; lack of flood control; disposal of untreated industrial liquid wastes into water bodies or on land sites. Air pollution from factories, open fires, and poorly maintained vehicles also plague cities.

Unfortunately, the poor seem to suffer most because they use dirty water and live in polluted areas and fragile environments. There is no simple solution to environmental problems since the level of untreated emissions and the effects they have on different groups of the population are related to the overall level of development and the degree to which basic human needs are satisfied. Public awareness is important. The public must be more involved.

Conventional responses have been unable to deal with these problems. The conventional master plans of the past were too rigid and inflexible. Most African governments too have failed to maintain existing public facilities, let alone expand them, and this has led to a prodigious waste of resources.

Three types of reform are currently being considered by most governments. The first is administrative decentralization, with financial backing, to strengthen local government. The second is privatization of services, relying on private firms, nongovernmental organizations, self-help organizations, and households. The third is a relaxation in the regulatory regime so that affordable services can be provided.

There are great obstacles to overcome, but already a wealth of experiments have emerged, such as the private collection of wastes in Ibadan and Gaborone and the cheap sanitation and sewer services provided by nongovernmental organizations to poor neighborhoods in some African cities.

Search for New Policies

African governments cannot be expected to solve all their cities' ills. These problems have been confronted before and are still being worked on, but without much success. Despite a wide range of policies and strategies—settlement planning, containment of the growth of large cities, redressing rural/urban inequalities, and promotion of rural development—the results have usually proved disappointing. Money is being poured into the main cities without effect. Governments have often lacked the will to implement such policies, especially where these are perceived as conflicting with the imperatives of national economic growth and with the interests of powerful urban-based groups and rural elites. For such reasons, policy issues in a number of areas need to be redefined.

If the experience over the years has taught anything, it is that there is no panacea in urban policy. Each country has its own solutions. There are some general strategies, however, that most countries can adopt.

■ **Urban populations and poverty.** The population explosion is by far the most significant event in African history. Hence it is essential to come to grips with African demography—by looking at the total population and, above all, at total growth rates and spatial distribution, including migration—if cities are to grow economically.

Since the alarming growth of the urban population is to a considerable extent attributed to mass migration of rural residents, efforts should be made to discourage such migration. This can be achieved only through more-balanced and effective development of rural areas, to provide adequate employment opportunities and other amenities for rural populations. Better family

planning can also slow the rate of population growth. Regularization of land ownership claims; land reform; policies facilitating access to credit, new technology, and other needed inputs; and pricing policies geared to the needs of small landholders should be of great help in absorbing rural labor, reducing migration to the cities, and achieving rural development goals.¹⁰

Alleviating urban poverty by increasing access of the urban poor to social services will help improve the quality and productivity of the labor force. Even within existing budgets, redirection of city services toward the poor should help increase their productivity and income. The rationale behind the policy is not only an ethical one—the alleviation of poverty—but one of efficiency.¹¹

■ **Intermediate urban centers.** Rural development strategies should be coordinated with policies designed to promote the growth of small towns and other secondary urban centers. These intermediate centers should become vigorous points of interaction with rural economic growth by encouraging small-scale industries, marketing facilities for rural products, and agricultural extension services. Furthermore, they offer better prospects for cooperation and success since there is more flexibility in planning and in conducting demonstration projects than in the big cities and metropolitan centers.

■ **Employment.** Employment in the major cities must be improved to raise the standard of living in urban areas. For example, efforts should be made to improve the urban poor's access to employment opportunities and social services. There is thus an urgent need to examine the scope and adequacy of current policies relating to employment promotion, particularly in the

informal sector; promotion of small-scale industry; employment generation through investments in housing and community infrastructure for the poor; and improvements in productivity and working conditions to vulnerable groups, such as women, in the urban labor market.

■ **Productivity.** In spite of the plight of urban centers in Africa, these cities nonetheless play a necessary and crucial role in a country's development—a role that can spearhead economic growth if successfully managed.

Cities need agricultural products, and they stimulate regional marketing by supplying rural areas with higher-quality goods and services. They provide the infrastructure necessary for the development of local resources, and they increase the productivity of agriculture. They provide relief for the rural sector by absorbing its migrants, thereby contributing to the preservation of ecological viability. Finally, cities are crystallization centers for social innovation and democratic participation; social change usually begins in cities.

If success is to come to future urban areas, the previous exploitative and resource-squandering economic patterns must be replaced by self-contained, resource-conserving ones. This will require a change in value systems by replacing such values as productivity, growth, and hedonistic consumption with those of regeneration, sustainability, and the ascetic life. Hence the informal sector and urban agriculture will have to be recognized and given all the help they need. Self help is indispensable to earning a living.

To increase productivity of the urban economy, the role of central governments will have to shift from being direct providers of urban services and infrastructure to enablers,

creating a regulatory and financial environment in which private enterprises, households, and community groups can play an increasing role in meeting their own needs. It also will require some measure of decentralization of responsibility to municipalities for urban finance and management of infrastructure, with adequate safeguards to ensure accountability.

■ **Infrastructure.** Studies have shown that if infrastructure facilities are provided, the people are capable of self-regeneration.¹² There should be a reformed infrastructure policy that focuses on meeting user demands. This would be a radical departure from the traditional concentration on the supply of services with little attention paid to the user. Consumer dissatisfaction results from not having a demand orientation; the result is wasted investments, lost economic production, and low willingness to pay for services.

■ **Mobility.** The most effective way of reducing transport problems is to concentrate homes, workplaces, shops, and schools in such a manner that essential movements are reduced to a minimum. Other solutions include control of motor vehicles, improved technical competence in car maintenance, and the establishment of local institutional frameworks to ensure efficient planning, management, and coordination of transport systems. Heavy investments are needed in pedestrian and bicycle-ways, roads, parking facilities, and public transport.

■ **Environmental awareness.** Another area requiring attention is the emerging environmental crisis in towns and cities.¹³ Urban development must include environmental consideration, and the law should facilitate the integration of environmental policy into development processes. For particular resources

and ultimately for whole cities, environmental audits are needed to deal with demand, resource use, and disposal of waste products. There is also a need for the development and implementation of municipal health plans that promote community participation in urban improvement activities, public health education, and strengthening of environmental health capabilities.

■ **Sustainable development.** Within a few short years, more than half of Africa's population will live in urban areas. The main challenge in the next 20 years, therefore, is to manage the development of human settlements in such a way as to satisfy the social, economic, and environmental goals of sustainable development, overcome the limitations of past human settlement policies, and satisfy the growing demand for democratic governance at all levels of society.¹⁴

Today, we are seeing the introduction of innovative land development mechanisms that combine social, economic, and environmental goals; promote appropriate standards that work with, rather than against, land markets; and use new forms of public/private partnerships. Efforts are being made in facilitating land titling and land transactions, infrastructure-led development, and improved investment decision making. Capacity building and community participation is being encouraged too. It is also important to develop strategic approaches to environmental planning that consider management and institutional implications.

■ **Governance.** Most of Africa's urban problems arise from a failure of government institutions to manage rapid change and to tap the knowledge, resources, and capacities among the population within each city. There is a fundamental lack of

good governance. The future of African cities will be shaped by the success of strategies aimed at ameliorating the urban crisis.

It is necessary to have an effective urban management that ensures efficiency in resource use. This can be accomplished through a civil service that encourages stakeholders to participate in decision making; develops forms of participatory municipal budgeting and enhanced ownership of programs and projects; promotes the alleviation of urban poverty; develops local judicial, financial, and managerial systems; and improves municipal finance and revenue generation.¹⁵

Governments need to assume a central role in guiding urban development but a lesser role in providing the investment. Municipalities should encourage and support a multiplicity of large and small initiatives, investments, and expenditures by individuals, households, businesses, and voluntary agencies. The municipal authorities' role becomes one of facilitating development, resolving conflicting goals and the competing claims of different interests, and using subsidies to leverage private development. Hence there is a need to build partnerships with government agencies, citizen groups, nongovernment organizations, and the business community.

■ **Training.** Today, there is a huge scarcity of adequately trained, qualified personnel for policy, management, and the technical operations of running a city. National human-resource-development policies and strategies for settlement, management, and development must be prepared.

Changing Attitudes

As the agenda of urbanization has grown more daunting, a change in public attitudes could be the means

of engaging more people in the process of coping with the problems of urban growth. If that happens, Africa's cities can be made to work. Problems that appeared insurmountable will become more manageable. The cities will then become more productive, making a greater contribution to national development and the welfare of their citizens.■

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