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Africa's future will be decided in its cities

Increasingly, Africa's growing cities are becoming the site of changing socio-political struggles for public goods

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In the next 25 years, Africa's urban population is set to double. By 2040, the majority of Africans will be living in cities. There are numerous reasons for this: climate change, violent conflicts and the hope of finding work or education, although this list could easily be extended. Urbanisation thus constitutes one of the greatest transformations facing Africa in the 21st century.

Despite the diversity of the African continent however, it's so far mostly 'unjust' cities that people are moving to. The majority live in informal settlements and work in precarious conditions, mostly in the informal sector, without employment contracts and social security. In Kenya's capital Nairobi, for example, over 60 per cent of the population live in informal settlements that account for less than 10 per cent of the city area. By contrast, the national and international elite often live in closed-off compounds protected by private security services.

Crucially, urbanisation in Africa is taking place in the absence of a structural transformation of the economy. The typical city dweller in Lagos or Nairobi is not a textile worker, but rather a hawker selling imported second-hand shirts; or a domestic worker with an average salary of less than three US dollars a day; or an Uber driver who has to hand over 25 per cent of his income to a Silicon Valley company. To have trade union representation in these sectors is particularly difficult. Incomes vary from day to day and are usually far below the minimum wage. When a worker falls ill, often she will soon be in debt.

The outdated developmental sequence

Urbanisation without jobs for the increasing number of city dwellers presents the continent with ever greater challenges. The sequence of

industrialisation and urbanisation known in Europe and parts of Asia is nowhere to be seen in Africa and, in an age of automation and increasing trade conflicts, probably not possible. The manufacturing sector remains stuck at around 10 per cent of GDP.

In Europe and parts of Asia, an increase in agricultural productivity and expansion of state education and health services have often been accompanied by a strategic industrial and trade policy protecting those nations' markets. This has led to the industrialisation of cities and the creation of jobs in export-oriented, urban factories. The availability of these jobs has accelerated urbanisation, increased the demand for urban services and sometimes led to socio-political and economic pluralism. This has been the case particularly when workers' parties and unions were able to gain new freedoms and better wages.

There's a threatening scenario in which the African labour markets of the future will, even more so than today, become urban, precarious and informal ones.

It's however often forgotten that, in Europe, this sequence was politically prepared by authoritarian land reforms forcing the rural population into urban wage employment. In Africa, you not only have the unequal distribution of land originating from the colonial era, but the increasing negative impact of climate change on agricultural productivity driving greater numbers of Africans into urban areas. However, there are hardly any prospects for a decent income there.

While economic productivity and the demand for jobs are decoupling all over the world, many African governments and the international community seem to continue to hope for an outdated 'developmental sequence' bringing the industrial jobs to the African continent that will soon become too expensive in China or Vietnam because of wage increases or automation.

Dystopian African labour markets

In many African countries, special economic zones and tax exemptions are expected to attract international investment for the growth of new industries. These hopes will probably prove futile in the future, when simple activities in manufacturing industries will be taken over by digital systems. However, there are few alternatives in sight. For example, a growing but still small IT and start-up sector in Kenya employs only a small educated elite and has limited growth potential, given that jobs require highly skilled workers.

There's a threatening scenario in which the African labour markets of the future will, even more so than today, become urban, precarious and informal ones. Shaping urbanisation therefore also involves the basic question of which economic path the continent can take, especially if the old industrialisation pattern is no longer available in an era of Industry 4.0 and the climate crisis.

For example, the discussions on the economic effects of climate change in many African countries do not focus on how existing jobs in carbon-intensive industries can be converted into climate-neutral jobs – because these jobs often simply don't exist. The issue is rather how climate-neutral jobs can be created in the first place.

Moreover, cities around the world are already responsible for more than 70 per cent of all CO2 emissions – and, in the future, over a billion people are expected to live in African cities. Much of the necessary urban infrastructure in Africa has not yet been built. It's unclear how, by whom, under what conditions, for whom, and with what kind of energy supply, this infrastructure should be built. There is great potential here for African countries to actively shape this future, but also an immediate need for international and national policy to focus more on African cities.

Urbanisation is changing politics

So far, urbanisation in Africa has been the catalyst of various inequalities. The political fight against inequality in Africa is therefore automatically becoming an urban one. That's why the multi-party systems introduced on the continent in the early 1990s are already changing. Multi-party elections were introduced at the same time as the reduction of public services, largely because of the structural adjustment programs mandated by the IMF and the World Bank. Hence, an increase in political freedom was accompanied with a decreasing access to public goods. Thus far, the economic patterns set during the colonial exploitation of the continent have been perpetuated by international financial, trade, and unfair taxation regimes. Raw materials and minimally taxed profits continue to be exported out of the continent, all the while manufactured products are being imported into it.

Along struggles for a right to the city, new forms of political engagement among urban residents

Without industrialisation in cities, there have hardly been any parties or politicians representing the interests of urban workers on the continent. So far, the population working in rural agriculture have been the majority. This made it much easier for political elites in many

demanding to be involved to ensure urban equity and diversity are becoming possible.

African countries to mobilise alleged regional, linguistic or ethnic differences during electoral campaign in line with their interests. This mobilisation model has now come under pressure. Opposition parties on the continent are already more successful in cities than in the countryside, while governing parties can still rely on support in rural areas. This will soon change when the majority of voters are living in cities.

Across the continent, it therefore seems likely that living in the city will gain in importance for the formation of political identity. It might not be the strike in the factory, but the threat of forced eviction in a slum to make way for a road, or a hike in fees for privatised drinking water, that will drive political mobilisation in the future. According to the researcher Lisa Mueller, social movements in different countries across the continent are already increasingly organising new alliances among middle classes and poorer urban dwellers against social inequality. Additionally, the analyst Nanjala Nyabola describes how urban online activism has led to new forms of – sometimes cross-border – political engagements and solidarity. Overall, social movement and citizen protests show a heavier focus on urban areas than in the past.

Urban populism and new alliances

Now, even politicians are changing their tactics. From Ghana to Kenya, some politicians are using new methods to target the majority of those who are informally living and working in cities. These campaigns often run on a discourse that distinguishes between the urban poor and the elites in the affluent areas.

The governor of Nairobi for example, Mike Sonko, has won elections by specifically targeting the majority of younger voters in informal settlements. He himself does not belong to any of the influential political families and does not focus on mobilising for electoral support along ethnic differences. Trucks with drinking water, short-term job creation schemes in slums and the ad hoc prevention of forced evictions have led to electoral support for Sonko, but also to controversial discussions among some Nairobians about his approach to politics and urban development.

As the researcher Danielle Resnick shows, candidates campaigning in different African cities, mostly from opposition parties, have been successful with different brands of urban populism in national and local

elections. However, it remains doubtful whether the ad hoc nature and often controversial modalities of decision-making among such urban populists offer long-term solutions to the immense structural problems in Africa's cities.

What seems to be missing is a feasible long-term social urban development policy combined with new ideas for socially just and ecologically sustainable economic paths creating prospects for the increasing number of precarious urban dwellers. Such a discussion must go beyond ambitions to build African imitations of Dubai or Singapore, so called smart cities, that however would not provide enough housing, transport and jobs for the city's majority in many African countries. That's why, in order for the 'unjust' city to become a 'just' one, economic and urban planning decision-making processes need to involve citizens more than ever to deliberate on issues that affect them, from the municipal up to the national level.

Growing cities are already the site of new socio-political struggles for public goods. More and more city dwellers across the continent are voting for new politicians out of mistrust for the old ones. New social movements are overcoming old divisions, using urban and digital spaces. In the future, civic engagement in Africa will be defined ever more by urban life. Along struggles for a right to the city, new forms of political engagement among urban residents demanding to be involved to ensure urban equity and diversity are becoming possible.



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