

## AFRICAN URBANIZATION—DEMOGRAPHY, NOT ECONOMICS

By George F. Ward

At a symposium on the United States and Africa co-sponsored by the Institute for Defense Analyses on June 7, 2016, participants identified key [megatrends](#) at play on the continent. Urbanization was one of these. Indeed, Africa's urban population is growing rapidly. In 2016, Africa was reported to have had the world's fastest average urban population growth rate, approximately [3.9 percent](#). By 2035, the majority of Africans will probably live in urban areas. Given the potential significance of Africa's shift from predominantly rural to mostly urban, it is worth looking into the nature of African urbanization, variations in the trend among subregions and countries, and the challenges posed by this important megatrend. [more...](#)



Aerial shot of Lagos, Nigeria, showing the extent of urban sprawl in the city. (Image credit: Sustainable Energy Africa [SEA].)

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Kenya's opposition leader Raila Odinga, center, shakes the hand of a supporter as he leaves after announcing he will challenge the results of the August 8, 2017 presidential election in the Supreme Court. (Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis.)

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### About IDA

The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## From Rural to Urban

Most of the world's population lives in cities, and the proportion of urban dwellers is growing. According to the [Population Division](#) of the United Nations, 54 percent of the world's population resided in urban areas in 2014. By 2050, that proportion is projected to increase to 66 percent.

In contrast to most of the rest of the world, Africa has remained mostly rural, with around 40 percent of the population living in urban areas in 2014. In the run-up to mid-century, the world's rural population is expected to decline from approximately 3.4 billion to 3.2 billion. Africa will again be an exception, with rural populations continuing to increase in many countries. In fact, the world's largest increases in rural populations are expected to be seen in Nigeria (50 million) and Ethiopia and Uganda (39 and 38 million, respectively).

Nevertheless, in the context of high rates of birth and longer life expectancies, Africa's urban population will increase much faster than the rural. By mid-century, Africa's urban population is expected to triple, reaching about 56 percent of total population. That number will still be lower than the global proportion cited above.

## Patterns in African Urbanization

In most of the world, recent urbanization has been closely linked to [structural transformation](#) of the economies of developing countries. As in the archetypal case of China, agricultural productivity has increased, producing both surpluses of food and of farmers. The latter have migrated to urban areas and fueled a wave of industrialization.

Urbanization in Africa has not been driven by improved agricultural productivity, and despite the increase in urban populations, industrial output has remained stagnant. The key here is that [natural demographic growth](#)—the predominance of births over deaths—has been the single most important driver contributing to the increase in African urban populations. Rural-urban migration accounted for less than one-third of urban population growth in most African countries from 2010 to 2015.

Looked at subregionally, [African urbanization is not uniform](#). Today, North Africa is already 54 percent urban, while the percentage in East Africa is 26 percent. The other subregions—Central, South, and West—are between 42 and 45 percent urban. By 2050, West Africa is projected to surge to 71 percent urban, surpassing North Africa at 62 percent. East Africa and the Horn would be the only subregions to remain majority rural.

These differentials in rates of growth have led one scholar, Dr. Deborah Potts of Kings College, London, to question the thesis of African urbanization. [Writing](#) in 2012, Dr. Potts asked, "Whatever Happened to Africa's Rapid Urbanization?"

She noted a decline during the first decade of the century in the proportion of Kenyans living in urban settlements, similar declines in Copperbelt towns in Zambia in an earlier decade, and the general unreliability or unavailability of census data. Although the weight of evidence seems to be on the side of increasing urbanization, the examples cited by Potts are reminders that the trend is by no means uniform.

## Impact on African Cities

Largely because African urbanization is a demographic rather than an economic phenomenon, African cities display key differences from those in some other regions of the world:

- Africa is urbanizing in poverty. Africa is [strikingly poorer](#) than other developing regions at similar stages of urbanization. When the Middle East and North Africa region became 40 percent urban in 1968, their per capita GDP was \$1,800 (2005 constant dollars). East Asia and the Pacific reached the 40 percent threshold in 1994 with \$3,600 per capita GDP. In contrast, sub-Saharan Africa, which today is 40 percent urban, has a per capita GDP of only around \$1,000.
- Africa's cities [are crowded with people, but they are not dense](#) with economic activity, infrastructure, housing, or commercial structures. Because of the lack of transportation infrastructure, people seek housing close to their work locations. The result has been the growth of large, sprawling slums near city centers. These slums, which often lack access to basic services, are where 60 percent of Africa's urban population lives. The percentage of urban slum dwellers elsewhere is 34 percent.
- Cities have become unplanned patchworks of developed and undeveloped tracts. In the cases of both [Harare, Zimbabwe, and Maputo, Mozambique](#), more than 30 percent of the land within five kilometers of the central business district remains unbuilt.
- Because of their decentralized, unplanned natures, African cities generally do not reap the benefits of "[agglomeration economies](#)." These are places where labor pools, intermediate industrial inputs, and knowledge can be shared and where transaction costs can be reduced. Instead, African cities are places where islands of relative wealth and economic activity are surrounded by seas of poverty.
- The lack of economic density decreases efficiency and drives up the cost of living in African cities. Despite pervasive poverty, necessities such as food, housing, and urban transportation cost strikingly more in Africa cities than in their counterparts in other world regions. According to [World Bank researchers](#), African urban households pay 20 to 31 percent more for goods and services than those in other developing countries.

## Conclusion

The net effect of these and other factors is that many African cities today seem condemned to remain local entities, trapped into producing only locally traded goods and services, closed to regional and global markets, and limited in their economic growth prospects. Urban sprawl will likely continue to outdistance efforts to provide the physical infrastructure, educational opportunities, and health services that will be needed to serve Africa's rapidly growing urban population. The [United Nations Human Settlements Program](#) sees indications that the failure of cities to fulfill basic human needs is fueling a rise in urban violence, resulting since 2010 in a spike in the frequency of demonstrations, riots, anti-government violence, and organized crime. At a time in which inter-state conflicts on the African continent have decreased, this increase in urban violence and instability demands the attention of African governments and their international partners.

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Kenya's opposition leader Raila Odinga, center, shakes the hand of a supporter as he leaves after announcing he will challenge the results of the August 8, 2017 presidential election in the Supreme Court. (Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis.)

## Background

Kenya is located in East Africa and has a population of [46 million](#). As noted in previous [editions](#) of Africa Watch, Kenya has an extended [history](#) of troubled and violent elections since the country moved to a multiparty system in the early 1990s. Post-election violence in the wake of the 2007 poll left more than [1,200](#) killed and 600,000 displaced. In the 2013 elections, which were largely peaceful, Kenyatta beat Odinga in a very close race. Violence during primary elections and the [killing](#) of an election commission official just days before the 2017 election prompted [fears](#) that this year's poll might return the country to the dark days of 2007–2008, which brought Kenya to the edge of civil war.

## The 2017 Vote

The 2017 poll itself was peaceful, with [turnout](#) reaching nearly 80 percent. According to the electoral commission, Kenyatta [won](#) 54.3 percent of the vote, compared with Odinga's 44.7 percent. After Odinga alleged fraud, saying that the results had been hacked (but not providing any evidence), protests erupted in opposition strongholds. Clashes with the police led to the [deaths](#) of up to 28 people, which are currently being [investigated](#) by Kenya's police-monitoring body, the Independent Police Oversight Authority. On August 16, Odinga and NASA announced that they would contest the results through the courts and not in the streets, filing a [petition](#) that is currently with the country's Supreme Court.

The petition [alleges](#) that more than a third of election results are "fatally flawed" due to irregularities that arose from the electronic transmission of paper forms at each local polling station. As Odinga and NASA [contend](#), "The series of gaps, whether deliberate or product of negligence, frustrated the use of technology to deliver an accountable results transmission process. . . . Manipulation and distortion of results renders it impossible to tell who actually won." The opposition also [alleged](#) that there were "numerous instances when their ticket was denied votes and others in which their competitor . . . had undeserved votes added to his total." The Court has until September 1 to make a ruling. If the Court [rules](#) in Odinga's favor, a rerun of the election will be held in 60 days. If the Court rules in favor of Kenyatta, he will be sworn in on September 12.

## Domestic and International Observers

Both domestic and international election observers, including the European Union and the Carter Center, have largely [praised](#) the conduct of the vote as peaceful and [credible](#). The Trump administration [agreed](#): "We commend the dedication of candidates, officials, and the public to upholding a peaceful, fair, and transparent contest, and we welcome the statements by international and domestic observer missions affirming the credibility of the election." The Elections Observation Group, a domestic civil society organization that deployed 8,300 observers and ran a parallel vote tabulation, largely [corroborated](#) the official results released by the electoral commission. But domestic and international observers also noted problems with how the [vote](#) was tabulated and called for transparency.

## Down-Ballot Results

If Kenya's Supreme Court upholds the election results, in addition to winning the presidency, the Jubilee Party will also have made headway further down the ballot. The Jubilee Party [won](#) a majority in the National Assembly and the Senate, and the party and Kenyatta-aligned candidates also took 28 out of 47 races for governor. Interestingly, with the exception of Kenyatta, [incumbents](#) did not fare well, with 179 Members of Parliament (out of 290) voted out of power. Kenyan women will also be major winners, for the first time [taking](#) three governorships and three seats in the Senate. Sophia Abdi Noor, from northeastern Kenya, will also become the [first](#) ethnic Somali woman to win a seat in parliament.

## Conclusion

From a logistical standpoint, the Kenyan election on balance appears to have gone quite well. Indeed, scholars Nic Cheeseman, Gabriel Lynch, and Justin Willis [assert](#), "The electoral process, and the results, currently look much more credible than any since 2002" (Kenya's 2002 election marked the first transfer of power in the country). But concerns remain regarding transparency issues with how the vote was tabulated and the use of force by police. Although the electoral commission [announced](#) this week that the body has handed over all vote tabulation forms to the Supreme Court, many of the forms have yet to be posted publicly, precluding independent verification of the results. The attempted [crackdown](#) on two nongovernmental organizations in the wake of the election is also troubling.

That said, the results of the parallel vote tabulation, as well as Jubilee's down ballot [success](#), suggest that widespread fraud, as Odinga alleges, is unlikely to have taken place. In addition, large-scale ethnically based violence, which many feared, has thus far been avoided. But the country is not in the clear yet. The conduct of Kenyatta, Odinga, and the police will be crucial to avoiding violence in the wake of the upcoming court ruling. As [noted](#) by John Campbell of the Council on Foreign Relations, "If Kenya is to continue to avoid widespread violence, Kenyatta and Odinga must be restrained in their rhetoric and the administration must insist on security service discipline."

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