

URBANIZATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: PERILS AND POTENTIAL

By Hilary Matfess

Although it remains largely rural, sub-Saharan Africa is rapidly urbanizing. The urban population in the region has been increasing [5 percent a year since the early 1970s](#). A number of factors have contributed to this trend, ranging from [conflict-related displacement](#) to urban [job markets](#). Just as the factors driving urbanization are both positive and negative, so too are the potential outcomes of this phenomenon a mixture of peril and promise. Urbanization is often considered a global economic boon, as cities account for more [than 80 percent of the world's GDP](#). African cities, however, are characterized by low levels of services relative to urban centers in other regions. In 2014, the United Nations (UN) estimated that more than 61 percent of the continent's city-dwellers live in ["slum conditions."](#) Understanding the potential benefits and risks of African urbanization is a critical task for the international community. [more...](#)

Hilary Matfess is a Research Associate in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.



Lagos, Nigeria. (Source: Image taken from Vladimir Odintsov, "On the Influence of Urbanization on the Situation in Africa," New Eastern Outlook, December 28, 2013, <http://journal-neo.org/2013/12/28/rus-o-vliyanii-urbanizatsii-na-obstanovku-v-stranah-afrikii/>.)

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Pastor Evan Mawarire leaves the Harare Magistrates Court Wednesday, July 13, 2016, after the court freed him ruling that police violated his rights. Mawarire was charged with attempting to overthrow a constitutionally elected government by organizing a nationwide strike that shut the country down last week. (Source: AP Photo.)

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Hundreds of South Sudanese protest in Juba, South Sudan against Foreign military intervention Wednesday, July 20, 2016. (Source: AP Photo/Samir Bol.)

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The role of economic development in promoting national security is well-established and [frequently commented upon](#). As Secretary of Defense Gates said in 2010, “economic development is a lot [cheaper than sending soldiers](#).” The United States and its global partners recognize the utility of “soft” development programing in complementing and facilitating “hard” national security objectives. This is particularly true for advancing strategic interests in Africa. [more...](#)

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The UN's Sustainable Development Goals are driving investment in data collection, but the amount and types of data required may be beyond the capabilities of many African governments to collect. (Source: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focus/sdgs.html>.)

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Benefits for the Taking

Cities often drive innovation and growth in nations. Not only do those residing in cities reap these benefits, they are also passed along to rural and suburban communities through money, called "[remittances](#)," sent to rural communities from urban workers. The "virtuous cycle" created by these remittance flows creates a situation in sub-Saharan Africa in which urban migration "[appears favorable on balance for sending and receiving areas](#)." Remittances make rural communities more stable, as rural residents have a more diversified income stream.

At the same time, more densely populated areas present the opportunity to expand access to social services. The World Bank asserts that the "per capita costs of many forms of infrastructure and social service are generally lower" in cities than in [rural areas](#). Health services and educational activities may also be improved by increased population concentration, if urbanization is well-managed and thoughtfully undertaken.

The importance of capitalizing on the opportunities urbanization affords has been recognized by the international community. The need to "make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" was enshrined as Goal #11 in the United Nations' compendium of [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).

Risks Abound

Despite the potential benefits of urbanization, the reality that many urban Africans face is grim. Although cities have the potential to be drivers of growth, many [migrants lack the education and skills](#) needed to find formal employment, resulting in the majority of urban employment in Africa being [informal](#), which is employment untaxed and unmonitored by governments, such as street hawking and food vending. This phenomenon is accelerating; the African Development Bank estimates that [93 percent](#) of all new urban jobs are in the informal economy.

The amount of urban informal employment, as well as the high unemployment rate itself, makes it difficult for municipalities and local governments to collect sufficient taxes [to finance necessary infrastructure projects](#) and improve living conditions.

Though, in theory, urbanization can improve service delivery, in practice these benefits have yet to fully emerge in sub-Saharan cities. In Lagos, Nigeria, [only half the residents have access to the potable water network](#), and delivery and availability are intermittent even for those that have service. These issues of access and delivery plague many social service programs in African cities—although it is worth noting that [access is generally higher in African urban centers than in rural areas](#).

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While sub-national government units are often responsible for service provision and urban planning, the current system of global lending and assistance is focused on national governments. A report by the [Center for Strategic and International Studies \(CSIS\)](#) noted that the multilateral development banks “and other donors need instruments and mechanisms that will allow them to work more directly with municipal and provincial governments, while encouraging accompanying private investment,” since national governments often are not well equipped to respond to urban needs.

All these developmental challenges have ramifications for global security. Richard J. Norton described the possibility of messy, uncontrolled urbanization creating “feral cities,” whose “very size and densely built-up character make them natural havens for a variety of hostile non-state actors, ranging from small cells of terrorists to large paramilitary forces and militias.” Norton suggests that because conducting military operations against these criminal groups and violent actors would be difficult given the physical and human terrain, feral cities create fertile ground for destabilizing movements.

Why African Urbanization is Different

Some of the unique attributes of African urbanization can be explained by the motivations driving urban migration in Africa. Studies have found that African urbanization is more frequently the result of “push” factors (such as declining agricultural productivity from shifting rain patterns or violent conflict in rural areas), rather than “pull” factors (such as the availability of higher paying jobs and better services in cities). In other regions, rural-urban migration is a means of securing a more stable financial future, but in sub-Saharan Africa, rural-urban migration does not radically alter livelihood security.

In addition, the lack of manufacturing centers and low levels of industrialization in sub-Saharan Africa means that many African cities maintain an unusually high dependence on [natural resource development and agriculture](#). These trades “can also be seen as [urban survival strategies](#), rather than a strong motor of growth.” As the [London School of Economics](#) observes, “pre-industry urbanization seems associated with consumer cities rather than producer cities,” which inhibits the ability of cities to drive growth. Another effect of the general lack of an industrial manufacturing hub in African cities is that settlements are often [diffuse and sprawling](#), which is an additional obstacle to establishing physical infrastructure and effective social services.

Conclusions

Since urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa is a persistent trend, it is important to understand its unique characteristics and to respond to them. Reforming international development strategies could make partnerships with cities and municipalities possible. At present, few African cities have access to the [sorts of financial tools](#) that could catalyze inclusive, sustainable growth through infrastructure development and human capital investment. Sensible planning, coupled with international technical support, investment, and aid, could help Africans reap the potential benefits of urbanization.

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The month of July 2016 has been a difficult one for Zimbabwe. Civic protests, fueled by social media, have continued to grow. The country's economic problems have deepened, and the government has been unable to pay its own employees. Plans for international help with debt relief seem to have gotten nowhere. With one key group of government supporters in open political revolt, gaps in the unity of the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), have been exposed. The question of whether any of these developments will result in political change remains open.

Grim Economic Outlook

Africa Watch [reported](#) on June 30, 2016, that staff-level talks between the government of Zimbabwe and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had concluded positively, with the government seeking financing to resolve its \$1.8 billion in financial arrears to the IMF, the African Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank. Significant hurdles remained, both internationally and domestically, with opposition within the ZANU-PF to cuts in the public sector payroll likely. Nevertheless, a glimmer of hope remained.

Since then, hope has turned to pessimism, both internationally and domestically. On July 14, a spokesman for the IMF [told](#) journalists in Washington, “there is no financing program under discussion with Zimbabwe at this point.” The spokesman added that negotiations could begin only after Zimbabwe's financial arrears have been cleared. The IMF's position on negotiations would also take into account issues such as “governance, accountability, and transparency.” According to *Africa Confidential*, the government of Zimbabwe and its advisors are having [difficulty](#) raising the funds needed to clear the arrears.

One [keen observer](#) of the situation in Zimbabwe described the situation succinctly: “Zimbabwe's money is running out—and fast.” Payment of military and other public sector salaries was delayed in June, and those salaries were again not paid in mid-July. Subsequently, the government [announced](#) that the military services would be paid on July 25; nurses and doctors on July 27; the police on July 29; and teachers, who make up the largest number of state employees, only on August 2.

Anti-Government Protests Increase

The delays in payment of public salaries, while probably dictated by financial realities, were certain to increase the already elevated level of popular unrest in the country. In April, [Pastor Evan Mawarire](#) had recorded a Facebook video in which he literally wrapped himself in the country's flag and lamented how the government had defiled and corrupted the promise implicit in that banner. The pastor's eloquent message struck a chord, and [#ThisFlag](#) went viral on Twitter, contributing to protests across the country. On July 6, the [#ThisFlag](#) movement mobilized a [peaceful, stay-at-home protest](#) that proved effective. Businesses, including banks and department stores, were forced to close for lack of staff. The next week, Pastor Mawarire was arrested and charged with inciting public violence. At Mawarire's hearing on July 13, 100 lawyers gathered inside the courtroom to show solidarity with the pastor, and a crowd of thousands gathered outside. The court released Mawarire, who soon resumed his nonviolent advocacy, but from South Africa, where he [fled](#) out of fear for his life.

President Robert Mugabe has outlasted popular protests in the past, and he doubtless aims to do so again. A serious complicating factor emerged, however, when on July 21, the organization of veterans of the war of liberation issued a [communiqué](#) denouncing President Mugabe and the ZANU-PF government. The veterans noted, “with concern, shock



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and dismay, the systematic entrenchment of dictatorial tendencies, personified by the President and his cohorts, which have slowly devoured the values of the liberation struggle in utter disregard of the Constitution.” The veterans’ statement concluded with a promise to support Mugabe no longer: “we the veterans of Zimbabwe’s war of liberation, together with our toiling masses, hereby declare that, henceforth, in any forthcoming elections, will not support such a leader who has presided over untold suffering of the general population for his own personal aggrandizement and that of his cronies.”

Where Is Zimbabwe Headed?

The surprising defection on July 21 of the veterans, who had been a core source of support for Mugabe and the ZANU-PF government, is a significant development. In immediate terms, it was a contrast to a ZANU-PF mass gathering in Harare on the preceding day, in which the party’s youth organization had shown its support for President Mugabe. In covering the pro-Mugabe event, the ZANU-PF–friendly newspaper *The Herald* fancifully [described](#) the ruling party as “a mean, mass-mobilizing machine” and characterized the stage-managed demonstration as a “flash crowd” that “nobody saw . . . coming.”

The juxtaposition of the veterans’ dissent and the pro-Mugabe youth demonstration symbolizes an increasingly important division within the ZANU-PF. The veterans decried President Mugabe’s intentions to “turn the present young generation against us for his own continued personal aggrandizement.” Responding to the veterans’ move, Minister of Local Government Saviour Kasukuwere [declared](#) at a party rally on July 22 that the ZANU-PF was prepared to repossess farms that had been allocated to veterans and subdivide them into residential plots for the benefit of “loyal youths.”

It is perhaps no coincidence that of the two putative rivals to succeed President Mugabe, one is identified with the older generation represented by the veterans and the other is supported by a youth movement within the party. Veterans have been an important constituency for Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa, while the so-called [G40](#), a movement of younger politicians within ZANU-PF that includes the aforementioned Minister Kasukuwere, is viewed as supporting the aspirations of Grace Mugabe, the president’s wife. Viewed through this optic, it would seem that rival factions within the ZANU-PF may be more interested in using the current period of popular unrest to score political points within the party than in addressing the pressing need for political and economic reform. Without the latter, continual deterioration in the Zimbabwean economy is probable, and the potential for significant social unrest could increase.

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Hundreds of South Sudanese protest in Juba, South Sudan against Foreign military intervention Wednesday, July 20, 2016. (Source: AP Photo/Samir Bol.)

A Winner-Take-All System Leads to Conflict

The latest outbreak of violence coincided with South Sudan's fifth anniversary of independence. Over five days, running battles between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the SPLA-IO left at least [272 dead](#) in the capital, Juba. The conflict was sparked by the presence of [1,400 recently-arrived SPLA-IO](#) forces in Juba. The soldiers were accompanying Machar as he took office in accordance with the [August 2015 Compromise Peace Agreement](#) (CPA-2) that ended the previous two years of civil war.

The resumption of conflict was unsurprising. As [Africa Watch](#) previously noted, South Sudan's constitution gives significant political power to the president, which is dangerous given the winner-take-all nature of South Sudanese politics. As longtime South Sudan observer Alex de Waal argues, South Sudanese politics are predicated on [patronage](#), giving an advantage to the politician with access to the most wealth.

The effect of political management through patronage has proven to be corrosive in South Sudan, leading to economic mismanagement that has inhibited the government's ability to provide [public services](#). It may also ultimately lead to political [fractionalization](#) as soldiers and political elites, given tacit authority to loot from the public, realize that they no longer need support from a national leader to gain power or turn a profit.

Upon South Sudan's independence, abundant oil wealth allowed Kiir to maintain political control by providing [payouts](#) to potential rivals. Following the January 2012 shutdown of oil wells, however, South Sudan quickly lost the revenue needed to maintain this "big tent" method of political management. As a result, opposition members challenged Kiir's authority, which ultimately led to a civil war.

While the civil war formally ended when Kiir and Machar signed the CPA-2, the newly created unity government did not resolve the underlying political conflict. In the interim, Kiir has continued to use state authority to strengthen his political power. Just four months after signing the CPA-2, Kiir dissolved South Sudan's existing 10 states and created [28 new states](#), appointing his supporters as governors.

Who's Really in Charge?

Despite years in power, both Kiir and Machar have recently struggled to maintain control of their factions. The most recent conflict created political vulnerabilities for Machar, who was forced to [leave Juba](#) during the fighting. In his absence, the SPLA-IO announced on [July 23](#) that Mining Minister Taban Deng Gai would replace Machar as the acting First Vice President.

Machar responded immediately, claiming he had [fired Deng](#), while SPLA-IO leaders loyal to Machar [claimed](#) Deng's supporters had forced SPLA-IO officials to make the announcement by holding them hostage at gunpoint in a Juba hotel. [Deng](#) rejected reports that he had been fired and maintained that he would continue to lead the SPLA-IO. On July 26, Kiir formally [replaced](#) Machar with Deng as the First Vice President, in a move that seemingly confirmed Kiir's [involvement](#) in his rival's ouster.

While Deng's appointment as First Vice President is an obvious challenge to Machar's authority, for the past year Machar has faced low-level internal challenges to his leadership. In [July 2015](#), Machar dismissed two of his most experienced generals after they objected to indications that Machar would attempt to broker peace with Kiir and reunify the SPLA-IO with the SPLA.

Like Machar, Kiir also faces significant internal pressure. Observers speculate that he does not control large segments of the SPLA, pointing to his [apparent confusion](#) at the outbreak of recent fighting and the high level of [control](#) the Chief of General Staff [Paul Malong](#) has over the military. Observers also believe Kiir faces pressure from the [Jieng Council of Elders](#), a group of political elites from the same Dinka ethnic group as Kiir who lobby for pro-Dinka policies.

Conclusion

As the international community moves forward in its attempts to maintain peace in South Sudan, Kiir and Machar's internal struggles pose a looming challenge. While the African Union has approved the creation of a [Regional Protection Force](#) to supplement the current [UN peacekeeping mission](#), Kiir's [supporters](#), and Kiir himself, have widely condemned the intervention as a violation of sovereignty. On July 24, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni [met](#) with Kiir to encourage him to accept the regional deployment. But if Kiir acquiesces to regional pressure, it may further weaken his position with hardliners within the SPLA.

The decision of whether or not to support the Regional Protection Force has also drawn attention to weaknesses within the SPLA-IO. On July 20, Taban Deng Gai claimed the SPLA-IO opposed regional intervention. He has maintained this stance and used his new position as the First Vice President to publicly push for the [integration](#) of the SPLA and SPLA-IO, a move that is [opposed](#) by SPLA-IO forces outside Juba who remain loyal to Machar.

The fractionalization of the SPLA-IO has increased the risk of a return to conflict. Perceptions of Kiir's involvement are especially concerning as SPLA-IO factions that remain loyal to Machar vehemently oppose Kiir's attempted co-optation of their party. Already, the SPLA-IO has [claimed](#) that the SPLA is carrying out attacks on its forces. In a conflict marked by brutal [ethnically based violence](#), further fractionalization of armed groups will likely make reconciliation and peacebuilding difficult.

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One of the greatest obstacles to effective promotion of economic development is the lack of reliable data. In calling for a [data revolution](#), the United Nations noted that “data are the lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability.” The lack of reliable data makes it difficult to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate programs aimed at either development or security. There are a number of obstacles to improving African data collection, including the politicization of the process, a lack of technical capacity, and the lack of standard metrics and processes.

Challenges to Good Data Collection

African governments, like the proverbial drunken man, often use statistics like lampposts, “for support rather than illumination.” The Nigerian experience illustrates many of the challenges to effective data collection. In 2013, the Chairman of the National Population Commission (NPC) resigned from his position after telling the media that “[no census has been credible in Nigeria since 1816](#),” because of the politicization of the process. Since in Nigeria, as elsewhere, statistics on populations determine the levels of funding received by state and local governments, there are a number of competing interests that compromise data integrity. A 2011 [analysis by the World Bank](#) was blunt, arguing that “the underlying cause” of poor data collection across a variety of sectors, “is that statistics are fundamentally political.”

Even in the absence of politicization of the data, however, there are a number of challenges, including “[weak capacity in countries to collect, manage and disseminate data; inadequate funding](#)”; and fragmented efforts to collect data. Low levels of education and constrained budgets have limited the technical capacity of African governments to effectively collect and manage data in a timely and regular fashion. The result is incomplete national data sets of dubious veracity, which are often unable to be compared to those from neighboring countries. Consider that in 2005, World Bank [statistics](#) demonstrated that Africa’s poverty rate had declined from 59 percent in 1995 to 50 percent, a result that was lauded as a major developmental success. However, only 39 countries had “[robust statistics](#) . . . for [which] we have internationally comparable estimates. And they are not comparable over the same year.” In fact, of the 39 countries, only 11 had comparable data for the same year.

Another complicating issue is the lack of methodological standards internationally. A study published in The Lancet in 2012 showcased an estimate by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) of 1.2 million deaths from malaria in 2010, [nearly double](#) the World Health Organization’s estimate for that same year. Although both organizations are well respected, variations in methodologies led them to vastly different results. The variations at the international level are replicated at



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the national level, creating a myriad of data collection and analysis variations. The lack of coherent methodologies makes it difficult to compare countries or even a single nation's progress over time.

Overburdening a Limited System

Unfortunately, the current trend toward “evidence-based policy” has increased the demand on African governments to produce and collect large amounts of data. According to Morten Jerven, the author of *Poor Numbers: How We are Misled by African Development Statistics and What We Can Do About It*, “donors are increasingly [demanding monitoring and data in return for funding](#).” This creates situations in which “the huge gaps in data, combined with blatant incentives to distort it,” result in “[policy driven evidence](#).” Aptly illustrating this increased demand are the [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#), which replaced the [8 Millennium Development Goals](#) in 2016 as the “blueprint” for international development. The new Sustainable Development Goals are subdivided into [169 targets and 230 individual indicators](#). Jerven asserts that these more [detailed goals](#), while laudable in their intention, will overstretch the already limited capacity of African governments to collect meaningful data. For example, throughout Africa, [fewer than half of births are officially recorded](#); it is unlikely these same countries will be able to gather the more detailed data required to comply with many of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusions and Reforms

The recognition of the importance of economic development for national security, in addition to the intrinsic benefits of human development, has galvanized action to improve development programs. But these same programs are overtaxing a data-collection system that is characterized by politicization, limited capacity, and methodological differences. There is a role for the international community to play in improving data collection and management in Africa. As the Center for Global Development asserts, one of the first steps is to reduce the demand on countries to produce so many metrics. Instead, “governments and donors should focus on the “[building blocks](#)” of national statistics systems,” such as “births and deaths; growth and poverty; tax and trade; sickness, schooling and safety; and land and environment.”

In addition to reducing demands on national statistics bureaus and focusing on a limited number of metrics, the international community could provide technical support and training to African governments. The maintenance of technologically relevant and methodologically sound data-collection practices would facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of programs aimed at improving economic development in Africa.

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