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SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION

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Sustainable Urbanization in Africa

In Africa, rapid urbanization is taking place at a moment when it is also passing through a deep demographic change with an exponential increase in the young work force; high economic growth mostly based on the continent natural resources and the need to speed up its industrialization process; environmental stress and the depletion of natural resources while at the same time the effects of climate change need to be mitigated and adapted to. In the African context, sustainable urbanization will thus need to address these mega-changes from a holistic and an integrated perspective to ensure urbanization will contribute to sustained growth, higher living standards, and environmental sustainability.

1. Urbanization in Africa: trends and characteristics

Africa is currently in the midst of a demographic transition that will shape its societies, economies and territories in the coming years. United Nations' data show that Africa is experiencing unprecedented population growth as the total African population is projected to nearly double from around one billion in 2010 to almost two billion by 2040, and may well reach 3 billion by 2070. Africa is also marked by a growing youth bulge that calls for increased attention to the plight young people face and the need to take advantage of the potential demographic dividend they bring.

Africa's urban transition is also taking place at the same time, with the accumulated relative growth rate of African cities now among the highest in the world. All African countries acknowledge the rapid pace of urbanization¹. About one century ago, the urban population in Africa was less than 8 per cent of the total population. At the end of the 20th Century, Africa was 35 per cent urban, 40 per cent in 2009, and 41 per cent in 2012. Currently, while Africa is the least urbanized continent in the world, it is experiencing the highest urban growth and the most rapid rate of urbanization. Between 1950 and 2005 the urban inhabitants in Africa grew by an average annual rate of 4.3% from about 33 million to 353 million persons. Even though the annual growth rate has declined to 3.36 per cent per year from 2005 to 2010 African urban areas grew 1.7 times faster than the urban growth rate of the world in the same years. The high growth rate means that some cities will double their population in 15 years, and some others even in a shorter period. The United Nations projections suggest that Africa will enter its urban age by 2035 when 50 percent of the population will live in urban areas. African cities with less than 500,000 inhabitants are now absorbing about 2/3 of all urban population growth. But, Africa larger cities continue to grow fast as well. In 2005, Africa had 43 cities with more than one million inhabitants, up from 28 a decade earlier. Traditional city-based urbanization is moving towards regional urbanization patterns, including the emergence of city regions, urban corridors, and mega urban regions. There are great variations between countries with a general pattern: the richer countries are more urbanized than the poorer ones, while landlocked countries are less urbanized than coastal ones at

¹ United Nations (2013), "Africa Regional Report: Main Findings and Recommendations", African Regional Conference on Population and Development, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), ECA/SDPD/PYS/ICPD/RP/2013

the same income level. The global urban transition currently being experienced is inevitable, irreversible and positive in many respects.

The changing landscape of Africa's increasingly urban future is often cited as constituting a 'mega-trend' resulting from a combination of rural-urban migration, natural population growth, and the spatial reclassification of urban areas. Moreover, conflicts, drought and rural poverty have driven millions of people out of their homes to live in slums and in the vicinity of the cities and towns as refugees and internally displaced persons.

This trend has enormous implications for sustainable development in Africa. Urbanization, together with Africa's approaching demographic transition may well become the most decisive determinants of Africa's economic and social development since independence. This shift from rural to urban population majorities – coterminous with the change to a younger demographic – will create difficult new challenges, but the potential to harness this powerful and unavoidable process represents an invaluable opportunity for accelerating Africa's transformation agenda.

The sense of urgency demanded by this unfolding scenario is presently limited. In the past, urbanization was neither given priority by national governments nor fully grasped by the population at large. This neglect is revealed in the failure by African policy makers to prioritize urbanization challenges and harness cities as drivers of development. Urbanization is carried on without concurrent economic development and without systematic urban planning leading to urban poverty and chaotic physical expansion. Urban centers are expanding without adequate planning and yet there is no appreciable drive to carry everyone along with their plans for addressing the urban challenges.

Most African cities suffer from a colonial "hangover" whereby the old colonial urban plans and practices (often replicated even in new "master plans") continue to prioritize the exclusion of the poor majorities and withhold investments for infrastructure and services for that population. Additional challenges facing urban development in Africa include low rates of economic growth and increasing urban poverty, inadequate infrastructure, the absence of clear urban land policies and land management systems, degradation of the environment and increased risks to public health, climate change, limited roles and capacities of local governments and municipal authorities, and weak urban-rural economic linkages².

Marginal role and weak capacities of municipal authorities: Although local governments are well developed in North Africa, in SSA (with the exception of South Africa), municipalities are marginalized and lack the required capacities and resources to plan and manage the more and more complex situations. The role of African local governments in urban development is indeed highly constrained. Many countries have sought to decentralize service delivery to local governments, but without a commensurate transfer/increase in revenue sources/financing. Moreover, most towns and cities in Africa have limited professional capacity for managing urban development. Municipalities lack legal and administrative frameworks for efficient service delivery and management of urban planning, land tenure and finance.

2. Sustainable development and urbanization in Africa: main challenges

2.1. Social Dimension: African cities are not fulfilling people's expectations, especially for the most vulnerable

Africa's urbanization "without development" should be a major cause for alarm for all member States. Historically, urbanization has been associated with improved human development, rising incomes and better

² African Development Bank (2011), "The Bank Group's Urban Development Strategy: Transforming Africa's Cities and Towns into Engines of Economic Growth and Social Development".

living standards. The urban trajectory in Africa has not generated significant formal economic development nor has urbanization in Africa derived from economic development (though the wealth generated in the informal economies should not be ignored and requires much greater research). UN-Habitat's data show that 63 per cent of Africa's urban population (SSA) still lives in slum conditions defined by the four dimensions of overcrowding, inadequate housing, insecure tenure and lack of access to water and sanitation³.

In most African countries, exceptionally rapid urban population growth has outpaced economic growth over the past 30 years contributing to the "urbanization of poverty" in the region. This, coupled to a laissez-faire approach to urban management has seen the proliferation of unplanned, under-serviced settlements, where diseases, associated with poor water and sanitation, are rife. Access to adequate health and education facilities is often limited; insecurity is dominant; organized policing is ad-hoc at best; and employment is mostly informal, insecure and poorly paid. Most African cities are characterized by severe backlogs in the provision of basic urban services, despite commitments made by African governments over the last 50 years to improve basic service delivery. And even more challenging is that, if no urgent remedial action is taken, the situation can further deteriorate due to the rapid rate at which demand for services and the cost for delivery are both rising in all types of human settlements.

The phenomena of urban slum proliferation is perhaps both the greatest existing challenge and the most pressing future challenge for those secondary towns and cities that are just now developing. In the mainstream urban policy approach there is seemingly little appreciation for the cumulative consequences of poverty and ill health if slum living conditions are allowed to remain as high as they are. Addressing urban poverty and slum conditions will require engaging urban poor majorities at an unprecedented level in defining the policy solutions needed and in better integrating social economies, informal economies and formal economic systems.

While lack of formal employment certainly is one factor contributing to urban poverty and the growth of slums, they are also the product of failed policies. Because of this, planned urbanization should be used as a tool for creating employment and livelihoods. This requires a shift away from viewing urbanization mainly as a problem, towards seeing it as a powerful tool for development, and a strategy against poverty, lack of adequate housing and urban basic services. Africa's rapid urbanization is also characterized by a sharp increase in inequality within African societies. The dominant type of city being promoted in African cities is detrimental to the built heritage and contributes to the generation of further exclusion and segregation. The make-up of the 20th century city that is being adopted today reflects and reinforces a pattern of wealth accumulation that is beneficial only for a few.

Informal employment and distressed youth are also becoming the new features of most African cities. Indeed, in most African countries, urban unemployment among the youth is higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. Moreover, given the youth bulge, especially in urban areas, and the urban values and habits, the needs for adequate responses to urban household formation are huge. Important to note that cities were at the centre of the social and political storm in North Africa and the Arab Spring offers a lesson to governments on the need to address the urban population grievances, especially of young people.

2.2. Economic Dimension: High potential but poor infrastructure and services

Historically, urbanization has had a close association with economic transformation: a declining share of agricultural employment; a shift in economic activity from rural to urban areas; and the rise of the modern industrial and service economy; as well as a demographic transition to lower rates of births and deaths (associated with better health standards in urban areas).

³UN Habitat (2012), "State of the World's Cities Report 2012/2013: Prosperity of Cities".

In the past fifty years, Africa's centers of economic activity have shifted markedly from the agrarian countryside to urban areas, accounting not less than 55% of the GDP. African cities can become an important driver of domestic demand-led growth, regional integration, and technological innovation. However, the inadequacy of infrastructure and services for meeting the social development and economic growth needs is undermining the economic performance of almost every African town or city. It is estimated that the demand for investment in basic urban infrastructure on the continent is in the range of USD 15-20 billion per year, while demand for urban housing investment is in the range of USD 20-25 billion⁴. Important to note that in Africa, for cities to serve as engines of growth, there must be strong economic linkages between urban and rural areas. When compared with other regions such as Asia, urban based economic activities in Africa (i.e. industry and services) have performed poorly and the link between urban incomes and the performance of the rural economy has remained weak.

2.3. Environmental Dimension: The most immediate and pressing challenge is to improve the environmental conditions of the urban poor

Informal and unregulated urban settlements and haphazard disposal of waste and industrial products contribute to the degradation of the environment in African cities. However, the most immediate and pressing challenge is to improve the environmental conditions of the urban poor. The urban poor live in life-threatening conditions with limited access to clean water, adequate drainage and sanitation. They are also affected by high levels of pollution due to toxic material, traffic and industrial emissions, residential congestion and absence of green spaces. The result is environmental degradation, increased natural and man-made disasters, scarcity of drinking water and increased risks to public health.

In addition, the adverse impact of climate change can only accelerate rural-to-urban migration-environmental refugees, while at the same time putting urban infrastructure at greater risk due to extreme weather events. It is important to note that urban areas account for about 60% of the continent's population that live in low elevation coastal zones that could be severely affected by rising sea levels, as well as, frequent floods. Climate change could lead to excessive strain on traditional infrastructure; increased shortages and hazards; increased epidemics; breakdown in security due to increased conflict over resources. Rapid urbanization implies rapid increased demand for energy, land and natural resources. Traffic congestion, due to a growing dependence on motor vehicles and intensive use of expensive fossil fuels is a new feature of most African cities.

3. Africa's structural transformation and sustainable development: Africa Urban Agenda

Few African countries have given attention to the challenges and opportunities of sustainable urban development. Notably, urban development has not been given a high priority in national development plans. Although urbanization has the potential to make people more prosperous, most African cities have found themselves grossly unprepared in the face of the spatial, demographic, social, economic and environmental challenges associated with urbanization.

African urbanization is entering a critical phase at which the growth momentum presents an opportunity for accelerating national development and for creating the foundation of a sustainable urban future. The dynamism which African cities are exhibiting today with respect to a higher contribution in the value creation chain, increasing productivity, fostering innovation, and optimizing infrastructure investment, provides an important lever for change. As the urban population almost doubles in the next two decades the imperative of steering and guiding the growth process – through urban planning - becomes a priority undertaking. Equally urgent is the need to improve livability and increase productivity of the city through expanding access to basic services. Indeed, Africa's increased urban population is a powerful asset for the

⁴ AfDB (2011)

continent's overall transformation. However, it can only attain its full potential when cities are properly planned and adequately serviced.

It is imperative for African regional organizations, including the African Union Commission to open a policy dialogue on urbanization and develop a policy framework that will inform and guide member States, including in the context of the AU 2063 Vision and the Post 2015 agenda.

Central governments play a leading role in guiding and steering urban development. Through their standing platform of AMCHUD⁵, African Ministers have exchanged experiences, jointly explored possibilities for action and, in the last 7 years, adopted declarations, frameworks, action plans, and strategies for guiding and steering the Continent's urban development. The thrust of AMCHUD's engagement throughout its seven years existence has been to tackle the African urban challenge as it manifests itself in the dimensions of growth, poverty, sustainability, governance, and also recognizing the role which cities are playing as engines of development. African Ministers has agreed that a major change is needed in the course of Africa's urban development that needs to include the following aspects:

Adopt a Transformative National Urban Policy: National Urban Policies with a view to emphasize that urbanization is a positive and transformative process and not only a transitional process. A National Policy acknowledging the power of urbanization to propel and guide national economic growth and reduce poverty both in urban and rural areas; a Policy that promotes a more optimistic perspective about the city, confronting the negative perception of urbanization. Governments needs to embark on preparing such a National Urban Policy to come up with a better direction and course of action to support more creative, productive and inclusive urban development. This national urban policy can also provide the general framework to orient public interventions in strategic regions and urban areas and be a reference for sectoral ministries, regional powers and local authorities. It can serve as a platform to support a collective action and a key reference for legislative institutional reform. The National Urban Policy is also a good instrument for public and political awareness of the gains to be obtained from sustainable urban development. It needs to be based on the idea of optimizing endogenous development by nurturing and utilizing local assets, particularly human capital, exploiting local potentials and maximizing local opportunities,

Promote local governance and decentralization: Central governments are increasingly appreciating that they need to work closely with local governments and other actors, and that political and administrative decentralization needs to be followed by fiscal autonomy. The subsidiarity approach needs to be adopted as a guiding principle.

Create a more compact city at a human scale: African cities need to move away from rigid planning and from urbanization that creates low densities and long distances: an unsustainable model that generates cities poorly connected, socially divided, economically unproductive and environmentally unsustainable. Leaders and decision-makers from Africa need to promote a different type of city that optimizes demographic and economic densities, privileges proximity among firms and people with a dominantly mixed land-use pattern. They need to create conditions to promote cities that are socially diverse and multi-functional. Promote sustainable settlement planning through a more efficient and equitable use of spatial resources, including basic services, facilities, infrastructure, energy sources, and most importantly available sub-utilized land. Indeed, well-planned and organized densification can support the use of modes of transportation other than private automobiles, e.g., public transport, cycling and walking, thereby reducing car dependence, energy consumption, CO2 emissions and air pollution. More compact communities reduce the use of greenfield land by building on brownfield sites within existing city limits, and contribute to conserving material resources as a result of reduced requirements for new infrastructure, e.g., roads, sewerage, water pipes, etc.

⁵ African Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development

Enhance collaboration and coordination: Creating conditions to achieve more sustainable urban development requires that different levels of government learn to work together. This is not only a technical and administrative exercise; it is also a political process that results from a political commitment. The multiplicity of entities that are responsible for policy development, programme execution, and front-end service delivery requires a high degree of collaboration and coordination to obtain optimum results on the ground. There is a broad range of sectors involved in urban planning and service delivery. There are multiple administrative levels, numerous activities to be undertaken, as well as different spheres in which responsible actors are located. There is an urgent need to develop, consolidate and refine effective mechanisms for fostering closer collaboration and coordination among public institutions, first, among national Ministries, and secondly across administrative levels. High level strategic tools such as national visions, annual and long term plans and budgets; special programmes have been used to foster coordination at the national levels. Practices such as cabinet consultations and approvals; and organs such as inter-ministerial technical committees have been common mechanisms enabling various Ministries to work together. However, a tendency towards operating in a sectoral manner has remained a major impediment for the realization of the full potential of such mechanisms, especially within the current multiparty democratic dispensation. The urban agenda transcends individual Ministries, and its outcomes are more than the sum of its parts. Successful implementation requires a holistic approach to producing results. It also requires the continuous collaboration of other core Ministries, such as those of national planning, finance, local government, and infrastructure development, employment, youth, and social development. One way of fostering collaboration is to change the target of urban intervention results from outputs – which are often sectoral – to outcomes, which are more integrated. Similarly, in the modern era of multi-level governance, mechanisms for enhancing vertical relations between national and sub-national level institutions are equally critical. After more than two decades of decentralization reforms in Africa, a lot of insight has been obtained on the effectiveness of mechanisms deployed in operationalizing inter-governmental relations. Reconciling working relations between central government agents at the local levels and those operating under the jurisdiction of local authorities has remained challenging.

Create more solid and flexible institutions through capacity building: The enhancement of local government capacity has been a primary agenda throughout the reform process in the past two decades. Changes in organizational structures, development of skills, streamlining of mandates and responsibilities, as well as improvements in resource allocation have been among the measures taken. However, it is observed that the reforms have been largely juridical, structural and organizational. Organs have been reconfigured, skills have been developed, functions have been reassigned and some administrative methods and rules have been changed. Yet, the actual delivery processes have been altered only minimally. The area of planning, for example, has remained top-down, dominantly technical, with insufficient degree of participation, and very complex in its implementation and desired outcomes. It projects a control orientation, thus almost acting as an inhibitor to local initiative and to endogenous development, and it does not have a built-in capacity to revitalize local assets, engage with local stakeholders, and promote the essential agglomeration economies. An urgent and priority task in this respect is the development of appropriate programmes for developing local capacity in planning and improving service delivery.

Close the Urban Divide: There is an urgent need to transform planning and basic services provision from factors, which perpetuate urban inequity to instruments fostering inclusiveness, sustainability and prosperity. Urban investments, in terms of goals and design, have to take into account the needs and interests of all social groups. Particular attention needs to be given to the wellbeing of the urban poor and the various constraints facing them in accessing services. Special needs of women and youths have to be given priority attention both with respect to improving everyday living as well as enhancing means of livelihood. The design of urban expansion and slum upgrading programmes based on minimal yet meaningful conditions to make them sustainable is critical. These interventions are essential to protect poor and vulnerable locations from various risks such as floods and landslides. Meeting minimum conditions is also the first step to enable the city to adapt to climate change conditions by laying down a street system and related infrastructure such

as an efficient drainage system. Skills and mechanisms have to be put in place for ensuring that spatial as well as project design are fully inclusive.

Initiate legal reforms: it is urgent to review and adapt the corpus of laws guiding urban development and the delivery of basic services with the objective of streamlining them and bringing into line with the desire of promoting inclusive and sustainable cities. It is also desirable to adopt simple norms and basic principles that can guide urban development and facilitate the transmission of tools and guides to end-users

Develop new housing policies: Access to land and housing remains limited calling thus for broad housing reforms and a new generation of housing and land policies that are more inclusive, rights-based, financially creative and in line with green building practices and environmental sustainability.

Promote south-south Cooperation: While appreciating that Africa is not unique, the continent's specificity and local variations have to be understood and potentiality optimized. However, experiences of other parts of the world need to be harnessed, particularly those from the South. Indeed, lots of relevant innovations are taking place in Asia and Latin America that could be brought to the attention of African stakeholders.

Africa as a whole needs to take into account the emergence of new economic powers in the global south such as China and Brazil and the role that the global south was playing in the promotion of sustainable urbanization in Africa.

Develop knowledge: Urban development requires a multi-sector approach touching on a variety of interlocking, technical, economic, social, and environmental issues. A good understanding of the various dimensions will require dedicated analytical work, including relevant and updated statistics, to be undertaken by national, sub-regional, and regional organizations in Africa.

United Nations: Given the scale and scope of the challenges of urban development in Africa, the United Nations system will necessitate a sizeable scaling up and diversification of the skills mix among its staff with increased resources to better respond to Africa's sustainable urbanization challenges. Moreover, urbanization would need to be incorporated in all regional, sub-regional and national programmes.

Achieving higher levels of sustainable urban development is not an accident. It requires clear policies, simple norms and basic principles, and concerted efforts from public, private and social actors. It also requires moving away from the idea that national development is to be achieved by external assistance, designing, on the contrary strategies, actions and plans that optimize endogenous factors.

Rapid urbanization in Africa underlines a qualitative dynamic. If, however, this opportunity is not "captured" by forward-looking policymakers and massive popular mobilization within the next several years to jointly pursue radically new policy approaches to developing and managing Africa's cities, the continent may witness how this inevitable process create new and possibly intractable social, economic, environmental and political obstacles to Africa's transformation agenda.