



RESEARCH BRIEF – JULY 2013

Migration, Urbanization, and Political Power in Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why – given the pace and intensity of urbanization occurring throughout the continent – do urban conditions continue to deteriorate and national political programs remain fixed on rural development? Perceptions of ‘rural bias’ and the lack of ‘urban’ improvement programs are largely related to the political calculations of incumbents, the administrative façade of decentralization, and poor, fragmented contests in democratic elections. The brief presents a general introduction to internal African mobility, followed by an assessment of the high and increasing urban risks. It concludes that the poor state of urban cities will continue if migrants, the urban poor, and opposition parties cannot raise support to alter the political calculations of leaders.

AUTHOR

Clionadh Raleigh is an associate professor at Trinity College Dublin, a lead CCAPS researcher, and an external researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). She directs the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED) project.

Much of the sustained focus on vulnerability tends to concentrate on rural areas and marginalized communities. Despite widespread, increasing urbanization and circular migration within African states, the study of rural vulnerability has been prioritized over urban risks and vulnerabilities. This brief branches out from the typical, rurally focused environmental security discourse in acknowledging the parameters and causes of urban vulnerability to poverty, ecological change, and marginalization across Africa. It does so through locating new threats and risks to African populations based on the intersections between demography, politics, and risk.

The main cause of ‘urban risk’ is a somewhat unlikely source: this research argues that democratization and decentralization have altered the political calculus against urban residents, who routinely suffer from the practice of multi-party politics. This is, in part, due to dynamics of elite manipulation in the ‘political environment’ through both decentralization and democratic change across Africa. Institutional change has altered elite political calculations, making demographically dominant rural communities more ‘valuable’ in voting terms. Further, ‘urban’ is neither an acknowledged nor viable political identity, and voting and voter registration disenfranchises migrant urban voters in favor of rural settled voters, leading to citizens voting against their immediate self-interest for access to services, representation, and development programs. In short, the new patterns of mobility and settlement across Africa are at odds with the patterns and processes of power.

WHO IS MOVING AND WHERE ARE THEY GOING

Why migrate? And to where? African mobility is a social and economic obligation, and its patterns are designed to distribute resources in high-risk environments.¹ The typical migrant engages in ‘reversible’ movements² characterized by temporary, circular,³ and internal migration from rural

areas. Such spatial mobility is often a component of household survival strategies for coping with high levels of production uncertainty.⁴ Migration sustains rural homesteads and livelihoods during difficult periods and provides urban residents with a safety net from the growing pressures in urban areas.⁵

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Explaining migration across African states revolves around two main causal drivers: environmental security, which considers migration as a reaction to rural changes; and modernization and economic explanations largely constructed to explain flows, directions, and motives for migration. The direct link between environmental change and migration is heavily debated, but research suggests that environmental change is neither a sufficient nor a necessary reason for movement.⁶ Yet, ecological hazards occur with sufficient frequency to influence how people incorporate such risks into their livelihoods.⁷

Indeed, environmental migration is often erroneously considered independent of other migration drivers.⁸ Limited evidence suggests that, in certain circumstances, environmental hazards alter the migration patterns typically observed in developing countries either by influencing the decision to move or intensifying labor migrations during droughts or famines.⁹ Yet, as Cecilia Tacoli confirms, “non-environmental factors largely determine the duration, destination and composition of migrant flows.”¹⁰

Although migrants are most attracted to proximate small to large cities in the global south,¹¹ and are responsive to income variability,¹² destination characteristics beyond economic gain are increasingly shaping movement.¹³ The absolute and relative location of movement, urban or rural, is largely structured by the migrants’ social capital, pre-established links, and infrastructure linking rural and urban areas.¹⁴ While rural-rural movements are considered to be the most common form of migration in the developing world,¹⁵ pursued by the poorest of rural residents,¹⁶ relatively wealthier segments of the rural population may have existing social ties to urban areas, as well as necessary skills to support a livelihood there. David Satterthwaite notes that the scale and direction of people’s migrations change according to the geography of economic opportunities.¹⁷ It is specifically cities, towns, and rural areas with expanding economies that attract migrants.

Migration is a contributing factor to the growing urbanization across African states: 37% of Africans are ‘urban dwellers’ and urban population growth averages over 5% annually.¹⁸ Yet,

these figures include countries with high rates of urbanization (e.g. North African states, Djibouti, and Republic of the Congo) and those with the lowest (e.g. Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Ethiopia). Further, urban versus rural growth figures suggest that those states that are highly urbanized have the lowest urban growth, while countries like Rwanda (17% urban growth in 2010), Burundi (6.15%), Malawi (5.6%) are the sites of rapidly growing urban centers.

But migration is not entirely responsible for the rate of urban growth, which is also determined by urban-based population growth and re-categorization of growing centers.¹⁹ Urbanization figures in several developing countries suggest that secondary and tertiary cities are growing faster than capitals, where populations are generally stagnant or decreasing. In response to growing pressures, African governments have attempted to alter migration patterns, flows, and incentives: in order to limit urbanization, many governments incentivized the rural poor to remain in or return to their villages, such as through nationwide access to primary and secondary education.²⁰ Such policies may have altered migration patterns somewhat, but ultimately failed to stem the tide of rural-to-urban migration.²¹

POWER AND PLACE IN AFRICA

Spatial reconfigurations and demographic changes within African states cannot be divorced from how political power is acquired and exercised. But how have institutional changes altered the urban–rural political divide? How have migrants and migration supported political change, and what are the political consequences? The main results of political changes are that rural areas are politically privileged, despite needed attention to urban issues; migrants and the urban poor vote against their own self-interest and this leads to poorer urban conditions; and decentralization has stunted an effective opposition and alternative urban political identity. In short, many African governments engage in different modes of informal disenfranchisement and demographic manipulation.

Political Policies Toward Urban Residents

Previous research into African urban policies and politics has largely focused on urban bias and impediments to governance. ‘Urban bias’ was the result of economic policies that systemically favored those living in towns and cities at the expense of the rural majority.²² Distorted commodity pricing systems for urban residents were designed to quell potential collective action against the autocratic state,²³ as this was considered far easier for urban groups to organize than poorly educated rural groups. This framework implies that individuals engage and support violent collective actions – including riots, protests, coups, or revolutions – to maximize their economic self-interest. The end to

'urban bias' was a result of structural adjustment policies, and despite relatively poor adherence to those,²⁴ the urban population bore the costs of retrenchment of the public sector, new collections of tax, and an ending to favorable prices for commodities.²⁵

In addition to new distributions of services in rural areas, concurrent, often forced, changes in political institutions ushered in multi-party democracy. The rural areas began to benefit from recognition as the major voting constituency, while the smaller and more demanding urban constituencies lost in the democratic transition.²⁶ Democratization did lessen urban bias, yet central governments remained in control through the machinations of decentralization, the re-capture of important areas across the state, and close control of public funds. These factors go far in explaining the lack of urban agendas across parties in rapidly urbanizing areas, the poor conditions that urban residents persistently live with, the lack of incumbent support in cities, and limited agency of opposition parties. Migration exacerbates the conditions in cities while reinforcing rural electoral dominance as both migrants and the urban poor do not act in their own political best interest.

Democratization

Democratization has resulted in a series of intended and unintended consequences for regimes and voters. The most critical are: the disenfranchisement through limited political 'identities' in Africa outside of ethno-regional affiliations and alliances, and the reversal of autocratic urban bias in favor of demographically strong rural voters. Simple political demography demands more efforts in rural areas, as they are more populated than urban areas. Several research trends note that despite the poor democratization record of African states, multi-party systems have clearly placed demographically strong rural areas as the main constituency.²⁷

The structure of most sub-Saharan African political systems reinforces the dominance of rural ethno-political territorial identities. Research finds that "ethnicity is a significant predictor of party support in most, although not all, African societies."²⁸ Political parties across Africa do not distinguish themselves through policy stances²⁹ and instead represent ethno-political divisions.³⁰ African voting systems are, therefore, largely expressions of group-based calculations,³¹ and groups are strongly identified with a specific territory.³² This allows politicians to cater a message of 'service delivery' without need to emphasize the ethnic dimension; indeed incumbent ethnic pandering is much more successful in countries with clustered ethnic communities.³³ Spatial clustering in rural areas, coupled with the creation of electoral vote districts benefitting incumbents, has allowed multi-party elections to become a fight over rural dominance.

The spatial consideration is an important factor, but by no means more important than where voters can vote: urban residents can vote in urban locations, but migrants are often not 'legally' registered there.³⁴ Of particular salience across African contexts is the close ties that most urban migrants retain with their sending communities, returning to rural areas for census taking, voting, holidays, and significant events and relying on these social network within cities.³⁵

Further, while the distinct lack of ethnic clustering in urban areas conspires to make urban zones less accessible regions for competing parties, the urban poor remain strongly 'ethnicized' in that they are more likely to resort to patronage voting behavior based on ethnicity markers.³⁶ This is in part due to social networks and associations that permeate African cities, providing access to services, support, and opportunities on an ethnic-club basis. Such ethnic fractionalization in poor communities limits the abilities of the poor to engage in collective action.^{37,38} In particular, it impedes the formation of alternate political identities, such as 'urban' over 'ethno-political.'

Democratization has effectively disenfranchised urban voters due to the reversal of autocratic urban bias in favor of demographically strong rural voters.

As evidence of the link between programs, space, and ethnic demography, rural candidates support incumbent parties in higher numbers, and urban areas return higher than average opposition support.³⁹ Danielle Resnick suggests that the urban poor are responding to strategies designed to better urban circumstances, indicating the potential for 'populist' over 'patronage' programs to fundamentally change the African political system.⁴⁰ However, incumbents have multiple advantages which may explain their rural support: while in power, they can engage in rival bargaining, thereby consolidating key constituencies into party alliances of which they dominate;⁴¹ regimes use state resources to court rivals, and those same resources to strategically plan the distribution of public and private (e.g. ministry position) goods to elevate their standing across communities. Rural programs are easier to organize, fund, and implement for direct electoral effects.⁴² For example, Yoweri Museveni's 2011 reelection in Uganda is largely explained by massive government spending intended to rouse support during the election (some estimates suggest 85% of the annual state budget).⁴³ Finally, incumbents can orchestrate obstacles for opposition candidates that limit their ability to educate and appeal to voters.

However, despite research suggesting that opposition candidates are likely to engage in populist appeals in urban areas, Bratton

and Van de Walle criticize the formation of opposition parties as often a ‘spontaneous convergence of diverse urban interests’ and directed towards appealing the wealthier and educated sub-sections of the population.⁴⁴ Indeed, a class distinction is evident in urban voting: while ‘ethnic voting’ is negatively associated with levels of wealth in urban locations,⁴⁵ the urban poor may not be active supporters of opposition candidates unless linked to accessible patronage.⁴⁶ This combined research casts doubt on the notion of a monolithic urban constituency and the notion that the urban poor may re-orientate African democracy.⁴⁷

Decentralization

Although a stated policy objective for over 30 years, decentralization in practice has been a process of regime reorganization, capture, and recentralization. This is due in large part to the creation of governing units in exchange for patronage (e.g. Uganda), a reluctance to relinquish significant power to the sub-national level, and a refusal to fiscally support new units (e.g. Nigeria).⁴⁸

Decentralization has in practice meant a central regime focus on rural administration to capture political bases, while urban areas are decentralized but inadequately funded to address their challenges through government programs.

The creation of decentralized administrative units is not a politically neutral process,⁴⁹ as both district proliferation and the use of decentralized administrative positions have allowed for central regimes to extend patronage networks in periods of constrained state budgets.⁵⁰ These combined practices have exacerbated urban challenges as the decentralization process has created centralized structures and limited agency for administrators across African states. As a result, it has effectively been a process of ‘recentralization’ as elites display considerable reluctance to relinquish power and acknowledge local authority. This is in part due to the largely hierarchical and centralized patronage and distribution system operating in most African states. Regimes ‘capture’ local areas through positioning allies in districts as part of nested power hierarchies where local elites facilitate the creation and continuation of power bases in the countryside.^{51,52} These governance agents become ‘intermediaries’ to exert control over the countryside and ensure regime support within a locality.⁵³ In addition to such undemocratic dynamics in local governance, the fiscal crises affecting most African states disables the ability of governments to provide for these units.

Central regimes create and acknowledge decentralized units, but provide administrators with little to no fiscal support,

especially in the case of urban districts. In a majority of Africa states, the transfer of funds from the center is calculated to range from less than 5% of national budgets⁵⁴ to less than 15%⁵⁵ (e.g. Kenya’s rate is 3.5%).⁵⁶ The reluctance of central governments to allocate sufficient funds to urban councils is possibly related to the higher than average rates of opposition support in urban areas.⁵⁷ Given that opposition parties controlling city council may benefit from urban programs, by starving the council of adequate funds, the central government is also ‘managing’ opposition support and risks to regime stability. In summary, rural administration is the focus of central regimes in order to ‘capture’ political bases; urban areas are decentralized but inadequately funded to address their challenges through government programs.

Hence, through administrative, fiscal, and representational constraints, the urban poor and migrants are largely disenfranchised, as political candidates do not often represent their constituency. They remain outside of active and funded patronage networks, as opposition candidates are largely beholden to wealthier urban residents. Further, through the ‘illegal’ stance and residence conditions for migrants, their voting practices uphold rural dominance. Politicians respond to a political calculus that maximizes voter support for minimal efforts and costs, hence demographically strong rural areas are far more attractive sites to position programs designed to increase patronage. Despite growing urbanization, this political strategy is kept in place through constraints and obstacles for urban voters and potentially urban-focused parties.

GOVERNANCE AND LIFE IN URBAN AREAS

These political relationships and manipulations create an increasingly dire urban situation for both migrants and the poor. The lack of urban governance and limited power of municipal governments is often postulated to be due to “institutional legacies from colonial rule and centralization in post-independence governments. There is also the application of imported models of urban planning and government that proved inappropriate to local contexts and possibilities.”⁵⁸ Many of the present difficulties can be attributed to support for deregulation and privatization that proved inadequate for the needs at hand.⁵⁹ However, an alternate perspective suggests that poor governance and increased urban risks are the result of political strategy and calculation in democratic and decentralized states.

Life in urban areas continues to grow more difficult and risky than rural areas across African states. This is due not to urbanization patterns in Africa, which are not out of the ordinary, but to sub-Saharan states urbanizing without parallel national economic growth. The continent has followed a

political development course that effectively disenfranchises the urban voter. Understanding this phenomenon requires a brief look at urban life in Africa. Urban vulnerability to risk is driven by both the density of people and issues (and their intricate inter-relationships), entrenched poverty, and significantly higher living costs, which limit the ways in which urban residents can cope with negative change. The urban poor have less access to municipal services and formal employment; they are disproportionately affected by disease, violence, pollution, and insecure living conditions. The UN Human Settlements Program notes that urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa is “virtually synonymous with slum growth”;⁶⁰ UN-HABITAT projects that urban poverty will account for over 40% of total poverty in several African countries by 2020.⁶¹ Consequently, the urban poor are excluded from many of the advantages of cities and, in a reversal of trends, are now worse off than the rural poor in some places.⁶² They are—in every sense—living on the ‘margins’ of legality, security, and safety.

Poverty and Employment

Illegality is best represented by livelihood choice: increasing numbers of urban residents are participating in the workforce in ways that are generally insecure and have lowered returns. While unemployment is high in developing states, the informal employment market (including day labor) takes in both the young and new migrants. While there is no verifiable information on the extent of this sector, best estimates suggest that over 50% of the urban laborers are employed in informal livelihoods and are disproportionately young.⁶³ Informal work is ‘illegal’ and traders face official discrimination.⁶⁴

In addition to fewer opportunities for waged labor and the threats involved in informal labor, poverty in urban areas is, in part, due to the significantly higher costs of services in urban areas. On average, housing costs 20-33% of income (while largely free in rural areas), transportation consumes 5-15% of income, and 10-20% of income is spent on water. The best estimate suggests that rural non-food costs are significantly lower (81%) than urban non-food costs. Prices for staple goods are typically 15.6% higher than rural areas.^{65,66} Commodity prices directly affect urban consumers as they are almost entirely dependent on markets for food, and are highly vulnerable to price shocks and stress.⁶⁷ In short, the urban poor are ‘vulnerable to the market’ and livelihoods are characterized by low pay, lack of assets, an inability to invest, and high susceptibility to commodity shocks.

Housing and Access to Services

Seemingly counter-intuitive, the urban poor have less access to services compared to rural counterparts. However, Bolnick et al. clarifies that “it is difficult to compare rural and urban areas

because lack of access to infrastructure and services is often a result of distance for rural populations, and exclusionary social and political structures for urban populations.”⁶⁸ There are millions of urban dwellers that have unsafe, unreliable, difficult, and possibly privatized access to water; less than 10% of the population is connected to sewers.⁶⁹ In poorly managed cities, the rate of child mortality (under five years old) is 25% with most deaths related to the lack of infrastructure and services.⁷⁰ Many African governments have little ability or inclination to provide widespread urban services; hence service provision (especially of water) is handled in a private and informal way or channelled through social networks.⁷¹ Compared to any other developing region, African urban dwellers have the least access to water and sanitation.⁷²

The patterns of mobility and settlement across Africa are at odds with the patterns and processes of power, and do not benefit migrants or the resident urban poor.

Slums are a physical manifestation of social exclusion and marginal status. These areas are common throughout African cities, housing between a quarter and half of a city’s population, including the majority of the urban poor and new migrants. Squatter settlements or other developments that have not received official approval⁷³ are often due to planning issues revolving around unplanned urbanization, limited land access, and rising populations. Countries with lower urbanization rates have the highest slum populations (often over 60%); Burundi, Niger, Ethiopia, and Uganda have some of the lowest urban populations (under 20%), yet the slum proportion of urban residents is 65% in Burundi, 82% in Niger, 79% in Ethiopia, and 63% in Uganda.⁷⁴ Incidences of ‘urban cleaning’ where military and police forces destroy illegal slum settlements are disturbingly common, as evidenced by recent raids in Zimbabwe (2005, 2007), Angola (2007), Kenya (2008, 2009, 2010), Nigeria (2000, 2009), Sudan (2005), South Africa (2010), and Ghana (2002, threatened in 2011), and Ethiopia and Uganda (2011).

Ecology

Slum settlements are often built on marginal land and the repeated pressures of habitation creates higher risks of floods, disease transmission, clustered poor services, risks to natural disasters, and violence. Urban ecological vulnerability is underscored and exacerbated by poor land potential and waste management, dysfunctional urban planning and housing, high rates of disease transmission, large impermeable surfaces that disrupt natural drainage channels and worsen runoff, and the effects of increasing natural disasters (rainstorms, cyclones, and hurricanes).⁷⁵ In comparison to rural areas,

several additional direct and indirect ecological conditions are exacerbated by poverty and informal working and living conditions. Those most at risk are people living in dangerous locations (e.g. slums, floodplains, or areas with poor quality infrastructure). The natural resource bases are affected by the transformation of land surfaces and drainage systems since African urban areas are frequently positioned in areas that are or were water plentiful; by the demands of an urban population for wood from forests, food from rangelands and farms, and water from watersheds; and by the waste generated from urban areas, often displaced into regions surrounding the cities.⁷⁶

The combination of ecological hazards and poor conditions result in natural disasters having un-natural impacts. In African urban areas, floodwater routes are restricted, which results in higher runoff, frequency, magnitude, and duration of floods.⁷⁷ In poor urban areas, the accumulation of waste and lack of drainage planning creates floods as a result of even modest storms.⁷⁸

Further, warm spells create heat islands, worsen pollution, and damage food. Heavy precipitation can, in addition to floods, lead to landslides, loss of infrastructure, housing, displacements, injury, and water borne diseases in clustered locations; and drought can create water shortages, lower rural demand for goods, and higher food prices.⁷⁹ The end results are that the risks fall disproportionately on people with the least adequate services and assets.⁸⁰ Diana Mitlin confirms that of the ten most significant factors that cause urban poverty, climate and environmental hazards are the most critical, while this does not appear in rural poverty factors.⁸¹

While capacity is certainly an issue in developing states, political calculations are a far more compelling and thorough explanation for the increasingly dire state of urban areas.

Hence, poorer populations are hardest hit by a combination of exposures, and have less adaptive capacity, government assistance, legal protection, and insurance. They have far fewer chances to redress their ecological and environmental vulnerability by moving within the city.

Despite the challenges, many migrants resolve to remain in cities. This presents a paradox: why move if the conditions are far worse across urban areas? Even under threat of persecution, as in Khartoum, or when offered incentives to relocate to rural areas, as in Dar es Salaam, migrants prefer to stay in cities.⁸² The answer is, in part, that the motivations for moving are not as simplistic as those suggested by environmental security or economic motives, and that migrants are not necessarily the most vulnerable urban groups.⁸³ The appeal still endures,

as rural areas remain under-capitalized and developed. Yet the improvements that are necessary across African states are increasingly difficult to bring about due to political circumstances of urban residents.

CONCLUSIONS

From 2025, Africa's urban population is estimated to be larger than its rural component. Will the urban poor be a key constituency at that time? Perhaps, but at present, this population finds itself subject to a host of new ecological, security, and economic risks, higher rates of poverty than their rural counterparts, a continued demographic challenge from reproduction and migration, and a political structure that actively seeks to limit their agency as citizens. Despite these challenges, migrants still engage in ever increasing rates of circular migration, while being forced to conform to rural and ethnicized political associations. The patterns of mobility and settlement across Africa are at odds with the patterns and processes of power, and do not benefit migrants or the resident urban poor.

To sustain a practice that benefits political elites, governments have branded more needy urban constituencies as largely 'illegal.' This allows governments to misrepresent and ignore their valid needs. In particular, this involves the 'illegality' of informal urban livelihoods and settlements, and this lack of 'legal' resident identities prevent migrants from accessing justice, services, and political representation.⁸⁴

Much of the research on both migration and urbanization does not consider the concurrent machinations of political institutions in directing movement, creating risks, and shaping political identities. While a debate continues on which factors motivate rural-urban movements, there is little question that rural development agendas are favored above needed urban programs and planning. These political and economic calculations have drastic effects on the lives of migrants, urban residents, and rural residents, whose livelihoods are closely tied to community members in urban locations. However, as demonstrated here, through a focus on decentralization and democratization, the institutional changes across Sub-Saharan African have motivated governments to downplay risk in urban areas, conflate appeals to rural areas, and actively work against an 'urban' political identity. While capacity is certainly an issue in developing states, political calculations are a far more compelling and thorough explanation for the increasingly dire state of urban areas. 

ENDNOTES

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
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This material is based upon work supported by, or in part by, the U. S. Army Research Office grant number W911NF-09-1-0077 under the Minerva Initiative of the U.S. Department of Defense.

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