

Report highlights myth of Africa's urbanization

March 12 2012



The widely-held belief that Africa is urbanising faster than anywhere else in the world is a myth, according to research from the Department of Geography.

In a study Dr. Deborah Potts, a Reader in [Human Geography](#) at King's, says that although the population levels of numerous [urban](#) areas in Africa are growing rapidly, this is mainly in line with rates of urban natural increase (births exceeding deaths) rather than because of significant net in-migration.

Dr. Potts analysed data from 18 countries across the continent which have had recent censuses and found only four were experiencing rapid population growth in cities. Levels of urbanization – the share of the population living in towns - had stagnated or increased only very slowly

in a further 10 and had declined in four.

In an article titled "Whatever Happened to Africa's Rapid Urbanization?," published as part of the Counterpoint series by the Africa Research Institute, Dr. Potts says that African governments, policymakers and donors need to respond to the fact that urbanisation is not happening as rapidly as thought and identify what this fact can tell them about economic development and employment in the continent.

Although most African countries experienced rapid urbanization in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, census records since this time have been erratic, and reliable, regular data were rare up until recently.

When census surveys took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they demonstrated that the shift of the population from rural to urban centres had slowed in several large sub-Saharan African countries.

This challenged data from UN-Habitat and the World Bank, which are the most frequently cited sources of urban [population](#) statistics for [Africa](#). Dr. Potts says that both organizations often failed to account for a decline in the rate of urbanisation and assumed it was still very rapid.

The evidence shows that in many countries there is a very small increase in the rate at which urbanisation levels are increasing of around one per cent a decade.

Dr. Potts said: "It is time for policy makers to realize these dynamics and to differentiate between countries which really are urbanising rapidly and those where it has slowed.

"The presumption of rapid urban growth can distract from the realities of how poorly African cities have fared under the pressures of globalised economies."

The full paper is available from the [Africa Research Institute](#).

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Report highlights myth of Africa's urbanization (2012, March 12) retrieved 1 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-highlights-myth-africa-urbanization.html>

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