

# Accra is congested, but relocating Ghana's capital is not the only option, say researchers

February 1 2023, by Stephen Appiah Takyi and Owusu Amponsah

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Accra's population has doubled over the past decade. Credit: Muntaka Chasant/Wikimedia Commons

Capital cities play an important role in the socio-economic development of every country. People generally move to cities where there are opportunities.

Accra, Ghana's capital, demonstrates this pull effect—and the problems it can create, like [congestion](#) and development planning issues.

One of the consequences has been regular [flooding](#), which has claimed lives and property. Over the years, the city authorities have tried to decongest Accra, without success. The city is now [demolishing illegal structures](#), especially those close to waterways.

Some people have suggested that Accra's congestion problem could be solved if the capital were to be [moved](#) to another city. Others [disagree](#).

Our position in this ongoing debate is informed by a six-year-old [study](#) one of us conducted comparing Accra with Nigeria's capital, Abuja. Nigeria moved its administrative capital out of Lagos to Abuja [in 1991](#).

The goal of the research was to make recommendations for the effective functioning of capital cities. We believe the findings are still relevant.

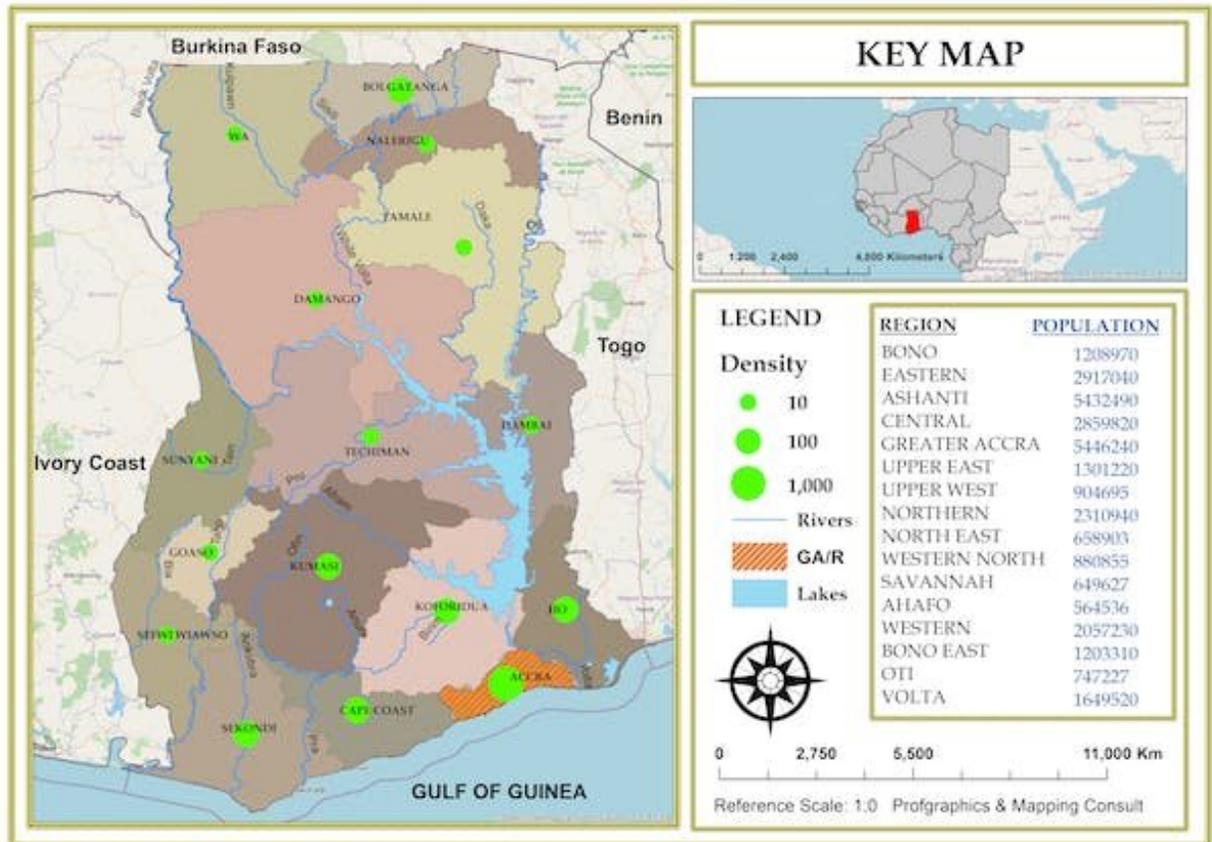
The study found that Accra was congested because too many facilities and services were concentrated in the city. We conclude that, instead of relocating the capital from Accra, its various roles could be shared among various regional capitals. Accra could keep its political role, but some of its facilities and services should be distributed around the country.

## **Accra's many functions**

Ghana's capital city has multiple functions: educational, commercial, entertainment and administrative.

As an [educational center](#), Accra has about 40 tertiary institutions. The seat of government, parliament house and the supreme court of Ghana are also in Accra, giving it an administrative and political role. The major sporting activities in Ghana are soccer, athletics and boxing. The country's only boxing arenas are in Accra. The city also has the Ohene Gyan Sports Stadium and the Olympic Stadium (under construction).

Reputable research institutes such as Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research are located in Accra. The headquarters of major religious organizations—such as the Christian Council of Ghana and the Office of the National Chief Imam—are also located here.



Ghana's population by region. Authors

Some facilities that could have been located in other cities are all concentrated in Accra. Overall, the city serves as the country's commercial, manufacturing and communication center.

This has attracted major private companies to locate their headquarters in the capital. Ghana Stock Exchange, the country's principal facilitator of the development of the capital market, also has its headquarters in Accra.

The combination of its political role and all the other facilities and services in the city has attracted people from all parts of the country. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, the Greater Accra Region is the most populous region in Ghana, with a population of over [5 million people](#). The region, with a population density of 1,200 people per square kilometer, is also the [most densely populated](#) region in Ghana.

This density has led to traffic congestion and overcrowding. On average, traffic across the major highways in the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area [grew](#) from 2.5% to 14.8% per annum.

The multi-functional nature of Accra has led to pressure on land resources which has also resulted in encroachment of green areas and wetlands. The result is that parts of the city are unsafe to live in. The perennial floods which claim human lives and destroy properties have been attributed to the city's [development and spatial planning problems](#).

## **Solutions**

Relocating capital cities does not necessarily solve the problem of congestion in the long term if the fundamental causes of the congestion are not addressed. For example, the relocation of Nigerian's capital city to Abuja did not solve congestion in Lagos.

We argue that a more feasible option for Accra is to change the role of the [city](#) from a multi-functional role to a political role.

National policies should focus on de-concentration by relocating some of the facilities and services that are currently in the capital but do not require direct access to the executive. These may include the headquarters of some government institutions, nongovernmental organizations, universities and research institutes, religious organizations and private companies.

The relocation of the headquarters of the Ghana Cocoa Board from Accra, for example, could be taken into consideration as Accra is not a cocoa producing region. Such an institution could be moved to a place where cocoa is produced.

The headquarters of Ghana National Petroleum Corporation could be moved to the western region of Ghana, where oil is drilled. Universities located in Accra could be encouraged to establish branches in other parts of the country, thus reducing the number of students on the Accra campuses. This would help promote spatial equity in Ghana in terms of geographic access to university education.

There could be incentive packages for institutions to establish their headquarters outside the capital. Those in the capital could be charged a special congestion levy. Finally, there should be a conscious effort to give functional roles to all the 16 regional capitals in Ghana. The functional roles can include commercial capital, defense capital, entertainment capital and sports capital. The decentralization of facilities and services would help distribute opportunities—and people—across the country.

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